I, Peter J Grimes, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

It is entitled:
Toadman and Other Encounters

Student's name: Peter J Grimes

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Michael Griffith, MFA
Committee member: Leah Stewart, MFA
Committee member: Gary Weissman, PhD
Toadman and Other Encounters

A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of English & Comparative Literature
of the College of Arts and Sciences

by

Peter Grimes

M.F.A. University of Florida

August 2011

Committee Chair: Michael Griffith, M.F.A.
Abstract

*Toadman and Other Encounters* is a collection of short fiction exploring the boundaries of human experience, at times experienced by the reader through narrative boundaries. Questions about what makes us human are framed and echoed by questions about what constitutes a story. In one essay and nineteen stories, *Toadman and Other Encounters* describes and portrays encounters between humans and each other, humans and animals, humans and texts, meanwhile underscoring these encounters with the encounter between narrative and non-narrative modes, distinct moods and tones, conflicting voices and points of view.
Acknowledgements

“Toadman” (Winner: AWP Intro Journals Prize) appeared in Hayden’s Ferry Review.

“The Progress of Tongues” will appear in Packingtown Review.

“Town and Gown” appeared in Gulf Stream.

“A Bad Man, Speaking Poorly” appeared in Lake Effect.

“Victoria” (Second Prize: Spring 2010 Narrative Story Contest) appeared in Narrative.

“Head Game” (Finalist: Mississippi Review Prize) appeared in Mississippi Review.

“Le Mot Faux” appeared in Mid-American Review.

“Transplant” appeared in Harpur Palate.

“El Sudor de la Rubia” appeared in Jelly Bucket.

“The Backbone of Peoria” appeared as “A Taste of Home” in Reed Magazine.

“A Literary Approach to the Third Problem” appeared in Copper Nickel.

“Rockville Is Not Like This” appeared in Brand.
# CONTENTS

What’s the Story? A Writer Learns to Read................................................................. 1

Toadman ....................................................................................................................... 37

The Progress of Tongues .......................................................................................... 60

Town and Gown ......................................................................................................... 68

A Triangle Theory ..................................................................................................... 72

A Bad Man, Speaking Poorly .................................................................................. 114

Night Patrol ............................................................................................................... 117

Victoria ...................................................................................................................... 136

The Witches of Haddonfield .................................................................................. 152

Head Game ............................................................................................................... 179

Trash ......................................................................................................................... 184

Le Mot Faux ............................................................................................................ 209

Transplant ................................................................................................................ 222

Two Fences ................................................................................................................ 229

El Sudor de La Rubia ............................................................................................... 240

Lord of the Castle .................................................................................................... 249

The Backbone of Peoria .......................................................................................... 268

A Literary Approach to the Third Problem............................................................ 273

The Storyteller ......................................................................................................... 275

Rockville Is Not Like This ..................................................................................... 289
WHA T’S THE STORY? A WRITER LEARNS TO READ

Introduction
Of utmost importance to writers of short fiction is, not surprisingly, an understanding of what a short story is. Many great short story writers have done just fine following an intuitive understanding of the form to decide when they have read or written a complete story, but it can’t hurt a writer’s appreciation or practice of the genre to struggle with achieving a definition of the genre. In this essay I first give a brief overview of the debates surrounding short story definition; next, after considering Wolfgang Iser’s theory of reading, I observe and comment on my own reading of two identical texts, one presented as a short story and the other presented as the third chapter of a novel-in-stories; last, I draw conclusions about what my reading experiment contributes to discussions of Iser’s theory of reading and of short story definition, as well as about its usefulness to short story writers.

The Essence is in the Story: Text-based Definitions
For as long as critics and practitioners of the short story have endeavored to define that literary form, they have done so by comparing its textual features to that of the novel. Edgar Allan Poe, in “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), explains that short literary works like poems, by virtue of being readable “in a single sitting,” must be treated as forms distinct from works not so readable (69). Only by satisfying this necessary condition of one-sitting readability, can a work also achieve a unified effect, which Poe regards as crucial to short literary works: “If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world intervene . . . .” (69). Though Poe doesn’t speak explicitly of novels and short stories here, we see the beginning of the dichotomy
that serves later critics who try to define these forms in relation to each other.

Brander Matthews, in his 1882 article “The Philosophy of the Short-Story,” picks up on Poe’s unity dictum by applying it to prose. Distinguishing between the “Short-story” (roughly equivalent to our modern sense of short story) and the “mere story which is short,” Matthews contrasts the novel and the short story in a manner that has proven seminal to short story theory: “The difference between a Novel and a Short-story is a difference of kind. . . . A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression” (73). In other words, Matthews is arguing that there are particular features or traits in the text itself that distinguish a short story from other genres, most notably the novel. Bold and scientific as this line of definition might appear, Matthews predictably runs into trouble (so far as more recent literary theory is concerned) when he sets out to list these traits or qualities. He says, for instance that unlike short stories, novels must deal principally with love, thereby mistaking a perceived contemporary trend in novels with a quality of the form itself (74). (Notice here that he doesn’t actually list a positive trait regarding subject for short stories; rather he relies upon pointing to the novel’s dissimilar trait.) Although other traits that he mentions are more palatable to some modern critics of the short story, such as the idea that something must “happen” in a short story whereas nothing need “happen” in a sketch (77), his Aristotelian project of definition through the listing of (sometimes) positive, essential traits is called into question by the times when one of his “essential” items doesn’t match one of a different definition. Nevertheless, his instinct to locate the definition of a literary genre in its textual traits (or lack of those traits), which might or might not be perceived by a reader, has persisted into critics’ definition of the short story well into the twentieth century.

Almost a century after Matthews, in his introduction to Short Story Theories (1977), Charles E. May calls for a new type of short story definition: “What is needed is a theory in the modern sense, starting not from external elements of form or even various classes of subject matter, but rather from
the underlying vision of the short story, its characteristic mode of understanding and confronting reality” (12). Although May here calls for a short story definition that doesn’t limit itself by fruitlessly compiling lists of positive, essential traits discoverable in the text, the definition he offers in place of such definitions shares these basic characteristics. In “The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction” (1984), May defines the short story in terms of the type of human experience it depicts. By focusing on the type of experience depicted, he seems to be attempting to identify an “underlying vision” unique to short stories, thereby doing away with the trait-list approach, but he does not differ from Matthews and other previous critics in his tendency toward both a text-based definition and an essentialist definition (one that denies its actual interdependence with the novel’s definition).

May defines the short story thus:

Long fiction, by its very length, demands both a subject matter and a set of artistic conventions that primarily derive from and in turn establish the primacy of “experience” conceptually created and considered; whereas short fiction, by its very length, demands both a subject matter and a set of artistic conventions that derive from and establish the primacy of “an experience” directly and emotionally created and encountered. (133)

One contrast he notes between the experience displayed in the short story as opposed to that displayed in the novel is that the former concerns itself with one moment in a character’s life, whereas the latter strives to depict his life in toto. The second contrast is that the short story’s experience is encountered emotionally, whereas the novel’s experience is considered conceptually. Thus, he associates contrasting word pairs like “social” and “antisocial,” “manners” and “dreams,” “profane” and “sacred” with the subjects depicted by novels and short stories, respectively (133). If he had, instead of defining short stories as essentially concerned with a character’s isolated, mythic experience, simply noted a tendency of certain subjects in certain times and places to be treated in short story form, he might have spoken
more accurately, though he would have failed to produce an exhaustive and elegant definition. It is
simply too easy to think of endless counterexamples to his categories for his definition to stand up. For
example novels such as *Hunger*, by Knut Hamsun, or *Blindness*, by José Saramago, to choose two at
random, depict lives on the margins or in dream-like states, are characterized by fantasy and fairy-tale
elements, all of which traits are supposed, according to May, to belong essentially to the short story’s
literary domain.

The Story Contains not Its Essence: Paratextual and Reader-based Definitions

Even as the aforementioned writers and critics have sought to define the essence of the short story by
pointing to certain textual features, they have consistently relied upon a discussion of the textual
features of other literary forms, especially the novel, to do so. Against such essentialist thinking, Mary
Louise Pratt points out in her 1981 essay “The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It” that genres
cannot be defined independently of one another: “The paradox is that bigness and smallness are
precisely the feature that cannot be conceived of as separate essences, for they are relative concepts”
(98). Instead, she defines the short story historically and socially by giving reasons that it has
developed dichotomously with the novel, taking the inferior position in that dichotomy. First, she
argues, short stories are commonly regarded as “incomplete” when compared with the novel in that
they can only tell a fragment (or moment) within a character’s “life”; that they deal with only a single
thing, whereas a novel deals with many things; and that they are not published as stand-alone texts.
Second, short stories are, historically, regarded as inferior to the novel in that they concern submerged
population groups, which must always be defined in relation to the mainstream population groups of
novels; third, short stories are oral (pre-literate) in tone or other quality, while novels are written
(literate); fourth short stories have absorbed moribund forms that novelists have shunned; and fifth
short stories have been associated with commercialism and how-to manuals, making them unfashionable with the modernist scholarly impulse.

Of particular interest in Pratt’s definitional traits for the short story are those external to the text itself, because these paratextual traits represent a departure from earlier attempts to define the genre. Her observation, for example, that short stories are seldom published as stand-alone texts adds a trait to the definition of short stories that has nothing whatsoever to do with what may be found within their texts. Likewise the association of the short story with how-to manuals or, I might add, the university creative writing workshop, is a paratextual trait of the short story. When we speak of definitions for things, we often imagine the pronouncement of a priori conditions that various candidates might or might not meet. Literary genres, Pratt is arguing, do not easily lend themselves to such definitions but are defined more inductively, through tendencies both textual and paratextual. Although her use of specific terms such as “incomplete” and “life” and “single” to define aspects of the short story might bear more scrutiny, her general point that short stories, like all other genres, are indefinable and meaningless in isolation is well taken and important for the work of short story theory.

A second, prominent non-text-based approach to defining the short story comes through reader-response criticism. In general, reader-response critics argue that literature, short stories included, does not exist, and therefore cannot be defined, without the participation of the reader. Literature is the interaction of the words on the page and the mind of the reader. By way of contrast, formalist critics like Matthews and May talk about short stories as if they are inseparable from the words on the page. For them, short stories are made of tone, theme, imagery, plot and other elements conceived of as being planted in the text by authors for the readers to find (or fail to find).

Not only do reader-response critics consider the reader’s experience while reading a text to be part of defining that text’s genre, they also consider the reader’s knowledge or expectation of the text prior
to her reading of it. In other words, textual features and their effect on the reader are important in a text’s generic categorization, but also important is the reader’s prior knowledge of various genres as well as her prior knowledge of the text in question. If she is handed a short story and told it is a short novel, her reading experience and sense of the work will be altered. Reader-response critic Peter J. Rabinowitz goes so far in *Before Reading* (1987) to argue that a genre is not a group of texts that share certain textual features but a way of reading texts (177). He points out that one way a given text can be misread is when a reader approaches it as belonging to a different genre than the author intended and, therefore, applying inappropriate rules of interpretation (176). The resultant misreading occurs then, not out of ambiguous textual traits but as a result of a mistaken impression held by the reader before reading. Rabinowitz’s point is useful to the discussion of short story definition in that it suggests that a given text’s definition as a short story is dependent not only upon a reader being familiar with the short story genre, but also upon her approaching the text as a short story, rather than as a chapter of a novel, in which case she would apply different interpretive rules, with different results.

The most prominent short-story theorist working from a reader-response perspective today, particularly with respect to the effects of the reader’s generic expectations on short story definition, is Susan Lohafer. In her 1990 article “A Cognitive Approach to Storyness,” Lohafer approaches defining the short story by accumulating data about how short stories are read. In this way she says, “We can gain an experimental approach to essentialist, honorific concepts inherited from Poe: ‘unity,’ ‘totality,’ and ‘single effect.’ . . . We can ask how storyness is recognized” (303). Using herself as a test reader, she identified what she calls preclosure points in forty-five different oft-anthologized American short stories. A preclosure point, she explains, is a sentence prior to a short story’s final sentence that a reader feels could be the last sentence of the story (303). Such sentences activate the reader’s intuitive sense of “storyness,” the impression that an entire story has been told. Lohafer therefore adds to the discussion
of what a story is the consideration of what readers of various backgrounds instinctively recognize as a story. Clearly the point at which “storyness” is activated in an actual reader depends upon her familiarity with the genre and sub-genres of short stories, as well as on her general education, her ethnic background, and numerous other factors. The important point to take from Lohafer, though, is that whether or not a given text is a short story raises questions not only of what is in it (textual considerations) and what is around it (paratextual considerations) but also on who is reading it.

A 1982 article titled “‘Tess’ and Tess: An Experiment in Genre,” by Susan Hunter Brown, presents the findings of a reading experiment similar to Lohafer’s, its goal being an increased understanding of how short stories are recognized by readers, as well as how a text approached as a short story is read differently than a text approached as a chapter from a novel. Brown selected a section of Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles in order to read it, in turn, as a short story (“Tess”) and as an excerpt from a novel (Tess). She proceeds on the assumption that a genre refers to “the interpretive conventions and psychological tendencies which the reader brings to the text,” and not on the “New-Critical belief in the text itself as sole and sufficient source of literary meaning” (26), words that anticipate Rabinowitz’s position in Before Reading. In other words, the reader wields at least as much power as the words on the page when it comes to determining meaning. She goes so far as to claim that, though some texts may resist certain ways of reading (28), “a reader may recreate [a] work as a short story by interpreting it as such” (26). It is of interest, then, to note that “Tess” and Tess were not identical, that she made alterations to Tess to create “Tess”, a text that seemed more short-story-like. Thus, Tess represents a full chapter from the Hardy novel, whereas “Tess” represents only a portion of that chapter. Specifically, Brown omitted a scene that struck her as more appropriate to a novel’s pacing and that, thematically, lacked the economy of a “good” short story and would therefore not sufficiently reward the correct type of reader attention (29); second, she ended “Tess” before the actual end of the chapter.
because, according to the theories of Russian Formalists, a short story ends at high intensity while a novel “continues after the climax” (28). What’s interesting here is that her alteration of *Tess* to create “Tess” threatens to undercut whatever findings her readings uncover in support of her position that readers will transform a text as a result of their attitude toward that text before reading, such as their belief regarding the text’s genre.

Before I summarize Brown’s findings, it is also important to note how she constructs herself as the reader of these texts:

The “I” who reads this short story is in part a product of a literary community and so to some degree representative of a “we,” all those with experience of short stories extensive enough to command, if not to articulate, those conventions by which texts called “short stories” are interpreted as meaningful structures. (30)

Presumably Brown also considers herself part of a literary community with extensive novel-reading experience. Rather than as an idiosyncratic reader, Brown constructs herself here closely along the lines of Stanley Fish’s “informed reader.” Fish’s informed reader is not only able to speak, read, and fully understand the text’s language and dialects, but she also demonstrates “literary competence” and can therefore apply the correct rules of literary interpretation to a text that its genre requires, such as what a symbol is and how if functions, or that beginnings and endings of literary works garner special attention (48). Of course, Brown’s standing in for the “we” of a literary community, begs the question of her ability to do so. Her results might, for instance, have seemed more sound, according to a pseudo-scientific method, if she had used a large sampling of diverse, actual readers who all shared her literary competence regarding short stories and novels. That said, genre as a way of reading transcends all its present, actual living practitioners, so an experiment of this sort can only hope to be partially conclusive regarding the way genre functions in the interpretation and “re-creation” of texts.
When reading “Tess,” Brown finds herself (or makes herself, given that she’s playing a self-assigned role as part of a literary community) paying more attention to each word than she does when reading Tess. The reason for this, she explains, is that the reader’s knowledge of a short story’s brevity commands her to read more carefully, considering word connotation. She writes, “We know in advance that we must form a tight network of connections among the elements of a short story” (34). She’s saying, then, that mere knowledge that a text stands alone rather than is part of a whole makes the reader attend to different aspects of that text. For example, both texts are characterized by “a series of words designating sleep or some state opposed to everyday waking consciousness” (31). While reading “Tess,” Brown notes the creation of a dominant “verbal pattern” out of this series of words, a pattern that works to create meaning through thematic associations and characterization. While reading Tess, on the other hand, Brown attends to this series of words less as a motif suggestion theme and more as a suggestion of what is to come in the plot (34). She explains this genre-constrained way of reading by citing Gary Saul Morson’s hierarchy of relevance, a concept that says “different genres . . . imply different rules for ordering [a text’s meaning],” that they determine which details of a text a reader will regard as central and which peripheral (34).

Peter Rabinowitz, in Before Reading, presents a similar model for making sense of how readers interpret (primarily long) fiction. His rules of reading—rules of notice, which guide a reader toward what elements of a text to give special attention (43); rules of signification, which guide a reader in making sense of those noticed elements (44); rules of configuration, which guide a reader in developing expectations about what will occur next in a text (44); and rules of coherence, which guide a reader in understanding why what occurs in a text has occurred (45)—are genre-specific. For example, he suggests that readers of popular fiction prioritize rules of configuration over rules of signification while readers of literary fiction do the reverse (185). Though Rabinowitz doesn’t deal much with the
difference between how people read short versus long fiction, it seems safe to say that, using his terminology, Brown’s way of reading “Tess” prioritizes rules of signification while her way of reading *Tess* prioritizes rules of configuration.

Brown’s experiment has important implications for the debate over story definition. We have seen how formalist short story theorists have relied solely upon a comparison of textual traits in novels versus textual traits in short stories to define the latter. Brown’s experiment adds to the discussion a consideration of how novels are read versus how short stories are read. Since, according to reader-response theorists, what the reader brings to the text is just as important as the words on the page in the creation of literature such as the short story, developing an understanding of how their knowledge interacts with the textual features becomes crucial in defining what precisely a short story might be.

That said, there are a few flaws in Brown’s experiment that limit its usefulness to discussions of short story definition. One I have already mentioned, her decision to be the sole reader and representative of her literary community. A second, also mentioned, is that she did not read identical texts, which prevents a certain consistency in her experiment. If her purpose was to determine how a reader’s awareness of genre affects her reading of the same text, then the text she reads should be identical so that all elements except her experimental variable is kept as equal as possible. A final flaw in her experiment is that, not only were the texts not identical, but that “Tess” was altered by Brown herself. Therefore, not only does Brown re-create the text as a short story through her reading, but, prior to reading, she has already re-created the text as a short story through her editing. In other words, she is essentially re-reading the text as a short story, being already familiar with what its short-story-esque elements demand of the reader. These flaws diminish the significance of her experiment’s conclusion and its relevance to a discussion of short story definition.
Neither Fish Nor Fowl: The Novel-in-Stories

Although Brander Matthews may have been prophetic in predicting some modern critics’ insistence that short stories must, by definition, stand alone (i.e. display “unity” or, to use Rabinowitz’s term, “cohere”), he seemed unable to anticipate or appreciate the hybrid genre called the novel-in-stories, among other names, despite the fact that this genre is at least as old as Chaucer, a “Short-story” writer whom Matthews admired: “The Short-story is not . . . a chapter out of a Novel, or an incident or an episode extracted from a longer tale, but at its best it impresses the reader with the belief that it would be spoiled if it were made larger, or if it were incorporated into a more elaborate work (italics mine)” (73). In fact, some of the most fascinating recent work in short story theory concerns this hybrid genre that goes by many names, among them the short story cycle, the composite novel, the short story sequence, and the novel-in-stories.

The earliest of these terms, the short story cycle, was coined by Forrest Ingram in his 1971 study, *Representative Short Story Cycles*, in which he defines the genre by explaining that each short story must be fully capable of standing on its own while at the same time cohering with the other units to form an artistic whole (2). Robert M. Luscher, took exception in his 1989 essay with Ingram’s description of the hybrid form as cyclical in structure. He argues, rather, that since “short story cycles” are intended to be read from the first page to the last, their themes and other meanings must develop for the reader cumulatively and sequentially. Therefore, he suggests that a more appropriate name for the genre is the short-story sequence. In a 1995 essay, Margot Kelley introduces the term “novel-in-stories” to designate texts that differ from short story cycles in the following ways: first, characters in novels-in-stories recur so that they are developed over the course of the entire text; second, novels-in-stories utilize multiple character points of view, with the result that there are few, if any, truly minor characters; third, important events occur “offstage,” allowing for reader agency in interpretation;
fourth, story climaxes are heightened sequentially, as if resonating with one another to form a “rising sawtooth” pattern, and fifth, framing devices are minimal. Luscher and Kelley are describing slightly different genres with the tension between short story and novel at its very heart.

Describing a series of short stories in these ways is clearly antithetical to Matthews’ notion of the form in that Matthews seems to view a short story as a self-contained planet with no elements in common with other planets. In fact, when Matthews claims that putting stories together to form a longer work would “spoil” them, we begin to think of stories of planets composed of mutually cancelling anti-matter. The existence and success of short-story cycles, along with the individual successes of their short stories, suggests that Matthews overstated the importance of unity to the definition of a short story. In any case, whether novels-in-stories, short-story sequences, and short-story cycles represent one genre or three, they are all useful to the discussion of short story definition in at least one way: they present a happy medium between short stories and novels so that the words that compose them are in a literal sense coextensive. In other words, every word in a novel-in-stories participates in both a novel and a short story, and every short story in a novel-in-stories represents, verbatim, a part of a novel. This coextension presents a wonderful opportunity to reader-response theorists to investigate how reading novels versus reading short stories alters the meanings of a text. Likewise it allows short story theorists to closely compare the features of texts that double as short stories and as novels, that work separately and yet together.

Reading *Love Medicine* as a Novel-in-Stories

Peter J. Rabinowitz didn’t comment on novels-in-stories in his seminal work on genre theory, but if he had he might have discovered a rich source for investigating the different ways readers approach two major prose genres. However, in 1996, Susan Ferguson applied a reading experiment similar to
Brown’s experiment with “Tess” and *Tess* to stories from Louise Erdrich’s novels-in-stories *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*. She distinguishes what she calls Erdrich’s “‘new’ kind of story-sequence novel” from short story cycles and sequences in a way that falls under Margot Kelley’s aforementioned 1995 definition of the novel-in-stories quite nicely:

[Erdrich’s] novels are not generically similar to those collections that are identified as ‘cycles’ or ‘sequences’ . . . precisely because [her] ‘stories’ have become ‘chapters,’ and the intermittently reappearing narrators achieve independent, important lives as characters in their own narratives as well as in those of the other character/narrators. (542-555)

In this “new” novel, which I have already called by Kelley’s term “novel-in-stories,” and which Ferguson distinguishes from cycles and sequences, characters can achieve the fullness they acquire in novels without requiring the linear narrative of the traditional novel. In other words, writers have the space to flesh out a character’s life that they don’t have when presenting a character in a short story. Although I don’t agree that characters cannot achieve a similar fullness in cycles and sequences as they do in a novel, I offer Ferguson’s experiment as an important improvement upon Brown’s. In fact, Ferguson announces that one of her purposes in repeating Brown’s experiment with this “new” genre of novel is to determine if and how the results will differ.

She begins her discussion of *Love Medicine* with its second chapter, “Saint Marie,” which, she explains, Erdrich transferred from its original publication in a 1984 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* to her novel-in-stories of the same year with few changes. The story/chapter follows a young Native American woman, Marie, as she climbs up the hill from her reservation to gain access to a Catholic convent. Part of Marie’s motivation is to defy a nun at the convent, Sister Leopolda, who had mistreated her in grammar school. The result is a violent conflict in which Marie is changed both
inwardly and outwardly into a saint.

Ferguson reads “Saint Marie,” qua short story, as a rewriting of the German folktale “Hansel and Gretel” with its primary characters, Marie Lazarre and Sister Leopolda, repeating (with variation) the roles of Gretel and the witch, respectively. Although, Ferguson argues, “Saint Marie” follows the folktale’s pattern, “the folk tale . . . is suddenly metamorphosed into a warped ‘saint’s legend’” when Sister Leopolda stabs Marie in the hand with a fork she’d been using to test the bread in the oven (551). The wound causes the bleeding in Marie’s hand that the other nuns, who haven’t been privy to Leopolda and Marie’s altercation, mistake for stigmata. As a result, Marie is elevated to the status of saint, as she had wanted all along. When Sister Leopolda is forced to kneel before her in order to hide her guilt from the other sisters, Marie feels pity for her and forgives her, thus taking on actual saintly aspects. In summary, Ferguson writes, “Although the end of the story suggests that Marie is not to be free of her illusions [of saintliness], it hardly matters, as the characters have played out their roles, served their purposes in the larger myth, as do Gretel and the Witch” (554). Essentially Ferguson is saying that the primary effect of “Saint Marie,” when read as a short story, is to amplify the importance of theme and minimize the importance of character development.

In reading “Saint Marie” qua chapter, Ferguson focuses less on thematic and intertextual issues, and more on the development of the main characters. Given that Marie is introduced as a minor character in Love Medicine’s first chapter, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” her role as narrator in “Saint Marie,” the second chapter, adds a new dimension to the reader’s understanding of her character. Since the second chapter is set fifty years before the first chapter, “Saint Marie” as chapter also gives readers increased insight into an older Marie’s behavior as minor character in the previous chapter. In light of the events in “Saint Marie,” Ferguson writes of Marie, “Her apparent lack of any genuine emotions [in “The World’s Greatest Fisherman”] except those connected with power and prestige may all be traced
to this formative period [that depicted in ‘Saint Marie’]” (546). In other words, readers’ recognition of Marie in the second chapter as a character from the first chapter will predispose them to interpret her actions and experiences as sources of her development into the older character depicted in the earlier chapter rather than to read her as a character type or symbol whose function in “Saint Marie” is to act in ways that present broader societal truths, such as to comment on the complicated relationship between the Catholic church and the local Native American population.

Concluding her essay, Ferguson claims that her experiment supports the “hypothesis that the short story is formally not so much an essentially separate and distinct genre as that fiction is read differently when it appears as a story rather than as part of a larger unit” (553). This conclusion, though articulated differently, is more or less in concordance with Rabinowitz’s and Brown’s formulations of genre as a way of reading rather than a category of works that share certain textual features. The only difference might be that Ferguson is attributing more influence to the words on the page over the meaning of the text “created” by reading than Rabinowitz and Brown, who locate more influence over the text’s meaning in the reader. I tend to agree with her on this point. I agree with Rabinowitz that a “trained academic reader [like Ferguson] . . . can find a pattern in virtually anything [they read]” (181) such as a letter between real people that is presented to that “trained academic reader” as a short story. Such an experiment is, in fact, borne out by Stanley Fish and described in his important essay “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One.” At the same time, readers’ understanding and anticipation of genre characteristics come primarily from reading actual works, grouping of words, in that reputed genre and, therefore, we must attribute a fair amount of influence over a text’s meaning to the physical words on the page and their properties.

Wolfgang Iser, in *The Act of Reading* (1978), provides a model of reading that, while it is as imperfect as any hypothetical reader, represents a mean between attributing too much influence to the
physical work and too much influence to the reader when it comes to creating a text. Iser’s “implied reader”

embody all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—
predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself.
Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the
structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader.

(34)

Here Iser makes it clear that that reader and the physical words on the page (which he calls the text)
share the responsibility of creating meaning, a process he refers to as a “cooperative enterprise” (27). If
anything, he attributes slightly more influence to the text. Also worth mentioning is Iser’s belief that the
implied reader, as it is “implied” by the structure of the text, has no “predetermined” character or
“historical situation” (34). Iser views this alleged lack of predetermined character an advantage of his
reading model because it suggests that the implied reader does not vary with time or place.

Crucial to understanding Iser’s theory of reading is the notion of “blanks” in the text. Iser explains,
“the blank . . . designates a vacancy in the overall system of the text, the filling of which [by the actual
reader] brings about an interaction of textual patterns” (182). By way of example, Iser speaks of
parallel plots. Imagine someone reading the beginning of a story that describes a plot in which Sally is
robbing a bank. Then imagine that the narrative suddenly cuts to a different plot that seems to have no
relation to the first plot, say a gorilla grooming a kitten as a rainstorm approaches. The unknown
relationship between these two plots constitutes a “blank” for the reader to fill. In other words, the
blank in the text invites the reader to participate by filling it in. Once the reader fills in the blank, a
process Iser calls “ideation” (135), a tentative explanation or meaning is achieved. However, when,
later during the narrative, the reader encounters information inconsistent with her explanation, the
process Iser terms “negation” (220), she is forced to revise that ideation. In sum, Iser’s implied reader, the text’s “network of response-inviting structures” (34) prompts the real reader to ideate and revise those ideations as new information prompts her during the sequential reading experience. The text’s meaning, then develops over time and is retained in the reader’s memory. It is described by the evolution of ideation that the implied reader invites.

Re-reading Love Medicine as a Novel-in-Stories

I will now report on my reading of Chapter Three of Love Medicine, “Wild Geese,” first as a short story and then as a chapter. Unlike Suzanne Hunter Brown, who altered the story “Tess” or Susan Ferguson, who read a chapter version of “Saint Marie” that the author, Louise Erdrich, had altered so that it fit more smoothly in with the other chapters of Love Medicine, I will read two identical texts. Also unlike these two authors, who used no clear reading model to construct themselves as readers, I will use Iser’s model of the implied reader as to describe my interaction with the texts.

“Wild Geese,” the Short Story

“Wild Geese” is a first-person narrative of roughly 2,300 words told in present tense. On the first page, the year 1934 is given under the title and, under that, the name “Nector Kashpaw.” The title itself immediately suggests to me, the real reader, a rural setting or subject, while the date connotes a time of world-wide depression shortly prior to World War II. Both of these associations must be regarded as idiosyncratic on my part, given my identity an American city dweller who associates geese with the countryside and the year 1934 with the Great Depression. “Nector Kashpaw” suggests to me the name of a person of indeterminate ethnicity situated in that time and place. The story begins: “On Friday
mornings, I go down to the sloughs with my brother Eli and wait for the birds to land.” This first sentence confirms the rural setting and suggests that the narrator is a hunter, either for sport or for food. We might regard this indeterminacy as a blank, which I fill by the ideation that the narrator is hunting for food, given the story’s setting during the Great Depression.

A second blank appears with regard to the relationship between Nector and Eli. How am I to imagine the relationship between these brothers? My solution is to consider the names symbolically. “Eli” simply makes me think of Biblical characters, though I’m not familiar enough with the Bible to pick out any particular story. The name “Nector” reminds me of Nestor from the *Iliad*, who gave bad, even calamitous, advice. Along with Nestor, I think of the word “nectar,” as in “nectar of the gods,” and associate that sweetness with Nestor’s words. The result is that I mildly distrust Nector, the narrator. I interpret the name “Kashpaw” to mean “cash paw” and attribute animalistic, mercenary motives to the narrator. Indeed, as I read on, it turns out that the brothers are hunting geese to sell to “the Sisters,” which I assume refers to the denizens of a local convent, given that “sisters” is capitalized and preceded by a definite article. Selling food to nuns carries with it a certain inappropriate connotation in my mind, given my association of religious figures such as nuns with acts of charity. So far, then, I feel that my ideation regarding at least Nector’s motives and character has been corroborated. I feel that I understand the world the text has placed me in.

The rest of the first paragraph reads as follows:

We have built ourselves a little blind. Eli has second sense and an aim I cannot match, but he is shy and doesn’t like to talk. In this way it is a good partnership. Because I got sent to school, I am the one who always walks into town and sells what we shoot. I get the price from the Sisters, who cook for the priests, and then I come home and split the money in half. Eli usually takes his bottle off into the woods, while I go into town, to
fiddle dance and spark the girls.

This paragraph gives me a greater feel for the setting and the characters’ weekly routine, sets up a background for the very short story to come. The importance of the date 1934 has already begun to fade from the my mind. Instead, the contrast between the brothers—Eli as skilled in rural pursuits and shy, Nector as educated and suave—becomes my focus, given the emphasis the narrator puts on their working together despite obvious dissimilarities. I notice how the brothers work together as a unit to satisfy their distinct ends. A blank is, at this point introduced to me: How do I predict their relationship’s success or sustainability, given their differences? For one thing, it seems clear that this story will be about the relationship between these two brothers since the story started with them. I’ve noticed in short stories that the character or situation introduced in the first paragraph often constitutes the primary subject of the story. As I consider the brothers, I guess that the differences in their personality will produce a rend in their relationship. I think of Cain and Abel, along with their distinct personalities. In this case, Nector would be Cain, the less skilled (in matters of providing basic needs) and more ambitious of the brothers, while Eli would be Abel. These associations add to my idiosyncratic conviction that a falling-out between the brothers is forthcoming.

But then it occurs to me that my rules of configuration, to use Rabinowitz’s term, have been activated, despite the fact that Suzanne Hunter Brown argues rather convincingly in an article I have recently studied that informed readers think less about plot than theme while reading a short story. I start to doubt whether or not I am reading a short story as a short story should be read. I wonder why the implied reader isn’t better guiding me. It also occurs to me that I might be identifying blanks where other readers would not, or that I am failing to identify blanks where others would. For example, shouldn’t I be wondering whether or not Eli is an alcoholic (I look back at the first sentence and see the word “blind” and think, strangely, of the phrase “blind drunk”) or whether Nector will contract an
STD? I’m not sure. So I bracket these concerns and go on with the experiment. I have a paper to write, conclusions to draw.

The next paragraph begins: “So there is a Friday near sundown, the summer I am out of school, that finds me walking up the hill with two geese slung from either wrist, tied with rubber bands.” Here the story’s plot seems to begin. In my experience, short story plots begin on the first page, often by introducing the “day that was different,” which I take to be this summer Friday. Due to Eli’s unremarked absence and to the fact that Nector is carrying geese, I conclude that Nector is walking to the convent to sell geese his brother has just shot, which corresponds with the routine described. Given that this is a very short story, I expect a quick interruption to this typical routine that was so succinctly set-up in the first paragraph. This expectation comes from my familiarity with patterns in short stories wherein a normal routine is interrupted by an event that initiates the plot. This suspicion is heightened when Nector provides a mysterious disclaimer in the next sentence: “Just to set the record clear, I am a good-looking boy, tall and slim, without a belly hanging in the way. I can have the pick of girls, is what I’m saying” (61-61). Whereas up to this point I’ve had only—at most—allusive reasons for distrusting the narrator, now a red flag goes up. Because his disclaimer comes apropos of nothing, I start to believe that there are important thoughts on the narrator’s “mind” that he is not sharing (or, to speak more accurately, things about the narrator the author has chosen not to reveal). This blank causes me to ideate that Nector’s behavior in the story to come will demonstrate that he is, in fact, desperate for female attention. It seems as though he is speaking of his “pick of the girls” here out of bravado, given that he is defending himself to no character but himself.

Nector partially explains his disclaimer in the next sentence by indicating that, although his options are not limited, he has already chosen his life mate: Lulu Nanapush. Lulu’s first name suggests to me a young or silly person, whereas her last name resonates with “Kashpaw” as being somehow ethnic.
Nector describes Lulu as mysterious, her personality elusive to him, and the connotation—given his current errand—suggests a predator-prey relationship. He describes her as “an eyeful” and “a tart berry,” commodities for his consumption. While lost in thought, he is unaware of the hurried approach of Marie Lazarre until she is “barreling down” on him “like a damn train.” Immediately such a description characterizes in my mind Marie as forthright and direct as opposed to seductive or flirtatious like Lulu. Likewise, her name, a combination of the Virgin Mary and Lazarus, suggests purity and sacrifice combined with eternal reward. As Marie tries to pass, Nectar detains her instinctively, suggesting his role as a bully, corroborating my ideation that he is not so confident with girls as he claimed to be.

Nector addresses Marie bluntly—“Whoa, slow down girl”—and, when she refuses to stop, comes to the conclusion that she has stolen valuables from the convent behind her, given that she is carrying a pillow case initialed SHC, which Nector recognizes as the acronym for Sacred Heart Convent. A blank pops up here as I feel asked by the text to wonder why Nector jumps to such a conclusion. I decide that he does so for one of two reasons: one, he is a misogynist or has something else against Marie that causes him to look for a reason to ridicule or otherwise abuse her; two, he has sometimes thought of robbing the convent himself or is, at the very least, feeling guilty for selling geese to the nuns. Either of these ideations leads me to expect that he will accuse her falsely and be proved wrong because his reasons for believing her to be a thief appear not to be sound. In the next sentence, he justifies his conclusion that she is stealing to himself by identifying her as belonging to “a family of horse-thieving drunks,” which implies she is of a lower social standing than he. This negation causes me to partially revise my ideation here. Perhaps rather than being poor, as I concluded earlier in the story, he is fairly well off and only sells geese for extra money. His next thought, however, negates and causes me to revise this ideation yet again: if she is indeed carrying stolen items, he might receive a cash reward for
returning them. Maybe rather than being better off than Lulu, he despises her for being poor like him. At this moment—particularly given Nector’s doubtful disclaimer about being in no need of female attention—I suspect that Marie is in danger of his physical assault. As if anticipating this reaction from his fictional audience, Nector, in the next paragraph, attempts to assuage suspicion by claiming that such money would be used for a “French-style” wedding with Lulu, a reason that sounds phony in the poor setting of the story.

As he physically detains her, Marie demands to be released, calling Nector a “dirty Indian.” At this point, Nector’s ethnicity is clear to me: Native American. Although “Indian” could also refer to a person from India, I am inclined to think of Nector as Native American because it occurs to me that Native Americans would be more prevalent in the United States in 1934 than people from India. This explanation makes me wonder why I have assumed all along that the story is taking place in the United States. The only reason I can think of is the lack of any unfamiliar vocabulary or idioms. Moving on.

Given the ethnic sound of “Lazarre,” and given the fact that she called him an “Indian,” I begin to suspect that Marie is not Native American. He, amused, in turn thinks of her as a “skinny white girl from a family so low you cannot even think they are in the same class as Kashpaws” (63) and grabs her arm so that the dead geese fall against her. This exchange suggests to me that characters are poor. In keeping with what appears to be (but hasn’t yet been negated or confirmed) Nector’s unreliability as regards his identity (high-class lady’s man, he would have the reader believe), I can only assume that the Kashpaws and Lazarres are both in the lower class.

Once Nector grabs Marie’s arm, she kicks him, which causes him—he reports with moderate shame—to twist her arm until tears come to her eyes. At this point—given the extremes to which short stories quickly move—I expect either a senseless escalation of violence, in which the oppressed becomes oppressor, or a reconciliation on the grounds of shared suffering. These are two plot patterns I
am familiar with in short stories, which typically involve just one or two reversals or changes in a character. The sight of Marie’s tears makes Nector release her arm, at which point she launches an attack by kneeling him in the stomach and knocking him down. This reversal of expectation, a skinny girl overpowering a stronger boy, lends the scene humor that lessens the serious danger to Marie that I have been sensing. I also, for the first time, I sense that Nector’s character is destined by the author to be redeemed, in the sense that Erdrich has been characterizing him as shifty and greedy so that a reader such as myself will notice when he takes sympathy on a fellow human being. In any case, I’ve noticed.

On the way down, Nector rips off part of Marie’s dress, which she reclaims from his prone figure. His action of ripping off part of her clothing suggests to me the possibility of rape. Otherwise, I think, why would Erdrich include such a detail? Does this constitute a blank, O Implied Reader? Why has Louise Erdrich included this detail? Never mind, you’re just a “response-inviting structure” in the text and can’t answer me. Marie says, “Lay there, you ugly sonofabitch!” Her description of him as ugly confirms my suspicion that he has been an unreliable narrator so far as his status as a lady’s man is concerned. At the same time, I think, maybe she is simply calling him ugly for what he’s done or for the look of pain he might have on his face. Her comment, perhaps as a result of the vanity he implied with his earlier disclaimer, causes him to lose his feelings of sympathy for Marie and to surge forward until she is lying pinned beneath him. He notes as he descends that the dead geese, which had aided in pulling him over after her initial attack, are now helping to hold her down. Of the geese, he says, “Their black eyes stare, frozen.” Here I begin to expect that my earlier anticipation of escalating violence was correct. The grotesque presence of the animal cadavers being flung around and pressed against their bodies lends the scene a grisly aspect. At the same time, I have leisure to suppose as I write down my reactions, the grotesque also lends the scene more humor. If, I think, this scene were being told from a more removed point of view, Nector might look very funny with the dead geese tied to his arms and
restricting his movements. So, I see that Erdrich’s choice of telling the story in first person through Nector, limits the comic effect.

As Nector pins Marie, he describes her eyes and his reaction to them: “Her eyes are tense and wild, animal eyes. My neck chills” (64). This turning of the tables and the attendant descriptions, suggestive of brute struggle and death, remove the brief comedy that accompanied the early part of their interaction. The rhyme between Marie’s eyes and those of the dead geese lead me to expect that she might be killed in this altercation. Nector accuses her of having stolen the pillow case and its putative valuables from the nuns. She laughs derisively, and his accusation begins to seem like more of an effort on his part to regain control of the situation than a follow-through of his greedy desire for the reward. Marie’s unruffled quality suggests that his physical dominance over her is no match for an invisible power she has over him. I wonder what this power might be. Social prestige? Her having witnessed his previous moment of weakness? Having identified him as unattractive? She repeats his accusation as if it were absurd. In an effort to squelch her continued defiance, he covers her mouth, and “her slick, white teeth click, harmless, against [his] palm.” I am reminded here of the scene in Native Son where Bigger Thomas accidentally smothers Mary Dalton to death by covering her mouth, out of fear that they would be discovered together. This intertextual suggestion occurs, perhaps, because I’ve recently read Wright’s novel, which shares some characteristics with “Wild Geese” in that it involves a lower-class ethnic minority narrator involved in an ambiguous relationship with a white woman. Since Native Son is tragic, some of this tragedy bleeds into my expectations for “Wild Geese.”

I reproduce the next paragraph in full because it seems to represent a turning point:

She lays still, then goes stiller. I look into her eyes and see the hard tears have frozen in the corners. She moves her legs. I keep her down. Something happens. The bones of her hips lock to either side of my hips, and I am held in a light vise. I stiffen like I am
shocked. It hits me then that I am lying full length across a woman, not a girl. Her breasts graze my chest, soft and pointed. I cannot help but lower myself the slightest bit to feel them better. And then I am caught. I give way. I cannot help myself, because to my everlasting wonder, Marie is all tight plush acceptance, graceful movements, little jabs that lead me underneath her skirt where she is slick, warm, silk. I touch her with one hand in that one touch I lose myself. (65)

This paragraph, given the narrator’s neutral emotions and the equalization of the characters’ power, shifts the struggle to apparent sexual intercourse without allowing an easy interpretation of rape. Through impressionistic detail provided, I gather that they have consensual foreplay or, possibly, sex. The end of the sexual activity is signaled by a paragraph change and a seeming return to conscious action on the part of the narrator: “When I come back, and when I look down on her, I know how badly I have been weakened” (65). Marie’s humorously dissimilar attitude is expressed by a growl and a pronouncement: “I’ve had better” (65).

The moment’s tension is again deflated, and the reader settles back to enjoy a tableau of young lust. Yet, the next lines—in which Nector reveals that they have not had sex and that Marie’s pronouncement is pure bravado—again ratchets up the tension with further connotations of rape: “I know this isn’t true because we haven’t done anything yet. She just doesn’t know what comes next” (65). The assurance of his declaration, along with its consistency with the description of their struggle—no intercourse was described—negate my ideation that Nector’s claims of sexual prowess were posturing. I begin to reevaluate his character and the honesty with which he tells the story. The advantage of his apparent sexual knowledge over hers also makes me question the true consensuality of the foregoing actions.

Panic enters Nector’s narrative at this point as he jumps away from her, as from a threat, and scans
the surroundings for witnesses. In particular he concentrates upon the buildings of the nearby convent, where he had been headed to sell the geese: “On the hill, the windows dark in the white-washed brick seem to harbor a thousand holy eyes widening and narrowing” (65). The fact that the convent has been in view the whole time, “witnessing” the scene, without having been described for the reader, recreates for me Nector’s apparent feeling of vulnerability. I realize that, had Erdrich described the convent as being in view beforehand, Nector’s panic would not so cleverly have been reproduced in me, the reader. Adding to this effect of vulnerability is that Nector can only imagine that there might be “narrowing” eyes behind the dark windows. This uncertainty increases his fear, I think, that he will be accused of raping a white woman. Again, my mind drifts to Native Son, where these were exactly Bigger Thomas’s fears. The only possible witness to his presence with Mary is Mary’s mother, who Bigger believes to be blind. But is he really? The intertextuality here is very suggestive to me, and I expect the story to veer toward a serious ending.

Nector accuses Marie, whose countenance is anything but disturbed, of having coerced him into their sexual union. Again she mocks the accusation, and I am left to assume that it is as unfounded as the first—that she had stolen from the convent. The implication, then, is that he is not innocent. Meanwhile he is hiding his shame—his erection—behind the dead geese, a humorous yet disturbing detail. The scene swings indeterminately between comedy and tragedy. Marie “shakes her hand, letting the pillow case drop clear so [Nector] can see the ugly wound.” This reference to an unknown wound, compounded with the location of his own hidden shame (his groin) and the thick air of falsity that surrounds his accusation, leads me to believe that the wound is sexual in nature, perhaps the result of forced vaginal penetration that the narrator has been denying to the reader. The tension is quickly cut away, however, in the next paragraph, which identifies the nature and location of the “ugly wound”:

Her hand looks bad, cut and swollen, and it has not been washed. Even afraid as I am, I
cannot help but feel how bad her hand must hurt and throb . . . The girl’s hand must have hurt when I threw her on the ground, yet she didn’t cry out . . . Did the nuns catch her and beat her when she tried to steal their linen? (66)

As Nector tries to come to terms with the sudden revelation of the wound, so do I. Where has this girl actually come from?

Marie is transformed for me into a woman with a mysterious past or, even, into a supernatural figure. The location of her wound suggests crucifixion, and her association with the convent along with her physical abjection combined with mental triumph makes me think of a saint, though not of the typical sort. Disarmed by his guilt at hurting her, Nector sits beside her and offers her the birds to take home and roast. He thinks then of the animals he traps or shoots, only maiming them, how difficult it is for him to put them out of their misery: “I touch the suffering bodies like they were killed saints I should handle with gentle reverence. This is how I take Marie’s hand. This is how I hold her wounded hand in my hand” (67). The story ends with Nector holding Marie’s hand, against his conscious wishes and judgment, as out of some natural instinct.

As a short story, “Wild Geese” leaves several questions unanswered. What will occur as a result of Nector and Marie’s encounter? The implication seems to be that they have no particular future together in terms of a successful, socially recognized relationship, given Nector’s ambivalent feelings at the end. Because this is the end of the short story, I decide that this blank is meant to be left unfilled. So far as the story is concerned there is no future relationship. The story’s meaning must be contained in this brief encounter. Who, then, exactly is Marie and why is she running wounded from the direction of the convent, carrying a convent pillow case? One of my options is to accept Nector’s interpretation that she has been beaten by the nuns as she tried to steal the empty pillow case. Since I’ve learned to question Nector’s judgment, particularly with reference to Marie’s motives, and since the wound seems
incompatible with such a petty theft, I discount this option. However, no alternate suggests itself to me. Am I to seek explanation in religious allegory? If so, I feel unequal to the task, not knowledgeable enough about Christianity. Is the story an allegory about white and Native American interaction? The characters seem rather verisimilar to be allegorical figures. With no alternative, though, I move to a different level of interpretation, that of symbolism and metaphor. The most obvious interpretation is that Marie is not a “skinny white girl” but a manifestation of the Virgin Mary who has tamed Nector, purifying him of his mean-spirited ways.

“Wild Geese,” the Chapter

Given Ferguson’s discussion of the previous chapter in Love Medicine, “Saint Marie,” it should be clear that none of the mysteries surrounding Marie will obtain when “Wild Geese” is read in its published order as a chapter. The story of her interaction with Sister Leopolda has just been narrated in the second chapter. Thus, Marie’s “barreling down the hill” along with her hard look of determination are easily explained as the result of her victory over Sister Leopolda at the convent. Instead of casting a mystical aspect over her interaction with Nector, she invests the entire scene with a dose of dramatic irony (I, as the reader, know more than Nector does) that lightens the mood throughout. However, the dramatic irony extends to Marie as well. From the first chapter of the book, I know that Marie and Nector eventually marry and raise a large family, many of whom are characters in the stories of Love Medicine. The first chapter of the novel, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” depicts him fifty years later in his dotage as the harmless, loveable husband of the family’s matriarch, Marie. Therefore, by the time I read “Wild Geese,” I not only know quite a bit about Marie’s ambitions in the world, such as raising her class by joining the convent, as is described in “Saint Marie,” but I’ve also seen that she has reached many of her goals: She has secured a husband, raised a family, and placed herself in a
respectable position in the community, all of which is revealed in the first chapter. This extra knowledge adds to the dramatic irony, making of Nector less a threat as a sexual predator and more of a buffoon destined to be seduced by the first girl who comes along, whether it be Lulu or Marie.

Thus, the effect of reading the exact same text, “Wild Geese,” is dramatically changed by its position of being read after the first two chapters. For the most part, I am much less likely to latch onto specific details of the text—such as the names, the imagery, the patterns—as way of understanding its meaning, when reading it as a chapter. These blanks have been filled in by the previous two chapters. In fact, the meaning is already framed with the first page. I know by his name that the narrator is Marie’s future husband. Therefore, when they meet in the woods directly after Nector has self-consciously claimed a destiny with Lulu, I assume the chapter will present the beginnings of their courtship. Even when the struggle between them starts, the ambiguity between consensuality and rape is diminished because I’ve already seen, in the first chapter, their “happy ending.” With a lessening of tension comes a lessening of attention to detail as a way of judging their relationship.

Because “Wild Geese” is set fifty years before the first chapter, I am not quite so attentive to rules of configuration, as Rabinowitz calls those conventions that suggest what is to come in a story’s plot. At least, I’m not as concerned with the action’s long-range consequence. At the same time, clearly the author would not include a chapter if it held nothing of importance. Some of the blanks, then, that occur to me as I read “Wild Geese,” qua chapter, then, have to do with the interim, the space between “Wild Geese” and “The World’s Greatest Fisherman.” A common structure of novels and even short stories is to start near the climax of the plot and then flashback and show how the action arrived at that point. Since I’m familiar with this narrative shape, I suppose that the chapters to come, those following “Wild Geese,” will explain just how the story got from Chapter Two to Chapter One (in terms of lived time). Therefore, though I know how everything turns out with their relationship in the end, one blank I
must fill as I read about their escalating struggle in “Wild Geese” is what it reveals about their seemingly happy relationship of fifty years later. Is it built upon the pregnancy caused by a rape that I am to witness? In other words, rather than activating my rules of configuration, as early chapters of novels often do, “Wild Geese,” as a novel chapter, is activating my rules of coherence, those that make sense of what has been read. Ironically, this chapter causes me to reevaluate what is yet to come in these characters’ lives but which I have already read.

In the same manner, I will reevaluate my reading of “Wild Geese” well after I have read it, as I would not be spurred to do when reading it as a stand-alone story. In Love Medicine’s seventh chapter, “The Plunge of the Brave,” Nector leaves his relationship with Marie for what he believes is true love with Lulu. His agonized decision to abandon his family for a woman that he, and everyone else, suspects as a seductress deepens, retroactively, my understanding of “Wild Geese,” the chapter. What read in chapter version as a primarily comic (as opposed to tragicomic in story version) account of Nector and Marie’s off-kilter courtship is revealed to have been the early warnings of a couple destined for infidelity. I am able to look back at that last moment of ambivalence in Nector as he holds Marie’s hand and re-evaluates it, not as the charming doubts of a young lover, but as the honest doubts of a man whose heart lies elsewhere.

A Wild Goose Chase? Conclusions, Thoughts, Speculations

First, my reservations about the experiment: In trying to faithfully record, using Iser’s model of reading, my experience of reading “Wild Geese” as a short story, I dramatically changed the way I would normally read it. Though I suspect, based on my experience reading short story collections and novels, that I would read “Wild Geese” as a stand-alone story slower and more carefully than I would read it as a middle chapter in a novel—primarily for the reasons given above (i.e. it would take me
longer to orient myself in the story’s world without having previous chapters to go on)—I would never read it as slowly as I did for this experiment. For example, not in a million years would I stop after reading the first sentence and ponder the names of the characters. I only did so in the experiment because I imagine that at some level, and very quickly, my mind is scrutinizing these names, making connections. For example, if one of the names had been “Peter Grimes” or “Britney Spears” or even a mixture of familiar names, such as “Barack Trump,” I would register the made connections. Not so with “Eli” and “Nector,” at least not to the extent that I registered (and essentially constructed) those associations in my recording of the experiment. That’s not to say, however, that my mind does not quickly make similar associations, below the level of my consciousness. For that reason, I noted them in my recording.

In other words, though I intuit that Iser’s model of reading correctly describes to some extent what goes on in a reader’s mind as she reads fiction, I can only assume that much of the putative blank-filling and negation occurs below the level of consciousness and at a speed that cannot be recorded without dramatically slowing down and altering the reading process. In fact, even recording the larger blanks that a reader might actually ideate, or at least wonder about, consciously, such as an unknown connection between parallel plots or uncertainty about a character’s motives, would unnaturally slow down the reading process and affect the process that follows in myriad, unknowable ways. For example, by slowing down to describe my theories about Nector’s honesty or lack thereof as narrator, I am “ideating” more completely than I believe I would have been doing unconsciously. In other words, my theory about his reliability becomes thought-out and tested by the challenge of putting it into words, whereas this wouldn’t be the case at my normal reading speed.

Doubts raised about my chosen method of recording my reading experience while it happened caused me to record my subsequent reading experience of “Wild Geese,” qua chapter, in a different
way. Rather than recording my thoughts as I read, I read at my normal speed and then recorded my experience from memory. This seems like the only way to test Iser’s model of reading without altering reading speed. The advantage it gains in that respect, however, brings about disadvantages in other respects. Given that so many thoughts go through my mind as I read, depending upon memory to recall not only the details of the chapter but also the details of my response to each detail seems dubious. I’m more likely to remember trains of thought than isolated thoughts. Also, by regarding the process in hindsight, after completion, I am likely to elide much of the process by which my ideations were formed and revised. Instead I would likely recall initial blanks and final ideations. Just the fact that my recording of my experience reading “Wild Geese” as a chapter is shorter in terms of word count than the previous recording suggests to me that it lacks many details that, ideally, would have been recorded but that I could not recall. In the end, then, I wonder if Iser’s model of reading is testable and, if not, what its use might be in discussions of how readers make meaning and interact with texts.

Setting these questions aside, I do not claim that the experiment was not interesting or that it offers nothing to the discussion of short stories. One conclusion I feel I can tentatively draw is that short stories are likely to elicit more ideation than novel chapters. This conclusion might be considered in future discussions of short story definitions. That is, it seems to me that, because of the limited space short stories allow an author to tell a story, a reader familiar with the form will be on the lookout for any key piece of information that will tell her how to read that particular short story, down to the level of words and shades of meaning. When reading a chapter of a novel, on the other hand, a reader might be more likely to let blanks go unfilled because she knows there are many pages left in which those tiny cognitive mysteries might be solved. I am drawing the familiar conclusion, based upon my reading experiment and the extraordinary number of blanks I noticed, that, in general, people read short stories more carefully than they do novel chapters. At the same time, such a generalization seems hardly
useful. Some short stories, such as those by O. Henry or those that appear in slick magazines, are likely to be read with less care and concentration than a chapter of *Ulysses* or, really, most Modernist novels. The variables of literary movements, individual author styles, individual reader knowledge, and so on seem to confound any useful generalization about the way people read short stories versus the way they read novel chapters.

Another reservation I have about my tentative conclusion concerns a fundamental doubt my experiment raised regarding Iser’s notion of the “blank.” As I read “Wild Geese,” with the implied reader in mind, the structure of the text that was evidently inviting my responses, it seemed to me that any number of blanks suggested themselves, many of which I doubtlessly ignored on an unconscious level so as to be able to finish the story and not stagnate between sentences, debating possible meanings and outcomes. In his explanations of blanks, Iser suggests that a given text contains a *fixed* set of blanks that every reader must fill through ideation in order to create meaning. Iser explains the variety in readers’ interpretations of texts by claiming that each reader fills in his or her blank differently, according to their personal experience. Whereas there is no doubt in my mind that each reader ideates differently, I have serious doubts that every reader identifies the same blanks in a given text. Claiming this would mean that each real reader understands the rules of every genre in the same way. Without an understanding of genre, there’s no basis for blanks to be suggested by the implied reader. I don’t think anyone would claim that every person with general “literary competence” understands every genre to the same degree and in the same way. Perhaps Iser would argue that blanks are identified and filled subconsciously, and that a reader is therefore unaware of the ideation process. If this is the case, then his theory of reading *certainly* would be untestable.

To conclude, I’d like to say a few words about the usefulness of my experiment as it regards my own writing of short stories. The dissertation that follows is a collection of short stories that I hope
demonstrates a writer taking risks and experimenting with different modes within the loose genre of the short story. In fact, I hope that the difference between my stories raises questions about short story definition and how readers are able to navigate short stories in any consistent and describable manner. I think that it’s sometimes as useful to merely describe what two very different stories have in common (presumably their “storyness,” to use Lohafer’s phrase) as it is to speculate a priori about the qualities of the short story genre. To be honest, my experiment has strengthened my belief that concerning oneself with formulating a definition of a short story is not something a writer of short stories will find very productive. Indeed, each short story I write is an attempt to understand what short stories are, and what else they can be. I feel that if I was able to define what makes a short story a short story, I would lose some of the joy I find in writing them. That said, I’m not very convinced that a short story can be defined in the same way a triangle is. This seems so obvious, in fact, that I wonder why short story critics have spent so much time trying to define the genre. Short stories move, they work, because they are at a very deep level resistant to exhaustive description. For every trait that one can name that seems essential to a short story, someone can find a text regarded as a short story that lacks that trait. This, I think, is a beautiful thing.
Works Cited


Perched in his folding chair at his first meeting of Come Talk to Us, Elliot Baker believed for once that if he opened his mouth people would listen. Through high school he’d been the oafish giant of the classroom, the monster with acne-studded face and calves the size of fencing rolls. In his twenties, while peers learned the double-consciousness of marriage, how to conquer the intractable social foibles of your partner, Elliot gave up on conquering his own. By thirty, he’d lost not only the confidence to mix with others but the desire to do so. Instead, his older sister, a professor of communication studies at Wofford College, had a habit of speaking on his behalf. It was Trudy who had signed him up—as a surprise—for this weekly public-speaking workshop. Although initially he’d resented not being consulted, he decided to try one meeting.

As the first order of business, Bridgie, the facilitator, encouraged the attendees to stand up and speak about what interested them. “Don’t worry about being interesting,” she said. “Just let it rip.” She turned first to the newcomer, Elliot. He blushed. Luckily, Emma, a cute curly-headed “veteran” of the group, must have noticed the agony on his face and stood up in his place. She spoke for several minutes about church, a subject that the other group members seemed to find familiar yet interesting.

“Jesus didn’t save my life or anything. Actually it’s not really about Jesus for me. It’s more about the community of the church. That’s what I like. Community.” Each time she said “community,” she gestured out into the crowd of fellow wallflowers. “I don’t know, though,” she concluded. “This group has sort of taken the place of church in my life.” She smiled and shook her pile of reddish curls. “Sorry, Jesus!”

Elliot chuckled extra loudly at her joke until others around him followed suit.
Next, a man named Derek got up to talk about his dog, Jude. He told a funny story about Jude’s fear of trees. “I have to walk him in the field behind my house, nowhere else,” Derek said, laughing himself to tears.

“Maybe Jude would like the beach,” someone offered, and the group erupted with mirth, not so much because the comment was funny, Elliot thought, but because each of them were finally participating in casual communication with peers. At least, that’s how he felt.

Bridgie didn’t pressure him to speak for the rest of the meeting, and he eyed young Emma gratefully. He longed to pull one of her red hairs and watch it spring back. Later, strutting out of that first meeting at the Spartanburg Community Center, he was bursting with confidence. He could do this. He only needed a subject, something that he could talk about better than anyone else could, better even than Trudy, in whose shadow he’d entered a silent middle-age.

***

At eleven that evening, bathrobed and sweating on his patio, Elliot smoked his nightly cigarette. Summers in South Carolina for such a big man were three straight months of moist groin and armpit, glistening back. The darkness hummed around him, crickets and cicadas chattering in some unknown bodily language: crescendo, decrescendo, expressions flowing and ebbing in urgency. He felt momentarily jealous—and silly for feeling jealous—of the bugs’ ability to chat without the help of a community group. With a wet chuckle, he flicked away his butt and turned to go back inside.

On the doormat under the porch light, blocking his pathway, sat a toad. About the size of a red-skinned potato, it faced him with front feet pigeoned inward, throat gulping.

“Hello,” Elliot said.
He liked animals, often thought about getting a dog but had decided to wait until he had a larger, fenced-in yard. Despite his reluctance, Trudy championed the idea, reminding her brother that a dog would be a good way to meet girls. He just wanted the dog, he said.

Elliot squatted, resting his saddlebag buttocks upon his ample calves. From this vantage point, the toad looked vaguely threatening, hunkered as if ready to charge.

“Who sent you?”

The toad blinked one eye, perhaps to wet it down.

Once July hit, his yard always hopped with these toads. The flash of their white bellies in the porch light punctuated the night-thrumming of insects. Never before, however, had he found one resting just so in his pathway, as if to accost him. He hadn’t considered toads as individuals, as potential objects of interest. Waddling closer he grasped his visitor with fingers made fatly dexterous by the work Trudy had gotten him at the Wofford College Media Center counting pages of syllabi, assignment descriptions, and fiscal reports. The toad’s skin felt cool and dry.

“That’s a boy,” Elliot said, petting its back with his thumb.

The toad squirmed in his grasp, pressing its webbed feet against his pink fingers. After a moment, he felt a cold fluid on his palm. Startled, he uncurled his fingers, and the captive hopped off. He squinted at his hand, recalling a rumor from childhood that toads harbor poisons. The wetness, however, did not burn. He hefted himself up and rushed inside to wash off. At the sink, he gazed through his reflection in the kitchen window out into the amphibious yard. Somewhere out there, he thought, the toad hid from him, just as he—until the workshop—had hidden from the rest of the world.

***

The next day was the slowest at the Wofford Media Center. Whereas on Monday mornings professors and secretaries from Communication Studies posted urgent notes to their order forms for last-minute
copy jobs, Fridays were the reverse, periods of calm during which conscientious customers should have been—but never were—requesting copies for the following week. Professor Trudy Baker, of course, never demanded urgent jobs of her younger brother. Five years in, Elliot still found the position comfortable because it required almost no talking beyond the receiving and filling of paper orders.

Today he hunched over the corner computer, listening out of habit for the bell at the counter. He searched the Web for information on toads. At first he found nothing but general information on the American toad, the species most commonly found in the Carolinas. He learned that their skin color changes depending on temperature, humidity, and stress (they are adaptable); that they hibernate in colder or drier weather by digging posterior first into the earth (they are introverted); that they are solitary animals, congregating only for sex in wet areas during the spring (they are practical); that their sexual position, in which the male grabs the female from behind, is called amplexus (they are interesting); that they are covered in warts and roam alone at night (they are like Elliot).

Next he found a site on toad ownership. Toads should be kept in containers with half soil, half shallow water. Alimentary generalists, they can be fed anything. Elliot thought about popcorn, cheese puffs. They drink through their skin. They don’t like to be touched. Elliot could relate. Toad ownership, claimed the web site, is a manageable and wonderful “starter” hobby. To Elliot, it also seemed like his own great subject, the one he’d been destined to talk about. Maybe even to curly-headed Emma.

***

That evening he ate pork chops at his childhood home with Trudy and their parents. He’d yearned all day to tell them how excited he was to want to speak and to finally have found a subject. Sadly, once at the table, he couldn’t begin. His family’s habit of talking him out of existence—especially when talking about him—seemed insurmountable. His older sister held forth each week on whatever subject appealed to her, and their parents went along for the ride.
Her topic for tonight was the function in the community of public-speaking workshops like Come Talk to Us. She started by reminding their parents that Elliot had done a “very brave thing.” He hated and loved her for speaking like that, as if he were a child. Although he truly believed that her heart supported her work, that she wanted people to efficiently communicate their feelings and ambitions, her expressions of that care often came across as overly dramatic. Even false.

“So tell us, Elliot,” Mr. Baker said, once Trudy had exhausted her subject, “how goes Shy Person’s Anonymous?”

“Dad,” Trudy said. “It’s a seminar on interpersonal relationships—my field.”

Their father’s stub nose flushed a little, as it always did when his favorite child provoked him. “Will you please tell me, Trude, why ‘interpersonal relationships’ is not a redundant expression?” He never missed an opportunity to correct her speech patterns, as if to say, “I could have taught communication studies but instead chose something more challenging: banking.”

“Well, Dad, you can also have a relationship with yourself, with God, with—with me see—with nature, but improving those relationships isn’t the purpose of Elliot’s seminars. He wants to improve at talking with other people.”

“I hope so,” Mr. Baker said. “I don’t want my son talking to the cosmic spirit.”

“You people are terrible,” Elliot’s mother broke in. “Jeez, he’s right here to tell us all we need to know. Aren’t you, Elliot?”

Unsure how to answer this question, Elliot gazed at his mother, at the silver hair that dangled around her wine glass. She’d gotten older so quickly.

“Elliot?” Mrs. Baker said.

He shrugged. “Yes, Mom.”

Elliot said nothing else. He didn’t have to because they didn’t expect it.
Chewing slowly, he dragged out his meal until the others left the table and collected in the family room to talk back at the television. A big man, he could always eat three helpings if need be. He guessed that, unlike himself, other men his age found solace in their childhood families, that home was a place where they went to speak freely. He wanted suddenly to ask Trudy what was wrong with him but then considered that doing so would be like asking an opponent for strategy. He told himself to be patient. The group would work.

After he could eat no more pork and cabbage, he joined his family for the very end of Friends. The characters glided with ease through their tumultuous twenties. At the show’s conclusion—some broken communication repaired—Elliot stood up with a sigh to indicate that he would be heading back to his one-bedroom rancher across town.

“Leaving already, dear?” Mrs. Baker said, watching a brawny man on television. “Won’t you at least stay for coffee?”

“I can’t,” Elliot said. “I’ve got stuff to do for work.” Everyone would know the falseness of this statement since he had had never brought work home during his half-decade at the media center.

“Well, we won’t hold a man back from his work,” his father said.

Trudy, who’d been sitting beside her brother, stood up too, her brown bangs reaching only his ham-shank shoulder. Her hazel eyes met his so directly that he had to look away. She followed him out of the room.

“So,” she said at the front door, her chin jutting out over her breasts, which Elliot found surprisingly large for her diminutive stature, “How was your first meeting?”

“I don’t know. All right.”

“It didn’t go too well, then, did it? I know you, dear brother. You’ve got to trust these people. They want to get to know you. You have interesting things to say.”
Elliot blushed, as he always did when Trudy cornered him to give pointers that he secretly craved.

She forced eye contact, one of her trade secrets. “You did go, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he grumbled.

“Sorry. Just checking.” Her many-ringed hand grasped his large, sweaty one. “Any girls there interest you?” Her clipped tone suggested that she expected the answer to be negative, that she was only changing the subject. His sister had always exhibited a certain territoriality with her little brother, as if he were her special project.

“I don’t know.” He thought about Emma, the church talker, her curly red hair and slim waist, her bouncy gestures. “I’m not really looking for any relationship.”

“Don’t say that, baby.” Trudy used her husky voice. She mussed his thick hair. To do so, she had to press her breasts against his substantial paunch, making him uncomfortable. “Some girl’s going to be lucky to have you.”

Elliot said nothing. He wanted time alone to think, to plan. “I got your old aquarium out of the attic. Do you still have the lid?”

“I swear, Elliot, you really know how to ruin a moment.” Trudy stuck out her bottom lip. “Just kidding. You mean that old fish aquarium with a crack in it? You can’t keep fish in there, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No fish. Toads. From my yard.”

She guffawed. “Toads? You kill me. You can’t steal animals out of your yard and keep them in a glass box. That’s cruel.”

Elliot bristled, angry at her relentless intrusion. “I’m going to talk about them.”

His sister stepped back, as if blown by his outburst. Tears welled in her eyes. “That’s great, Elliot! Really great.” She reached forward to embrace him, but he backed out of the house, lumbered off the
porch, and stuffed himself into his Datsun. Driving away, aquarium glinting in the passenger seat, he wondered at her tears. She’d teared up before when he lashed out. Surely these tears meant his sister felt happy for him, but they’d come so quickly, obediently, like pets.

***

Over the weekend, he collected residents for his toad house, pushing his sister from his mind. What could be wrong with giving wild amphibians a safe space to congregate and live in peace, away from predators and bad weather? Squatting in khakis under his dogwood, he imagined that he himself resembled a toad as he snatched at his brown neighbors. Sometimes they peed in his hand—out of self-defense, the web site had said—and sometimes they made odd little grunting noises as they squirmed. By Sunday, the toad house boasted three residents—Botan, Popson, and Stark. Botan, the smallest, commanded the others. Ecru in color like skinny Stark, he herded his aquarium-mates, then scattered them when he leaped into the water dish. Even the biggest one, Popson, deferred to Botan in matters of soaking and feeding privileges. Little Botan possessed a quality more powerful than bulk.

Elliot spent the next few evenings watching his pets: the way bugs disappeared with the snap of a tongue, the way the toads squirmed underneath the water dish, the way they bumped against the glass over and over. Meanwhile, Trudy left two messages on his answering machine, the first offering an apology for calling his proposed hobby cruel, the second reminding him that she’d paid for a whole month of Come Talk to Us, stressing that he should talk about the toads, that he shouldn’t give up. Actually, giving up was farthest from his mind. Although he wasn’t angry, he didn’t return her calls. This small defiance felt good and so did watching the toads, their secret nocturnal society. He could appreciate how sometimes they would sit on one another’s heads and other times burrow under earth to be alone. They required of each other no explanation.

***
Returning to the community center on Thursday for Come Talk to Us, Elliot took in the high-traffic carpeting, the murals celebrating diversity, the bored but friendly security guard, and his family-shaken confidence fully returned. He itched to talk, to tell sympathetic strangers about toads.

Standing in the doorway of the meeting room, he searched for Emma’s curly head, her thin hips and peasant dress. He would sit beside her tonight, maybe exchange a greeting during break or share a laugh over someone’s engaging story. Emma’s chair from last week, however, was vacant. He spotted her, instead, standing across the room in a small group that included, to his horror, Trudy. His sister had dressed in sweat pants and piled her hair under a baseball cap. Normally she wore professional skirts and blouses, frizzed her hair, and smelled like papaya.

When she spotted her brother, Trudy looked quickly away. His face burned. She was spying on him! It crossed his mind to blow her cover, to embarrass her for doubting him. The problem was that doing so would ruin his first real chance at conversation. Maybe he’d never find another environment so ideal, so respectful of his needs, as this collection of shy people. He took a seat toward the back and waited for the meeting to begin.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Bridgie said, “tonight for the second straight week we have a newcomer in our ranks. I’d like to introduce Tracey, who describes herself as a family-oriented cosmetology student. Is that right?” Trudy nodded. “Then enough from me! Let’s let Tracey take the stage.”

As he watched Trudy prance without hesitation up in front of the audience, he felt an ancient pang of sibling rivalry surface. Why hadn’t he simply spoken last week? Not since adolescent bulk and blemish destroyed his social cache had he thought twice about being bested by Trudy. Come Talk to Us, however, had become in one short week his territory alone, never mind his sister’s behind-the-scenes puppetry.
“Thank you so much for your kind welcome, Bridgie. I am indeed a family-oriented cosmetologist. For so long, I have looked for just this sort of organization as a cure for what I call my speaker’s block. You know, as opposed to writer’s block?”

The group laughed while Elliot crossed his massive arms and sighed. No matter how frumpy her clothing, she was unable to hide her charm. A straight nose sloped under her cap’s bill. Her purple sweat suit arranged itself into competent curves.

“What I’d like to talk about tonight is my brother,” she said, pausing as if to test the air. “Earl. His name is Earl.” Elliot’s insides constricted.

“That would be fine, Tracey,” someone in the audience said. “We’d like to hear about Earl.” A general murmur of approval followed, and Elliot started to feel the shut-down that he always experienced when Trudy talked about him, almost as if her words stole, piece by piece, his physical presence.

“You see, I’m worried about Earl. I love him very, very much. But I’m worried about him.”

“Sure you are, Tracey,” someone said. “Sure you do.”

“He has…well, how can I say this? He wants to have toads, which is a variety of terrestrial amphibian, but he just doesn’t know where to begin. I’ve told him that maybe he should talk to a specialist on the topic or just look on the internet for information. I don’t know—he’s just very shy and easily frustrated. But I love him so, so much.”

“Sure you do, Tracey.”

Tracey nodded with slow emphasis. She’d once explained to Elliot that the slow nod creates solidarity between speaker and audience.

“Actually,” she said, “it just occurs to me now, but I wonder if any of you out there, any of you at all, could give me some advice that I might pass along to my brother. Anything would help. For
instance, what do toad pets live in? What do they eat?” She lowered the microphone while she waited, a habit Elliot recognized from her public lectures. She looked with a nonpressuring yet inviting expression around the room, standing on her toes to see Elliot. “Anyone at all?”

How, he wondered, could anyone believe this confident speaker had come to cure her shyness? She made eye contact with him, or maybe she stared just above his head at the back of the room. Elliot, he thought. My name is Elliot. This woman, Tracey, is not my sister. Somehow this helped, and he raised his hand.

“Yes, sir?” Professional though she was, his sister did a poor job hiding the victory in her voice.

Shy faces turned to Elliot, faces ruddy with vicarious pleasure.

“Whatever you can tell me would be great,” Trudy said.

“Well,” he said. “Well. I don’t know. I’ve got toads.”

Several heads nodded encouragement.

“Great.” Bridgie’s adenoidal voice was unmistakable.

“American toads are what they are. Native to the area—South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia. Many states.”

“Good, good,” Trudy said. “Maybe Earl, too, should get some American toads.”

“Yeah.” Elliot shook his head and breathed heavily. He closed his eyes to fight back the stealthy blankness that threatened to steal his words. He dodged Trudy’s knowledge of him, her impossible brother. This is Tracey, not Trudy. “American toads make a great ‘starter’ hobby. It is not a cruel hobby as some people might think. A terrarium is an ideal environment for toads. No natural predators. All you can eat.”

People laughed. They laughed! He opened his eyes.
“That’s great,” Trudy said, but Elliot thought he could detect some strain in her voice. He could detect his sister in that voice. No matter how he succeeded, how small his victories, no matter how much she wanted him to do well, her reactions always baffled him.

“So, really great.”

People continued to laugh, made comments to their neighbors.

“All-you-can-eat toads!”

“Maybe I should get some toads. They sound like fun.”

Trudy paced, a thin smile on her lips that she often employed while she waited for applause to die down. Elliot knew that smile. It wasn’t one that belonged to public-speaking Trudy; it was, instead, the smile she gave when she occasionally lost center stage.

After a moment, she cleared her throat. A pair at a time, the crowd grew silent. “I have so much to tell my brother now.” Her voice had no sincerity, authentic or put-on. “I really appreciate your help, sir.” She walked to someone in the front row, handed off the microphone, and ran out of the room.

“Tracey?” the man with the microphone said. “Tracey?”

A murmur rose, people wondering about the new woman’s behavior. Elliot burned with a strange pleasure. Being the subject of such public inquiry, he thought, had always been his lot. What is Elliot thinking? Is he okay? He must have very, very deep thoughts. Why don’t you share them with us, Elliot? Now Trudy knew how it felt.

***

After the meeting, he approached Emma. Once she spotted him, she secured her Styrofoam cup of coffee on the nearest surface, a window sill, as if she feared he would be unable to halt his progress and might flatten her with his bulk. Then, to his surprise, she held out a hand for him to shake. He made sure not to crush her delicate bones.
“Fascinating about the American toads,” she said. “Are there French toads too?”

“I don’t know,” he said, drawing closer to her red curls. He smelled churches, frankincense smoking in a censer. “I just wanted to help that lady out.”

“Well that was very nice of you.”

“I wonder why she ran out of the room.”

Emma drew the corners of her mouth down into a respectful frown. “Some people just can’t deal with success. What’s-her-name—Tracey?—was probably looking for the nuthouse and took a wrong turn. Anyway, who would come to a social club like ours dressed in purple sweats?”

“I don’t know.” Elliot couldn’t go so far as to openly criticize his sister, no matter what kind of dirty trick she’d played on him, but it felt a little satisfying to listen. Each of Emma’s confidential words about Trudy made him feel more and more real. They gave back little pieces of the reality Trudy stole.

“How was I?” he asked.

“When? Just now?” Emma screwed up her lips. He wanted to put his mouth there.

“When I talked about the toads.”

“You did just fine. You really saved the day. People aren’t supposed to bring questions to a public-speaking workshop. They’re supposed to do all the talking themselves.”

His neck tingled.

“Now, tell me. You don’t have an entire toad kingdom at your house, do you?” Emma poked him in the sternum. He felt that welcome jab for moments after her finger moved away.

“No kingdom, just a knot of three toads.”

She furrowed her brow. “They call them knots, then? How romantic.”

He didn’t understand her, but he grinned. “Yes, a group of toads is a knot.”
She picked up her coffee, surprising Elliot with the lipstick imprint on the rim. “Actually,” she said, “three is a rather kinky number. I hope you’ve gotten them fixed.”

Elliot felt dizzy, drunken with newness. “Come over,” he said. “Come see them.”

***

Entering his apartment, they left behind the humid hum of insects and crossed the threshold into air-conditioned darkness.

Elliot kept his house pretty clean, for a bachelor. That’s what Trudy said.

He lined his DVDs on top of the television and collected old magazines in a basket. He even kept—and used—a coat rack by the door. Emma draped her bony body lengthwise across his basket chair and let her Birkenstocks fall to the carpet.

They drank a few of his ultra light beers, Emma telling him her life story and he nodding. She’d become shy after working for ten years as a pharmaceutical rep. The salesperson’s loaded language had eventually moved beyond her job and invaded even her most intimate conversations. “It was like catching a virus,” she said. She’d joined Come Talk to Us during her last year as a rep, hoping the group might somehow make sense of her feelings. To her unpleasant surprise, the group only reinforced those feelings over the long haul, led to just another restricted view of communication.

“But you seemed happy last week,” Elliot said. Could she have been faking her excitement? Had she been lying when she said the group had replaced church? These new possibilities unsettled him.

“I hate being told how to talk,” she said.

He nodded. Although her fruitless experience with the group disheartened him, this gesture towards intimacy, this honesty, made the bad news worthwhile.
“I might have to take a break,” she said, moving over beside him on the couch. “That clueless woman tonight was more the rule than the exception, to be honest. I can’t tell you how ridiculous I feel up there talking about church.” Two beers had made her tipsy. It took him a case to get him drunk.

“I know what you mean,” he said.

“Actually, I meant one thing I said last week, about church being all about community for me. I don’t believe in God or anything. I’m much more into science.”

“Yeah,” Elliot said. “That’s how I feel about my toads. Nothing bothers them.” For the first time, he’d brought up the alleged reason for her visit—the toads that coexisted peacefully in his bedroom.

“Exactly!” she said. “If people would just do their own thing, we wouldn’t need this public-speaking bullshit.”

She squirmed in her seat, as if to get comfortable. He realized too late that she was moving against him. Suddenly, she grasped the sides of his head and pressed her lips hard against his. He recoiled a bit when her slimy tongue pushed into his mouth. How weird, he thought. Carefully, he followed her tongue with his own wide one, moving it into her mouth. While he concentrated on the kiss, its astonishing mechanics, she pulled off her dress. His sweaty hands clothed her shoulders while she undid his fly. What he’d always feared and hoped for—exposing his pale, puffy body in front of anyone but Dr. Michaels—quickly came true. Contrary to his expectations, Emma seemed overjoyed by the sight. Cradled on his belly, she pulled at his pimpled flesh wistfully, as if it were a coat she’d once worn on lovely evenings.

He didn’t care about the group either, he decided. Just so long as she’d stay with him.

***

Twenty minutes later, shiny, they padded to his bedroom. He switched on a table lamp so Emma could peer into the toad house.
“Uh oh, this one’s not looking too good,” Emma said.

Elliot bent down beside her. Popson lay flat on his back, legs splayed, a gory hole in his stomach. A few mealworms waved their heads out through the hole. A horrible feeling of shame flooded over him.

“That’s tough, being eaten from the inside,” she said. “Were you attached?”

“No really.” He watched Stark snap up a sow bug that was crawling across Popson’s carcass. Stark ignored the murderous mealworms. “They’re just a hobby.”

She gave him an affectionate pinch, which made him jump. “Well if what’s-her-name comes back to a meeting,” she said, “you can warn her that toads can’t eat quite everything. I bet that would flip her out.”

“I don’t think she’s coming back,” Elliot said, wishing desperately then to hear his sister talk and give him her blessing.

When Emma left at midnight, he called Trudy. She answered on the second ring and, before he could say more than “hello,” launched into congratulations.

“Don’t you feel good about tonight?” she asked. “I rushed right home to tell Mom and Dad about your smart answer. I honestly got the impression that you didn’t even need me there at all.”

Elliot said nothing.

“Listen,” she said. “Thanks for playing along.”

After a moment, he asked, “Did I say something wrong?”

She sighed. “Have you been listening to me at all, Elliot?” Her voice was exasperated, defensive. “I just told you that you did a great job.”

“Thanks,” he said. For such a communicator, Trudy had never been very honest.

“One of my toads died today,” he said. “I fed him mealworms.”

His sister cooed mournfully. “Poor thing,” she said. “Poor, poor thing. You should let them go.”
“Okay,” he said, “but now you have to tell me why you really left the meeting.”

“Elliot, Elliot, Elliot. It’s complicated. Kind of a personal matter. I had to hurry.”

“Okay,” he said. His feelings were public, hers personal. “I’m keeping the toads.”

“You don’t need to take this out on them,” she said. “That’s what you’re doing, you know.”

“No,” he said.

“Well, we’ll talk about it Sunday. You’re coming to Mom and Dad’s for dinner aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” he said, his bluff not very convincing.

“Okay, little brother. I’ll see you there.”

***

Emma spent the rest of the week in his company. As soon as their respective jobs let out they’d meet at his place and explore their new intimacy. On Friday, she stayed over for the first time, curled into a ball at the edge of his king-sized bed. Often during the night she’d jerk into a sitting position, gasping. He woke up each time, too, and reached over with large hands that she’d elbow away. “I’ve got it under control,” she said once. “Sleep apnea sucks.” After a couple of minutes she’d turn off the light again and press her hard body into his soft one until she fell asleep and returned to a ball.

Saturday they went like tourists to downtown Spartanburg and ate ice cream by the statue of Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary War hero. As usual, Emma did most of the talking, often about past boyfriends, none of whom resembled Elliot. Listening to her, he felt a little sad but also that he belonged to a large brotherhood, one that had always rejected him before now. Her old boyfriends were outdoorsy, muscular, bossy, and pugnacious. One named Bruce had gotten into a brawl at the skating rink on the night she left him. Now only Elliot remained in the ring.

“What happened to them all?” he asked.

“All my old boyfriends?”
“Yes.”

A new look flashed over her face, the kind that Wofford professors sometimes gave him when he explained that urgent copy jobs couldn’t be guaranteed on time. “Think of it this way,” she said. “My old boyfriends all bit the dust. Something was eating at all of them, and then they let it eat at me. I didn’t like that.”

He determined in that moment that he’d never let any of his problems become hers. He took her empty ice cream cup and walked across the square to throw it away.

“I could have done that,” she said, when he returned.

“No. I can.”

Back at his house, they discovered tiny Botan clinging to Stark’s back, a position he recognized as amplexus. He hadn’t considered his own toads as sexual beings.

“You need some curtains for this aquarium,” Emma said. “Even I don’t do doggy style.”

Elliot blushed. “We could try.”

“I don’t think so, you sexy beast. You’d crush me.”

The next day he surprised her. He told her they were going somewhere special. “Uh oh,” she said, “I hate surprises,” but her widened eyes and slightly parted lips told him she exaggerated. They got into the ’85 station wagon he’d inherited from his parents, and he drove at a slightly accelerated pace to the Bakers’ neighborhood. He’d told his family nothing about Emma, his special secret. He couldn’t even think about it himself, so excited was he. His two worlds would finally meet.

As houses and yards replaced marquees and parking lots, she grew a little quiet, thoughtful. “This isn’t meet-the-parents, is it?”

He grinned. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You won’t have to talk. They’ll take care of that.”

Her face grew stony, and she turned to the window. “Nice neighborhood.”
As usual, he let himself into the house and, followed by his diminutive guest, found his family in the living room. “Hey, Ell,” Mr. Baker said, hardly looking up from his crossword, but when Emma stepped around beside him, the three Bakers noticed the movement and raised their faces.

“My goodness!” Trudy said, hopping to her bare feet and sashaying over to the couple. Her power suit gave her short body a long stride. She shot an arm out at Emma, thumb cocked for a handshake. “And who might you be?” Her stiff voice reminded Elliot that Trudy also hated surprises.

Emma looked hard at Trudy, as if trying to place her.

The meeting! Elliot reeled. How could he have forgotten his sister’s performance at Come Talk to Us?

“It’s all right,” Trudy said. “I won’t bite. What’s your name?”

“Ahh,” Emma said. “Your voice. I know where I’ve seen you.” Her eyes cut to Elliot, whose brain had begun to fill with speech inhibitors, invaders that attacked and replicated within his very cells and couldn’t be stopped.

“I’m Elliot’s sister,” Trudy said.

“Not Earl’s sister? I thought your name was Tracey.”

Trudy maintained eye contact with Emma, kept her shoulders in line with her interlocutor’s. She took a deep breath—all things she’d coached Elliot to do in conversations—yet she said nothing. Mr. and Mrs. Baker whispered on the couch.

“I should have known something was fishy about this toad thing,” Emma said. She grabbed Elliot’s biceps, hard, digging her nails a little into the flesh. “Am I completely bat shit, or have you been lying to me about this woman?”

Elliot didn’t understand women at all. Why couldn’t Trudy be his sister? He was his own person! Yet, he didn’t know how to say this.
His family had never been so silent. Never before had their eyes burned into him with such intensity. Even Trudy, whom he’d half-expected to come to his aid, stood rigid, her mouth slightly open.

“Don’t look at your sister,” Emma said. “I’m talking to you, buster.” She pinched as much of his chin as she could and pulled him toward her. He saw curly-headed fury, the pointy chin and bony joints of a woman who’d long been disappointed, who’d expected him to disappoint her and been satisfied in this expectation.

“It wasn’t my idea,” he said. “I didn’t ask her to come.”

Emma nodded, her glare softening just a tad. “And?”

From the corner of his eye, Elliot saw Trudy cross her arms, pull them against herself.

He closed his eyes. “And I was embarrassed, so I didn’t tell you who she was. I wanted you to like me.”

Emma chuckled, a throaty laugh he hadn’t heard before. It frightened him. She chuckled for several moments, clapping her hands. “That’s classic. Classic.”

Then a body was on him, slapping at his face, screaming and crying. He kept his eyes shut tight. She beat on his chest like a little girl trying to revive a corpse. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!” Trudy said.

His face stinging, his arm wet with his sister’s tears, he fell back against the wall stunned and opened his eyes. He watched her stomp in bare feet out of the house. Her car started, and he listened to the diminishing hum of her driving away.

“What’s going on here, Elliot?” Mr. Baker asked. “What the hell is going on here?”

Elliot glared at his parents, huddled there on the couch, puzzled, resentful. Their gray hairs, furrowed brows, crow’s feet.
Elliot and Emma didn’t speak on the way to her house. His face still stung from Trudy’s attack, but he knew that this time his victory had been real. Painful, yes. But painful is real. Trudy couldn’t lie to him now. Occasionally he’d glance over at the pleasant smile plastered on Emma’s face in the console light. That smile, he recognized from experience, was no smile at all. If only, he thought, to be oneself wasn’t to be alone. While the drive lasted, however, he sat, real for the first time, in all his bulk. He’d commanded the evening.

“It’s been swell,” Emma said once she stood on her curb, bending down into the passenger-side window. In a wave, these first sounds brought back all the anxiety that the short ride had helped him forget. Her red, curly hair, her knees pressed together, the distance of her hips from the car door as she leaned. All these were unmistakably a person saying goodbye, signs of a brief, noncommittal space where he had to say something normal, something smart, to ever enjoy her company again. He couldn’t.

And she walked away. Moving between box hedges, under the halogen-reflecting sweep of an oak branch, she disappeared.

He knocked on Trudy’s door just past midnight. The foreign appearance of her welcome mat, its army green weave, reminded him how seldom he’d stood here lately, how often Trudy came to him. A desperate moth rammed itself over and over against the porch light. After a while, the door opened a crack and stopped there. Footsteps inside moved away down the hall.

He entered his sister’s house, its soft-colored curtains, its fragrant oil burning above a low flame on the entry table. Stacks of student papers covered all but one seat on the living-room futon. Her television flashed mute pictures. He found her on the balcony out back, leaning on the railing.
“I take it your girl got spooked.”

“I guess,” he said. “She didn’t really say.”

“She’s spooked,” Trudy said, with a look that searched for both weakness and support. “She was no good for you, anyway.”

He stepped onto the balcony to lean on the railing beside her. He vaguely feared he’d bring the whole structure crashing down. “You don’t know what’s good for me anymore. She was good for me.”

“You’re so stubborn, Elliot. Why won’t you let me help you?” Trudy pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Since when did she smoke? She exhaled the smoke, and it rose evilly into her bangs. “Can’t I do a little bit of goddamn good around here? You’ve chosen the wrong girl.”

“You’re my girl,” he said, “but I won’t let you help me.”

Holding the cigarette out over the railing, she narrowed her eyes. “You can’t put me on. I’m the queen of that.”

He repeated himself and then knelt down in front of his sister. What was he doing? It felt right; that’s all. “I won’t let you help me anymore.” The concrete cooled his palms, his knees. He watched a mosquito land on his hand and bite him. He pushed his head into his sister’s knee, wanting just the smallest amount of contact without explanation. Her knee pressed back a bit.

“God, you’re such a weirdo,” she said. Then he felt her fingernails play through his hair, dragging furrows over his crown. This was the communication he’d wanted, had always wanted, but it couldn’t last. “I’m a fraud,” he heard her say. “I know that. I don’t know how else to be.”

He pushed his head harder into her knee. She’d been a fraud for him to hide the fact that she was a fraud herself. “I’ll help you,” he said.

The balcony’s cool concrete pressed up beneath him, supporting him—it, too, making a promise.

***
Just before dawn, he crouched under the dogwood in his backyard and turned the toad house on its side so that Stark and Botan could hop out. Both did so after a moment. Under the moonlight, the toads faced opposite directions in the dirt, Stark with one front foot on Botan’s back leg. Most likely these toads would never meet again. Toads are solitary creatures. They roam at night. Stark moved off first, a few tentative jumps followed by a succession that led her under the bushes. Gone to her luck.

Botan remained, seemingly as unaware of his change in location as of his companion’s departure. The toad squatted there for several moments while Elliot’s knees grew sore in the crouch. Botan gulped. He swiped one foot over an eye. He took one hop, his posture toad-erect. He shifted direction, took another hop. The whole wide yard stretched before him, dark and green, humming. He waited.
THE PROGRESS OF TONGUES


Bilious (bil’yəs) adj. (1) Relating to bile, especially William’s. (2) Suffering, as does William, from liver dysfunction. (3) Indicative of a peevish, William-like disposition, prone to episodes of lying, desperation, and animal aggression. – bil’ious•ly adv. –bil’ious•ness n. [Fr: Guillaume.]

***

October 16, 1980

Editors

*Merriam-Webster*

43 Ave. C

New York, NY 10009

Dear Sirs,

I write as a concerned citizen in objection to certain elements of your definition for “bilious” on page 139 of your most recent edition. My considerable research reveals that this particular gloss dates back to 1828, when it debuted in your founder’s *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Reasons an update is needed appear below, organized according to the elements of your definition.

(1) *Relating to bile, especially William’s.*

By “bile” I suppose you mean my occasional low spirits. Like all gentlemen—Williams or otherwise—I have a particular way of coping with the human condition. Churchill battled his Black Dog; I happen to call my bête noire the Squids—an inky malaise when the seasons turn. This is
unrelated to my gallbladder, as your definition would have it, where bile merely emulsifies fats, assists their absorption into the intestine, neutralizes stomach acids. I don’t, of course, hold it against Mr. Webster—who likely meant a different William—for making wrong assumptions based on the wild inaccuracies of 18th-century science, but maybe we could omit the personal from the modern dictionary? I’ve got my Squids; you might wake up some mornings as Lester the Magnificent; my wife displays the Luff when a rival gets her goat. So be it, unremarked.

(2) Suffering, as does William, from liver dysfunction.

One glass of Cabernet Sauvignon with supper, maybe a second on Fridays at Le Bec-Fin. I know my limit. (If you want an elbow-bender, it’s Larry Boswell of Cherokee Ct., whose liver is likely foie gras.) Burroughs and Faulkner may have given Williams worldwide a bad name in the years since the French and Indian War; however, while accusers cite the pickled priests of Tangier and the Mississippi Delta as evidence of abuse, I counter with Penn, my state’s founding Quaker.

(3) Indicative of a peevish, William-like disposition, prone to episodes of lying, desperation, and animal aggression.

“William-like?” This word, I might point out, appears nowhere else in your editions, and it’s this definition that particularly paints me blue in the face. Accuse a man of lying and . . . well pardon my French, but merde if we moderns are to honor dear Webster’s belief in bodily “humours.” The Sanguine will get studded with leeches, the Phlegmatic forced to expectorate, the Melancholy tapped like maples. And William the Choleric? I’ll be plied with cold porridge, pursued like Frankenstein to the North Pole, there stashed in an iceberg. It is 1980, fellows. Biology is not destiny.

Let me bring the issue into perspective by way of a little cautionary tale. Last Friday my daughter
encountered the contested word, “bilious,” in her schoolbook: *The bilious turtle snapped at the boisterous salmon.* Joan sidled up: “Daddy, what does that word mean?” I’d taught her well (she knew “boisterous” already). Together we turned to the most recent edition of your always well-maintained and updated tome. So many words has it taught me: *animus, perfidy, jihad.* This time, though, what did we find? Verbal atavism, etymological fossil! Joan is nine years old. Is this how she will know her father? She wept as I burned your 8th edition on our front lawn.

(4) *Reasonable, principled, direct, as William Gaul of Philadelphia.*

This is only a suggestion. I’ll admit to getting carried away at times. In hindsight, it’s better I waited a week to write—seven days for logos to equal pathos. Too, it’s taken half a fortnight for Joan to forgive my fury, though it was mainly through her own verbal misfortune at school yesterday that she came to appreciate my position.

Over French toast this morning, she asked why classmates call her Bones. (Her true eponym burned in Rouen.) At last! I thought. She perceives how language can go wrong and send a father to burning books. Kids are cruel, I wanted to explain. Most get it from their parents. Take the *Roots*-induced genealogy craze, *toubab* housewives scurrying to their branch libraries. Their fuss sends kids the wrong message. History, body, lineage—these alone do not determine identity. Webster knew the true American way to be self-definition, not digging for clues among the putrid roots of the European garden. Think of Horatio Alger, Ben Franklin, Frederick Douglass!

But a nine-year-old wouldn’t understand this, so I took the direct approach, no beating around the buisson. We splurged for lunch at Showbiz—not because I regard the restaurant as anything less than a vitiation of Italian cuisine, but because she likes it. In fact, I required four fingers of Cognac before I could brave the stench of kid sweat and mozzarella.
I levered a slice of the revolting pie onto her pre-sticky plate.

“Aren’t you having any, Daddy?”

I raised my glass of flat beer, undeserving of the brand name its tap must have born. “All yours. They call you *Bones* as it is because they find you svelte.”

“Do you think I’m slender, Daddy?” (“Svelte,” you see, she already knows.)

“You’re perfect as you are.”

“Am I fat?”

I quaffed my brew, tried to keep frustration at bay. The youthful mind, taught to respect and subsequently misled by a reference book, becomes a delicate and unpredictable thing.

“How do you contemplate being both ample and airy at the same time? Those imps have made you doubt your body beyond logic.” I raised a finger. “Always question the source!”

She must have sensed reproach when I’d only meant to convey love through reason and a touch of wit. Her eyes welled with a clear fluid that—if Hippocrates were still Surgeon General—would indicate not excess of blood, of yellow or black bile, but of the nymph’s humour. Hopping up from the table, she ran into the play area near the stage with the fake gorilla and his band. Joan is sensitive. The tones of words—the curve of connotation, the web of context—affect her more than they do the average child.

“The cheese was phlegmy,” I told the cheerful waiter, and pursued Joan into the welter of sound and lights. I found her seated on a little plastic chair, her band-aided knees under a little plastic table. The gorilla, his space-suited canine drummer, the cheerleading mousette, and other automata lip-synched a Beatles medley, starting with “Drive My Car” and moving on, prematurely, to “No Reply.” Evidently they were unable to finish an entire verse.

I squatted, knees popping, beside my daughter. “Perhaps this is the wrong venue for our tête-à-tête.
Would Le Bec-Fin serve as well?"

She shook her head and scooted her chair in.

“I only meant to say that you’re neither fat nor skinny. Words can be false and hurtful.”

No reply. I couldn’t even be sure she cleaved to my wisdom over the distraction on stage. I felt rising in me the inarticulate rage—tentacles grasping at a quill—that sent me to your dictionary in the first place and taught me the pen is mightier than the snee.

I stood and approached the stage.

“Will you knock it off?” I’d adopted an argot low enough that even a mechanical gorilla might understand—Fatz, read the tag on his golden lapel.

They played on. “Happiness is a Warm Gun,” and then, inexplicably, “All We Need is Love.” By this point, fractions of half-a-dozen songs, transitions like interstate speed bumps, had serenaded the carpet. I spied an electrical outlet by the stage and, with the directness and principle-guided behavior characteristic of my name (see definition #4), yanked the cord.

The flashing lights of a pinball machine went dark; the animals still gyrated.

“Hey,” came a snotty grievance, no doubt that of a spoiled Billy deserving your definition.

I ignored him and scissored onto the stage just as the animals faked their way into “Michelle.” Michelle, my belle. Sunday monkeys gone touché on some. I’ve never understood the Fab Five’s appeal. I stood up front a moment, sucking air, a conductor who’s thrown in the baton. The animals’ snouts moved, but nothing came out. They were puppets without a master. Whom else could I blame?

Note: I don’t report the following incident with an aim to justify my behavior. Nor do I seek in this missive, against my own interests, to prove the Webster of 1828 correct about me. As if a man can be encompassed in a definition! I only want what every William wants: the truth of my life noted.

I wrapped my tentacle around Fatz’s neck and shook till it yawned, dangling the head by wires. I
pummeled the circuits behind his horsehair coat, his Radio Shack heart and lungs and liver. None of his pals came to the rescue. He whirred to a splendid silence just before someone cut the power on stage, and the remaining animals sunk into gloomy stillness. “Quiet!” I shouted. “Quiet, quiet, quiet.”

After collecting myself, I faced the human audience I sensed behind me—adults and kids alike had joined my daughter stage side, close to one hundred having come out of the parti-colored woodwork. “Now maybe we can talk,” I said. “Maybe now we’ll attempt a civil conversation.”

Nobody answered. Some of the kids held their hands over their ears, as if the silence oppressed more than the British Invasion preceding it. A few mothers had clamped sparkly-nailed fingers over their mouths in disbelief. My daughter sank her elbows into her lap and hunched down with palms pressed against her eyes.

So this is how it’s going to be, I thought. This is where my example leads. Back to the Stone Age. Grunt and beat the ground.

Sirs, the moral is simple. Revisit your definition of “bilious” and, from now on, maintain a closer watch on each entry, no matter how quickly the language expands. *Keep up with the times or you’ll have a hard time keeping your nose clean.* (That’s my own coinage, a first-rate chiasmatic arrangement of honest American idioms. Feel free to include it in your next edition as an example for this rhetorical figure).

Despite what you may be thinking, I don’t approach you solely from a position of defeat. The police officers who arrived at Showbiz to haul me away bore no signs of learning beyond the academy, where I suspect they don’t teach Literature. One was a drawling country lad of no more than twenty, acne like corpses strewn across a Southern battlefield. The other, a husky woman around forty, looked to be of Samoan descent. No doubt they’d both known the cruelty of American schoolchildren. Why else would they have joined the law? I expected the worst.
To my delight, once I had explained my attack’s provenance—both dictionary and elementary classroom—their expressions changed from routine disgust to a nervous respect. They spoke quickly with the manager, who agreed to let me and my traumatized charge go with a promise not to return (Joan’s mother can always bring her back to this menagerie if she so desires). The parents clapped as we exited. You may suspect otherwise, but I maintain they were saluting my victory, my example—my stand.

Stand with me, editors! Change the word.

Sincerely,

William Gaul of Philadelphia

***


Bilious (bil´yəs) adj. (1a) Of or relating to bile. (b) Marked by or suffering from liver dysfunction and especially excessive secretion of bile. (c) Appearing as if affected by a bilious disorder. (2) Of or indicative of a peevish ill-natured disposition. (3) Sickeningly unpleasant “with clapboards painted red and bilious yellow”—Sinclair Lewis>—bil´ious•ly adv. – bil´ious•ness n. [Middle French: *bilieux*]

***

Obituary from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*:

WILLIAM MILLHOUSE GAUL—Age 51, of Willow Grove, on January 29, 1985, at Abington Memorial after complications from liver disease. Born Oct. 21, 1933, in Yorba Linda, CA, son of the late Richard B. and Elizabeth (Taylor) Gaul; husband for 22 years to Betty (Lough) Gaul; father of Joan Gaul; preceded in death by two brothers, Edgar A. Gaul and Ulysses S. Gaul.

Mr. Gaul worked in sales for 16 years at Westinghouse, was a Vietnam veteran, member of American Legion Post 89, and patron of the Free Library. Friends will be received Friday, 2-4 p.m. in
the Dolence Funeral Home, 557 Spring Garden Street. Mass on Saturday in St. Catherine of Siena at 11:00am. Burial in Fairview Cemetery. Memorial contributions may be made to the Gaul Dictionary Club of Upper Moreland High School.

In words spoken shortly before his passing, Mr. Gaul expressed his gratitude to the editors of *Merriam-Webster* for correcting a prolonged error, though he never received the pleasure of a personal response.
The widow rose from her chair, restirring the dust, and padded down the hallway toward the jiggling at her front door. Each step released a plume of mold from the carpet. With Frank dead from drink these many years, she had no one, nothing but the warm decay of the once-stately house, its frowning facade, its imminent dispersal like the spores of a puffball mushroom. Her town-near-a-college had become a college town, and the house now shivered on Greek Row aside old homes painted in appalling oranges and blues, yards littered with beer cans and unmentionables. No one knew the widow; no one ever came by.

Through the peephole she saw a shrub and the edge of her railing in the feeble porch light. The jiggling had ceased, yet she heard a moaning, a scuffling near the doormat, a few curse words and then retching. She recognized the scenario. Frank. How often on Fridays, then Tuesdays and Fridays, then Tuesdays and Fridays and Sundays, he’d have trouble getting in the front door. He’d make sick on the rug, lose his glasses, sleep on the linoleum where she’d wake him with a squirt bottle and lead him up to his bed beside hers.

When she opened up, a young man—twenty at most—sprawled at her feet in his sickness. He wore a pink bikini, and his hair foamed with shave cream. She heard the dull pump of rock music at the men’s house next door. Alpha Gamma Gamma, or Delta Delta—she couldn’t recall which. Perhaps the young man had wandered over by accident. Leaving the door ajar, she retrieved the squirt bottle, never emptied from its days of service with Frank, and knelt to spray the visitor’s face. Either his cheeks were filthy or the water had discolored over time, because a rivulet of black ran down into his mouth. He smacked his lips and uttered a profanity he couldn’t mean.

“You poor dear,” the widow said. A man drunk is past blame, past reason—one might as well tell a
dog its faults.

Forever slight, the widow knew just how to shift her weight, when to use a hip for leverage, how to make a drunk take a little of his own weight. She maneuvered her guest off the floor, down a crooked hall, and onto the parlor couch. She covered his indecency with a tattered quilt and then, determining he needed nothing so much as sleep, retired. Upstairs in her own bed she thought of Frank where he lay at Spring Lawn, body amolder. So often in life he’d slept in his clothes that he probably hadn’t minded carrying his habit over into eternity. Although she didn’t like to imagine him too closely—stewed brains between pink ears, the poison he’d lived on blackening his nails—she’d found that holding in her mind the smudge of his form, recumbent in its coffin, warded off the house’s crackling that kept her awake nights.

***

Her guest had vanished by morning—leaving his bikini top draped over the fire poker, the bookshelf soaked with urine—but he returned several nights later with a lady, both of them soused. The lady wore albino-blond hair, a strapless gown. She spoke in a Southern accent as the boy wrestled her through the door, past the widow.

“Clay, this doesn’t look like your frat.”

Clay leered at her before stumbling over a disintegrating footstool.

The widow decided these darlings were in no condition to reseek home, so she led them upstairs. Clay more or less sleepwalked, bleary eyes monitoring one step ahead. His date studied the dark fuzz speckling the widow’s walls. In the guest room, the furniture looked bearded, but the couple didn’t seem bothered. They shut the door in the widow’s face, and she heard them creak onto the bed. Ah, youth! When she and Frank were teens, and the town was still its own, they’d stroll beneath the lindens out front. Now the lindens were light poles peppered with strange messages, the avenue a stream of
faces.

Around noon she scrubbed growth off two additional table settings. She made her guests a hearty breakfast to soak up the everlasting poison that had tricked them. When they at last ventured down, they took one look at the snowflake-sized motes already powdering the waffles and eggs, and scurried out the door. Although she’d hoped to spend the afternoon in their company, the widow didn’t let it get to her. Frank. Frank. At the end he’d been so much worse than they, in ways she couldn’t help now but recall. That voice he took on. *I am The Alcohol*, he’d say like a demon. *My job’s to fuck Frank up.* He smelled of cinder, as though his veins held not blood but heat. But there’d been sober times too. She’d have to remember. Leaving the food in case her guests returned, she went up to change their sheets. She found blood clots and feces tangled in the cotton, sickness in one corner of the room. Always a loving, patient woman, she cleaned.

***

The holidays arrived, vacuuming the town of students, and the widow spent many a blustery eve scouring her rooms. She coaxed a pillow of orange tentacles from under the bathroom sink with a butter knife. She lanced the bulbs growing in the closet, mopped up the fluid that seeped out. She bleached the barnacles on the basement floor that threatened to shred her slippers. The cleaning felt like something a long time coming, something she’d been preparing for without knowing. By the time Alpha Gamma Gamma reopened in January for a party, she could hardly recognize her own rooms. She sat by the hearth listening to the pulse of music and tinkle of voices next door. Soon. Soon he would return. The readiness of her home guaranteed it. Toward midnight she dozed, dreamed a world full of sleeping men, come home.

Sirens woke her. Banging at the door. A lurid glow through the curtains drew her to the window. She saw a wall of flame where the men’s house had been. The students must have been careless with a
candle. Or maybe it was old wiring. Something they hadn’t known about, couldn’t be prepared for.

Firefighters hosed the structure to little effect.

The knocking at the door grew more insistent. It would be, she thought, the fire department warning her to abandon house, that the fire would surely spread. Drawing close her robe, she opened up. Men stood on the porch, but none wore the shiny helmets or flame-retardant coats of firefighters. Instead, they wore tuxes, carried bottles of champagne and canted in unruly postures. They were young, a whole fraternity of souls. Their bodies shivered in the winter bite though the widow suspected they were too far gone to realize. At least they were safe. In front, right on the doormat, stood Clay, so drunk he looked through her.

“Oh, you poor dears,” the widow said. “Not a place else in the world to go.” She stepped aside as Clay pushed his way in.
While Dirk and Zoë argued behind his parents’ bedroom door, Rob Nelson stood in the driveway. It was a muggy early September evening. The ignition fuse he’d plucked from Zoë’s Jetta—he’d had to do something to prevent them from leaving him in North Carolina—resembled a pronged spaceship. He crossed the gravel road under the halogen lamp, crept through the Bascombes’ sandy yard and out onto the communal pier, the timbers beneath his feet rocking in the tide. Tyrell County was a beautiful place, Dirk had once said, after you’d left it. Rob arched his back until a mess of stars filled his vision and pitched the fuse into the Albemarle Sound.

***

His triangle theory of grief was the culmination of the best summer of their lives, Rob liked to think. And the worst. He and his friends each claimed tragedies of varying degrees—his own six weeks ago, Zoë’s yesterday, Dirk’s in progress. Dirk’s tiny Philadelphia apartment, where they’d been living, had become cramped with conflicting emotion. That’s why Rob proposed spending Labor Day weekend on his family estate down south. That and because Dirk gave him no other choice. She and I need our space. No offense. Rob came to see the trip as a chance for the three of them to stretch their legs, gain perspective on the value of living together.

Before Rob met Zoë—before he’d lived anywhere but North Carolina—his mother and father were killed in a T-bone, blocks from where the Jetta sat now. That evening, July 18th, the Nelsons’ only child was delivering pizza. He’d just graduated from UNCG and planned to stay on in Greensboro, halfway across the state from Tyrell County, toward the mountains, until his lease ran out. His deliveries that night consisted of house-of-mirrors subdivisions and tree-shrouded county roads. Numberless condos waited with porch lamps lit. Time after time he knocked on doors with a cooling delivery in one hand,
grease spots firming on the cheese. By shift’s end, he’d given away three large pies plus a box of breadsticks, pocketed a meager four bucks in tips. At his Tate Street efficiency, he listened to a restrained recording of Uncle Josh back in Columbia, Tyrell County’s seat. Probably it had been a relief for Josh to let the answering machine break the news. The blinking box couldn’t commiserate with a blubbering boy of twenty-two, offer advice on dealing with grief in a natural way—look after your physical health, draw comfort from your faith, plan ahead for triggers, don’t seek to replace loved ones. But neither could Uncle Josh, it seemed.

The first person Rob called was Dirk, his childhood friend from Columbia. Dirk worked for social services up in Philadelphia, going door-to-door in lower-income neighborhoods to assess need. Using a professional tone Rob didn’t recognize, his friend instructed him to tuck a key under the welcome mat. He’d jump in the car and reach Greensboro in the night. The image of Dirk’s massive head tottering above the steering wheel as he raced down the emptying expressway was Rob’s only help in getting to sleep.

He awoke in a patch of sunlight. A dream; it had been a dream. One of those cautionary tales of the mind: value family while you’ve got it. But he remembered too many details from the painful confirmation call to Uncle Josh—Lawton and Channel Roads, blocks from his parents’ house; impact on the passenger side; Mom crushed and killed right away, Dad’s lungs giving out at the hospital; their German short-haired pointers safe with Josh and Phyllis, Mom’s sister. Rob felt the same clothes clinging to his body. Jeans, a Superchunk T-shirt. He tasted puke. Coaxing himself through the bedroom door, he discovered that his usually cluttered breakfast nook was Windexed and laden with Bojangles’ chicken and biscuits. Dirk embraced him with the firm sympathy of a civil servant.

“Listen, jackass,” Dirk said as Rob, suddenly ravenous, crunched through fried skin into moist meat, “you’re coming back to Philly to meet my new girl. I drove a U-Haul down.”
“Philadelphia, huh?” Rob was relieved by the return of Dirk’s customary way of speech. Irreverent. Crude. In control. Where had he gotten a U-Haul in the middle of the night? Never mind—his friend steered things now. But what about the funeral? Was he, Rob, supposed to arrange that? He hadn’t been to one since age five, when the last of his non-estranged grandparents died—both his parents the youngest of many children. He couldn’t even undress last night, or brush his teeth. How could he be expected to pick up where his parents had left off? He and Dirk ate without napkins, gorging themselves on a family-sized meal, piling bones on a paper plate. Philadelphia. Rob thought the word over and over, hoping it would fill his head before the seed planted there the evening before sprouted more dark leaves. Philadelphia. Ugly as sin, Dirk claimed a gaggle of admirers in the City of Brotherly Love. What a city it must be. Dirk told Rob about his ladies during their weekly phone calls. Bright faces, curved softness. It wouldn’t matter if they were dumpy, the best Dirk could attract. The lights in tall buildings would dazzle as they cruised in a car that hummed with bodied voices, going to a party, windows open, breeze in hair. Together. Too many ever to fear separation. Philadelphia. It sounded like the cradle of civilization.

Dirk dealt with the absentee landlord, power and water, Rob’s boss at Dominos. How well oiled is a mind free of grief! It was a ten-hour trek up I-95, bike and boxes rattling in the trailer, Rob’s Honda hitched behind that. Dirk had played triage nurse, consigning Rob’s twin bed, chest of drawers, and fold-out couch to the Salvation Army, anything that couldn’t be absorbed into his one-bedroom South Street apartment. In early August, he’d convince Rob to sell his geriatric, pepperoni-scented Honda to help with groceries. This purging of individual belongings lent the Philadelphia arrangement an unspoken sense of permanence. Mi casa es tu casa, Dirk’s gesture seemed to say. Take as long as you need. No wonder he’d become popular. He’d never be alone.

They parked three blocks from dim-lit Ammons, in Dirk’s neighborhood. The bar smelled of ashes,
the kind of common man’s pub Dirk claimed to favor nowadays. No more slick sports bars packed with college kids. At Ammons, Xeroxed posters for bands called Boys Alive and Lung Cake, magic-marker dates scrawled across the sheen, flapped under a squeaky ceiling fan. Hipsters in torn jeans and black-rimmed glasses slouched in booths, beards pruned. Rob noted no nods of recognition between these dudes and Dirk. The bartender riveted his friend’s full attention.

“And this is Zoë.”

While Zoë drew their pitcher of Honey Brown, sickly sweet but on special, Rob gazed at the floor. Never having seen a photo of Dirk’s alleged Philly gals, he hadn’t expected much. Especially not this Grecian model with tight black ringlets, button-up shirt cuffs pushed to her elbows, gems everywhere. She leaned her six-foot-plus frame across the bar to peck Dirk on the lips. Rob dared raise his eyes only when she moved out onto the floor, amber liquid sloshing in the pitcher, and slid into the nearest booth. “I’ll watch the bar then, Zoë,” came the peved voice of her co-tender, a tubby kid who winked at Rob as if to say watch out. Dirk snuggled in beside Zoë with three glasses, and Rob centered himself in the opposite bench.

“What’s up, asshole?”

Rob couldn’t help but be surprised by her greeting. Dirk’s pumpkin head wobbled in spasms of glee. Evidently, he’d claimed Zoë as a protégé in coarseness. Did that actually work with women? Since childhood he and Dirk had peppered their speech with fond insult and expletive. This way, circumstances never grew too heavy.

“Hi,” Rob replied, a tiny verbal rebellion. His tragedy had to signify something, mark a change in his life.

Zoë’s shoulders slumped.

Rob felt like someone’s lame dad for not playing along. “Dickweed,” he said to Dirk. “I didn’t
They laughed—Dirk’s raucous, Zoë’s operatic, Rob’s studied and breathy.

A half hour later, he jerked off on Dirk’s couch while listening through the wall to his friend and Zoë fuck five feet away. Her sounds were low, moans in a cave; Dirk’s were frantic, high-pitched, that of a tiny Indian chief fighting a bear. Rob tried to time his clammy strokes to her moans except they gathered in chambers, ebbed and flowed. He finished early. Without cleaning his belly, he rolled over and thought with directness for the first time of his dead family—those dark leaves that had been germinating all day. Uncle Josh said the funeral would be in a week, assured his nephew that he’d take care of all the arrangements while Rob took care of himself. And wasn’t that what he was doing in a skin-tight apartment, a space too small for one corner of shadow? Here no snub nosed image of double mud-coated coffins could insert itself. In that moment Rob’s triangle theory was conceived, though not articulated. It never would be explained well to anyone but himself—if that.

Zoë slept until two o’clock the next day, leaving the boys a Saturday morning alone. They cradled their heads at Dirk’s rhomboid kitchen table, caramel-colored coffee steaming open their eyelids. Dirk’s cheek bore the imprint of a seam.

“She wants to move in.”

It was too good to be true. Rob gripped his friend’s shoulder, shook. “Nice! Did you tell her my situation?”

“That’s when she said it. ‘Let’s make it a threesome.’” Dirk looked glum.

“And you’re cool with that?”

“With what?”

Rob took a long sip of coffee, strategized how to redirect Dirk’s mind to the real issue—the strength of togetherness against humankind’s eternal enemy: death. “I mean, will three be too crowded?”
“No. She’d be sleeping with me, and you out here. Basically the same.”

Rob’s skin tingled. “That’s right. They say four’s a crowd, three’s co—”

“You’re not paying a cent,” Dirk said.

The day before, Rob would have interpreted these last words as more generosity. *Mi casa es tu casa. And so is my paycheck.* Now they suggested a renegotiation of terms, time ticking on a limited warranty. “What about Zoë? You going to make her pay?”


Level-headed Dirk. Rob was reassured. Zoë’s payment represented nothing more than a security deposit. Unlike Rob, she had yet to demonstrate her loyalty.

“Of course not.”

***

Six weeks later, the trio baptized their first afternoon of Labor Day weekend in Columbia with a dip in the Albemarle Sound. Rob hadn’t been ready to go inside the house his parents had left him, which loomed large and yellow, surprisingly decrepit after a good part of the summer vacant. A board swung under the gutter. The porch rails were gray, paint-stripped. Maybe Mom and Dad hadn’t kept it immaculate as Rob remembered. The trio changed into swim suits between the moving truck and overgrown bushes, piled the luggage on the porch. The Jetta’s warm engine clicked, still warm.


Rob smirked. Vehicles were just the sort of detail Dirk would notice—not the load they carried. For all Rob knew, it was the very same U-Haul they’d driven from Greensboro to Philadelphia that cast a shadow on the tall grass.

Zoë acted more solicitous of Rob’s needs as his abandonment approached. She took a dump behind the VFW lodge at the end of the block rather than ask him to open up the Mausoleum, as they called his
parents’ house now. In high school Dirk had been the author of many such atrocious acts. But he objected to Zoë doing it. She ignored him, wiped with tobacco paper. Rob had to laugh.

Later, she shrieked when her foot sunk in slime. Rob and Dirk shared stiff smiles, their chins lapped by green waves. A smoker, she was instantly out of breath, bicycling her legs. “I thought salt water would have sand on the bottom, not mud.”

“It is sand,” Dirk said. “Just low-budget.”

Rob and Dirk had spent hours as kids dredging handfuls of the black gunk, ever in search of something worth finding—bullet casings from a battle in Columbia’s unrecorded past, the tooth of a tiger shark on detour from the Atlantic. Usually they ended up flinging the gunk into each other’s hair.

“Grab the ladder,” Rob said.

Zoë joined him next to the pylons. He’d seen flashes of her strutting to their Philadelphia bathroom in panties and long T-shirt, emerging flushed in a burgundy towel, but this was the first time he’d been close to so much of her flesh. A nest of freckles hovered above one clavicle. Her thigh brushed his as she coughed out water.

“You guys are pussies,” Dirk said. He displayed a few backstrokes toward open water. Beyond him Rob saw the skeleton of a target the Navy had once used for practice. Dirk snapped his head forward so that droplets arced through the air. “This was the only good thing about living here.”

The whole Borden family had disliked Columbia. Rob met Dirk in first grade, the year Mr. Borden, a Pepsi manager, moved them to coastal North Carolina from New Jersey. Mrs. Borden did her shopping once a week in Edenton, thirty miles away, because she couldn’t stand the dirty floor of the local Piggly Wiggly. The year Dirk got ring worm, she threatened to move back to Trenton and take the boy with her.

“I can’t believe you grew up in this paradise,” Zoë said.
The shore pines, rigid above rocks and driftwood, made Rob proud. Their desolate beauty. “Yeah, but no one wants to live here.”

“Nobody? If I were you, with this whole house. I’m just saying. You’re going to sell it?”

Rob’s head reeled with unexpected excitement, a feeling just born. It had taken Zoë to say it. What was stopping the three of them from moving to Columbia? His default plan, which Dirk had forced him to come up with last night in Philly, was to sell the house and get his own apartment on South Street. The thought made him blue. Here he could retain their companionship in exchange for free housing. They’d work for Uncle Josh’s company. Construction or something, Rob couldn’t remember. If Zoë agreed, so would Dirk.

“I can’t live here by myself, without my parents.”

Zoë pressed her lips together in a tight smile of commiseration. “Sorry. It would get lonely.”

No shit, Rob thought, waiting for her to state the obvious solution.

“What’d you do?” Dirk paddled over and plunked between them on the ladder. “They need to invest in some modern-day wood around here.”

“I was bumming Rob out.”

“You’re the one I’m worried about,” Dirk said in a gooey voice.

Rob pushed off from the ladder with a force that sucked Dirk a few inches into his wake. So Zoë’s interest in Columbia had been nothing but idle chatter. Or did she cut her eyes to him just then? Treading water at a distance of some yards, he gazed at The Couple. They’d gotten so accustomed to him that they quarreled, cuddled, and even spoke of him in his presence. He never complained.

“I haven’t decided what I’m going to do yet,” he called over the waves.

He sidestroked out into deeper water. The taste of his youth got in his mouth. Salt and dirt and decay. Dirk said something—what the fuck are you talking about, something like that—but Rob’s ears
gurgled underwater.

***

Zoë moved out of her parents’ Germantown Victorian and into Dirk’s South Street apartment one week after Rob arrived in Philadelphia. She angled her daddy-bought Jetta onto the sidewalk out front, the whole backseat packed to the roof with blankets and lamps, dresses.

“Looks like we’ll need a bigger place,” Rob joked, bumping up against Dirk on the buckled pavement. “Now that we’re three.”

“It’ll fit.”

The apartment shrunk under coverlets, a Bob Marley poster, jewelry boxes, incense, books about qi and intestinal health, Russian nesting dolls, a manikin, end tables, a bongo, batik wall hangings. Her pin-headed dachshund, Virgil, clacked over the tile and wood floors, supervising.

“Any other crap you can ditch, Rob?” Dirk pointed at a crooked lamp.

Rob, sweat dripping on the carton of Zoë’s books he clutched, shrugged.

“No, I’m the intruder here.” Zoë twined her fingers in Dirk’s stiff hair, bristles on a melon. “I don’t have to bring over everything from my folks’.”

“Moving out completely would be healthy,” Dirk said.

“Why?”

Rob set the carton on another carton, reached over to pat Virgil, but the little devil screeched and dodged away. He was just the sort of dog Dirk and Rob made fun of, rats on leashes.

“Listen to Virge,” Dirk said. “He wants his own pad.”


How Dirk tolerated Zoë’s treacle baffled Rob. What was her angle? His friend’s cynicism had always fit him like a tailored suit of dark leather, ever since he’d been teased about the size of his head.
in grade school. They’d formed a team of anti-popularity guerillas—egging houses, ordering crappy tapes from BMG for unsuspecting rivals, dropping mysterious notes in lockers. Rob decided that Zoë, too gorgeous for Dirk by half, must have self-esteem issues.

She led Dirk to the bedroom. She needed to “show” him something. They shut the dog outside with Rob.

“I guess it’s us against them,” Rob said to the glossy black thing. But already he sensed that they needed him, even if they didn’t yet know it. He dropped onto a still-clear cushion and waited for their fucking to begin. So long as they let him stay, he could live with invisibility.

He picked up the phone to call Uncle Josh, got Phyllis instead, Mom’s fat sister. Her dopey voice constricted when he said his name. Having grown up an only child, Rob couldn’t imagine what losing a sibling would be like. Other families with lots of kids seemed crowded. He’d breathed small sighs of relief Sunday mornings when Mrs. Borden dropped him back home after a sleepover. Dirk and his two sisters, one brother, all teeming in their Cato Street rancher.

“I don’t think I’ll make the funeral.”

“I know.” The way Phyllis said it, she didn’t know, couldn’t understand his selfishness. “Just tell us how we can help you.”

Stay away, Rob thought. I’m doing fine. Wrap up my old house, the dogs, my parents in a tidy box and keep them for a few years until I’m ready to unwrap it. “Thanks.”

No sound came from the bedroom when he hung up. Was their sober sex quiet, tender? Or could it be that Zoë had lured Dirk into the room not to reward but to scold him for trying to screw up the threesome? He walked into the kitchen to stand by the refrigerator, cocked an ear toward their bedroom. Nothing.

Virgil whined by the patio door, so Rob let him out. He had a second thought. Grabbing a PBR, he
joined the dog outside. Let them imagine they had space.

***

Rob felt as though he didn’t really enter the Columbia house until the trio had finished unloading the U-Haul, piling the remainder of his belongings in a corner of the living room. They sat to rest, their bathing suits dry, on the dusty couches. Only when the stale air stilled and Rob heard refrigerator’s familiar hum, smelled the subtle odor of pine that marked the house, did he sense he’d come home, that “home” still existed after he’d spent a month and a half trying to replace it in Philadelphia. The house wasn’t nearly as desolate inside as he’d expected. Josh and Phyllis were still paying the power bill, keeping the water on. An inexplicable favor to Rob. From what he could tell, they hadn’t budged a footstool, adjusted a picture. Indeed, it was as though he were still in college, back for fall break with a few friends, Mom and Dad napping upstairs in the dull afternoon. A pair of reading glasses, propped on an open magazine, made his parents’ absence concrete; it also rendered their death more manageable, the life they represented replaceable. All Rob had to do was roll out the area rug he’d bought at a Greensboro yard sale, exchange the replica of Picasso’s bathers with Zoë’s Jamaican flag, plug in Dirk’s stereo, and they’d be good to go. It would take just one more load from Philly.

“I’ll get some dinner going,” Rob said, rising from the couch.

Dirk guffawed, an ugly sound—like a turkey warning its flock about hunters. “You want to poison us, go ahead. I wouldn’t look in that refrigerator if I were you.” He’d been in a bad mood since the night before, when Zoë insisted they join Rob on the last-minute trip, even after what he’d done.

“There must be some canned or boxed goods,” Zoë said, joining Rob by the stove.

“We’ll eat out.” Rob was determined to play peacemaker, staying in the neutral territory of the third. “I haven’t been to Valentine’s in a year.”

“That old dump? We’ll get scabies from the forks,” Dirk said, arms crossed on the couch. In fourth
grade, Rob remembered, Dirk couldn’t eat too many greasy cheeseburgers from Valentine’s, stuff enough freezer-burned crinkle fries into his cheeks. The food was heaven compared to the couscous and steamed kale Mrs. Borden served up.

“Drop the tude for one weekend, can’t you?” When Zoë got irritated, it happened in a flash. She didn’t stew like Dirk, deflect like Rob. The anger came like the point of a knife through her forehead, between her closely spaced eyes. His parents’ Kenmore range looked like a child’s toy pressed under her hip.

“I was just teasing.” Dirk crossed the unswept floor, stirring a tumbleweed of dog hair, and wrapped his orangutan arms around her waist. Rob retreated to the microwave to give them space. “We’ll paint the town if you want,” Dirk murmured into Zoë’s neck. “Whatever town there is.”

The meal at Valentine’s proved disappointing. New management had attempted to class the diner up. The Pentecostal-church-style marquis had been replaced by slate on an easel, specials chalked in cursive. Artificial ferns lined each booth back. The wait staff had dropped thirty years and put on fresh linen. The food retained the unappetizing quality Rob craved: mushy rice, brown shades of sauce, lemonade like sink cleaner. Yet without a run-down atmosphere to match, the whole experience left him confused and dissatisfied.

“I see what you meant about Valentine’s. I feel slaughtered.” In the backseat of the Jetta, he had to speak up to be heard over the air conditioning.

“I don’t know. My green beans were brilliant. Full of ham like they’re supposed to be down here.” Zoë dragged a forearm across her brow. “Show me the South, Honey.”

“Sure thing.” Dirk had cleaned his own plate. In the driver’s seat, he rotated his sunburned globe to check for traffic. There was none. “They really spiffed the dive up. A typical southern eatery with some modern charm.”
What happened, Rob wondered, to Dirk’s newfound praise of the commoner? After driving that morning down I-95 at the wheel of a U-Haul three times bigger than he needed—the only size available on such short notice—he felt like a sullen teenager, on a road trip with Mom and Dad.

“I’ll show you my old crib first,” Dirk said. “No great shakes like Nelsons’.” They cruised past the Bordens’ former rancher, Dirk pointing out with a tour guide’s enthusiasm the window of the bedroom he shared with his brother, now living in Boston. He showed Zoë the purple-flowering hydrangea bush where he said he’d French-kissed Sally Parker. Rob didn’t remember this. Dirk neglected to explain that the bush had also been his and Rob’s hideout, a cool place in the summer to yell insults at passers-by with impunity, bumblebees buzzing around their heads. He didn’t indicate the nonfunctioning chimney they’d hid skin mags in. They passed the Amoco where Dirk had worked his first summer job. They viewed the courthouse, the post office, the chamber of commerce, landmarks having nothing to do with their childhood. Rob dropped his head against the rest. It was one of those moments when he’d learned to become invisible, while The Couple mended a rift.

“This town is so quaint,” Zoë said. “I’ll hate to leave.”

Rob’s scalp went cold. “Then don’t,” he blurted, his first words in twenty minutes. “You can live here for free.”

“Wouldn’t that be a blast.” Zoë’s tone was hard with her face turned away, the AC growling.

“We’ll ask my uncle about jobs with his construction company.”


“Turn here,” Rob said.

Dirk jerked the car onto Riverneck Road, which wound through a cypress swamp. Darkened by overhanging trees, hemmed in by leaning marsh grass, the road had always reminded Rob of a snake, moving toward open water.
“Creepy,” Zoë said. She waved her hand at a Spanish-moss tree wig. Potholes shook the car.

“Potholes were a great place to find frogs after a rain,” Rob said. “When we were kids. We caught them by the fistful. They hid in potholes so the car tires couldn’t squash them.”

“I didn’t know you had frogs here.” Zoë’s face displayed childlike amazement.

“What did you think that incessant racket was?” Dirk lowered the window and cut the air. The din of tree frogs penetrated the car. Nights in Philadelphia, Rob recalled, meant the hum of power lines, bleary voices on the street. A human attempt to recreate this garden.

“It sounds like the jungle.” Zoë’s eyes gleamed in the dusk. She unrolled her own window.

“Exactly,” Rob and Dirk said at the same time.

Josh and Phyllis’s house sat in a clearing. It had always looked like a disguised trailer to Rob. A mobile home with the wheels removed, the stacked-block foundation hidden by pricker bushes. They parked, half in the driveway and half in the yard, next to Josh’s Dodge truck. Josh answered the door in a bathrobe.

“Robby!” His uncle’s baggy eyes weighed down the energetic greeting. He’d always been that way, tired-seeming. “We didn’t expect you.”

“I wanted to it to be a surprise.” Rob felt encouraged that he could stare at his uncle, hug his soft body, without wilting with the memory that the last time he’d done so, he was hugging Mom and Dad too. Maybe the six weeks of erasing Columbia had really worked.

Uncle Josh ushered them into the formal living room. Like in a funeral parlor, the surfaces were cleared of anything save fragrant candles and porcelain. No sweating glasses of melted ice, no rumpled blanket.

“Been to see your folks yet?” Josh’s question made it sound as though the Nelsons had relocated to a little cottage on the edge of town.
“Not yet. These were—” Rob glanced at Dirk, who lounged beside him on the couch. “—my roommates in Pennsylvania. You know Dirk.”

“Howya, Borden.” Josh hadn’t caught Rob’s use of the past tense. He and Dirk shared a hearty handshake, as if freed from grave restraint by the orphan’s evident comfort.

“Anyway, I’m thinking of moving back here,” Rob said.

“Here?” A look of concern at last sharpened his uncle’s features. Rob had always taken Josh’s exhausted look as the outward expression of misanthropy, disinterest in family or children. Now he felt that the same blood ran in their veins, transferred somehow through Phyllis. Josh got it: the idea was ridiculous. Nobody should face grief alone.

“Not here. I wouldn’t want to be a burden. I meant my parents’ house—my house. I’ll live there by myself, pick up a shift at Amoco, or deliver pizzas. Does Columbia have Dominos?” Rob knew full well it didn’t.

Zoë perched on her chair; Dirk glared at the backs of his hands.

“Have you thought this through?” Josh asked. He seated himself on the armrest nearest Rob. “It’s just that there isn’t much so far as work goes.”

“He said you might have some construction work,” Dirk remarked with great irony, keeping his eyes on his hands, as if reading there a script written by a child. “You know, hard hats and I-beams.”

“Construction?” Josh shook his head. “I’m retired. You didn’t know, Robby?” A door in the back of the house released a scramble of paws, Phyllis’s heavy tread. “Your aunt still works at the clinic.”

Barney burst into the room, sliding across the wood floor. Chloe minced in after. The pointers made for Rob, jostling for position between his knees. Swarming grays and browns, a cold nose pressed against his wrist. They were massive zoo animals compared to Virgil, whose feathery, ticking chest Rob had been able to get his hands around. Rob glanced up for Zoë’s reaction, but the recliner was empty,
rocking. A third animal skulked across the carpet toward the dancing dogs. Zoë crawled toward them—
toward him—and pushed her face into their haunches. Perfect.

Aunt Phyllis halted in the center of the room, arms outstretched for a hug. She wore a flower-print blouse and pink skirt that her poofy hair suggested were hastily put on. “Every day you look more like your father.” She always said shit like that.

Rob pried Barney’s forelegs off his thigh in order to stand. Hugging Aunt Phyllis was like squeezing a bouquet of dried flowers. Was it age or grief that made her fragile? Perhaps grief pooled longer an old body. He pulled away, though she still gripped him. People like her were doomed, she and Josh. One would die, and that would be it for the other. Three. You need three. The animals pushed against his leg as they writhed in affection.

“I’m glad you came by when you did,” Phyllis said. “We were going to shut off the power and water next month. With Josh retired—”

“I understand, Phyl. You didn’t have to keep it on this long. We’re here now.” Rob took in Zoë and Dirk in one glance—she a warm blur below, he an angular scowl at the sofa’s end.

“It didn’t cost us much, being vacant,” Josh said. “We just didn’t hear from you for so long.”

“Lately,” Dirk said, “he’s been talking nonstop about living back in Tyrell County.”


“I can’t believe we used to live in such a paradise.” Rob tried to match Dirk’s sarcasm, but he found himself, to his dismay, meaning these words.

He settled back on the couch. Zoë’s hair was mussed, one cheek pressed upward against Chloe’s back. Apparently, she hadn’t heard his and Dirk’s battle of wits, which had been equally lost on Josh and Phyllis. It might as well have been he and Dirk alone, like in gradeschool.

“I think,” he said, after a moment, “we have no choice but to borrow the dogs for a few days.”
That night Zoë and Dirk argued, their voices muffled, behind his parents’ bedroom door. How natural that they’d chosen that room, leaving Rob his boyhood bunks. His parents had threatened good-naturedly every summer since freshman year to convert his bedroom into a study. But they never had. It remained just as he’d left it five years ago, a shrine—he the dead one. He wandered the house, looking items over—toaster with one lever broken; framed Pepsi ad from Mr. Borden; Mom’s quilts. It had become a museum of sorts. One of those slice-of-American-life displays he’d seen in on the marching band trip to DC, staring dummies in vintage dress, posed in everyday situations. In this one, the raised voices of parents drifted down the hallway. Arguments about the kid, finances. The dogs had stretched panting on the porch. After a while, Dirk’s voice lowered to a soothing murmur. Zoë’s fell silent.

Rob drank a long glass of water from the tap, sprinkled a handful on the back of his neck. He wandered out into the yard, where frogs and cicadas throbbed. Under the halogen light, the Jetta’s carmine chrome shined like viscera. Home. Dirk would never accept it, but Zoë might. For months his sexual fantasies had featured her. Scenario after ridiculous scenario about how they might one day betray Dirk against their will, which wouldn’t really be betrayal. Made to undress at gun point. Trapped in a snow bank, huddled skin on skin. The last pair on earth, forced to procreate. Each ridiculous vision was safely locked in his mind while he remained, in real life, under the protective custody of The Couple. But perhaps they could survive no longer. And if there had to be just two, why not Rob and Zoë? A sick dread filled his belly as he approached her car.

***

After two weeks on South Street, it was clear to Rob that Dirk had fewer Philly friends than he’d let on. Several work acquaintances would join them for drinks at Ammons once or twice a week, but mainly Rob met neighbors in their seventies and eighties, propped on stoops in aluminum chairs, kids pushing scooters down Sheridan Alley. Jerry at the used record store knew Dirk’s name, in a salesman-type
way. Dirk’s cousins, Karen and Regina, lived in Trenton, and came to shop on Saturdays. Beyond that, there was just the trio. They were enough.

Rob had struggled through a string of romantic relationships in college, so he knew balancing bonding and alone time can be difficult. Julie. Lisa. Eleanor. Each of them had judged him clingy. He soon learned that alone time with three was almost out of the question. Neither Dirk’s house visits as a case worker nor Zoë’s bar hours proved regular. Whenever one chanced to be home without the other, Rob would be around, cleaning or cooking or clipping Virgil’s nails. For the trio, “alone” came to mean two—Rob and one other.

“Together” meant finding something all three could tolerate. The boys had been on the high school track team in Columbia, and Zoë demonstrated a clear health-mindedness. She baked her own granola, engaged in colon cleansing, smoked low-tar cigarettes. They tried afternoon jogs together along South Philly’s grimy sidewalks, through the sporadic litter-strewn parks. The problem was one of distance. While Rob and Dirk, neither in top shape, could both manage to walk/run three miles, they seldom stopped at the same time to suck breath. Zoë couldn’t manage more than a three-block jog, breasts jouncing without a proper sports bra. These bursts would be followed by a five-block wheezing shuffle and then a shorter bout of jogging. The only obvious solution was to run at separate paces, but Dirk said he worried about Zoë in spotty neighborhoods, and Rob couldn’t stand running alone.

When they tried swimming, flailing kids and floaters so clotted the public pool that they scurried back to their burrow. Yoga and concerts were no good. Might as well be alone, Rob pointed out. Same with reading and TV. Truly being together implied interaction. He convinced

Dirk to buy board games. Monopoly inched along, and chess required rotation. No one enjoyed playing the board-game bystander. Scrabble worked for a weekend, except Dirk won every time, and not with long elegant words, just the same do-re-me-fa-so-la-ti’s jammed together with ox or za or xi to
make potent syllables in three directions.

The answer came at last through the animal kingdom. The South Street patio was so tiny that even a toy dog such as Virgil required exercise twice daily. As luck would have it, one of those urban inventions of necessity, the dog park, bustled around the corner from the apartment. After a probationary period in learning the etiquette—what to do during scuffles, how to manage treats, how to pick up crap—the trio settled into a routine of effortless and fluid togetherness. Three parallel spheres of intercourse operated in the dog park: human/human, dog/dog, dog/human. The result was constant but never monotonous interaction. A visitor could spend a third of an hour trading cute stories with fellow dog owners, a third petting and throwing sticks for dogs, and a third deriving vicarious pleasure from watching dogs at play with their own kind. In no place like the fenced turd-dappled half acre of Cianifrani Park did Rob find himself removed from his orphanhood. Likewise, Dirk seemed to be without the lovelorn anxiety that had been growing since Zoë moved in. Zoë laughed more often, and in a lower, throaty way that suggested ease.

The dog park days lasted in reality just the middle of August. By month’s end, Rob and Virgil often shuffled through the leash-draped gate at Cianifrani without their pack. Their spheres fell out of balance; the play lacked poignancy. Autumn approached. First Zoë and then Dirk had begun, without explanation, working longer hours. “Could you take Virgil to the park?” was his farewell most mornings. Since you’re not doing anything useful. He stretched his chores into the evening so they’d witness his own work when they returned. It was easy. Depending on the level of scrutiny, the apartment could never be called absolutely clean. If he buffed the stereo console to a shine not matched by the linen closet doors, the doors had to be addressed, even if he’d just cleaned them. It was a matter of balance.

At dawn on the Friday of Labor Day weekend, Rob rolled off the couch and stacked his sheets
behind the corner fern, restoring his squatter’s bedroom to the daytime den. He returned all clutter to its place of origin. After his roommates left for work—Zoë now moonlighted as a lunchtime counter girl at Johnny Rocket’s before heading to Ammons in the afternoon—he planned to break out the Dyson and remove every dog hair and crunched-under-shoe kibble, every fresh cobweb and bug wing before squeegeeing. He’d pass the day dusting and polishing from refrigerator top to baseboard. He had discovered that a sheen expanded even the meanest floor plan.

At 7:30, Dirk stepped into the kitchen wearing the grim face of morning. Rob had brewed the French Roast strong, the way Dirk did, taking care to grind the beans behind the closed bathroom door, the grinder muffled by a towel. He’d emptied the dishwasher and set out clean bowls and spoons for cereal. His friend eased shut the bedroom door, raised a finger to his lips.

“She’s not feeling well today.” Dirk had taken to calling Zoë she, the antecedent foregone, as if she occupied both of their minds nonstop. To an extent this was true.

“I’ll take good care of her,” Rob said, handing Dirk a mug of coffee, caramel colored with a half-spoon of sugar.

Dirk nodded slowly, without conviction. “So you’re here today.” He set his coffee on the table, spilling a drop on the handsome pine. “Have you seen my keys?”

Rob had seen them. Dirk’s ring was marked by a Pavement bottle opener. Zoë’s had a “rape whistle,” as she called it, and troll with bright pink hair. He’d made a place for both sets in a drawer beneath the microwave that was previously designated for odds and ends. He retrieved them for Dirk, who gave him an unappreciative look.

“Consider me your personal secretary. I appreciate what you’ve done for me since I inherited the Mausoleum.” Maintaining the calm way Rob felt, six weeks later, about his tragedy necessitated this sort of joking. He’d denied himself closure by missing the funeral and avoiding Columbia. Irreverence
had become essential, a way to distract himself.

“About the Mausoleum”—Dirk spoke with an emphasis that placed scare quotes around Rob’s coinage—“don’t you think it’s time to see about it? You could make enough off selling it to rent a posh crib up here.”

“I leave that legal nonsense to Josh. Escrow. Liens. Liquidation. He’ll mail me a check.”

Dirk grabbed his mug, sloshing more on the table. At the sink he transferred the contents to a thermos—Rob should’ve washed that—and added more coffee from the urn, throwing off his usual ratio of cream and sugar. “You’ve got to stop putting this on other people.”

“I know, I know,” Rob said, not caring to ask what, exactly, Dirk meant.

“Think about it. Your uncle’s keeping the power on in case you come home.”

“I can’t understand why he’s doing that.” Eventually, Dirk would see he was being the opposite of selfish, refusing to let grief take over. “Bagel?”

Dirk raised a finger again to his lips.

“Sorry. I’ll make sure she gets what she needs.”

Dirk took his first long sip of coffee, accompanied by the satisfying glug of the thermos. He shook his head, long and slow. “She and I need our space. No offense.”

Rob’s ears burned. Then you shouldn’t have brought me up here, he thought, gotten rid of half my things. A lonely bachelor in Philadelphia, Dirk leapt at the opportunity the Nelsons’ accident had provided to bring his best friend north. Then a woman enters the picture, and suddenly he has too much company.

“I understand.”

***

The Jetta emitted a mechanical whir, barely audible from the open living room window. Rob parted the
curtain. Inside the car—shrugging shoulders, hands on brows, tails thumping the back windows. His satisfaction was solemn at best.

He had slept on the top bunk, his favorite all the way through high school, and opened his eyes at one in the afternoon. His guests’ bags sat by the front door. Zoë looked excited, as if the night before—the yelling—had never occurred. Dirk was taking her for a day trip to the Outer Banks while Rob “did what he needed to do.” Jealousy clenched Rob’s throat. Slathered in coconut-scented sun block, her features shaded by a straw hat, Zoë seemed little to care exactly what it was he needed to do. Figure out how to put a house on the market. Look for a job in this ghost town. Visit his parents’ graves. How quickly we take one another for granted.

“Great idea,” he said. “Me and the dogs have some catching up to do.”

Zoë’s face fell. Sometimes only wounding others made him feel needed. “Of course.”

Barney and Chloe thundered down the stairs behind Dirk, who wore sunglasses, a towel around his neck. He smiled, glowing brighter than Zoë. His cheer always infected Rob. Lately he’d gotten too close to remember this about his friend.

“Syonara,” Dirk said. “If you’re a good boy and see about listing this palace, maybe we’ll have some fun tonight.”

Rob couldn’t help but smile in return. Fun had been the trip’s goal. Together, like before. Floats on the sound, empty merlot bottles, a walk through the sultry neighborhood. He had only wanted to gain time by pulling the fuse. Now he feared the time he’d gained was the wrong sort.

Barney bounced. Dirk unpocketed a biscuit. “One thing that hasn’t expired around here.”

“Actually, please do take these beasts off my hands for the day.” Rob squeezed Zoë’s greasy forearm.

The way her jaw dropped, her unabashed pleasure at such a small gift, made Rob wish they could
stand in the foyer longer, all day. The three of them, points of a pyramid in the sun. It was easy to be kind, to be loved.

Dirk and Zoë returned within ten minutes, bags drooping at the ends of their arms. The pointers pranced on the porch. To have a dog’s memory. Rob’s friends stared at him without staring at him. Their coiled silence accused him of the sabotage.

“What happened?”

“What won’t start,” Dirk said.

Zoë plopped onto the couch, selected the spring issue of Better Homes and Gardens from the basket. She flipped through the pages like someone waiting for news of a sick relative.

“Can you take the U-Haul?” Rob pushed back the curtain again to draw attention away from the tremor in his voice. He was a terrible liar.

“I’m not going anywhere until we figure out what’s wrong with Zoë’s car.” Dirk never called it ‘Zoë’s car.’ Always ‘the Jetta.’ Rob understood that this was part of the accusation. Look what you’ve done to poor Zoë.

“But it’s Labor Day weekend.”

Dirk let out a groan that escalated to a small roar. He threw his balled towel onto a chair. Chloe trotted to his side, tail between her legs. “I know that, Rob. That’s the reason we’re here.”

“I just doubt you’ll find a mechanic.”

Dirk looked hard at him. “I thought you might know something.”

“About cars? I don’t think so.” Stating this simple truth lent Rob an edge of confidence. He sat next to Zoë on the couch.

Zoë dropped the open magazine onto her lap, one eyebrow arched, cutting the tension. What did the trace of a smile on her lips signify? “Maybe it’s a sign.”
“A sign?” Dirk spit out the words.

Rob couldn’t tell if she meant the car not starting or the sabotage, or maybe the way they weren’t getting along. He giggled, a release of the nervous energy left over from his lie.

“That we should enjoy our last weekend.”

Dirk’s eyes narrowed. He looked back and forth between them. “What’s the joke?”

“There’s no joke.” Zoë stared at her boyfriend, her expression serene, as if she were confirming something. “I’m going to walk the dogs.”

Dirk said nothing. He looked disappointed.

“I’ll go,” Rob said. He didn’t care that Zoë’s announcement may have been a coded invitation to Dirk, so that The Couple could have a Talk. If this was his last weekend, he demanded to be part of them.

“I’m getting drunk,” Dirk said. “You two lovebirds go on your walk.”

“Whatever,” Zoë said. “Come on.” Her cool fingers plucked Rob’s arm, and she tugged him off the couch.

The floor tilted. Rob blinked at Dirk’s blushing face, the huge head he’d defended like his own since childhood. Maybe he’d been joking, calling them lovebirds, but now the joke had disappeared. Lovebirds? Rob mouthed, his shock genuine despite what he now realized he’d long wanted, and darkly expected, from Zoë.

Dirk shrugged. He disappeared with his spraddled gait into the back den, where as teenagers they’d sampled from Dad’s liquor cabinet, the bottles never changing, Dad never noticing.

Zoë led Rob into the steamy afternoon, where the silent car burned in the sun. Barney and Chloe churned like butter around their legs. A mosquito, heavy with sunlight, dipped from the eave. They strolled down the sidewalk between jungle grass, gazing across the Bascombes’ yard at the slate gray
sound. At the yard’s edge he shed Dirk’s disappointment and confusion, like a garment that he wasn’t sure if he would need again. To live here. He’d done it as a kid, when the smallest town is a continent. They turned right, toward the pond at the dead end, two hundred yards of gravel road between scraggly pines and smaller houses. Rob was floating. Impulsively, he reached for Zoë’s hand, but she pulled it away. What was he doing? Dirk could be watching from the back window. But the move was inevitable. He’d given Rob no other choice.

“I am leaving Dirk,” Zoë said. “That’s why I don’t want him left alone in that apartment.”

“I know.” But Dirk had said he didn’t want him. Rob’s heart raced; his voice took on a husky edge as he tested this new territory. Zoë wasn’t his type—to pretty. There’d been less pressure under the guise of friends, the trio. Still, it was better than being alone.

“The thing with Dirk was temporary. He knew I wanted something of my own.”

“Sure,” Rob said, nodding. What did she mean something of her own? A vague feeling of indignation, either on Dirk’s behalf or on his own, stirred in him but faded under his exhilaration. Do not question it. Take what’s yours.

“A loft, maybe.”

“I guess that explains your second job. I was wondering.”

“Yeah, an artist’s loft with lots of light. Maybe up in Northern Liberties.”

Rob nodded. Northern Liberties, across town from South Street. And here she could have a whole house for free. They passed some buckra Rob didn’t recognize weeding his figurine-glutted garden. The old man lifted a dirty glove. Amazing how you move away for a few years and all your neighbors change. “So Dirk hasn’t figured it out?” Rob said, half to himself. “That’s hard to believe.”

Zoë shook her head. Biting a lip, gaze focused on the gravel ahead—a nine-year-old trying on compunction. “I thought it was obvious. What serious couple would want a roommate?”
“Beats me.” Rob blushed. To hide it, he bent and broke a stick off a branch in the roadside ditch. He flung it as far ahead as possible so the dogs would chase it. It landed halfway to the pond and bounced in the dust. “I guess it’s just what we needed at the time.”

There must have been an edge to his tone because Zoë grabbed his hand and squeezed. “Sure. You with your parents, me trying to save money.”

They halted a few yards from the nameless pond, before the bank dipped, uneven and muddy. She let him rub his thumb up and down the back of her hand. He and Dirk’s girl—the girl he’d finally brought home—out here in the open. It didn’t feel like he wanted it to, not that he’d ever really thought it would happen. Last night, Zoë alone seemed his last hope. She smelled so good, as she always had. But now he noticed an acrid undertone. Her dark brown eyes, irises he could barely distinguish from the pupil, looked down into his brain, waiting for something.

Uneasy, he glanced along the shore, which had been re-graded into caked reddish dirt. Barney waded into the brackish water. Chloe sniffed a Bobcat backhoe. A Mountain Dew bottle, tobacco spit in the bottom, glowered from the cupholder. The pond used to belong to him and Dirk. Creeping around the shore offered a challenge—steep banks, water plants, snakes they couldn’t see. They sketched plans for building a raft of cypress branches, talked of floating out to the middle of this small pond next to the Albemarle Sound and spending the whole day out there where no one could reach them except with their voices.

He wanted to tell Zoë these memories, but it felt wrong to bring up Dirk. “Looks like whoever owns this pond has been clearing trees and brush.”

“Yeah,” Zoë said.

“Maybe they’re going to build a dock.”

“Anyway, Dirk won’t see us for what we are. Good friends. What we’ve been since July.”
Rob breathed a sigh of relief. It was time to take the leap, to talk frankly. “You mean you need my help.” He put a second hand on hers, cupping it. “You need a good reason to call it off. To make him understand.”

“I have a good reason.” Zoë’s lips, which had just been parted as if to reveal something intimate, pressed shut. She pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms.

Rob became aware of his erection, a dull ache. “I didn’t mean to sound coarse,” he said. Zoë was fishing a cigarette from her pack. “I’m just scared. He’s my best friend.” These words seemed to hang in the air, black and repulsive.

Zoë frowned and shook her head, a cloud of smoke dissipating to her left. “Well, if you want to help, maybe you can talk to him.”

“Talk to him?”

“It would mean a lot to me.”

***

It must have been Dirk’s blunt statement—*she and I need our space*—that had rendered Rob so light-headed, so careless, Friday morning. This was how it felt to be on the outside, not chosen by Dirk Borden. After his friend refilled the thermos and left for work, Rob looked around for Virgil’s leash, unable to remember where he’d stashed it during the pre-clean clutter bust. The apartment looked like a model unit, for display only.

Half of him wanted to enter the bedroom and jostle Zoë awake. He couldn’t believe they both wanted him gone. Neither could he explain the extra work hours. It could be they planned to marry, buy a house in Conshohocken. One thing a triangle teaches is that closeness isn’t a matter of feet and inches.

The walk to Cianifrani took extra long, Virgil demanding to squirt every leaf, every dried worm.
They had to get back soon in case Zoë woke up. He’d study her expression, normally heavy lidded in the morning, for signs of a late night talk, cuddled with Dirk in a tangle of sheets, the only place Rob’s grief had left them.

He ignored the other patrons in the park, a woman in a safari hat and a man with a big ass. Their dogs, both huskies, wrestled in the dust, and Virgil, an eighth their size, dodged in and out of the ring. “Break it up, kid,” Rob whispered. Virgil wagged his tail and waddled under a bench into the grass, where he emptied the rest of his bladder. He lay in some clover. It was the garden that must have changed after the Fall, Rob thought, not the couple. Mud half-filled the bucket by the hose-down area. Most vegetation in the park had been trampled, leaving a plain of dirt.

He let the lead out on the way back home. Virgil didn’t have much of a life. Two walks a day, tapping around a packed apartment when his ancestors had scared badgers from their dens. Virgil made the best of the longer leash, straining ahead for more ground, to reach each scent before Rob could claim any of it. Rob scanned a row of cars. He’d seen the Jetta parked near the corner of 7th and Catherine, and he looked for it now. There. Zoë’s reflective sun guard in the window. She hadn’t left yet. He got the crazy idea that if the door was unlocked, he’d sit inside to wait for her. Lately, she’d been giving him rides when he needed it. And the Jetta was the car he borrowed to do shopping. In her glove compartment: cigarettes, car manual, napkins, CDs. He’d organized it for her, but she never mentioned the change. He tugged on the leash, Virgil pulling with extra insistence as Rob peered through the shadowy interior to the far doors. Everything locked. He noticed a tiny scratch under the passenger rearview.

“Hey, buddy. I’m sorry.” People yelled to one another on the street all the time, but this voice came from nearby. He pulled on the leash. Virgil didn’t always like strangers, especially loud ones. Taut as a tightrope, it stretched from the plastic casing in his hand around the grill of a luxury car parked three up
from the Jetta. Out in the street, a foreign diesel sedan idled, a gray head protruding out the front door. “I didn’t see him till I was right on him.” The face under the hair was cherubic, a black man in a suit. With traffic stalled, an oblivious delivery truck driver honked.

The man gave Rob a towel to wrap Virgil in. He waved the traffic around for a beat before Rob released him on his way. Head crushed, the dog was obviously dead. Rob had allowed him to run in between cars onto the street. What more could the man do? Still it seemed as though the transaction required more than the awkward handshake, oblong bundle on the sidewalk at their feet. He watched the sedan rattle down Catherine until it turned on 9th and moved out of sight.

He couldn’t go home and deliver Virgil, still warm, to Zoë. Of course, if she were really sick she wouldn’t come out of her room much. When she did, though, she’d ask for the dog. She’d open the freezer to press ice on her forehead and see the frosty bundle. Because heat was an issue. Poor Virgil, where would they even bury him when they rented not a square yard of dirt? Anything to throw off the balance, the positive aspects of living together, he didn’t want. He could already guess that without the dachshund getting under their feet, the apartment would seem paradoxically smaller. Less reason for Zoë to come home. Less use for Rob.

As usual, he called Dirk.

***

Bitter, Rob stroked the dogs in the living room, debating over exactly what to tell his friend. After their walk to the pond, Zoë had retired to the master bedroom, saying she wanted to be alone for a while. Rob supposed this was his cue to talk with Dirk. Would he say that Zoë, a coward, wanted him to break Dirk’s heart so she wouldn’t have to? That she’d used Rob as a buffer all summer, a way to avoid commitment? He didn’t see much in it for him but Dirk’s jealousy. Rob was her confidant, not him. So what if he didn’t tell Dirk? That would put the pressure back on Zoë. If she wanted to break up the trio,
he didn’t have to help.

Dirk sat in the den with his back to the door, a sweating tumbler beside him on the leather couch arm. With no television opposite, no window or person, the vision was unsettling. Rob had the crazy thought Dirk was dead, another stuffed item in the household museum.

“I was going to marry her.” Dirk’s voice sounded sober, telegraphed across generations.

So Rob had been right—or half-right—thinking The Couple would be married, legally annulling the triple union. But how had Dirk known it was he, Rob, who’d entered the room?

“Why do you say you were going to marry her?”

Dirk guffawed, but there seemed little anger in it. “She wants you, asshole. You move in, then she does. Before your folks died, we’d held hands at most, flirted a bit.” Dirk picked up the tumbler, holding it with some sort of rag. He gestured as if they were speaking face to face.

Rob’s eyes drifted over a painting on the opposite wall: five old-fashioned bikers in skull caps pedalled toward the painter over a plain of brown. In the bottom corner were Dirk’s eyes, reflected. Above that, next to an outside biker, himself standing in the doorway.

“We took the dogs on a walk to the pond. I told her how as kids we tried to build a raft. That’s it.” Rob walked out of the frame and around the couch. The glass coffee table by Dirk’s knees was shattered, a couple of shards tinged with blood. Rob glanced back at the rag in Dirk’s hand, avoiding his friend’s face. A tube sock. “What did you do?”

“Build a raft. Come off it. We were kids. The fact is Zoo-woman, that Amazon, wants your skinny ass.”

Could it be true? Maybe she’d told Dirk as much Friday morning, given him a reason to want Rob gone. Dirk had proclaimed her sick, refusing to listen.

Dirk let Rob take his injured hand. Blood from the gash had soaked through the sock, fastening it to
Dirk’s palm.

“You might need stitches.” Made brave enough by the medically sanctioned truth of this statement, Rob was able to look his friend in the face. Drunk. Very drunk, despite the crispness of his speech.

“I’d rather have a scar.”

Rob picked up the tumbler and smelled. Pure gin. He swallowed it in one go and slid onto the couch at the other end. Thirty seconds later, he was already feeling it. Pink mixed with the clear sweat on the glass. A drop of Dirk’s diluted blood moved down his wrist.

“I’m just shocked you’d go through with it,” Dirk said. “After six suck weeks, it was time for you to split. Anybody would say so.” He spoke aloud but as if to himself, taking inventory. Unsteady, he stood. “Then you kill her mutt.”

Rob pulled his head closer to his body, expecting a blow. “It wasn’t on purpose.”

Dirk took an acrobat’s walk over to the liquor cabinet, which stood open. Inside, Rob saw the same bottles lined up, gifts slowly drunk with guests over a lifetime. They’d outlived Dad. Maker’s Mark. Wild Turkey. Seagram’s. Did they ever go bad? Dirk grabbed a bottle with the label turned away. Amber liquid. He filled up a new glass to the top and left the bottle uncapped on the counter.

“I know,” he said. “You’re not that evil.”

***

Rescuing Rob, again at a moment’s notice, Dirk took the bundle at 7th and Catherine. Rob hadn’t needed to walk a block. Like a caseworker holding a clipboard, Dirk asked what had happened. “An accident.” Dirk nodded noncommittally. They drove to the vet and ordered cremation. “But we want him back,” Dirk told Dr. Schneider. The vet handed him the address to Charmac. “He won’t be ready until 5:00.” Either because Dirk refused to let Rob return to Zoë without the dog, or because there was just no time to drive to South Street, they went together on Dirk’s last appointment of the afternoon. A
North Philly complex with a surprisingly nice courtyard. Benches under a walnut. Quaint.

Inside the apartment they encountered at least seven adults and a few kids, everyone standing around an obese black grandmother, who sat on some sort of stool in the center of the room. She had few clothes on, and she pushed her hand down into the cloth wrap around her privates in search of something. “How much?” one of the men asked. Dirk stated their business, to ask a few routine questions for determining aid. “They ain’t the pizza man, Ma,” the man said to the black grandmother. Adults and kids dispersed up and down dim hallways crusted with phone books, wires, equipment. It seemed that nothing in the room worked. Four lamps in a corner. Rob breathed deeply when they emerged twenty minutes later.

“Nobody should end up like that,” Dirk said.

Charmac, a warehouse surrounded by tastefully stenciled vans, produced Virgil in a foot-long cardboard box. In shape, the box resembled a casket for humans—oblong with symmetrical obtuse angles broadening the sides where human shoulders would be. There the likeness stopped. No pasted wood veneer for the sides and top. Plain corrugated cardboard. Inside, they found a plastic bag of dust and bone char.

“Fuck,” Dirk said, poking at the honeycombed remains of a femur or pelvis.

They picked the biggest bone pieces out in the parking lot, Rob sneezing once, twice, the ashes warm on his fingers.

At home, Zoë hugged the coffin to her belly, her hair hanging down. “I knew something had happened. With Rob gone and my keys missing. Now he’s burned.”

Rob thought of going then to get the keys from the drawer under the microwave, to dispel at least one mystery, but the action seemed vulgar.

Dirk pressed three fingers between Zoë’s shoulder blades, massaging in a circle. “You wouldn’t
have wanted to see Virge, baby.”

Zoë elbowed him away and pulled up her head. Rob saw mascara running down her lower eyelids. Make-up? She glared at Dirk. “I guess I should just leave everything to you.”

Rob backed into a corner of the room, amazed that Zoë’s anger, which he’d expected, was directed at Dirk. As if Rob were nothing but a child who shouldn’t have been let to walk the dog alone, Dirk the negligent parent. He wanted then, more than anything, to be blamed, to be held responsible for this significant action. “I’ll rent a U-Haul,” he said. “It’s time for me to go.”

Dirk inhaled. Rob watched his chest swell with relief, his nostrils flare. At least one good thing’s come of this tragedy, he was probably thinking. Because a dog’s death was a tragedy, so long as it was her dog. Never mind that Rob had lost his entire family mere weeks before. He pushed the self-pity away. A clean break would be good, like an ice bath.

Zoë laughed. “You can’t be serious.” She stood and set the coffin on the chair, like an empty shoebox. She walked halfway across the room toward Rob. “You’re leaving too?”

Rob glanced at Dirk for direction, saw his lip bit bloodless. His big head revolved in a slow shake.

He looked back at Zoë, the sadness on her face. He was touched. “I have to. But I could use some help. What do you say to a weekend road trip?”

“Yes!” Zoë seemed about to fall on him, hug him. Her stare left no space between them.

“Let’s not forget what happened to Virge, and who did something about it.” Dirk sounded like a child, breaking out a puny threat.

Zoë smiled at Rob, sun on soil. “We’ll bury him down South.”

The South, Rob thought. Nothing since Philadelphia had sounded so good.

***

Zoë didn’t come down from the master bedroom until they started breaking things. Rob had tossed the
tumbler he was using toward the andirons of the cold fireplace, missed. The face on the antique mantle
clock exploded, and it tipped onto the floor. “Here’s to your marriage. I’ll do whatever it takes to help
make it happen.”

Dirk fell back against the cabinet, startled. “Why’d you do that?”

Rob didn’t know. He was drunk, warm inside. Dirk still needed him, and—according to Dirk, who
would know, who had no reason to lie—so did Zoë.

“Breaking the place in.”

Dirk howled. He tipped a lamp off the cabinet, but it snapped short of hitting the ground on the end
of its cord. “To my marriage.”

“And to us,” Rob picked up an ashtray and took aim at the five bikers.

“What’s going on in here?”

Rob lowered the ashtray to his lap and turned to find Zoë, puffy-lidded and still wearing her sunhat,
in the doorway. Her eyes rested on him solely, as if Dirk were a wild stranger he’d let into the house in
the middle of the night.

“We’re breaking the place in,” Dirk pronounced, repeating Rob’s joke. He cackled, and Zoë ignored
him. Then he hurled the empty bottle on the counter through the den window. Glass rained down on the
back patio, the curtain sucked into the hole where it had been.

Zoë gasped and stared wide-eyed at the swallowed curtain.

Rob dropped an arm behind the couch and beckoned her over with a few flaps of his wrist. She
moved over to him with thick-legged stubbornness, her movements suggesting grudging capitulation,
not flight to safety. Rob ran a finger down her calf, which flexed or twitched. Dirk squinted toward
their closeness, as if the drunkenness had dimmed his sight.

“Whassat?” he said, sounding drunk to Rob for the first time that night.
“I’m moving out too,” Zoë said. Her voice lacked the matter-of-fact quality it had boasted in the living room, whatever she had then been confirming no longer certain. Rob patted her calf for encouragement. She stepped away, to the end of the couch.

Dirk’s grin looked somehow toothless. He reached behind the cabinet and unplugged the dangling lamp. It thudded to the floor and remained balanced, upside-down, on its shade.

The lamp’s poise echoed Rob’s confidence. His brain cavity felt empty of regret, fear, loneliness. He controlled them both. With all his strength, he sailed the ashtray into the face of Dad’s wide-screen TV, causing an ominous pop and flickering, glass spiderwebbing around the disk-shaped hole.

This time Zoë moved quickly, over to Dirk, covering his face from Rob’s view. Her back was to him, figure tense. He felt like the only one drunk. The Couple stood together, holding hands. No, Zoë was inspecting Dirk’s wound—the bloody sock had fallen to the floor. They mumbled to one another.

“I’ll get a proper bandage,” Zoë said. She marched out of the room, without looking Rob’s way.

“Hey,” Rob said, patting the cushion beside him. “I was just trying to lighten the mood.”

Dirk stumbled over to the couch, kicking glass, and collapsed next to Rob. His hand didn’t bleed, the gash just a dark frown where the sock had been. Other than the sparkling shards on the floor, the overturned items, and whitened TV screen, nothing in the room had changed. Rob squinted so that even this evidence dimmed.

“I had my fun,” Dirk murmured. “Philly’s no great shakes. Nowhere is.” With eyes closed, he looked like a lizard, sunning on a rock. Dirk’s skin always stretched tight over his massive skull. Thinking back to Friday morning in the kitchen, Rob recalled the hollows under his friend’s eyes, the way he’d hunched over the sink, pouring coffee into the thermos. Rob had taken this for a territorial sullenness, the snap way a dog will lunge at any other canine crossing into his yard. Now he wondered if Dirk’s ailing look weren’t the first signs of a private grief. What he wouldn’t give now to have
sneaked into the bedroom to view Zoë’s face. He listened for her in the hallway, upstairs. Nothing. No opening and shutting of bathroom cabinets.

“When you said I had to go, Zoë wasn’t in on it, was she? You knew she would break it off with you, and you considered me a threat.”

Dirk didn’t respond. The placid expression on his face, the relaxation of muscles around his eyes, told Rob his friend slept. Rob flipped Dirk’s hand palm-upward in his lap so that he wouldn’t disturb the wound in his sleep. He looked like a blind beggar.

“But am I really a threat? Does she like me?”

Animal warmth crossed his groin. He would find out the only way you can. No one would blame him. He ran his fingers through Dirk’s hair, finding it surprisingly soft, like corn silk, not at all stiff. He crept from the room, tucking his own hair, which needed cutting, behind his ears.

The hall echoed as he mounted the stairs, a sound that made the house bigger, a cavern with unmapped chambers. The second-floor bathroom faucet dripped as it always had, leaving a blue mark by the drain. One light in the sitting room burned, illuminating empty chairs. He entered his parents’ room and stared at the bed. It had been made up by practiced hands, the sheet molded around each pillow and tucked underneath. No one, it seemed, had ever lain here. Or if they had, their bodies were long returned to dust.

The downstairs revealed no sign of Zoë. On the front porch, the dogs had curled into dark spots on the wood. No U-Haul, but her car, of course, remained. Rob smiled. Stubborn girl. Where she expected to find first aid supplies this late on a Sunday night, he didn’t know. If she got lost, called him frantic at a pay phone, all the better. She needed him. They needed him.

Beginning to sober up, he lay on his back, blocking the front door, so he’d know when she came home. Tonight, unlike last, clouds covered the stars. Long ago—well before he and Dirk were kids
playing explorers, when colonists sowed these low, wretched fields with tobacco—navigation on such an overcast night must have been difficult. Only a few stubborn stars to go by, meaningless in their solitary windows. A ship’s crew might lower the sails and wait out the rocking night in a temporarily lost Atlantic. Or maybe their voyage was yet to begin, the ship still nestled in the Albemarle, anchored in the shallows. The sailors would lie, limbs stretched, star-shaped, making a honeycomb over the whitewashed deck, wrist to wrist, foot to foot, crown to crown, the sky one generous blanket.

***

Dirk woke him the next morning by gently bumping the front door against his skull.

“Where’s Zoë?” His friend asked the question casually, as if she weren’t his girlfriend, never had been. “The back room’s a wreck.”

Rob stared at him from the deck, sat up. A crack ran down the empty driveway’s center, green weeds popping through.

“Sorry about my part in that.” Dirk winced as he leaned against the railing on his cut hand. “A guy needs to get shitfaced.”

Rob walked to the other end of the porch and looked down Channel Road. Nothing parked there either. Just drainage ditches studded with dew. He looked the other way, out at the sound, as if he might see a brown head bobbing there, see a tan wave. What sort of person was Dirk, who felt not even his own pain?

“That’s okay.”

They discovered the few items Zoë had brought on the trip—khaki designer suitcase, canoe-shaped purse—missing from the master bedroom. Dirk’s own bags remained piled in a lonely slope under the window.

“Could be she took that Outer Banks trip on her own,” Dirk said.
“But she left the dogs.”

“Zoë’s a rather independent sort of person, in case you haven’t figured that out.” Dirk stretched out luxuriously over the empty bed. “I feel like a scrotum.”

Rob wanted to punch him, club him over the head with luggage, not because he refused to see that Zoë had gone, had left them for good, but because he seemed okay with whatever she’d decided, almost satisfied. One day in junior high Billy Atkins had squirted ketchup all over Dirk’s locker, some of it getting on his math book. Like some sort of big-headed Buddha, Dirk had uttered a “whoa” of innocent surprise, admiration almost. He galumphed to the bathroom for a few sheets of damp paper towel and scrubbed down his locker in plain sight of every kid, gathering their books to go home. Rob had wanted to fight, even if that meant getting a bloodied lip, a scabbed arm. Dirk just laughed, despite whatever it was he may have wanted underneath.

Uncle Josh came over to inspect the Jetta at noon. Shaved and out of his robe, wearing a torn T-shirt and paint-splattered cutoffs, Josh looked potent, fatherly.

“Boys,” he said, in greeting.

It took him under three minutes to diagnose the problem. “Your ignition fuse is missing. And I don’t see it anywhere around.” Josh crouched on the ground. Rob watched an ant crawl over his calf, eliciting no reaction. “The thing of it is, you couldn’t have got here without one. My guess is someone took it.”

“Hmmmmmmm,” Dirk said. “I wonder who that might have been.” He was back to his old self. Jolly, careless. Nothing could get him down so long as the sun shone.

Josh cackled in an oddly Southern way—Rob could hear it after a month and a half up north—a kind of high-pitched desperate sound. He smacked his hand against the packed dirt beside Zoë’s front tire. “Women, can’t live with them, can’t give them your car keys.”
Rob felt tired. He listened to Dirk treat his uncle's stale joke to a spate of laughter. No one outside of the situation would be able to tell his friend was only feigning amusement. Dirk, face red, eyes sparkling, kicked the back tire. “Yessir, yessir,” he said. “Except this is Zoë’s car. And she wouldn’t know a fuse from a . . . a hub cap.”

“Some kid, then,” Josh said quickly, brushing dirt off his jeans. “Farm boys get bored. You guys remember.” He busied himself gazing inside the Jetta in the silence that followed. “There’s a box on the front seat.”

Rob moved first to the driver’s side and tried the door. Locked. Inside, Virgil’s coffin rested on the seat. Everything else had been cleaned out—the CD clip for the visor, a few novels she’d tossed on the floor, even the wood-bead seat cover. “It’s nothing but a new radio, Uncle.”

“I could install it while we wait. I’m retired. What else I got to do?” Uncle Josh tried opening the front passenger side door, the back. “Of course, we’ll need a key.” It felt to Rob like someone was trying to break into his room. “You say she took off for Nags Head?”

“We’ll take it from here,” Dirk said, maybe reading some expression on Rob’s face.

“Right,” Josh said. He tugged up on his hat so that the sun fell on that sleepy expression. “If you need a ride to Amoco tomorrow, give a call.”

“Thanks, Uncle Josh.”

***

They found Dirk’s copy of the car key flashing among the glass on the den floor. They put everything back in order to the extent that they could. They lugged the TV into the Jetta’s trunk, taped a flap of cardboard over the broken window. Rob returned the antique clock to the mantle, face turned toward the wall. Even after they’d swept up all the glass and vacuumed, they still didn't dare to walk on the floor barefoot.
Each time they called the Philadelphia apartment, Dirk’s goofy outgoing message picked up.
“You’ve reached Dirk, Rob, and Zoë. Peter, Paul, and Mary. Whatever, just leave a message at the scream.” Somehow he’d replaced the standard tone with a heavy-metal roar. Slayer or Metallica. One of the fast bands he played before a night out. Rob was pleased Dirk had said his name second, placing it right in the center. He’d never noticed before since he was always home.

“When are we supposed to worry about her?” Rob asked, feeling less worried the second he posed the question to Dirk. They sat, dangling their feet off the pier over the waves, brown from this angle, at this hour. Each sucked on a beer.

“Shit,” Dirk said. “She ain’t my girlfriend.”

“Yeah,” Rob said. He pictured the U-Haul flipped on the side of the highway, Zoë’s hair splashing out from under the trailer. What would that feel like? It felt like nothing.

“I’ll call her folks if we don’t hear from her soon,” Dirk said. “She’s a tough lady.” Way out in the sound, no more than a speck in the hazy line between water and land, a boat rocked. Buddies fishing at dusk. The coast guard. Could be anyone.

Rob pictured Zoë in the apartment, packing her stuff, returning it to a pre-historic solitary state, however that had looked. And if Dirk didn’t call, would he have insisted? Or if Zoë had stayed instead of Dirk, would it matter? Put a dress on his friend, shrink that head, and presto, Rob Nelson’s satisfied. Drop Dirk’s head over Barney’s, tie him up on his hind legs and shave the fur. Jam shoes on his hind paws and never fear. Robby’s safe from grief.

“I haven’t even visited their graves.”

“They’ll keep,” Dirk said. He tried skipping a new bottle cap onto the waves, as he’d done the last. It flashed, like a fish’s scales, and sunk.

“I didn’t even ask where they are.”
“You’re a terrible person.”
“I know. A bigamist pigfucker.”
“Pacifish leechsucker.”
“Don’t take much to get you drunk anymore.”
“Fuck you.”
“If you please. Just let me finish this beer.” Two meager drops rested on Rob’s lower eyelids. The first two, daring each other to jump into all that water below.

***

When the phone rang at nine, Rob told Dirk to answer. He listened to Dirk’s voice soften, resume the Couple tone, despite the adjusted distance between him and Zoë. He wondered when phone had last rung. Maybe it was Aunt Phyllis calling to ask if his parents had made it home safe. Could be they’d all been eating at Valentine’s the night of the accident. Rob had no idea. That was one of the many questions he’d been afraid to ask, as if their deaths were nothing more than a possibility the details would confirm.

Of the many things Dirk had to report after the conversation, one was not that Zoë planned to move out. She was sorry for ditching them with the car. She’d done some thinking on the drive back. She’d return the U-Haul in the morning. She wanted them to bury the dog.

“I think we should just scatter the ashes and be done with it,” Dirk said. “That what she would have done. It's just too damn sad, like burying a baby.”

He clutched the cardboard coffin and stood over Rob, who struggled with flat rock to dig a hole. They’d wandered across Channel Road to the undeveloped field on the other side. Never quite a yard, never a garden or a park, Rob had always regarded the field as a no man’s land. It was where he’d hid important items from his parents, from Dirk.
“That’s probably why she wants us to do it,” Rob said, feeling brave. “If she ever comes back, she’ll want to see where we buried him.”

“Right,” Dirk said. “Fuck if I’ll be here to show her.”

“This is a solemn affair.” A gnat sounded its horn in Rob’s ear. Just passing through. Nearby, Barney and Chloe sniffed around the dark field, as if they hadn’t checked it out two hundred times.

When he judged the hole deep enough to cover—they didn’t need to worry about animals digging up ashes—Dirk set the coffin in the bottom. “He was a good dog,” Dirk said. “A true member of the family.”

Rob pushed the loose dirt back over the box, but it seemed like there wasn’t enough, even with the box inside. He felt around in the grass for more dirt. Somehow there was less than had come out.

“He never demanded much of others,” Dirk said. “Run over at two and cremated by five. One pallbearer, one gravedigger.” With the toe of his shoe, he helped Rob push a few more grains of dirt onto the grave. “He will be missed.”

Rob set the rock on top and remained squatting, head bowed, mind blank. He breathed in the wormy smell of dirt, the smell of kids, boyhood.

After a minute, Dirk patted him on the back. “You’re welcome to stay on in the apartment.”

Rob concentrated on the rock before him, on the dirt that wouldn’t fill.

“What happens with me and Zoë, I mean.”

“Shhhh,” Rob said. For everybody, for everything, there’s this. “Not now.”
Daddy come out the Chevron bathroom with a tire iron. He go, “You never done right but when you tried to suicide in grade school.” I go, “I never done that.” He swings the iron at me, busting open the jar of eggs by the coffee urns. They slide across the floor like penguins. Daddy’s all, “Well, you should’ve.” He ain’t shaved since church three weeks back when he smeared Crisco in his part and played the devil with Ms. Daltry. During the creed he go, “My wife couldn’t kneel like you, Edith. Had them rheumatoid arthritis.” Mama died in 1980. How come Daddy goes to church, and how come he gets us kicked out. Ms. Daltry’s like, “Shhhhhhhhhhh!” But he don’t. He mouths off during the next creed, too, and we’s booted by Butch Washington—a real church man—around communion time. Then, by God, Ms. Daltry come by our place and sits with Daddy in his room, whispering over Romans and feeding him airplane peanuts saved from her mission to an ignorant land. She go, “Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.” She go, “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” When she drives off in her Buick Daddy’s kicking his heels and saying a prayer unto the Lord. He rubbing our dog, Juniper, all over her fatty tumor. He’s all, “Now there’s a woman to match your mama,” the which he’s said fifty times since the burial. But no woman wants him. The next week Ms. Daltry takes ill and goes to the Lord, and that’s mainly why Daddy’s swinging that iron. Slim Jims and cheese sticks go flying, and the only other customer in the Chevron hides behind the rotisserie counter. I go, “We gonna have to pay for all this.” Daddy go, “You gonna pay for what you said about Edith.” The tire iron connects with my shoulder, feeling like a soldering iron, and I hear a snap. I’m lying in a heap of Tom’s crackers, hot nuts, fruit pies, and Ho Hos. I said what I did about Ms. Daltry out by the gas pumps before we come in to pick out dinner. I’m like, “If she hadn’t a died you’d a seen she
weren’t no Mama. You’d a seen ain’t nobody gonna be Mama again.” We bing into in the store, and he’s like, “I guess you’s right, Junior.” But instead of walking to the potted meats, he slinks off to the john. Must’ve found the iron back there. He stands over me with it raised, one shoe creaming a Ho Ho. The manager go, “Sir?” Daddy go, “You’s a bad man said a worst thing. ‘Tweren’t enough to kill your mother with meanness. You got to keep her dead these years.” The iron smacks my shin, soldering the same but sounding more like a jack on glass. He’s wrong, always has been. It’s him what was mean to Mama, me back to him, Mama what defended Daddy, making him think I had all the meanness. And it wasn’t me kept her dead, neither. Daddy don’t have luck with women. His dandruff is tick-size, and he only shaves enough to look scragglly half the time. He interrupts the preacher and picks fights with the shoe boy at league bowling and rots his teeth on Jolly Ranchers and tells old ladies his son’s a wastrel. I guess I am. But I ain’t keeping Mama dead. The manager go, “Sir, you can’t do that in here.” Daddy come back with, “Where else they gonna let me do it, you A-rab?” The manager’s like, “Scum.” The iron sinks into my stomach with a muddy-boot sound. This pain’s harder to feel with my arms and legs sounding off. I puke up something I didn’t et. I’m like, “Don’t kill me.” Don’t know why I’d want to live, but that’s what I say. The customer behind the rotisserie go, “For God’s sake.” Daddy go, “Mind your own killing.” Then to me, real low, he’s like, “I ain’t going to sink to your level, Junior. Murdering family. You’ll learn to do like I raised you.” I’m thinking, I raised myself. The tire iron chinks against my other shin bone, but I don’t feel it. I don’t feel nothing but shame for us acting this way. A gun go, “Pow.” Daddy’s lying beside me in the crackers. With my one good arm I shake him. He’s out, or already dead. My one good hand grips the tire iron. I’m thinking, he was just trying to do right by me, in his way. Son of a bitch. The customer’s all, “Is he dead? Oh God. Is he dead?” Footsteps crunch through the crackers, and the A-rab stands over me with a cowboy’s pistol. He go, “It appears the older gentleman is.” He don’t look sorry when he nudges Daddy with a loafer. Then he crouches by me,
smelling like spices. The customer’s on the phone. “Send an ambulance. Pike Road Chevron. And the police.” Soon Daddy’ll be gone. Soon he’ll join Mama with the Lord because the Lord takes us all. But I’ll still be here. The A-rab’s like, “Are you okay? Did that scum bag hurt you bad?” I’m thinking, I hurt him bad. I’m a bad man. I puke some more nothing, and the A-rab peers into my eyes. He go, “Just stay calm. The medics will be here soon.” A bad man. I swing the iron at his head.
The Corolla’s so full Ben can only watch in his side rearview as the ambulance pulls to a stop behind him. Three AM has left the interstate clean, and he couldn’t help notice this same ambulance, headed north moments before, executing a U-turn across the median. A tiny EMT hops to the asphalt. The ambulance’s headlamps reveal badly bowed legs as he waddles forward. He trains a flashlight police-style on Ben’s license plate, at his tires, into the back seat, through the driver-side window.

“Is this an emergency?” The man’s voice is muffled by the glass.

Yes, Ben thinks. Twenty-four years old and he’s headed back to Mom, belongings jammed into a Toyota. That counts as an emergency.

The crown of the medic’s head just crests the rearview. His scraggily red beard looks frozen under a pair of saucer-sized lenses, strapped to his head with a yellow band.

Ben cracks the window. “I ran out of gas, sir.”

“Where you live?” The medic’s smile is warped in the flashlight periphery.

Ben has seen the smile before, and not long ago. But he can’t place it. “Maryland,” he says. Then, unable to help himself, he goes on. “My plate’s from North Carolina, because I grew up there. I had an apartment in Baltimore. I—”

The medic holds up a diminutive hand. “Moving back home then?” He shines the flashlight on the crates of books, vacuum cleaner, pillows, blankets, and other items crammed around Ben.

“I got evicted.” It’s a compulsion of Ben’s to admit the truth to authority figures—elders, people in suits, landlords—as if he has no connection between brain and jaw. *Yes, ma’am, I was laughing at you. I do have change for a dollar even though I said I didn’t. I couldn’t keep a job at Cash n’ Carry, sir, to pay the rent.*

The man shakes his head. “Where's home?”
“Rocky Mount.”

Ben’s startled as the medic opens his door, ushering in a blast of winter air, and stands aside. “I know Rocky Mount. You come with me.”

Legs stiff from sitting in twenty degrees so long, Ben follows the blue-suited manchild back to the ambulance. Up close it’s battered and antique looking. The orange-lined doors down the side are scraped and dented so badly he’s not sure they’d open.

“Think you could call me a tow?”

The medic doesn’t respond, just disappears around the nose of the ambulance. Standing in the dark, Ben remembers where he’s seen the warped smile: that past summer, the man who parked his Grand Marquis in the middle of the highway. The far ambulance door opens, as of its own accord, and the medic rockets up into the cab. The engine roars to life.

The seat’s so elevated that Ben’s sledding hat rubs the ceiling as he slides in. Extended pedals jut up from the driver side floor like steel jaws. Ben's mesmerized by the medic’s quick movements. One tiny hand darts a Marlboro to chapped lips, presses in the lighter, adjusts the mirror, lowers the volume on the radio. Ben fails to notice the other hand gripping the wheel, steering them onto the highway, little feet working. In the corner of his vision, the stalled Corolla moves past.

“Just up to the next gas station, please.”

The first drag the medic takes on his cigarette could’ve filled a garbage bag. It’s as if his lungs extend down into his legs. He exhales a smoky haze into the cab, and Ben moves away even though he’s used to Mom’s smoking.

“Thanks so much for the lift. I know this isn't your job.”

A gas station sign appears around the bend. Three hundred yards, a smiley face on the overpass. Ben laughs bitterly, inwardly. Just like him to sit for an hour in the cold because the road’s not straight. *Yes, sir. I am a complete moron.*
“No problem at all, son.”

The ambulance keeps on past the exit, and the medic begins humming a patriotic tune, “Battle Hymn of the Republic” maybe. He sucks on the insides of his cheeks while he smokes.

“Oh, I think you missed it.”

Ash hangs in the medic’s beard. Brown eyes, magnified by powerful lenses, fasten on his passenger.

“Make you a deal. You pull a shift with me, and I’ll drive you home.”

Ben averts his gaze. The cab’s musty, full of personal belongings. A camouflage jacket, three shot-gun shells, a map improperly folded so that nameless roads show on the front. A few normal ambulance items appear too. A trucker’s radio, a broad panel of knobs and switches with the labels curling off, on the seat between them a first-aid manual with sketched figures reclined, unconscious, being resuscitated. It’s a piece of the official world, converted for strange purposes. Drugs, Ben thinks.

“No thanks,” he mutters. “I don’t want any trouble.”

The man opens his mouth and releases a silent laugh, then coughs for half a minute and puts out his cigarette. “You’ve got to want trouble.”

Ben clinches the door handle. “I don’t think I want any trouble, sir, if you don’t mind.”

“But trouble’s the whole reason for night patrol.” The man sets cruise control and pulls up his little legs, Indian style.

Each mile the ambulance creeps south through the night—in Mom’s general direction—Ben senses he’s nevertheless getting further from her protection.

“Night patrol?”

Starl—the name Ben hears—explains that March through September he drives a Peterbilt tractor-trailer between Richmond and South Florida—office furniture, settings for other people. The rest of the year, he operates this ambulance, a 1979 Ford. When he bought it for parts, the auctioneer warned that he couldn’t drive it. “No probrelo,” I told her. “I’ve got a rig for getting around.”
Ben’s skin stings in the vents’ full-blast heat. He keeps his eyes on the road. It’s the Passenger’s Illusion: four eyes keep you safer. They’re crossing one of those thumpity-thump stretches, a reminder that the expressway was laid piece by piece, each slab your home for a fraction of a second, together creating a path.

Starl flicks his cigarette butt into a can and pulls the pack from his pocket. He curses, balls it up, and throws it on the floor. “I started night patrol because my daddy collapsed on Patterson—three, four years ago. Ain’t a bystander would cough up two dimes to call a doctor. Died on the asphalt.” Ben pictures an older version of his driver, curled up like a fetus on the sidewalk, lunchgoers giving him wide berth. “And that’s why I kept this baby intact. I’m the only chance some people’s got to be saved.”

“You save people?” Ben hasn’t meant to say it that way. “I’m sorry about your father.” Ben’s own father lives in Telluride with jangly, overtanned Brenda. They speak once a year.

“They don’t judge me.”

Starl steers the ambulance off I-95 at one of those dark exits. Outposts. This one displays a barn and gray fingers of woods. The smell of loam wafts through the vents as they draw up to the stop sign. Ben turns his back to the door. Swaddled in an EMTs jacket sizes too big, Starl should be no more threatening than a baby in his high chair. But his face is tanned, carved as with hurried hands in the cold.

“Now if you don’t mind, let’s work,” the older man says, hands gripping ten and two. “Fact is more accidents happen on these skinny roads, with less notice and rescue. This one meets 301, so you’ll be home by dawn.”

The barn has almost entirely collapsed, gray boards cracked and leaning. It’s one of those quaint structures no one but tourists value. No warm light announces a farm house tucked away. “Maybe you should just leave me here.”

“You’ll freeze.”

Ben can’t see a highway number, marking the route that’s supposed to lead him home. While the turn
signal counts down, no car within miles, the guardrail on his right blinks orange. He senses Starl wants something impossible.

“What about my car?”

“The Corolla will manage.” Starl drops a hard hand on Ben’s shoulder, emphasizing each syllable.

“We'll call it in tomorrow morning and have it towed to the shop.”

Starl’s firmness and his knowing the car’s model give Ben an absurd burst of confidence. These are small details, but marks of professionalism. He grasps at them. “I’m sure you’re right—”

“Alright.” Starl takes a breath that puffs him up in his seat, kind of proud. He looks left and starts the ambulance south. Tendrils of beard rasp against the steering wheel. “Keep your eyes open for anything unusual is all you need to know.”

Ben sees nothing but black slit by gray, the flash of reflectors. He's had dreams like this, dark situations where he can't make himself run or lash out. He's paralyzed. Starl turns up the radio. The oldies sound even older on the ambulance radio. Ben buckles up.

They ride without speaking for a while, though Starl snatches at a few lines of Motown in a congested voice. “I don't like you, but I love you.” Ben tries to keep up positive thoughts, thoughts of home, best-case scenarios. Worse comes to worst, he could overpower the midget.

The road is creepy, like a path through a cemetery. Mom says two-laners like this one used to be the only way north from Rocky Mount. There would have been a lot more accidents then, boxy cars without airbags crowded together so that one mirror image sped toward another, just a few bright lines to the left. “You really got a hold on me!” Starl slows the ambulance intermittently. At one point he stops right in the middle of the road to spotlight a shredded tire on the shoulder, as if to make sure no bodies are mixed with the rubber. Ben checks the rearview but sees only blackness. He’s relieved when they move on.

The incident involving the man with crooked smile happened six months ago, two days after Ben bought the Corolla by saving up Mom’s hush money, the allowance she gave him to remain a boy in his
mid-twenties. By then, she was already driving his car. She claimed he’d almost clipped a black dude on the way out of the used car lot. Most moms are jumpy, but his, she’s another story. Her jumpiness made him nervous, so the next block he really did clip something, a parked Chrysler, knocked his rearview off. Stop, stop, stop. And that was that. Two nights later, a summer Sunday, she was driving them home late from Uncle Allen’s place in Smithfield. Highway 301 was empty. Ben squirmed in his passenger seat, glaring at the wires where his rearview had been. Mom wore jewelry too old for her—pearls, a walnut-sized ring. She was chattering on about how Uncle Allen let Cousin Luke do as he pleased, burp at the table and Allen laughs, her cigarette stinking up his new upholstery, when they almost collided at fifty with a parked Grand Marquis.

Cardboard brown. The long angular kind that sails around city-street corners, a white-hair at the helm. Brakes squealed, and Mom swerved. Ben can still remember the burnt rubber smell drifting on the balmy breeze through his window as Mom backed up beside the Marquis, her arm thrown behind his seat rest like a man’s. Get your fucking car off the highway! Her shriek died on the concrete. The other car’s interior remained dark, window unrolled. Soft country music flowed out like the silhouette inside was somebody’s grandpa spending Sunday evening on the porch with the wireless. In retrospect, it seems Mom sat there a full minute after yelling, discombobulated, sighing, one piece of hair drifting free of her matron’s bun; in retrospect, Ben thinks, they shouldn’t have stopped at all, completing the highway roadblock, a metal surprise for the next red-eye semi. At the time, though, he and Mom seemed to share an understanding that they had to see the man’s face, assign this near-disaster to some specific human.

When the man leaned out, he didn’t look senile like Ben had expected, more middle-aged. A tie expertly knotted under a pressed collar, hair combed in a part straighter than the road, teeth bared in a grin—that warped, desperate expression Starl wore an hour ago. The man held up his car keys, jangled them and shrugged, as if to say, Beats me what these are for. The Corolla roared forward, engine rising under the hood in factory-guaranteed obedience. This is what I can do for you folks in a pinch. It’s why I cost your
boy so much. Ben twisted to look back at the Marquis, headlights shrinking, vulnerable in the big black of
the empty road. Son of a bitch, Mom was saying. He should be shot. Her skirt was hiked up one leg,
revealing a curdled thigh. He should have loved her at that moment, a tigress and her cub, but all he felt was
betrayal. A man’s mute cry for rescue, the waggle of keys, ignored in Ben’s name, drowned out by the roar
of his engine.

Through the ambulance window, Ben sees the same second-hand roadway from that night near Rocky
Mount—just one hundred or so more miles south. Potholes filled in with blacker tar, edges crumbling into
dirt shoulder. Starl is scrutinizing the road sides, flipping his high beams on every time a shape looms. “I
was feeling kind of seasick. The crowd called out for more!” He honks at a possum, waits for it to cross the
road. He squints to appraise even the most insignificant scrap for signs of tragedy, chews cough drops, now
that his cigarettes are gone, and mutters what sound to Ben like explanations, the likely story behind each
scrap. He seems like a good man. Deranged, but harmless.

They’re doing thirty-five or forty around a bend guarded by a thick oak tree, when Starl turns down
Procol Harum and grasps the mouthpiece of his CB radio. “7-5, 7-5, all clear at mile marker 56.”

The code, and the perfunctory way Starl utters it, sound official, connecting the ’79 Ford to a network
of life-saving cruisers. But he hasn’t mentioned a partner.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Trucker’s habit.” Starl returns the mouthpiece, drums his fingers on a knee. “This is the intercom
system for the back of the ambulance. I’m used to talking to myself on the road.” He dismisses the CB with
a wave, like Ben has stumbled upon a closed-off room in his house.

Ben thinks of crusty IVs and bags of congealed blood, a gurney strapped in the aisle—everything left
over from the year he turned three. Or maybe something else is back there, someone alive, waiting for them
to pull up to a designated dirt lot. Mile marker 56. He thinks of the shotgun shells.

*Are you telling the truth, sir?*
It’s the kind of question you can’t ask just anyone. But Starl seems like the sort who’d tell you if you asked, whatever his plan may be. “Were you talking to somebody?”

Starl’s expression goes wooden, a puppet poised to answer but giving nothing away in advance. It’s as if he’s been waiting for this question. “It’s better you don’t know.”

The ambulance keeps its pace. No turn-offs enter the headlights. Why indeed would Starl have waited for so long to do whatever he’s going to do? It’s been dark and lonely enough for an hour. Ben’s damp fingers leave marks on the vinyl seat.

“Better for me or you?”

“Both.”

A few miles later, they come upon a white van parked to the left the road, five feet into a clearing. Starl gets excited. “Now we’re talking.” He flips on the siren, slow and nasal. A leisurely anthem of the disco era. Ben feels removed from it all, the way you’re supposed to grow calm when you’ve got minutes to live—not that he’s in danger. Their headlights catch shades hanging in the back window. Starl rests his hand on the CB but draws it away, grabs the flashlight and leaps out the door. Alone, Ben thinks of testing the radio but is afraid of who’d talk back, someone ten inches behind him. He fumbles behind the seat: jumper cables, a hard hat, box of Little Debbies, a tire iron. He takes the last, kills the siren, and joins Starl, who’s squatting beside the bumper.

“What do you see?” Ben asks, iron behind his back. Nothing stirs around the van.

“Abandoned.” Starl pops to his feet and trudges to the ambulance. Ben stands so he can see both vehicles, whatever might come out of them. If he fled now, hid in one of the groves beside the highway, he might be able to flag someone down, eventually. Starl perches in the cab, speaking into the CB again. Inside the ambulance bay—men drawing knives, whispers. Ben notices he’s pulled the tire iron out in front of him. It catches the headlights.

Starl reholsters the radio and sticks his head out between ambulance door and roof. “It’s abandoned,
son. No plates. I called it in."

One minute the radio doesn’t work; the next it does. Ben pretends to investigate the van. Rusted screw holes indicate where the license plate was. A rectangular outline of chipped paint.

“But knock yourself out,” the older man adds. “See who’s home.” He shuts the ambulance door and leans back in his seat. He didn’t even mention the tire iron.

Ben steps to the van and gives a tentative rap on the back door, for show. But Starl’s not even watching, just sitting with his eyes shut. Wild-bearded mountain man, asleep in his roost.

Frozen mud reaches the van’s hubcap. Ben raps again, this time straining to hear over the ambulance engine. The van’s tail pipe is ruptured like an exploded cigar, the right rearview frosted over. He creeps along the side, leaving enough space so no one can grab him from underneath. Shades cover the side windows too. The passenger window’s cranked down or busted out, and Ben stands a foot or two back, peering in at an angle. He pokes the tire iron through the opening. Inside is a super-size stadium cup filled with cigarette butts. The dashboard’s a bank of maps, napkins, brochures, a phone book, batteries, a penlight. Grocery bags filled with paperbacks crowd the passenger seat, a blender, tapes in disarray on the floor. It’s like staring into an animal’s burrow.

The grinding of tires and wash of light, the engine’s chuckle. Starl pulls up beside him, one arm hung outside the door. “Ten minutes,” he says. “We’ve got to scram.” By morning all evidence will be gone, travelers seeing nothing but unmarked snow on each side of the road.

“I thought the radio didn’t work.” Ben stares at the receiver. A red light blinks.

Starl sighs, his breath turning to smoke in the cold. “It does when I mash the button.” He touches the side of the mouthpiece and shakes his head, humiliated. “Like I said. I help out when I can, which usually means I call the authorities and beat it.”

Ben notices a long scar on this side of his face, running from one earlobe to the point of his chin. He feels the danger to him has passed. This would be the place, if any. He walks around and climbs into the
“Sorry. I had to make sure.” He taps the tire iron on his sneakers to dislodge mud, as if he’d unearthed it for that purpose.

“At least you were prepared. People don’t always take kindly to my service.” Starl’s thumb points back at the van.

Ben tucks the iron between seat and door. “Who did you call?”

“A buddy. I’d trust him with my life.”

“A buddy?”

Starl says nothing more. Driving on, they listen to the oldies channel, now on its way out of range. Ben recognizes the tunes like certain photos of early childhood. “Just Walk Away, Renee.” Black men in suits, snapping fingers for a sea of white faces—horn-rimmed glasses, page boys. Mom could be a part of that crowd. “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida.” Butterflies landing on a naked hippie, stretched in a field. The songs guarantee the past occurred, that the present doesn’t just emerge from the dark. Ben tries to imagine Starl’s buddy, some guy seated at a desk in an abandoned hospital. A bank of buttons beep, calls from Starl about a fallen limb here, a bent guardrail there. But then what? Who does that guy call? Just so long as he gets back home, Ben thinks. That’s all that matters.

An hour into night patrol, they meet up with 301, which is four lanes this far north—miles of median grass that somebody has to mow, reflectors meticulously pasted every few yards. The ambulance doesn’t slow too often to investigate litter on this larger road. Starl’s mind seems occupied as he munches cough drops. The ambulance speeds right past a bulky plastic bag, dusted with snow. A sign places Rocky Mount at 45 miles.

Ben stretches his legs. He acted as any sensible person would, he thinks, the same way Mom would, but he feels rotten.

“It’s my mom makes me jumpy, I guess. I’m like her.”

His words surprise him. The similarity is obvious, but it took him saying it out loud to a stranger before
he believed it. Right now she must be reading one of those novels she cracks in half, legs tucked inside her nightgown. She doesn’t sleep nights.

“Yep,” Starl says. His voice is matter-of-fact. “Me and Daddy was Siamese.”

Ben imagines two Starl heads, straining at the end of their necks to rise from one collapsed body.

People walking past. Mom cruising by in the Corolla.

“I’m sorry about what happened.”

“Not your fault.”

Starl has chewed up the last cough drop, but his mouth keeps working, mulling something over. Ben’s own father speaks quickly, hardly ever seeming to need a moment for thought. His tie knotted around his fat neck keep the words in his mouth, always at the ready. Jack’s so smart. That’s what Brenda kept saying the one time Ben met her. She reeked of a cosmetics counter.

“I just wish everyone I rescued out here acted more decent,” Starl says.

Decent like Starl. Dull boots perched on the metal jaws, sagging uniform. Everything smaller than usual. What does he expect? Maybe he clipped that scraggly beard each morning, kept his glasses in a case by his pillow. Disrespected all the same.

“I left a man once.”

“Is that right?” Starl cocks his head, ear like a fleshy satellite.

“Mom made me.”

Starl doesn’t answer. He’s squinting through the windshield in the old intent way, lips pressed in concentration. Ben wants to smack him atop his greasy crop of hair.

“It’s like my running out of gas was vengeance for it.”

Ben looks where Starl’s looking—at a cycling flash up ahead. A shoe reflector. A group of people is walking on the shoulder with traffic. Starl taps the horn, and the ambulance pulls up behind three bundled figures.
When the figures turn into the light, Ben sees a woman and two boys, rosy-cheeked in the cold. The woman grabs the boys by the shoulders and pulls them over to the railing.

Starl raises his hands off the wheel and grins, harmless. “It’s your lucky day,” he says. Ben supposes he’s mouthing these words at the people, but he continues, glancing over at Ben in the dark cab. “You won’t often come across something pre-accident.”

The woman’s shading her eyes in the high beams, boys’ faces pressed to her mid-section. Starl switches off the headlights and flips on the interior dome, inking the world beyond into darkness. He pulls some juice boxes from behind the seat and raises them in the air. “Do the honors?”

Ben’s distorted reflection in the windshield returns his gaze. He could’ve taken the Corolla back out that night, later better than never. Maybe he’d have found a bloom of metal where the brown Marquis had been. An oil slick. Blood, and all this helplessness stopped before it started. Instead he left Rocky Mount at dawn for an independent life, planned on the fly. Baltimore, it turned out, no better than running.

“You want to help these folks?”

Ben shakes his head.

Starl’s gone in an instant, a monkey jumping through a trap door, and Ben sits there, listening, on display. He can’t make out what Starl’s saying over the motor and blast of the vent. Hiya, ma’am. Look up there in that glass box. Is that your son? He’s just along for the ride. I’m showing him the ropes.

Ben switches off the dome lamp, and it takes his eyes a minute to adjust. Starl’s alone in the moonlight, talking across the hood to Ben. Ben turns on the headlights again, catching the reflective sneaker flash of the retreating figures, mother dragging her little ones along as fast as she can go. Starl has the juice boxes clutched down to one side, his beard a shadowy tangle under twin fiery discs. He looks confused, at a loss for what to do.

“What did you say?” Ben asks when Starl climbs back behind the wheel.

Starl, hands shaking, pierces a juice box and offers it to Ben, who declines. The older man takes a long
suck and smacks his lips. “Nothing. They’re just scared.”

His resignation is weird. Here’s somebody with enough courage to buck the law and drive around all night like a lunatic but who can’t actually help people when he finds them. Maybe he only forces spineless sorts like Ben to take his help.

“Maybe she doesn’t trust our looks. Let me try.”

Starl crushes the juice box between thumb and finger, drops it behind back the seat. He jerks the steering-wheel shifter into drive.

They catch up to the trio and coast alongside, watching three plumes of breath, two small and one large, drift up into the atmosphere. Ben cranks down his window, is shocked by the frigid wind, mixing with the warm air of rescue. “Ma’am, please don’t be alarmed. We’re only trying to help you. It’s why we drive around at night.”

One of the boys is crying uneven wet gulps. The woman jerks him along. “Lay a hand on us, and I’ll scratch your eyes out.” She won’t look over as she talks. Three hoods in profile, monks on a pilgrimage. Ben’s jolted forward as Starl applies the brakes, bringing the ambulance to a keening halt.

“That bitch,” Ben shouts under his breath. It’s a new anger, slick and pulsing like something vital. It flows with power, righteousness.

Starl scrounges behind the seat and offers him the other juice box, one man to another. “We’ll send help back for her,” the older man says, grown calm.

Ben sucks the headachy sweetness from the box, and he’s a kid at the city pool again. Hardly a place to put his towel on the concrete with men, women, and children crowded around. “I want to make her do the right thing.”

Starl’s silent. He pokes his tongue around in his mouth, hairy cheek bulging. Blessed by ignorance. Ben notices a chink in the bottom left corner of Starl’s lens, the eye behind it barnyard dull. He’s a hillbilly, that’s all. His patrol will never be anything but illegal. Ben opens the door and gets out, bracing air cutting
into a gap between sock and long underwear.

Up in the cab, Starl looks like a marionette, waiting for the strings to move. Ben slams the door and runs after the trio, who’ve made surprising progress. That man’s kidnapped me. Please play along and ride with us awhile. Together we’ll have a better chance of subduing him. He’s kind of small. At the next gas station they’ll all have a big laugh. Mothers require extraordinary measures. They’ll suffer any joke for their kids.

By the time he catches up, he’s sucking icy wind that hardens his throat. The woman’s helping the boys over the railing. One rolls down the embankment into heavy brush. “Run,” she calls when as he gains his feet.

Ben slides inches short of colliding with her hunched over form. He hasn’t yet seen her face, but her voice sounds young and inexperienced, Mom’s twenty years ago, soft lotion-rubbed cheeks and damp ringlets washed with off-brand fruity shampoo. He doesn’t get to see her face because the branch she’s holding crunches the bridge of his nose. A flash and warm gushing. An unbelievable pressure, as though his eyeballs have been sucked into one socket. He doesn’t feel himself fall, dirty roadside snow caking one ear. He doesn’t notice the lug nut someone forgot on the shoulder bruising his hip, his head bouncing.

He awakes in a small, padded room. Not pads, but backpacks and duffel bags of all materials and sizes lining the walls, pushing in toward him. A garage of some sort. A pleasant rumble, like a clothes dryer at night, just beneath him. “Broke his damn nose,” he hears, a familiar voice that fills him with dread and a queasy gratitude. An uneducated voice that snaps on certain syllables. “Some laaaaaady walking her kids. I told him they was frightened.” Plumes of breath. Her twisting body. He remembers. “No, Daddy. I don’t believe there’s a connection.” This must be the back of the ambulance, Starl talking on his radio up in the cab. Double doors when he lifts his head and gazes through the vee of his shoes. “I’ll keep you in the loop. Look for me tomorrow evening.”

Footsteps crunch, and the back doors swing open. Daylight makes Ben cringe.
“Easy now.” Starl jumps into the ambulance and leans over him. The beard hangs down. Wood gnome.

“Welcome home.”

“Where we?” Ben’s tongue is a sponge that’s sucked every drop of spit from his mouth.

“Rocky Mount. I didn’t have your address, so we’re in the bowling alley lot.”

Alley Katz. It would be mostly empty until evening. Except on a Saturday. Ben has no idea what day it is. He asks for a mirror, and Starl pulls one off the wall, probably the one he uses to clip his beard.

Two black eyes, nostrils crusted with blood. It should hurt worse. “I feel okay.”

“You’d be in a world of pain without the Percocet. Not so hard to get with my trucker’s leg.”

Starl moves out of sight, and pulpy bite-sounds assault Ben. The breathy feasting of a cat. Mom’s pale-gutted Calico. She must have called Baltimore last night, as usual. The line would be disconnected.

“I heard you talking on the two-way just now. You said ‘Daddy.’ That your buddy?”

A plastic bag argues. A wham nearby. Bombs. Starl’s dropped something in his nervousness. “Always called my brother that since Daddy passed.” He sets a triangle on Ben’s chest. It’s one of those egg salad sandwiches they sell in 7-11 stores, bright yellow filling pressed between damp bread, all the nutrition pushed out.

Ben isn’t hungry. He’s thick, a breathing statue. “You call your brother ‘Daddy’?”

“Yessir. Younger brother.” Starl’s voice comes from above and behind, shaky and uncertain. “Misses Daddy the most, so I give him the name.”

Ben thought he was bad at lying—even gets clocked in the face for it. That woman was no mother. He picks up his sandwich and takes a bite. It cleaves to the palate with points of sugary pickle. Bad-for-you job food.

“This was nice of you.”

Twenty minutes later, he’s back in the passenger seat, a smoky pair of Starl’s sunglasses resting painfully on his swollen nose bridge. He knows every block they pass. The Amoco on the corner with old
timey pumps, the Episcopal church with the red door, the lots with high grass and nothing else. Starl’s driving respectably, waving to people, keeping the music low.

“I’ll drop you off at the end of your block if you rather.”

Ben looks over at Starl, sees a tired man, at least Mom’s age, maybe ten years more. A guy trying to lead his own life while his father keeps tabs. In the light of morning, the EMT outfit has become a Michelin-man puffy snow suit with a front desk clerk’s badge pinned above the heart. Starl Roberts.

“Mom will want to meet you.”

“Yessir.”

“Seriously.”

Starl ducks his head a little and pulls into the parking lot that Dairy Queen and Ralley’s share, emptying out on Roanoke Lane. “Cop up ahead.”

Ben imagines Starl standing by the refrigerator, an empty mug in his hand. Mom, make this man some tea. He saved my life. Grubby Starl. He’ll probably leave footprints on the white linoleum. And Mom there in her pink bathrobe, pulled tight around her chest, glowing because Ben’s home—given up on his adult-living experiment—but looking askance at the stinky troll he’s brought back from his travels. Oh, and there’s his own face to consider. She’ll cry, ask Starl for his credentials. What happened? Why haven’t you taken my son to a hospital? She’ll raise a few problems, sure, see the holes in the story. But he wasn’t a baby anymore.

Starl stops the ambulance at a red light. A woman with groceries at a bus stop looks right through them. Once you sink to a certain level of scenery, Ben thinks, people can’t see you.

“Keep on straight ahead here?”

“Yes. Take a right at the third light, a left at the next.” Until he can get Starl to agree, he’ll lead him randomly around town. Left, left, right. He doesn’t even need to look out the window. “What day is it, by the way? Mom’s home on weekends.”
“Monday.”

“We’ll just have to wait then. She’ll be thrilled. In the meantime, you can get a hot shower, take a nap in our guest room.”

Starl thinks this over, maybe wondering whether or not “Daddy” will approve. How long has it been since he’s felt the comforts of a real home? At length, he scratches the back of his hand, shakes his head.

“She’ll have questions I can’t answer.”

“She’s nothing like that crazy bitch who tried to kill me, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No, sir.” Starl chuckles in a way Ben hasn’t heard, an earthy relaxed sound, his yellow teeth sucked behind cracked lips.

“I’m glad you think it’s funny, what you do for a living. In my opinion, people need to know about it.”

Starl’s face has gone wooden again, just the way it had when the woman ran away. He’s peering through the windshield with his jaw clenched.

Ben forces a laugh, which makes his head ache. He closes his eyes and leans back against the head rest.

“I guess it is funny.”

The radio station playing now is one of his favorites. Bush, Creed, Third Eye Blind, Goo Goo Dolls. The familiar agonized voices over fuzz guitar sound strained, adolescent. Starl doesn’t sing along, but Ben bets he knows every word. Town to town, blending in, offering weird assistance. Ben waits for the throbbing to subside, lets his head roll side to side as Starl follows his directions. After a while the ambulance stops.

“Just what is it that you want anyway, Starl?”

“A shower would be nice,” Starl says. “Which one is it?”

Ben opens his eyes and looks out front of the ambulance. He sees a sheer face of brick, the side of a multi-story apartment building. Another just like it stands across a dirt-spotted quad. The ambulance is idling at the end of a street, the entrance to a housing project from the looks of it. Two Hispanic teenagers, a
boy and girl, are lounging on a fence, courting. But they’ve stopped to look over at the ambulance with puzzled expressions. *Windy Hill*, a sign reads. Ben's never heard of it.

An hour later, Ben finally guides them to 256 Laurel Drive. Mom’s clanky old station wagon is gone, so they park the ambulance in the driveway. “That’ll teach her,” Ben says.

Moving gently to keep down the growing throb in his nose, he steps out of the ambulance and walks between the hedges to unlock the front door. The same drape over the oval window, the same tomblike smell of evergreen, the hideous ceramic frog crouched over the spare key. He’s home. He turns quickly to see the antique ambulance, rusty fender glinting in the sun. Inside, his little friend is talking on the CB. He gives a half-wave as if to say, Be with you in a second. With that vision in his mind, Ben enters the cool house as if for the first time.

He hangs a left at the kitchen, the first place he’d normally go—for a sandwich, a soda, out of inertia—and heads down the hallway to the linen closet. One green towel, big enough to make a robe for his companion, and a matching washcloth. He drapes them over the side of the bath tub, the same one Mom uses, her pink soaps and non-slip floor mat ready for Starl’s horny soles. He enters his bedroom and turns down the comforter, an action he’s never valued, or even understood until now. Pulling one cord in the double-bulb desk lamp by his bed, he adds a warm glow to the scene.

Headed back out toward the foyer, he stops at the hall phone, hooked like a beetle to the wall. He dials the number to her shop, and it rings three or four times before she answers.

“Well, I’m home. I wanted to let you know.”

“Ben?” It’s crushing to hear her voice. He picks at peeling paint on the door frame. She always senses things about him, like he’s a weather pattern, a storm front. “What happened?”

“Just visiting. There’s someone here at the house I want you to meet.”

Silence. Muttering on the other end. “Come again,” he hears her say away from the phone, to a customer. The shop door chime. “I’ll close up early then. But who is it?”
“It’s a surprise. I’ve got to go.”

The ringer in the handset hums after he’s hung up, fades to silence as he stands in the hall.

He emerges from the house to find a bright afternoon, 48 degrees on the thermometer, the front yard its usual winter brown. The driveway is empty. The little half wave must’ve been goodbye. I do my part, but then I’ve got to scram. Or maybe he just went to park the ambulance in a less obtrusive spot. Ben looks up and down the road, sees the same grays and whites, the occasional red—Nissans, Hondas, Mitsubishis.

He sits on the stoop. In the house opposite, Mrs. Ammons is standing by the window, looking out. She’s studying him as if he’s some new arrival, somebody other than the Dickson boy who left six months ago. He waves.
Some things you want because they’re not yours. Other people’s candy, houses, spouses. You either keep wanting them till death, or somehow get them out of your system. I read about a guy here in Bangor who lived in a mansion attic for three years, unknown to its residents. Each night he’d sneak down to the living quarters and lounge on the divan, make a pimento cheese sandwich, even play with the toddler’s toys. In prison, he’s very unhappy.

Exodus 20:17 says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” That book was written by people who had what they wanted. It might be a good book, but what can I say? I’m covetous of my rich and worldly neighbor, Jefferson. And he’s not accommodating.

I went to borrow some sugar. It should go without saying that I—being covetous—had no baking to do, no hot tea to sweeten, and that Jefferson—being unneighborly—gave me none.

He adjusted the collar of his dashiki, set aside a glass of cognac. “Only Wilma knows where we keep such things. She’s not here just now.”

The codger had no wife that I’d seen. “Nutrasweet?”

“Wilma. She’s here Thursdays.”

Thursday afternoon, a station wagon with stretched plastic for one window rattled into his drive. Jefferson’s golden Porsche 911, envy of I-95, was missing. The wagon disgorged a hunchbacked fifty-something who toted a vacuum and bucket of chemicals up the alabaster sidewalk. It was unbearable that this woman, this Wilma, should have access and not me.

I had to have her.

“Hello, ma’am. I was hoping to borrow some sugar.”
Framed by Jefferson’s Egyptian portico—a replica of Philae, I suspected—Wilma’s washed-out flabbiness took on antique charm, the kind little understood today. “I’m just the cleaner.”

“Oh.” I was disappointed but not surprised that she didn’t immediately embrace her role.

Red faced, stuffed into a too-small maid uniform, she lowered her eyes. I could tell she came from a part of town where people did borrow sugar, that turning a neighbor away pained her.

“Sorry for the inconvenience.”

I stewed back at my house (or curiosity shop, as my ex called it), nagged by an untimely recognition that Woman—no matter what side of the tracks She calls home—is wooed by gifts, not petition. I was twice divorced, and my living area bore the evidence. It stowed one of everything: claw-operated vending machine filled, like the one in the Walmart café, with stuffed toys; signed copy of Das Kapital (probably apocryphal but still once fetishized); photograph of a luxury lobsterman shack Down East. I squeezed into bathroom, kitchen, and bedroom through the spaces between these prizes I no longer prized, yet I could no sooner part with them than slough off my insolvent flesh.

The next Thursday I returned with a strawberry pie from Hannaford, found my love out of breath, as from beating the drapes. She offered dimples and joked that I’d found my sugar after all; she took the pie and closed the door. No batting of the eyelashes, no invitation to join her at tea. Not an unattractive man, I chalked up her continued squeamishness to occupational demands. But if Jefferson was proving an exacting master, I would be a dogged Romeo.

***

In the end, flowers were enough. Flowers and chocolate and bracelets and engraved lockets and coffee mugs and hiring her to clean my house. Though no salary proved sufficient to lure her from the Thursday afternoon gig at Jefferson’s—he must’ve been trading diamonds for her Pine Sol treatment—I was able to buy her service Thursday mornings.
Coffee and fresh bagels awaited her each week. Under my fluorescent kitchen lights, her complexion was boiled pork, her voice billy-goat gruff, but her provenance kept my platelets flowing. As she dusted I’d make up excuses to bother her; I offered raspberry iced tea, éclairs, TV breaks, rides in the Jetta. I’d retired with a government pension and didn’t have much, but what I had was hers.

I let her memorize the crowded floor plan and count the multitude of surfaces that collected dust before making my move. She’d just rubbed down my stove dials and was turning toward the sink with Flitz metal polish in one hand, a blackened rag in the other. I captured her whiskery jawsides and pressed my lips against her chapped pucker. My tongue wormed toward moisture. She groaned, smelled close up of diner hash. I loved her. Loved her. I wanted to sneak inside her and clean Jefferson’s palace.

“What say we move this party next door?” I said as we caught our breath. “He’s gone Thursdays, right?”

Her mouth hung open. She adjusted her apron. The lower class are so superstitious, the slightest intimation of change—for better or worse—leaves them shaken.

“Don’t worry about Jefferson. He doesn’t even know how many bedrooms he has. We could shack up in one for a week.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.” She nudged past me to stow the Flitz and rag in her no-brand caddy. “It would be wrong.”

Wrong? The only injustice I recognized was Jefferson’s wealth. “I’ll even raise your salary.”

Her hands dangled above the caddy. Somewhere inside her untended cave of self, a germ shifted upward. “I got a widow sister in New Mexico.”

I spun her to me. “Yes! Any widow could use extra.”

“Now?”
“No doubt.” Her morning work, I informed her, was finished. Single-minded as any lover off to make love, I dragged her into the sunlight. We walked through my native crabgrass and into Jefferson’s springy Bermuda, trucked 1,700 miles north from the palm-fringed streets of Florida.

At last! But how can I describe first entering the storehouse of all I coveted? A leopard-print runner showed us from the front door across checked tile to a burnished staircase. A Westinghouse crystal chandelier illuminated moldings and furniture from every continent in a moody light that must be how the rich see. I raised a Georgian candlestick aloft, butler fashion. I ran my fingers along the spines of all-but-forgotten authors—Chrétien de Troyes, Baltasar Gracián y Morales, Olaudah Equiano. A stuffed rhino grazed in one corner!

“I never knew it could be so . . . so . . .”

Wilma motioned me to keep my voice down, as if the place were bugged. More superstition.

She let me screw her on one of several guest beds—*in my father’s house are many mansions*—but only after spreading out a not-yet-soiled cleaning towel. Though the towel was hers and she mine, I pretended nothing separated me from the bed. I climaxed between the wild hairs of her thighs, grasping a handful of comforter silk and weeping tears of possession.

***

The worst of us coveters, from Mount Sinai to the Pine Tree State, knows that full ownership doesn’t ease our ailment. A more delicate balance between wanting and having must be struck. As Wilma and I settled into a routine—rutting in a Jeffersonian guest room each Thursday—I grew tired. Only for a short while did I derive pleasure from thinking, *These hands are caressing me when they should be buffing his bidet.* Just for a few weeks did the sputter of her car spur me like the cry of a bitch in heat. The mistake had been to hire her myself. I saw that too late. Becoming mine, she was no longer fully
his. Therefore, I didn’t fully want her.

Meanwhile, she became quite attached to me, or to my money. “Honey,” she called me. “Bubbles.” And I’m not a cruel man; I didn’t even think of cutting her loose. With heavy heart, I grappled among her bones through February, March, April, all the while casting about for something else of Jefferson’s I couldn’t have. I took a Tiffany lamp as she freshened up in a palatial bathroom; I pocketed an ivory coaster stenciled with jungle animals, likely from West Africa; I robbed him of a Rookwood sugar bowl. Cradling each hot item, I’d scurry, giggling, through the frosty dusk from his threshold to mine, where, to my routine disappointment, the booty lost its luster, becoming no more valuable than my mother’s argyles. Nothing else for it, I stuffed, scooted, jammed it in any nook I could find out of plain sight.

As far as I could tell, Jefferson never missed anything.

A wet New England winter passed in this muddle of compromise, burgled articles getting larger, more difficult to haul unheard out the door and through the snow, all equally as useless and detestable upon entering my sphere. A paella pan. A brocaded ottoman. His Steinway baby grand—if only! My already-crammed living space and hiding places dwindled. Then, one drizzly afternoon in early May, as if in answer to my heaping despair, Jefferson brought home a lurcher. In medieval times, peasants crossbred sight hounds and herders for poaching small animals since the law allowed pure sight hounds only to royalty. Lurchers are lanky, power jawed, fleet. Jefferson’s back gardens are estate extravagant—grape arbor passageways leading to marble busts—so when I first saw Victoria displayed in a yellow zinc-coated twelve-by-twelve pen under an ivy canopy, I knew he prized her. Her muscles tensed under silky fur, set to propel her into a thicket. But she hardly had room to pace. Her precision ears twitched. Poor lurcher.

“What’ll he do with Victoria?” I asked, glancing out a guest-room window that Thursday.
“Who?” Wilma said.

“The dog. What can she do in that pen?” Lurchers, I’d read, require heavy exercise. Hedges to arc, forests to navigate, game to spoor.

“He don’t call her that.”

“The name fits.” Victoria’s pace was regal, owning every inch he’d begrudged her. I figured her a mix between greyhound and terrier.

“Listen, Clark. We going to, you know, or not? I’ve got four bathrooms to sponge.” After a season as my mistress, Wilma had developed a certain confidence, directness.

“Right.” The towel discomfited the comforter. Mixed with my lover’s sweat, I detected the sandalwood and mint notes of Jefferson’s Burberry cologne, which she sampled on “the day.”

“I was just thinking that we could talk this morning. About Vicky.”

Her frown was a puzzle. Never before had my interests annoyed her. What else were we doing together in the first place? I could recite the year, the artisan, the style of all Jefferson’s furnishings: the curvaceous Queen Anne table, Hepplewhite sideboard, bright Berber rug.

“I thought we could discuss her thralldom.”

Gears clanked behind my lover’s low brow. She had the wounded look from that day with the Flitz metal polish. “But he’s only gone Thursdays.”

“Well, how about Thursdays?”

She trundled into the bathroom and turned on the water.

“I’ll keep up your salary, of course.”

“Throw in an extra hundred,” she called over the wide-open faucet, her voice taking on its roar, “and you can hump the bitch.”

No one would call my lover genteel, yet such a comment wasn’t her. I feared stubbornness had
replaced superstition. In the bathroom, I found her crouched over a mop bucket, as if smelling the suds. Her face was puffy and damp.

“It’s just for now.”

“Actually,” she said, “make it two hundred.”

***

Our first outing was the next Thursday, May 9, overcast and in the thirties. April’s mud had nourished the lilacs and bunchberry. Devil’s paintbrush spread like wildfire. It was prime time in our nation’s prow. I’d given Wilma the morning off, been assured in a quiet voice over the phone that Jefferson wouldn’t return till six. The pen, she said, had no lock. That surprised me. As a rule, the most coveted is the most difficult to obtain.

I knew of a stony field behind Walmart that had once been slated for development. Summers, I used to bring a Bounty Hunter and step among the lupine. I’d unearthed a 165-mm foldaway shopping cart; the monitor of a 1984 Apple, equipped with a calculator-shaped mouse; a few unusual bottles—ink, strap flask, green squat. Some scavengers would’ve been proud, but not I. (This was before I realized that only other people’s belongings counted—nothing tossed.) In the end, I dug a pit near the tree line and buried the useless lot, metal detector on top.

The moment Victoria leaped from the Jetta and tore through the familiar flora, I knew I’d chosen well. Her lithe limbs, bounding for unseen quarry, promised there remained something I hadn’t found those failed summers. No mere fix—no house cleaner—she was an inspiration. For hours my love coursed through the tall meadow grasses, the clover and nettles, the lady’s slippers and trillium, throwing her angular head toward the sky, some squirming vole or rabbit pinched in her jaws. Not once did she appear to think, Do I really need to stop this tiny beating heart, sink my teeth into fur? Doesn’t my master feed me Fromm Four-Star Nutritionals? She didn’t even eat her prey, just dropped it bloody
and broken at my feet.

I delivered Wilma her first payment of two hundred dollars cash at 5:50, ten minutes before Jefferson was due home. She wouldn’t even let me in the door.

“You don’t look so well. Have you been sleeping okay?”

“The mister’ll be back.” During our season of rut, we’d called Jefferson by his first name, Theodore, but of a sudden she’d reverted to timid house wench.

“We’ll just tell Theo I’ve come for the sugar.”

“You already got that.”

I took her hand, the one not holding the money, and found it clammy. “Come on, hon. I’ve only just helped out a friend.”

“You think you can have everything, but people have a right to be treated decent.”

It was all I could do to forbear naming my sacrifices—stringing along a woman I no longer valued, supporting her Southwestern sister, all to no end but another deflated Friday morning, hemmed in by the growing evidence of my need. “I’ve treated you all right,” I said.

“Shhhhhh.” She snatched back her hand and shut the door in my face.

Jefferson’s 911 had crept into the drive, not a sound from the lubed engine. Disembarked, he inspected the tread on his Dunlop SP 60s and retrieved the mail before acknowledging me.

“I just came for the Dixie Crystals, sir.”

He didn’t seem to know what I was talking about, or even to recognize me. “See Wilma, please.” He flipped through his enviable correspondence and stepped past me, trailing Burberry.

“She couldn’t find it either.” I held up empty hands.

“I recommend you purchase some. That way you’ll have it in a pinch.”

He pressed the toe of a Brooks Brothers wingtip into his tulip bed, tamping down the mulch. Wilma
appeared in the second-floor window above him. She looked pale, fat, ugly, no doubt fearful for her job. When Jefferson closed the door between us, she drew down the shades.

***

In this way began the happiest days of my life. The Thursdays of summer and early autumn. Thirty-nine rabbits, seventy squirrels, a few mink, fifteen possums. I sowed them all in the field. Once, Victoria scared up a woodcock and leaped six feet to snag it from the wind. Flusher, shooter, retriever—all in one. Watching her flight through field glasses from the hood of my Jetta, I was integrated. No longer did I have to choose between coveter and owner, craving and overdose. Watching her, I became a man—just a man.

Keeping Wilma satisfied proved another matter.

The quality of her cleaning plummeted—not that I’d hired her to bring sparkles. Either I’d gotten used to a new standard of living or she’d begun rubbing mud into my floors. Our screwing ceased altogether.

“I ain’t no charity case,” she whined one morning, after showing up, even though I’d given her the day off. It seemed she’d taken exception to my paying her without the sex.

“Consider the extra money a bonus for doing a nice job.”

She flicked a cream-cheese wrapper onto the filthy floor.

“You can even come along with us today.” Maybe it would help to show her what joy I’d brought Victoria, she to me. At the same time, I wanted the dog all to myself.

“No, I guess I’ll go get an early start on Jefferson’s.” She had no chemicals or buckets to collect—hadn’t even brought them over. She just slunk out the door, leaving it open to the crisp November dawn, and across the yard to the palace.

I could hardly wait to grab Vicky’s collar and get the morning’s bad taste out of my mouth. We rode
to Walmart, she in the passenger seat, tongue flapping on the glass. We were like two sweethearts on a
date. Always it was a date. Before proceeding to the field I stopped in the megastore. I don’t know if it
was Wilma’s utter dejection that had depressed me, but—whatever set it off—the thing in me that
always wants more had begun speaking up for the first time since snow covered the ground. I craved
powerful binoculars to get ever closer to her prey-seizing jaws; an article on skinning and tanning
seemed vital.

Ahead in the checkout line, a baggy-eyed Native American in a Hawaiian shirt carried a basketful
of Hawaiian shirts. The sweat-suited matron in front of him had her cart loaded with Thanksgiving
decorations—a garland of paper leaves, model Mayflower centerpiece, turkey dolls. I had to wonder
what Wilma’s sister in New Mexico bought with the unearned hundreds I coughed up each week. No
doubt it was the same theft-resistant crap these people fed on. Because who would want to steal a pot of
fake poinsettias? By the time I reached the tongue-studded cashier, I was shaking. She appraised my
Bushnell 10x42 Legend Ultra HD binoculars as if trying to determine, not their market value, but
something deeper, something they lacked. She whisked my Field & Stream across the laser, treating it
no better than a Busty or 1980s-era Hustler.

“$317.75” was all she said before flinging out a palm.

Four hours later—despite the purchases and two squirrels in the sack—I still felt low. While Vicky
prowled and panthered through bright orange and umber, I drifted apart. Untethered. It’s not that my
mind had moved past her to future conquests the way it’s done at each of my life’s painful plateaus.
With action figures, then Huffy dirt bikes, then Moroccan cookware, most recently Wilma. No, my eyes
were, as always, riveted on her haunches, her still tail, her trembling nose. I was untethered not from
my desire but from the wholeness watching her sport had given me only seven days prior.

Dusk fell. She returned with a broken-necked hare, her muzzle dewed with blood.
“What’s happened to me?” I grasped a muddy paw. “I thought you were the one.”

Her pupils, wide with bloodlust, replied. *I have shown you happiness.*

“But it’s still not *mine.*”

She dropped the rabbit at my feet. Teeth bucked out, eyes squinted, the carcass seemed excited to have been made by Victoria. My furry Artemis disengaged her paw and stepped toward a copse of firs.

While she grew taut for her next kill, the dark back homeward roads already taunted me. I’d make him an offer. Trade him my Jetta, my pension. I needed what Victoria possessed—her je ne sais quoi—more than a weekly peep show could provide. I’d pay Wilma to clean *his* house.

These were my ideas, though I suspected deep down an honest transaction would solve nothing. We got in the car and tooled through the Walmart parking lot. Victoria sniffed the window crack, gathering information on the laden shoppers in search of their compact cars, chipmunks with acorn-packed cheeks. She wagged the stump of her tail. Doth a weasel creep, a fox hide, somewhere in the sea of asphalt and chrome? She could find life anytime. Me, I could hardly find it once a week.

***

I left her, flanks steaming, in Jefferson’s corral. She panted; I shivered. She lapped water from a china bowl and nestled in the dirt. No lights shone in the palace, so I gathered Wilma had finished her cleaning early and limped off like a gut-shot doe. I trudged through my own yard, bucking against a wave of despair. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. They lined up like empty storefronts, stretching into the desperate winter months. It took two full minutes to find my key. I was remembering my long-sought bottle of Nefertiti’s Tutankhamen Brew, frosting in the fridge. Could that get me to next Thursday? And there were other beers I hadn’t tasted. There were many, many countries I’d never set a sole on. But my eyes welled up anyway. Surely I was lost.

In my living room, I found Jefferson’s living room. All the items I’d borrowed over the winter had
been lugged from their hiding places and sat arranged in the center of my Oriental rug, which I hadn’t seen uncovered since 1993. My own furniture was pressed off to one side and out into other rooms. Jefferson’s Tiffany lamp glowed atop his Shaker nightstand. His jungle-stenciled coaster, antique calculator, Iron Chef carving knife—all these had been displayed to advantage atop the teak sheen of his coffee table. The ottoman that had cost me twenty minutes of sweaty labor from door to door through February slush formed the centerpiece of the arrangement. On it sat Wilma and Jefferson, the former grasping a broom and the latter my Frederick Hurten Rhead mug, filled halfway with what looked like merlot.

“The thief returns to his den,” Wilma said, probably borrowing the line from Jefferson. Her voice was a grackle’s, and her former antique beauty had faded, as if under a mummy’s wraps.

I gathered myself, elevated my rhetoric. “To what do I owe such a—”

“Please,” Jefferson interrupted. “Wilma gave me disturbing news this evening.”

“I’ll explain.”

“But the explanation’s here.” He raised his arms, as if to indicate not just the stolen furniture but my lair. “You’ve taken my things, you sad, sad man. Having stopped by under the pretense of borrowing sweetener, you cased my house.” He looked self-satisfied, perhaps a little tipsy, not the least bit angry. “You hired Wilma and lifted her key. I should have you arrested!” He gaveled the Rhead onto his coffee table.

So he hadn’t yet called the police. That was good. I relaxed a smidgeon. “I apologize. It’s an affliction of mine.” This wasn’t the first time I’d been confronted about my covetousness, and the further sins to which it leads me. “Since a child, I’ve felt incomplete . . .”

“Bah!” Jefferson sprang from the couch into a posture of moral outrage. I had no idea what he did for a living. Politician? Sheriff? “You live in a nice neighborhood, do you not? You have food to eat, do
you not? You have the luxury to hire a *servant*, do you not?” As did everyone else, he was missing the point.

“But, sir—if I may—you didn’t even notice the items were missing until *she*”—I cocked a thumb at my betrayer, still clutching her cleaning weapon—“ferreted them out.”

“You call this woman a ferret?” His forehead appeared to lengthen, and he held one arm cocked at the elbow. John Calhoun. Daniel Webster. “She who’s been toiling on her knees to support an invalid husband and mentally challenged daughter? For shame!”

That Wilma harbored a family hadn’t, for obvious reasons, occurred to me. I pictured them now, mismatched limbs and underbites huddling around a kerosene heater. “You never told me.”

She groaned. “You never asked!”

I barely sidestepped her broom-javelin, which clattered onto the stairs.

“Take it easy, dear.” Jefferson perched a doubtlessly soft hand on her shoulder. He retook his seat. “I don’t deny, Mr. Sutton, that I’m a wealthy man, but I bought very little of what you stole. It’s not a matter of my losing *money*.”

“It’s not?”

He frowned and gazed at the ceiling, as if cataloging his stock. “No, son. My most prized possessions are gifts of thanks from the downtrodden! People I’ve helped.”

This was absurd. Yet something in me—something unrecognizable—liked the idea. Still I didn’t trust it. “You’ve got thirty bedrooms. Did beggars drop those off at your doorstep?”

“My rooms are available to anyone who needs them.” The always-dignified Jefferson seemed a bit ruffled by my hard-nosed realism. His hair looked like it needed cutting. “This coffee table here,” he said, “was gifted by the Bushes for my outstanding contributions to Save the Children. The ottoman under me came from the Karamanli family, the Pasha of Tripoli’s descendants, for investing heavily in
Libyan irrigation! If you only frequented the same charitable circles I do, you’d know my name graces the annals of philanthropy.”

I studied the table for the first time since I’d swiped it. The mark of charity was plain. In fact, I could almost swear the teak amounted to nothing more than plastic veneer, skillfully applied. Indeed, a classier shin barker could be had at Target. How could I have missed this? I scrutinized a few other objects—the knife, the ottoman—with similar results. The weight of their possession lifted.

“Yoo-hoo, Mr. Sutton. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Regarding my accuser, I beheld a field mouse only half secreted in the grass. My talons flexed. Every tycoon has his vulnerable spot—that one item he knows he shouldn’t have.

“My conscience is fine, sir. What I want to know is how you came by Victoria.” I couldn’t imagine my love suckled by peasants, swaddled and delivered to my neighbor in appreciation for a rent extension. He’d definitely shelled out the bucks. “Don’t tell me she’s just another hand-me-down from the poor.”

Jefferson’s features went slack. He turned to Wilma, as if for guidance; meanwhile my body inched backward. If I had a plan, I didn’t know it then. Instinct backed me up the first few stairs leading to the second floor. I’d made it halfway to the landing before Wilma broke the silence, hollering after me.

“Don’t you even bring Victoria into this!” It seemed she’d omitted our triangle from her gossip. And, of course, Jefferson wouldn’t have noticed Vicky’s absence from the pen.

“Who’s Victoria?” he said.

I lurched up the remaining steps and ran down the hall. In the bedroom I ducked into an alcove behind eight-foot stacks of Harper’s from the war years. I sensed no pursuit; doubtless Wilma guessed me treed. Feeling on top of the doorjamb, I located the key to my storeroom—the one place my betrayer couldn’t have ventured—and let myself in. Walmart holds no candle to it. My storeroom is a
mausoleum of what I’d like to throw away but can’t—half of it childhood mementos. A scooter, Dad’s homemade bench, cookie cutters from all those holidays in the kitchen. Then there’s my first wife’s sweaters. She abandoned me one July and couldn’t stand to return long enough for her winter wear. How many times I’ve wished for a fire!

I left off the light and crept past shoulder-high shelves of shadow. Since it was well past dark, only the moonlight guided me to the gray square of window at the back. I swiveled it open and popped out the screen. The breeze brought wood smoke, pine. I crouched, closed my eyes, and thought of all the places I could go. Miami Beach, its rolled r’s and neon-washed art deco; Colorado, where the plains meet the sky; Hawaii and those limpid, ball-freezing waterfalls, the girls of Kona complexion. Anywhere but here, as they say.

***

Midnight found me in the Jetta, splitting forests of fir up Golden Road just outside Millinocket, town of my childhood. The moon illuminated the Great Northern paper mill’s plume, the ever-ruffled water of Moosehead Lake. In these forests I’d hunted mink as a boy, napped on moss between sparse pines. And if I could’ve turned child again, pre.want—for I believe true want only arrives with age—I would’ve stopped there, started over in a world without Depression-era glass, Department 56 Snowbabies, Mongolian harnesses. But I kept on the road, destined for the north woods, maybe Canada.

“In the mountains we’ll find all there is. A cabin. A brook. God.”

After hours of unanswered speech, I felt not the slightest bit self-conscious. I planned to live away from humankind for a while. Hadn’t that been the motive of Thoreau, that wise, poor man? To go into the natural world, where covetousness is plain folly. No one can possess such grandeur.

I passed lakes in the dark—Ripogenus, Caribou, Ragged, and the little ones without names. Beside me in the passenger seat, a curl of paws pulsed. Victoria seemed to be storing up her energy for a hunt.
that would never stop. I cracked the window, careful not to disturb her, and lifted my nose to the biting stream.
During Salome’s senior year of high school, her widowed mother found work at Haddonfield Public Library. Salome knew her mother better than most daughters knew theirs and believed Mary had taken the job to forestall the loneliness her daughter’s approaching departure for Swarthmore would bring. In part, Salome was right. The generous settlement from her late father’s wrongful death had made it unnecessary for Mary ever to seek employment again. Thus, Mary’s reasons weren’t pecuniary.

Salome soon learned that three veteran librarians who called themselves the New Women worked with Mary at Haddonfield Public. Within the first week it became clear that Clotha, Lachena, and Astra had taken Mary under their skirts, vowing to make her a New Woman too.

Salome had heard of the New Women of the 19th-century, had read *The Awakening*. An honors student and budding civil rights activist, she supported feminism, even the proto-feminism that the librarians’ name recalled. So each time Mary returned from a shift with schemes for winning independence from fashion and all other trappings of gender normativity, Salome didn’t bat an eyelash. She grew troubled only when her mother began to embrace each of the New Women’s bountiful suggestions for self-improvement without a second thought. This passive acceptance led Mary to embark on too many projects to realistically finish. Thus, while Salome registered for classes at Swarthmore, completed vaccination forms, and looked into extra-curriculars to join as a Phoenix, she became the de facto manager of her mother’s self-renewal.

Until now—and even now—Salome had been proud of her single mother. Mary had remained strong since her husband’s tragic death fourteen years earlier. Salome was three at the time, the twins, Marian and Miriam, still in Mary’s womb. As an adolescent Salome had read everything about the incident she could find. Her father, James, had been a librarian at Haddonfield Public and was sorting
acquisitions in a stuffy carrel when he asphyxiated on fumes from a new ink stock. That was all Salome knew until last Saturday, shortly after her seventeenth birthday, when she discovered James’s diary while packing up some of Mary’s dresses that the New Women had declared too fashionable. Salome read the first few yellowed pages and replaced it in the dresser. Every day or two since, she’d found a moment to steal away and read more of her father’s words. Among many interesting tidbits, she learned from the diary that the New Women had been active in James’s time at the library, and that his opinion of “the coven” seemed less than complimentary.

One afternoon, unfamiliar stiletto heels on the kitchen tiles startled Salome. Fresh home from a shift in her fourth week at Haddonfield Public, Mary grasped a scrap of paper with a phone number and the name *Fata Morgana* penned in Clotha’s red cursive.

Here we go again, Salome thought. She laid down her pencil on her post-calculus homework.

Mary announced the ladies’ latest scheme in her acquired story-hour voice: “With this product, Fata Morgana, we can create a brand new ancestor for ourselves!”

Barely listening, Salome frowned at one of her homework answers. She erased an extra zero.

“We just buy a simple kit. Don’t you see what this means?” Mary spoke louder to interrupt her daughter. A once-trendy bolero jacket rode up on her breasts. “We get half our genes from each parent, a quarter from each grandparent. A new ancestor will literally make us new women.”

Salome, who had only just begun to consider herself a woman, said, “Fine.”

Mary wasn’t finished. “We can decide how distant our ancestor will be, where he’s from, all that.”

“If that’s what you want,” Salome said, really starting to wonder why the librarians so badly wanted her mother to be someone else.

“Then it’s settled.” Mary planted a kiss in a forgotten shade—anti-white—on Salome’s brow.

Salome passed the afternoon without giving Fata Morgana another thought. She finished her post-
calculus, cultural studies, and wireless network technologies homework. She dropped a few gen-mod crickets in with the desert gecko Mary already ignored. She cancelled unread subscriptions to *The Journal of Remote Sensing* and *Bigtop Gardening*. In the evening, she answered videomarketing calls, asking to be removed from the lists Mary managed to get on. Not until right before bed did she get around to looking up *Fata Morgana* online, expecting it to offer little more than a fictionalized family history—including digitalized sepia photographs of someone else’s ancestors—pixilated in a handsome electronic volume. She found nothing. Nowadays, if a company didn’t have a cyber presence, they were as good as non-existent.

***

Two crates arrived the next day, *Fata Morgana* stenciled in blood red on their sides. Mary set down her debut attempt at knitting—the sleeve of an argyle sweater. “Our ancestor,” she announced to Salome and the twins, her coerced knitting assistants. “Zebedee is here for assembly.”

“Zebedee?” Salome had a pretty good guess about who’d been consulted on their ancestor’s name.

“Zebba,” Miriam, the older twin by fourteen minutes, half-repeated. The twins suffered from impaired echolalia, among other mental abnormalities.

“Zeb,” Marian half-repeated Miriam’s partial repetition.

“Zeb it is, then,” Mary said, her intonation suited for children, though the twins were two years into puberty. “We’ll call our ancestor Zeb for short.”

Under Mary’s direction the suited delivery men, whose thick glasses and bowties lent them the look of librarians, placed a small crate, labeled *Somes Secui*, in the center of the knitting circle. Salome translated the Latin to mean *Body Parts*. She felt queasy. The men balanced a larger, oblong crate on its end under the carport.

Mary dismissed them and removed a severed arm from the smaller crate. The faux skin was a lurid
patchwork of discoloration. Each daughter was instructed to remove a body part. Miriam took out a bent leg. Marian plucked a shoulder from the square of darkness. Reluctantly, Salome groped on the crate’s bottom until she reached a hank of hair. A tug brought a real-looking head onto her lap. Its expression was stern, in keeping with long ago.

She wanted to shriek and brush off her dress, but she’d learned of late to control herself. Someone had to be steady and sensible in this family. The parts aren’t real, she thought. Think of them as bolts and screws. “How do we put it together?”

“There are things we must do first.” Mary drew from her pocketbook an amethyst ring. “Zebedee was an earl and always wore jewelry typical of his class.” She twisted the ring onto one blue, swollen finger and held it up so the gem glinted in afternoon sun. “There,” she said. “Now you girls must mark your parts.”

“Par.”

“Pa.”

“It’s like a game,” Mary explained for the twins. “Like Mr. Potato Head.”

Miriam’s job was to saw off a frozen toe with a bread knife. Though typically unobservant and insensitive like her twin, she almost fainted at the sight of the fake blood. Salome rushed to steady her, brought a cool rag to drape over her brow. While Miriam recovered, Mary explained that, once Zeb was activated, they were to tell him about his sword-fighting accident. Marian pinned an epaulet on Zeb’s rock-hard shoulder, a memento from his service in the royal navy, and Salome was made to dab his neck stump with a tincture of bay leaves and cardamom that Mary had brought back from Haddonfield Public. Lachena claimed it was the Renaissance equivalent of cologne.

“Zeb never missed an opportunity to dance the pavane,” Mary explained.

Everyone returned her body part, with its new accessory, to the crate.
“Girls, we have a lot of work to do if the relation is going to take. These ancestor templates are highly suggestible, ultra absorbent, which means that we have to be careful what we expose Zebedee to, especially in the first few days after his activation.” Mary spoke these key words as if she were reading a text inscribed within her skull.

Miriam, recovered from her sawing expedition with the speed of a divided worm, inhaled to repeat. Salome clapped a hand over her sister’s mouth.

“Once Zeb is activated,” Mary continued, “we’ll need to begin memory implantation. Zeb grew up in 1540s London. He inherited a fiefdom and sent his sons to Oxford. A lot of the money that we have now came initially from our ancestor’s coffers.”

“By way of my father’s wrongful death,” Salome thought, not meaning to say it aloud.

Mary didn’t seem to notice the remark. She continued to recite their past, while the crate loomed in Salome’s periphery. Her prom with Jimmy Diamante came in May, 28 days from now. Surely this latest project, like all the others the New Women had prescribed—canning vegetables, macramé, pole vaulting, high-intensity yoga—wouldn’t last. Mary would grow tired of Zeb like a girl of her Christmas doll, and Salome would happily ship him back to the non-existent company that begat him. At the same time, his parts were so life-like, so concrete and significant. She could half imagine Zeb, properly assembled, propped in the bay window, waiting up for her on prom night. The room hummed. Sweat gathered beneath her breasts. It was all she could do to keep from leaping up and nailing the crate shut.

“We’ll all be much happier when it’s done,” Mary said.

Assembly took the whole afternoon and into the evening. Fata Morgana’s long skewers slid without resistance along Zeb’s bone into his thawed flesh, forming joints. At sunset, the patriarch lay spread out on his back like a primitive toy. Outside, under the carport’s bare electric bulb, Mary pried apart the larger crate’s wood to reveal what looked like a double-sized telephone booth. Following their mother’s
lead, the girls lifted Zeb’s body, careful to support all limbs, and hung him on a metal rack inside. Mary shut the steel door, and it self-started, heating elements on the top and back illuminating the scarecrow within—tricornered hat, epaulets, pantaloons, lumpy tights stuffed into buckled shoes. Zeb looked like the corpse of Henry VIII.

“Say goodbye,” Mary said, beaming at their glowing ancestor, “to our old selves.”

“Selv.”

“Sel.”

***

After sleeping and not sleeping, according to their temperaments, Salome and the twins descended at nine to find their ancestor slumped at the breakfast table. He grasped his coffee mug with a hand pink as baked ham. Mary squeezed his other. “Meet my daughters. Your lovely descendents.”

Zeb gazed at a corner of the ceiling. The oven had clarified his dull eyes into a piercing blue. His body looked wrong.

“Girls, say hello to Zeb.”

Miriam and Marian twirled their skirts and curtsied. Each popped behind one of his mismatched shoulders and beamed across the table at Mary. They partially repeated his name.

“Salome?” Mary prompted.

Salome inched to Zeb’s side and waited until his gaze refocused, five feet lower, on her face. He no longer smelled of Elizabethan cologne but of something left too close to a space heater.

“Hi,” she said.

Zeb dropped his head as if to nod, left it lowered. His tricornered hat fell onto the floor. A bald spot Salome hadn’t noticed the day before was visible amidst crispy follicles, maybe a burnt patch.
Something struck her as familiar in the creature’s threadbare demeanor, as though he existed in the same tenuous way James had begun to live again, through his diary.

“Welcome to America,” she added.

Although the instructions, a musty home-made booklet, recommended that a new ancestor undergo forty-eight hours of *controlled acculturation* before exposure to the public at large, Mary invited the librarians over for dinner that very evening.

Salome cautioned against this rashness.

Mary arranged her face to look offended. “The librarians are like family now.” She made a show of lowering her voice to a respectful whisper, since Zeb, exhausted from his morning activities, had been situated on his back in the next room. “I’ve actually thought this through, you know. Give the woman who raised you just a wee bit of credit.”

Salome flinched under the instantaneous shame her mother had always been able to evoke. She recognized a bit of the self-deprecating humor she loved, and that had been missing since Mary became a librarian. “Sorry, Mom. What did you have in mind?”

“My dear, sometimes you’re as dense as your sisters. Olde Towne! It’s the perfect way to speed up Zebedee’s acculturation.”

“You can’t be serious.” Olde Towne Haddonfield was five blocks of stinky character actors, a tourist trap built only just a few years before Salome’s birth. “That place is a scam. The employees are paid minimum wage to memorize a script.” Salome found herself quoting from the section of James’s diary she’d read after breakfast. Her father had evidently been a minor historian of Haddonfield.

“How else will our ancestor learn where he came from?”

Show him the crate, Salome almost snapped as she would have during her rebellious early teens, but her mother’s voice had taken on an unfamiliar naked quality. Something approaching desperation.
Salome looked at her carefully. Her new glasses, horned rims, had slid to the end of her nose. Did her mother remember her late husband’s interest in Olde Towne? She rarely spoke of him anymore. The anxiety in Mary’s voice touched Salome.

“I’ll take him on a quick tour. You stay here and get ready for the librarians.” Having never met the New Women, Salome had to admit she was rather curious.

“That’s a good girl.”

Salome strapped Zeb into the passenger side of the new Dodge Dakota, one of the librarians’ most expensive suggestions, and drove toward downtown. Locked in the small space with this recently animated being, Salome had her first opportunity to study him unobserved. His burnt smell, which had been unpleasant at first, brought out a feeling of sympathy in her. As she kept the oversized car between the lines, she tried to imagine she was driving James to visit Olde Towne so he could see its progress over the fourteen years since his death. The concurrent appearance in her life of Fata Morgana’s creation and the pages of her father’s history, rendered in his own voice, suggested a possibility to her. Her father. James. She glanced over at the benevolent monster beside her. No, it didn’t work. Zebedee resembled a newborn, an old baby—not a man. Not a possible father. He gazed out the windows at billboards, pedestrians, other cars with a matter-of-fact blankness, the objectivity of a camera lens.

“I’m taking you to see Old Towne, your childhood home,” Salome said, turning her thoughts back to the task at hand. It sounded ridiculous. Another half-baked plan that she had to manage.

“I was a child?” Zeb asked.

Salome almost rammed the tiny Honda in front of them.

“Of course.” At least everyone else had the chance to ease into existence, starting as a coddled, bald thing. Not Zeb. “We all were.”
Though in some respect it was easy to lie to the figure in her passenger seat, she felt troubled. Even such a well-meaning fib as this—that Zeb had been born of woman—felt different, wrong. Every person deserved the truth. Yet was Zeb a person? And, person or impersonator, she couldn’t very well tell him where he’d actually come from without disregarding the instructions.

She parked the Dakota along the main street of downtown’s revitalized section, the length of a few brick tunnels from Olde Towne, which allowed only foot traffic. She punched their code into the meter and took Zeb’s brittle hand.

“What would you like to see?” She’d let him determine the first few steps of trip down memory lane, a small way of atoning for her lie.

“That’s me,” Zeb said. He gazed into the truck window.

Misshapen as Zeb’s face was, his reflection verged on the amoebic. Salome tugged him gently away down the street. He toddled beside her, head turning side to side with the out-of-control suddenness of ice tilted in a glass. A baby, a robot. Scientists had been able to could clone human beings for five years now—though no state allowed it—but Zeb struck Salome as more miraculous. The way he’d gone from parts to human. Family. If he’d come with a brain, muscles, bones, everything waiting to be activated by heat, maybe he contained memories as well.

“Who are you?” she asked.

Zeb stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. “My foot hurts.”

A couple of ninth-graders, college girls’ little brothers, separated like currents in a stream and swept past, one of them bumping Zeb so that he wobbled like a bottle on a table.

“Hey!” Salome said.

The boys giggled and moved on. Some girls fail to set a solid example for younger siblings.
“Do you remember what happened to your foot?” She thought of how Marian, a creature barely more cognizant than Zeb, had almost fainted, bread knife falling from her blood-covered hands.

“No.”

Zeb creaked and groaned as he tried to reach his left riding boot from a standing position.

“Easy now. You’re just out of the . . . you’re not quite well.” Guiding him to a green bench made of recycled cans, Salome slipped off his boot and stocking, gagged.

The walking had ruptured his bread-knife wound. Fake blood drops made circles on the new pavement.

“I did that?” He sounded pleased.

Salome’s nausea shifted toward inebriation. Of course. He knew nothing of the disgusting or abject. He used language like an extra limb, grasping and offering information without equivocation. Like a straw in cool water.

“No,” she said. “It’s not healthy to wound yourself.”

This, Salome thought, must be why people have children. Her mother had been so good with the twins. When they emptied their diapers on the mirror or knocked over cereal in the grocery store, Mary made a game of it. Salome could see that giving birth and raising children was a way of recharging the world with honest amazement. Perhaps her father had known her like that.

She helped Zeb slide the stocking back over his gory foot.

Amusing though his sense of discovery was, it hurt her to witness his aloneness, the way he was cut off from any story that explained him. She’d grown a bit larger each day since she’d found her father’s diary, the more she learned about him, and her past.

“Your toe was cut off in a sword fight seven hundred years ago,” she said. “You’re an English earl.”
A lady with a perm strolled past, trailing a harnessed terrier. The dog yapped at Zeb, straining at the end of its leash.

“I do remember a great pain,” Zeb said. “All over my body.”

Fata Morgana’s musty book of instructions, written as if on a typewriter, lines uneven, errors X-ed out, leaves bound with horse hairs, had stated that the ancestor-in-progress wouldn’t suffer, that cooking was a pre-conscious step of his creation. Because an ancestor’s brain and joints required heat in order to be formatted, he didn’t technically exist until the oven had cooled. Similar thoughts had once comforted Salome whenever she thought of her father’s death. The Herald claimed that the asphyxiation from the poison ink occurred only once he’d fallen unconscious.

“You slipped on wet grass,” she said. “The other earl didn’t mean to cut off your toe.”

A look of intelligence came over Zeb’s face, the look of having understood. “I remember a skirt, hands touching my face. Cool water on my neck. The voices of women.”

Salome wriggled the boot back over his blood-spotted stocking. “Don’t worry about old stuff.”

All day she’d been able to dissociate the memory of Zeb’s decapitated head on her lap from the being who’d stepped out of the oven and into their lives. The idea that his severed parts had been able to feel, to hear, to see, horrified her. This horror didn’t, however, attach to the creature, the sum of those sentient parts, who slouched beside her. Instead it hovered like a black cloud over her and her sisters and mother and—regardless of her mother’s innocent and selfish intentions—what they’d done.

She helped Zeb to his feet. They continued their stroll, past maple saplings in wood-chip beds, a lamppost plastered with flyers for upcoming events. The revitalization of downtown had brought in a lot of entertainment.

Salome took a deep breath. She didn’t see why she couldn’t bend the rules a little for Zeb, just another of the New Women’s experiments. “Those were my hands you remember. Those were our
voices—Mary, Miriam, Marian, me. Your family around your sick bed. You were a librarian who’d been accidentally poisoned.”

“I am sorry.” Zeb pressed together his fingertips on one hand and then spread them out, as if to indicate an explosion. “I can’t remember.”

“We call you Zebedee,” Salome said, no longer trying to distinguish between the script and the reality, “but your name is James. You are my father.” Perhaps truth was merely a function of need.

Zeb made no comment, though he nodded to indicate he’d heard. He puckered his bluish lips but did not whistle, did not speak. Only a hiss of air escaped. They passed a window filled by a “Coming Soon” sign for a kitchen store. Atmospheric noise music played in the loudspeakers outside.

“I didn’t mean to confuse you.” Really, she thought, I must be my mother’s girl, so distractable.

They moved on in silence and at length walked past the ninth-graders who’d bothered them earlier. The boys crouched on the gum-free, uncracked sidewalk by Starbucks, shaggy-headed and scheming about the near future.


“None of your business.”

Furious whispers faded in their wake. Salome didn’t care. She’d be gone in a few months. Several blocks ahead, a gaggle of girls closer to her age, including a few seniors, drifted their way. Her heart jumped.

Just past the Starbucks a passageway broke off the main street. It was one of several that traversed the no-man’s land between New Town and Olde Towne, a few blocks over. Full of broken bottles, dumpsters, and dust, the tunnels’ sole purpose appeared to be separating one section of Haddonfield from the other, connecting them like ducts. They turned in. After half a dozen yards, Salome could hardly see anything but the torch lights of Olde Towne at the far end. Zeb stumbled beside her in the
dark, and Salome heard the toppling of a can, the rustling of a bag, echoing down the length of the passage. She gripped her charge’s skinny arm.

“Ouch.”

His arm went slack in her hand, and Salome had the dreadful thought that she’d ripped it from the socket. “Are you okay?”

The arm came back to life as Zeb took a step away from her. “I remember this darkness,” he said. “Is this Olde Towne?”

“No.” Salome couldn’t help but smile. “This is a tunnel.”

“It looks familiar.”

“Every place gets dark, James.” It felt like ages since she’d play-acted with anyone, since she’d pretended to be a mother or queen or police officer. The twins had never been able to catch on to the idea of role-playing. They were always just themselves.

“James,” Zeb repeated, as if to savor the name.

The seniors passed the entrance without noticing them. Nobody but tourists went to Olde Towne. Salome picked out Claire Hopkins, Deana Stuart, Melanie Parker, and Christine Phillips. They were speaking of high school soccer, the boys team that had gone undefeated this season.

“Goals,” Zeb said, echoing one of the girls.

“Excuse me?” Salome’s eyes hadn’t adjusted enough yet to see his face.

“Me.”

She started. It was as if Miriam or Marian was speaking through his lips, repeating words. When she’d tried to teach the twins to read, they scratched at the letters as if they were ants crossing the page. That had been the beginning of her loneliness, shortly after the death she couldn’t remember. And now her mother, seemingly lost to the coven.
To ward off panic, she spoke, saying whatever came to mind. “That’s Olde Towne up ahead. See the fire? It hasn’t always been like that. There used to be electric lights, regular people. You wrote about it in your diary, how Mayor Scott cared only about revenue, not his own poverty-stricken citizens who were ousted when this monstrosity was constructed. He wanted to bring culture to Haddonfield, give it the European heritage, the Dark Ages it never had.” Speaking in her father’s language began to soothe her. She’d only read it to herself, silently, locked in the bathroom while the twins played or slept or stared at the walls. Now, filling the half-light around her, it was as if a part of him had come alive.

Zeb seemed to listen, no longer repeated.

Salome could make out a few figures slumped against the wall. Bums. From looks alone, they could be dead, but the stench was of living creatures.

“I wish I could remember it all,” Zeb said. “These things I am told.”

A slow warmth spread over Salome, as if her blood had long stood cold and now moved. “Me too,” she said. That was precisely how she’d felt about her father for so many years. He was composed of stories she couldn’t confirm. “Let’s start over.”

She took Zeb’s hand again. His grip was stronger. He seemed to walk with increased lubricity, as they moved toward the lighted end of the passage, torches flickering in the dusk.

***

They returned to the house at nine, late for dinner. Pausing at the front door, Salome heard minstrel music, smelled roasted meats and camphor.

“Just as I thought,” she whispered, dramatically, into Zeb’s ear. She was tipsy from the cloudy Sussex ale Zeb bought in Olde Towne with her allowance. “The librarians have laid an ambush. I only wish I knew what they wanted from Mom.”
Zeb nodded. “The New Women’s retro attitude only replicates the market-driven fashion they rail against,” he said, reproducing perfectly her earlier paraphrase of James’s diary, even the slur she’d developed. “They think they’re new when indeed they’re very old.” He looked tired, though unimpaired by the ale, much of which had seeped out of his riding boot under Engelnd Taverne’s rough-hewn banquet table, wetting Salome’s sandal and toes.

She pecked his rubbery cheek. “That’s right, Dad,” she whispered. “I know a whole personality was a lot to absorb in one night. Just watch for my little dance.” They had worked out a signal—she’d execute a few steps of the Quantam Slide so he’d know when to speak his, James’s, lines, putting the librarians in their place.

He craned his neck downward as if attempting to see the mark her lips had left.

Over the course of the evening, Zeb had improved exponentially in his ability to ape human speech and gestures, in coordination and coloring. Salome had taught him to run, even to dance a sloppy jig. She’d told him how the merchants who lined Olde Towne’s cobbled streets were paid actors. “You taught me this,” she said often. The red-haired chandler, the hunchback fletcher, the bootblack and chimney sweep, the horse-faced cooper and gouty glazier, all of them earned minimum wage to sweat it out in the New Jersey summer night, pretending to live in a flea-bitten, pre-penicillin age of astronomical wealth gap and disease. Zeb seemed to appreciate the irony. The man he was imitating found Olde Towne amusing and sad, Salome explained, had written all about it in his diary. He’d even planned to publish a book on the subject. Zeb straightened up when she said this, as if proud. They sat opposite one another at the long banquet table in Engelnd Taverne.

“Mom doesn’t get your fascination with the place, though. She thinks you’re nostalgic for dukes and damsels and dragons.” Salome gestured at the ridiculous-looking brew wench who made sure to
spill ale on the tops of her breasts while serving randy tourist fathers. “That’s why she sent us here, so you could learn how to be an earl for her sick librarian friends.”

Zeb frowned. “But I am an earl.”

Salome’s tankard came down hard on the tabletop, splashing ale onto the sleeve of a nearby peasant on break. “No, no. Forget everything I said before we got here, everything anyone said.”

Fuzzy from the alcohol, she tried to think over the roar of voices, the flute and mandolin combo in the corner. What contradictory stories had she told him that evening in order to make him feel better? She wondered if his brain or circuit board—she no longer wanted to know the organic base of his self—could recognize conflicting accounts and choose which to believe.

“What did anyone say?” Zeb prompted his drunken hostess after a minute.

She wiped foam from his bottom lip, readjusted his tricornered hat. “I have no idea.” She held the tips of her fingers together and spread them apart to imitate his earlier gesture. “All you need to know is you’re my father, the twins’ father. Mom’s your wife, and we have dinner guests visiting this evening that you don’t care for.”

“And I’m not an earl.”

“Exactly!”

By the time she led Zeb through the front door and into the dining room, Salome was confident he could forget as easily as he remembered. They found Mary, the twins, and three unknown figures around the dining room table, which was piled with meats, cheeses, and fruit.

The librarians introduced themselves in order of size and age. Clotha had long black hair and pliable Mediterranean skin. James had described her features exactly in his diary, down to the silken black dress she wore, the black polish on her fingernails. According to the diary, she was about twenty, but
she looked hardly a day over that now, despite the fourteen years that had passed since her father worked at Haddonfield Public.

Seated beside Clotha, and a head shorter, Lachena appeared to be in her mid-forties, Mary’s age, and, in fact, looked like Salome’s mother. They had the same wavy, brown shoulder-length hair and heart-shaped faces. Both wore earth tones, Lachena a tan cotton T-shirt printed with Haddonfield Public’s slogan, Read to live, and glasses with thick beige rims.

Astra, a tiny, withered woman, hunched at the head of the table. Salome judged her to be about ninety. She had white, curly hair trimmed close to her head, like a poodle’s. Her pallid skin crowded in wrinkles around beady eyes and pressed mouth. The sole garment on her body was a bleached sackcloth slip. She grasped carving knife and fork in her gnarled hands, elbows barely high enough to prop on the table.

Mary, at the table’s opposite end, looked stately, truly changed from this afternoon, bone structure and blood altered. Salome tried to catch her eye, but her mother watched Astra, as if for a signal. Everything had gone too far, Salome decided. This is the last we’ll see of these hideous creatures.

She briefly introduced herself and Zeb. The librarians looked unaccountably pleased with Zeb, paid scant attention to Salome. The latecomers took their places at the table beside the twins, who’d been dolled up like courtesans. Astra said grace.

“Boar’s flank and pumpkin gut, meat of fish and fowl, virgin Shirley Temples brewed in a cauldron of stainless steel, forbidden fruits, knives to slice and forks to tear, woman’s lips to kiss and strip bare. We salute Artemis and Callisto, huntresses of Arcadia, for bringing home the kill, killing the hearth and home of old. We, the New Women of Haddonfield, guardians of the stacks, keepers of celibate secret, welcome a brave and noble soul into our fold. Mary, you have vanquished all the tasks we, your counselors, have laid before you. Mary, an archetype of womankind as writ, birther of mankind’s self-
proclaimed savior, you have elected to reject vesselhood, to pluck history from your thigh like a
noxious weed. And here he sits, brought by his dutiful daughter to his first and last supper.” The old
woman leveled a crooked finger at Zeb. “Zebedee, father of James, martyr of mankind, we have called
you forth to return the sins you’ve visited upon your daughters.”

“Hold on a sec,” Salome said. “I don’t like the way you’re speaking to my father.” She laid her hand
on Zeb’s, which felt taxidermied. He appeared shrunken, a naughty prince on his throne.

“Him!” shrieked the three librarians at once, tones high to low combining to form a strident chord.

Each stared toward the sky beyond the ceiling and moaned.

“James Raleigh of Haddonfield broke my heart,” Clotha cried.

“He endangered my soul,” Lachena moaned.

“He abused his library privileges,” Astra lamented.

Their voices seemed hardly human, their gazes lifeless, like nubs of coal. Each having said her
piece, they settled into a low growl, rocking back and forth in their seats. The twins growled along with
the librarians, but in a halting manner. Salome shivered and drew Zeb’s chair closer to hers. She looked
over at her mother, feeling scared but triumphant. Now Mary couldn’t deny that she’d fallen in with the
wrong crowd.

Mary had furrowed her brow. “This isn’t James, ladies. This is Zebedee, our ancestor from
England.” Then, she lowered her voice, as adults do when children are present. “The product you sent.”

“Ahhhhh. Fataaaaaaaa Morganaaaaaa,” the librarians proclaimed. The insides of their mouths
were black.

“You sent it?” Salome felt betrayed. She drew her hand away from Zeb’s, repelled by the thought
that these disgusting librarians had concocted his body from who knew what ingredients.

The librarians cackled.
Salome felt as though she’d been playing with a poisoned doll. She glanced to her right, fearing what she might now see in the man she’d adopted as her father. She saw an asymmetrical face, singed whiskers, inquisitive expression—the same innocent being she’d spent the evening with. Surely, the librarians lied.

Drawing her head left to right and shrugging her shoulders in syncopated rhythm, Salome launched, still seated, into the first step of the Quantum Slide. She twitched her eyebrows significantly at Zeb, who was screwing up his mouth, as if trying to place her.

“Please forgive Salome,” Mary said. “She’s acting out of character.”

“Charac.”

“Care.”

“Or perhaps,” Lachena began. “Perhaps, perhaps,” her co-librarians hissed in echo. “Perhaps she is acting purrrrrr-fectly in character. She stewed her brains tonight.”

“What?” Mary’s voice was scandalized, hurt. “You haven’t been drinking, have you?”

Salome wanted desperately to reassure Mary of her loyalty. But she was still trying to secure Zeb’s concentration. His pupils had begun to drift in separate directions, and he intermittently jerked, as with hiccups. The wild stimuli must have been distracting. “Dad,” she hissed. “Pay attention.”

At last he seemed to come to and notice Salome’s exaggerated head movements.

“This coven seeks,” he said, “to re-mold all women in the image of the mid-twentieth-century’s classic librarian, a knowledge-hoarding harpy and silencer. For shame!” He spoke the words perfectly, though his gestures left something to be desired.

The librarians went silent. They were smiling.

Salome heard gasping and a shuffle. The soft flesh of her mother pressed against her as Mary knelt by Zeb. “James, is it you?” Mary wept thick mascara tears. She laid her head on Zeb’s lap.
Salome hadn’t expected their ruse to be so convincing. It frightened her that Mary would prostrate herself before this illusion she’d created. She caressed her mother’s hair. “Mom, it’s not James exactly. But he can be like James. I thought it would make you happy.”

“It does, it does, honey.”

“I am James, the librarian. I am not an earl.” Zeb stared down at the head in his lap.

Mary gazed up into the face of the creature she believed to be her husband, cheeks glistening in the candlelight. “I’ve been waiting for this day. If I just go back to that library, I thought, I’ll be near him, as close as I can be so many years later.”

These words hurt the selfish child in Salome, who’d thought Mary got the job for her, but she was glad for Mary.

“The stinking library’s where the hussy found him the first place.”

“He knocked her up with his poisoned gism that made a forked babe.”

Furious at the interruption, Salome jerked up her head to address her mother’s accusers. Their chairs were empty. The three librarians stood huddled by the china cabinet. A motley crew of hair shades and heights and clothes, they bent murmuring in their cabal with the same grim purpose.

The ludicrous accusations continued, but from the mouths of the twins.

“Oh good sister, smart sister, college-bound sister, your father left you penniless and took up with our mother,” Miriam said.

“The hussy stole him away from your mother and paid the price. She and James Raleigh both. And the curse greeted us in the womb,” Marian said.

The twins had ripped open their bodices, baring new tits, dark nipples like petals unfolding. The leers on their mouths bore no relation to the attitude of their eyes, which were shut under serene brows.
“Mother! Mother!” they cried in unison. “How could you damn us to a life of fractured echo? We have no souls.”

“Oh darlings,” Mary said, springing to her feet. “It was never my intention. We’ve always taken care of you, Salome and I. But you speak! What are you saying?”

Salome tried to grasp her mother’s hem but Mary ran past and gathered the sleeping twins in a hug. They clawed at her back, their womanly thighs kicking, but soon they fell limp.

“Stand up. It’s time for bed.”

Always docile under Mary’s care, they obeyed and followed her softly, like sleepwalkers, out of the dining room, upstairs. How many times had Salome marveled at Mary’s magic over the twins, their tempers and congenital difficulties? Tears sprang to her eyes as the trio disappeared through the doorway.

***

The witches had returned to the table, though not to their original seats. All three sat opposite Salome and her father like a row of judges. Clotha held a sewing needle, Lachena a skein of yarn, Astra a pair of golden shears.

“This was once our family,” Lachena, the one who was Mary’s age, said. “It was our fate to meet your father at Haddonfield Public Library.”

“We were nubile and attractive then,” Clotha, the youngest, said. “He swept us out of our sensible shoes, so knowledgeable was he about the world beyond our calfskin-bound convent.” She pointed her needle at Salome’s father, who appeared to be sleeping, misshapen head propped against his chest.

“James came from a university, Rutgers, specially trained to locate, catalogue, and store the volumes that had taught us what we knew of life. Our library. He became the master of circulation. King James! One by one, our means of accessing ourselves were replaced. The card catalog. Microfiche and
microfilm. Sometimes the physical volumes themselves. They disappeared. But James taught us to love ourselves in a new way. With computers and online publications accessible to patrons anywhere in the world, patrons who never cast their shadows through our doorway to have a library card printed and laminated. In this manner, he accessed us as well, in ways we’d never known possible.”

“We bore his child,” Lachena said. As she spoke, she unwound the skein of yarn, letting the loose end fall to the floor. “This brought us the greatest value. We became his treasure trove, the possibility of his continuance beyond death. It was you, Salome, who grew in our womb. You were our living book that no one could update. You emerged from our loins dancing, delivered among the stacks, our helpful assistants marking pages in reference books. Your golden hair trailed you as you shuffled down the aisle. The Charleston, the twist, the caveman’s romp and gypsy’s reel, you knew them all. King James admired the spectacle from afar, through a gap in the cookbooks. And on his arm, who did we laboring mothers see but the awful seductress? She was no one but Mary Magruder, our young apprentice, come to steal the master of circulation away!”

“But that can’t be,” Salome said, limbs shaking, heart racing. “My mother only just signed on at the library. She only did it to keep herself occupied. I’m leaving for Swarthmore in the fall, her only . . . responsive daughter.”

“Sweet Salome, that’s where you are wrong,” Astra, the poodle-haired crone, said. She plucked from Lachena’s fingers the end of yarn closest the skein and snipped it with the golden shears. Salome’s father flinched, burped, and settled back into a steady sleep. “Mary knows you are lost to her, a tender shoot moving toward light out of wretched darkness. Your genes seek knowledge. Truly you are your mothers’ daughter, and that of your ignoble father. Mary came to the library so that we might lift our curse on her two-headed spawn that share a tongue. She was wise enough to know that, when you betrayed her for the halls of higher learning, she would have lost everything.”
Salome stood at the table. She tossed a bunch of grapes at Astra. “I would never betray my mother.”

Astra caught the grapes in her mouth and mauled them, stems included, between jagged teeth. “You betrayed all your mothers, blood and surrogate. The day after your father fell in the line of duty, you slipped from the library, leaving us not so much as a note or trail of index cards. You sneaked off to live with your father’s seductress. At first we thought our three-year-old prodigy had gone to exact revenge on Mary Magruder for betraying Womankind, to become a golden asp in her bosom. We closed the library for days, reveled among the basement volumes, those our former master of circulation had held in reserve—Simone de Beauvoir, Gloria Steinem, Mary Wollstonecraft. We waited for you to return, carrying Mary’s head in a satchel. But you did not. Instead you helped her raise the cursed spawn, worked behind the scenes to groom the seductress into a model single mother. We watched it all unfold in the pencil sharpener’s globe. Not until many years later did your true colors show. When she needed you most, as her monstrous twins entered puberty, you planned to strike out on your own like a boy. When she came to us, we couldn’t believe it, it had been so long, even for librarians. We’d adjusted to life in the modern world, made of Haddonfield Public a fortress against those who would access women, read their viscera. We forgave her like a sister, made a pact.”

The witches groaned and swooped up into the air, where they circled overhead, creating a giant windstorm. A platter of salmon fell from the table. A wheel of cheese rolled into the corner. They shouted in one voice that was channeled down to Salome’s ear as if through a funnel cloud.

“If she would change her past,” they chanted, “preventing the seduction, we would remove the curse on her brood. Reason stunted by hope, she failed to realize that changing her past would obliterate her seed, that she and the twins would crumble to dust around our treacherous Salome’s skirts.” The witches spun faster and faster, until they looked like a cloud of ink floating in the air. Their voice shrunk to that of a wasp. “And we in our need for revenge, little did we count on a further
betrayal from our golden child, that you would disobey your false mother and the book of Fata Morgana, raising King James from the dead!”

With that, the ringed cloud of witches dispersed, leaving the odor of a page hot off the press. Salome sank to the floor. The dining room was a mess. Shirley Temple’s blood dripped from the walls. Melons and overturned spreads, baguettes, cuts of meat, soufflés carpeted the floor. The carving knife shivered in one seatback. Zeb was nowhere to be seen. Salome ran to the open window, where the curtain had been flung up on the rod. She peered out into the night, only realizing now that she’d never seen the librarians’ car. There sat the Dodge Dakota, blocking the entrance of the driveway, where she’d drunkenly parked it. There was the row of pines, Mary’s herb garden, the twins’ sandbox, everything undisturbed.

She turned from the window when a door opened. Mary, black tears lining her cheeks, stood in the room. This was the woman Salome had always taken for her mother, whom she’d chosen in a time unrecorded in her personal chronicles. From now on, Salome would wonder about the imperfection of memory, the imperfection of humankind it suggests. She’d come to believe that we are what we remember of ourselves, and what others remember. And that sometimes there is a cancelling out.

She and Mary moved toward each other at the same time, stumbling on plates, slipping on sauce. Salome fell once, twice. The second time, she came nose to nose with Zeb, a stern expression from long ago etched on his features. It was Zeb’s head, broken off at the joint they’d baked shut the night before. Under her, crosswise, lay his body, which she’d tripped over, separate limbs held together by his Renaissance garb. “Are you okay, dear?” the woman who was her mother asked as she hurried over. Was she okay? Upset? She didn’t know. She picked up Zeb’s head in order to set it back on his shoulders, perhaps to make the death look more natural. On her knees, she lugged it off the floor. It had grown heavier than the afternoon before, so much heavier that she thought it must be still attached to
the body somehow. It wasn’t. She supported it entirely with her arms. She set one foot on the floor and prepared to stand, but Mary was there before her. Not knowing what else to do, she handed her mother the head.

***

Four months later, in August, Mary helped Salome pack her things for Swarthmore. They worked in Salome’s book-lined bedroom with the antique four-poster bed and the dark oil paintings she’d purchased with her allowance in second-hand stores. Her small group of friends found the décor depressing, stifling. Hannah Bainbridge even refused to sleep in there back in ninth grade, before they stopped having sleepovers. Salome thought back now on those times Mary had touched the severe furniture, the tomes most adults would never read, a worried expression on her face. “You need to get out more,” she said once, “like other girls. You don’t want to wind up an old maid.” Every such remembered comment emerged in a different light now.

Salome still hadn’t repeated for her mother what the librarians had told her. Nor had she revealed that their story had made her a new woman. Maybe Mary could sense the change, but that whole night had been swallowed up between them in silence, like a freak accident witnessed. The twins had regressed to stony silence, near cataleptic state—the way they acted when Salome was younger and hadn’t learned to use her talent for coaxing them from their shells. The more distant the night of the librarians became in Salome’s mind, the dimmer the picture of a mother and daughter burying body parts in an unmarked backyard grave became, the more natural it seemed that they should never speak of it. And the more desperately she wanted to.

“I can defer admission for a year, you know,” she said, taking the dryer-warm blouses Mary had folded and placed on the bed. “Girls do that.”
Mary refolded a pair of jeans so that they looked exactly the same as before. “No, no. I’ll have my hands busy with the twins all the time. We’ll hardly see each other.”

“But that’s what I mean. I can help.” So far Salome had been able to do nothing. She sat up late many nights during the summer, reading the twins fairy tales and newspapers, wearing funny hats and speaking in accents in a futile attempt to make them repeat or even smile. They were like vegetables. Soft stones. Now that she was someone else, the daughter of librarians, it was hard to use her gift as she once had. “I’m good with them. Even Dr. Michaels said so.”

“I know you are, but it’s not your fault.”

“I don’t see what fault has to do with it,” Salome lied. She furrowed her brow, giving Mary an opening to break the silence and confirm the librarians’ story.

“Of course. I didn’t mean fault exactly.” Mary turned away and opened the closet, which they’d emptied, as if to check for something overlooked. “You’ve already given me more than you know. That’s how a mother feels about her child. At some point the mother must give the child to itself.”

Salome put her hands on her mother’s shoulders. They were warm with cool patches, bony. Unlike Zeb’s or the twins’. Unlike any shoulders Salome knew, they felt like flesh should—put-upon, strangely designed with soft on the outside. Yet resilient. “I understand, Mom. We’re like two ships destined for different lands, passing in the night, keeping each other company on the vast sea.”

***

Salome faithfully lived the last lie she ever told Mary. She was her daughter until the day she died and her story became public domain.

At Swarthmore, different professors encouraged her to pursue different disciplines. For professors, she learned, dilligent and talented students following in their footsteps is a validation of their role in the system called Education. And really, in college she felt she could become anyone, that she was a block
of sentient clay privileged with the choice of which hands might mold her. Often in her first year, she spent the weekend chewing over the tasty choice with Mary. Haddonfield was, after all, only a half hour from a Swarthmore.

She considered literature, history, and writing, subjects she’d excelled in during high school. Engineering and computer science presented themselves as options that were sure to produce even more options later, but they seemed somehow distasteful to her. In the end she chose dance. Though she never displayed the talent the librarians had reputed of their three-year-old prodigy, she felt at home in movement, gesture, in the way a body be about nothing but itself.
HEAD GAME

Because we hate each other, the fam plays a game whenever I go home on holidays. My little brother calls it murderball. “It’s not the real murderball,” my geography-freak sister whined one Thanksgiving. “Murderball is the original name for Canadian wheelchair rugby.” Sister’s smart, but she mainly uses her dome to be annoying. “I’ll put you in a wheelchair,” Mom said, and slapped her. She cried. Dad laughed. That’s how we are.

We play this game in the living room with my grandfather’s head as the ball. That was Mom's idea. It’s not his real head—Mom makes a new one each year out of papier-mâché and rocks because he's the reason we hate each other. He named her Dudie, which caused her to have a lame childhood. Before she got old enough to change it, my grandfather's real head was stolen by somebody who hated him. So many people hated Shithook, as Mom calls him, that we never found the head or who took it. The police didn't even care because they hated my grandfather too. “Here's one case,” they said, “we can sweep under the rug.” Shithook being murdered meant Mom couldn’t get revenge on him, so she gave her male spawn, as she calls me and my brother, the name Dudie. My brother's still too young to do anything legal about his. I changed mine last year, and Mom despises me for it.

My new name is Tommy, and I’m happy at college. I come home on holidays for two reasons. One, all my friends split, so it’s boring to stay. Two, the fam hates it when I come home. “You think you’re doing us a favor by visiting?” Dad yells the second I walk in. “Like we don’t have enough problems as it is.” He has no real problems, and he thinks a father should—stock market crashes, gangs trying to recruit his sons, scabies on his eye. He doesn’t, and we know it. And he knows we know it. So he hates us.

Playing a holiday game was Sister’s idea. We hate her so much she doesn’t even have a name. We
hate her because she wants us to love each other: “The holidays are for coming together, people of all faiths, races, genders, sexual orientations, diets . . . .” There she always trails off, like she doesn't even know what she's talking about. The rules she made up for the game are that when you hit somebody with the ball, you have to say something nice to that person. We agree to play because we like to throw Shithook's head. Also, saying nice things is exciting because we all hate to be lied to. “When you don't mean it, you cancel out the game's whole point,” Sister complains each year. She plays anyway—blinded by her principles.

This Thanksgiving, I lose. You lose if you’ve said the fewest nice things by the time my grandfather’s head falls apart. Mom sucks at crafts, so that never takes long. I didn’t hit anybody tonight because my hand's been shaky with anger all day. Every time I come home it's worse. The shaking. The rage. Mom wins every game. She has the most hate and the strongest arm. “I love you all,” I say while Sister cleans up the dust and rocks and all the other wreckage our game has created. “That's out of line,” Mom says. I go into the front yard to smoke. Dad hates to see a young man like me make my body sick. That was one of the nice things he said to me tonight, right after beaning me so hard I tipped over his idiotic sculpture of primitive people screwing. He almost cried and so didn't get full satisfaction from his lie about my health.

Tonight is pleasant, a balmy breeze carrying wood smoke. The shittiest places to live always have the best weather. After lighting up a Newport, I pace by the garden, kicking over Mom's trellises. I stuff a few into a bush, where I discover the neighbor’s head. It’s his real head. His wife must’ve finally cut it off. I smoke a few more cigs, grinding out the butts against the new paint job on Dad's shed. Sister and Dudie don't have anything out here, so I figure I'll deal with them later. I retrieve the head, which is tricky because our neighbor was bald, so there's no hair to grab. I cradle it like a melon and waddle into the living room. I heave it at Mom. The impact knocks her silly and makes her mad because the game
is supposed to be officially over. Also, she hates our neighbor and doesn’t want his head touching her. I use her favorite throw pillow to dab at the blood on my shirt and try to think of something nice to say. It should be easy since Mom’s such a horrible person—any compliment would be a lie—but nothing comes to me. Instead I start feeling rotten for hitting her. This hasn't happened before.

“Follow the rules, curse of my loins,” Mom slurs, woozy from the blow. “Cheater.” She's not comfortable with me not saying something nice after knocking her silly, but for whatever reason I can't bring myself to add insult to injury. In her typical way of taking out her wrath on somebody who didn't do anything, she takes a potshot at Dudie. The head hits him in the head, and he falls unconscious. Laughter is my knee jerk reaction, but the laughter feels hollow. Sister, whom we hate because she not only states but acts on her principles, calls the police. I feel a flicker of hate return. But it's brief, only as long as a phone call. “Yes,” she says, “they're throwing a human head at each other.”

I don’t know how long it takes the slow-ass police to arrive because I’m watching Mom cry. I can't help it. She never cries, unless it's out of frustration or fury. Normally, she tears apart or sets fire to our personal belongings while she cries. This time she's got sleeping Dudie's head in her lap and wipes away her tears as they splatter his eyelids. It’s all my fault, I think. I’m the one who brought in the real head and screwed up the vibe we're all comfortable with. I actually think that. I can't take a mournful atmosphere any longer. “You're a good mother,” I say. Dad and Sister laugh. They look happy—Sister because I've said something nice that she probably believes I mean, given Mom's abnormal behavior, and Dad because he's got a real problem now. “I'm glad you called the police,” I tell Sister. “It makes me happy when you do the right thing. I think I'll call you Sally.” She cries. I've never said anything nice to her that I meant. And I never will. She knows it. I know it. But as she cries, my remorse only grows. She looks like one of the Bosnian refugees she's always reading about, and I want to give her an emergency ration.
The police officer comes inside without knocking, pistol drawn. When he finds us all sitting around, acting glum, he puts the gun away. After some figuring, he arrests me and Mom because we're the ones with the blood on us who aren't unconscious. He reads us the Miranda Rights. “They only do that on TV to make justice look real,” I say. “That's not true,” he says. “I knew it,” Sister says, beaming. She wants to believe in justice. I start to hate the police officer, but it doesn't help too much because he's not one of the fam. He stashes us in the back of the cruiser, which smells like piss, and blabs away for a while on the radio. “Two suspects, blah blah blah. Decapitated head of neighbor, blah blah blah. Send crew, blah blah blah.” A college junior could do his job.

Dad run-walks up to the window. Tears stream down his face. “You too?” I mouth through the glass. He ignores me like usual. “Where are you taking them?” he demands of the officer. “That’s my wife and son.” The officer finishes up blabbing and rolls down the window. He probably thinks Dad's a concerned dad. He doesn't have blood on him. “Don't worry, sir. They'll be okay.” “When will they come back?” “That I don't know.” I bet the real reason Dad's happiness has shrunk up is that now no one will be around to see him have a real problem—me and Mom being in jail, Dudie unconscious. Nobody except Sister, and that’s no good because she’s the one who gave him the real problem, and he wanted to get the real problem on his own. I try to get one last jab in. “Sorry I won't graduate college,” I say. He gives a rueful smile, backs away. Nothing's working.

Mom's weeping with energy now. “I feel horrible doing this to a family,” the officer says as he pulls out of the driveway. “You just can't go messing with state's evidence.” Neighbors stand on their doorsteps, watching the police car. “Fuck you,” Mom says. “Ma'am?” the officer says. “I figure we have dibs on this head since your incompetent office couldn't find Shithook's.” That shuts him up. Where has my hate gone? Am I not my mother's son? To get my mind off kind of admiring Mom, I think about jail. I learned last semester in criminology that cons in the calaboose hate each other in a
more real way than we students can understand. Going home for the holidays, Dr. Thatcher claimed, isn't even close. At the time, I was jealous. “I don't want to go to jail,” I tell Mom because I guess I don't. Also, I figure that acting like a child will make the jailers and cons nice to us. “Think next time before you pick up a body part you find,” the officer says. Mom scoots across the seat and presses against me. When she does this, it means—well, I don't know. She rarely touches me except to punish. She's distant, nasty, and shrill. The very center of our family's hate. At jail they'll probably separate us and lock us with the bad people of our respective sexes. “Don't worry, Tommy,” she says. “Mommy's here.” I kind of love and need her fiercely for a lame second. I'd push her away if it weren't for the handcuffs.
Eighteen-year-old Tiffany followed her putrid husband down the path through the woods. Home from the power plant, he’d put on his tunneling outfit—a flabby suit of once-nice fabric; the shoes of a giant, stuffed with extra socks; and a porkpie hat with a mustard stain on the crown he couldn’t scrub out. Every last filthy inch of it had been salvaged from the pile.

“I won’t hear you flap your mouth about reporters,” he said over his shoulder, scuttling down the steep trail. When angry, he scolded her as if she were his own child, which, agewise, she could’ve been.

“I’m talking about Mr. Newhouse, not the media,” Tiffany said. Her husband had been refusing the idea of WLOS coming to view the pile for so long—three years now—that he apparently hadn’t registered her new angle.

Trent stopped and tugged up on the oversized hat, revealing a dirty forehead. “There ain’t no Mr. Newhouse. That’s just God’s pseudonym for fools.”

“Why would God use a pseudonym unless he were ashamed of the dump?”

Trent dropped the hat back down over his ears and walked on, as if her slip of the tongue betrayed a fallacy in her argument. Subject closed. “It ain’t a dump. The cornucopia will sustain us till the end of days.” He acted almost as proud of that ten-dollar word as he was of the enormous self-generating trash pile it referred to. He quickened his pace down the slope so that it was hard for Tiffany to keep pace and raise again the specter of Mr. Newhouse.

When she emerged from under the canopy at the base of the pile, the sight of its parti-colored peak, swarming with mountain seagulls, struck the same emotional chord it had since she was fifteen and a newlywed. It thrilled her, as any marvel of nature would, yet with its daily growth—every candy wrapper, chicken bone, and crushed can—so grew her despondency. She watched as Trent, without
slackening his pace, began his ascent to the north-facing tunnel.

“Selfish fucker.”

It was just like him to doubt Mr. Newhouse’s existence. They’d been married and moved into his fancy shack six months before he even showed her the trash pile in the valley that, she then learned, had supplied most of the shack’s nice furnishings. Big deal, she’d said. A dump. This goaded him into unveiling the pile’s “divine” source. That’s when she started in about WLOS coming in so she and Trent could maybe make something off this discovery. She could already see the headline in The Asheville Times: MYSTERIOUS ILLEGAL DUMP, MAINTAINED BY AIRPLANE. Of course, she’d never seen an airplane dropping garbage, but it was the only logical explanation. Trent would have none of it—neither logic nor profit. The cornucopia was God’s work, bequeathed to the Curtis clan, who had been chosen as its stewards.

She spent the next two and a half years hoping he’d grow tired of the dump, weary of furnishing their lives with cast-off, albeit expensive, material. Turning her attention to her studies, she finished up high school. Now, the summer of her graduation, she’d grown restless again. A diploma wasn’t even necessary for the jobs she could get around here. Why don’t we sell this land to National Geographic, or maybe get a lawsuit going? We could move to a city, even if it’s just Asheville, and you could start trucking again.

Trent called her a blasphemer for thinking of suing God.

It was only last week that she’d thought of investigating the pile’s contents, doing some detective work. Why hadn’t she thought of this before? Probably, she told herself, because she didn’t relish digging through trash. But it paid off. Mr. Newhouse was born—and promptly ignored by her husband.

As Trent disappeared into the north-facing tunnel, she drew a utility bill from her pocket, the
highest she’d ever seen: $644, with no past-due amount to explain. The customer’s address, like that on all the envelopes, voided checks, business correspondence, and old drivers licenses from the pile, read, *Mr. Braden Newhouse, 1629 North Plainview Street, Charlotte, NC 28201*. By his power bill, he was wealthy. If Mr. Newhouse was having his trash dumped from a private jet into what he *thought* was just woods, more than a hundred miles from his mansion or castle, then he must have something to hide. And a rich man with something to hide would always pay.

***

Braden Newhouse lounged in his immaculate consulting office, loafers up on a desk the size of a banquet table, listening to his client Wyatt Mack tell of another adventure. At fifty, Braden had a lineman’s frame jammed into an Irish linen suit, a business haircut with skin showing around the ears, and hands that appeared laundered, like wedding gloves. His client was a rangy fellow with long, thinning hair cinched in a ponytail, his face bearing various brands of melanoma from a life “prospecting” in the sun. Wyatt’s tale concerned a wild rodeo weekend in Cullowhee.

“I’ll be,” Braden said at the story’s lurid conclusion, which involved Wyatt riding “bareback bronco” on a naked Western North Carolina hussy equipped with nipple pasties. “That sounds like some time, Wyatt.”

“Better believe it. I don’t have anything *but* good times. It’s why I dump my finance on you.” As was his habit after filling his accountant in on the outside world’s interesting happenings, Wyatt stood and strutted out to the elevators, jacket over his shoulder, without saying goodbye.

Braden struggled into his jacket, pocketed the afternoon mail, and locked up before heading to the urinals. He towered above the porcelain, impatient with the delay of flow. He’d spent half his life now advising people on what to do with their money. How much more satisfying it would have been to work as a builder, like Wyatt, constructing edifices that would stand a hundred years. Castles. At last, a
rope of brothy urine. Maybe it wasn’t too late. He could start by turning over a few “fixer-uppers” to amass capital. Then he’d move around Mecklenburg County, “prospecting.” Surely he could wear sun block to avoid the cancer. While his bladder emptied—slower every year, it seemed—he tried to imagine himself crouched in a rickety house, measuring a banister or ripping out copper pipe. What then? He didn’t even own a pair of overalls. His fancy shrunk as drips followed the stream, always one left to stain his briefs.

In the elevator, he kept busy so that he wouldn’t have to speak to the trashy woman who ran people up and down the Gimbal building. She smelled of menthol and bad decisions. He unpocketed the afternoon mail and flipped through the usual until he came across an envelope redolent of a familiar perfume. His heart leapt. Poison, the Dior fragrance his ex-girlfriend wore. In fact, he’d kept a bottle Katie left in his medicine cabinet for two years before finally tossing it. He ripped open the envelope, only to find an unfamiliar name at the letter’s conclusion.

Dear Mr. Newhouse,

I have something very dear to you. Can you guess what it is? It’s in Fist, North Carolina. That’s near Asheville. Your whole life is here. This might sound strange, but everybody loses things, and people find them. Come meet me this Saturday at 9:00 A.M. sharp to find out more. Don’t be late.

Tiffany Curtis

He briefly entertained the fantasy that Katie had been kidnapped, that this was his opportunity to be her rescuer. But the letter had said it was in Fist, not she. Anyway, Braden was the last person Katie would have her kidnappers contact. Last he’d heard of her, she’d married a pharmacist and moved to San Jose. As the elevator filled with his departing building mates, he racked his brain but could remember losing nothing else of importance. Other people’s IRAs, CDs, 401(k)s, there was nothing he could hold in his hand to misplace.
The elevator clanged open, and he shuffled out into the lobby, suspecting—fearing—in his big gut he would do nothing. Mom even lived in Asheville. But what would his clients think if their accountant pursued every ridiculous hoax that came across his desk? He wouldn’t be where he was today if he . . . Braden shut off the sensible narrator that was his most recognizable self. He raised his eyes from the perfumed letter and spotted Wyatt out on the sidewalk, smacking his thigh, no doubt treating the two young attorneys at his side to a dirty joke. Wyatt. The builder. What would Wyatt do?

***

That Saturday, Braden tooled in his Jaguar down main street Fist, following the map “Mrs. Curtis” had scrawled on the back of the letter. He turned down a curvy road that then became a windy road and, eventually, a switchback. On the roadside, two knobby-kneed girls in grimy skirts threw rocks down the bank at a goat. He waggled a few fingers at them and tossed his tie over his shoulder. To them he must seem a prospector of sorts, his sharp eyes out for the perfect pitch of land, clearings suitable for mansions. Business one minute, rodeo the next. He tried to ignore his near-paralyzing fear that he was driving into a trap by munching fruity Rolaids.

Well, Wyatt, I did a little prospecting of my own this past weekend. Nothing much, just following up on a hunch, a mysterious message of sorts. That he would never have made the trip had Mom not lived less than an hour outside Fist would, of course, not enter the conversation. Nor would he point out that summer was an accountant’s easy season, the only reasonable time to undertake such odysseys. The last Rolaids’s powdery fake-grape coated his tongue, insulating his mind from chronic indigestion and fear of new experiences. No big deal. He wadded up the Rolaids wrapper, cracked the window of his climate-controlled force field, and flicked a little pellet of proof into the word. Braden wuz here.

Soon he arrived at a hovel cobbled together with disparate materials. According to the map, this had to be it. Indigestion and despair broke through the chalky coating of his consciousness. The shack
exemplified a den of Appalachian bandits. On the roof, ordinary asphalt shingles alternated with laminated and architectural, all of it likely peeled at night off the homes of Christians. The structure seemed little more than a pile of refuse, coerced by unseen paws into a sinister design. Braden scanned the dirt yard for a place big enough to turn his Jaguar around. A bicycle wheel, spokes impaled by a washboard; a picnic table laden with a feast of paint cans; a lonely hat tree—obstacles crowded every inch. Wyatt always complained about how much crap needed to be cleared away before building began. Braden squinted at the shack for signs of life. You could knock it over with a broom, though he had to admit that the front door, while beat up and painted an inappropriate red, boasted substantial oak panels and period iron fixtures. In fact, he’d replaced such a door in his first house and regretted it ever since.

An angular woman in a patched dress—she could’ve been twenty or fifty—appeared around the side of the hovel and beckoned before he’d even shut off his engine. She looked harmless enough, and definitely not the kind of woman bandits would use for bait. Perhaps he could sift a bit of gold from the gunk. He pulled off into a shallow gulley and rocked out of the Jaguar.

“I’m Braden Newhouse.”

“You’re late. Follow me quick if you want to see it.”

This confirmed his destination, but the lady sounded more like she was talking about a used tractor or a slaughter-time hog item than anything relevant to Braden. The idea that anything here could interest him was frankly offensive. He glanced up and down the road. *Always make sure you buy the cheapest house on the block.* The one or two other “houses” in sight were lowlier than the hovel. One resembled a tepee made of vinyl siding wrapped around a dead tree. Another was more like a burrow, with some scraps to sit on scattered around the edges.

The woman he presumed to be Mrs. Curtis preceded him down a trail into a wooded area out back. The trail descended as they walked, dusting his loafers with the topsoil of Western North Carolina.
These people lived so close to the earth, Braden thought, undifferentiated from plants and animals. Mrs. Curtis, for instance. She slunk like a panther between paper-choked scrub. Her limbs flowed under a garment that might have blended with the wasteland if she stood still long enough. Bed sheets, curtains, and other dresses knit together into a humanoid shape with dental floss and puppy dog tails, wishbone for a needle. The silent foliage around him suggested the animals had been cannibalized or simply refused to live here. He smelled a growing stench through the trees.

They emerged from under the canopy into a clearing that swept up into the largest pile of garbage he’d ever seen. Five stories high, the multicolored mountain formed a perfect cone, snow-capped in the colors of Coca-Cola cans. Something was fundamentally horrifying about the sight, disgusting and familiar. Braden stood slack-jawed. He could use a Coke.

“Recognize it?” Mrs. Curtis’s premature wrinkles bent into a grin. “Take a look around.”

He did recognize it, but not in the way you spot something you’ve lost. It was more like the way you recognize death. Yet he saw nothing threatening along the periphery—toilet paper roll, ketchup packet, calculator, ripped underwear, drinking straw, receipt, glove, stained coffee filter, water-logged newspaper, dog leash, tissue.

“It’s trash,” he said.

“How about those? See the shiny object next to the plunger?” Like a magpie, his hostess identified what he had missed. Keys. Tiptoeing in his Italian loafers to avoid rotted food scraps, Braden plucked the keys from their fast-food-container cradle. Office, car, house, safety deposit, P.O. box, Food Lion saver’s cards, unused ID from Tom Buff’s gym. His lost keys from February that had been such a pain to replace. This had to be some sort of joke. Holding the keys by their ring, like a rat by its tail, he couldn’t decide whether to be more annoyed that what he’d lost turned out to be set of keys or more amazed that the keys had wound up here, two miles outside Bumfuck, Egypt.
Mrs. Curtis wasn’t finished. “And there, the album beside the Fritos bag?”

He uncovered a warped record, Aerosmith’s Permanent Vacation. The scrawled signature on the label was an early, unbalanced version of his own. He hadn’t owned albums since the late seventies, drove the whole collection to the dump (a different dump) right after college. That was thirty years ago. He felt just then that the ground itself wanted him to sit. He stumbled over to a scuffed Naugahyde recliner he recognized from the house on Malbourne Circle. The keys dug into his fingers; the album bent under his arm. Seated he closed his eyes, palmed his skull.

“Mrs., uh, Mrs. . . .”

“This mountain is yours. Call me Tiffany.”

That these objects from distinct epochs of his life were taking their eternal rests together made no sense. Landfills get smoothed over, converted to golf courses. New ones open. He gazed up at the specter who’d led him here. Her brownish-blondish hair had a bounce he hadn’t noted before, the kind you can’t get from shampooing with lard and rusty water. Her fingernails were painted that eggplant color Katie loved. But she wasn’t Katie, nor anyone else he’d known.

It had to be a dream.

The specter looked at her man’s watch. “In a few minutes you’ll remember how it got here.”

And if it were a dream, then this feminine projection from his subconscious was toying with him. Hadn’t he suffered enough of that from Katie? He rustled up some anger.

“Tell me how you got my trash, or I’ll call the police. Stealing my garbage.” He snapped the record in half over his knee, right through Aerosmith’s yellow-winged insignia. He’d thrown the album out for a reason. He broke each half into two new halves, and so on until the shards were too small to be further demolished. He stood to leave but noticed the way the projection kept looking into the sky.

“Please.” She glanced at her man’s watch again, the way a hungry dog watches its food dish. “Two
minutes now.”

Her agitation showed him he’d gained control of the situation. Mind control. Maybe he had more in common with Wyatt than he knew. He sat down again, dropping his keys into a pocket.

***

Tiffany had considered the various ways Mr. Newhouse might respond to being confronted with his trash. If he were like some men, he might deny it was his—the way her scoundrel of a father had said he didn’t recognize the pantyhose Mama found under the bed. If he were like other men, he might give thanks and climb the mountain in search of something long lost. Being accused of theft, however, she hadn’t expected.

At 9:13 on the nose, she pointed to the sky. Half a dozen cardboard boxes, spilling books; two bookshelves; a few shirts; and sheaves upon sheaves of paper fell from the heavens and onto the top of the mountain. Like usual, the private jet flew too high up to be seen or heard.

Mr. Newhouse jumped up and down, leaving himself out of breath and red-faced. “Did you see that?” He pointed to the summit. “Did you fucking see that? That was Mom’s stuff.”

Tiffany edged away from him. Though dressed in the swankiest clothes, he looked clumsy, the kind of guy who might sit on a poodle dog. “Your mom’s stuff?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I cleared out part of her attic last night. I’m staying with her over in Asheville. I threw out that stuff exactly. Books! Shirts! My term papers from college.” Sweat made half-moons of his armpits. He struggled out of his expensive jacket and tossed it to the ground. One day, she thought, Trent will wear that.

“Please calm down, sir. This happens every day.”

“We’ve got to do something about this.” Mr. Newhouse’s wild gray eyes scanned the woods, as if to find a hiding place. Could it be that this man’s leftovers were being carted off without his knowledge,
loaded into a jet plane and dumped? “Why did you invite me here? By God, why would you show me something so horrible?” He lumbered close to her, his nose releasing a drop of sweat onto her blouse.

“For a chance,” she uttered, not knowing what else to say but the truth. Because the wilder he got, the wilder her idea about the plane seemed.

He glared at her, ignoring a fly that landed and re-landed on his ear. “A chance?”

“And all I want,” she said, “is enough money to relocate. If you could help me get a start, no one will ever know of your litter.”

His stunned expression gathered a point of focus, as if he’d just remembered something that explained it all. He took a few balanced steps backward, now as agile as an acrobat on a wire. He picked up his coat, dusted it off, and slung it, waiter-style, over his arm. “Are you accusing me, Tiffany, of littering?” When he said her name, he made air quotes with his fingers. He wagged his hand behind him at the mountain. “What makes you think I put that there?”

Maybe she couldn’t prove that he’d put the pile here, with the airplane being so high up. She could prove that it was his. And that constituted littering.

Then she had a better thought. “Think of it, sir. Everyone’s done something they regret. Not telling what my husband could uncover in that mountain.” She hadn’t intended to mention Trent, but he lent her threat legitimacy somehow. She imagined dirty photographs and lovers’ panties heaped up in Trent’s treasure closet.

“Your husband?” Mr. Newhouse scrutinized her features, shook his head. “Dreams don’t have husbands. Anyway, if I want something out of there, who says I can’t just go get it?”

“Because it’s Trent’s. He’s spent years tunneling.”

This quieted Mr. Newhouse, and he turned to look at the mountain. From where they stood, the north tunnel was clearly visible. His expression sobered, a general noticing for the first time the
advance of a huge army.

“Mr. Newhouse?”

He removed a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his jowls. “I wish that I could help you, but I’ve never done anything I’d need to conceal. Dig to your heart’s content.”

Without glancing back at her, he started a huffing ascent along the trail. His agility of moments before had vanished, and he stumbled a few times, dislodging rocks to set them rolling back toward her. Tiffany knew he’d never return. When at last he passed from sight, the stench descended on her, bluing her lungs, singing her capillaries. She wanted at that moment to die and be buried beneath it all.

***

That evening, Braden’s mother fried pork chops, mashed red-skin potatoes, and opened a can of green beans. He drank three Cokes.

“Did you have any luck with your client out in Fist?” she asked. Her fat face and orthopedic shoes went a long way toward correcting his harrowing experience of the afternoon. She moved around the table, pouring him more Coke, fetching napkins. She never ate with him when he visited, because she snacked throughout the day. Instead, she asked questions.

“No, not too much luck. The woman turned out to be a loony, told me a crazy story. I spend half my life listening to crazy stories.” He remembered some of Wyatt’s—hitchhiking to Denver with a convict and then selling him a condo; bulldozing a duplex to find an actual Indian burial ground under the foundation, suing the developer; quelling a house fire with a garden hose and bag of road salt. They all ended in glory. They were all true.

“You’re such a good listener.” His mother lowered herself onto the edge of a chair, as if she couldn’t bear to stand and hear him complain.

“Sure I am, but people, they just aren’t that interesting so much of the time. I mean, what have I
done in my life that would be worth talking someone’s ear off?"

She handed him a new napkin, her brow furrowed. “You’ve had a very successful career. I’m sure you’ve plenty of stories to tell if you wanted.” She watched him eat, making quiet circles with her index finger on the dark fabric of her turtleneck.

“Come on, Ma, I’m just joking around. Don’t worry your head over it.”

After she’d retired to her room for her typical three hours of sleep, followed by tidying up the house, Braden gazed at the television in his boyhood room and ate pistachios. Between his knees he held a small wastebasket into which he dropped each pair of shells after munching the nut. Every once in a while, he’d glance down from the AMC program to make sure the shells hadn’t disappeared. The shells were always there, dyed a washed-out red, spent.

He had to face it. If he’d dreamed his encounter that afternoon with Tiffany, then he was still dreaming—the drive home, dinner, talk with Mom. But he never dreamed anything worth repeating. Drooling over a billboard that promised low interest rates, forgetting to charge his cell phone. Those were his dreams—short and boring, financially motivated. Everything he threw away falling out of the sky over Western North Carolina? This sounded more like a textbook case. Tiffany would represent Katie, and her absent husband would be the pharmacist. That made Fist symbolic of San Jose, the hovel a seaside villa. Absurd. Anyway, Braden knew you weren’t supposed to analyze a dream while you dreamed it.

But believing he was dreaming beat the alternative. He just had to be careful not to believe too much. Like when the contents of Mom’s attic dropped from the sky and made that distant tumble, like a sloughing of dead skin. And those tunnels! He never expected to dreamed up a detail like that. It was like grabbing an apple and spotting worm holes in the back of his hand. Not until the projection who called herself Tiffany tried to blackmail him was he reassured he was standing in his own nightmare.
She was no more than a poorly disguised desire. Sure he still pined for Katie as any bachelor of fifty might. Lesson learned. Tonight he would sleep, or dream that he slept, and in the morning wake to find that he’d chickened out and stayed in Charlotte after all. As penance, he’d start dating again, maybe invest in the city’s recycling initiative.

He cackled as he watched Jimmy Stewart on mute. This was one way to save on home video fees. Strapped into his wheelchair, the actor gazed through his binoculars at the window opposite his apartment. Pitiful. Braden tried to ignore the implications. He balled up the empty pistachio bag and stuffed it into the wastebasket.

***

Trent dragged his feet leaving for work the next morning. The usual. Tiffany stayed in bed, feeling she couldn’t bear to witness it. He went less and less often these days, and she knew that if Mr. Dunkirk at the power plant could find another body to fill Trent’s spot, her husband would be out of a job in an instant. Anymore he spent twelve hours a day digging and maintaining the trash tunnels. She had only glanced inside the mountain once, a week ago as she combed the pile for evidence. She marveled at the tunnel’s construction, a cylindrical throat swallowing light. It amazed her that Trent, who could scarcely make enough to keep them in Bunny Bread and Treat—food was one necessity they couldn’t gather from the pile—had managed such a feat of engineering. Every evening, while he scrubbed his treasure of the day in the kitchen sink, he related in precise detail for Tiffany his day’s progress downward—he used words like torque, suspension, and displacement to describe the tunneling architecture. At night she’d seen light coming out of the mountain. He’d dragged metal staves, timber, and fencing rolls down the woodland trail on multiple occasions. He was as doubtlessly the author of the tunnel as Mr. Newhouse was the creator of the mountain.

And he was no longer the man she’d married. That summer after freshman year, the hottest and
driest of her youth, she’d walked up and down Web Cove Road while her parents bickered. She wore her pink Mary Janes and a short polka dot skirt turned under like the out-of-fashion page boy her mom cut for her. Days on end she traipsed past the shacks of the hollow—the Robinsons’, the Tudors’, old Mr. Curtis’—thinking that she’d rather live in any of them than continue in the actual house her parents owned, where she had her own bedroom, indoor plumbing, magazine pages to turn. Dad’s sneaking and Mom’s dull detective work spoiled it all, like rancid meat stink penetrates the Borden carton. She knew other neighborhoods existed, places with lawns, sprinklers, shady trees, and those secret windows that popped out of the roof, but she never expected to walk through one, much less live there. A peaceful shack would be enough, even if she had to take care of a harebrained neighbor or two, toss millet out for the chickens, milk the goat.

Such were her thoughts as she marched through the summer on the dirt road, a penniless girl window shopping. Then one day something winked through the trees, metal or glass. She rounded the bend to find a purple Mack truck with a silver trailer stretching all the way to the next turn in the road. Its lights blazed, the headlamps and fog lights and even the little orange ones between the horns on the roofline. The double antennas wobbled, as if the truck had just come plowing into the hollow from God knows where, and taken out old Mr. Curtis’s shack. Not until she crept along the side and peeked between the massive wheels was she sure the shack still stood, if standing was what you could call it.

“Hey, missy. Mind helping me load up some of this junk? I just come from California.”

A handsome face peered around the end of the trailer. A hatchet nose cut down from a full head of salt-and-pepper hair. When the man stepped out to shake her hand, the buttons on his overalls sparkled like the gold coins she thought they used as currency out on the Pacific.

“Name’s Trent Curtis, but you can call me Trent. The old man finally bought the farm, and here I am cleaning up. That’s what we do with parents, huh? Clean up after.” Though she regretted now not
scolding him for talking that way about his late father, at the time the rebellion delighted her. “I might even stay a while. Nothing so peaceful as all this in Barstow, or Flagstaff, or the Duke City, or Amarillo, or OKC, or Conway, or M-Town, or Music City, or Knoxville, or Asheville!” With the name of each town—some she recognized, some sounding made-up—the stranger took a step closer, the wintergreen scent of his bubblegum wafting over her, until they were nose to nose. “Especially with a beauty like you around to keep me company.”

That was then, before her future husband had discovered the “cornucopia” and sold his truck to fund his mining operation—back when a pretty girl and a wide open road and eating with a fresh napkin tucked into his collar meant something to him. Nothing about the man she heard shuffling around in the pantry for work clothes the morning after Mr. Newhouse’s visit reminded her of the worldly-wise trucker she married. She pressed a pillow over her head. Decades of guarding the treasure had gnarled Trent’s joints and sharpened his features into a lizard’s. His skin stank of waste.

When at last the front door banged shut, Tiffany got out of bed and put on a hand-stitched robe—unlike Trent, she wouldn’t wear trash—and moved to sit in the quiet of their cluttered living room. The couch beneath her smelled of a dog they never owned. A cradle filled with odds and ends blocked half the window’s light. Trent’s prized globe with a dented Australia served as the room’s centerpiece. The pleasing thought of burning their junk-museum to the ground came to her for a minute before she reluctantly discarded it. Her only choice now was to descend into the trash tunnels and find something to blackmail stubborn Mr. Newhouse with, yet the thought of spelunking through Trent’s labyrinth unsettled her. It would be like double-trespassing, once into the past of a stranger and again into her husband’s realm. The room pressed in around her, and suddenly she had to flee into the open air.

Flinging open the door, she ran straight into a soft chest. The bulk bounced her back into the room so that she had to sit on the coffee table, upsetting the globe. Mr. Newhouse’s wide face in the doorway
was pale. Its translucent puffiness was that of a salamander’s.

“I want you to take me into the mountain,” he said. “I’ll pay you.”

“Of course.” Picking up the globe, she shook with excitement. She glanced down at the pinks and browns of Kuala Lampur, Papua New Guinea. What were these places? Instead of setting the oceans and continents back on the table, she tossed the globe to her visitor, not knowing why.

He caught it in big hands and frowned, as if trying to place it.

“It’s the world,” she said.

“I recognize it.” He tossed the globe back to her and walked off to the left, toward the woodland path.

***

The feminine projection of yesterday led him up the trash-slope toward the tunnel entrance. Halfway there, he wheezed from strain. A tar-like substance streaked his sweatpants hem; some ancient drink sloshed from its souvenir cup into his left sneaker. He’d bought the cheap outfit on his drive over from Asheville with the intention of burning it in Mom’s fireplace that evening.

“Sure you can make it?” the Katie-stand-in asked, grinning back at him. She must get proper exercise in this environment, he thought. Not only was the trash mountainside steep, but walking on its surface was like moving through plastic balls for kids.

“If I don’t, just bury me here in my nightmare.”

She giggled and continued tromping. “You ain’t dreaming, sir.”

“I’ll decide that.” It amazed him how altered the apparition was by his decision to cooperate. She acted nothing like a stubborn symbol of the unconscious. Her wrinkles had absorbed, her gait acquired a lilt. He wondered about the Guinness World Record for longest dream and how it could be verified. The chipped stem of a ceramic apple poked him in the ankle. It hurt.
“We’re going in there?” he asked, joining her at the tunnel opening. Floor to ceiling measured no more than five feet, which would oblige him to waddle the entire journey.

“I expect it opens up.”

“I thought you’d been down before.”

“Sure. Me and Trent. It’s perfectly safe.” She secured a surgical mask over her nose and handed him one. “For the fumes.” Her blue muzzle reminded him of the Twilight Zone episode where all the normal people turn out to have pig faces. She flipped a switch that illuminated light bulbs all the way down the tunnel. “Trent reinforced the walls with rebar and chicken wire.”

“My God.” It was the work of an engineering corps. A whole tide of trash held back by wound metal.

Tiffany entered the tunnel, which appeared a perfect fit for her figure. Attempting his first crouched step behind her, Braden caught his foot on a half-submerged stepladder and tumbled, taking his guide with him, down what felt like three hundred yards of passageway. The racket of their bodies pounding aluminum, plastic, and wire was punctuated by their groans. In the spinning light Braden was most aware of Tiffany’s pointy elbows and knees prodding his soft belly, the odor of Katie’s discarded perfume that clung to her skull. They came to a halt on a platform, their heavy breathing echoing in the cavern around them.

“You oaf.” Her voice swatted, claw tips extended. Her tousled hair resembled a nest in winter—stiff straw disordered and empty, but witness to a life carried on above.

This was no product of his mind but an earth-born person with her own thresholds of civility. She’d crawled, toddled, and now paced these twenty years inside walls, swinging on wires, peering through screw holes and rolling away crumbs; meanwhile, he’d lounged in the den, supped alone in the kitchen, cursed in the bathroom, slept in the bedroom—all the while fearing he appeared as unknowable as the
people he wished would know him: Katie, Wyatt, even Mom. He lacked the imagination to script such an actress as Tiffany for his slumbering psychodrama. Rather, no thanks to him, she knew independently what he could not—she knew him.

“I’m sorry I underestimated you.”

She dusted off her tatters and stood, his apology apparently the least of her concerns. On her face: amazement. The mouths of half a dozen tunnels led off the cavern’s sides. Beside every entrance hung a sign made of lumber, a lid, or some other flat object, bearing a year and arrow pointing up or down. These inner workings of the mountain, imbued by his awakening and by their own resplendence in the jerry-rigged lights, filled with Braden with dreadful curiosity.


“Knew what?”

“Trent believes in you. It’s like his museum.”

Trent. He would be made of flesh too, a scrappy knower of Man. “It’s horrifying,” Braden said. He glanced back up the entrance tunnel. Its raw material had once been castoff vessels, a candy wrapper flicked into a plastic-lined barrel of Reedy Creek Park or a tissue ball secreted between the cushions of a friend’s couch. Now, the vessels, fashioned together by lowly industry, contained him. He would never be able to reach daylight again without assistance. “Maybe we should leave.”

“No!” Tiffany’s voice grew hoarse behind the mask. “I want to see this even if you don’t.”

“What if he comes home?” Home. Here. Trent the recycler. “What if we get lost?”

“Then it’s your own fault. Can’t dispose of your trash like someone decent.”

Now that Tiffany was a real person, he saw he’d have to treat her differently, with the same tact he managed his clients. She would be unreasonable at times. She would have needs that needed negotiation. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”
She moved into the tunnel pointing down to 1976, the year he turned seventeen, and having no alternative, he followed. Though it wasn’t as steep as the first tunnel, he half-scooted this time. Partway, he pulled off his mask to rest and catch his breath, having already adjusted to the nostril-burning stench. He looked around but could tell little about the objects behind the chicken wire. A bunch of trash he didn’t remember: smoke detector, fork, locked Master lock, light bulb filament, snorkel, copy of *Moby Dick*, power cord. That he didn’t remember the objects increased their reality. Of course he wouldn’t remember them. He’d thrown them out in the ‘70s.

Standing up in the next cavern, he noticed that all the next tunnels ascended, to the 1980s, mainly, and one to 1995. “You do realize it’s possible—a strong possibility, Mrs. Curtis—that I alone am not responsible for all this trash? Anyone could have thrown this stuff away.” He said this, but his curiosity had already begun to harden into hope.

Tiffany crouched beside a trap door marked *Sampel, 1976*. His hope grew, piece by piece, falling from an overcast sky. She opened the door and plucked objects from the exposed trash, setting them at Braden’s feet: empty sugar-free TaB bottle, ear muffs, capless marker, Agree shampoo container, tripod, toothbrush. “Tell me these aren’t yours.”

“Could be.”

She submerged her arm to the elbow and pulled out a tambourine. “Recognize this?” He shook his head. “Anyway, these are just random objects, whatever happens to be on top. You shouldn’t remember most of it. I mean, think about it, Mr. Newhouse. Of all the stuff you toss in a regular day, how much of it do you regret?”

“None, unless I throw it out by accident.” That was true. But Braden felt sad. At the very least, he should’ve recognized the tambourine.

“Exactly!” She flung desperate gestures around the cavern, her mask slipped below her nose. “We
won’t miss our trash for years. I used to have a pair of pink shoes that I got rid of after marriage. Seemed too girlish. Not anymore.” The animation he’d noticed an hour before had burned into excitement. She handed him one of the garbage bags she’d jammed the front pouch of her make-shift garment. “Take something.”

He stooped and picked up the tambourine. Several of the jingles had rusted together or fallen off. Shaken, it sounded more like change in someone else’s pocket.

By the time they’d visited a half-dozen years, Braden was soaked. His garbage bag held the tambourine, a soiled backpack, a cheese grater, an intact fishbowl, a light-switch cover plastered with Atom Ant and Secret Squirrel stickers, and the skull of a small animal, perhaps a hamster. Each seemed like the sort of belonging he’d have accumulated at a different point in his life, but the objects themselves rang no bells. He and Tiffany now stood in the lowest level yet, 1961. Two tunnels led back up and three had been started but not completed. The trap door for “sampels” had yet to be constructed for this year.

“Take care you don’t step back.” Tiffany indicated one of the unfinished tunnels behind him.

“Without the steel and wire reinforcement, you’d probably be sucked right down to your infancy. How old were you in ’61?”

“One or two.” Braden thought of diapers, mother’s milk. They were really scraping the bottom now, and his hope of an hour before—an instinct that he’d find his Holy Grail, induced by Tiffany’s pep—weltered. In truth, this trip to Fist had shown he’d done nothing interesting in his life except, perhaps, come on this trip. Another intangible to add to his portfolio of securities.

“What’s the least you’ll take for your troubles?” he asked.

“Least?” The mask cinched her neck, a travesty of jewelry. The shallow pockmark on her cheek, the scar piercing one eyebrow—both took on stage lighting from Trent’s Christmas tree bulbs. She bared
these ravages without shame or cunning, which made them desirable. She became pretty in a way creations couldn’t. “Ain’t you satisfied?” She who’d eked out an existence amidst his fifth had offered him consequence. Yet the offer was only as good as what he’d put in. Nothing of value.

“I can give you money. I’ll even have this dump cleaned up if you want, not that—”

“Shhhhhhhhhhh!” A vein throbbed in Tiffany’s forehead. “Don’t you hear that?”

Standing above her in the rank cavern, Braden felt tainted with dirty sweat. Over his still labored breathing, he heard in the tunnels above them a sound like twenty hammers on tin.

“That’s him running the tunnels,” she said. “If you value your life, you’ll hide in here.” She pointed at a steep tunnel to 1994. “Promise you’ll look to my needs, and I’ll cover for you.”

Now that the distant tapping had been identified as Trent’s footsteps, moving impossibly fast through the passageways, Braden wanted to curl into the size of a marble and hide in one of the cans behind the chicken wire. He imagined a quadruped version of himself, aluminum-can scales, paper hair ablaze, face like a death mask, galloping to meet him here at the Earth’s center. He ducked into the tunnel and climbed several yards before registering Tiffany’s hiss.

“He’s coming.”

Braden halted his scramble, tried to become his breath, his heartbeat. Zen. His feet resting against an iron support, he could still see a great deal of the platform below.

A slender figure flew into the chamber and crouched beside Tiffany. “What you doing? I missed you up at the house.” In aspect, Trent didn’t appear frightening. Of medium build and with intelligent features, he was the sort of guy Braden would trust to mow his lawn, staunch the leak in his commode. It was the way Trent held himself that sent a tremor through Braden’s thick nape. He perched upon the trash, limbs fine-tuned to the pile’s geography. His shoulder blades stretched back like wing nubs and he gazed at the cavern ceiling, as if listening.
“I thought I’d come in here and see what’s so damned special about the place,” Tiffany said. Braden could see her walking back toward the 1982 tunnel. “And, you know what? I didn’t find one thing. I’m going back home.”

“No you don’t.” Her husband sniffed at the air. His nostrils worked like pincers, each flexion separating a thread of invisible scent from the trash bouquet.

Tiffany rapped on a wooden sign. “Yoohoo, Earth to Trent.”

“I smell someone. His sweat crease is strong.”

Braden braced himself against an old headlight, trying not to swoon.

“You’re crazy,” he heard Tiffany say, as if at a great distance. “Trash is turning your brain.” Then silence, a gasp.

Braden lifted his head. Trent’s pointy face peered up the tunnel at him.

“Slide down before I poke you through.” The little man grasped a sharp piece of trash. His stillness was that of a mousetrap.

“Don’t you hurt him,” Tiffany said, grabbing for his shoulders from behind and then falling to the platform when he struck.

“I’m Braden Newhouse.” Never had his name meant more, less. He began to crunch forward but didn’t leave the tunnel until Trent had ceded a few inches. You cannot deny that every move of mine, no matter how trivial, is vital to life as you know it. He stood in the cramped space, and the spear whizzed by his neck, piercing the trashwall. There it went. Death almost. Tiffany screamed and clawed at her husband’s legs. Trent rushed the intruder but tripped on the garbage bag of junk.

An odd energy filled Braden. His waste meant so much to this little man.

Trent squirmed on the ground to right himself, maggots in the dust. Eyes like bottle caps glinted in Braden’s direction. “Using my land for a dump these years and then coming back with a bag. I made
“But I don’t want it,” Braden said. He waved his hand around majestically. “All yours.”

“Let him go, Trent. He’s trying to help us.”

Trent fumbled inside the garbage bag and brought out the fishbowl, lifting it high in both hands.

“What’s this here for if you wasn’t after nothing? You a plain thief.” He gently set down the bowl. This time he got in close enough to pummel the larger man’s stomach and chest.

Braden beat at Trent’s hat with dainty fists. “If you kill me,” he wheezed, “you’ll have no income.”

Like a dog locked in aggression, the little man bit and punched and elbowed. The punches felt good, fists of gold in exchange for a life of inadvertent philanthropy. Then there were two heads and four arms flailing around him. “I won’t let you ruin the rest of my life.” Tiffany’s voice was bare rancor.

“Get off me, twat,” Trent screamed. Braden pushed at their heads, but Trent clung on, and a moment later, the whole mass fell over backward. To Braden’s left there was a metallic flush.

***

Late that night, Tiffany lay spread eagle in the center of her—her—used queen-sized mattress and glanced around her at the hovel’s bare back room. All that had filled every inch of the floor just that morning—broom, shoe hanger, assorted books, guitar stand, spare curtains, space heater, crowbar, turntable, pencil sharpener, microscope, stamp collection, fire ax, carabineer, miniature windmill, lampshade, flywheel, kimono, trash can, file cabinet, cream separator, metronome, curling iron, bowling pin, witch costume—all of this lay heaped in the side-yard, part of Mr. Newhouse’s settlement. Likewise, the front room was barren, save the couch and a lamp. If she were going to live here, which she planned to do while the cornucopia produced, she would have space. Mr. Newhouse had promised to send her five hundred dollars a month and to increase trash production so long as she kept her mouth shut about the accident. He’d left an hour ago, sweating but happy. And that happiness was something
she couldn’t quite figure out. After all, he’d just moved several tons of useless belongings out of a house and agreed to shell out big bucks for an indefinite time period. She didn’t see exactly what he had to be happy about. All she could figure as she lay there was that he was glad to be alive, glad to have escaped those suffocating tunnels.

She scooted to the edge of the mattress and gazed out the dusty window at the small hill of trash in the side yard, shining in the moonlight. How could it be that the pure need to accumulate had taken over her husband so? He’d lived ten years on the road, shipping people’s stuff to California and back, never keeping it. Always delivering. Maybe that was it. He’d gotten tired of moving things but never having them. Or maybe it wasn’t just having the things that mattered. Maybe it was the absolute gift of the pile, falling like manna, that’d got him. If so, it wouldn’t matter to him if the fallen objects were gold or tin, so long as they seemed his entitlement. In the dim moonlight, the objects made his memoriam. Looking at the grotesque hump, rimmed in silver, she knew she’d never fully understand what the trash had done to him, that she could only guess. All she knew was she hadn’t killed Trent. She might have pushed him that last foot or two while Mr. Newhouse fell to the floor, but it was the trash that had taken his life.

***

_Time, Newsweek,_ and papers nationwide carried the story of “The Miracle in the Hollow,” a trash pile created apparently from thin air. Braden had, of course, done his part. The day he returned to Charlotte, he’d begun his career “turning-over” houses for profit. Never one before to rush into things, his hurry was justified in this case. He needed to create more trash, other people’s trash, as quickly as he could in order to hide what he’d done. He’d killed a man. Not many people could say that. Not even Wyatt. More trash. More, more, more! From his calculations, he produced over four tons in the first weeks from the quick purchase and gutting of row houses on the South Carolina border. And according to the
stories he read, the tunnels hadn’t yet been discovered.

His “prospecting” client strolled in one spring morning holding Newsweek’s version of the story, complete with pictures of the pile itself. The cowboy slid the magazine across the desk like a challenge, one more thing to impress his consultant.

“Take a look at that, will you?”

From what Braden could tell by studying the pictures inside, his work had paid off. He’d been keeping away, so as not to raise suspicion. The mountain’s peak and much of its slope had lost the colorful, sparkling appearance of the average individual’s trash and turned the earthy colors of house gutting. Gray, brown, black. These were the new colors of the substantially larger mountain. And from this point on, he could mold that mountain however he wanted, change its color, build it higher and higher until it reached the source, whatever that was. God’s hand? No one would ever know of the man at the bottom. He shut the magazine and slid it back across the desk to Wyatt, who sat nodding.

“Weird, huh?” the cowboy asked.

“It is.” Braden kept a straight face, tried to act in the sedate, professional manner he always did when his client spun miraculous tales.

Wyatt removed his hat to mop his brow, then put it back on and adjusted his bolo tie. He shook his head. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s the damndest thing I’ve ever seen. Want to make a trip down there with me, get out in the fresh air?”

“What?” Braden said, feigning disbelief. “With this mountain of finance you’ve dumped on me, I’ll be at my desk for a week.”

Wyatt cackled, popped on his hat, and strutted out of the room, destined for more adventure.
LE MOT FAUX

Ferguson’s Steps to Word Power, Step One: Accept that your vocabulary is young. Enjoy your word youth.

Elizabeth’s husband struggled with words. She identified the occasional spoonerism (The news came as a blushing crow) and malapropism (It wasn’t the heat but the humility), but more often he used the wrong word in a way not traceable to syllabic reversal or phonetic similarity. As far as she knew, his problem was unclassified.

He’d first approached her in 1999 at an art gallery while she studied an inexplicable conceptual piece composed of gray curves.

“What say you and me matriculate down the street to Chez Leon’s?”

Being a dedicated English teacher and active single, Elizabeth was bothered more by his misuse of matriculate than by his forward manner. But the geometric precision of his jaw and nose added up to honest intentions, and she felt lonely that evening—conceptual art always made her lonely—so she replied, “Matriculate we shall.” If only her students could hear her now!

In addition to liking the stranger’s face, it seemed he was offering her a chance to redeem herself. At forty, she hadn’t been on a date in five years, ever since her affair with local poet Randolph S. From what she could gather, she’d scared him off one night by criticizing a poem for not containing complete thoughts. She couldn’t make him understand how this was different than complete sentences: Fragments were allowed in poetry, just not incomplete thoughts. “You schoolmarms,” he’d said, “are the reason everyone calls poets snobs.” He ripped his manuscript from her hands and huffed out the door, never to return.

She would not be mistaken again for a schoolmarm.

The art gallery stranger, who introduced himself as Cody, made a few more verbal gaffes en route
to Chez Leon’s, but the subsequent drinks seemed to help damper his word abuse—in the same way she spoke better French at her favorite bistro. The restaurant’s greenish atmosphere made his presence feel rich and orchestrated.

“I’m an accountant,” he told her. “For a hospital.”

“A math doctor, huh?”

He frowned. “I suppose that’s a more grammatical way to put it.”

“I didn’t mean that. Your grammar’s fine.” She’d told him her profession, which always made people act self-conscious when they spoke.

He nodded without conviction, which made her want him in a partially sexual, partially predatory way. What had English teachers done to deserve everyone’s passive aggressive hostility? While they picked at appetizers he proceeded to say may instead of can, he or she instead of they, well instead of good. The correct way people speak. She began to drink more. By the time they left for his high-rise apartment, she was slurring. “I’m shorry,” she repeated.

While Randolph S., poet though he was, had only grunted during sex, Cody talked nonstop.

“This feels so ivory fissures,” he proclaimed, his 200 pounds flattening her like a soft iron. “Like my gyroscope is welded to yours.”

“Eshuse me?”

“Expanding. A copulation of stars.”

There among his musky flannel sheets and double-thick pillows, she feared momentarily that she was losing her mind. Or that he was, had. She lay still.

He stopped his thrusting and studied her face, sweat dripping from his forehead onto her nose. “Did I use the wrong word—just now?”

Thank god. Crazy people couldn’t perceive their madness. Ergo, Cody was simply inarticulate. Her
sigh of relief quickly morphed into a gasp of pleasure and a sex-scene cliché. “Pleashe don’t stop.”

She decided in the next day’s lucid, paper-grading light that a little nonsense was actually understandable during sex. If Cody felt the need to verbalize orgasmic bodily sensations, how was he to do so and remain in the realm of common phrases? Maybe he, too, had a poetic mind.

Step Two: Realize that vocabulary reaches deeper than you think. Your understanding of the world is filtered through words.

Cody was the common man’s poet, the anti-Randolph S., Robert Burns of Yonkers. This was the consideration that kept her with him, two weeks later, when it became clear his word problems extended beyond new or nerve-wracking situations, such as flirting, sex, meeting her friends, and talking about emotions.

During Letterman at her modest suburban efficiency, he sustained a fart under her mother’s quilt. The stench was repulsive, but he acted as though he were in the room alone. She watched him dilate his nostrils to enjoy the smell.

“Can’t you at least excuse yourself?”

“I’m sorry, honey.” He chuckled along with the gap-toothed host. “I didn’t mean to offend your intensities.”

If an experimental control situation was ever going to present itself, this was it. His utter relaxation indicated his word problems were unconscious. They had somehow become enmeshed in the fibers of his language system, like viruses. A multi-colored licorice of fear and fascination twined up Elizabeth’s vertebrae—the fear she and Cody were categorically incompatible, the fascination of the linguistic researcher she’d wanted to become.

Dr. L’Heureux of Sarah Lawrence had foreclosed that possibility for her one balmy afternoon in May of 1980. “I will write the recommendation [for graduate school], but I do think your moderate
talents would better serve practical application than an attempt to expand what we know.” From his tight-lipped smile of sympathy, she could tell he thought he was being kind, letting a young soul down easy. She told him not to bother.

*Step Three: Repeat, repeat, repeat.* Like the songs you learned in grade school, saying a word several times a day is an easy way to remember it.

It wasn’t that Cody became nothing but her experiment, she told herself. No more so than any couple constitutes an experiment, a test, a trial run. She began taking secret notes—*affectionate* secret notes—on his rickety constructions, his verbal sinkholes. She proudly compiled a Cody dictionary. Outside of Noam Chomsky, Noah Webster ruled her universe. It turned out Cody’s wrong words were consistent, just as right words are, a sort of shadow-puppet language. *Utilitarian* always meant *blue-collar*, a *free-for-all* was always a *sale*, and he only uttered *mollify* when speaking of wool.

She decided to write a study, though she couldn’t tell Cody without compromising him as a subject. This was her great chance to pursue her undergraduate passion, to make Dr. L’Heureux eat his words. Of course, she wouldn’t have gone forward if she wasn’t learning to love Cody—the way he matched his dirty socks, his obsession with *Consumer Reports* though he never bought *anything*, his dimpled ass.

They married.

At the altar of her Lutheran church, she said, “I do” without guilt or dread. When Cody replied, “I coruscate,” Minister Bourne hurried them along to the kiss. She’d planned for this high-pressure moment in front of their family and friends by warning the minister about Cody’s *poetic mind*. Pressing her lips to his, she imagined them to be two glorious, formerly incomplete halves, finally brought together: female and male, Lutheran and Methodist, subject and predicate.
Step Four: Expect set-backs. Every situation of growth is also a time of loss. Just as old verbal habits fly out the window, so will a few new words. Let them go.

Their married life proceeded with the order of a diagrammed sentence, an accountant’s ledger. Cody took care of figuring restaurant tips, doing the taxes, and calculating property value flux, while she negotiated social and business activities, wrote holiday letters, dominated conversation with friends. They were a great team.

Six months in, her secret research had blossomed, overfilling three triple-subject notebooks. She devoted every moment alone to circles, arrows, and the occasional heart, hypotheses matched to data, refined scenarios. While Cody watched football, she sat in the bathroom, notebook on her knees. When she’d finished an evening’s grading, she’d continue pretending to mark up papers when she was really annotating her husband’s verbal tics.

Then the dot com bubble burst in March of 2001, and the economy fell on hard times. As Cody’s client became more desperate, his stable language problems took a dive. Not only did he more frequently misspeak, his pseudo-vocabulary also expanded. It was fascinating! Rather than having just one wrong word for comfort, he developed several, including coerce, laud, and pelican. Metastases sprang up throughout his word core, but he didn’t seem to notice. As the crisis hadn’t seemed to affect his quantitative ability, Elizabeth saw no problem in taking advantage of the verbal avalanche. Her projected study expanded.

Then one evening at canasta—the only social event for which she could drag him away from his number crunching anymore—the problem expanded too. They were tied with the Andersons two games all, when Mark Anderson said, “No more screwing around now, you two. Sally and I aren’t going to pull any punches from here on out.”

Cody hadn’t been drinking, given his intention to return to the calculator before bed. “We’re going to inseminate you,” he said with a friendly fake scowl.
His wrong word for *defeat* had always been *catechize*. Elizabeth felt torn between scribbling this odd change down on a cocktail napkin and running from the room.

“What’s that, Cody?” Sally blushed.

“We. Inseminate. You.” Cody used his Terminator voice.

“It’s a joke,” Elizabeth said, and everyone contributed to a strained chorus of laughter.

She decided then that she’d have to point out his slippage, even if it skewed her newest findings. There was their marriage to think of, the way others perceived it, issues of trust. He was working eighty hour weeks, sleeping hardly at all. Most of the time, she could find him hunched over his desk in the den.

“Someone seriously ameliorated these records,” he said on dreaded April 14th, W2’s and charts strewn across his work area.

She stood in his doorway, blood rushing in her temples. Now or never. “At least that’s one thing you don’t have to worry about. The *amelioration* of the records.” She hadn’t meant to be so indirect, but her Socratic instincts had taken over.

He creaked around in his chair. “Right,” he said. “Surely the IRS isn’t too particular.”

Such sarcasm was unprecedented; maybe he’d noticed more than she thought. Out of respect, she cut to the point. “You said *ameliorate*, which doesn’t mean *make worse*; actually, it means the opposite.”

He looked glum, as if she’d broken a silent deal they’d made with the kiss after *coruscate*. “You knew what I meant,” he said. “From the juxtaposition.”

From the context. She looked at the man who’d saved her from eternal schoolmarmhood. Really looked at him. Of course she’d known what he’d meant. This was the plain truth. And hadn’t he perhaps sensed that first night at the art gallery that there was a reason she was alone? Hadn’t he
perhaps given her the benefit of the doubt? Yet her selfish ambition to break out of the schoolmarm cocoon into the form of a brilliant linguist had led her to experiment on him! The weight of this sank upon her just then.

Her eyes brimmed with tears, like the unexpressed words of a shy student.

**Step Five: Have verbal fun.** *The next time you hang around with your friends, instead of just lounging on the couch and watching the tube, entice them to play word games.*

After a sleepless night spent regretting her words to Cody, trying to think of ones that would have been better, she decided to seek professional help. She visited the most experienced English teacher at her school. Mrs. Donatus had been married for more than fifty years to the principle, a man with very poor grammar. Elizabeth had heard over the crackly PA system Mr. Donatus say things like “Smelling wonderful, I visited the gym this afternoon for our annual Renaissance festival!” and “If anybody out there knows who’s been busting into the lockers after school, him and me need to talk.” Without suggesting the similarity of their conjugal situations, Elizabeth explained hers almost exactly to Mrs. Donatus, substituting an anonymous student’s identity for Cody’s. The withered woman appraised her over half-rims, *Ferguson’s Steps to Word Power* propped like the New Testament on her desk. Elizabeth knew she’d come to the right place.

“And you’re sure direct correction will not work?” Mrs. Donatus tapped a pointer.

“I’m sure. I mean, just this morning he said, ‘I conjugate you slept without quills, dear?’ He looked so sad!”

“This morning? Dear?”

Elizabeth sighed. Who was she kidding? “The subject’s my husband, not Justin Hall.”

Mrs. Donatus took a long breath, sucking on an invisible pipe. “Ahhhhhh. I see. Well that changes everything. Correction never works with a husband. Your only option is to make a few verbal
concessions. Show him that you accept his vocabulary and will meet him halfway.”

Elizabeth tensed, as if on the edge of an invisible precipice. “You mean I should misspeak?”

“Precisely. Don’t overdo it. Just slip something in every once in a while.”

Though Elizabeth could never imagine a misshapen word coming out of Mrs. Donatus’s pursed lips, she’d have to trust her on faith. One English teacher to another. Master to apprentice. If the elderly woman didn’t know what she was about, how could she have tolerated being married to a boss who could fire her by saying, “Certain problems with your performance needs to be addressed, my dear”? When Cody came home from the hospital that evening and dropped his ledgers on the dining room table, she started right in. “Maybe we could regurgitate some pasta and salad for dinner. Then we’ll tamp the custard Mom sent over.”

She’d carefully chosen the substitutions from her most recent notebook entries, but Cody frowned, making her fear the meanings had already changed, that his condition was accelerating.

“The custard’s all impacted,” he said.

Custard. Impacted. After translating, she could barely contain her excitement, as she lifted the lid of the pie safe to find it barren. The last piece of pineapple upside-down cake had gone to work with Cody.

“So it is,” she said, slumping her shoulders to pretend disappointment. “No custard tonight.”

They had communicated like natives—or at least like a native and a knowledgeable tourist.

Step Six: Learn to look at words with the mind of a child. *Children under ten absorb more words in one week than the typical adult does in one year.*

The first few weeks of adjustment were hard. Sometimes Elizabeth used an expired word, and Cody would be puzzled, ask her if he’d heard her right. With practice, though, and by sticking with a small vocabulary of substitutes based, Berlitz-style, around common situations, it became easier. And, sure
enough—according to the Donatus prediction—Cody’s word decline seemed to slow, as if Elizabeth’s participation had stabilized his corruption of the language.

Their marriage was once again secure, a closed system. Meanwhile the stock market started to improve. Elizabeth was even considering beginning the first chapter of the book—perhaps a Christmas present for Cody. The holiday was so far off, a time when their communication breakdown would be recalled as little more than a blip.

Then the worst happened.

The sharpest student in her world literature class, Bertha, said, “I can understand Emma’s frustration. People should only stay married when they want the same things.”

Elizabeth was touched but a little unsettled by naiveté of the comment. Young Bertha didn’t know the first thing about how hard it is to get on the same page with the one you love. “And how do you propose that Emma finds out exactly what Charles wants?”

“Simple. She can ask him.”

At an unusual loss for words, Elizabeth leafed through her copy of the novel, as if trying to find textual evidence that precise communication was not to be taken for granted. Finally, she raised her head to rows of eyes ranging from eager to hostile to dull to closed. “You must not forget that this is a work of insubordination.”

“What’s that?” Bertha said.

Elizabeth winked, hoping that would allow her to save face, but she watched Bertha write down insubordination, sure to look it up later. “You see,” she continued, “Flaubert spoke of choosing le mot juste, the correct word, when it came to writing. However, choosing the correct word only applies to authors, not to characters. Characters are just like you and me. We don’t have a chance to stop and choose the correct word.”
Bertha had very little to say to that, which made Elizabeth feel she had escaped a bullet.

In the same class period, however, Elizabeth went on to say apocalypse for allusion, digest for dialog, inflation for conflict, each time only realizing her mistake minutes later. It was all very funny. For her students. The daily handout even had an error. Please read the insurrections closely before beginning the exercise. She was fairly certain these mistakes were new, and self-generated. A wrong word for allusion was not in Cody’s vocabulary. From the last bell that day until her husband walked in at home, Elizabeth managed not to say another word.

Step Seven, the last step: Make it personal. Making words uniquely meaningful to you will lend them special connotations, and you will retain them better.

It was either the study or her marriage, an illusion of herself or who she really was. Elizabeth had always believed in speaking frankly. You could say it was why she’d become an English teacher. It was why her first instinct had been to correct Cody’s word problems. If only she’d trusted herself and not fallen prey to flirtation, love, flight from loneliness!

That week she picked up a copy of Ferguson’s Steps to Word Power from her local Barnes and Noble. The thinness of the handsome leather book promised that all was not lost. Seven easy steps and she’d be back to where she started, perhaps even further. Waiting in the check-out line, she opened to the back cover for a glimpse of Ferguson, who she expected to be a gray-templed man in tweed, head tilted thoughtfully. Instead, the author turned out to be one Sarah Ferguson, an attractive thirty-something wearing pink. Sexy and grammatical! It was nothing less than a sign from God: All would be okay.

She surprised Cody Saturday with a trip to the bar where they’d matriculated years before: Chez Leon’s. The place the problems had started. The notebooks of Cody data were stuffed in her purse, to be pulled out for dessert. She would admit her crime and renounce it. Things would go back to the way
they’d started. Consenting adults. Opposites attracting. He with the numbers, she with the words.

Also stowed in her pocketbook was Ferguson’s, an insurance against failure, her crucifix. She’d already read it cover to cover four times, and each step felt like déjà vu, the entire seven like a return to her roots, her true self. Rather than expanding, she was turning inward and finding herself beautiful.

As if by fate, the table they’d chosen years before was vacant. The fixtures were the same: the private jukebox in their booth that didn’t work; the green mood lighting that tottered between romantic and sleazy; the dog-eared menus. They held hands across the table and smiled.

“I’ll have the cheeseburger and some milk,” she told the pig-tailed server, who wore an identical green apron as the last one had worn. The girl grinned and noted.

“Same here,” Cody said. Ordering without a hitch. They hadn’t done that in a while. Maybe there was something magic in the restaurant’s air, a sort of alternative honeymoon universe.

Once they were alone again, Cody blew Elizabeth a kiss. “My clam’s beating a mile a minute. This is so ambidextrous,” he said.

How sweet! Of course, she’d hoped he would say something wrong to make the transition into her confession easier, but he was speaking perfect English this evening.

“Listen, Cody. We need to tintinnabulate,” she at last said, at the risk of ruining the moment.

He nodded, seeming to take no offense at her own reversion to standard speech.

“You may not have cannibalized it, but we’ve both been using the wrong triangles when we speak.” She used her hands to gesture, the way successful people accompanied their speech in business situations.

He sighed relief. “Exactly! No one else speaks our Pekinese. I darkly realized it, but I think I’m lettuce now.”

Elizabeth’s chest fluttered. Never had hearts spoken more directly. Indeed, to bring up their daily
trials now—during this miraculous respite—seemed wrong. Their talk about a new strategy would have to wait. The notebooks burned against her leg through her purse.

They shared a romantic gaze and then Cody headed for the bathroom.

“Here you are,” the server said a moment later.

Elizabeth flinched as two glasses of milk and a bottle of ketchup were placed on the table.

“No, that’s one margarita for me and some Dimetapp for my husband.”

“Dimetapp? I don’t think we’ve got that.” From the poor girl’s squirming, Elizabeth decided it must be her first day on the job. And she wasn’t too bright.

“I’ve never been to a restaurant that didn’t have such a standard weed whacker,” she said, with her English teacher’s enunciation.

“Sorry, ma’am,” the girl said, looking worried. At least she had manners.

“Never mind, dear. This will be statutory.”

The girl bowed gratefully and scurried off.

Elizabeth palmed her milk, the one beverage that always gave her a stomach ache. How ironic that on the one night they’d both ordered perfectly, the server got it wrong! She gazed around the dining room. At this hour, Chez Leon’s was full of families and couples, all of them talking. Passing information, sharing anecdotes, telling jokes. An entire smorgasbord of communicative functions under one roof. Finally, she and Cody were a working part of it all.

Her attention settled on a couple to her left. The man listened to his companion with his chin rested on a fist. He nodded. Looking closer, though, Elizabeth could detect what seemed like the glaze of incomprehension in his eyes that she frequently observed in slow students. As if she’d just seen something lewd, she turned away. But at the next booth, three Latino men and a child, she found a similar incomprehension.
To her shock, when she scrutinized each face in the other booths, none seemed quite at ease with what was being said. There were furrowed brows, frowns. Older people cupped their ears to listen over the general hum. A few scraps of conversation reached her ears: “I told you not to get involved!” “You said what to the janitor?” “I know you keep reminding me, but what do you do, again?”

Could it be she’d been mistaken about couples all these years, that easy communication was not the norm? Was it possible that she and Cody had, through tough work, achieved the infrequently attained? Here these people were boxed into intimate booths, bodies sixteen inches apart but communicating as if with smoke signals, candles and mirrors, Morse code. She wanted to fling copies of Ferguson’s on all the tables, grab her husband and flee. She thought of young Bertha, assuming that marital communication was as easy as saying “I do.” Poor dear.

Before Cody returned, she set the glasses of milk on a nearby empty table. She didn’t want to spoil the moment while it lasted. There could always be a relapse later at home, but at least they’d have this memory. She watched him exit the bathroom and waved vigorously, like a fan in a crowd. Their eyes locked across that hum of other people’s non-communication. The glance was layered with a sense of newness and another of home, of knowing the language at last. He quickened his pace, arrived with the heavy breath of Romeo.

“Favorable bulletproof,” she said before he could sit down. “Topsail?”

He looked askance at the milk.

She shrugged. “Topsail?”

He nodded at last and picked up his coat. “Guachero psychoanalysis,” he said.

Arm in arm, they scurried off before the waitress could return with God knew what entrées, before the world caught up to them, before they were somehow forced to publicly defend what was theirs.
TRANSPLANT

The protocol is for us to follow behind the transplanter, crouching above black plastic; we must cover the strawberry roots Mr. Tomlinson and Pedro drop into the machine-punched holes. Riding six inches from the ground, with a double wheel of puncturing cogs between them, they toss the stock crown-first into each fresh rupture. Fish emulsion from the tank above sloughs on top. In my opinion, they should leave the roots beside each hole since we always have to dig deeper: it's necessary to create a more secure place in the fishy soil. Until we arrive, the roots stick out of the plastic holes like starved arms reaching in the wrong direction.

I joined the workers at Gates Farm last summer after spending many years at Arnest International, a company specializing in industry-related physical therapy. I entered patient information and still remember some of the more gruesome injury codes: 802.6 for fractures of the skull, 944.3 for burn with full thickness skin loss, 986.4 for degloving of the hand. The codes were as close as I got to the mutilations—very often farm-related—because therapists seldom attach photographs to their descriptions. I'd planned to quit on my fortieth birthday. Instead I met Randy Jameson.

One afternoon, I stopped at a fruit stand situated on the highway from Arnest back to the city. Randy, a long-haired, peaceful intern at Willow Branch Farm, insisted I taste each organic berry before making my decision. He spoke of the different soil conditions that gave each fruit its distinct flavor and texture, how the farm used natural fragrances to ward off pests while attracting pollinators, how they utilized only animal labor, never machines. I was suspicious at first, taking him for an out-of-touch granola. But when he found out what I did for a living, he boasted that Willow Branch workers had suffered no injuries during the young farm's first five years. That was something, I thought.

Randy was half my age, and we dated mainly out of loneliness at first, but we cultivated our
relationship with care—no TV while we ate together, just conversation; walks through the woods, noticing the trees and animals; equal contribution to expenses, though I made much more. All this in stark contrast to the decade of dead hours I spent at Arnest, cataloging injuries. This contrast in my life remained after we got serious and decided that I would continue at Arnest, where my salary could support us both until Randy got through his bachelor’s program. Then I would leave the office for good, and we'd start our lives together in the fresh air in a place like Willow Branch, a farm of our very own.

Three weeks before Randy’s graduation, he was decapitated when a semi jackknifed in rainwater on Interstate 76. No code for that. In line with his wishes, his liver was donated to a boy in Houston. Even with immunosuppressive therapy, the boy’s body rejected the organ. It seemed Randy's sacrifice meant nothing. Quitting Arnest was automatic. With the money I’d saved I could afford to take a break from salaried work, so I sought employment as a farmhand. I wanted Randy to live on in what I did with my days, but Willow Branch had no openings. Their workers were happy. I could only secure a position at Gates, a more conventional farm, one with chemicals, machines, and injuries. The transplanter was the machine that most of all reminded me that to fulfill Randy’s dream, I had far to go. A puncturing, twisting, creeping parasite on the landscape, it must have certainly mangled a few limbs in its tenure.

My sowing partner behind the transplanter today is Mrs. Tomlinson. Kevin, the overseer, told us this morning in the barn that the quickest way to get the root stock out of the baking sun is to match up and keep pace with another of the women. We squat on opposite sides of the plastic and dig in our respective holes, starting about five behind Encarna and Inez, five in front of Sarah and Consuela. Each time we reach roots already covered, we skip into place at the front of the line. In this way, the group of us moves worm-like behind the machine.

Mrs. Tomlinson works only two days a week compared with my five. She and Mr. Tomlinson, the
root-dropper ahead on the left, are retired farmers from Illinois who came to Pennsylvania to be near their children. They’d thought they were through with farming, but when they found a long road of empty years stretching through the farmland north of Philadelphia, they had to get their hands back in it. Their years of familiarity with the soil make them the people even Kevin turns to with questions about Japanese beetles and misfiring tractor engines.

Being around such a veteran of the fields and her husband, I can’t help but think of Randy and our plans. When he disappeared in a crush of metal, I felt like I’d lost half partner, half child. I lost the child that would have been our marriage, the marriage that might have soon produced an actual child, connecting me—us—with a chain of others to come. Company of our own making. Lately I’ve thought of telling Mrs. Tomlinson my own ideas about how farm work might heal my loneliness, how digging my hands in the same earth that conceals Randy forty miles away might help me to let him go, a seed left in the earth.

“A scorcher today,” she says, as she must have a million times in the last thirty years.

I nod, watch her dig and tuck, trying to match the dexterity of her fingers. She squats flat-footed, allowing flies to rest on her arms as she works. Most of the other women came today wearing cotton white shirts and hats, but Mrs. Tomlinson wears what must be her everyday style of clothing—tennis shoes, some khaki shorts, and a multicolored T-shirt that says Spain!. No sunglasses. No hat. No bandanna. She works as she lives, lives as she works. Maybe she’s found that all the accouterments Goretex or the Banana Republic can come up will never stand up in the end between us and the sun. Indeed, despite various precautions, many farm injuries start with heat exhaustion. I still remember a case of a woozy farmworker who was pulled into the tailgate area of a hay baler. 897.2 for a unilateral amputation of the leg below the knee.

A practiced sower, she moves quickly, but—for the good of the whole operation—I’ve determined
to keep up. Still, it takes some will power to forgive myself the roots I've imperfectly sealed when I move on to the next hole. I'm still very detail-oriented, a demand of my job at Arnest. I wanted to get every injury code right to avoid any loopholes insurance companies will seek in a worker's comp case. I only manage to keep pace now by focusing on the five-hundred waving roots still wilting in the sun.

“I’ve been thinking,” I say, “about how much I’ve missed this in my life.”

“What’s that, honey?”

“Farming. Planting, weeding, harvesting. The whole process, I suppose.”

“You aren’t missing nothing. Dave and I are back at it just because we’re crazy.” She glances to the side to locate her husband, riding low behind the transplanter. He and Pedro are flinging the roots down frantically, as if they’ve been behind from the beginning. I share a knowing smile with Mrs. Tomlinson, but when I look back at the men I decide that rather than frantic, their motions are simply fast, as precise and effortless as the dropping of road cones. We stand and move to the next empty holes. At the end of the row, Kevin's already turning the tractor to work down the third, coming at us head-on and two feet to the left.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” I say. “I think something like this is really the only sane thing to do. You can’t imagine what it was like being in an office all day, away from everything that truly sustained me. The sun, the air, the earth.”

When I put my thoughts into words, they seem silly, dissolved into romantic ideals. They glance off the on-coming machine like glare. However, as with the flies, the swirling dust, the monotony of farm work, Mrs. Tomlinson doesn’t seem to notice.

“Earth, sun, air,” she repeats. “Tell me about it.”

My calves have grown tight from squatting on tiptoe so that I might always be on the move. By the time the worm of women reaches the row’s end, my fingertips throb where dirt has gotten packed under
the nails. It would all be worth it, I think, if I could go home to Randy. I'd push through the front door and find him at a desk, reading entomology. I'd hold my hands out to him, bleeding and smelling of fish.

But Randy's gone. Even the kid he tried to save, the transplant recipient, has gone, taking a part of Randy to a different place. A grave in Texas.

We start the next row without taking a break for water or stretching, the Gates way, and I change tactics. I'll do it my way—Randy's way: concentrate on every hole, making sure to fold and press each beginning of a plant into the earth without worrying about the hundreds yet to come.

“I just want to feel like what I’m doing today will have some effect in my lifetime. I'd like to see these strawberries grow, taste them, make a pie, whatever.”

“We better.” Mrs. Tomlinson chuckles. “If Kevin announced he’d given us dead roots, he’d have twenty mad women after him come fall.”

Fall. I chuckle to match her but feel a sudden confusion, as if the world has just begun spinning in the opposite direction. Dizziness from fume exposure: 780.4. Randy brought home cartons of strawberries from Willow Branch in *summer*. They must have been planted in the spring, not on a July day like this one. I feel as if a small miracle has descended upon my understanding, as if Randy is speaking through me to correct a mistake here. Aren’t we planting too late? Isn't this just another wasteful oversight, labor without the reward of life? But surely the Tomlinsons would have noticed. This past year I've developed a tendency to wreathe even the most light-hearted chats with black ribbons.

“These berries are late bloomers, I take it?”

Mrs. Tomlinson waits while I press dirt around the crown. The women have bunched up behind us, discussing the hold up. My partner doesn't answer until we move up front again.
“These are an autumn variety,” she says, flipping one over and cupping soil over the roots in one fluid motion.

Strawberries in fall. Her words are ripe with an automatic meaning for her that I can’t yet comprehend. Her fingers tuck in another crown. Yellow, cracked, they tell me the answer must be in me too, waiting for the right time to show. Maybe I’ll see fifty first; maybe I’ll understand by morning.

Speeding our way down the fourth row, Kevin and his low-riding assistants drop the endless roots into their unready holes.

“How’s it coming, girls?” he shouts over the throttle of the engine.

Mrs. Tomlinson, our spokeswoman, gives him the thumbs-up sign and then flicks off her husband, who rides comfortably in a slight breeze. He replies with an obscene gesture using his tongue and two fingers. They cackle, and Mrs. Tomlinson resumes her work.

Amazing, these two. How could they love each other? I imagined them having sex, their heavy, seventy-year-old bodies sweating with the honesty of pigs, rolling around the bed, snorting, her spider-veined legs rubbing across his hairy back. Another thing I’ll need to learn.

With the tractor moving farther and farther ahead, we work in silence for a while, only interrupted by sporadic conversation in Spanish to our left and right. I sneak a glance at my partner’s knee, listen for the hum of her husband’s drawl.

“That is one hell of a machine,” Mrs. Tomlinson says, calling me back from a place she’d never suspect.

I follow her gaze to the transplanter and its three passengers, chugging along. At this rate, it seems the last roots will be long dried out before we ever get to them. Likely, though, they’re more resilient than I give them credit for.

“I don’t think I’ve seen something quite so lazy in my whole life,” she says. “You’d think that with
all those wheels and hoses and levers, they’d have one little mechanism to finish the job. It doesn’t seem hardly worth it to have us crawling through the fields.”

The men reach the end of the row, fan their faces with hunting caps. I agree there's something not quite right about the set-up. We’ll always be needed to follow behind on our knees. I move to the next spot, opposite Mrs. Tomlinson, and reach into my hole. No root. The droppers have missed this one, as they're bound to do sometimes. A second miracle, or a mistake? Kevin told us this morning to mark these empty holes with red ribbons he’d stuffed in our aprons. We’d come back later with left-over root stock.

But I don’t mark it.

I reach instead into the earth, turning it over, feeling dirt jam into dirt under my fingernails, the small rocks and hard clumps making way for my insistence. I crumble up every stubborn piece I find, preparing a place for something. With none of the other holes have I taken so much care. I churn until Mrs. Tomlinson waddles over to the next hole, and then I leave the empty one, unmarked and ready.
I’d stopped wanting it by the fifth week. My husband, who’d taken over Fairgrove after Dad passed, was keeping me penned up in the house while he and the Mexicans ran the farm. John Mark drove around on his go-cart, ripping up root vegetables, plucking berries out of briars, and patrolling his employees; I paced our downstairs, talking to doors, because no task suited me. Knitting made me dizzy, and I couldn’t can since the smell of peaches turned my stomach. When I told him pregnancy felt like whole-body sepsis, like invasion, he just laughed in that way men do, as if to say, *Women are cute.* Not until day thirty-three did he grow concerned. At six o’clock, when he typically comes in for dinner, I pulled a bottle of bourbon from the cabinet, poured a finger in a glass, and sat by the backdoor.

“Let me out of this goddamn house. I didn’t drink any, but I will.” At that point I couldn’t tell if I was joking.

At six the next day, I trembled behind the wheel of our idling pick-up. Dust settled behind the employees as they left in two cars for the house they shared in Norristown. Behind me, John Mark lugged the compost bin onto the bed so we could drive past the pit and make our fieldtrip worthwhile. “We’ll start slow,” he’d said, “take some rides around the farm. You can even drive.” With sun on my arms, the smell of manure and sod on the breeze, I didn’t care that his tone had turned patient, as if he were dealing with a stubborn machinery supplier or waiting for the blackberries to finally yield.

We rumbled over the first rise, our fields to the left, quietly producing crop. I could tell the vibration made him nervous by the way he kept an eye on my belly, even though I wasn’t showing. Maybe he was imagining his seed, floating there in the dark. I hardly needed to watch the road, no one else on it, twenty-five miles per hour with shoulders of tilled soil. We cut through the stagnant air, making wind of it, while all around us waited for sun, rain, and season.
When we reached the pit, I stepped out of the truck and walked to the edge of the forest between our acreage and Torvald’s dairy farm. I stretched in the still sunlight. This is where my soon-to-expand body belonged. Outside. I had a vision of myself camping in the cucumbers, puffed up between green shoots. Behind me came the splatter of rinds and expired fruit dropping into the moldering pile. He really had taken it well, hadn’t seemed mad I’d threatened our fertilized seed. It was sweet, in a way, his being a farmer. I considered apologizing for the overreaction, but then a strange cry drifted to my ears.

“Ready, soldier?” John Mark said.

“Shhhh.”

The cry hadn’t been human, but we didn’t keep animals. Just tomatoes, squash, strawberries—silent creeping things. John Mark’s blank face told me he hadn’t heard. Then we both faced the woods as a low growl and leafy gallop pulled our eyes behind the trees to the left. A double report sounded—our border collie’s bark.

“Dame must be after something on Torvald’s side,” he said.

I knew the fence was there—as around the rest of our property—but I could only see trees, as if the edge of a vast wilderness. The cry turned and came back toward us. Strident, half-formed, the voice of a mutant. My abdomen vibrated like a drum. Something in me wanted to see it, the way I sometimes want to ogle horrible things on the road, on television. After the noises passed, I entered the forest, picking my way through briars.

“Where are you going?”

“One sec.”

Far to the right, the cry announced itself again, then fell off. I stopped short. Straight ahead in the shadows I saw the black fence, ten feet high, its links entwined with ivy. Three feet beyond, a smaller
fence, gray and chest-high, ran away to either side along the property line. This fence I hadn’t seen. Past it were Torvald’s lots, his dairy equipment and sheds. Hardly a wilderness.

In between the fences ran an empty corridor of stick and stone, carpeted in last year’s leaves. I spotted a child-sized gate in ours—a way to get in and make repairs, I supposed.

“Rachel?” Leaves crunched behind me.

“Why are there two fences here?” I had to stall him somehow, until the animals returned.

I heard him stumble through the underbrush. Soon his breath reached my ear. “Just for this reason.” His fingers grasped the links. “To keep whatever Dame’s after out of our fields.”

He took my arm. “Come on.”

I grabbed the fence. “I can understand one—to keep animals out—but why two?” I followed the corridor between fences until it disappeared in the greenery that concealed the animals’ coming. “Why two with space between?”

“Why not? That’s extra protection. The black one’s ours, the other Torvald’s.”

He tugged me gently—the way he’d handled me since we knew of the conception—but I held on. Then he moved off toward the forest’s edge in long, slow steps. Belly pressed against the mesh, I felt like an offering left behind and suddenly doubted the wisdom of staying.

If I could only see it, I’d know what we were dealing with. That’s what I said to myself. Then I saw Dame coming toward me on our side, weaving around saplings. Blood whistled at my temples. To her right a dusty blur, brown fur billowing above paws or hooves, moved along through the unclaimed space. Instinctively I pushed away from the fence and fell on my back.

“John!” I called as Dame’s prey sped past, hunched in the shadows. Its hair was long, and it ran close to the ground. Baby warthog? Not with a cry like that. Goat? Too quick. As the shapes reblended with the bushes to the left, a chill washed over me and the bottom dropped from my skull. I’d been so
close to it, something utterly foreign.

“It’s on the other side,” John Mark said cheerfully, moving behind me. “Won’t hurt a thing.”

“But it’s in between.”

“How’d it get in there, then?” he said, pushing aside a branch. “It got in, it can get out.”

I stood to follow him out of the thicket, feeling confused. Soon I’d be back in the house. Safe. I
sunk and heaved, yielding clear liquid on the roots of an oak. These spells of sickness normally came in
the morning, but I knew he’d believe the act. My mother had spent most her life inside that house,
ordering what no one but Dad would see. I’d always chuckled at her meticulousness, but remembering
it now, I couldn’t leave the forest.

Heavy footsteps came and a hand pressed on my shoulder.

“Please go. Stand by the road while I clear my head.” I spoke with my face buried in my arms and
listened to him hesitate before

moving off.

The cry had stopped, but I could hear Dame’s growls and scratching just on the other side of a
clump of trees. Perhaps it had escaped, jumped back over Torvald’s lower fence. That sight, I decided,
would be gratifying, an empty corridor of leaves. Whether I felt this way because I’d be glad for the
animal or because I imagined it too hideous to see, I didn’t know.

“Dame?” Her barks lowered and doubled, running together with growls. Picking my way around
the sun-dappled trees, I squinted to find her black-and-white fur in the foliage. She squirmed back and
forth, tail-tip wagging. In the passageway under a fallen tree limb that slanted down off Torvald’s
fence, a shadow lay. My knees locked and I felt the sweat on my wrists.

“Are you okay in there?” John Mark called.

“Call Dame!”

When he did, Dame backed off as if under a sorcerer’s spell. “Good girl,” I heard.

232
The animal breathed in jagged gasps, and at first I was afraid to get closer. I appraised our fence, how high it was, the thickness of its links. John Mark wouldn’t have built one too low. All I had to fear then was the shock of its look. Its being there so close.

“What are you doing?”

I moved to where Dame had been, feet from the animal. I could see that its fur was both black and gray, that the tufts stood at different lengths. The fallen limb hid head and legs, but a wide tail of shorter fur stretched behind it. A sour smell, like compost or vinegar. The odor of experience. I tensed.

I’d been assuming without realizing it that the trapped animal was young, still growing into whatever it would become, something I’d never see. From the way it screamed maybe. If mothering instincts existed, maybe I had them after all. Yet something about its demeanor now as it huddled, gasping, under the limb told me it was full-grown, resigned. It was shameful.

“I’m coming in,” John Mark called.

“Wait just a sec.” I couldn’t let him see it. He’d insist on uncovering its face, destroy it out of horror. “I’m peeing.”

The child-sized gate hung partially blocked from my view by a box elder. I couldn’t imagine John Mark fitting through this tiny door to clear the brush. A gate that size seemed both preposterous and perfect just now, and when I swung it open, my arms seemed hardly under my control. This had been my way lately, hurling cans against the wall, methodically ripping pages from a novel at the rate of reading, as if something were acting through me, practicing for life.

Nothing stood between my legs and the animal. And a strange magnetism drew me toward the opening, but I stumbled backwards and ran out of the forest, branches ripping at my eyes and dress. I found my husband just on the edge, dog at his foot.

“What happened?” His face looked as it had when I held the bourbon, set as if against eternal
elements—wind, rain, pestilence. Patient. “Did Dame scare it off?” He approached the woods.

“Just a fawn,” I said, grabbing his shoulder. “Please take me home.” And I didn’t mind anymore the thought of going.

“Let me handle that sort of thing from now on. You don’t know what could have happened.”

We walked to the truck, its red chrome shining like John Mark’s promise to defeat the land, all obstacles between our family and the future. Inside, he turned on the air vents and sighed, stared again at my midsection.

“The baby will be fine,” I said.

I closed my eyes as he drove, imagined the animal waiting between fences, yards from escape. Crouched, it would spy the opening, a hundred acres of fertilizer-fed globes. Momentarily I regretted not having seen its face, its full form, because soon it would be gone.

John Mark slammed on the brakes. “How did it get in?” The horror in his voice infected me.

I followed his gaze out the back window, where I saw nothing but our dust, the strip of forest, our fields.

“What?”

“How did it get in?”

The animal must have already come through the gate. Too soon. I jerked my head in each direction. If only it had come out after nightfall, like something unreal. I saw only leaves flashing their undersides, a crow lunging into flight. I waited for him to identify what alluded me, but he didn’t.

“I don’t see anything,” I said.

He sped us toward the house.

***

We went to bed shortly after sunset. He moved up behind me and slid his hand under my shirt, over my
stomach. One of his nicer qualities, one that makes him a successful farmer, is his quickness to cut his losses. Surely he thought of the intrusion as a loss, an invading pest. Or, at least that’s how I’d been hoping he saw it. Nothing more than a pest. Yet neither of us had mentioned the breach since we came in from the truck.

In the soft darkness, his callused palm on me, we spoke of the baby to come—names, places it could go to school, a playhouse we would build beside the vegetable shed. It was the first time since before I got pregnant that everything felt right inside. We were in here, while the unpredictable world was out there.

He fell asleep first, and the silence deepened the significance of our silence about the breach. Why, if it were simply a pest, hadn’t he identified it, spoken its name? What roamed in the darkness beyond the light of our porch, through our fields, fenced in and desperate? Since a child I’d hated the woods, all its unplanted, unintended life. The poison oak that blistered, the random bees’ nests, every rock a risk to turn over. That afternoon, though, for twenty minutes, the world had seemed centered there, everything rushing out of the light to lose itself in the brush. What had I let in? I backed up against him under the covers and pulled his arm around me like a bar.

***

In the morning, he was gone. Although it wasn’t unusual for him to check up on things Sunday, his day off, I knew he’d renewed the search. Without me there to confuse or distract, finding the animal would be easy. He’d follow its tracks, see where it had nibbled a pepper.

In my state of half-sleep, I felt steady, not yet queasy. So I stayed still, dozed as long as I could. I got up an hour later to vomit a wicked curl of white in the toilet. Perfect evidence I didn’t need to go running through the forest.

I grew hungry. Though the thought of food made me sick, I took some peanut butter out of the
cabinet and ate it with a spoon. Not too horrible. Next, I got a bucket and scouring pad. On my knees I
dipped the pad into the hot water and vinegar solution my mom had used. By keeping my eyes shut and
my mind on John Mark, I found I could scrub the floor without feeling sick. Right now he’d be
whipping in his truck past the red streaks of strawberries. Up ahead he’d spot the animal trotting along
the road. As he drove toward it, it wouldn’t run. Just trot, ready to be captured and released. Though I
couldn’t see in my mind what it was, having it in my husband’s sight was enough. By the time I
finished scouring and rinsing, the section near the stove had already dried. I doubted it looked any
cleaner than before—doubted it was any cleaner. Except I knew I’d cleaned it. That’s all that mattered.

“All done,” I said.

I brewed some tea and sat by the den window, which looked out over the front yard and Route 80,
through a power-line space in the trees, and up a steep field belonging to the Petersons. A few goats,
recognizable animals, stood out in the dawn. Life could be simple. I wanted the baby just as much John
Mark. More, perhaps. I would be its soil. I’d lend it the patience of my body. Everything was fine.

As I studied the goats’ peaceful graze, a splintering sound startled me. A gunshot. It echoed, as
gunshots do, even without mountains and valleys. I set down my mug. I hadn’t thought about what he’d
do when he found the animal, his finding and identifying it having been my focus. Shooting it seemed
like an overreaction. I watched the goats until they forgot about the gunshot and returned to grazing.

I went through the house to sit on the porch by the driveway, grabbing a light jacket against any
chill. But the jacket did no good. I rocked on a dew-covered chair under the sparkle of a garden
spider’s web.

The black truck pulled up five minutes later, headlights still burning though the sun was already
half an hour in the sky. My husband walked over and sat heavily on the swing beside me. At once I
could tell something was wrong.
“I heard the shot,” I said.

He nodded his head, eyes trained on one spot, as if the thing were still there, writhing in the open with a hole in its belly. I’d have him bury it on our land. A reminder, maybe. Or an apology. I would not look at its body or learn its name.

“They ran her over,” he said after a while. “The fuckers.”

I saw then the look was sadness. “Who?”

“Dame,” he said. “Out on Route 80.”

The tears were there before I even thought of them, my body forming my reactions. But underneath, an uncertain joy flashed through me. It was alive. I’d already counted it gone, but it had a life, a resilience of its own. It must have re-entered the corridor and this time found a way out. Or maybe Dame had gone in alone.

“I couldn’t keep up with her,” he was saying.

“You mean she got out of the fence? Where?”

I appreciated that he didn’t answer. Two breaches made even less sense than one, and I was, of course, to blame. I thought of the yelp he must have heard. How must it have felt for him to find the mangled fur? To see her teeth gnash in agony? That divide. He must have placed the shotgun barrel against her gently, looked away.

I pulled his hot head down against my stomach and looked the way he’d come, through the dust as it settled. I could feel his tears and drool through my shirt, but when I pulled him closer, his neck stiffened. In his grief, he remained careful of the life inside me. I loved him at that moment for keeping this place together. For his fortitude against certain dangers he saw lurking at the edge of our lives. For letting me alone decide what I’d done.

***
We buried Dame behind the farm house in a quilt my mother had made. John Mark wouldn’t let me see the body, its wounds. For all I knew, it could have been the intruder we were burying, the way it could have—maybe should have—been. Together we lowered her stiff, hidden form into the hole. I flinched when a clump of dirt fell onto her side, though I knew she was dead. Safe. Once John Mark filled in the dirt, he sprinkled grass seed on the grave. We decided not to mark it. It was better that way.

The next day, he came home with a new dog. A border collie like Dame, but not as sharp. It’s his mind for crops, I guess, one generation preceding the next, on schedule. I also wonder though if he was showing he forgave me, that he was willing to lose our dog to keep me happy, our fetus safe. Although young, the new dog is lazy; Kirby sits around our yard while my husband and his help work around him. Our place might be overrun with raccoons and beasts of all stripes without us knowing it. There’s no way he’ll catch or even sense what stalks our fields.

It’s been two weeks now since the incident, the breach. Already my nausea has decreased. I can get around the farm all I want, though I take it easy for John Mark’s sake. With the exception of Kirby, the farm appears the same as it used to be. In the fall we’ll harvest the gourds and pumpkins, vegetables for show. Then the winter will come, and the two of us will have more time together. Inside will appeal more. The fireplace. Stews. Movies. Doctor Phillips says that the baby will soon generate heat. I’ll be like a walking furnace.

One change, though, does linger. The little unsown joy my body conceived the morning we lost Dame has grown. I don’t summon it. It’s just there. People believe children are miracles, fully formed identities sprouting from love. I’d have to agree. This imperceptible presence in me is coming fast, blooming into consciousness until one body won’t be enough for the two of us. A miracle for sure. But I’d say it’s just as much of a miracle that out of a space just wide enough for a person to walk, a space
no wider than one body, a blur might come rushing, carrying strange odors in its uneven fur, renewed life.
César and the Ohio boys lounge on their elbows under the maple tree, sucking on peaches they slipped into their pockets while filling baskets. Pits litter the shade. It was Randy who assured César that the farm owner wouldn’t mind sharing a little in this unseasonable heat. I watch the barn kittens sink their claws into the holes the pits already have and wonder if they see something alive in there, like the birds that will nest in the trees the pits will become.

César speaks English better than I do although we both grew up outside Juárez. From his gestures in the shade, I know he’s telling the boys more about his encounter with the *groundhog* they’re trying to kill. A *groundhog* is a cochino, he told me last night as I snuggled against one of the white undershirts he wears to deflect the sun. I don’t like it that he joins the Americans when they see the *groundhog* surface. The Ohio boys are different from César; they act as though they want to kill the animal, tear its head off, and throw it at each other. César, I want to believe, just goes along because it’s what they do here.

He’s been my novio since we met before coming north a year ago. He’s so handsome and good with his hands. His skin is tanned almost as dark as his wild hair, and he wears a fold-out knife, una navaja, on the back of his belt for whenever he wants to take a bad spot from a tomato or cut a piece of twine. I sense that the high school girls on the farm, here for work-experience credits, admire him, and though he’s always been faithful to me I fear one of them might try to enchant him. He says these girls believe in a type of magic that brings fame and fortune, the kind that their magazines promise. The odds, he jokes, are *stacked against them* here in the U.S.—competitive colleges, divorced parents, cliquish peers—so it’s natural they’d look to a higher power like celebrity. To me, they’re too spoiled and lazy to bother with seduction.
At the same time, I’ve learned you can never quite tell when César’s serious. For instance, he told me once after a long day in the fields that he’s got a twin brother stationed with the Navy in Maryland. It’s weird knowing there’s somebody who looks just like him living amid ships and white caps. César had been trellising tomatoes since sun-up and had come by the apartment I share with my best friend, Xenia, and her family. Not knowing how to take this delayed bit of his background, I made a joke about his brother basking out there in the water among men, bristly-chinned like the *hotties* in the magazines those Ohio girls take so seriously. I don’t know if the day’s heat had spoiled his sense of humor or if his brother really was different in some way he’d grown ashamed of, but my joke drew a stare from him black and deep, the kind someone gives you before he buries your body in the corner of the orchard. The next minute he was back to his sweet self and hasn’t mentioned his twin since, so I figure it was the sun.

I’m worried today as I stand in the shed, hosing carrots, because it seems that while telling his stories about the poor cochino, César has forgotten entirely about me. Like a showman, he has the Ohio boys rolling on the ground, tossing crab apples and peach pits at the kittens. It’s amazing how he can reach these people born a thousand miles away. He can reach everybody. I wonder how much he forgets me once he’s out in the fields away from the shed, if he thinks about me as each tomato falls from his hand into the basket. I wonder if he thinks about my hand drawing that tomato back out and inspecting it for bruises.

My only American friend on the farm is a quiet girl named Brooke. She and the other Ohio girls arrive at the shed on Tuesdays and Thursdays around noon, after they wake up, I suspect. By that time, Xenia and I, along with the older Mexican ladies, have done at least half the work. Today, for instance. After these carrots are washed, clipped, and bunched, we can clean up and go home. I consider Brooke my friend because even though most of us from Chihuahua can speak a word or two of English, she
talks only to me. This attention makes me feel special.

Because I trust her and want to practice my English, I’ve told her lately about my worries that César will leave me for an American girl. It's taken a long time to convey the nuances of this worry, although it helps me to point to the pictures in magazines the Ohio girls leave around. Cosmopolitan, Seventeen, Vogue. I think she understands because she’s been trying to explain something since she got here today, something about changing bodies with another person and then walking around in that person’s body, a way to check up on a lover's devotion. The body-changing sounds like a metaphor rather than a literal solution, but she describes it with such technical detail, almost like a recipe. I have a Spanish-English pocket dictionary that I started bringing to the farm when she first spoke with me, and I’m flipping through it now as she talks.

Switching bodies is easy, she explains. I could do it right here today with Natalie, the most popular girl on the farm. I say I don’t know and laugh a little, dropping a carrot into the puddle beside my shoe. I'm waiting for the punchline, but she beckons Natalie, who's sorting peaches. Natalie is much prettier than I am; at least she’s more exotic. Brooke has told me everything about her. Her platinum blond hair, which has no frizz, is what makes her most exotic, even though Brooke says she dyes it—Natalie's no true rubia. Her breasts are full even though the rest of her isn’t. She wears flip-flops from the Gap and carries a Dolce & Gabbana handbag Brooke says was a steal at T.J. Maxx. She comes right over when Brooke calls, like a man's dream, and the two talk for a minute in Ohio-girl English too fast for me to parse. They seem to reach some sort of agreement, and Brooke tells me to go behind the shed with Natalie, that she’ll finish up the carrots. Natalie smiles in kind of a devilish way, like she’s going to take some piece of American fruit away from me because I don’t know how to peel it or haven’t gotten used to the taste. Maybe I shouldn't have trusted Brooke, I think. Maybe this is a practical joke. Still, just communicating feels too good for me to stop.
Natalie and I go behind the shed, where there’s a bunch of shade trees and a compost pile used to make rich soil for the crops. Natalie opens a *Cosmopolitan* magazine on the grass and kneels beside it, making sure to gather her vintage floral-print skirt. She turns to a photograph of Jessica Simpson, her idol, and gestures for me to kneel before her. I wait for her to burst out laughing, or for someone to giggle behind me, but she looks as grave as the nuns from the convent in Juárez. I drop to my knees facing her, grimace as an acorn nipple punctures my skin. The beads of sweat at her hairline that I can see up close give me a burst of confidence, even though it's probably just the heat. I doubt she's nervous like me. She takes my hands in hers and closes her eyes. I close mine. Her hands are cool and dry as peach fuzz. Let's get this over with, I think. I must be a good sport. In the humid afternoon air, I smell her Giorgio body spray. Nothing happens for a full minute, and I start worrying about César, that they've brought him to laugh at me. I'm wondering what that laugh would sound like, how different from his normal laugh, when my knees seem to press lower in the dirt. I almost open my eyes, but Natalie squeezes my hands so I keep them shut.

“You are sashaying down the catwalk,” she whispers, “all eyes upon you. You are Natalie. You have hair that gets you what you want; you know all the hot sex tips and conversation starters; you are slaying the men because you’ve got their number. But no one can touch you.”

I don’t understand most of what she’s saying, but she keeps repeating her name, as if it were mine. “You are BFF with Jessica Simpson, Paris Hilton, and Jennifer Aniston, and they let you read their real secret-celeb diaries, not the ones they put in *Cosmo*. You read the ones that tell Brad Pitt’s all-time favorite sex moves, and Christian Bale’s, and Ashton Kutcher’s. You are Natalie, and all the girls want to be you, but they can’t.”

Something is happening to me. With my eyes shut, I can’t tell exactly where I am. My body is growing numb all over and at some moments I feel like I’m under the ground facing up, or above the
ground facing down. Distantly I can locate my knees pressed into the earth, but it becomes harder and harder to feel the surface between my skin and the dirt. I almost open my eyes, but Natalie squeezes my hands, like she can read my mind. I want to vomit, so I try to calm down and think more of César, not laughing but sitting at the counter while I prepare his favorite, chiles rellenos. This helps, and before I know it, Natalie’s releasing my hands.

When I open my eyes, I see a sight I’ve never seen before. Never. It might seem strange to say I’ve never seen this before because what I see when I open my eyes is myself: I see Inez García staring back. The difference between what I see now and what I see when I look in the mirror every morning is that in the mirror I never see myself being curious, caught up in what’s before me. Now I want to look a bit closer, maybe touch that face as César would, hug myself as he would, but the body I’m in—as I can see by the floral pattern of the skirt below me—is Natalie’s, and it wants to get up and walk back into the shed. I start to panic as it glides me toward the door. What if this is permanent? What if I’m stuck? What if— But the luxurious tap of Gap flip-flops on the soles of my feet allays this worry somehow. The flip-flops seem to say, *This is nothing but a stroll, a privileged moment in Natalie’s shoes.* I sashay through the shed, past Amanda and Debbie, who lower their eyes and nudge each other. I walk past the tables of fruit and past Brooke, who looks at me like she's known me for years. Her eyes bury into me like seeds. As I pass, I recognize each brand of cover-up, scent, and moisturizing cream on her body.

Out in the sunlight, I toss my no-frizz hair. A wavy, blond strand brushes my tan arm as I strut toward the boys, who still lie under the maple. They’re so caught up in César’s story that they don’t notice my approach at first, but Steve catches my eye and seems to realize right away where I’m headed, what I’m doing.

I wish I knew.
With Steve in the lead, the Ohio boys rise in one body, gather their sunglasses and baseball caps carefully made ragged, and walk out through the rows of carrots and onions to stand several yards off. César’s still talking in English as they depart. He’s saying things that I can now understand, with my new ears, but that seem to mean nothing important. His words sound awkward, like a Mexican’s attempt to speak Ohio-boy English. Almost at the same moment he sees all the boys have walked off, he notices I’m standing before him, my razor-smooth legs spread apart, my full locks fallen over one eye.

“What is up?” he says, and I expect him to peek behind me, trying to find my old body, but he does not.

“Hey, killer,” my voice says, and I stare into his eyes. “Did you know that one third of all men don’t wash their hands after the bathroom? Men really are dirtier.” At first I don’t understand what I’m saying, but then, in the same way that eyes adjust to the dark, I tune into Natalie’s words. I recognize one of Cosmo’s conversation starters that will make you the most interesting person in the room. Tips that have been stored in Natalie’s body.

He looks away, but not toward the shed. He glances at the Ohio boys and shrugs his shoulders. The boys don’t play along. They kick at the dirt and talk in a serious tone, like farmers. With a foreign sense of confidence, bone deep, I understand that these boys act tough but don’t know all that Natalie does about the opposite sex. Their pick-up lines are cheesy, and she has read them all.

“Please, repeat it?”

“Here's another one, César.” Natalie's voice pronounces his name like the Roman emperor’s, in the way American girls say it. “Connie Martin, Ph.D. in anthropology, says that when it comes to just friends, men want to hang out with women who make wisecracks, but for romance, they're only into women who laugh at their jokes. Do you want me to laugh at your jokes?”
He laughs nervously, as I’ve seen him do since I met him when he talks with people he doesn’t know well. He looks down at Natalie's feet, toenails painted in Vixen, the season’s sexiest polish.

“I’ll laugh at everything you say if you’ll just be mine.” As Natalie's voice speaks, I begin to suspect the words, new to me, are tinged with cruelty. That her body carries with it a residual agenda. To my right, the Ohio boys have gotten interested, realizing now that I am only teasing.

“César, César!” they chant. “Get you some, boy!”

César’s eyes narrow with suspicion when his gaze returns to my face. It’s horrifying to feel he doesn’t know me, here in Natalie’s body, even though the scent of her perfume reminds me this is temporary—Natalie would never give me her body forever. It’s hard for me to be a stranger to him that I love even for a second. I want to call it off and tell César who I really am, but when I open my mouth more Ohio girl English comes out.

“You can hold me in your arms made strong in the fields from working morning to midnight, and then take me back to your extended family’s one-room apartment. Feed me tacos and that nasty green salsa with your rough hands. Lift me with your back so muscular from bending all day in the hot sun to pay for the rest of your huge family to sneak over the border.”

The flush on César’s face reveals that he can’t follow my English. And I am glad. Still, I know him well enough to realize that he gets the gist.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I no understand.” This time he does look toward the shed, but I can tell by his expression that he doesn’t see my old body anywhere. Natalie must be hiding it in the back under the shade trees. I wonder if my body is fighting her.

Then César’s brown eyes come back up toward mine with more directness. My heart—or Natalie’s—leaps with sick fear and thrill; she's flirting with a Mexican. Her armpits, the nape of her neck, the cup of her bra, places I could only imagine before, run with common sweat. El sudor de la
rubia. César smiles with sneaky corners to his mouth, as if he can taste it. He grins as he had when we first met back in Mexico, before things started to get serious.

“Por favor, me escucho.” Please, I listen to myself. My voice speaks now in an awkward, elementary Spanish, stored in Natalie’s short-term memory from her final exam a week ago.

César nods without pause. He’s a master like the rest of us in interpreting fragmented Spanish. Listen to me is what my voice was trying to say.

“Te amo,” my voice says. I love you.

“What?” he says in our native tongue, forgetting English entirely. He pushes his wild hair up a bit with a tan wrist, but it drops back over his forehead, and I feel my own tingle of tender ownership mixed in with my new body’s lust, which is full of fear and pity for this naive and possibly dangerous Mexican. It’s hard to tell which feeling is Inez’s and which is Natalie’s.

“You and me have sex,” I say in the kind of Spanish that must be cobbled together from the legitimate expressions of a textbook.

He guffaws, and I hate him then either as Natalie, for not taking me seriously, or as Inez, for hiding from me the seriousness of the situation with this laugh for strangers. I flinch as he drops a calloused hand onto the top of my foot. It burns, and I feel Natalie fighting with me in her body for what isn’t supposed to happen.

“Senorita,” he says, “estoy enamorado de Inez.” I’m in love with Inez.

Natalie’s foot kicks his hand away in a panic, and he looks up at me noncommittally, eyebrows raised. This is exactly what was supposed to happen. Strictly according to the magazine Natalie knows so well. César has proven he wants only Inez García. But as Natalie’s body turns away, spurned, as we stomp back toward the shed, back toward Inez’s old body, I can’t help but feel disappointed. I can’t help but long again for that burning touch on my skin, that look he’d given me like a boy both ashamed
of and mystified by his body, that blush Inez García might never arouse in him—familiar, safe, and Mexican as she is. I long to see in him what he won’t let me see, that face he wears for the Americans, that face he puts on for the world that isn’t me, the face of his twin, staring out into the sunlight, unshaven, from a magazine on a pretty girl’s lap at the salon.
Nancy and her son, Jason, hadn’t been in their new trailer twenty-four hours before she noticed their neighbor spying on them. Maybe the landlord had unloaded such a quaint spot—no other mobile homes in sight, just forest and an honest-to-God castle up the hill—for only $200 a month precisely because of the nosy old man. *Where else do you expect to wake up each morning and see King Arthur’s Court up the way?* She’d bought the line and the next morning stepped out into the driveway with her coffee only to see the voyeur’s shock of white hair peeking over the parapets of his privately owned estate, a telescope replacing one eye. She wanted to shield her child before remembering he was inside playing with his train.

Her twenty-two-year-old son was big-boned, deep-voiced, and mentally disabled. Jason’s father had left when he was sixteen, forcing her to find work. *The world is bigger than you and Jason.* That’s how Billy Ray had explained his leaving. Since Jason was declared “unresponsive” in eighth-grade, Nancy had been homeschooling him and generally limiting his contact with outsiders. It was all for his own good, she believed, no matter what her husband said. In fact, she guessed the real reason for Billy Ray’s leaving was shame, and she’d vowed to make up for his absence, to be everything to Jason. For a while, he sent wrinkled bills stuffed in an envelope. When he stopped, Nancy didn’t file for divorce out of fear she wouldn’t be rewarded full custody. That’s when she found the remote trailer with cheap rent and a half-time job at the speedway concession stand. Workdays, she brought Jason to the racetrack and watched him the best she could while ladling chili onto foot- longs, refilling monster Mountain Dews. She had Jason, and he had her. Relatively speaking, things were good. The fact that their new neighbor spied on them mattered little in comparison.
Look all you want, Nancy thought. Just don’t touch. And he didn’t, never even left the castle. Maybe he’d be the ideal neighbor: one in name only, another seeker of solitude. A mantle of peace would wrap the hollow. Then one Saturday evening in July, she’d just shaved Jason’s face baby smooth and tucked him into his too-short bed when a racket rose in the garden. Through the blinds her driveway light revealed a red-faced man in a Dale Earnhardt jersey ripping up her pavers. Jason. He’d hurt Jason, mistake him for a man. That was the thought that sent her to the phone. “Yes, a crazed racing fan,” she told the officer. Oaths echoed outside, thuds of stone against trailer siding. “Hurry.”

“I see you looking,” the racing fan yelled.

Instinctively, she held a finger to her lips.

He kicked at her dry-stack retaining wall, dislodging stones until they littered the driveway. Just that morning, the stones had looked like a miniature complement of the castle on the ridge, giving their trailer a dignity it would’ve never achieved in a park.

“Who lives in that castle?”

“I don’t know him,” she hissed through the screen.

“Liar!” He pelted a rock against the aluminum siding and bent over panting. “Tell him to come out and man up. He crippled Rusty.”

“I’ve called the cops.” She strained her ears for sirens. There’s a child asleep, she was about to add, when a crunch of leaves and a clank of metal sounded just beyond the arc of light.

“The castle is mine.”

A knight in full armor stepped out of the woods, brandishing an axe. As if stage lights had risen, now the emphasis moved outside, lessening any danger to Jason. She watched half-hypnotized as he backed the racing fan against the damaged wall. Not since her childhood trip with her father to Nashville’s Renaissance Festival had she witnessed such a costume.
“Who bothers these good people in the night?”

The racing fan slid to the ground, hands aloft.

“Tell me your name, or I shall slay you where you cower.”

Going to the festival had been her big third-grade treat. They’d sat on a sloping lawn, she bundled in a fleece with a funnel cake in her lap, watching scenes of chivalry. The scene outside her trailer seemed equally choreographed—good and evil distinct.

“I’ll ask you only once more.”

The racing fan squirmed and received a kick in the groin with a pointy metal boot.

Nancy was vaguely aware that high-wound motors had reached the driveway. The racing fan no longer struggled; instead he yelled something she couldn’t hear over the noise of engines—his name, she guessed. Floodlights soon focused on the combatants.

“Drop your weapon, sir.”

The knight raised the battle axe higher.

“Now!”

“As you wish.”

The axe blade buried itself in the garden soil, inches from the writhing man’s leg. And this—the falling of the blade—chopped off any more reminiscence. Once again good and evil were gleaming metal and loud noise, inseparable in the wreck.

She scurried down the hallway to check on Jason.

***

According to the officer who called the next morning, the racing fan had been one Purvis Evans. He and his brother were drunk at the speedway when they heard of Clement Castle and sped here full of
intoxicated bravado. Trying to scale the curtain wall, the brother fell and fractured his leg, which had sent Purvis on his rampage.

“What kind of man would try to break into a castle?” Nancy asked, mostly to herself. She was still trying to grasp that knight in shining armor and hermit voyeur were one and the same.

“What kind would defend his house with an axe?”

“Somebody with sense.” Once out of her mouth, this expression of solidarity with the eccentric embarrassed her. “Anyhow, I’m not pressing charges.”

“As you wish. Just let us know soon if you change your mind, and I’ll see what I can do.”

She knew she wouldn’t, because what she wanted most was to be left once more in peace, as far from the race track as she could get when not working. She’d long held a low opinion of those people. El-shaped sideburns that melted into jowls, sunburned backfat mounding into short necks, mirror sunglasses to reflect the wrecks of their faces and those on the track. Though she herself didn’t look much better, the tight skin of her face and ropy muscles were the result of living for two. Or two-and-a-half, given Jason’s extra challenge. Her lifestyle wasn’t a choice.

That afternoon, a sheepish Clement came by dressed in a moth-eaten suit and presented her with a spray of daffodils. Close up, he looked about eighty, what would have been her father’s age, and had brackish green eyes. His skin was soft and aristocratic, his nails manicured.

“Thanks for helping, I guess.”

“Don’t mention it, dear maiden. You and your boy are neighbors.”

He certainly had a quaint way of speaking, but just the mention of Jason in conjunction with last night’s violence flipped a switch in her. She stepped onto the porch, pulling the door shut. “But tell me why you been spying on us.”
Clement released a raspy sigh. “Just reconnaissance. Something I do with newcomers.”

“We like our space.”

“Sure!” He toddled forward. “Do forgive me. If you’ll only join me for supper tomorrow.”

She surveyed the castle’s gloomy tower and dark windows. He had to be kidding. Yet his face was eager. “My son’s not—”

“What you witnessed last evening was unusual. I’m peaceful. I only meant to protect.” His eyes watered, probably from gusty chambers. “I know your son’s not well.”

Though his diagnosis seemed intrusive, presumptuous, it was kind presumption. What’s more, it felt genuine. In Jason’s school years, other parents always said, *Oh, don’t be silly. Jason’s fine.* Then they’d ever so subtly steer their Wade or Misty to a different part of the room.

But surely she had the right to suspect an ax-wielder. “I’ll think on it.”

“Very well.”

She watched for ten minutes as he retraced the hundred yards uphill and entered his castle gates. How he’d worn a heavy suit of armor astonished her. He looked like he’d soon need a cane just to get to the john. If castles had johns. Poor soul. He’d be in an institution if he had any family spoiling for his castle, and if the white-suits could breach the wall.

***

Clement cranked open the gates at 6:00 sharp and bowed, visibly pleased to find Nancy and Jason outside. He marched them through the courtyard, gesturing at lichen-covered walls. “The fortress is a half-sized replica of William the Conqueror’s on Bristol Bay. That’s Bristol, England.” He winked at Jason. “Bill’s the king who put a little French in our English.”
Jason’s eyes saucered, and he fidgeted with his chin stubble as when meeting strangers. Nancy thought he’d hide behind her, a bear behind a post. Instead he stood at attention.

“He has the build of Sir Lancelot!” the old man cried.

True, that was true, though others would call it the build of Grendel.

Entering the miniaturized Great Hall, she felt oddly at home. From outside the castle had looked like a ruin. At best she’d expected stiff period furnishings, something like a museum, but the interior looked medieval and lived-in. She saw hunting tapestries, their fabrics faded from centuries of sunlight; candelabra, twisted with dried wax; an andironed blaze in the rear wall. She could understand why he’d want to protect such a place.

He treated them to the “baby-grand” tour, from the north tower to the dungeon. The rooms and hallways—dimensions no larger than those in an upscale house—offered claw-footed oak chairs, fur rugs, stained glass in autumn colors. They moved through the gentle tuck of doorways into candlelit stairwells. Most comforting to Nancy was the dungeon. Instead of whips and chains, Clement stored average junk down there. A pool table covered by plywood to serve as a work bench. A ten-speed Schwinn. Souvenir plates from the mountain west states.

They dined in the Great Hall on knotted benches. Clement served steaming earthen dishes of roasted capon and root-vegetable pottage. Rather than use a napkin, he wiped his hands on dark bread, which he then ate. Nancy found this rather disgusting but probably authentic. The adults-in-mind sipped mead from goblets while Jason gurgled grape juice.

“How do you like castle life, Young Jason?”

Her son perked up. “Yes,” he said.

Clement tapped his temple as if to indicate the wisdom of this answer. Nancy approved of him. He treated Jason like a kid, not a man-child, and everyone should be approached according to their inside
state, not exteriors.

“I think he likes it,” she said.

Clement blushed, or maybe it was the drink. He took more, the sleeve of his royal purple robe sliding up one pale forearm. “Let me explain why I built it. You’re curious, no?” He continued before she could nod. “This section of the world swarms with unsavory types. You’ve got racetrack people, gangs, bank robbers, child molesters.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Particularly difficult to raise a child with special needs.” He nodded toward Jason, whose face gleamed with chicken fat.

“We do all right.” Though she felt the stirrings of kinship with Clement, his simplifying her struggles to a battle between good and evil rubbed her the wrong way. His dressing up himself and her dressing up Jason were as different as castle and trailer. She remembered the eighth-grade teacher’s comment after Nancy declared she was removing Jason from the system. *I’m so proud of you for having such a big heart,* like Nancy had *chosen* to love her son rather than join a country club or take up drinking. “There’s more to it than keeping him safe from bad guys.”

“I’m sure you do fine,” Clement said quickly, but his expression shone with the same conviction that came with his mention of molesters. “It’s just that the unsavory types are getting worse. Bolder. Soon the law won’t be able to restrain them.”

This must be, thought Nancy, the side of Clement that sent him out at night in armor. “So you built a castle?”

“Yes, yes, yes.” He refilled his goblet, arm shaking on the ewer. “That I did. I came home from the European theater and built a castle. The war, it was terrible.”

“I’m sorry.” She wanted to avoid a long story, keep with the present. “But you never told me what
happened with Purvis. Are they going to charge you with anything?”

“Me! The police understood where I was coming from, protecting my land from intruders. You see, dear, they’re one seething mass of misdirection. Have I told you how many con artists I had to turn away who wanted to help me build? They couldn’t accept that, even if it took me fifty years, I needed to erect it on my own. A symbol for the Good.”

When chimes rang at 10:00, he looked hardly able to keep his head up. He’d been talking nonstop about Welsh armies, chivalry, sacrifice for ideals.

“You’ll have to excuse us, Bernard. Thanks for the hospitality.” She hoped using his first name would ease the departure, but when she motioned to her son, Jason gripped the sides of his saucer as if it were attached firmly to the castle. Though he certainly couldn’t have understood much of Clement’s ranting, he’d stayed wide awake, eyes riveted upon their drunken host, an hour past his bed time.

“I fear I’ve cast a pall over the evening with my opinions,” Clement said.

“No worries.” She caressed Jason’s fingers. She always had to coax him out of a temper. Sometimes this took hours. “He gets this way when it’s late.”

Their host stood unsteadily and wrapped his purple robe around himself, a magician preparing to disappear. “You may return whenever you like, Young Jason.” Her son’s fingers relaxed. “It would be a shame, however, if you couldn’t accompany this maiden in such a lawless land.” He pointed to a stained-glass window, set deep in the castle wall, at the night beyond. “It is our job to protect the good people of the valley.”

Jason was rapt. He looked almost intelligent, and Nancy’s heart swelled with a hope she thought she’d buried.

“Now take your mother home.”

Jason grabbed her hand, almost crushing it.
Clement stopped a few days later, bearing gifts: cod liver oil, blood pudding, frankincense. Standing inside their single-wide in his doublet and feathered hat, he looked to Nancy like a unicorn in a real pasture. She gave him her own tour. Living room, kitchen, dining room.

“A circle,” he said. “Brilliant! There is virtue in simple living.”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

He stayed for dinner. Nothing fancy. Pan-fried hamburgers, steamed veggies. “I haven’t eaten like this since the Norman Invasion,” he joked, dabbing his white whiskers with a napkin.

His adaptability pleased Nancy, even something so little switching from bread to paper.

“And what do you do, by the way, my dear maiden?”

The next day, all three were at the race track. Clement and Jason munched on butter-dipped roasted corn and pretzels near Nancy’s concession stand while the cars burned ovals. She made them wear earplugs and sunblock, boater hats. NASCAR culture had surrounded her as long as she could remember. In high school one tough girl had even threatened to press a lit cigarette into her shoulder unless she named her favorite driver. When she told her father, he bought her a Richard Petty T-shirt and winked. If you can’t beat them now, fool them till you can. Had he lived, he would’ve been proud of her marriage to an educated man, even though Billy Ray’s mechanical engineering degree married them to NASCAR for good.

Near her shift’s end, a reprimand in a familiar voice reached her ears. “What on God’s green earth are you plotting, heathen?”

By the time she’d dropped the ladle into the chili and burst out of the concession stand, a man with revered number three shaved into his back hair towered over Clement. Jason was laughing. When Clement spotted her coming, he jumped into action, as if it were expected of him. Reaching up, he
slapped the giant across the face with the buttery husk. Nearby racing fans had to restrain the giant while Nancy apologized and escorted her charges outside.

“I’d hoped you’d keep my child out of trouble,” she scolded Clement on the road back to their hollow. “Now I’m going to get my pay docked. They could even can me.”

“Those people are sub-human!” he cried. He sat dazed in the passenger seat of her Subaru, white hair standing on end.

Nancy recalled the fans who’d restrained the “ogre” from manhandling Clement. There’d been a family of three wearing the jerseys of different racers. A woman who looked ninety but was probably sixty had tapped at the ogre with her cane. Not sightly, but human. “You need to be tactful. This isn’t Europe.”

“Point taken, dear maiden. One just loses one’s head sometimes. One gets the impression of inbred conspiracy.”

When he begged her to take him back the following workday, she relented only with his vow to behave. She reasoned also that any bleacher-mate wrath would be directed at him rather than her boy. Still she kept her senses sharp. Only once did he erupt in high-pitched outrage. Luckily it was directed at a child whose parents weren’t present, and no retaliation resulted.

A week into their new routine, he’d become a respectable babysitter and racing fan, though not a fan of other racing fans. On the other hand, she noticed—or imagined—a murmur in the crowd, furtive glances at the odd duck who’d descended to watch the races. She spotted people of the ogre mold congregating by exits, gesturing toward the pair, or maybe toward the track. She couldn’t be sure.

She fed Clement most nights. After dinner, he liked to “fix” things around the trailer, a favor usually little more than cosmetic. He installed a dragon-faced knocker on their cheap front door. He hung a few musty tapestries over the wood wall paneling. He situated the skull of a large animal over
the sink fixture, with cold and hot water handles coming out the eyeholes.

“I guess it’s a little more like a castle now,” she’d say, surveying the latest anachronism.

He was their first friend. *That* she’d decided. When he came around, she didn’t feel so much like she and Jason were living in a glass bubble in a mad, rock-throwing planet.

***

“I don’t see the foreign dude today, but his gimp’s here.”

This remark came on a Friday Clement had taken off for feeling “a mite gouty.” The speaker was an obese twenty-something with stringy hair, his companion a human tattoo with shaved head. Her coworker, Tanya, had just served them Coors.

“The *gimp* is my son, villain.” It was as if Clement spoke through her.

“What you call me?”

“And the foreigner’s his grandfather.” When Nancy thought later about why she’d claimed a relation, she’d tell herself that *grandfather* sounded more proprietary, safer, than *neighbor*. She had to wonder, though, if it hadn’t been a wish for what Jason had never enjoyed, the pleasure of knowing his true grandfather. “Bugger off.” She was going with it now. Entirely in character.

“You sound funny. Where you from?”

“A castle.”

The narrowing of the obese fellow’s eyes made her look at him again to assure herself he wasn’t Purvis. No, the hair was too long, and he was older. But the comment had angered him somehow. Her grip tightened on the chili spatula in her hand. “You. Leave. Us. Alone.”

He kept the stare until his tattooed buddy tugged him away, leaving their beers.

“You shouldn’t have told them,” Tanya said, her face flat, broiled by years over concrete.

“What?” Nancy still gripped the spatula.
“That you’re in with Clement. The Evans kid will find out.”

“You know Purvis?”

“They all know each other. You saw how that creep looked at you.”

The talk was strange. “I insulted him.”

“Just take my advice and drop it. Don’t mention it no more.”

Nancy set the spatula on the beer cooler, pulled off her apron and left the stand. No thugs in sight.

Twilight coming on, the bleachers dazzled in picture flashes. Just now the horde of screaming machines were rounding the near bend, two of them nudging noses for the lead. She found Jason lumped on the end of a bench, an untouched pretzel on his lap.

“Come with me, honey. I want you to stay in the booth for a little while.” This was against the rules, but Tanya wouldn’t report her.

Jason didn’t respond. He glared toward the donut marks some victor had left on the infield. Once he got in a routine, whether it was going to bed at 9:00, ignoring his eighth-grade teacher, or coming to the race track with a new friend, it was hard to break him.

“Please, honey.”

She reached for his plate only to have him press it down on his lap. Standing beside the bleachers she felt exposed, so she sat on the concrete step. A few people were faced their way, studying the spectacle. One woman with frosted hair. An overweight man. Could Tanya be right? Could they know each other? She traced the patterns of color and texture through the audience, the garish red and orange jerseys, the checkered flags, the cylinders of tepid beer. That was silly. To believe in such connections was to share Clement’s paranoia. Better to be safe, though.

“Fancy a stroll, young Lancelot?”

Jason stood at once, plate and pretzel sliding to the soda-sticky concrete. Shifting back into
Clement’s argot had been easy enough. They marched back through the crowd between nosebleed and terrace seating. She glanced at the oval-spun cars, snarling orange metal cages with helmets inside. Front-row seating, amidst fumes and strips of flying rubber, looked more like torture than recreation. She threaded her fingers with Jason’s and turned away from the track. “I’m glad, Lancelot, that we’ve at last come for the jousting, our king’s favorite event.”

Jason giggled at the change in his mother’s voice.

If she squinted at the nosebleed crowd beyond him, she could alter the miniature victory flags into ladies’ handkerchiefs, the flashy sunglasses into tiaras. The corndogs were rendered legs of mutton; the Coors became mulled cider. Just then they were arriving at the queen’s box seating. “What a glorious day!”

But Jason had stopped. His mitt jerked her back against him.

“You turned away a man in need, ma’am.”

The twang of the voice, the outline of the man by her concession stand, these communicated danger like a fox-scented breeze. She’d seen Purvis only once, a hulking figure in her driveway, but she knew him right away. He wore the same Earnhardt jersey, puffed through the same red-splotched cheeks. From the downy starter sideburns she guessed him late teens or early twenties.

“Take me to your old man. That’s all. Having that castle ain’t fair.”

She could have at that moment denied relation to Clement, but she was full of him just then, full of whatever filled him. “You might recall, scoundrel, that I didn’t press charges.” Jason’s excited grip on her hand sent a shooting pain up her arm, but she didn’t want to draw any attention to him. “Now if you’ll please move aside, we mean to pass.”

“I’ll get my revenge.” Purvis pressed a meaty palm against the latched door, a motion that must have alerted Nancy coworker inside to the situation.
Tanya pushed out and elbowed Purvis aside. It seemed that the women who belonged among these ogres could handle them. “Bring Jason right in here.”

“Blood’s blood,” he said as they moved past. His breath smelled of salt pork, sour clothes.

Inside, Nancy pressed her face into Jason’s chest. My dear, dear boy.

Tanya closed the door. “It’s finished.” She put an arm around Nancy’s shoulders. Small comfort. Nancy felt as capable of protecting her son as this plywood shack was of withstanding the cheering mass outside. The long-hair had known Purvis.

“I think he threatened me.”

“Those types ain’t nothing but talk. Don’t pay him mind.”

Nancy gazed over the domestic beer taps and hot dog condiments at the crowd. How many of the faces she saw everyday now saw her and Jason in a different light? How many placed them in the castle? “You’re probably right,” she said. “Just talk.”

***

That night she awoke to what sounded like firecrackers. At first she thought herself imprisoned. The bed was hard, and the unfamiliar furniture in the room wobbled under candlelight. The walls were stone. What had she done? Then she remembered. From outside came horn blares and shouts. Her first thought was to call the police; her second was that the castle had no phone, might as well be hunkered down in the 11th century. She’d made a horrible mistake. But when you flee a cracker-box in a swelling crowd, sure at any moment a face will appear, do you seek refuge in a shack of aluminum and tin? No. You look for higher ground. A fortress.

As she’d driven from the racetrack, Jason buckled beside her, she considered going to the police. But “Blood’s blood” is all he’d said. Maybe he’d receive a warning, but he wasn’t finished. His hatred ran too deep. It was the enmity of an entire race for Bernard’s beacon of good, and somehow a mother
protecting her child had gotten mixed in it. Turning off Speedway Boulevard onto the winding two-lane that led to the hollow, she looked twice at a man skulking by an outbuilding. A mile in, she jerked the wheel into the oncoming lane, startled by a drab pick-up parked halfway on the shoulder, a white rag tied on the rearview. Jason had started to hum in his basso voice, something he did when she made him nervous.

“I’m just jumpy, that’s all.” She mussed his hair.

At the bottom of their driveway, she didn’t stop to get the mail. She floored the Subaru over the twig- and leaf-littered asphalt, pausing only a moment before deciding not to stop by their trailer. What had made her fly to the gates of Clement Castle and blare the horn until he admitted her? Nothing really. Just a hunch, something a mother learns. She’d spotted a few things out of place around their front door—a flower pot, a large stone—as if someone had been searching for a spare key. That had been enough to seek a night’s refuge in the castle, to treat her neighbor at last to the gratification that this Bristol had needed a castle.

The popping and yells in the night beyond the castle walls told her she’d been right. She roused her groggy son from the rude guest bed beside hers and pushed him ahead of her down the spiral staircase to the Great Hall. There they found Clement pacing beside the banquet table, sloshing goblet in his hand.

“Young Jason, we’re under attack.”

“Why are you speaking to my child?” Nancy needed the assertive Clement now, the medieval warrior king.

Clement wrung his hands. “Pardon me, madam. I only wanted to comfort him.”

“I’ll take care of him. You take care of us.”
“We must wait.” He could’ve reminded her they’d flown to him. That she’d put herself in this situation. But he didn’t. He dropped a hand on her shoulder. “When a castle is besieged, it helps the good people inside not to waste their energy. Most of the time the enemy gives up.”

“Besieged,” she thought she heard Jason repeat. He was fully awake, humming with energy.

“Help me start a fire,” Clement said, apparently to Jason. Jason make a fire?

As her son moved away from her with the old man, she didn’t object. They were in his hands now, where she’d put them. Before she could change her mind, she returned to the guest chamber, where she stood in the center of the circular room, high in a tower.

“I’m sorry, Nancy.” Clement must have been standing behind her several moments.

She looked behind him, saw only shadowy stone. “Where’s Jason?”

In the half-light from the candles, she could see the sweat on Clement’s lip. He turned to the doorway. “Pack in as many logs as you can, Young Jason.”

“Yes,” came the response.

“Then what is it?”

“I’ve done a horrible thing. Caused a horrible thing to happen.” Outside of the danger to her son, she could imagine nothing horrible. Yet Clement’s sudden gloom seemed thousands of years old. “Yes, yes, yes. I—.” He stopped. “I must show you.”

He left the room ahead of her, his robe filled like a sail, and hurried up the tower staircase. The wall candles guttered in his wake. He opened the hatch to the tower deck and motioned her up. The wind on the deck surprised her, as if it were trying to blow her over the ramparts and back in time. “I’m sorry, dear,” Clement was saying. She grasped a crenellated tooth of rock and looked where he was pointing.
In the distance fire bloomed, sending glowing ashes into the atmosphere. The open-mouthed faces of Purvis and his horde were lit by her burning trailer.

“I should never have built it.”

She heard but didn’t respond. It no longer mattered what had brought them to this moment she’d always feared, losing everything that sustained them, being deprived of her powers to care in her own way for Jason. Clement said nothing more, for which she was grateful. She needed to concentrate—or else she’d faint, die, scream. Squinting at her burning trailer she tried to see only a bonfire outside the gates of a castle. She willed the NASCAR profiles to be none other than barbarians warming themselves for another charge, gnawing on charred gristle and bone. The rocks and trees and stars around the fire, those were simply England, a land before law.

“Things are okay, Bernard. We’re here. Safe.”

She gazed out at the new world she’d made, an older one, everything seeming fresh and violent. Straightforward. Things were what they appeared.

***

She didn’t notice Clement had vanished until the barbarians turned from the fire and approached. Their hoots sent her back down the stairwell, through the regal passageways with their musty drapes, verdigris-covered shields, trailing portrait eyes. In the Great Hall, she discovered Jason wearing a visored battle helmet. On one arm he carried a shield that looked like it weighed 150 pounds. In the opposite hand, a spear. Cloth had been wrapped around the blade, rendering it harmless, a piece of paper spiked on top.

“What’s Clement, honey? Why are you wearing that?”

She took the paper from the spear. *The castle is yours. Papers in my room.* So he’d forsaken her by drawing up a will on the sly. Maybe back on the parapets she’d been mentally preparing to share his
fantasy. Out of the wind, though, beyond the sight of her burning home, she feared she wasn’t ready to
live in the castle. Not without Clement, or what he represented. She wouldn’t know where to start, how
to relearn an entire way of life.

“Move out of the way.”

Her son was blocking the front door. When she tried to step around, Jason dropped the spear and
gripped her arm in a hairy fist. The spear made a skeletal clatter on the floor. It was as though Clement
had cast a spell on him. If she could only remove his helmet and see his face, its rough skin around
doepy eyes.

“Take that off this instant.”

She reached for the corroded metal with her free hand but was pushed to the floor, where she
scraped a knee on the flagstones. Tears came to her eyes without running over. Outside she heard a
familiar groan, the gate opening, followed by a strident roar.

She didn’t stand again to approach her son but instead crawled into the adjacent sitting area and
raised her eye to one of the many peep holes augured into the wall. The night beyond was stone,
headlights, angry faces. The barbarians were, of course, no longer barbarians. She looked at their
sunburned faces, their NASCAR get-ups, their mullets. In the front stood Purvis, leering like a kid
waiting for a wreck. Then she saw Clement. No helmet this time. No shield. His handsome white hair
shone like the castle rocks. Clement the Conqueror. The Fool. Later she’d think up the reasons he’d
given his armor to her already-protected son. It was to keep Jason on task, guarding the door. It was to
keep her from treating him as a child, coaxing him away. It was to disguise the person he’d abandoned
just as all the rest had, to dress a boy in men’s clothes. It was to die. Above all, it was to give up the
other Bristol for this one.

But she couldn’t think about all that now. Couldn’t watch. She slid down the wall until her hands
rested on the cool ground. For now she could only think how she’d been a fool, too. One day she’d die, and Jason would be more alone than ever. All because she’d tried to protect him, fought for him with tooth and nail. And for what? So he’d one day be alone. There he stood—helmet still in place, shield hanging effortlessly on a forearm. Her son. A man for a moment.
Me and Spicer at dinner on his porch when we spot people eating the Myers’ mansion. Spicer’s world-wide boss at Maui Dave’s Sunscreen downtown. He’s got us both in white seersucker, sweating on the porch under the evening sun. We’re smeared in Number 45 because all races burn, he say. He’s a business man. Here on Grandview, where Spicer brought me, all the homes are mansions. Each one’s the size of six or seven Southside row homes and about two gutted warehouses apart. Instead of concrete and newspaper-stuffed bums and half-lit liquor signs, Grandview got trees and birds and lawnmowers. Some of the blonde-haired girls walk around with hula hoops and sell drinks on the corner. I’ve never see nothing quite like those people eating the Myers’ place, though.

From here they look like them destruction workers that tore down the homes in my old neighborhood, making everything ready for the Gentries, except those workers wore helmets and bulletproof vests. These are dressed in regular clothes—sweats, pantsuits, muumuus—and they’re more swarming than working. From their black faces, I can see most be brothers and sisters. The swarm chomps down to the Myers’s grass and in no time starts on the Fairfax’s. Dust and rubble flies everywhere in a big cloud. Two young punks are fighting over a little playhouse in the yard—an exact copy of the regular house—but they chill out after a sec and start on opposite corners of the tiny roof. Being Saturday, the Fairfax family’s at home, and they escape in a Tahoe only the biggest thug in Southside could shell out for. The shriek of their tires makes me think of teeth on my bones. I shiver.

“Spicer, I think that swarm’s coming at your house.”

“Our house. And no, dear boy. They know better than to bother the backbone of Peoria.” My new pops is an ancient white dude with skin baby soft. “Let’s focus on dinner.”

“I ain’t hungry.”
“Aren’t. Watch me.” He rips off his lobster’s little legs. This morning he stood behind me in the mirror for a half-hour while I put on the 45, showed me how to rub till the white disappeared, which took longer on my skin. It was creepy, like he doing voodoo. He twists off the big pincher. “This appendage is the crusher claw. What’s remarkable about this Downeast delicacy is that each square inch of speckled chitin conceals a juicy morsel.” He cracks it with nunchuck-looking things and pokes out the pale meat, dips it in a saucer of soft butter. “That’s delicious.”

A growing buzz makes me look back toward the swarm; they’re already halfway down the block. Closer up they look like normal people, but how they’re acting ain’t right. More desperate than China, that crackhead on my old block. One nappy-haired brother sticks his whole head in the Brinkers’ chimney. A lady in a housecoat like my mama’s is chowing down the gazebo. Bricks tossed everywhere, a whole wall falls down with just a few bites.

“This never happen on Southside.” I’m all tensed and ready to run, but Spicer just breaks down that lobster and wipes his long fingers on his bib.

“Dear boy, you’ve a new life. Much to learn. In two years, you’ll caddy for the club. Then you’ll read at Bradley. Never thought you’d be so lucky, eh?”

The club’s across the street, kind of like the MLK center on Western, but with golf instead of b-ball. “Look like they gonna eat the club.”

Spicer shakes his head, sucks meat out of a leg before answering. “Think of your less fortunate brethren out there as nomadic African army ants. Occasionally they’ll sweep through and devour the terrain—be it neighborhood or ghetto, they don’t discriminate—but they always move on. Grandview will rebound.”

I miss Southside. My momma passed from the white rot that started when the destruction workers came. The rot spread from her feet, like she was extra ashy. By morning she’d turned the color of chalk.
I ran out the house and never came back. So they put me at Christian Brothers in East Bluff with some other hoods whose mommas died. Two days later, some white dude with a cane and glowing face strolled into the common room. Spicer. All the nuns acted like he was Jesus resurrected. He pointed me out, and before I knew it, I was living here. The Star reported he has a big heart for adopting me.

He pushes my lobster toward me. He’s so calm, I can’t help but be a little too.

“Did I tell you, son, that Roosevelt the First, our president who saved the American Eden from industrialists, declared Grandview the world’s most beautiful drive? We’ve a vista of the Illinois, lush gardens. Now, please eat.” He begins pulling meat out of his own shell again.

I look at the creature on my plate—red bug your mamma make you squash. “I’m going in for a drink.” Spicer gives me all the Jungle Pop I want. It’s his own trademark.

“No need to flee. They’re passing us by, just as I predicted.” He doesn’t stop messing with his dinner to look up.

Even though a few brothers and sisters are still picking through the Brinkers’ foundation, some have already sidestepped us, headed for the Hensons’. It’s been weeks since I’ve seen a brother’s face, but I’m glad these are passing by.

“You ain’t say why they don’t eat this house.” I hate not being answered.

Like he senses this, Spicer stare me in the eye, just like them suits on the news look out the TV. “I financed the glass-paneled arcade at the civic center, dear boy. I restored the Spirit of Peoria on the waterfront. People love me in this town because I’ve saved their skin.” He winks, but his protected cheek don’t even wrinkle.

As the swarm passes, I spot Daryl and Cedric, hoods from Christian Brothers. Both bulge with brick and mortar. That day Spicer arrived, Cedric told me the old man put his money on taking Southside for the Gentries. Everything that old dude touch make a brother sick. Spicer come up then
and say to me, I’m here to give you a true taste of home, of the world, of life! Cedric shake his head from across the room, but I went with the old man anyway. Nobody wants to be around them nuns and a bunch of brothers with no mothers.

“Here’s the most succulent part.” Spicer’s got his lobster upside down and spread wide, showing green gunk. “The tomalley!” It looks like the guacamole we ate on Guadeloupe night.

Even though the danger’s passed—even though Spicer always be right—I’m feeling ill just now. Plus, I don’t want my boys to see me here on the porch, so I get up and duck inside.

“Bring me a glass too, if you wouldn’t mind,” he calls after. “With ice.”

But I don’t walk down the hall toward the kitchen. I make a left into the parlor, which look like a TV room with no TV. Besides framed Maui Dave posters, my new pops stuffed his parlor with souvenirs from around the world: African masks with straw hanging off, Moroccan wash basin, silk folding screen painted with Chinese flowers. My momma kept junk too; except hers was from Peoria. Thursday nights we’d take the 34 up to the Heights. Friday’s trash day for white people, she’d say. Most of the time we found something she wanted on a quiet corner and lugged it back to Southside on the bus. I never could see where it got her.

At the window I watch the brothers and sisters work next door on the Hensons’. The roof’s already gone, like at the burned-out grocery on Western. A dude with a big ass be hanging off one wall. A momma got her baby sucking on the banister. It’s strange they won’t eat the biggest mansion of all. Probably everybody just paranoid like Cedric about my new pops. He and Daryl crouch on the patio, stuffing cream-colored pavers into each other’s grills. It looks fun.

My stomach growls because lunch was poi, some Hawaiian gunk that I didn’t want either, and I wonder now just how a rich house tastes.

Getting out Spicer’s limo and walking up here that first time, I seen a gingerbread house. I’d been
real hungry cause the nuns don’t give you nothing for breakfast but oatmeal and milk. They bitches. Spicer’s crib is cut with arches and Hershey-brown doors. The columns are chiseled like circus peanuts, and the roof over my head looked from the yard like beef jerky. So why don’t nobody eat it? Those nuns at Christian Brothers say I’m lucky to live here. Maybe I am. But I don’t see why me and Spicer have to eat lobster and paella and fish eggs and all that nasty food you got to be born eating to like. I’m hungry, and my momma’s dead, and before I know it I’m chomping on the parlor window sill.

It might be a fancy window, but it’s no Mac D’s. Sort of crunchy with a tropical tang. Still, it beats lobster. Outside, a few sisters cross Grandview for the country club; it feels good to be a small, secret part of what they’re doing. I take another bite and watch my old people waddle their bloated selves onto the golf course. One lady tears into the steering wheel of an abandoned golf cart; another stuffs the putting flag down her throat. I won’t eat quite so much as them, I decide. Just enough so the old man won’t notice.

I’m leaning to dab my lips with the curtain when the first jolt hits me. Pinchers in my stomach. I never ate any of the lobster, but it must have somehow sneaked through my skin when I touched it. Sweat breaks out on my forehead like it did on my momma. Except I’m not turning white. It’s something different. My stomach hurts so bad I curl up on the floor and hold my knees. I think I shit my pants. The lobster inside me has babies that swim through my blood, gouging my veins. Momma, momma, momma. I must not be like the others. Been spoiled by the old man. I rock back and forth with my eyes shut, scared to look down and see my body half gone. Rock, rock, rock. Momma, momma, momma.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO THE THIRD PROBLEM (WITH HUMAN EXAMPLES)

*Read the instructions below before attempting the exercise. Beginning the exercise before reading the instructions may skew the results.*

Instructions:

You have a hole and more objects than can fit in the hole. You also have a problem. The objects are yours, but the hole is *more* yours. That is, you consider it more a part of you. To make the objects equally yours (to solve The First Problem), you decide to put some of the objects inside the hole. This solution to The First Problem results in The Second Problem: your sadness over the hole’s filling. It is no longer the hole you knew. Technically, it is not even a hole. The Third Problem derives from The Second (i.e. your sadness).

Exercise:

Now that you have read the instructions, your first task is to re-imagine filling the hole. Begin by emptying the hole (or poem). Next pick up the objects (again) in whatever order you choose. You might, for instance, take whichever one your hand (or eye, or desire) falls upon. Alternatively, you

---

1. It may be impossible to read the instructions before beginning the exercise.
2. Human example: You obtain a lover, causing loneliness in your best friend. This is called jealousy and has been treated in works of literature such as *Othello*, *1001 Nights*, and *The Kreutzer Sonata*.
3. Human example: You encourage your lover and your best friend to spend more time together, hoping to make your best friend feel more included. This is called generosity. Examples of generosity can be discovered in almost any work by Charles Dickens, particularly those involving orphans or the low-born.
4. Some theorists skip The Second Problem entirely and argue that The Third Problem derives from the filling of the hole, rather than from the sadness. Others dispute the basic distinction between problems and solutions.
5. Wordsworth defined poetry as overflowing emotion recollected in tranquility. You might then, according to your temperament and literary tastes, pretend you are writing a poem instead of refilling a hole.
might select objects in the reverse order in which you removed them, or follow a random order. Place them one by one into the hole (or poem) until you believe it full.

Now stop. Put down whatever object you are holding. The reasoning: Nothing else will fit. You are now free to imagine experiencing The Third Problem (i.e. Was it worth it?).

Forget The Second Problem. Look at the objects on the ground around you. These objects on the ground are those that could not fit because a.) you decided not to put them in sooner, b.) they were too large, c.) you feared losing their familiarity, or d.) you did not notice them. In other words, this is what you are left with: what you didn’t put in. The problem: Was it worth it?

See Dadaism. Also, whether or not following one’s desire is different from following a random order is a matter of ongoing contention, largely among psychoanalytical theorists.

Whatever happened to The Second Problem? One theory is that The Second Problem and The Third Problem are actually counterparts, one being in the “heart” and the other in the “head,” respectively. This theory has, however, been discredited by those who find The Second Problem inferior to The Third Problem (see *Getting a Head in Coleridge* by Theodore Mellon). A second theory holds that the two problems have a correlative, not a causal, relationship (see *Romancing the Enlightenment* by Desiree Chambers). A third theory—by far the most popular in literary circles today—is that problems must be solved in the opposite direction of their engendering. Thus, The Second Problem should not be approached before The Third Problem is sufficiently understood, if not solved. Although this third theory has enjoyed quite a bit of prominence in the aforementioned circles, objections have already surfaced as footnotes in leading journals. One such objection is that The First Problem was solved before The Third Problem. In fact, it was the solution to The First Problem that made it even possible to detect the other problems.

Human example: You believe you have moved everything out of your ex-lover’s apartment, though you are not positive. Some thorny considerations: You and your ex-lover bought some items together. Other belongings (such as books) shifted ownership as one party grew tired of them while the other gained an interest. Finally, you originally borrowed a few objects (other books) from your ex-best friend, who will soon move into the apartment.

If this exercise has made you feel the urgency of The Third Problem (i.e. Was it worth it?) then it has served its function. If not, then write to 142 Escondido Ave., Parkview, CA 90205 for more human and literary examples. A literary exercise approaching The Second Problem is forthcoming.
The art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly.

-Walter Benjamin

On the day I decided to interview the storyteller, I found him in front of my college telling one about a lame puppy. The short man parted his inky hair and wore spectacles with enormous circular lenses that perched on the point of his nose. Bystanders—nurses on smoke breaks, a hot-dog man, fellow students, a surprising number of homeless—were laughing because the lame puppy dives deep into the Atlantic Ocean and slays an underwater dragon.

The storyteller’s pinstriped suit and silk handkerchief had convinced me of his affluence—at least in cultural riches—but the bystanders who’d come out of Mike’s Campus Java offered their change, which he accepted, bowing like a Japanese businessman. I had only a twenty from the ATM and didn’t know quite how to approach him since I guessed his skill was telling stories, not being interviewed.

“That was a good story.”

“No, it wasn’t.” He pressed his spectacles up so that they owled his dark eyes. “Good stories always make an audience cry.”

His resistance surprised me, though I realize now he’d hoped for money along with the compliment. “What about funny stories? They don’t make people cry.”

“The good ones do.”

Laugh till you cry. It wasn’t what I’d meant, but I let it go.

“When did you know you wanted to be a storyteller?”

“My folks made me. Since a child I’ve dreamed of being a chemical engineer.” He related this enviable biofactoid with indifference while counting his earnings, aimed a shiny leather shoe as if to
I want to be a storyteller, so I practice on my parents, Jean and Rick, who aren’t storytellers. I tell them the storyteller’s story. Once upon a time, the storyteller was born in Akron, Ohio.

“Who is this man you met?” Rick asks.

“She didn’t say it was a man,” Jean says. “Why do you assume?”

“Don’t interrupt my story.”

The storyteller’s parents urged him to be a furniture salesman or family therapist, jobs that had worked out okay for them.

“We’d never ask you to be just like us,” Jean says.

“Thank you.”

“We enjoy our jobs even though they’re steady,” Rick says.

“Thank you.”

The storyteller’s parents always interrupted him when he tried to tell a story. They’d think the story was a secret code criticizing their parenting skills. Their narcissistic interpretations of his stories made him feel sheltered and incompetent. It seemed to the young storyteller that his themes hadn’t yet overstepped the threshold of childhood. So he saved up over three summers of mowing lawns and painting fences and—

“Very thrifty.”

“Rick, you’re interrupting her, just like she said.”

He saved up money and after high school hitchhiked all around the kingdom, gathering tales of peasant life. Some were bawdy, expressing desires the storyteller had been taught to repress; some were
practical, meant to pass on crucial knowledge such as how to churn butter or swing a scythe. Others were myths and fairy tales in which folk heroes defended society from monsters that secretly represented the peasantry.

When the storyteller returned from a year among the lowly, a first beard disguised his baby cheeks and he wore the homespun browns and grays of the impoverished. His parent flung their arms around him and promised he could be whatever he wanted so long as he never left them again. He still wanted to be a storyteller, so he wandered around Akron by day telling stories to anyone who would listen. Usually the passersby would glance at his clothes and give him wide berth, sometimes flipping a coin his way. Akron just wasn’t like the rest of the kingdom in earthy appreciation for folklore.

“Ah, a moral,” Rick says.

Then one day, combing The Beacon for literary event listings, the storyteller saw an advertisement for creative-writing classes at the local college, which offered open admissions. His parents were glad to pay so long as it kept him off the street. He signed up for a class with the storyteller-in-residence, Jack Gatherer, and for the first time was treated to a captive audience. Even though Gatherer required that they write the stories down for the others to read on their own—very different from the improvising around bonfires the storyteller had learned to love—they at least discussed each story together. Gatherer’s classroom became an island of humanity in the metropolis.

***

“Who taught you that good stories have to make people cry?”

I’d located the storyteller the next day in a bustling playground. He wore the same pinstripes, sat on a swing surrounded by elementary school children.

“Jack Gatherer.” He didn’t even turn away from the children’s eager faces to answer my question.

“Jack Gatherer? He’s my teacher, too.” The only thing was, Jack had just graduated from an MFA
program, and this was his first teaching job.

“Not that one. Mine was much older.”

“Tell us another story,” the children sang. “The one about the puppy and the dragon.”

“It’s the only one they want to hear.” The storyteller mopped his high brow with the silk handkerchief. It was ninety out.

I squatted with the children. “Maybe they like it because it’s funny.”

“Yes!” they screamed.

“They have no taste. They’re children.”

“I think yours is limited.”

“Limitation is at the heart of the business.”

A little blond boy, about nine or ten, stood up next to the storyteller. “Tell another story, or I’ll punch you.”

***

The college where the storyteller took Jack Gatherer’s class was high in the mountains above Akron. All the buildings were made of stone cut from the cliffs. The desks had been hewn out of giant forest trees. Every morning, Jack Gatherer roared up outside the classroom on a refurbished Harley, the same bike he’d later die on for refusing to wear a helmet. He liked to let his gray ponytail fly behind him in the wind.

Once Jack Gatherer had been an apprentice at the same college, under a different storyteller-in-residence. As an apprentice he’d told riveting tales that captured the earth-rhythm of his hometown in Washington state. His fellow apprentices always cried when they heard his stories about loggers, waitresses, quarrymen, truck drivers, and the homeless. The characters felt to the students like their people, even though the students were all from Ohio and Indiana, one or two from Michigan. They
wished they’d been born in Jack’s hometown of 357 people. The storyteller-in-residence cried so much when he read one called “Hurting Animals” that he sent it to the Spanish court for the Queen to read. She read it, cried, and issued a writ that all literate subjects must read it on pain of death. Jack Gatherer’s literary career was born.

“I thought this story was about the storyteller,” Jean says.

“It is.”

“No, the first storyteller. The one at the beginning.”

“This is the beginning.”

***

“How do you know when to begin a story?”

“When I know the beginning.”

“That’s not useful.”

“When I know the ending.” The storyteller offered me a licorice, but I declined. We sat on a pier at the wharf, swinging bare feet above the water. Every half hour or so a ship would sail off, or another would return.

“You answers are fake-obscure. How do you know when to end a story?”

“When I stop talking.”

“All aboard!” called a captain, as if his sailboat were the Titanic and the three or four crewmen smoking on the pier were his multitude of doomed passengers.

“You’re no help.”

“I’m not supposed to help.” The storyteller chewed his licorice, gazing out to sea. “I’m a storyteller, not a storyteller-in-residence.”

Sensing black depression, I used a trick I’d heard on NPR interviews: flattery. “You'd be a fine
storyteller-in-residence. You could move to a school.”

“My home is here.” He slipped the rest of his licorice behind the handkerchief in his pocket.

The day’s interview felt at an end. I wondered what his house looked like, what was so special about it that he couldn’t leave for a teaching job. I figured it could be a grand estate, he an entrepreneur’s son, or just a humble storyteller’s cottage, hidden by trees in the city park.

***

Jack Gatherer’s influence over the storyteller was profound, some would say too profound. By the time the storyteller graduated with a creative writing degree, he believed with scientific certainty that a story was good only if spectators cried, the effect all his teacher’s stories had. But times had changed in the world outside the academy. The storyteller’s parents were long dead, the grass thick above their graves. The steam engine, telephone, and VCR had been invented, and the nation boomed with industry. The sense the graduate got was that people had even less interest in or time for stories. News was what they wanted.

A small window of opportunity remained for him. He would seek Jack Gatherer’s help, ask him to share his royal connections. The storyteller had heard that working as a court jester wasn’t so bad even if it was selling out to the “light” humor school. He revised his thesis and made an appointment with his former teacher.

Jack Gatherer sat in his office, cowboy boots propped on his desk, gray hair shining in an angle of afternoon sunlight, when the storyteller entered. _Before you take a seat, young man_—Gatherer had never learned the storyteller’s name—_I should tell you that this is no good._ He held up the thesis before dropping it into a conveniently placed wastebasket. _My eyes didn’t even consider watering._ This is the same feedback Gatherer had given him at the defense, at which point he'd also dropped the thesis into the trash before passing him anyway. It was the same demonstration he provided all his students. But it
got to the storyteller now. Knees about to buckle, he found a chair. *But, sir, I don’t know how to make people cry. Isn’t there another way?* Gatherer rolled up his flannel sleeves. *You need real-world experience, the school of hard knocks.* The storyteller wanted to cry. *That’s what I had before enrolling, I had real-world material and wanted to learn how to tell it.* Gatherer had stopped listening. Already his mind had wandered to real-world concerns, such as traffic conditions for his bike ride home.

“I told you she can’t get a job with a creative writing degree.” Rick’s cheeks labor with breath.

“Settle down.” Jean has always been the patient one.

That night, the same in which Jack Gatherer crashed his motorcycle, the storyteller started west along the Oregon Trail, catching rides on pioneer wagons. In the territory towns—Deadwood, Tombstone, Leghorn—the storyteller walked up and down the muddy central streets, telling stories to whomever would listen. Often he was taken for a charlatan because people of the Old West were very suspicious of strangers, and the storyteller didn’t have a letter of reference from back east. He wrote for one but received a telegram that Gatherer had run his motorcycle into a barn and died in the hospital, students weeping around him. For the first time the storyteller was really on his own.

He grew up fast in the Old West. Because competition was the spirit of the new age, even the smallest towns crawled with storytellers, all vying to become the laureate of a territory, a town, or even a telegraph office. Some were fresh out of MFA programs, others self-taught, most very lousy. The storyteller found himself in duels almost every day. These occurred in saloons rather than on the street like a gunfight. Surrounded at a card table by outlaws, lawmen, prostitutes, and miners, two storytellers would take turns measured by the level of the referee’s beer. Tears from the crowd scored the highest points unless accompanied by laughter, which scored the lowest. A year on this circuit taught the storyteller to make listeners giggle, swear, sneer, fall asleep, dance—once he even gave a croupier an aneurysm—but he never got them to cry. Only an Iowa graduate named Jack Farmer could call the
saltwater from those sun-baked, cholera spotted eyes. And that’s how Jack Farmer, not our storyteller, won the West.

Jean and Rick are rocking with laughter, rubbing tears—the wrong tears—from their squints.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Sorry, honey.”

***

I next met the storyteller in the town square. The pinstrips on his suit were crooked, as if drawn by someone half-asleep. And he looked exhausted. The part in his hair had shifted down just above his ear. His pocket held no handkerchief.

“You look horrible.”

“I am.”

I offered him some licorice I’d bought on the way over.

“No, thanks. It reminds me of myself.”

I hate licorice. I returned it to my pocket.

“Today I want to ask you about the storyteller’s lifestyle. Where do you live? What do you eat? How do you deal with storyteller's block?”

He nodded after each question, as if to indicate he’d heard them before. “My lifestyle’s like that of any other homeless person. I sleep and eat in the shelter. When I have storyteller's block it doesn’t matter because people give me money anyway. Also I move around the city and can tell the same story over and over. I’ve told the lame puppy story over a thousand times.”

“You’re homeless?” Looking back, I should have seen it. Same suit every day. Always outside and never in transit. But I was an apprentice then. I was blinded by ambition, admiration.

“Lots of us are.”
“Lots of storytellers?”

“It’s an unpredictable market.”

A sparrow hopped onto the storyteller’s shoulder as I’d seen birds do to statues. The sun’s glare hid his eyes behind his spectacles. It was spring.

“It’ll get better.”

“You’re talking about yourself, not me. You’re telling a story.”

“I am?”

***

When no doubt remained that Jack Farmer had won the West, the storyteller decided to try the private sector. Jack Farmer’s favorite singer was Jim Croce, and he often quoted the songwriter’s melancholy lyrics during duels. Croce sang about photographs and memories, phone operators who were last line of connection for broken-hearted lovers, time in a bottle. The storyteller disdained Jack Farmer’s plagiarism, but the saloon audiences never seemed to care.

Rather than stoop to Jack Farmer’s level and rip off a hard-working songwriter from Philadelphia, the storyteller decided he'd contact Croce to ask if he could accompany him on his tour. Maybe he would learn a trick or two. When Croce picked up the phone, he was crying. Go ahead, he moaned, come on out. Nothing makes a difference any more.

“I like Jim Croce.” Jean’s eyes are watery, on the verge!

“I’m not criticizing him. He’s just in the story.” I’m trying to control my excitement.

“You make him sound depressing.”

Rick hands Jean a table napkin and scowls at me. “Your story lacks historical consistency.”

It was 1972. Jim Croce’s assistant, Tommy the Leper, an ex-mobster from South Philly, met the storyteller at the door of the Croce ranch in Santa Fe. Make him happy, or I’ll break your knees. The
The storyteller didn’t want more trouble in his life, so he turned to back to the taxi. A beefy hand dropped onto his shoulder. *Make him happy.*

The Leper led the storyteller to a dim room. Jim sat surrounded by recording equipment and sheets of paper. *Would you like to hear my new song? It’s called Photograph in a Bottle.* He spoke to the storyteller as if he were familiar, a producer or favorite roadie. *You need to get some sleep, Jimbo,* the Leper said. *Oh hush, you.* Croce had become transfixed by the storyteller. The Leper prodded the storyteller. *I’m here to cheer you up,* the storyteller said. Croce put down his guitar. *Maybe the song can wait. Anyway, I think I’ve written it before.* He drew close enough that the storyteller could smell gin. *There’s something about you,* Croce said. People often claimed this about the storyteller, but never about his stories. He wondered what it was. The studio’s doom leached into him, the sad sponge.

Croce composed the only two spunky songs in his oeuvre the next day, “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown” and “You Don’t Mess Around with Jim.” After recording, they drank Corona by the pool, invited over girls. *He’s so happy,* the girls whispered. The Leper danced, a sombrero on his head, grasping a piña colada in a coconut. The storyteller wanted to sink into the water and never come up. *You know why they call him the Leper?* Croce asked. Just thinking about the answer made him spit up beer foam, capsizing his pool raft in convulsions of laughter. When he resurfaced, water had beaded in his thick eyebrows. *Tommy’s not welcome in South Philly. Witness protection placed him with me.* This made the storyteller, who was already considering flight, feel both guilty and frightened.

In the early morning, while the coyotes sang and the Leper lay in a drunken coma, the storyteller crept out through a window. He hitchhiked down to Galveston, where he lay low for a few days in a shabby motel, scrawling down everything he’d noticed about Croce upon his arrival, anything that seemed remotely sad that he might imitate in his own performances. World War II was on, and Navy recruits filled the Texas streets with their last hurrah before heading to France. The storyteller tried to
capture the sadness of Initial Croce in his journal—the numb hang of his lips, his invasive Italian mustache—but the celebratory distraction outside was too much. Real world experience, the late Gatherer had said. Maybe the peasants had been too low brow. What could be more tragic than modern war? He enlisted and put on a blue cap.

On a ship near Normandy, the storyteller learned of Croce’s death. *Breaking news from Albuquerque,* came a voice over the short wave, interrupting the strategic command. *The legendary folk singer Jim Croce flew his plane into a silo today. There were no survivors.* When the bullets began to hiss, bodies to fall in frothy salt water, the other troops were sobbing, meeting death or victory that way. The storyteller hid from this Revenge of Jim below deck.

***

“I’ve been telling my parents your story. My mom almost cried.”

“The lame puppy story? Don’t rub it in. Nobody cries when I tell it.”

“No, your story.”

The storyteller and I were slurping milkshakes at his place, under I-81. He shared the space with several other storytellers, but they’d gone off to work. It was the storyteller’s day off, and we had the whole place to ourselves.

“Nice incline.” I indicated the sloped concrete that led up under the buttresses to the interstate overhead. “Rent must be an arm and a leg.”

“Just an arm.” He pinned one arm against his back, so it would seem from the front to be missing. His spirits were high, as if having nothing more to hide from me had released him.

“Why do you keep at it?” Today was the day for the hard questions, now that we’d established our rapport. I planned to type up the interview soon and sell it to *The Paris Review* for their Art of Fiction series. It would be a coup for me and the storyteller both. I’d call it “The Last Storyteller” because he
was a dying breed. In fact, my time with him had convinced me to be a storyteller-in-residence instead, for the added comfort of shelter and a captive audience.

“Why do I keep at what?”

***

The storyteller regained consciousness after washing ashore. *La plage du Normandy* was littered with corpses. Evidently the ship he’d stowed away in had exploded, jettisoning him into the waves. Maybe the world just doesn’t need another storyteller, he thought. The world needs dentists, health-care lobbyists, mechanics—even criminals and outcasts. Almost anything’s more useful than a storyteller nowadays. Their news is too old. Old as the world. And we have anchormen for the new news.

These thoughts made the storyteller very sad. He wept on the lonely beach, helmets and limbs bobbing in the surf. Nobody could make the storyteller cry like he himself could. He was his own perfect audience. But that wasn’t the point of storytelling, and he knew it. I’m a lame duck, he thought. No, a lame puppy. That was worse. It was then that the story of the lame puppy who who dove deep into the sea to slay the dragon pounced fully formed into his mind. Sometimes during his travels this had happened to him. Inspiration. The inspired stories were his favorite, only they never made people cry. The inspired stories made people laugh the hardest. Still, inspiration always inspired him to try again.

Should he tell the world the story of the lame puppy? He’d heard recently of an expedition President Jefferson had ordained to follow the Missouri River all the way to the western ocean. Maybe he could join—Lewis and Clark and the storyteller. It sounded epic. Would this be the story to make them cry? Meriwether Lewis was known to be a morose botanist. Or would this be the story that did the storyteller in?

“He should tell it,” Jean said. Her face was waxen, and she clenched my father’s wrist.
Rick looked glum, like he’d just filed for bankruptcy. “I think the point is that it won’t make a
difference. It’s the kind of story they teach these kids to tell.”

“That’s a negative viewpoint, Rick. She’s our daughter.”

“They are rhetorical questions,” I say. “You aren’t supposed to answer.”

“Well,” Jean says, “yours isn’t the only opinion that matters around here. Think of your parents.”

***

The last time I saw the storyteller, he wore a backpack and grasped a piece of rolling luggage. He’d
bought a ticket for Dallas with his storytelling proceeds and now stood in the buzz of the Greyhound
station.

“It seems wasteful to use your money just to go somewhere else and be homeless.”

“I’ve got a sister there. I think I’ll rest at her house and consider career options.”

I couldn’t argue with that, even though it didn’t seem like a very romantic decision.

“What career options are you considering?”

“Suicide.”

“What?”

“Maybe banking.”

“That’s awful. You make me want to cry.” I winked. “See, there’s hope yet.”

“I only want my stories to make you cry, not my life.”

I shook the storyteller’s hand because there wasn’t much else to ask or say. His grip was clammy
and limp, but he looked good. His part was back on top of his head. His suit seemed crisp, the stripes
straight. Even his handkerchief was back.

“Hey,” I said. “Your handkerchief is back.”

“I feel better.”
Then he got on the bus for Dallas.

***

The storyteller sat a long time making his decision on the beach at Normandy. The dead soldiers decayed, and scavengers carted away the helmets and guns and flak jackets and unused landmines and skulls. Nudists ambled past in the sunset. Vikings arrived, stormed the beach, moved on. On holidays, ships way out in the distance shot off fireworks. In the end, he decided to keep the story of the lame puppy to himself because telling it would only make him sad. He just knew it. It would only remain a good story so long as no one heard it.

“No!” Jean says.

Standing, he limped to the water’s edge, one of his feet having fallen asleep over the centuries. He looked out over the steel-blue horizon with its constant choppiness and frothy white. It was the setting for his secret story. A French kid had left behind his shovel and pail. They would have to serve as sword and shield. He grabbed them and swam out into the ocean. His musty fatigues and boots made dogpaddling hard enough, so he put the bucket on his head, the shovel in his teeth. Still the going was rough. Just past the breakers and swells, the storyteller knew the time had come for the story to begin. He took a deep breath and dove into the sea. The salt water hurt his eyes, but it was just a story, so he kept them open and could soon see clear as day. He swam down and down. Even though he was just off the beach, a chasm opened up beneath him. Down he went until he started breathing water, which gave him more energy and made it so that he could hear for miles. He heard the stirring of the dragon way down in the dark.
ROCKVILLE IS NOT LIKE THIS

You ask me to write about after; whatever that may be, and I'll oblige you because Death and Dying means well. Your readers shouldn't grieve alone. I call it Rockville, not after where I may live in Maryland, Minnesota, South Carolina. You need only know that I live; I'm no authentic ghost writer. Nor am I the other sort—ethnographer of spooks, plugged into the Ouija board. Yet my idea outweighs words of the cloth. Father Kelly promises business as usual into the ether, and his business is promise, predict, prescribe. All words. I show him a stone.

Rockville is exquisite exile from words and their wording. Exile as in exhilaration. Exit. Exist. Suggested, not contained. That's where authorities err. Even your readers—forgive me—search inside words, whereas no one visits a grave for its corpse. Death is. D e a t h. A beautiful word. But it is our beginning and end with words. After, only the shapes remain, the sight of them. They are cave thrones, or afield, buttresses holding up nothing, balanced in daylight. They cast no shadow.

Rocks here are no more dependable than men. I won't say that. We may depend on all that comes to an end. Father Kelly, my father, Him. You might be surprised: I don't value stones for silence. In Rockville, they emit a sound made not with tongue, palate, lips; it can't be parsed into diphthongs, glottals, fricatives. Yet language it is, as ‘good boy’ to a cockapoo, ‘gee’ to a mule. All ear, a hearer can't reproduce their geothermal hum, isn't equipped to slide beneath a syllabic crust to the mantle of langue. It is the language of alone.

Stand in a room once your guests have gone—in Wisconsin, Florida, Spain. You're never alone. Likewise one can't just fester in families until decease and expect everyone to come clean. Even afterward, body conceals motive and makes meaning mean. But it's no more the ball of clay rolled oblong, destined for a vessel. In Rockville, it is the heard activity between passenger and driver, in a
silent cab, on the trip back, everything said for the day, and for eternity. Only we didn't know it. It rode between us, steady and welcome, singing separate echoes of our unknown tunes. It is a stone.

The rocks there live in a smooth stone-aged pile. What are fragments of Highway 29 next to this mound beyond wound? What was the gravel at His temple, gore-dappled, compared with their cool compress? Look on any map under any number. Go there, and it's the same. In Rockville, some sparkle, some are striped, some would chip under a careless boot. But I won't touch. I won't study. I will listen. I'll hear. The message is constant and clear. Not the worms working in the body, the body in its cradle, not the rolling of eyes behind lids or the twitching tongue. I will hear the activity between Him and me.

If you can, pile these words into stones. Arrange them so they rise out and up, lighted from the edge. These stones have no center. The compass won't point within. Give your readers circular maps that follow the air around each gray face. The rocks they'll find aren't like this slab I visit here—in California, Montana, Texas—this square etched with careful nonsense, categories for corpses, a door too heavy. When I get to Rockville, I'll roll on the ground through shade and creek bed into dappled and permeable silence. I'll enter His humming, unsculptable presence.

-Beverly T.