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hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

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Strange Houses

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by

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation, *Strange Houses*, is a collection of original short stories by the author, Joseph Alex DeBonis. The stories engage notions about home, family, estrangement, and alienation. Since many of the stories deal with family and marital relations, homes feature prominently in the action and as settings. Often characters are estranged or exiled, and their obsessions with having normal families and/or stable lives drive them to construct elaborate fantasies in which they are included, loved, and part of something enduring that is larger than themselves.

The dissertation also includes a critical paper, "A Butterfly, a Cannonball, and a Sneeze: Notions of Chaos Theory in Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*." In this essay, I argue that the novel *All The Pretty Horses* grapples with a sense of freedom that is rife with ambiguity and demonstrates McCarthy's engagement with chaos theory. The essay shows how Thomas Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, exhibits similar concerns with the dynamic interaction of order and disorder. Though *Horses* has realistic details and does not appear to engage chaos theory in as obvious a way as *The Crying of Lot 49* does, McCarthy's novel can be profitably read through the lens of chaos theory.

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It's all very well to read about houses, and see houses from the road, and to tell yourself, That's where folks live. But it's another thing entirely to walk inside and stand there.
—Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love*

Strange Houses is a collection of thematically linked short stories, each engaging notions about home, family, estrangement, and alienation. Since many of the stories deal with family and marital relations, homes feature prominently in the action and as settings. Often characters are estranged or exiled, and their obsessions with having normal families and/or stable lives drive them to construct elaborate fantasies in which they are included, loved, and part of something enduring that is larger than themselves. The house is the literal and figurative container for our society's basic tribal unit, the family. Many characters have clear—sometimes reasonable, sometimes not—expectations of what a family should be, how it ought to act, whom it should include, and what part they play in it. Some houses in the collection act like beacons that characters are tracking, others are temples the characters try to maintain, and others are cages of loneliness or despair.

For four of the stories, the strange houses are literal and serve as settings. In "Housesitting," a floundering young painter tries to resuscitate his failing marriage by attempting to reconnect with his stressed-out wife, who uses housesitting duties for her boss as an excuse pull away. The narrator tries a couple of desperate, ill-conceived ploys to remake himself and halt his marriage's dissolution, but his efforts only repel his wife further. The setting comes to represent the narrator's alienation as he fantasizes about the owners' apparently terrific relationship and reflects on his marriage's demise.

In “Mike’s House,” eleven-year-old Virgil is enlisted by Keith, his mother’s crass boyfriend, to help loot a house recently vacated by Virgil’s best friend and his parents, who served as Virgil’s surrogate family. The boy’s reluctance to help remove the basement carpet and his guilt at being party to the defiling of his friend’s house pit him against Keith. Though he’s long given up on the capability of his own family to sustain him, as the story goes on he softens toward the hapless, more-or-less well-meaning Keith; Virgil eventually tries to save this hoodlum, who is threatened with jail over the theft, and comes to see his mother’s boyfriend is part of the only family he has left.

“A Place To Sleep” also employs an unfamiliar home as a setting. The paraplegic narrator—a disgraced inventor named Melanie—is forced by financial necessity and her handicap to move into a cramped apartment with her brother Ned and his family. The problem is that Melanie has to bring along her invention—the last working prototype of a coma chamber, with occupant—because she feels responsible for the fate of Andrew (whom she put in a voluntary coma a few years before) and has nowhere else to keep him. Caring for Andrew has made him a son to her, and she brings the coma chamber into her brother’s living room, displacing furniture and disrupting his ordinary family life. As her supply of sedatives diminishes, she is forced to resort to a crime that ends disastrously. The narrator continually exploits the guilt of her brother, whom was party to the injury that handicapped her as a child, to keep Andrew’s chamber operating. This story is, in one way, about how guilt can serve as a precarious but palpable kind of familial bond—responsibility. Though Melanie strains her relationship with Ned, it holds, but he can’t absolve her of the guilt she feels for asking so much of him.

"Where The Day Takes You" is the story of a devoted company man whose mysterious corporation appears to be falling apart around him. In an attempt to hunt down his reclusive boss, he resorts to a weird game of chance played with a car and a coin. The narrator winds up at a nondescript suburban house where he encounters an unusual family arrangement. Herbert Mooney and his son are building ruthlessly efficient selling machines in their garage, and their subterfuge leads the narrator to question the ethics of his job as a salesman. The ugly, lie-ridden side of selling and capitalism literally enters the home of Mooney and son, and the narrator sees the fraud he's been perpetrating being born right there.

In the collection's second vein of stories, the narratives involve metaphorical strange houses. Once familiar homes become strange, and imagined homes become repositories for obsessions and fears. Characters resort to self-destruction, mischief, and hopelessness when reality does not conform to their hyperdeveloped expectations.

"The National Housewives' Toilet Fund" is the story of Karen, a young woman who discovers $5,000 and a mysterious note in her commode. The note claims the bagged and bundled money is a gift from the National Housewives, and she believes it is meant to help her and her boyfriend, Rob, buy a house. Yet she's deeply uncomfortable at being identified as a housewife, a role she pledged to her feminist friend Lindsay to avoid at all costs. She suspects that Rob plans to propose to her and fears that he might, wittingly or unwittingly, want her to conform to the housewife mold. Might accepting the money and Rob's imminent proposal mean the same thing, that she is being co-opted by an institution that makes women subservient to men? In a scene that takes place at Lindsay's graduation costume party—theme "Figures of Dogmatic Oppression"—

Lindsay's derision and wholesale rejection of marriage prompt her to decide what she wants for herself.

While "Housewives" engages these issues and expectations somewhat comically, "Nomads" is more downbeat. To earn a living, eighteen-year-old Tammy accepts her father's carnival food-booth in exchange for his taking primary custody of her infant daughter, Jo. Thirteen years later, Tammy is still struggling to make enough to pay her debts and bring her daughter to live with her. In an attempt to maintain a relationship with Jo, Tammy invites her to travel with her for a summer and work the booth at fairs and expos. Her daughter's wayward father, a one-time drug dealer, surfaces at a town festival when Tammy is least able to thwart his claims on Jo. Tammy wants to achieve the relatively simple dream of a stationary home with her daughter, but she comes to see that her circumstances will not allow it. As the possibility of a reunion with Jo grows ever more distant, Tammy reaches a fateful decision. Here, the home life imagined by the main character is tragically denied her, and the story depicts her disappointment.

One of the more conventional stories in *Strange Houses*, "Donkey Basketball," concerns a son's reaction to his father's desire to recover the sense of home long after divorce has broken it. After a retired high-school basketball coach begs his remarried wife to reunite with him after eleven years apart, his estranged sportswriter son, Dan, journeys to Iowa to check up on him—has he lost his mind?—under the pretense of writing an article about a weird sport the father follows called donkey basketball. Despite clear evidence to the contrary, the father believes that his marriage is salvageable, while the son is convinced that repairing it is impossible and that his own disconnection from his dad is permanent. His father's desperation and obsession with the

sport suggest to Dan that the old man is growing senile. Yet when Dan participates in a game with his dad, he sees that the man is not losing his grip and reestablishes a connection, managing to heal their broken home in a way neither of them expects. Like "Nomads," this story deals with the pain experienced when a home is irrecoverable, but unlike the earlier story, "Donkey Basketball" shows this pain can bear the fruit of renewed bonds.

"The Killing Kind" is the story of a man named Palmer and his crippling phobia of mice. His new home, just purchased with his fiancée, Dee, seems to come alive with threatening rodents after he sees one skittering across the kitchen counter. Dee responds to his abject fear with skepticism and disdain, and though Palmer is squeamish about killing the mouse via a trap, he allows Dee to bring in a cat to do the dirty work. When the first cat doesn't do its job, his ultra-macho friend Derrick provides another, more vicious cat to dispatch the mouse. Like the introduction of the money into the dramatic situation in "Housewives," the mouse infestation impels the narrator to contemplate his role in the impending marriage. This story explores how Palmer's increasing anxiety about his wife's seeming incapacity for sympathy leads him to a shocking act of self-assertion.

Finally, the egotistical narrator of "Cutting Season" is a thirty-six-year-old landscaper named Tony who achieves celebrity status as the premier topiary artist in his small town. Tony falls for a younger woman, Willow, whom he supervises at his job. In order to woo her he trains her in the art of topiary, and the she quickly eclipses him in skill and popularity. After Willow snubs his advances and supplants him as the most sought-after talent at his job, Tony feels compelled to vandalize her work. "Cutting

Season" mostly takes place outside the "strange houses" of the landscaping company's customers, but it also belongs to the more metaphorical category; Willow awakens, for the first time in this confirmed bachelor's life, a nesting instinct in Tony. As in "The Killing Kind," the narrator is driven to anger, but in Tony's rage he creates a magnum opus.

Like many characters in the book, Tony feels debarred or exiled from a cherished myth about himself, a kind of home truth, and the resulting disappointment and frustration drive him to a foolhardy, ultimately self-destructive act. Home is supposed, by these characters, to be a place of predictability and solace—a still point in a turning world—and they compulsively envision a place for themselves in some kind halcyon domesticity. But the characters' instincts have become distorted and unreasonable, and these spaces—where they project aspirations and unmet desire—become warped, too.

Prospectus: Critical Portion

"A Butterfly, a Cannonball, and a Sneeze: Notions of Chaos Theory in Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*"

All The Pretty Horses charts John Grady Cole's acquisition of worldly knowledge, and at novel's end, frustrated with trying to rationalize an irrational experience of reality, John Grady understands that he can only continue repeating, reordering, and reinterpreting the given. In this essay, I argue that John Grady's grappling with his newfound sense of freedom, rife with ambiguity, demonstrates McCarthy's engagement (if not John Grady's) with the complex laws of dynamic systems, or chaos theory. McCarthy is not the first author to engage these issues. Among others, Thomas Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, exhibits similar concerns with the dynamic interaction of order and disorder. Though *Horses* has realistic details and does not appear to engage chaos theory in as obvious a way as *The Crying of Lot 49* does, McCarthy's novel can be profitably read through the lens of chaotics.

Like *Horses*, *Lot 49* engages chaos theory by pursuing a quest narrative, but a quest narrative in which any final, transcendent meaning is denied, even foreclosed. The existence of the Tristero—and the meaning of much of the extensive conspiracy Oedipa Maas thinks she's seen—remains a mystery both to the reader and to Oedipa. *Horses* appears to depict a much more conventional quest narrative, one in which the reader finds many of the familiar themes of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American novel (the journey from innocence to experience, the morally inflected retreat into nature, and a confrontation with the harshness of the universe, for example). This looks, at first, like a pretty traditional *Bildungsroman*, but as many critics have noted, McCarthy stops short of

the conventional denouement. John Grady's trip ends tragically, and though the ending does not feel withheld or truncated in quite the way that Pynchon's does nor is McCarthy's break as flamboyant as Pynchon's, I argue that the unconventionality functions in a similar way: in *All The Pretty Horses*, too, both protagonist and reader are denied not only ultimate answers but even the possibility of them. Furthermore, the frequently cited ambiguous freedom John Grady achieves at the conclusion is reminiscent of what John Barth calls, in his essays on postmodernism, chaos theory, and arabesque design in *Further Fridays*, "coaxial esemplasy." Barth writes that coaxial esemplasy is the idea that not only is "the voyager . . . changed by the voyage" but also that "the voyage is also changed by the voyager: dynamic feedback loops." In interpreting *Horses* in this way, we can see in it an exchange that happens over the course of the novel between John Grady and the journey he takes, one that corresponds to one vein of inquiry in chaos theory.

When faced with their powerlessness, characters in *Strange Houses*, like John Grady Cole, experience the same obsession Dueña Alfonsa recounts in McCarthy's novel during her parable of the myopic coiner at a press. She says humans are like this coiner, "taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work, determined that not even chaos be outside of our own making." Chaos arises from apparent order, from the characters themselves. Rather than fate dealing the blow, chaos originates in what they thought were predictable, closed structures.

Housesitting

I crunched over an ice-crusted flowerbed and peered through the Gillans' dining room window, searching for my wife. I imagined explaining my actions to some uniformed authority figure, who was long on intimidation and short on patience: *I don't know what I was looking for, officer*. Though I was afraid what I'd see—exuberant dancing? domestic bliss?—I had to sneak up in the cold night and look.

Shadows lined the dining room, and flickers of ghostly blue light emanated from the TV down the hall. I stepped on a brittle plant that made a loud snap. A black lump rose and padded to the other side of the window. Michelle's housesitting duties included the care and feeding of her boss's corpulent black Lab, whose breath now fogged the glass. It emitted a deep-throated bark and propped itself on the sill. Michelle's garbled voice echoed faintly from another room, calling him, and the dog barked again. I didn't want to leave until I knew what she was getting out of this respite from our marriage. I might be able to detect whether this break would turn permanent. The muted thump of her steps came through the glass. She would see me in the window if I remained, and my presence would definitely annoy her. Frustrated, I retreated to the street and drove home.

In the entire two years of our marriage—sexless for six months and now officially troubled—this was the first night we'd spent apart. Initially, I thought the slowdown in the bedroom was a natural occurrence, nothing to worry about. But we hadn't since July, and by the end of August I started asking regularly. Whenever I suggested if we could, Michelle would wince and say *she didn't think so,* that she was *too tired*. It aggravated me when she said this a good seven hours before we went to bed. At one point, I expressed concern about the hiatus, and Michelle got angry. She said that being married

didn't mean I got sex anytime I wanted. I agreed, but pointed out that a month had passed since the last time. Tears swelled in her eyes, and she said, "I can't be *forced* to perform like a circus animal!" I sympathized. I didn't want her to be a trained seal; I only wanted to sleep with my wife.

After that, I felt like a sexual aggressor—hardly better than a rapist—who expected it from his wife regardless of her mood. Michelle wasn't a possession I could flop on like an old bed. For weeks I chastised myself for treating her like a cheap whore and decided to let her initiate sex the next time. But the months wore on and on without a moment of heavy petting.

Lately, she began to recede in another way, avoiding me entirely in our cramped apartment in Ellettsville, Indiana. After work, she'd arrive home and shut our bedroom door to change while I waited expectantly in the front room. Sometimes she stayed in there for an hour. Michelle maintained this routine until she got the housesitting gig at the Gillans'. When she said her boss was taking a mid-January jaunt to the Caribbean, I felt a nasty stab of jealousy and muttered that *it must be nice*. "They're even paying me," Michelle announced, gathering her hair in a ponytail and settling in front of our TV. Kim Gillan supervised my wife at Farm Bureau Insurance, where Michelle entered medical histories into a database. "Instead of traipsing home after work *then* going over to let the dog out *then* coming back here every night," she said, "I'll stay in Bloomington all week."

I'd never been to the Gillans' and imagined it a dignified and luxurious place, open space stretching into open space. It wasn't the Virgin Islands, but it might do. "We can fantasize that the house belongs to us," I said. I tipped back a plastic lawn chair—our

apartment's only furniture—and envisioned us lying together on a well-stuffed couch, bathed in the spectral light from a gigantic TV set. Plus, Bloomington—almost twenty minutes down the state highway—had all the stores and movie theaters tiny Ellettsville lacked. "The Gillans go to the Virgin Islands, and we go to the Gillans'. It'll be like a mini-vacation."

Michelle cleared her throat. "It's not a time-share, you know. *I'm* going to stay there and make sure the dog gets fed and let out."

I touched my chest in wounded disbelief. "You don't want me to come?"

"You can't be lounging around in their house all day," she said, flicking her cigarette ash into a Coke can. "I'm supposed to take care of the place. You'd get stoned watching the Food Network and eat everything."

I was hurt; I thought she didn't trust me. "What makes you think I would do something like that?"

Michelle breathed out and made the same face she did when clearing a vacuum cleaner blockage. "Maybe I just need a break from *this*." She spread her arms.

"Me, too. That's why I want to come."

"Not just the apartment." She indicated the space between her and me. "*This*."

"From our relationship?"

"It'll do us both some good," she assured me, and started watching *Law and Order* on our minuscule TV.

"Okay," I said. "If you think it'll help." Michelle nodded but remained facing the screen.

The first year after we got married, everything seemed temporary. Michelle planned to attend graduate school to study folklore at a school out East. Our lease was for six months. We didn't want to lug furniture cross-country, so we used the lawn chair or sat on the floor in our apartment. Until she found out where she was accepted, she would work at the insurance company.

We wanted to go to a city where I could get my paintings into galleries. Though I'd graduated with a commercial illustration degree, I devoted myself to painting full time. I wanted to burst on the scene with a series about animals viewing significant moments in history: Caesar's falcon overlooking a battle in the Gallic Wars, a llama's view of Cortez's arrival in South America, a bushtit presiding over Lee's surrender at Appomattox. I imagined magazines would hale my work as a contributing factor to a resurgence painting in the art world. Titles of articles about the series would be something like "Painting Comes Roaring Back" or "Zootopia Now."

In this temporary mode, Michelle didn't mind that I had the same part time job I'd had in college. I occasionally painted for a carpenter named Gene, who installed wall units and shelving. It was easy work; when he finished a room, I'd swoop in and paint everything. He paid in cash, usually stuffed in electric-bill envelops from his house. He and I had a nice arrangement; most of the money came back to him when I bought marijuana.

Then Michelle got rejected from grad school. She planned to reapply, but she had trouble tracking down former professors who could attest to her folklore acumen. We got another six-month lease. She started saying things about me finding something long-term where I worked more regularly, like her.

I thought getting a similar job went against our plans. She was getting caught in the *job vortex*—this sense of obligation that workers felt to their jobs resulting from idealism shoved down our throats in public school. Gene had been an accounts manager at Farm Bureau before giving it up to be a self-employed carpenter, and was highly quotable on the job vortex: "On the first day in a corporation, they tell you about responsibility and how phrases like 'That's not my job' don't apply around there. What a load of horseshit. You find out real quick that everybody *says* that, but they don't mean it." After Michelle got the job at Farm Bureau, he told me the best thing for her would be to get fired or quit. I mentioned Gene's advice once when she came home fuming about an awful day at the office. She stared at me sullenly, and I apologized. But she kept staring until I got panicky and started cleaning up around the house. She watched me with narrowed eyes for a minute then sequestered herself in the bedroom.

I didn't want to end up like her. If anything, I needed to concentrate *more* on my art, not on some corporate job. Besides, most jobs in Bloomington were for college kids who quit every fall to go back to school and were replaced by more kids returning from summer who needed to make ends meet during the semester. Nothing I could get was better money than painting for Gene anyway. I had a bachelor's degree for God's sake; I wasn't going to flip burgers.

I tried to express this to Michelle, but she was unconvinced and kept prompting me to apply. So I'd made a show of looking in the few pages of want ads each week. I loudly recited them every Sunday morning in front of her. They were either for a counter jockey at Fazoli's or a radiology technician. It wasn't my fault there wasn't anything in between. Nonetheless, she seemed to hold this against me. I would say things like:

"Hey, honey, the hospital is looking for a pediatric oncologist. *Maybe I should apply for that*."

This is when she got all fussy about smoking weed in the apartment and about how much I was spending. I paid for it myself; it's not like she ever had to front me any money. She claimed pot made her tired and too absent-minded for work, so she switched to cigarettes. I was relegated to the basement so she could avoid a contact high and the odor, which I could barely detect over the cigarette smoke. Lately, when I picked up a quarter ounce from Gene, she commented that *she* wished *she* could afford *my* habit.

The day after Michelle left for the Gillans', I sat in my basement working on my first animal-centric painting. For the last seven months, whenever looked at it, I discovered some problem or mistake. It was from the point of view of the last animal in the line going into Noah's Ark. I imagined talking frankly with *Art In America*'s columnist about the struggles with the first piece, which I titled "In Line for the Ark." It is supposed to set the tone for the rest of the series—which I hadn't started. I couldn't go on until I'd finished this one.

One flash of brightness I liked was the sandy yellow of the towering giraffes. That afternoon I was about to detail the delicate pattern on their necks when I realized that whatever the hell kind of animal was last in line would be as tall as the giraffe since the view came from the same height. I didn't, however, know what animal that would be. I already had tall creatures in the picture—elephants and giraffes—and all the birds where walking two-by-two into the ark, not flying. I'd been down there for two hours daubing my brush ineffectually in the cadmium yellow. The phone in our apartment

rang, and I was off like a shot to answer. Grateful to be away from the humiliating painting, I hoped it was Michelle calling to invite me along.

"Dusk is fast approaching, matey," a voice crowed when I answered. It was Gene. He affected a baffling and entertaining pirate accent when discussing pot on the phone. To further elude the prying ears of law enforcement, he also spoke in day and night euphemisms to convey product availability. Dawn meant some was available and night meant he had none. Dusk meant there wasn't much left, and I'd better get a move on if I wanted any.

My latest bag was almost empty, and I said I'd be right over. Gene's place sat on a dead-end street near the overpass and didn't look like the house of a carpenter. Shattered, rotten boards jutted up from the porch like a broken smile, and the front door was wedged in the frame crookedly.

Even freshly showered, Gene seemed covered with dust. "Business is slow," he said and beamed as he showed me in. "Your regular quarter ounce-a-month makes you my number-one customer," he said, pounding on the door to get it closed. I felt an uncomfortable twinge—*I* was his most frequent buyer.

I didn't think I smoked *that* much. "If you're expecting to live off me," I said, "you're going to starve."

"Come on, you're regular as clockwork." He cocked his bald head at me and went to a chest of drawers against the wall. "Is this more talk about you quitting smoking? I've heard this song before." He fished out a quarter-ounce bag and held it up. "The usual?"

I nodded and gave him the money. "I really *should* quit," I said. "Michelle makes me smoke it in the basement." He rolled the bag into a spongy gray-green rod and handed it to me. I'd mentioned quitting before when Michelle started objecting. I'd even abstained for a few weeks, in hopes that my willingness might re-ignite our sex life. It didn't, and I thought that since I wasn't getting any I might as well smoke up now and then.

As I slid the bag in my coat pocket, he cleared his throat and collapsed into a tattered chair, giving me a bemused expression. "How *is* your old lady?" he asked, folding the money into his wallet. Gene was always keenly interested in Michelle since learning she worked at Farm Bureau. "How's the working world treating her?" His shiny head caught a sliver of lamplight from the dresser.

"She's housesitting over in Bloomington," I said. "For a little extra cash."

"She still at Farm Bureau?"

"She's still there," I said. "Hates it. Wants me to get a job just like it."

"You need to watch out for the *vortex*," he said sliding a cassock over so I could sit.

"You have any painting jobs coming up?" I asked and remained standing. Gene looked poised for an exhaustive lecture on the evils of the corporate world, but I was in no mood to hear it.

He perceived my disinterest, threw one leg over a wobbly armrest, and picked his teeth with a penknife. "Nothing right now," he said and gestured to the dresser. "I'm making all my dough in sales these days. You know anyone who wants some?"

My stomach lurched at his question. I wasn't a *dealer*, for God's sake. "All our friends from college moved away."

"You think of someone I can sell to," he said, winking, "and I'll throw you some free product."

"No painting, though?"

"Sorry," he said. "Not the right season." He proffered a pipe and lighter.

"I have to paint later," I said. "I can't." I usually smoked a little with Gene when I came to buy, but the dinginess of the surroundings bothered me as they never had before. All Gene's furniture looked decrepit and used. Nothing in the room was worth more than a few dollars, except for the dope in the dresser. That he thought me a suitable candidate for a dealer made me uncomfortable too.

He lit the pipe and sucked. "What's wrong, chief?" he asked. "You look sick."

My mind churned slowly. "I'm not sure," I said. I pulled the weed out of my pocket. "I think I'm gonna take a pass this week."

"No refunds after purchase." He smiled, but there was no genuine amusement behind his eyes. I stuffed it back in my pocket and left.

As I sat in my little Honda, shivering until the back windows defogged, I developed a plan that would demonstrate to Michelle that I was the grown-up partner she wanted. I would clean our entire apartment, start dressing more neatly, and find a better job. I would get up earlier in the morning to paint. I would get past "In Line for the Ark" and complete my series. Michelle would come to appreciate her husband. I could see now that the time apart, though only a day long, *had* done some good. I felt the bag of marijuana in my pocket and told myself it would be my last. I stopped at a convenience

store for a newspaper to check the want ads. There *were* only a few I qualified for: drive-thru clerk, gas station attendant, or sales associate. None of these would be all that impressive to her. I found some administrative assistant positions but couldn't get the nerve to call any of the numbers; I wasn't prepared a cheery businesslike voice on the other end of the phone. I remembered an old mantra from my college roommate: *Look good, feel good, do good*. I decided to go outside-in and get a haircut first.

I frequented this place called Cost Cutters, where a guy named Randy Berbs did it cheaply and quickly without an appointment. But Randy was off, and a chubby girl named Debbie, with immaculately coiffed red hair, took me. I told her how I wanted it and she led me to a sink. Unlike Randy, who roughly scrubbed my scalp and ushered me back to the chair, Debbie took her time, luxuriantly combing her fingers through my soapy hair. She radiated wet heat, and her scent—fuming out of her cleavage before my face—reminded me of raspberry sherbet. I had not been touched so intimately in months; I was quickly sheathed in goose pimples and shifted in my seat. Sweat beaded on my thighs, temples, and back, and I dropped my wallet twice trying to pay her.

I left Cost Cutters completely engorged. I hungered for Michelle, but I had nothing to offer her. I was the same loser she'd left the day before, only now I had a haircut. I would tell her of my plan. She would surely appreciate the attempt. She'd gone to the Gillans' to teach me a lesson, and it had worked. I was grateful, and I needed to show her that. I thought it would sweeten the deal if I picked up some wine and flowers at Kroger. I drove east on the highway silently practicing my modest acceptance of her praise. But, as I neared the Gillans', doubts about what she actually might have

wanted crept in. Maybe she really wanted out of the marriage. Maybe she only desired a change of scene. Hell, *I* needed a change of scene. But I'd have brought her with me.

What Michelle needed, I decided as I pulled up in front of the Gillans', was a night off. She'd been in charge for too long. She needed to be pampered and catered to. Actions speak louder than words and rather than telling her about my new outlook I would show her.

I went straight to the front door, though I was tempted to gauge her mood from a side window. Instead, I gripped the bouquet of tropical flowers and the merlot and stuck to my plan. The temperature was supposed to dive into the teens. I wondered if she'd make me drive all the way home once I interrupted her. Surely not. I rang the bell, and she peeked from a narrow window. Her harried expression made my heart sink, but I remained smiling.

"What's this?" Michelle asked, opening the door. She looked skeptically at the wine and flowers. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to surprise you. In a cheesy, romantic sort of way."

She cocked her head. "You look different." She brushed the velvety short hair just above my ear. A spasm of electricity passed down my side into my groin. I sensed she was about to smile but held back. "It looks better than I would have thought." I considered revealing my plans for total personal overhaul: new look, new attitude, better job. Her tentative pleasure at the surprise *might* coalesce into gratitude, but I wasn't sure. Plus, I didn't want to stoke her hopes too much. Her disappointment that I hadn't secured an actual job might make her retract the friendliness.

"Let's get inside," I said instead. "It's fucking freezing."

We toured the Gillans'. The interior was not the mansion I imagined, but it was modestly ornate and well-decorated. Michelle showed me three bedrooms on the second floor, one with a promising canopied bed, another containing an unfolded wood futon for guests, and a third set up as a study. They had nice artwork, too. Aside from Andrew Wyeth prints in expensive frames, the Gillans had summery-looking cityscapes with the Mediterranean in the background. I also found an intriguing charcoal etching of three sheep with wings in the guest bathroom. We returned to the kitchen, and Michelle examined the label on the wine, making pleased-sounding noises.

"I'll make dinner," I offered. "I'll take care of everything. Just sit down, have some wine, and let me do it all." This seemed like an achievable goal, not something that would be a piercing pain in the ass. I opened the cupboard for some pasta, but all I could find were those little nests. I tossed the bag on the counter.

Michelle watched me, incredulous. "Make sure you write down everything you use so we can replace it." She pointed to a legal pad with some items already listed: Evian, Lean Cusine, SOS pad.

"I thought housesitting meant you were welcome to their food," I said, filling a saucepan with water and sprinkling olive oil in so the noodles wouldn't stick. "On top of what they were paying you."

"You *would* think that," she said. "Here I'll write it down." She grabbed the pad and a pen from beside the phone. "Oh, did you use that olive oil?"

I gazed across the counter at her. "Are you kidding me?" I said. "You're going to replace that whole bottle because I put a few drops in the water?"

She scribbled *pasta* and *olive oil* on the pad and sat the pen down hard. "I don't want to forget anything."

"Michelle, *they* asked you to housesit." I walked into the pantry and found a bottle of sauce. When I returned, I said, "You don't have to replace this stuff."

"You want me to lose this job?" she asked. The corners of her mouth stretched back along her jaw. "Look, why don't *I* cook? You can take Pavlov out for a walk."

"*I'll* make dinner," I said.

"If you're not going to keep track," she said, coming over the stove, "please let me do it." I saw the tendons tense in her neck, and her hands clenched and unclenched. She was so sensitive about this job crap. I didn't want her getting stressed out, so I agreed, smiled even, to show I was a fine with it.

"Whatever you want, hon," I said, and pecked her on the cheek. I snuck a glance over my shoulder as I left the room. She stood beside the gleaming stove, shaking her head.

I ambled into the Gillans' extra bedroom, where Pavlov snorted at me from the futon. His tail beat against the bedspread—*thump, thump, thump*. I sat down beside him, and he licked my hand shyly. "Do you want to go outside, boy?" At the word "outside," Pavlov heaved himself up and started dancing on the bed. She wanted me to take him out; I would do it. I can follow orders. Maybe cooking dinner would make her more relaxed since she wouldn't worry so much. Later she might have some wine and be in the mood.

Outside, Pavlov jerked me down the porch steps and into the yard. I gritted my teeth in the brutal wind. Old snow edged the street in three-foot battlements. Pavlov,

suddenly spry as a pup, bounded over them. I tried to climb one and came down hard on my tailbone. Once I was up, Pavlov and I (pain lancing through my rear) marched for a good twenty minutes, the dog hauling me along and steamily pissing at the base of every lamppost. He looked back at me with his mouth open and tail whipping, as if to say, *Come on*. By the time we thundered back to the Gillans' street, all sensation had bled out of my thighs and a dull thud had enveloped my ass. I wanted to run in the house and relate each frigid, painful moment to Michelle, to show her how I'd suffered to make her comfortable.

We approached the house, and I saw a cat in the buttery light from the Gillans' windows. Unfortunately, so did Pavlov, who yanked me horizontal and dragged me several feet trying to get at the animal, shoving three pounds of snow into my pants. It darted into the shadows around one corner of the house. I rose unsteadily, still holding the leash, and yanked back as hard as I could to settle him down.

Before we'd left, Michelle told me to bring Pavlov through the back so I could towel him off in the linoleum-floored kitchen, but I wanted out of my frosted jeans so bad I went in the front. Pavlov danced in place at the door, waiting to be let in. I opened it, and he bolted inside, yanking the leash from my hand and leaving slushy tracks across the Gillans' carpet. I rushed to kick off my snow-crusted boots and catch him.

"Make sure you wipe his feet!" Michelle called.

He barked plaintively and invaded the dining room, throwing off bits of melting snow and looking for Michelle, who was setting the table. I heard her scream out, and a knot of dread tightened around my midsection.

We eventually got things cleaned up. I went upstairs to take off my wet jeans, underwear, and socks. I dried my nude bottom half, and Michelle came up, Pavlov following.

Her shoulders hunched forward as she stalked in the door. “What the hell are you doing?” she asked. “You are using their *nice towels* to wipe your privates.”

I gritted my teeth, growing angry that my plan had so spectacularly failed. “Well, *I’m sorry*, Michelle, but I was dripping wet.”

She retrieved some thin towels from a closet and handed me one. It felt scratchy, and much of the nap was worn away. She snatched the fluffy, inviting towel I’d used. “Look at this,” she said, grimacing and holding it out. The towel was wet but didn’t seem permanently damaged. “I need to wash it now.”

“Put my clothes in with it,” I said, handing her my damp jeans.

“No. They’re the wrong color.”

“I don’t have anything to change into,” I complained.

“You should have thought of that before you rolled around in the snow with the dog.” Michelle left me standing there with a coarse towel over my shrunken genitals while Pavlov panted in the doorway.

“I just wanted to make things easier for you,” I called after her. “So you wouldn’t want to leave me at home.”

She stopped in the hall. “I thought it was pretty clear why I came here. Can’t you let me be?”

“You want me to leave don’t you?” I said. “Do you really think I’m going to fuck something up so bad you’ll lose your job?”

She gripped the towel with both hands. "I only wanted a break."

I picked my underwear out of my sopping jeans. "From what? You treat me like I'm made of shit." I dropped the boxers on the bathroom floor. "You hate it when I touch you; we can't even talk about it without you *bursting into tears*."

Her spine straightened in anger. "You're always thinking with your dick," she said, eyes narrowing. "Maybe I'd be more willing to do it if you didn't reek of pot all the time." She turned on her heel and started down the stairs.

"Maybe I wouldn't smoke so much if I could have sex with my wife," I called. "Pot's all I have left." I struggled into my pants, sans boxers. "In fact, I'm going to get some out of my car now," I yelled. I pulled the wet pants over my thighs, but they clung to me. I waddled to the top of the stairs like a penguin.

Michelle planted her feet on the landing, her mouth set in a stern line. "Don't you *dare* do that here!"

"Or what? You'll throw me out? You won't fuck me?" I asked, shoving past her. "What else is new?"

Her furious expression collapsed into hurt. She turned quickly to hide it and went back up to the Gillans' bedroom, slamming the door. I walked out to the car. My damp legs ached in the icy wind, and the bone-cold night tamped down my anger. I retrieved the bag and studied the front of the house as I walked back in. I couldn't tell how things had gone so wrong, but I knew I hadn't handled any of it right. I went back up to the bedroom door and spoke softly to Michelle through the wood. I assured her I wouldn't smoke, that I was giving it up. But she didn't answer. I told her about the job plans and that I was going to clean our apartment. There was only silence.

I went into Pavlov's room, feeling like an intruder among the Gillans' things, as if I learned something embarrassing and private about people I'd never met. I started wandering around the empty rooms and decided to comb through their belongs to get a sense of how ordinary people lived.

Wedding photos—recent—were displayed prominently. They'd gotten married in their forties, and I wondered if it was the first for each of them. Michelle and I had intended our wedding to be simple, but it wasn't. Though it was in a city park and officiated by one of our college friends (we'd been legally wed at the Monroe County courthouse), it took months and months of planning. I had the same idea about our marriage—that it looked simpler than it was. When I'd proposed, I was infatuated with the idea of marriage, of binding myself to another person. I'd said words like "forever" and "eternity." Now, six months seemed a lifetime, a year interminable.

In the closet of the Pavlov's room, I found some toys still in boxes. A ceramic Noah's Ark sat on the shelf above the stacked boxes and hanging clothes. I took it out. Pairs of animals crowded all over the little boat, with a bearded, wily-looking Noah facing forward on the bow and two ants carefully painted on the deck. Perhaps the Gillans were saving it to give to a young relative, but it might have been that they wanted to have children themselves and could not. They were both over forty, and—I looked over at Pavlov—they already had a proxy. I wondered how often the Gillans had sex or if this was even an issue with them. Maybe all they hoped for was to be beside one another when they woke up each morning.

My head felt heavy, and I reclined on the futon beside Pavlov's enormous rump. I shut my eyes and saw all the creatures on the ark being paired off for eternity. God had

chosen your mate, and you were both responsible for repopulating the earth with your kind. It was more pressure than a marriage could bear. Then I thought of the Gillans, who sat on a shining beach beneath a Caribbean moon, listening to the gentle surf. I hoped they didn't worry about having enough sex or about needing a break. I hoped they—at the very least—held hands.

A Place To Sleep

"Melanie, we're only saying that this situation cannot be permanent," my older brother Ned says, lowering his eyes to speckled top of his kitchen table. Ned's face, narrow and forlorn, lends itself to a disgusted expression, which is the same now as when I got stuck in his bathroom and he had to help me off the toilet. He doesn't have any of our father's pomposity, but he's easily aggravated. "Not that you have to put him out on the street."

At the sink Diana, his wife, eats Oreo crumbs out of the bag and watches me. "Ned," my sister-in-law says, "tell her Hailey is going to have nightmares." Hailey is my five-year-old niece. Diana noisily wads and tosses the cellophane wrapping beneath the sink. The muted sound of uncrinkling plastic comes through the cabinet.

They want me to get rid of Andrew Burgin, who lies in a twelve-foot tube in my brother's living room, inside the only functioning prototype of my invention. All his legal documents, his last will and testament, and the keys to his storage facility (stuffed with his belongings) sit in a cardboard box wedged beneath the coma chamber. Andrew is the last patient and I'm not parting with him, regardless of my brother and his crotchety wife.

"Tell her about the nightmares *we're* gonna have," she prompts. Since Andrew arrived that afternoon, Diana only speaks to me through Ned. It's not like she and I have longstanding interpersonal warmth to reminisce about, but at least she was more gracious before I took Andrew in. It's not that she's outright rude; that would be too confrontational for her. Diana remains ruthlessly civil. For instance, she's too civil to point out what a burden I am on Ned. She's too polite to complain about the little ramps and rubber guards on the doorways my brother installed in their apartment for my

wheelchair. Her resentment manifests in off-hand jabs like "We probably would have installed a ramp from the kitchen to the living room anyway; it's so *convenient*." When finances forced me to move into their three-bedroom apartment a month ago, Ned said he was happy to help, and I sensed some satisfaction that I'd returned to his care. I could tell by how Diana's smile seemed to creak and harden on her face that she didn't share his sentiment.

Now she says, "Tell your sister how Hailey crawls in bed with us at night when she's scared. That casket in the living room is going to give her a *permanent* complex."

"It's a coma chamber," I say, addressing her. "It looks nothing like a casket." And it doesn't; it looks more like an iron lung.

"And let's not even *talk* about the noise," Diana says.

"Are you sure someone from the team can't come and get it?" Ned asks delicately, attempting to redirect. Since we were children, Ned's been my personal guardian, always ready to be the buffer. When I was young, he put himself between me and our father who resented that I was paraplegic, especially when my wheelchair inconvenienced him. One summer Dad left me in our gruesomely hot van in a hardware store parking lot, despite Ned's offers to personally assist me, because Dad didn't want to wait for him to wrest me into the chair. He said they'd be right back and took Ned inside. It had been only a year since the accident, and I wasn't adept at getting around yet. I had been perched in the middle of the backseat with my chair collapsed against the side and couldn't reach the windows. After ten minutes, I managed to pop open the rear ones, but they didn't vent any of the building heat. I'd started seeing blue shadows and gleaming streaks flowing from objects when Ned finally came running back with the keys.

"There is no team anymore," I tell Ned. "Everyone has moved on to other projects. Except Sanjay, but he's still in grad school and lives with his mother."

"Something's gotta be done," Diana says.

"There's only me to take care of that man," I say, pointing to the door to the living room. "I'm all he has left."

Andrew had been sleeping at Steve's, a project engineer who lived twenty minutes away. For the last month, Diana grudgingly hauled me over there two or three times a week so I could check on him. Steve then announced that he landed a new research position at Duke and was leaving town. I didn't let on to Diana or Ned that we'd have to uproot Andrew again because I knew they'd just suggest a convalescent center. I'd moved in with Ned to save money to restart the project and couldn't afford to put Andrew somewhere like that for more than a couple months. The only place I could afford to keep him was with us in the apartment.

I decided it'd be easier to beg Ned's forgiveness than get his permission. Earlier that day, I'd been babysitting Hailey while Diana ran errands and Ned was at work. I told the girl that a special man was coming to stay with us and could she move the end tables and couch away from the wall, "so there could be room for his magic bed?"

Diana came home before Ned and asked Hailey why the furniture had been moved. That's when Sanjay rang the bell downstairs. I buzzed him in and tried calmly to explain the situation to Diana, who immediately shuttered herself and Hailey in her room and called Ned at work. I wheeled into the hall to find Sanjay holding the elevator doors open. Though necessary, it was dangerous to move Andrew. Sanjay had positioned the coma chamber upright next to the battery and generator cart he'd rigged

for transportation. Through the observation window, Andrew looked like he was turning pirouettes because of a feature we'd developed—the stretcher he's strapped to spins and flaps, exerting a centrifugal force that helps prevent atrophy and bedsores.

Sanjay pushed the elevator's STOP button and leaned against the wall in his Kanye West T-shirt, puffing a Marlboro. "What's the word, Captain?" he said, falling into our old *Star Trek* game. He gazed doubtfully across the hall at my brother's doorway.

"Ramming speed, Sulu," I said, smiling, trying to keep it light. "Bring him in." Sanjay worked the chamber out of the elevator, and carefully—*carefully!*—eased him into horizontal position so he could roll. The chamber scraped off a good-sized chunk of the trim around the door as we brought it in. Luckily, the little ramps Ned built to accommodate me also supported the chamber's weight, and we got Andrew into the front room without more trouble. Sanjay unhooked him from the power cart and plugged the cord into a nearby outlet. The lights in the apartment dimmed by about thirty percent and remained that way. I heard Diana shout the name of God from her bedroom. I prayed we wouldn't blow a circuit breaker.

She's calmed by the time we have the sit-down in the kitchen. I listen for the unit humming in the family room and, satisfied that it's still keeping Andrew asleep, I say: "Ned, what do you think?"

He takes a mouthful of air and expels it. "Something's gotta be done," Ned says, echoing his wife. Diana arches her back in triumph, but I don't comment. Ned continues, "I mean, I know this is your project and that you're in charge of this guy."

"But he can't be staying here!" Diana says, finally directly to me.

"Look," I say, shifting my gaze back and forth between them. "I'm really low on sedative, and Sanjay and I have to get some by Wednesday . . . or we'll have to wake him up." My voice cracks, and Ned's hand creeps forward to console. But he stays it, cutting his eyes to Diana who's planted right beside him. I say, "We'll figure out a better place, I promise. Just let us handle this sedative situation."

Diana continues staring defiantly at me. Ned says, "I'm sorry, sis. You know we'd let him stay if we could." An outraged giggle almost escapes me. It's like he's talking about a damn dog. "But we can't keep him in here. You know that."

I nod. "I'll have something figured out," I say with certainty I don't actually feel. I spin around and roll through the door. Looking back, I catch Ned reaching for Diana. She jerks violently away, and he drops his arm, disappointed. Diana's wealthy family apparently dislikes Ned, but she told me she didn't care. She said she loved him enough to forsake them. That was the word she used: *forsake*. I unhappily thought she'd made a big deal out of defying her family to get leverage on Ned, like he'd begged her to reject them. Though they'd warmed up a little when Hailey was born five years ago, Diana still wore the suffering martyr hat.

After the kitchen summit, Hailey stands in the door of Ned's study—now my bedroom—while I comb through Andrew's medical files to find a doctor who treated him. The physicians on my team refused to return phone calls after the money dried up, so I will have to beg strangers to prescribe sedative to keep Andrew's pretty blue eyes from flying open in terror as he twirls inside the chamber.

"Mom says that man in the coffin isn't dead. He's just sleeping." She bounces on the balls of her feet. I love the way she draws out the *ee* sound in *sleeping*.

"That's right," I say. "But it's not a coffin; it's a chamber. I built it to help him."

"*You* built it?" she says and stops moving.

"Yep," I say. Her brow creases as she tries to figure it out. "I drew some plans. Then me and some very smart people got the materials and put it together."

"Really?"

I wave her over to sit on my lap, and she does. Her hair, which shoots out in all directions like a blond fountain, smells like this awful goop Diana uses on her, lemony and rancid. I hand her a manila folder and a pencil from Ned's desk. "Can you sit on the floor and draw me something while I do more homework?" Ned says she reminds him of me, and I assume he means her curiosity. Hailey asks endless questions about how things work, and since I always answer her with thorough technical knowledge instead of telling her to be quiet like Diana does, I became a big hit.

I often wonder if my mother was curious like Hailey and me. She left when I was around two, moving to Kentucky and out of our lives. I long assumed the interest in science came from my veterinarian father, whose drinking was either a result of my mother's leaving or what pushed her away. After she left, Dad moved us out of Tilson to top of General's Hill along US 31. He bought a sprawling one-story beside a couple of outbuildings that housed his veterinary practice, which he shared with another vet, Dr. Knotley.

One day, when I was in first grade and Ned in third, we got off the rumbling school bus and found the office eerily empty, the doors standing open like everyone had rushed out at once. There was, as usual, a mash of sound coming from the kennel, but no customers were around. Everything seemed to be holding its breath. We found Dad

splayed on his office floor, face slack and reeking of Jack Daniel's. The place had no other staff besides Dr. Knotley, who'd was attending to livestock out in the county in the mobile unit.

One of Ned's favorite pastimes was rolling his wheeled toys down the steep road, which sat at a vertiginous incline beside our house and gave into the whizzing traffic of US 31. The previous summer, Dad had beat Ned hard for sending a metal dump truck down General's Hill. The stand of trees at the bottom hid anything entering the highway, and Dad was more worried that Ned would cause an expensive car wreck than about him getting hit. Ned still did it on the sly, whenever Dad wasn't looking.

That afternoon Ned and I brought any toy that rolled or bounced—all our Slinkys, rubber balls, toy cars and trucks—to the road's shoulder beside our house. We lined up toys like a convoy and started releasing. The miniature cars sped over the rumpled blacktop, careening down until they hit a bump and flipped, sliding noisily on their hoods for several yards. I remember an old woman's shocked expression through the window of a truck slipping past, but no one interfered. We sent balls, a Barbie Corvette, and a Radio Flyer with a Cabbage Patch Kid in it down the hill. The debris collected in a brightly colored pile on a flat patch of road at the bottom. We ran up and down the hill, rolling things and retrieving them.

This was in the days of metal garbage cans. I don't know whose idea it was to send the first empty one down the hill, but the racket and the speed delighted us. Ned said he wanted to roll down the grassy hillside, next to the road, in one of the cans. He set the metal barrel on its side, climbed in, cocked an arm out, and started pushing himself. He didn't go far in the grass, so he called for me to help him. I got him some

speed, then gravity took over, and the can full of Ned tumbled through the grass, crashing into a stand of tall weeds near the bottom.

He wiggled out at the bottom, stumbling comically from dizziness. "Now you! Get in the other one!" he yelled.

I put another can on its side and climbed in, the rank odor of rotten food heavy in the empty can. I tried to get myself going like he did but was only able to rock the can back and forth. "Come push me!" I squealed, waving my arm out the open end. I couldn't see down the hill, but I heard him pound through the grass toward me. Then I saw his sneakers, and he—giggling—rolled me to where the hill dropped away.

While Ned would apologize, again and again, for what he did next, I don't know that it was his fault. After all, we were playing in the road for over an hour; something was bound to happen. *I* asked him to push me. Instead of the grass, Ned positioned my can in the roadway and shoved it hard. He wanted to make me even dizzier than he'd been. He said he never meant to hurt me, but he was eager to see how fast I'd go on asphalt instead of grass.

I called out, "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" as the horizon spun outside. Then I speeded up, gravity yanking me down the hill; the metal can rolling on blacktop deafened me, racketing around my head. But as I picked up more speed, the racket subsided to a loud buzzing. The trees, grass, road, and sky formed a gleaming swirl, and the force of the spin plastered me against the sides of the can, which crashed into a bump and went silent as it lost contact with the road. Into the quiet, I screamed.

All dreams I've had of that day, and I've had many in the years since it happened, begin when the can returns to earth after the first bounce. The crash is head-splittingly

loud, and the can rockets over the short flat stretch of read at the bottom of General's Hill and on to US 31 in front of a delivery truck, heavy with cargo from the cannery in Reider. The truck's bumper connected with my can, making a monstrous sound through the open end, and the front wheel violently caved in the cylinder, breaking my arm, totally crushing both legs, and snapping my spine in two places. Then all went dark.

Ned says he ran full speed down the hill, and the driver, a fat man in overalls with a mustache, started shouting at him. The driver thought Ned had tossed the can into the road as a prank and tried to grab him by the neck. Then they looked in the dented metal bin, which was still wedged beneath the bumper, and saw a bloody twisted mess with white bones jutting out of flesh.

My recovery was slow, expensive, painful, and our father made sure Ned never forgot that he was responsible. Ned had to wheel me everywhere, open doors, clean up after me, wash me, put me to bed, wake me up, and so on. My brother made our meals and did all our laundry. Our father, after a short time, hardly did more than drive us and buy medicine. Anytime Ned complained or didn't fulfill all of our father's requests, Dad would load us both into the van, screaming that he was taking us to an adoption center. We cried for him not to, and Ned promised to undo whatever mistake he made or vowed to stop complaining, and Dad swung the van around and took us back to General's Hill. I knew Ned resented Dad's strictures, but he never took it out on me. If anything, the more insistent Dad was, the more Ned devoted himself to my care.

After a few years, Ned's complaints ceased, and I forgot what it was like before the accident. Dad became less and less involved in my care as Ned became capable of doing more; in my memories, Ned always seemed like the one less likely to neglect me.

He was up with the chickens each morning, cooking breakfast and laying out clothes. He was last to go to bed at night, usually waiting to put load in the dryer.

By the time we were in high school, we had the system down. I relied on my brother as much as my father did. There was a big blow up when Dad wanted Ned to drop out of school because he needed him. The veterinary clinic was in financial trouble, he needed someone to answer the phone during the day (lots of calls got missed because Dad would fall into a boozy torpor most afternoons). I needed him to shuttle me around: to school, home, and physics club. Dad, of course, won out, and relations between he and I deteriorated. I'd like to say that wanted Ned to have a life, that I was sticking up for him, but I wasn't. I just wanted his services for myself. For Ned's part, he tried to please us both, spending his time out of the clinic in squiring me around.

When I finally graduated and got an engineering scholarship to IUPUI, my father didn't want me to go. He knew I would try to convince Ned to come with me to Indianapolis, and he intuited—correctly—that there would be no one to take care of him or his failing business once Ned and I left. Dad had been so rough on my brother through the years that it was easy to sway him to come with me. Our father angrily threw our belongings on the lawn, claiming that he needed the room for renters who were on their way.

Ned started working as a maintenance man at a plant that manufactured climate control units to help support us and planned to take classes in British history once I'd finished my degree. He'd become a ravenous Anglophile after watching *Secrets of the Tudors* on PBS on our fuzzy TV. I borrowed a bunch of books from the university library on the royals, and we'd spend the evenings studying in the living room of our

little apartment just off campus. The first two years of my degree was a contented and hopeful time.

Then Ned took me to a picnic for plant employees where he introduced me to Diana, who worked in the manager's office. They apparently had struck up an acquaintance where they traded dry quips from old British television comedies. They practiced accents and indulged in numerous in-jokes all afternoon, i.e. "Jolly good!" and "I am unanimous in this!" As he wheeled me into our apartment building that night, Ned told me Diana wanted to take him to an exhibit of late Victorian clothing at the state museum, but he'd told her he couldn't go.

I didn't know to respond. "Why can't you go?" I asked, though I knew that he'd told her he was too busy caring for me.

"Oh, you know," he said in an off-handed way, steering up the ramp, "we have so much going on this month." He'd always seemed contented with his role as my constant companion since the accident. Now he was reminding me that he was a single 23-year-old male who'd never been on a date because he had to tend to his crippled sister.

The ugly, sad thought that I didn't want him to go left a hitch in my chest. Once in our place, he went around the room turning on lights, silently anticipating. This was a close as he was going to get to asking me if he could go out with her.

"You can go if you want," I said. "Don't let me stop you."

He stared over the coffee table at me. "If you think you can spare me," he said. "I'd like to."

"Of course," I said. I noticed a queasy resentment for Ned that I appeared to have been building for years and realized that his pitiful life made me angry, even though I'd

needed him all those years. His vigilant care now seemed servile, his attentiveness instead came off as dithering acquiescence.

They began dating. The more he worried about neglecting me the more my resentment grew, until I felt shrouded in it.. One night he'd come in from dinner and movie with Diana bearing a bouquet of flowers for me to apologize for being late, and I'd screamed, "Ned, you don't need me in your life anymore." I'd meant to say *I* didn't need *him*. The next day I arranged for a transfer to a university just outside of Washington, D.C. Ned was stunned when I told him.

"You have no right to make decisions like that without consulting me!" he shouted. His face looked raw and broken, tears streaming out the his eyes. "We'll have to get a whole new place; I have to find work out there." He glanced around frantically.

"You're not coming," I said. "I'm moving into a handicap dorm at Georgetown. I need to be on my own."

"You shit," he screamed. "How dare you. After all I've done for you." He thundered into his bedroom and slammed the door.

"Ned," I yelled. "You need to let me go." At the time, I told myself that I was doing it for his own good. He needed to be on his own; I needed to be on mine. I knew he felt like I was abandoning him, and he was hurt. But I was confident he would see that we needed to be apart. So abandon him, I did. The first months without him were almost impossible, but I gritted my way through it and ended up attending graduate school in Virginia.

We had two icy encounters during those years: once at my father's funeral (attended by only me, him, Diana, and Dr. Knotley) and once at his wedding. I busied

myself with graduate school and didn't contemplate my decision to leave him to his life. It was only much later that I came to see that I pulled away because I was jealous of Diana. And I didn't like what that jealousy made me.

In my bedroom, Hailey hands me the pencil drawing when she's done. It depicts me in my chair, my brother, and his wife in the front room next to a big cylinder with a face peeking out a square window. All the figures smile, even Andrew.

I wake up in my chair the next morning, my back achy. I stretch my arms and spread my fingers, wiggling them in all directions. Then I move into the living room, positioning myself beside the observation window, so I can watch Andrew's restful face spin in the green light. The whirring motors and humming hard drives probably drown out my voice, but I confess to him as I'd seen penitent characters on TV confess to priests. I thought of how I'd explain his surroundings if we ever had to bring him out of suspended animation, how I'd break it to him that there was no cure for The Illness, how he can't go back once he wakes up.

Things had not started out this desperate, of course. Sure, there were no investors at first, but The Illness—that famously unnamed virus mutation borne by the wings, thighs, and breasts of chickens raised in American factory farms—had flared like a torch, spreading through Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, with the rest of the continent to follow. We weren't offering a medical miracle; the chamber was not a cure for The Illness, only a way to stall until there was a cure, a way that didn't involve freezing. Cryogenics was unstable, old-fashioned, and unattractive to patients—which is why it never caught on. My research team developed the coma chamber as an alternative.

Whatever disease you were battling, you waited it out. Even though we called it a coma, the state is technically suspended animation. Chambering people involves putting them in an indefinite dreamless sleep maintained by automatic IV drips of a heavy-duty sedative and keeping them under while their other needs are met. Any disease's advancement is retarded, but the body is preserved. Our guiding design metaphor was to imagine that we were putting someone back in the womb.

Soon, biotech companies and investment firms were sending Bill Blass-clad ambassadors to our facility in downtown Indianapolis (where I'd returned to take advantage of tax-incentives) to practically throw money at us. Sanjay even drew a joke design for a hydraulic system, like the drive-thru chutes at a bank, where investors could drop their checks and drive off. These heady days, though, did not last long. When the chamber of Leland Flotch, son of U.S. Senator Freddie Flotch, malfunctioned and the patient perished, the legal and financial backlash was quick and brutal. The investors enlisted powerful attorneys to excuse them from all contracts and agreements with us. The chambers had been touted as gateways to a healthier future, but all except Andrew's ended up as waiting areas, only forestalling the inevitable fate that awaited those who revived.

I vow to Andrew's revolving face that I will keep him from meeting that fate. I wish I could reassure him like when I said the chamber would spare him the most unsavory and painful aspects of The Illness.

"But there are no guarantees," I'd cautioned. I was more forthright and convincing then. Andrew had come along in the early development of the chamber. Even though animals had been revived and one person—Sylvia Durris—had already been

chambered, I didn't want to give him false hope. Though we'd done it with lab rats, dogs, and chimps, no people had ever been brought out of voluntary coma, or been preserved for more than a year.

Though he'd been sick for a while, Andrew still had his looks. He was handsome in the way insurance salesmen were handsome—cleanly, like he'd been shined. "I'll take anywhere over this place," he said, gesturing at his antiseptic room.

I then shuffled through the legal papers we'd drawn up. I noticed he'd left some parts blank and asked, "Whom do you want us to contact if you do not regain consciousness?"

"There's no one to contact," he said. He gently sipped a cup of water the nurse had brought. "My family and I are not close."

I tried to give him an understanding look. I hated to be pushy, but I needed the information. "Surely your parents would want to know if you don't recover."

He shook his head and straightened his blue gown over his legs. He suddenly reminded me then of a boy I'd had a crush on at Georgetown, someone I'd tutored during my senior year. His name was James and he was sweet and dumb with Andrew's same bland handsomeness. He'd been woefully inept at physics despite wanting desperately to be an engineer. After he got a C- in the cupcake "Applied Physics I," he didn't reenlist for the more formidable "Applied Physics II," telling me he thought he'd leave the "Pre-engineering" major for "Construction Trades," which broke my heart.

"Dr. Ritts," he said. "My family is just blood relation. My parents and I are oil and water, even since I was young." He watched me steadily. In those days, when we were trying to find patients, only one of about seventy or eighty would actually go

through with the procedure once I explained it to them. I expected him to renege, but he didn't.

He looked at me, breathing laboriously, and said, "I'd like to turn it all over to you."

"Me? You don't *know* me."

He smiled. "You're the only one besides me who has something to lose if I kick off." He coughed dryly and wiped his eyes. "Plus, there's no one else. Mom and Dad live out in the boondocks of Georgia, and it's too expensive for them to come up and see me. I literally can't remember the last time I called them. Plus, I have a feeling you'll be responsible for me."

"But *they're* your family."

"Not by choice."

I chuckled at this and thought of my dad.

He grunted and readjusted his position. "Another reason is: I like your honesty. You aren't promising me I'll get better and blowing sunshine up my ass like these doctors. I like that."

"I guess my bedside manner sucks. That's why I went into engineering." I smiled at him, and for a second I forgot we were in the hospital, forgot that he was about to sign his life over to me. I glanced down at the documents. "You want to leave any instructions?"

He shook his head. He made me promise that I would not contact his family under any circumstance other than his death. I was a proxy for his next of kin, and we signed the documents. I chambered him the next week. In the two and a half years since, his

vitals have always been good, and his body adapted quickly to the rotation. He hadn't suffered as much degradation from The Illness as some others I'd seen. I always thought would make it until there was a cure. I also felt proud and fiercely protective of Andrew. When he was at the Ruhl Center with the other chambers, I liked visit his every time I brought new patients in, and then I did it when we were waking people up, and his serene face always made me feel better.

I watch him spin and marvel at how his youthful appearance, though pale and thin, is still intact, and pride blooms in my chest. I wonder if this is how a mother feels looking down into her child's crib.

I contact every doctor in Andrew's files, resorting to begging at various intervals. Not one is willing to prescribe the sedative. I call Steve in Durham and talk over what to do.

"I just don't know what to tell you, Melanie," he says. "If no one will prescribe the sedative, then you'll have to wake him up."

"He'll die in a matter of months, if not sooner."

"I know it's sad," he breathes. "You put a lot of yourself in this project, but you need to let it go. There's no way to get the stuff."

"Can we buy it on the black market, do you think?"

He remains silent.

"I think if there's a chamber still working when there's a cure, I can get the project going again. But I need the sedative in the mean time."

I hear him shuffling papers on his desk and, though I've never been to Duke, imagine him looking out his window down on the brilliant green campus crowded with students. "You remember an engineering intern named Helen?"

I vaguely remembera dark-haired girl starting at the same time Sanjay did who dropped out halfway through the semester. The word around the lab was that she'd become dependant on pain medication after a water skiing accident. "I think so. Druggie?"

"Well, if you want the stuff without a prescription, she'd be the one to ask."

The buzzer in our kitchen sounds—it's Sanjay. I quickly say goodbye to Steve, and wheel into the kitchen to buzz him up. As I have Hailey open the door for Sanjay, she and Diana eye him suspiciously, which figures, I guess, since the last time he came by he brought a portable, spinning man in a tube. As we pass Andrew on the way to my bedroom, where we can talk privately, I show him how low the chamber's sedative levels are and explain that Andrew will start missing calibrated doses at some point tomorrow.

Once he closes the door to my room, he says, "You look like hell, Dr. Ritts." I move my head to look in a mirror I've perched on an old chest of drawers. I look like an oily-skinned and disheveled rag-doll with limp blond hair.

"I'm quickly approaching breakdownville," I say, meeting his deep brown eyes. "But I might have a source for the sedative. You remember Helen who started as an intern when you did? She quit two months later."

Sanjay nods seriously.

"Do you know how we can get in touch with her?"

"I don't," he said. "I think she had to seek treatment."

"Damn," I shout and hear shuffling in the front room. Diana is shuttering Hailey against any more bursts of profanity.

"Dr. Ritts, I'm sorry," Sanjay announces. "But I've been invited to work on a project for the Navy at school. It's a paid internship." Sanjay smoothes his t-shirt, which features the grizzled, shiny face of Miles Davis.

"You're deserting me, too?"

"I'd like to stay. I have to contribute to the family income. My sisters and mother all work at the restaurant."

"I'll pay you once we get the project going full steam again. Until then I can give you a little from my savings."

"I can't pass up the Navy."

I start to cry in galvanic, heaving sobs. Choking them back, I put my hand against my face to hide my broken expression from him. I'm sobbing from total exhaustion more than sadness. Something like anger is festering in me, too, something that doesn't want to give up Andrew.

"Dr. Ritts, please don't cry."

"What are we going to do?" I said. "He's going to wake up tomorrow. And there's no cure. We only need a source of this stupid sedative. The doctors won't do it because they think the chamber is unsafe." I grab his arm desperately. "Please. Please, Sanjay. I need that woman's number. She's the only chance I got."

Sanjay feebly attempts to pull out of my grip. I don't care that he's seeing my pain now; I think I want him to see the desperation in my eyes. He quits pulling and looks away at the tall stack of folders on the bed.

He shuts his eyes. "I called her once because my sister needed some antibiotics. My mother didn't trust American doctors so she called our cousin in Canada, but he's not allowed to call in prescriptions. Helen said she could get a prescription from a worker at St. Vincent's Hospital named Reg." His gaze rises past me to the ceiling, his eyes fixed in an expression of peaceful resignation.

"Just take me up to the hospital, and *I'll* do it," I suggest. "If we get in trouble, I'll take responsibility."

"No, don't go alone. I'll help you. I owe you." He stands up and smoothes his stupid T-shirt again. "Everything's going to be fine, Dr. Ritts. No one is going to get into trouble." I don't actually believe his assurances, but I like the way it feels to pretend. Even though I have no reason to trust this feeling, I let it in.

Down on the street, he helps me into the front seat of his station wagon, folds my wheelchair in the back, and we go. At the hospital, he wheels me through the front doors. We check a map for the third-floor employee breakroom, which Sanjay's friend said Reg uses as a kind of office. We careen down hallways and ride elevators to a bustling room full of tables and a humming Coke machine. Per Sanjay's suggestion, we wait there. Sanjay doesn't know what this Reg looks like, so we squint at workers' I.D. badges as they pass. They all move around us the same way they avoid the medical equipment lining the hallways. A man in overalls with an enormous forehead and no tag pulls dripping slices of peach out of a little container with his fingers and stuffs them in his mouth. His eyes focus in the middle distance, and he doesn't chat with any other staff members trotting in and out. I tell Sanjay to roll me over next to him. He glances at us and returns his gray eyes to the middle distance.

"Reg?"

He doesn't turn but nods almost imperceptibly.

The break room is full of people. I pull out a paper with the name of the drug and whisper as quietly as I can, "We need some Di-ethel-corti." Without once glancing at me, he shakes his head vehemently. He folds up his napkin and stuffs the container back into his brown paper bag, then stands up. He's leaving. I want to scream and rip his face with my nails, but all that happens is tears slink out my eyes.

"Meet me by the dumpster near the east entrance," he whispers. As he leaves, he clips on a tag that says: *Reg*.

Sanjay has to tip my chair back and pull me over a bed of marigolds. We leave a ragged black trail through the flowers and crumbled wood. I know we're near the cafeteria because the rich odor of chicken-flavored tofu flows through exhaust vents. We follow the edge of an access road that bends crookedly around the corner to another entrance, and just beyond it, a huge dumpster. Reg exits a door that proclaims NOT AN ENTRANCE in bold yellow letters.

"Don't you ever come in the hospital looking for me again, you understand me?" he says, wagging his finger in our faces. Then, sounding like a mob villain from a late-night movie, he adds, "You're going to get us pinched." His protuberant forehead creases in anger, and sweat glistens. "You want something, I'll get it for you. But don't *ever* come in again." He points back to the building with the remnants of his index finger. "And don't say nothing like that in the fucking breakroom."

"I'm sorry. I thought that's what we were supposed to do," I say. "This is our—*my* first time." I gesture to Sanjay behind me, "He's just helping me get around."

He scans us both with his deeply recessed eyes. "You know how I know you aren't cops?" he asks. We silently wait for the gleaming Reg to tell us. I venture a shrug. "Because you're a Indian pushing a white woman around in a hospital looking for drugs, that's how. No cops in their right mind would draw this much attention."

"Sorry about that," I say. "We don't want to get you in trouble."

He shakes his head like he's refusing charity. "It's okay." He seems to relax and takes out a cigarette pack. "It's squashed; it's squashed." He pops the cigarette into his mouth, lights it, inhales deeply, and squints one eye down at me. "*What*'cha want?"

For a steep, steep price—a price I'll need the rest of my savings to pay for—Reg will have it for us the following day. Enough to keep Andrew for a couple months. When I tell him I will be there with the money, Reg demands Sanjay come pick it up alone because he doesn't want me returning. People in wheelchairs get noticed, even in St. Vincent's. Ever since a patient froze to death last January when he wheeled out for a smoke and couldn't get back in, hospital staff are required to make sure patients know where they are going and that someone is with them.

Sanjay looks down at me, naked terror on his face. "I don't know about that, Dr. Ritts." He eyes Reg warily.

"Please, *please*, Sanjay. If you could do this for me. This one last thing." I feel like I've been saying nothing but *please* for the last two days.

Sanjay stares at the grass for a minute. He shakes his head, like he's denying some accusation, and quietly says, "All right." He and Reg set a time to meet, and he pushes me back over the landscaping.

"I'll pay you for the trouble, I swear. Once I get things . . ."

"Dr. Ritts, you don't need to pay me."

I clamber into his passenger seat and think that by this time tomorrow, it will just be me taking care of Andrew.

At thirty-three, I'm learning too late that I'm terrible at subterfuge. In the morning, I want to leave a message for Sanjay to call me but don't want to mention the sedatives so I tell his mother we needed to talk about the tea party. I roll around the apartment and keep looking in at Andrew. I take the empty sedative bottle out of the side of the chamber. By my hasty computations, I believe there is enough built up in his system to make it through the day. But I keep checking. Diana goes out of her way to avoid me, which I don't mind at all. She makes a sandwich lunch for Hailey and I, and we sit across from each other crunching corn chips without talking. Sanjay was supposed to be back from the hospital by 1 PM. I sit next to the chamber, gazing in at Andrew's rotating form, which throws shadows from the green lights inside. His vital signs appear normal, but I feel my heartbeat throbbing through the rear lobe of my brain. The phone rings, and I nearly flatten Hailey to answer it. Sanjay's mother begins a stream of barely understandable high-pitched jabber.

I finally discern that she's saying, "Do you know Sanjay was in jail?"

I say I do not and grip my cold, throbbing head with my free hand. I whisper to Hailey, who watches from the couch, to bring me an aspirin. "He says he needs you to bail him out," Sanjay's mother continues. "Says you would know why." She either spits or snorts in anger. "What have you done to my son?" she wails.

"Where is he?" I accept two aspirin from my niece and chew them. She goes to the chamber and peeks in the window. I grab for my notebook in my backpack slung over the back of my chair.

"He is the only child I trusted to send to college, and now look what's happened to him," the woman says.

"Mrs. Rajesh, I need to know where he is so I can get him out."

"I told him not to involve himself with some American strumpet like you."

The accusation dislodges my train of thought from its tracks. All I manage is, "I'm over ten years older than Sanjay."

"Oh my God," she cries. I let her berate me for another minute (she seems to be spiraling toward an exhausted crash landing). She says Sanjay is a police station near St. Vincent's. I hurriedly tell Diana a bullshit story about an auto accident and having to give statements at this station. I plead with her to take me up there.

"But I need to go to Bed, Bath, and Beyond."

"Please, Diana, I need to help this friend of mine," I say. Then I decide on another tack. "He's working on a place to send Andrew so he'll be out of your hair. He needs our help." She calls Hailey in to roll me to the elevator. All three of us go to the station, and I beseech Diana to write me a check that puts me severely in debt for bail. "Probably never live to see *this* repaid," she murmurs, handing the check to the clerk. Sanjay's filthy when he appears to collect his shoes, watch, and wallet at the desk.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He looks down at me and only says, "Take me to my car." I tell Diana we need to go. We load everyone into the Corolla and he directs us back down 82nd Street to St.

Vincent's. Diana stares at Sanjay in the rearview, and I clear my throat raggedly, hoping she'll get the message and knock it off.

I can see in her look she's on to my lies about Sanjay and removing Andrew. She glances at me, then stares at Sanjay some more. "Melanie."

"It's okay," is all I can think to say. "He's okay." I rub Sanjay's bare arm beside me in the backseat, and he jerks it away. "He's okay," I say again, even as I become less and less sure this is true. I put my hand on his shoulder

He leans forward, shrugging off my caress. "Just take me to my car, please," says Sanjay to Diana. "It's in the St. Vincent's parking lot."

"Of course, hon," I say. "You want to stop for something to eat or—"

"Take. Me. To. My. Car."

Diana, mercifully, drives in silence. Hailey peers over the front seat at Sanjay beside me. "You know what, Aunt Melanie?"

"Be quiet, Hailey," Diana snaps.

"What is it, baby?" I whisper, nodding.

"I saw the man in the coffin open his eyes."

I make Diana take us home immediately, yelling that it's a medical emergency. I scream that Andrew could be killed. I am not sure this is true but am gratified when Sanjay joins me in begging her to forget about his car and take us to Andrew. I think of all the animals we'd removed from the synthetic coma. They were fine, I keep telling myself. He'll be fine.

Sanjay and I shout at the elevator, "Come on! Come on!" as it rises to the third floor. I scream at Diana to get out of my way once she unlocks their apartment door.

Sanjay shoves me through, and I nearly topple over in the rush to the living room. The first thing I notice is the body isn't swinging around inside the chamber. Diana grabs Hailey, leads her into the master bedroom, and shuts the door. The chamber is in dosage mode, but no sedative was working its way through the guts of the machine and into Andrew's bloodstream. He lies on his back, still strapped to the stretcher, and his eyes are shut. His vitals, running on the screen attached to the chamber, say he is still comatose. Sanjay kneels beside me and rifles through rolls of stats that print out every twelve hours to keep a paper trail. I call for Hailey, but she doesn't come. I feel sure that Diana's on the phone to Ned right now.

"I'm not seeing any spikes in respiration, blood flow, or brain activity," Sanjay says. The printouts rattle in his quaking hands. He is grubby from head to toe from being in the cell.

"It's all normal here," I say, hesitantly. And for a moment it seems to be. I use the arrows on the keyboard to scroll back through the last few hours. An alarm is supposed to sound if the patient's breathing and heart rate reach a certain number, but I hear nothing of the sort. As the wavy lines on the chart drift across the screen from left to right, we go back in time. I watch the red and blue readouts creep up a long incline that spikes above the DANGER line. There is a creeping heaviness in my chest. "Here it is, Sanjay."

He looks over my shoulder. "The brain activity is normal," he says, tapping a green line that remains unchanged, below the others.

"He's gone six hours without sedative. But he wasn't cognizant when he opened his eyes." I silently thank God for this. "Maybe Hailey just saw some kind of side effect from sedative withdrawal. A reflex."

"But how is this still so low?" Sanjay asks, still indicating the green line. "If there's no sedative?"

The answer trickles out my mouth, though I want to keep it to myself. As I'm saying it, I feel a queasy relief. "His comatose state isn't synthetically induced anymore. It's natural."

Sanjay makes a soft, high-pitched noise, and I can feel his body stiffen behind me. "We must take him to the hospital, Melanie."

"Yes." I turn around as much as I can in the chair to look at him. "I guess it's over. I'm really sorry, Sanjay. We'll get you a good lawyer. We'll keep you out of jail."

Sanjay looks bereaved. "You will have to confess. They didn't believe that we were trying to get medicine for a patient."

"I know. I'll confess."

He pats my shoulder. "You worked very hard to save him." I hate myself for feeling this way, but gratitude sweeps over me. I fool myself, for a second, that I'm vindicated in what I've done. Then I disgust myself even more by feeling glad that Andrew is beyond my help now.

"Don't worry about it," I tell him. "I will work hard to save you, too." I can't imagine this is much consolation.

A steady strobe of amber streetlights pulses as Ned drives through suburban Atlanta two weeks later. It's almost midnight. St. Vincent's transported Andrew down here, where he can be made comfortable. Ned parks at the extended-stay place across from Andrew's new home, we go in and tell the clerk that we only need one night. He puts us on the ground floor because of my chair.

In the room, Ned rolls me to the window without saying anything and brings the phone from the desk. The last few weeks have been difficult, with all of Andrew's arrangements and Sanjay's hearing. I'm sure I just about ruined both Ned's and Sanjay's lives. Diana took Hailey and went to stay with her parents, but I pray not permanently. They're still talking, though. He grabs an ice bucket and leaves to call Diana from the pay phone in the lobby. I mean to remind him to thank her for me. She refuses to be in the same room with me now, and now that I'm likely to be convicted for soliciting narcotics she probably won't warm up, but I am grateful she let Ned bring me down to Georgia.

I retrieve my organizer from my backpack on the wheelchair and dial the number written on the first page. Andrew's cousin Angie answers, and I immediately apologize for the lateness of the call, but I tell her I wanted to reconfirm the time we were meeting.

In a mild southern accent she says, "Now don't worry about a thing. Reed and I will be there tomorrow at ten," she says. "It's been so long since we seen Andrew." I want to feel good about handing him over to a distant cousin, but I can't muster it. The Pikes were the best I could do since his parents were so dirt poor.

I hang up and look at the sheaf of Andrew's estate and medical documents, most of it now obsolete. Much of this stuff—official documentation, financial statistics—

doesn't matter when you're in a coma. This, I suppose, is obvious to everyone else, but I'm also just now realizing that most people treat comas like death. I liked thinking of the suspended animation as a holding pattern, like a plane waiting to touch down.

We left the coma chamber in Ned's living room, still splayed open, with the tangled tubes and wires hanging out of it like vines from the maw of a carnivorous plant. A sour odor emanates from the tube, an old-clothing smell that prompts memories from childhood. I'd sobbed into the vacant space for an hour after they took Andrew.

I'd planned on rechecking all Andrew's information, but I'm too wiped to do it so I switch on the TV in the corner. There's a movie on about a beautiful pregnant teenager with incredible hair. I'm thoroughly envious of the girl's blond tresses and tell Ned so when he comes back with some Sprites and ice. In the next scene, a woman I recognize from an old soap opera encourages the girl to give up the baby for adoption. She is unwilling to do it even though the woman claims the girl is totally incapable of caring for the child. The woman finally confronts her with all the selfish things she's done: The girl skips doctors' appointments, won't save money for the baby, goofs off with her boyfriend, and refuses to eat right. The older woman says it's like she doesn't want the baby. The terrific-haired girl tearfully agrees and they embrace.

I look at Ned. "Why do you think Dad never actually gave us up for adoption?"

"I don't know. He probably did it to scare us." Ned kicks off his loafers and gazes down into the Sprite can. "Worked, didn't it?"

I think about all that I've put Ned through. And Sanjay. And Hailey and even Diana. "Maybe he hated being the kind of person who would actually give up his kids more than us."

Ned shrugs and clears his throat theatrically. "It's true that you can be obligated to something and not love it."

"Is that true for you and me?"

"Never. But, little sister, the opposite is."

I look out the window at the lights winking on top of the hospital. I imagine Andrew nestled inside it, like the building was a giant coma chamber. "So this is it?" I ask, and nod to make it real to myself. "You're done with me." I choke out a breath, about to burst open with regret, and I start trembling. "God, I've made things so hard for you. All to put a guy who wasn't in a coma into a coma." He pushes the cup to me, and I stare at him. "What made me think I could save Andrew?"

"He'd have died already, if it wasn't for you. Remember that. Plus, don't be so self-absorbed. Losing something you're responsible for harder than you thought? Join the club."

"What are you talking about? He's gonna *die* now," I say, gesturing to the hospital framed in the window.

"You're not sad about *that*, though," he says, shaking his head. "You've lost your reason for waking up every day. I've been watching you the two weeks since he left; I recognize it. You miss the responsibility. Even if it was killing you."

My breath catches. "I was killing you?" I ask.

He nods and says, "But in the end, I was glad you left. Even though it hurt. Then I was angry that I felt good about it. But those feelings pass."

I shake my head slightly to make the blinking lights on the hospital look like readout lines. "What replaces them?"

My brother shrugs at me, and says, “We’ll have to see.”

Where The Day Takes You

At first, I thought the job with Tele-Frontation was a step up. This company sold digital answering systems to large businesses, which was much more prestigious than my previous job—going from motel to hotel around town, selling miniature bottles of SunShower grooming supplies (shampoo, body wash, and lotion) that they provided for guests. It was an ugly business, and I was terrible at it. Going into a Holiday Inn or Marriott, I felt powerless because so much was left to chance. It was always something: the person who purchased these goods wasn't there, they already had a sweet deal with Procter & Gamble, or the hotel didn't provide complementary bathroom stuff. For the two years I had that job, my car reeked of shampoo because sample bottles would melt if it got too hot. I drove with the windows down all year long just to keep the fragrance from choking me.

To ease frustration, I developed this little game with myself to take the edge off. My private name for it was "Where The Day Takes You." I used to play for a couple hours during work every day. Here's how it worked: I got in the car and drove to a part of the city I didn't know well. The first few times I did this, I needed the map to find out where I was and how to get home. Later, I would use the map only at the beginning to find a starting point. Usually I picked something out-of-the-way, in a residential neighborhood usually, or the junction of a country road at the edge of town. Then I flipped a quarter and drove in whichever direction corresponded with the front or back of the coin. I became very adept at flipping the coin and catching it with my right hand while clutching the steering wheel with my left. If I flipped at each intersection, then turned right if it was heads and left if it was tails, I sometimes ended up circling the same

block several times before I was allowed to leave. This was not such a big deal downtown, where there is a lot to see and so much change in the intervals between each time you pass the same street. Residential neighborhoods were a different story, where people would eye me warily. But I stuck to the rules because this was the game as I had defined it, and kept flipping and turning.

After a while, though, "Where The Day Takes You" didn't work. My gorge would rise every time I went through the SunShower spiel in some housekeeping director's office. It was always hard for me to make a case that they actually needed my brand instead of those they already used. Most often they didn't, and I only got sales if I offered drastic discounts. It was a dead-end job, so I sent Tele-Frontation my application. I interviewed downtown at a nearly deserted suite on the Laughlin Building's eighteenth floor by a man named Bob, a squat fifty-year-old who was inordinately fond of aphorisms. After I described my experience with the grooming products, he called me a natural for the sales game and said that as long as I kept my head up I would land on my feet. He knew the perfect position, saying I was a nice fit. I would be telecommuting, which was a first for me. All my sales leads, reports, and marching orders came through email, and I would sell these answering devices by cold-calling. I was grateful I didn't have to live out of my little Saturn, which I'd been doing for almost a year while working for SunShower.

After Bob sent me home with all this literature on the Answering Wizard 8000, I spent two whole days studying the ins and outs of the device and its upgrades. It could absorb up to 200 incoming telephone calls at once, deal with each of them politely and quickly, then expertly funnel the calls to relevant personnel's phones and/or voice

mailboxes without breaking a digital sweat. The 8000 also had the important distinction of being the only system that could be expanded infinitely by purchasing upgrades from us, earning it the rather truthful—I think—distinction of being "the last communications system your company would ever need."

And I did very well, pulling down a decent base salary with excellent commissions. I spoke the language of office managers, who loved me and our product because we, the product and I, both presented a vision of an office run with utmost efficiency and organization. It felt good to be an advocate for a product I actually believed in.

A couple of months into the job, a Priority Action email from P. Herbert Mooney, president and CEO, informed me of three things: Tele-Frontation was entering a restructuring period, Bob was axed and I would report directly to Mooney, and it said that I needed to begin selling the AW-9000, which was sleeker, more powerful, and more polymathic version that the AW-8000.

The 9000 seemed like stellar product—more memory, more features—but my sales leads were crappy. I was ordered to contact our Most Valued Customers (MVCs), those companies who'd purchased both the 8000 *and* unlimited lifetime service agreement, and offer them the 9000. But these firms *already had* the 8000, with accouterments. The system, *as advertised*, worked so well that my calls were expertly funneled to some subordinate of the person who made purchasing decisions or, worse, cast into the dark maw of our Prioritizing Message Bank, where my message bunked with riff-raff like calls from the American Cancer Society.

I found myself lashing out at the AW-8000's early version of the Intelli-Gent software, an upgrade of which was standard on all 9000 models, which responded to incoming calls with a buttery, broadcast-quality, digitally produced male voice or, as we liked to say, "male personality." This "personality" offered the caller a nearly limitless variety of connection possibilities based on basic question-and-answer scenarios. R&D emailed me a breakdown of the analyses. In blind tests, 6 out of 10 callers could not discern the Intelli-Gent from an actual receptionist, given that the receptionist is only empowered to take messages and forward calls to specific employees. They cross-referenced these findings with the narrative feedback sections and had stats that showed the 40% of respondents who correctly identified the Intelli-Gent software were either blindly guessing or somehow familiar with the limitations of telephone answering systems. Even though I knew this, the learning mechanism programmed into the 8000's interface matrix began to irritate me. I knew it was all show to wear down callers, make them settle for a connection with voicemail, but I still got mad.

This morning, after a week of ham-fisted attempts to get around office peons, unreturned calls, digital dead ends, and polite declines, I came to a conclusion as I pored over my old lead sheet. Since I'd believed so strongly in the AW-8000, I gave customers faith that the system would save them time, energy, and resources, which it did. Now I had to be an ardent disciple of a new god, the 9000. But the fact was that I couldn't, and I realized I'd begun to resent Mooney, his R&D clowns, and marketing fools. I didn't want to know how far my earnings would plummet without the rich gravy of commissions on top of my base pay.

I fired off a High Priority message of my own to Mooney informing him of my inability to reach my clients and requesting help. He responded that he was "on it" and that I should "keep up the astonishing work I was doing for the company." The most valuable use of my time, he suggested, would be to research potential clients and build call lists myself in addition to the ones I received, via email, from the marketing department. Market research was for wonky amateurs. I was a *seller*, not some fresh-from-college kid with a shiny new degree and no experience.

I moped around all morning, drinking coffee and halfheartedly profiling local companies we hadn't sold to yet. Being at home, by myself, with only research to do made me feel antsy. I felt the vague panic I used to get when I would be sick at home from school. I always imagined my classmates and teacher going along without me, taking math quizzes and assigning homework just as they did when I'm there. I never missed much school because I didn't like feeling this way. But when I did, I would prop myself up to see out the back window and watch cars on the interstate that ran behind our house. It would fill at rush hour, then empty almost completely by 10 AM. I had the anxious sense of the world turning without me and that whatever hole I left would soon close over like I'd never been there.

So I went back to the Laughlin Building, to make sure I wasn't being ignored or forgotten. I wondered as I rotated through the glass doors of the building if the restructuring period would end in my termination. Two dynamite-looking women waited at the lobby elevator, which expelled a fat kid with an empty satchel from a sub sandwich shop. With his head cranked almost backward to see them, he stumbled across the lobby and collided with the glass wall leading outside.

We got on, and one of them pushed eighteen. When the doors opened, they both strode directly across the hall to a door marked "Saffer Modeling Agency." I thought I had the wrong floor and almost let the doors close. I stepped off and looked up and down the hallway. There were a couple other doors, both belonging to law and consulting firms. No Tele-Frontation anywhere.

I went into the modeling agency to see if they knew anything. A woman named Nina said the agency had rented the space a few weeks earlier. Building management had told them whoever had it before them hadn't used it for a couple months. She said any Tele-Frontation mail got forwarded to an address, 5801 Glenway Crossing. Even though I thought it might just be the payroll office, full of accountants doing work for several different companies, I wanted to check it out.

I returned to my car and dug out a coffee-stained map stuffed under the passenger seat. After a few minutes I located the road, which snaked through what looked like a heavily residential area in a suburb. I jumped on the interstate and guided my car through the thickening noontime traffic. With the map in my hand, I was reminded of when I was schilling the personal grooming stuff to hotels and the game I played.

I drove to a neighborhood called Peabody Woods next to a little town called Holcomb, which had been absorbed by the city. I passed the post office, which still had HOLCOMB in the cement above the door. I'd been to Peabody Woods when I'd played the game before. I found Glenway Crossing right away. It was very long, curling back through more and more impressive houses to a "T" at Glencrossing Way. I checked to make sure I hadn't switched the parts of the street name, and I hadn't. No 5801 wasn't

on either road, and when I reached the Holcomb P.O. again, I decided to give "Where The Day Takes You" a try.

I pulled up to the post office boxes on the corner, flipped, got tails, and went left. I drove to the next block, where there was a stop sign, flipped, got tails, and went left. I got caught in some kind of probability vortex that gave me never-ending tails, passing the Holcomb P.O. three times. I became increasingly sure I was doing something with my hand that made the coin come up the same way. I didn't want to change my rhythm, though, because doing so would be imposing my will on the outcome of the coin toss, thus violating my self-imposed rules. I expected to play for a few more minutes, then return home and begin looking for a new job when, on my third pass of a series of split-level houses on Waycross Glen Road, an elderly man tottered over and waved at me to stop.

I considered not doing it, but I thought that if the impetus for stopping came from outside myself, then I had no actual control, as with a traffic light. People had gestured for me to stop during previous games. Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't. And I always debated with myself, just as I did that day on Waycross Glen. On one hand, I wasn't supposed to be responsible for my direction, so pulling my Saturn to the curb would be acceptable. But I also worried that stopping was *my reaction* to the man waving his hand, not the random result of a coin toss. It occurred to me then that obeying the outcome of the toss was still controlling my actions since I was arbiter of what each toss meant, my will seeping through even though I didn't want it to.

I contemplated speeding away in cloud of leaves, but I was afraid I'd scare the old man in his black socks, khakis, and jacket. He would *know* I had seen him, would think

I'd been casing his house for a robbery. Still, when I came close to him, my foot hovered at the edge of the brake pedal, gently applying pressure, but ready to pounce on the gas in case I changed my mind. Finally, though, I came to a stop, rolled down my window, and clutched my quarter in my right hand.

"Are you lost?" he asked brightly.

"Just a little turned around."

"Where were you trying to get to?" the old man asked. There was something slightly nautical about his appearance with his colorful canvas jacket and cheeks reddened by the bracing wind. I gave him the address and asked if he knew Tele-Frontation.

He nodded and pointed at me like I'd just revealed a secret he'd long suspected. He really looked ancient in the gray light. "My youngest son knows about that. He's better at that stuff than I am."

"That would be great." I wondered if he stopped everyone that passed more than once.

"He's working in the garage. Come on in." As we walked up the yard, I noticed the garage had its own address, 5801, and the house was 5803. He led me inside where a haggard-looking kid, probably twenty-two, sat in the middle of the garage with the lab equipment around him. And this boy was *white*—toad-belly white. He'd been there, under the fluorescents, for weeks on end I'd bet. Pizza boxes were stacked on the floor beneath the tables. Ashtrays brimmed with cigarette butts like little shorn forests. Wadded tissues and paper were stacked atop pieces of digital hardware. Soda cans littered any counter space that wasn't taken up with electronics.

And the technology around him was astounding. Stuff I'd never seen before freshly shucked from the plastic wrapping, pulled out of boxes, and disassembled all over cheap office tables. Electronic boards that sprouted ribbons of wire sat on empty shells of telephones and hard drives. Two blinking computer towers took up one table beside a huge monitor and keyboard. Seven phones were arranged on what appeared to be a pizza platter, all with lines snaking across the floor to a motherboard.

And there, in the corner, it sat. About the size a phone booth, housed in trauma-resistant plastic with glass doors on either side. An Answering Wizard 9000 with several tentacles connecting to one of the computer towers. I felt a weird displacement, like I was watching myself on a screen. I pointed at the machine, my mouth working to ask why they had it.

"It's nice, isn't it? My son Danny built it." He gestured to Danny, who clicked around on his screen with a mouse. He didn't seem to notice we were there. One of the phones rang. The old man reached for it.

"Don't answer that, Dad," he said and lit a cigarette without moving his eyes from the computer monitor.

The old man dropped his hands to his side, disappointed. P. Herbert Mooney looked like a decrepit and borderline-senile version of his irascible son. "Hey, Danny," the elderly man announced, "you need to help this gentleman . . ."

Danny's eyes cut up to me standing by the doorway. "Where did he find you?"

"Excuse me?" I thought he wanted to know why the old man had hired me. I was about to explain that Bob had offered me the sales job back in September when he spoke again.

"Where did Dad find you?" he said, breathing smoke out his nostrils. "He's always bringing people home like stray animals." Danny's father moved over to a stool and perched himself on it precariously. Danny asked him, "Did you make this guy follow you from the supermarket?"

Another phone rang, and the old man started toward it. Danny glared at his father, and the old man's hand stopped in midair. "I *told* you not to answer it. Don't touch anything." Danny kept punching keys and moving the mouse around. Since the back of the monitor faced me I couldn't see what he was doing, but his ghostly face seemed to glow by itself rather than just reflecting light from the screen.

"I'm sorry, Danny," the old man said and gazed at his brown loafers.

I spoke up. "You built that?" I asked, pointing to the AW 9000.

Danny's father said, "Oh, yes, he designed our whole line. That's right, isn't it, Danny?" Obviously, this wasn't how I pictured our Research and Development operation. The doddering old man seemed unsure what to do with himself up on the stool, so he got down. He turned to me and asked, "What kind of work do you do, sir?"

It seemed too much of a coincidence that I could have come upon J. Herbert Mooney in my random traveling. Yet still I had the vague notion that somehow I was influencing the outcome of the coin tosses, and some force had directed me to them. I thought of revealing myself then. I wanted to know if, in addition to R&D, Danny's siblings were working in other parts of the house on Marketing, Legal, and Payroll. I wanted the unvarnished truth about why they were perpetrating this fraud. But I knew they'd probably keep lying to me. So I kept my identity to myself and told them I worked with computers. After a pause, I decided to add, "For the government."

"Ah, computers for the government," the old man breathed, nodding to the floor. I detected a note of disbelief in his voice, and felt a thin lance of panic. "Let me ask you something." Mooney seemed to be preparing to launch into some elaborate speech. The phone rang again and his hand moved, automatically, toward it. This time, he stopped himself. Then he inhaled, squinted at me, and asked: "What kind of product do you sell?"

"He just *told* you, Dad," Danny practically screamed. "He doesn't sell. He works with computers. For the government." Danny's eyes never left the monitors.

"Okay," he said, a thoughtful expression dawning on his face. Then to me: "To homes or businesses?" The phone rang again, and he reached for it, making it to the receiver before incurring Danny's wrath.

"*Dad!*" the kid shouted. "*Don't touch*."

"Oh, that's right. That's right." He pointed at Danny like he was vehemently agreeing with an argument the kid had made. He looked over at me. "We're working on a sales tool."

"Really?" A buzzing excitement thumped through my fingertips.

"Yes, it's designed to get around our answering system."

"*Dad*," the kid warned. "Don't give away our strategy." Then he blinked and gazed up at me from his station. "Where did you say you were going?"

"Danny, we need another opinion besides ours," the old man said. He seemed to be gathering himself to exert effort.

"All right," Danny said, clearly going along to keep his dad happy. "Tell him." He sighed dramatically. "But don't be surprised if Bell Labs comes up with something just like the Silver Bullet."

He straightened himself to his full height. "How many times have you heard this?" the old man intoned, extending his hand to Danny, who tapped on the keyboard.

The manly voice of the Intelli-Gent came out of his speakers with its standard deflection message: "I *am* sorry. The person you are trying to reach is away from his desk right now. May I forward you to his mailbox?" The Intelli-Gent, I realized, was the old man's voice, cleaned up and beautiful.

I raised my eyebrows, trying to look impressed. "I'm hearing that more and more." I have to admit at this point I kind of felt like I was in a commercial, acting falsely interested. "Is this like an electronic answering machine?"

"It's more than that," Danny said. "It is a digitally-automated *receptionist*. So businesses can block a bunch of the crap. You know, increase efficiency." He stubbed out his burning Marlboro and lit another. "Intelli-Gent adapts to a caller's tones and responds accordingly, or follow to particular commands. The Intelli-Gent will warn of potentially important and/or hostile callers by supplying a read-out of the their name and emotional state—*PATIENT*, *ANGRY*, or *SAD*—on a liquid crystal ticker on the phone."

Mooney cleared this throat and rattled off the marketing information I already knew. "Ninety percent of those who correctly identified it as an artificial system said that their calling experience was enhanced by the software. The respondents stated they would, on the whole, *prefer* to talk with Intelli-Gent *instead* of a receptionist."

Danny chuckled. “Most of the ‘respondents’ were stray people Dad brought home like stray animals.”

The old man’s face reddened. “Their opinions are just as important as your—“

“I know,” the kid said, sitting down. “Don’t start.”

I reached into my pocket and felt the quarter that had delivered to me to the garage of P. Herbert Mooney, who now blinked at me through his trifocals. Danny continued, “We needed to build another system for salesmen to get around the Answering Wizard. Like if you wanted to call and present someone with your product and go through the whole spiel. The Answering Wizard is designed to keep these kinds of calls from ever getting through.”

I just nodded.

Danny swiveled around in his chair. “I’m putting together a 50-channel generator that can identify the target, then connect the target with the seller. The seller would only have to sit in his office and wait for the phone to be answered, then he could jump on and start talking to the office manager or whoever buys for the company.”

“Then we got the—” Mooney began.

“*I* got the idea,” Danny called over his father then faced me fully. He was a real sallow-looking kid who seemed to be covered with a thin layer of translucent grease. “I got the idea that if we could simulate a receptionist answering the phone then we could definitely automate a sales call.”

The old man brightened and stared at me. “Danny wants to call it ‘The Silver Bullet.’ But I’m not sure.”

"I came up with the name Answering Wizard," the son said. He scratched his hair, and a shower of dandruff fell on the computer stand in front of him. He said, "And look where *that* went," and brushed the dead skin to the floor.

"Like with werewolves?" the old man said to me. "Silver Bullet?"

I felt like my face might be contorting all over my head.

"Danny," the old man said. "I don't think he gets it."

Blood gushed to my face. "Yes, but," I stuttered, "those automated callers don't work. I've seen figures on them. Their yields are really low."

"They are now," laughed Danny. "But I made a *goddamn answering machine* that is way more intelligent and capable than some bimbo who answers the phone. Plus it doesn't need paid vacations, trips to the bathroom, or dental for its six kids." Then he erupted in a sudden, manic display of mirth. His father smiled benignly, like he didn't understand.

I felt a black storm of resentment building behind my eyes. I imagined a series of phone banks with no one on them. Huge terminals talking to other huge terminals somewhere, making requests and getting responses, sending tentacles of inquiry into more outlets that would either accept or rebuff their advances. Electronically produced profiles sent to tireless digital salesman who didn't get bored or need to leave the office to play a game of chance with their car and a quarter to boost their yields. Then the businesses that were being hassled would request us to install yet another electronic buffer into their systems to counter the onslaught. Limitless versions of the Silver Bullet coming out, alongside infinite upgrades to the Answering Wizard. New answering software would sell itself and its weakness. In response to which, the Mooneys would

have to develop even more sophisticated selling software, which would be followed by yet more sophisticated defense mechanisms. At the company's electrically convulsing heart was a notion that if they could only get rid of the human weakness, that weakness off which most salesmen made their bread and butter, then the business could attain an ultimate, ruthless efficiency.

"Well, of course, that's a long way off," Mooney said, shrugging. "Right now, we want to get around the Answering Wizard so our salespeople can get through to their leads. My sales department is having trouble selling upgrades. So I had Danny start working on something we could use in-house to get around our own defense mechanisms, so to speak."

Danny nonchalantly lit another smoke, said "Our sales department" in a low voice, and chuckled. "We've been listening in on our slack-jawed sales guy to figure out what answers are holding him up." He clicked a couple times, and my heavily distorted voice came out of the speakers.

"Mr. Thornton, please," my voice said. It was tinny and weirdly bored, almost unrecognizable to me. "This is Tele-Frontation calling."

"Just one moment," said the smooth Intelli-Gent. Simulated background noise filtered through the speaker, as if the receptionist was checking. I felt an angry heat begin to bloom across the bridge of my nose.

"I'm sorry, *sir*," said Intelli-Gent after a moment. "Mr. Thornton isn't in. May I forward you to *his* voice mail?"

"Cocksucker," I heard myself say. Then the anger at their spying and lying went out of me, replaced by a dreadful fear. All the equipment seemed like dead organs

pumped full of electric life, and all the streaming information choked the air out of the garage, reminding me of my fragrance-filled car from a few months ago. It would know more than I'd ever know, carrying on conversations long after my voice was gravelly and lost.

"See?" Danny said, not looking at me. "The Silver Bullet will never give up." He tapped some keys.

Then my voice came back, this time vastly more deep and attractive than my own, sounding nothing like me.

"May I please speak with your purchasing agent?" it boomed.

Intelli-Gent replied, "I *am* sorry. The person you are trying to reach is away from his desk right now. Can a forward you to his voice mail?"

"No," my digitally enhanced voice said, "I would like to wait." The voice was full of confidence and vigor, without anger or resentment.

"But the person you are trying to reach is away from the work area right now. Can I forward you to voice mail?" Intelli-Gent said.

The old man cackled. "It will just keep trying and trying until it gets through. It knows nothing of discouragement."

Danny stared at his screen and tapped some keys. "Our sales guy will quit trying to call because, unconsciously, he thinks he's *annoying* Intelli-Gent." He took a long pull on his cigarette and laughed out an enormous cloud of gray smoke. "Then he gets all torqued off. Listen." The exchange stopped. The old man and Danny were smiling at the speakers expectantly.

"I'm sorry, *sir*," said Intelli-Gent, again, blandly. "Could you please repeat that?"

My garbled voice said: “Tell him this for me: he’s a cocksucking fuck.”

Danny howled with laughter, his eyes shining and face flushed crimson. I felt disgust, like the time I’d opened a trashcan to find a rat gnawing on rotten fried chicken, and my lips pulled away from my teeth. I started backing up to their kitchen door. Mooney nodded, and Danny played another clip of my staticky voice. The old man gestured for me to stay and listen. I turned and slipped into the kitchen. “I don’t think you understand our project,” the old man called. I turned and threw the door open, mortification pulsing in my temples. I strode through the house, passing all the domestic knickknacks, and left through the front door, leaving it hanging wide. I could still hear the old man calling for me to listen. I shook with a powerful anxiety, unsteady on my jellied legs. I glanced up as I was rifling for my keys, and the garage door slowly lifted. The November wind blew plastic wrap and boxes around inside. Mooney ducked to get under and came shambling toward my car. I jumped in, peeled out, and took a right at the end of the block.

At first I drove without destination. I didn’t want to return home. I took the quarter that had delivered me to Mooney’s and started flipping it. I traveled through suburbs, over viaducts, under bridges, on to divided highways, and back off. The quarter kept giving me lefts and rights. I didn’t want to decide or even know where I was going. Then I came up beside this location of Central State Hardware. I hope you remember me, Mr. Chatham. Your sales and purchasing department was my biggest client. I don’t think fate brought me to your office on your day off. Random chance did that. It was fate that you agreed to talk to me over speakerphone. I think I’d be a great fit here. It’s time for me to leave the selling game and work as a buyer for Central State. I really

appreciate your willingness to do the interview from your boat. Can you hear me okay, sir? Are you there?

Mike's House

We came in through my best friend's bedroom window. My mother's boyfriend, Keith, boosted me from the ground in Mike's yard, my bottom jacket button catching on the sill as I swung my legs inside, stepped to the floor, and looked around.

I stood in the empty room for a moment, breathing, then Keith reminded me he was still outside. "Zip? A hand?" He called me Zip because he didn't like my real name, Virgil, which he said was faggoty. I grasped his arm and pulled as he scrabbled through the window, making a huge racket.

"We're going to get in trouble," I said. "There's nothing left anyway." Mike's walls stared blankly at us in the gray light from the window, the Ferrari calendar and Navy posters missing.

Keith made a chuffing noise and blew into his fist. "God, you're such a worrywart." He lowered the window to keep out the bitter wind. Plumes of steaming air flew from his mouth. He grunted "Sound like a damn girl," and walked down the hallway to the Marksons' empty living room. Mike's seemed more like an empty museum than a house. Ghostly outlines of pictures still hung on the walls, pale shapes cigarette smoke hadn't stained.

Keith opened all the closet doors and kitchen cabinets while I stood in the denuded living room, rubbing my nose to warm it. The Venetian blinds palely illuminated the dull wooden floor. I remembered where the sofa had sat, the end tables brimming with JC Penney catalogs, grubby ashtrays, and *People* magazines. Mike's father, Leonard, spent his weekends lodged in front of their enormous television console with a date reminder for the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes hanging from the

volume knob. He kept ancient tickets from the Ohio and Michigan lotteries, claiming that these states sometimes redrew numbers years later. His face had reminded me of a folded piece of burlap, with crimson veins broken all over. He'd always referred to me as Gus, after Virgil "Gus" Grissom, the famous Hoosier astronaut. I looked at the blinds covering the front windows and wondered if Mike's father had thought Virgil sounded faggoty, too.

"Hey, Zip," Keith called from the kitchen. "Your friend's dad keep anything out in the shed?"

"Not really," I said, stuffing my raw red hands in my pockets. "Just lawn stuff." When I realized he was going to break into the shed, I decided to fib. "I think Mike's dad took it all." I went to the kitchen and saw all the cabinets hung open like gaping mouths.

"There's no lock," he said, gazing through the rear window into the backyard. He ran his fingers through his hair while he stood at the sink, patting the strands down into a ducktail. Keith's hair was designed to make him seem taller, but it just emphasized his small, wiry body. "Probably nothing in it," he said, moving to the back door that led out to the patio. "But worth a look." Then he was outside and across the yard, shielding his neck from the wind with his denim collar.

I closed the cabinet doors, but the place still felt violated.

Two weeks earlier, Mike and I had been drawing maps of continents we'd made up at the Marksons' table. Mine was called "Ekanphandra," and Mike's was "Rodrigo Domingoro." Ekanphandra sported an isthmus and a meandering coastline around two large bodies I'd named "Upper Terwillinger" and "Lower Terwillinger." Mike aspired to

be a board-game designer, and he spent lots of time "experimenting" with his own self-devised contests. The hand-drawn maps on discarded graph paper and tiny strips of construction paper were for this warring nations game he'd concocted. The construction strips represented armies that took more turns to travel over areas marked by mountains, so I had surrounded my capital city with a jutting range called the Grand Virgils.

I liked being at the Marksons' because, out of all my friends' houses, it was the least like mine. It didn't smell sour from backed up sewage, and wasn't missing shutters and screen doors. The carpet didn't have big stains halfway down the hall from recent toilet overflows. No one got fired from one bad job and had to take two worse ones to make up the money or left in the middle of the night and returned—broken-looking—a couple days later or locked someone out of the house.

Unlike at my house (where Mom, Keith, and I rarely encountered each other), the Marksons all had dinner together. Even Mike's older brother Toby would rumble up the basement stairs and plop down at the table. I usually ate Ramen noodles and swigged root beer while watching *Wheel of Fortune* alone in the dark living room.

The afternoon we sketched continents at the kitchen counter, Mike's dad burst in the back door from work and stared down at us, then glared over at his wife who was slicing tomatoes by the stove. He seemed outraged, like he couldn't believe we had the nerve to be doing what we were doing.

"Len?" Mary Beth Markson said. "What is it?" He just grunted, then shambled into the back bedroom and slammed the door. She followed him down the hallway and I heard her softly talking. Mike's mouth shrunk to a mute oval, and I slipped on my coat. I'd seen this before, knew what was going to happen; I'd watched badness and strife

erupt out of nowhere. I'd seen men my mother dated, perfectly nice at first, turn on her like rabid dogs after a few weeks. I didn't like that it was happening at Mike's house, but I could figure out what was coming.

Mike crept up to the kitchen doorway and peeked down the hall. I told him I'd see him at school the next day, but he didn't notice me as I left. I heard his dad shouting through the wall as I passed around that side of his house and hopped on my bike.

During the ride home, I imagined that night at Mike's with him, his mother, and his brother trying to choke down dinner while his dad slammed around in the kitchen. Or his dad might just leave and his mother would make stuttering phone calls as it got late, asking his friends if they'd seen or heard from him.

I felt sorry for Mike, but anger bubbled up my scalp, too. I didn't want Mike's house to change. I skidded to a stop beside a beer bottle, picked it up, and hurled it at a fence post. The bottle missed the post, denying me a satisfying tinkling of broken glass, and thunked dully in the dead grass. Mike's would start being like my house. The air would turn sour, and sound would carry differently. Everything would seem more fragile. Light would have difficulty piercing the grimy windows.

I went to the dump behind our neighborhood and watched other boys ramp their bikes off planks and milk crates until the sky fell dark. Bitter wind began blowing cold after sunset, and I sat on my front steps until I couldn't stand it anymore. When I came in, the sour smell choked me, forcing me to run into the kitchen and vomit in the sink. Though the house had reeked this way for months, it turned my stomach now. I imagined it would never end. I'd have to drape a wet dishcloth over my nose and mouth to breathe whenever I came in the house.

The next day at recess Mike said his dad threw away all the old lottery stuff and told his mom he didn't want to live in America anymore. Mike's face flushed red from trying to look brave. A few days later, Mike told me his dad had lost his job at the hospital where he managed the janitors and housekeepers because he started hitting this woman he supervised and wouldn't stop because she'd said she was pregnant with his baby. The police took the woman down the emergency room, where it turned out her jaw was broken, and they put his dad in Tilson's city jail. Mike said he was moving to North Vernon, which he did the following day. I hadn't seen him since.

The Marksons' buzzer went off, and I involuntarily squeaked. I was about to call out the back to Keith, but caught myself. I didn't want to reveal our presence. My eyes filled with panicky tears and a hot bubble inflated in my chest. I opened the back door as Keith ambled up to the patio with his hands jammed in his pockets.

"There's somebody at the door." My voice came out all high-pitched, and I coughed to lower it.

"Well, don't piss yourself." He smoothed his windblown hair again. "Just take it as it comes, my man." He punched my shoulder gregariously and shut the back door.

I asked, "What are you going to say?" as he strode through the kitchen. I hung back and watched him, ready to bolt through Mike's backyard to the dense little woods, then down the hill to Route 25.

"About what?" he said and opened the front door. A bespectacled man not much taller than Keith or me stood on the porch in a puffy blue jacket and toboggan; his face was pinched, like he'd been waiting for a bus in the rain.

"Can I help you, sir?" Keith sounded annoyed like the man had interrupted an important speech he was giving.

"I wanted to make sure everything was okay," the man croaked. He had one of those holes in this throat and kept a finger over it to talk. "I saw you climbing in the window."

"I'm a contractor," Keith said and introduced himself. This was true. Keith installed wall units and Formica countertops part time. "I was supposed to do an estimate for some work in the kitchen, but the realtor forgot to leave me the key."

The man shoved his glasses up on his nose. "Who are they listing the house with?" Keith gave a realtor's name I'd seen on signs around town.

The little man introduced himself as Ray from across the road. "It's too bad they got divorced," he wheezed. "Nice people."

Keith shrugged. "Well, we gotta get back to measuring," he said. "I got my son working here with me today." He stood aside and pointed at me, grinning. I didn't think the old man would believe Keith since he would have fathered me when he was thirteen. I felt like darting into the pantry.

"Hello," Ray called weakly. "Working hard?"

I shrugged, and Keith answered: "*Hardly working* is more like it." They both chuckled and I blushed. I walked back into the kitchen so they couldn't see. I always felt like Keith was making fun of me in some way, like he had something against me. Even though he'd been dating my mother for almost two months, and he was already living at our house, we never spent much time around each other. Keith fell all over himself to express an interest in me when Mom was home, but we didn't talk when she was at work.

A couple nights after I puked in our sink, Mom and Keith came in shortly after I arrived home from school. Mom ignored me and sort of collapsed at the card table set up in our kitchen, but Keith asked about the washcloth over my face. I didn't want to complain since Mom looked so spent. I just shrugged and told him my face had been dirty. The smell never seemed to bother either of them. Mom put her head down on the kitchen table while Keith started making French toast for dinner. I told my mother Mike was moving, but she was mostly unresponsive. Keith, though, seemed interested, and he quizzed me about Mike's house.

"Is his dad gonna live in there?"

"Mike said his dad was going to move to Canada. Or the Bahamas."

"So it's vacant?" Keith blinked, his hands whipping the eggs. He said the only food he liked to eat was breakfast food; the only two times he cooked dinner, we had French toast.

I looked at Mom. "What does vacant mean?"

"No one living there." She mumbled and clutched her head. "God, I feel wrecked. Get me some Tylenol."

"Don't take any of that," Keith said. "It'll make 'em worse." He retrieved a bottle from the dish of medicines we kept on the refrigerator and gave Mom two red pills, which she swallowed without comment.

He didn't say anything else about it, then, but on Sunday afternoon—while Mom was napping—he came into my room holding my jacket. I snatched it from him quickly; I'd been keeping money Mom gave me in the inside pocket ever since Keith had

"borrowed" five dollars from my John Deere tractor bank. When he handed it to me, I slipped my hand in the inside pocket and felt the little roll. I announced that he was supposed to knock if he wanted to come in my room.

"You're not doing anything in here I ain't seen before," Keith said. Then he grinned and asked if I wanted to go check something out with him. This was the first time he'd ever suggested taking me anywhere without my mother. "I need the help of a strong guy like you, Zip." I put on my coat, and when I followed him out to his battered orange Chevy with the white door, I felt powerful, flexing my biceps under the sleeves.

In Keith's rattling truck, we turned at the base of the hill near my friend's development and I knew immediately where we were going. Keith and Mom had picked me up from Mike's once last winter when I rode my bike there and it snowed too heavily for me to make it home.

"There's no one at Mike's."

"I know," he called over the engine racket. "We're just gonna see about something."

When we pulled up, he asked me which window was Mike's. I pointed, and he guided the truck up the driveway. "Want to make sure he didn't leave anything behind?"

"You mean *go inside*?"

"There might be something in there." The engine ratcheted and died. "You never know; people leave stuff on accident all the time." Then he'd opened the truck door and said he'd boost me through.

When I heard Ray say goodbye, Keith called, “Thanks for stopping by,” and pushed the door shut. He then tromped down the hall and opened another door. “Is there anything in the basement?”

“No.”

He stomped down the stairs anyway. “Come on down here,” he called, and I immediately dreaded the excitement in his voice. He stood on the bottom step, surveying the expansive basement. Light from the windows fell down the stairway, creating a wedge through the dark. The basement was empty and even colder than the upstairs, its cinderblock walls stripped of Toby’s things. A Def Leppard poster had once loomed over the corner where Mike’s brother’s bed had sat. Some stickers still remained on the wall, near where his head lay; they said Judas Priest and Ozzy Osbourne. The odors of dust and—more faintly—of anxious sweat hung in the room. Sounds we made upstairs had been alarming and loud, but down here our footsteps were dull and muted.

Keith squatted in the stickered corner, pulling at the edge of the carpet. “Hey, this is good stuff.” It was yellow and purple, with bubbly shapes that reminded me of magic bottles and genies. “We could do our hall. Get that nasty carpet out of there. Maybe have enough left over for the front room.” He glanced at me. “Go get my tool box.”

“I don’t think we should,” I said, pulling my toe across the low fibers in the carpet. Even though I was desperate for an end to the stink in our house, I didn’t want to rob Mike over it.

“Stop thinking and start working,” he said. “Oh, and bring in that twine behind the front seat.”

I did as I was told. Outside, the neighborhood looked deserted. Frigid rain tapped on Keith's truck. I grabbed the toolbox and felt behind the bench seat for the ball of knotted-up twine. On my way back, I saw Ray standing behind his glass storm door across the street. He waved, and I felt like confessing the whole thing to him. I thought he might take me in and call the police. I would say *I only did what Keith told me.* I could watch from behind the glass door while the officers carted his little body away, and he would never know who called them. I carried Keith's supplies inside, and even though I hadn't ratted us out, I practiced surprised expressions for when the authorities arrived.

Keith already had the corner yanked back to expose the dull yellow pad beneath. He pulled out a flashlight out from the toolbox. Thorny nails reached up from where the baseboards met. He looked up at me and said, "Come on. Help me." We slowly picked it out of the floor. It was tough work and I took off my jacket when I felt sweat pooling in the small of my back. Eventually, I didn't have to stop every few minutes to rub the feeling back into my hands.

We wrestled the carpet into a big roll and Keith cut a crooked line across the floor to get it loose. He put me on one end and we lifted, trying to shove it up the stairway. I could barely lift the roll off the cement floor. The muscles in my arms ached and squirmed under my skin. Keith started up, and I stood at the bottom, keeping the carpet a mere three inches above the floor.

"Push!" he yelled. "Push, goddamn it!" I shoved with all my might, but the carpet scraped through my hands, the rough underside burning them, and thumped on the stairs. "Shit!" he screamed.

"I'm sorry," I gasped. "It's too heavy." My lungs burned from the cold air.

"*Bullshit*," he said. "You're just not lifting."

I choked up. "I'm *trying* as hard as I can." Hot water filled my eyes. I had a sudden vision of my dad. I'd never actually met him, but I imagined a tall, brawny man built like an oak, who would crack Keith in the mouth for talking to me that way.

"Jesus, Zip," Keith said. "Stop crying." Silhouetted in the pale glow from upstairs, he huffed out his exasperation and gazed down at me with his arms folded. He flicked his eyes up and said, "What a pussy."

"I *am not* a pussy," I sobbed. "You shouldn't say that to kids, you know."

"Take it easy, partner," he said, putting his hands up in protest. "I'm just trying to toughen you up. And since when is twelve still a kid?"

I was eleven, but I liked him thinking I was older. I breathed out haltingly.

"Come on." He waved for me to try again. "We can get this fucker up." We tried once more without success and then we switched ends so he could push. With Keith pushing and me pulling, we finally heaved it up the stairs to the living room. He returned to the basement, yanked up the pad, and rolled it into a single yellow column that looked like a giant noodle.

"Okay, partner" he said, shuffling up the stairs with the pad. "We need to come back after dark." He tossed the yellowed foam on the roll of carpet.

"Why?"

"I don't want the citizen next door to see us bringing it out." This seemed like the first smart thing he'd said, and I nodded.

We left the back door unlocked and walked out to his truck. Ray waved from his doorway again, and Keith jovially returned it. Through his grin he said, "Wave at him and smile, Zip." I did. He drove down the hill on Clovis, and I craned my neck to see behind us. I thought of the Marksons' carpet and pad stacked in the living room like a couple of dead bodies.

We drove down a street leading away from Tilson, bisecting two muddy cornfields littered with sheared stalks. Keith's Rolling Stones cassette played, and I coughed from the rank air wafting from the heat vents. Though he'd replaced his old speakers with new ones, the music still sounded like it came out of a coffee can. On the outskirts of Dudleytown, he pulled into the gravel lot in front of a narrow building with neon Pabst signs in the window.

"Are you thirsty? Cause I'm dying for a cold beer."

"Kids aren't supposed to go in places like this," I said, even though it intrigued me. I stood outside the truck looking around.

"How did you get to be such a goddamn expert on kids?" He waved for me to come on. I'd never been in a bar before and thought every one had strippers in them. A ticklish excitement started in my belly because I expected to see a woman shucking her clothes in the corner as we came in. Instead, smoke hung like curtains inside the door, and a bunch of men in sweatshirts hunched over the bar while the Indiana basketball game blasted out of the overhead speakers. Keith eased up on a stool, and I stood beside him looking this way and that for the illicit show. Dust coated yellowed beer signs and basketball posters. One man leafed through the Sunday edition of the Indianapolis Star

while puffing a cigar. Large-mouth bass with cobwebs stretched across their maws stared down at all of us.

Keith stared at me. "What are you waiting for? Sit down."

The bartender, an older man with a face like ground beef sheathed in cellophane, squinted at me and came over. "No way, Grimes. No minors."

"Come on, Phelps," Keith pleaded. "We've been out working all day." He gestured to me like I was a mistake he couldn't avoid. "No cops are gonna come sniffing around here on Sunday afternoon."

"I see *him* drinking," Phelps said, pointing at me, "and you're out of here. For good this time."

"All right, all right," said Keith, holding his hands up in surrender. This was his favorite gesture. "You're the boss." He ordered a beer, and Phelps brought me a ginger ale. The Hoosiers trailed Purdue and the crowd yelled in fury whenever the Boilermakers scored. For a little while I felt good, even though I was disappointed about the missing stripper. Keith, sucking on his beer beside me, looked tired and bored. I thought of the loud sounds our shoes had made in Mike's hallway and the ripping noise the carpet had made in the basement silence as we'd pulled it up.

I stared into my reflection in the mirror behind the bar and said, "I don't want to steal Mike's carpet." Keith's reflection looked over at my reflection. "I'm going to tell Mom where we got it." I was afraid to look at either him or his reflection, but I could feel his eyes on me. By this time of the afternoon Mom was cleaning offices in a medical building out by the interstate, which was her second job besides the shirt factory.

"Go ahead, Zip," he said nonchalantly. "She won't care where we got it." He shoved his empty glass away. "You're the only one who's getting bent out of shape." He ordered another beer. "In fact, go ahead and tell her. We're not stealing. It's not like they're living there anymore."

"Yeah, right," I said, trying to sound like I didn't believe.

"She won't give a damn."

I didn't want to admit that he was probably right. Mom no longer cared whether I did my homework or what time I came home, like she had only a few months before. Since she started dating Keith, she often left the house at night with him, leaving me by myself. I didn't really mind it so much. When Mom and Keith weren't around our house wasn't that bad except for the smell.

Most days, I went to Mike's until dark then came home and watched TV in the empty house until I heard Keith's truck pulling up. I scurried to my room and pretended to be asleep to avoid them. Keith and Mom were never mean or bad to me, but I didn't like how they were all wound up when they came in. My mother was a hard little woman, like a coiled spring, but when she came home really late—which was starting to be every night—she acted giggly, like she was younger than she was.

As long as my bedroom door kept them out, I didn't care what they did in the rest of the house. I preferred those nights when she and Keith burst in the front door, fumbled around in the hall, and slammed themselves into Mom's bedroom to those when she opened the door and called out to me in a singsong voice. She'd come into my room reeking of cigarettes, flop on the bed beside me, stroke my hair, and say, "I love you, Virg. I love you. You know that, right? Tell me you love me." I always had to tell her I

loved her about fifty times before Keith came in and dragged her off to bed. After she was gone my room didn't seem like the same place it'd been before. I couldn't sleep or seem to get comfortable in my bed. It was always a few days before the space went back to normal.

Keith drank two more beers in quick succession, and the game ended in a Purdue victory. I went to the bathroom and noticed through the high window over the sink that it was night outside. "Heartache Tonight" started blasting from the jukebox and the bass throbbed through the wall. I hoped we'd stay at the bar until Keith forgot about Mike's carpet.

But then I thought of how Keith wanted to get rid of that rancid carpet in our hall, get rid of the smell. I couldn't decide if Mike would care that we tore out his basement carpet. I was unsure of what his reaction would be if he ever saw it in our hall. Maybe he wouldn't recognize it.

I nervously rotated the hand towels a bunch of times and checked the condom dispenser for change. Then a burly guy in overalls banged through the doors. He stared at me twisting the knobs on the prophylactic machine for a second before bellying past me into the stall. I came out, and only a couple men were perched at the bar.

"There you are," Keith said, throwing up his arms. "I thought you fell in." He stood and took a couple of steps to regain his balance as if the floorboards were uneven. He glanced at his watch and squinted. "Let's go, Zip," he said. He swayed as he went to the portholed door leading to the parking lot.

"Are you okay to drive?" I asked, following behind. I reached out to steady him as he swayed back alarmingly.

He whirled toward me and roared, “What the fuck!” The remaining men in the room, including the burly guy emerging from the bathroom, all stared. “Don’t ever ask me that again.” He wagged his finger in my face. “I’m not a drunk.”

He grabbed my shoulder hard to yank me out the door. I choked up again, but this time I held it in. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I pleaded.

Out beside the truck, he poked me sharply with his finger. “Who *the fuck* do you think you are?” he bellowed, opening the passenger’s door. “Get in.”

“I didn’t mean . . .” I tried to explain. The bubble of hot panic thumped in my chest again.

“Just come on,” he said, and I jumped in. The burly guy stuck his head through the door and watched us careen out of the lot.

“Virgil,” Keith said loudly as we thundered back to Mike’s. “I’m going to teach you an important lesson today. Don’t ever question adults like that. You need to respect your elders.” I kept quiet. “We don’t like being smarted off to by kids, all right?”

I nodded, and Keith gripped the wheel in sullen silence.

We took the turn to Mike’s street slowly, and Keith switched off the lights. We glided past Ray’s house. He angled the truck into the Marksons’ driveway and pulled to a stop beside it, checking Ray’s over his shoulder, as he turned off the truck. Rain plinked steadily on the roof in echoing quiet.

Without saying anything, he opened the door and swung his legs out. Even though I had decided that Mike wouldn’t care, I still felt disgusted at what we’d done. I slipped slowly out my side and followed him around the back to the kitchen door. We

went inside, where it was even colder and pitch black. I flipped the light switch, but nothing happened.

"It's dark as hell in here," Keith said from the front room. My eyes adjusted and his shadowy form materialized, crouching over the carpet and pad.

"Let's go. We can't see nothing."

"Knock it off, Zip. I'm going to get the light again." He disappeared out the back, and I stood in the dark. I went to the front door and opened it, gazing through the dappled glass storm door to the yellow glow of Ray's across the road. The light reminded me of butter melting on a piece of toast.

"Close that door," Keith hissed when he came back. "Do you want him to see us?" He shouldered me out of the way and pushed it shut. He'd also brought a torn plastic poncho that I'd seen under some wrenches on the floorboards. It only covered one end of the carpet roll. "We're gonna have to use the pad to keep the carpet dry." We unfurled the yellow foam and tried to roll the carpet into it a couple of different times, but there wasn't enough space in the living room. "Oh, fuck it," he said.

"Why don't we just leave it?"

"I'm *not* leaving it," he yelled. "Here," he said, grabbing my arm and moving me around to face the back door. "You hold it when I put it up on your shoulder."

"This is stupid. It's gonna get all wet."

"Just shut up and do what I say." He reached down and heaved the carpet on to my shoulder, which pressed down so hard the floorboards squealed beneath me. Keith grunted and lifted his end up to his shoulder, swaying under the weight. "March," he said and lead us, tottering, out the kitchen and around to the driveway.

It rained harder, and an awful moaning wind came through the bare branches. My arms ached from all the work that afternoon as we trudged through the wet grass with the weight of the carpet pushing us deeper in the mud. Keith angled his end on to the truck bed and the burlap bottom burned my cheek. He jumped up to haul it in, and it slipped off my shoulder, splashing in the muck alongside the gravel driveway. Keith let out an enraged grunt.

I was straining to get my end out of the mud when another light snapped on, bringing Keith's vague black form into glistening focus. The light came from Ray, in a hooded raincoat, standing in front of the truck with his huge flashlight trained on Keith.

"I know what you're doing," he rasped. He took in air through the neck hole, and it sucked wetly. "Fifty dollars."

"What?" said Keith, climbing down. His hair hung in his face, so he leaned forward and snapped his head back to throw it out of his eyes. "I'm not giving you one red cent."

"Fifty. Or you go to jail in front of your son."

Keith grinned at me, standing beside the carpet soaking in the cold rainwater. "He doesn't care." He faced Ray again. "He won't mind a damn bit."

"No," I called. "Please don't." I wanted to run inside the Marksons' and hide until some new family moved in. Instead, I looked at Keith desperately and said, "*Please* just give him the money."

"I'm not giving him shit," he said, shading his eyes from Ray's enormous flashlight. "You can just forget about it." Keith pulled out a cigarette and cupped it in his hand to light. It drooped in his mouth and wouldn't catch.

"Fifty dollars," Ray repeated.

"Keith, do you have any money?" I asked, walking over to the truck bed. "Please. Give it to him."

I could only see the outline of Ray's shape behind his gigantic light. I jammed my hands into my coat pockets in nervousness and felt the wad of bills Mom had given me a few days before. I took them out and unrolled the bills in my hand. "Here," I said to Ray.

"Virgil," Keith said. "Don't give him anything. He doesn't mean it."

"I have fifteen here. This is all we have," I said, holding the bills out to the light. A hand emerged from the dark and snatched the wad. Ray turned on his heels and marched back to his warmly lit door without a word.

"He didn't say anything." I turned to Keith. "Is he going to tell?"

"You shouldn't have given him that money," he said, sounding more tired than angry.

"Are we going to get in trouble?"

"Don't worry, Zip," he said. "He's just a rotten old bastard. Here, help me with this goddamn thing." He turned to the carpet in the muck.

"Are you sure he's not going to call the police on us?"

"*Yes.* Now help me with this."

We got the soggy carpet into his truck and went inside for the pad. I was relieved to see Keith lock the back door before he shut it. As we drove off, the rain stopped but the wind wheezed against the windows and pulled the droplets off the windshield. "I

have half a mind to go back there and whip his ass for him," Keith said, flicking his eyes to the rearview mirror. "What about you, Zip?"

I held my hands out to feel the weak heat the truck chugged into the cab. "How do you know he won't call the police on us?"

"He won't. Stop worrying."

We took the soaked carpet and pad to the garage behind our house. Mom, home from work, watched us unload from the back door. "What are you going to do with a bunch of wet carpet?"

"We'll get it dried out," Keith called. "It'll be great."

She disappeared back inside. As we went up the rear walk, Keith pushed a five-dollar bill into my hand. "I'll get you the rest next week." I looked at the money for a minute and stuffed it in my jeans pocket.

Five years later, Mom and I are cleaning the house so she can get our security deposit back. She assigns me the rear garage and I trudge out, reluctant to even pull up the door because I know a tangled mess waits on the other side. When I do, I see the carpet slouching against the wall like a familiar corpse.

Mom and Keith broke up after the night we snuck into Mike's. She said the split had nothing to do with our crime. With Keith gone, the basement carpet never replaced our hall carpet and remained in our garage. I'd forgotten about it out there until I had to wrestle the moldy, forgotten mess out to our alley trashcans and deposit it alongside the rat-gnawed carpet pad.

Since Keith left, I've only had one other occasion to think of him when some people from the state made Mom pull up the nasty carpet in our bathroom and scrub down the wood to get rid of the smell. After that embarrassment, Mom said she wouldn't let things get so bad anymore. When we hauled that old carpet out to these same trashcans where I am putting Mike's carpet, I felt angry prickling in my wrists that Keith had never given me my money back.

But today, as I hug his dumb gift to my chest and sniff the mold, I hum "Gimme Shelter" low and imagine the bubbly genie shapes strewn over the floors of our house might have looked pretty good.

The National Housewives' Toilet Fund

I wanted to be Barbied up for the party by six, so I left work an hour early. After I got home, I had to spend the hour removing the puddles of dried toothpaste, dissolving soap scum in the shower, and blasting curly pubic hairs nesting on our toilet rim with Formula 409. While finishing the rim, I noticed something peeking out of the soil pipe at the bottom of the bowl. It looked silver in the fluorescent light, and I reached into the cold toilet water. It was a half-inch stack of twenty-dollar bills rubber-banded together with a folded piece of paper and sealed in a zippered sandwich bag.

I spread a towel on the floor and counted the money, making stacks. Only the first few bills were twenties, I found; the rest were hundreds. I shuffled through the bills and quickly reached twenty-five hundred with half the stack left to go. As quickly as I could, I counted the rest—there were five thousand dollars covering the towel. I unfolded the note and read it:

Dear Housewife,

Please accept this contribution to help you through your difficult time. Do with it as you please. Accept it as it was given, with the best of intentions. Take as much or as little as you need but do not be afraid to use all of it. It was meant for those who need it all. Once you and your family are financially afloat, replace as much as you can and flush it at the nearest public restroom.

Remember, the National Housewives' Toilet Fund is a <u>secret organization</u>. Men are not allowed to know about our contributions.

If you find that you do not need this, please contribute anything you can and simply flush it. New bills only please. It will get to those who need it; believe us.

Best Wishes,

The National Housewives' Toilet Fund

Anyone who knew me—I hoped—would put me in the "Does Not Need Charity" category. The note said to take as much as I needed, but I didn't *need* any of it. I thought uneasily about why someone would think I did. The note and money could have been a joke, but from my job at the bank I knew about counterfeit money. I handled bills every day, often amounts larger than this, and faithfully attended every required workshop on how to spot fake legal tender. The money was real and new, as if untouched by human hands.

Don't get me wrong, I would appreciate the five grand. Anyone would. But Rob and I weren't charity cases, and I certainly wasn't a *housewife*. Rob and I only lived together. I looked down at myself then, and noticed I was wearing a pair of Purdue sweats my dad gave me years ago and one of Rob's old undershirts. Sure, I'd need to be showered, primped, and costumed in an hour for the party, but I always cleaned in my grungies. The word "housewives" made me think of June Cleaver-types, who sported pearl earrings while scrubbing linoleum within an inch of its life, who wore smocks and aprons every day, who thought it was a tragedy if they didn't have a piping hot dinner ready when their husbands got off work. And, I think, the money started to offend me because housewifery broke up the Harpies.

In seventh-grade World Civilizations class, taught by the bowling pin-shaped Mr. Franklin, Lindsay Pemberton, Cheryl Meade, and I learned the Harpies were misunderstood angels. Once thought to be beautiful winged females, Mr. Franklin explained how they became hideous monsters as the Greek myths were passed down. Lindsay, Cheryl, and I were the three most academically accomplished students in class and bonded as objects of class derision. We recognized our own situation in the deterioration of the mythical Harpies' public image and started calling ourselves, nerdily enough, "The Sisters of Iris" in reference to Harpies' sibling and to the fact that we all had the same brown eyes. Once we reached high school, we dropped all the Greek stuff, but our bonds had solidified. I liked thinking it was us against the rest, three survivors in an intellectual wasteland full of facile, idiotic harlots. We were a three-person tribe of warrior queens, a bitch-goddess nation formed by a common worldview, an unstoppable wall of smirking disdain.

G.P.A.-wise, Cheryl and I were second and third (respectively) to Lindsay, who chewed up advanced placement classes like a bulldog with a bunch of hambones. Lindsay was the idea woman, the planner, the card, the talent, the charisma, and our leader. Our job was to admire her and take orders. Cheryl was our conscience, a role that entailed mildly disapproving of our more black-hearted judgments of the stupid drones we encountered at school. Early on, I was unsure of my exact role, but it became clear when I mediated arguments between the others that I was the cement keeping us together. I exemplified good citizenship in the "The Sisters"; I demonstrated how to conform gracefully.

We were too smart for dating jocks, too cool for geeks, and too refined for anybody else. We didn't join groups or clubs: too demure for drama, too American for Spanish, too jaded for pep, too easily bored for sports, and too subversive for student council. We were just too damn much for the paltry goings-on at our high school. When our four years were up, Lindsay was named valedictorian and got to deliver the speech all three of us wrote, a nose-thumbing at the whole senior class called "Everything Worth Knowing I Learned from *Scooby-Doo*." The gym erupted in reverent, enthusiastic applause when she concluded, and we were disappointed no one got the dig. We all went to the same college and moved into a three-bedroom apartment together.

Our plan was simple and ambitious: Lindsay would be President of the United States, I would run Nike, and Cheryl would cure cancer. But we would remain close friends, and newspaper reporters would often cite our long-standing friendship in biographical profiles for the Sunday supplements. We studied like crazy that first semester to realize this dream—Lindsay in poli-sci, me in business, and Cheryl in pre-med—and the Harpies made the dean's list.

The next semester, in January, Cheryl proposed a purely academic exploration of the dating scene, but Lindsay wouldn't go for it. Cheryl pitched the experiment—going to parties, meeting men, hanging out in dance clubs—and she made it sound like Outward Bound, saying "Imagine the stories we'll have to tell." Lindsay wouldn't budge and said we could get date-raped if we wanted to but to count her out. Finally, Cheryl buffaloed me and Lindsay into participating in a no-obligations posting on an online dating service. Cheryl received promising leads—probably because the photo she used had her gussied

up and languorously hanging against her bedroom doorframe. Lindsay's and my plain-Jane images only attracted the old, desperate, and perverted.

Instead of hooking up with another IU student for her dating safari, Cheryl started obsessively corresponding with Stewart, a twenty-five-year-old investment banker from Ft. Wayne, who looked like a mannequin and built remote-control airplanes in his spare time. After a month, Cheryl started making the three-and-a-half-hour drive up to Ft. Wayne every Friday night. Then she called one Sunday and said she wouldn't be returning for a couple weeks because Stewart was taking her on a business trip to New York. I asked about her classes and grades, but she didn't care. While she was on this excursion, Lindsay and I concluded it was a damn shame Cheryl was throwing her life away to be with this guy. Without her, our sisterhood grew cruel and cynical. We took to wearing black, smoking cloves, and listening to moaning mope-rock from the UK.

Then we met Stewart, who took us all out to eat at the Jade Panther. He was quiet, immaculate, and polite, like a well-heeled child with male pattern baldness. He doted on Cheryl, buying her things and pulling out chairs, but left no impression on anything or anyone. Cheryl seemed to think he was a real catch. Throughout dinner, Lindsay and I simulated vomiting when she wasn't looking.

When Stewart excused himself to use the bathroom, Cheryl grabbed our hands and announced, "I think he's going to ask me to marry him next weekend." She squeezed our hands, and her eyes glinted in the crystalline light from the reclining panther fixture on the wall.

"Is that what you want?" I asked. I knew the answer.

"Of course," she said. "I always wanted to be married."

"Since when?" Lindsay leaned back in her chair, folding her arms under her breasts. "And what about med school?"

"I'll probably just finish up the bio degree at IU Fort Wayne."

"What are you going to do? For money?" I asked. Lindsay took a large gulp of her tropical drink.

"I don't need a job. I've got Stewart," she said, smiling. "I feel so blessed."

"But don't you want one?" Lindsay asked, hiccupping into her Polynesian Fog Cutter.

"Not really," Cheryl said seriously. "I think I'd be perfectly happy as a housewife."

After this, Lindsay and I became a nation of two. Cheryl moved to Ft. Wayne, and we got a smaller place to live and to practice our sarcasm. We reached new heights of withering contempt for everything, but ultimately we only seemed to be expressing pain from our missing member. We couldn't fathom why she'd settle for an M.R.S. degree. So we turned on her. We described her to each other as a super-housewife, putting her formidable intellect to work on projects like removing old food from behind the stove and picking out drapes. Lindsay and I had to be bridesmaids in her wedding, which we'd attended with barely disguised hilarity: dumbass Cheryl had already gotten knocked-up. In the weeks following, we reached new heights of pettiness, relentlessly slandering her. While doing this amused us, it felt hollow and a little sacrilegious, like speaking ill of the dead. Our sisterhood was gone, and I felt like mourning. I watched couples strolling around campus and wondered if Cheryl might have the right idea. But I never would have admitted these notions to Lindsay.

A month after her wedding, Cheryl started leaving rambling phone messages. On weekday evenings, we found them, usually crap about her pregnancy, like: "Hey you guys. It's me. I'm just looking through this catalogue of baby stuff. You would not *believe* how much of it is geared toward the baby's sex. I mean I don't know what our baby is going to be. Hey, Lindsay, what did your sister do when she was pregnant with the twins? Because I just don't know . . ." On and on like that. She also started leaving them on weekday mornings, when Lindsay and I were at class. We tried to return them as much as possible, but our phone bill quickly got out of hand. The messages continued: "Hey. I have this weird growth on my foot, but I don't know what it is. It could be a bunion, but I'm not sure. Do you know what a bunion looks like? I can't tell if what I have is a bunion or something else . . ." It was worse when Lindsay or I actually talked to her. It got to the point where we argued about who would call her back. Lindsay and I, steeling ourselves with a stiff dose of ironic self-awareness, went to her baby shower in Ft. Wayne. On the way back, Lindsay said she'd bet dollars to doughnuts that the calls would stop when Cheryl had the baby. They did.

Though the idea that Cheryl had given herself up to be a housewife still bothered me, there are only so many sarcastic observations a girl can make. Though Lindsay and I remained friends, there was something missing. I toyed with asking out this supremely dorky boy in my accounting class. Rob's manner was so unsure and anxiety-ridden that I found him strangely endearing. I told Lindsay that he looked like a guy who'd ask permission before he tried to touch your boob. She seemed skeptical, so I brought him to our apartment for dinner. The first thing Lindsay said was: "You look like some kind of a cartoon character." And, admittedly, he *did* look cartoonish. He wore ridiculous short-

sleeve collared shirts to class, eternally paired with pleated khaki slacks that came almost up to his chest. It was like a nerd costume from a teen sex comedy. He told me he wanted to look *money but neat*. I didn't know what the hell he meant by that, but he appealed to me because he was so self-conscious and misdirected. I was sure he'd never be marriage material.

I sat on my bathroom floor, gazing down at the five thousand dollars of Housewife money that had found its way to my toilet, thinking the National Housewives might be something like Publisher's Clearinghouse. Our front door wheezed, and I could hear Rob's keys jingle merrily from the front room. For a brief moment I considered showing him the money, despite what the note said. But a hot flush of resentment shot through me at the thought of him pawing it. I might not be a housewife, but he *certainly* wasn't one. I snatched up all the bills and rolled them in an old towel, then stowed the roll beneath the sink. Rob lumbered into the bathroom just as I double-checked the bowl for any more packages.

"Are you sick or something?"

The bowl was empty. "No," I answered, and rubbed the base of the toilet with my rag, which I waved at him innocently. "I was cleaning this stupid thing, and I thought it was going to overflow." I gestured to the plunger beside the bathtub. "I had to plunge it."

"Here," he grunted, kneeling down beside me. "Let me see it."

I rolled my eyes at his attitude. He always wore the same put-upon face whenever he helped with household repairs. "You don't have to," I said. "It's fine now. Get out of the way so I can finish in here."

He pulled the lid off the tank to satisfy himself that everything was under control before he relinquished management of the situation. He made it seem like I'd broken the toilet, then botched the repair job, and he had to make sure I hadn't damaged anything permanently. He asked, "Did you call maintenance?"

"No," I said. "I told you it's fine now. Quit messing with it." I glanced at my watch and saw it was almost time to leave for Lindsay's party. "Oh! We need to get ready." I pulled myself up and went into the bedroom.

I'd planned for us to go to Lindsay's party as Ken and Barbie, but I didn't think Rob really registered that we had to dress up because he seemed so preoccupied lately. Usually he was highly fastidious and selective about what he wore around Lindsay because of her cartoon comment, but he hadn't even looked at his costume.

"For what?" Rob asked, following me.

"The *Figures of Dogmatic Oppression* Party."

"The what?"

"You don't remember? Lindsay's party for her master's thesis? It has a theme." I unhooked the costume beside mine from the back of the door and held it out. "Here's yours," I said. "Put it on, so we can get going."

He eyed the pink vest through the plastic sheath. "You've gotta be kidding me." He took it from me uncertainly. Then he spied the brown wig. "There's no way I'm wearing this to Lindsay's."

"What's wrong with 'Ken'?" I couldn't wait till Lindsay saw my Barbie. It deeply satisfied me that the costume made a statement about how the little plastic dolls perpetrated an impossible body image *and* made me look sexy. I wanted Rob to go as Ken so we would match.

"God, Karen," he said. "I'll look as gay as the day is long." He hung the costume on the bedroom door and dug out the wig, pursing his lips.

"You'll look fine. Don't worry." I stripped off my grungies and returned to the bathroom, glancing at the cabinet door below the sink. I twisted the shower knob and waited for the water to warm.

He came to the bathroom doorway wearing the wig, and it *did* make him look like a deranged barber had given him a Beatle haircut. Rob seemed about to cry from shame. "Come on," he pleaded. "This is totally *gay*."

"Just put on something," I said. Rob said he was going to be some crooked businessman or politician and would wear a suit. I didn't really care—"Ken" wasn't that *dogmatically oppressive* anyhow. But I still wanted to go as Barbie and wear the tight corset to simulate the doll's curvy form. But an hour later as we trudged the four long blocks from where we parked to Lindsay's, I realized that this corset, tied to toe-numbing snugness by Rob, made it difficult to breathe.

"Are you sure I look okay?" Rob asked again, walking sideways to check his appearance in the reflection of a darkened store window. He adjusted his tie, threw his shoulders back, and yanked on the lapels of his sport coat.

"You look fine. She's not going to ridicule you," I said. I often assured Rob that Lindsay actually liked him when she didn't. When we graduated, she'd wanted me to

attend grad school with her in the city, but Rob also planned to move here. He had a great starting job at a marketing firm downtown, and asked me to live with him. Rob said the living-together would be on a trial basis, and now that our triumvirate was broken, I worried living with Lindsay any longer would make me permanently cynical. She was furious for a while after I told her, but I vowed to maintain contact and kept my promise for the two years she'd been in school. She never did seem to forgive Rob though. But I had hope that she'd eventually come around, and I said, "She gives you a hard time because she likes you."

"She gives me a hard time," he countered, "because she's jealous of me." He'd previously voiced the opinion that Lindsay harbored romantic feelings. "You know it's true," he said.

"Oh, come on," I'd said, sucking hard for air while we climbed a rise to her building. "She's not gay and definitely not jealous of *you*."

At the front door, a woman dressed as Margaret Thatcher passed out nametags.

"Hiya!" she exclaimed. The former PM looked us up and down. She had drastic black makeup lines drawn on her cheeks to look like wrinkles. "Oh, don't tell me. Let me guess." She cocked her head earnestly and scanned me again.

"Olivia Newton-John?"

"Barbie."

"Damn! And you would be . . . ?" Rob opened his mouth, but the girl held up her hand. I filled out tags for both of us while she thought.

"Donald Trump?" she asked.

Rob chortled. "Nope. Pat Buchanan." I handed him a nametag, which he managed to get stuck to itself, and he tossed it in the bushes by the door. I followed him upstairs while Thatcher guessed the identities of the next two people in line. I heaved to get a deep breath into my constricted chest.

Lindsay had moved into a vast loft space near IUPUI with two other grad students. It was separated into "rooms" by ten-foot high "walls," which divided the place into a tight rabbit warren of halls and rectangular spaces. Several Hitlers, George W. Bushes, and Reagans lined the rooms lit with black lights and strobes. I squinted at people in the dark, trying to find Lindsay.

The corset was causing nausea and dizziness. "Rob," I said, struggling for air. "You've gotta help me get out of this thing." In a crossway choked with costumed partygoers, I saw a lone door with a handwritten "bathroom" sign. We squeezed into the little space, which had no shower or bathtub, only a toilet and sink under a medicine cabinet. Rob tried to untie the corset, but it wouldn't come off without cutting the laces. He rifled through the cabinet.

Someone outside knocked, and I heard indecipherable voices mixed with the heavy bass of dance music. "Who's in there?" a female voice shouted.

"Olivia Newton-John and Donald Trump," I said. Rob guffawed.

"Who?" the voice responded.

"Just. A. Minute," I yelled. Then the door swung out to reveal an older woman clutching a mop and bucket. I saw her face perfectly framed in the mirror on the cabinet. Something about the position of her nose and the set of her jaw made me think of an ironing board, and she seemed vaguely familiar.

"Goddamn it," yelled Rob. "Clean the bathroom later." Rob's face entered the mirror, at an unflattering angle, his expression stern. He slammed the door in the woman's face, and attacked the knots of the corset again, this time pulling one loose and untying it furiously. It instantly reminded me of how he'd horned in to check the toilet earlier, and I thought how unsure of himself he'd once been.

"She wasn't actually a cleaning lady," I said. "She was just dressed that way. She probably thinks we're a couple of assholes."

"This stupid party throws me a little, you know?" he said. He undid more laces, and I took a luxuriant breath. The tightness ebbed away, and I put my hands on the sink until my vision cleared.

"Jesus, how did people wear these?" No longer constricted, my midsection pooched out a little. I relished the looseness.

"I guess it's whatever you get used to," Rob said.

"Did you see that woman's nametag?" I asked. Rob shook his head. I'd glimpsed it in the mirror. "It said *Your Mother*. As in 'I'm your mother, not your cleaning lady.' It's very clever."

I made him help me search for the woman through the halls so we could apologize. We passed through a room where Lindsay had set up a strobe light, and the dogmatically oppressive crowd throbbed to the music. I wondered how *Your Mother* fit the theme. It never occurred to me that my own mother might be a perpetrator of repression. She was just a housewife, someone the toilet fund wanted to sponsor. She said the "not your cleaning lady" line to me a hundred times when I was a kid. I didn't

want to be relegated to bitter, snide complaints and didn't think I could stomach being a housewife.

I observed Rob in his stupid power tie vainly searching for the woman. Part of his appeal had always been that he let me call the shots when it came to the progress of our relationship, but I suspected he was considering marriage, at least in a roundabout way. Two weeks before, we'd been invited to a barbeque at his friend's new house. Clark, this guy Rob knew from work, had monitored housing trends for almost a year before buying a place in this white trash neighborhood. Rob had visited and touted the area as an "up-and-comer." I was shocked when we arrived by how run-down it was (Rob claimed his friend was fixing it). But more than that, the house was pedestrian, way too ordinary—shuttered windows and plain beige siding.

When we left Clark's, Rob dragged me around the dingy neighborhood. He scribbled addresses and realtors' phone numbers on the back of his hand. The houses looked boxy and horrible to me, but he seemed particularly excited about one that had security bars over the windows. Even though our credit sucked, he urged me to approach the loan officer at our bank about getting enough for the one with bars. There was no way I was moving into that house with him, but he seemed to want it so bad. I told him I'd try. I still wanted to be with Rob, but I just wasn't ready to move into that rat trap with bars. I told him we'd need a huge down payment I knew we couldn't afford, and he took it hard for a couple days, then he got all fired up about some new bar that opened downtown. And we *couldn't* have afforded a house. That is, we couldn't afford it until my package arrived in our toilet.

I trailed him through the partygoers, heading back to the kitchen. Did he want the stupid place so much that he put the money in the toilet to surprise me? I quickly dismissed this idea. For one thing, he was severely tightfisted and wouldn't risk me accidentally flushing five grand. If I ever made my reservations known, he'd argue that I wouldn't actually *be* a housewife, but I knew I couldn't stand living in there, even for his sake. He'd point out that I worked at the bank full time, earned a paycheck just like he did, but I couldn't face staring into the dead, barred eyes of the house each time I came home.

We found Lindsay in the kitchen, done up in full regalia as the Pope, receiving people funneled from the front door. A convincing-looking bishop poured martinis from a shaker for two Fidel Castros, one of whom was a woman. We stood at the kitchen island for a moment, and Rob asked the bishop to pour him one. She told him to do it his-fucking-self.

Then Lindsay saw us and blessed us with drunken conviction. The impossibly tall miter on her head was dangerously canted to the left and close to falling off.

"I saw you two slip into the bathroom," she said, burping loudly. Then, to Rob, "Were you getting it on with Farrah Fawcett here?"

"No," I answered for us. "Just some last-minute costume adjustments. By the way, what do you think?" I rotated slowly so she could see.

"Are you supposed to be a trophy wife or something?"

"*No.* Barbie."

"Oh, great idea," she slurred. "I thought with Rob's ridiculous-looking business suit you were some kind of suburban couple."

"This is the suit I wear to work," Rob explained.

"You dressed as yourself?" Lindsay asked, snorting a thin stream of red wine out her nose. "Are you *Dogmatically Oppressive*?"

Rob whispered he would get a beer from the other room and glared at Lindsay before walking off.

"He needs to grow a sense of humor," Lindsay said, leaning against the island for support.

"He had a long day." I was always making excuses for Rob to her, just like I was to him for her.

"Is he still pissy about the house thing?" she asked. "You know, it's not like that was *your* fault."

"The house thing is no big deal," I said. I'd told her how much I despised the place but, like I had with Rob, let her think we'd been turned down by my bank. I knew she'd rush to defend my choice and insist that I not feel guilty, but I deserved how I felt about it.

"Oh, that reminds me." Lindsay stood straight up again. "Cheryl and Stewart are here. They just bought a new house."

"Really? What made you decide to invite her?" Lindsay and I both occasionally got banal email updates about her kids. I assumed Lindsay discarded them without reading, like I did.

"I emailed her not too long after I started school. She tells mommy stories, and I bitch about school."

"Oh?" I felt a jealous quickening in my throat.

"Yeah, I shoot them an email about get-togethers like this," said Lindsay. "They never come. I was surprised when I got this one back."

"I assume they left the kids at home."

"There's the new one, you know."

"Oh God, she had *another*? How many total?" I joked. In college, we referred to Cheryl as a baby-making machine that could not be shut off. We had talked about how she could barely get out of bed because of the torrent of babies coming from her and couldn't wear pants because they would fill with babies. I glanced around the room to make sure she wasn't there.

"I'm not sure. Could be a bunch." Lindsay snorted, and wine jetted from her nose again. She dabbed at her face with a paper towel.

"Look, I want to tell you before I forget. Congratulations on your thesis."

"Thanks," Lindsay said, twirling in her robes. "When are you going back to school?" I was interested in getting an M.B.A. through a nighttime program at the University of Indianapolis and had mentioned it to Lindsay last winter.

"At least you got your bachelor's in before getting hitched," she said then looked away quickly.

"I'm not getting hitched."

"I was sworn to secrecy, but . . ." she said, quaffing more wine and playfully covering her mouth. Then she blurted out, "Rob wants me to look at engagement rings with him. He doesn't know what you'd like."

My hands shot up to my ears. "Jesus, Linz! Why did you tell me this?"

Lindsay fanned herself. Her face bore the telltale flush of drunkenness. "I *knew* you were going to end up like Cheryl when you moved in with him." She tipped her head at Rob, who stood in the next room, nodding along warily as a young guy dressed as Dick Cheney gestured emphatically with his hands. "Won't he want you at home raising the kids?"

"My God," I sighed. "He's not *that* backwards. I wouldn't be with him if he was."

Lindsay plucked the miter off her head, and her piled red hair fell in her face. "I guess I never understood what you got out of being with him." She combed through the strands with her fingers. "I always worried you were just like Cheryl."

"I *want* to be with him," I said, feeling like I was describing my costume to someone. I always envied Lindsay's opinions and her ability to articulate them. I was sure she was much smarter than me, and I worried she'd think I would turn out conventional like Cheryl. I didn't *want* to care what she thought, but I imagined her and her grad school friends dogging me like she and I once had, saying things like, "Be careful you don't end up with a guy like Rob" or "It's too bad about Karen; she used to be so on-the-ball."

Lindsay could tell I was infuriated. She began, "I just don't want . . . you know." She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry to say this. But I don't want to see you, like, at home with three kids driving you crazy while Rob works."

"Did you send the goddamn toilet money?" I asked. "Was that your fucking clever way of making a point?"

"What?" she said. "Toilet money?"

"I got a bunch of money in the toilet today. You know. With the note?"

"You have money in the toilet?" She seemed genuinely confused, and I felt my hands go cold. *It wasn't her*. Then I glanced at Rob through the doorway, feeling a dull panic in my chest. I didn't want to leave him, but I also didn't want him to propose. "Did you tell him I'd want to get married?"

"No. He didn't *care* if you wanted to. He just said he planned to ask." She stared at me dourly. "That's how he is. Now what about this money?"

A song ended, and a bunch of partygoers flooded into the kitchen. "Nothing. Never mind," I said. "I'm going to talk to him." I fought through the crowd to get to Rob in the other room.

"Good luck," she called as I left.

I marched over to Rob, who looked at me and said, "You look upset. What's wrong?"

I didn't want to get into the whole thing right there. "Go get our stuff and let's go. Meet me where we came in." Happy to be excused from the party, Rob bounded off to retrieve my coat from the bedroom. I went out in the hallway to wait by the front door and saw another bagged stack of money lying on the floor in the semi-darkness. I gasped, my throat tensing, and snatched it off the ground.

"That's mine," said a voice. *Your Mother* stood in the half-light from the dance floor, extending her hand. The package felt funny to me; it was too light, and a slightly different shape. I squeezed and realized it was just a cleaning sponge in plastic wrap. "One of my props," the woman said, and a trickle of excitement ran through me. *I knew this woman*.

"Cheryl?" I asked. She had straight brown hair woven into a beehive, and she'd coated her face in makeup to make it look heavier and older. It was like trying to identify someone through a grimy window.

I wasn't sure until she spoke. "Do I know you?" Cheryl leaned her head back.

"It's me. It's Karen."

"Oh my God!" she shouted. "I totally didn't recognize you." We hugged, and she surveyed my outfit while I did the same to hers.

All I could think to say was: "How are the kids?"

"It's nice to get away from the kids. But hard not to worry. The oldest is only four."

"You have three now?" I asked, and she nodded. I imagined Cheryl in a new house in Ft. Wayne overflowing with children like the old woman in the shoe. "Is that why you dressed as a mother?"

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Everyone keeps asking me if I'm a mother." This was clearly the latest of many times she'd had to explain her costume. "I guess I shouldn't have worn this. I wanted to go as an immigrant maid, you know. I thought the theme was *Dogmatically Oppressed*. Stewart—God knows why—came as one of the hundred and one dalmatians."

"Your tag says 'Your Mother.'" Her eyes followed my finger down to her chest.

"Goddamn it," she said, ripping it off. "Stewart put that on me. God knows why. He thinks he's hilarious." She seemed thrilled that he was such a card.

"Rob and I were going to be Ken and Barbie, but he wouldn't wear his costume." I remembered him looking into the glass storefront and self-consciously primping and

thought he was no longer the oblivious kid I met in class, who I was beginning to miss. I thought, *Money but neat*, and smiled as she went on.

"Barbie's a good choice. She can be either *oppressive* or *oppressed*."

"Do I really look oppressed?" I asked.

She didn't seem to hear me. "Were Ken and Barbie dating?" she asked slyly. "Or were they *married?*"

"Lindsay told you?" I felt a sting as I imagined them corresponding about my engagement. "Weren't you supposed to keep it a secret?"

"You'll know soon enough."

Rob appeared beside me, eagerly extending my coat. "Here you go," he said, then looked at Cheryl. "Are you supposed to be someone's mom?"

Cheryl scanned him up and down, like Margaret Thatcher had. "Are you supposed to be someone's husband?"

I bid her goodbye and we left quickly.

A half-hour later, I shut myself in the bathroom at our apartment. I snatched off the wig and knelt beside the sink. The money and note were still there. I flipped the paper over, grabbed a brown eyebrow pencil from my makeup stuff, and wrote:

Dear National Housewives' Toilet Fund,

I might get married. I might not. But I'll never be you. Keep the money.

Sincerely, Karen Kearns

I re-wrapped the note around the money and secured it with the rubber band. Rob knocked at the door and I jumped. "You almost done?" he asked.

"I'll be just a minute," I called, and stuffed the package down the soil pipe, the water making a loud sloshing noise in the bowl.

"Is the damn toilet stuck again? Are you using the plunger?"

I flushed, but the bundle only danced around the bowl. "Gimme a sec. I almost got it."

"Unlock the door. I'll help you."

I stuck the money back in the gullet of the bowl and held it there with one hand. "Just wait two seconds."

"Let me help." Rob's voice was panicky and the knob rattled nervously. "It's clogged, isn't it?"

A force I never knew my toilet could muster sucked the money out of my fingers and down the pipe. I whispered "No offense" into the shushing water.

"You're going to flood the whole place!" cried Rob, thumping on the door with his fist. I unlocked it, and he almost knocked me down to get to the toilet.

The Killing Kind

A blur of dark brown between the toaster and the dish rack caught Palmer's attention as he stood at the refrigerator, his mouth full of grapes. It skittered onto the gleaming stovetop, wedged itself between the rungs of a front burner, and disappeared. His panic felt like a quaking column of chalk dust rising through his throat and exploding out his mouth in a ragged scream. Dee shouted "*What?*" from upstairs, and through his terror Palmer detected annoyance and—he was certain—anger. He trotted up to their spare room—almost ran—to evacuate the ground floor. He arrived shaking and breathlessly told her what he'd seen.

His fiancée bent over her sewing machine in the harsh light from a bare bulb. "In the stove?" Dee said, squinting at the ivory fabric in her hand. She'd spent the last three weeks slowly rehabbing her grandmother's dress for their wedding.

He repeated where it went. "Into the burners?" she asked.

The astonishing thought that *she didn't believe him* bubbled up in his mind. "I *saw* it," he said. "It's *inside* the stove." He started casting around for some piece of evidence to prove the mouse's existence. Wasn't his terror enough? He wished Dee would have a stronger reaction; he wanted her to charge downstairs and get rid of it without him having to admit the extent of his fear.

"I heard you the first time," she said. "What do you want me to do?"

Palmer felt vulnerable in his old gym shorts and T-shirt. His leg hair curled to life, and he felt tiny paws scrambling up the backs of his calves. While he swept imaginary mice off his legs, he asked, "Could you go take care of it?"

"Are you kidding me?" She glanced at the clock. "It's midnight. I'm about to go to bed."

"Don't you think we should do something?" Palmer's stomach churned. He would refuse to go in the kitchen if it came to that. "What if it gets into our food?" He felt shudders thrumming through his chest like a cement mixer.

"Just go kill it with a broom."

"You don't understand," he said. "I can't go back down there if there's a mouse."

She stopped sewing and stared at him. "What the hell are you afraid of? It can't hurt you."

His panic spiked, and the dust clogging his throat now squeezed out his eyes, and he hurriedly wiped the tears away. "You don't under*stand*. I'm really... I can't." Palmer was astonished she wasn't raring to bolt downstairs and wax the linoleum with the critter. It was her nail-tough persona that had attracted him in the first place. He'd grown tired of women who expected him to be macho. He liked that Dee didn't need a protector and preferred being one, and told her so. That he'd felt safe with her was part of the allure. She'd been tempered by hardship, and her conception of herself as "mean as a rattlesnake" had always made him feel safe.

She exhaled loudly. "I'll kill it," she sighed, jamming her needle into a pincushion. "Just not tonight." She gathered up the voluminous dress, fixed it on a hanger, and switched off the light. Palmer imagined several black shapes darting into the middle of the room before it fell dark. He fled to the lit hall that ran the length of their second floor.

"Don't kill it; just take it outside."

"I *have* to kill it," Dee said, entering their bedroom. "It'll just get back in here."

"If you need to," he said, regretting that he had sentenced a little animal to death. "Could you do it tonight?"

She peeled off her jeans and tossed them on the pile in front of their closet, then glared hard at him. "Do I always have to be your bodyguard? I can't believe you're afraid of a mouse."

The anger behind her exasperation alarmed Palmer, but it was dwarfed by the fear of the rodent. "I won't be able to sleep if I know it's still here," he pleaded. He wasn't entirely sure this was true, but he felt like he was perched precariously on the edge of a dark well seething with tiny brown bodies. "I can't sleep until it's gone."

Dee pulled on an old pair of his boxers and slipped off her shirt. She clutched a tube of lotion, squeezed a pale yellow pile on her hand, and swabbed it on her chest and shoulders. "Come here and do my back."

He wanted to scream in frustration. "*Dee*. Goddamn it!"

"Calm *down*," she said, wincing at his volume. "I'll get to it. Just not tonight."

"I just *can't* . . . I don't know. This is crazy. I'm all jittery." Palmer pressed his hand to his chest dramatically. "I think I'm having a panic attack."

Dee rolled her eyes. "You are *not*." Dee claimed expertise about extreme mental and physical states. When a dippy woman at an office party alleged to have suffered a wrenching panic attack during a Christmas-shopping spree, Dee had quizzed the woman coolly about her state of mind. After she answered Dee's questions (Palmer's favorite: "Did you feel like you were going to die *right then*?"), Dee would pronounce with utter certainty that the woman had *not* had an actual attack. Dee *had* experienced an authentic

one, which she then recounted in thrilling detail to the nodding woman. It happened when she lived alone in Chicago and a former boyfriend dumped her, and she became certain that some stranger on the elevated train planned to rape and murder her. Her condition grew so horrible and overpowering, she recalled to the office-party woman, that she could barely leave her apartment that summer. She spent so much on cab fare commuting to her job at Montgomery Ward that she couldn't make rent and was forced to borrow money from her parents. Dee told of how she eventually got over it by getting car rides from a grad student in psych at UIC who lived one floor up. The grad student had counseled Dee until she was able to get back on the El without flipping out. Since then, she subscribed to the Nietzschean maxim—highly revised, but maxim-revising was another of her formidable powers, and he didn't dare contradict her—that surviving the nearly fatal makes you borderline invincible. Palmer had expected Dee's listeners to burst into applause when she concluded the story.

At first Palmer had been leery of committing to a house—so much could go wrong, so much money could be lost. But as he watched Dee probe the realtor about the three-story fixer-upper, he knew that it would work out because she would always take charge and make a logical decision. They'd fallen into their roles easily since he was the congenital follower, and she would never trust him to play boss. Attaching himself to her made such crystalline sense to Palmer that he proposed the next week, just after they decided to buy the fixer-upper—Dee, unsurprised by the proposal, said they had a "nice dynamic." The wedding, shoehorned in between Thanksgiving and Christmas, was her operation entirely; he only had to arrange tuxes. But since she started repairing the dress, an incredibly painstaking and endeavor that strained Dee's masterly sewing abilities, her

zeal for leadership had started to flag. The repairs on the house, preparations for the wedding, and Dee's own plans to start a sewing business out of their home had all been left by the wayside as she worked on the dress. Lately, when he'd ask for direction on some errand he was supposed to do she acted peeved that he needed to be told. Now Dee appeared to be moving from ambivalence to outright resentment, and Palmer felt abandoned, on his own against the mouse.

As Dee rubbed the lotion on her shoulders, he thundered down to the coat closet at the bottom of the stairs, dug in the pockets of one to find his leather gloves, and pulled them on. After nervously checking for furry squatters living in the toes, he slid on his black leather boots and laced them up against his bare legs. It was early September, and they'd tried to leave the air off since their new house was expensive to cool. His hands and feet immediately began to sweat, but the gloves and boots reassured him that at least the mouse wouldn't be scurrying across his bare toes. He thought he could touch the creature, if it came to that, with his gloves on. He wanted to fill Dee with regret, to show her how seriously she needed to take his fear. Maybe her hardheartedness would ease if she saw how much he suffered from the phobia.

When he returned to the bedroom, she'd turned the lamp out. She faced the wall; only the slope of her hip was visible in the shaft of light falling through the doorway. "Honey," he called. "I just can't sleep if I know it can climb up on me."

"It's only interested in food, Palmer," she breathed. "It's not going to come up here." She sounded disengaged, half-asleep already.

"But it climbed up to the *kitchen counter*."

"Look," she said with finality, her head rising from the pillow for emphasis, "I have to get up for work in the morning, just like you. If you want to broom the little bastard then, we will. But right now I'm going to sleep. If you're not coming, will you at least close the door?" Her head fell back, and Palmer wished she would look at him, see his distress, see his mouse-proof outfit. He didn't want to ask for pity directly, though. She had to notice his terror and discomfort on her own.

He thumped the door closed and stomped down the stairs. Once at the bottom, though, he felt more than saw the white pulse of fear around the edges of his vision. The kitchen light was still on, just as he'd left it, and he didn't see anything through the doorway. Sleep or no sleep, he wasn't going back in that kitchen tonight. He sprawled on the couch, leaving his booted feet hanging off the armrest, and watched *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* until he drowsed. He woke up with only the hazy recollection of fear instead of actual panic and sleepily ascended the stairs to their bedroom. Sweat coated his extremities; he felt calm enough to slip off the gloves, but left his boots on. To avoid getting dried mud on the sheets, he slept above the covers and made sure his boots jutted off the edge of the bed.

He dreamt of darting brown missiles and dirty things scrambling over his face. Every forty-five minutes he came awake with a yelp, pawing at his chest to sweep the brown phantoms off. Whenever he jounced the mattress, Dee would curse and huff loudly. The morning came raw and early; Palmer sat up, rubbing reddened eyes that felt dipped in silt. He shambled downstairs to the sunlit kitchen. At the doorway, he remembered he'd left his gloves on the nightstand upstairs. He imagined a shield across the doorway of the kitchen keeping him out, but he thought Dee would shame him if he

refused to enter. He gritted his teeth and forced himself through the invisible barrier. Palmer flinched when he opened the cabinet above the sink to get a coffee filter, expecting a wall of wriggling brown bodies to spill on him.

Once he got the coffee going, he retreated to their front room until it finished dripping. Instead of making oatmeal or toast, he thought he'd pick up McDonald's on the way to the outlet mall, where he sold suits at Men's Fashion Showroom. A high, distant squeaking came through the floor vents. His hands quaked as he bolted up the stairs. He almost collided with a bleary-eyed Dee coming down.

She must have sensed his panic, because she rasped, "Is it in there?"

"I didn't see it," he said. "But I think I hear it in the walls."

"I smell coffee." She shoved past him. "At least you managed that."

Palmer decided to ignore the dig. "Are you going to kill it?" he asked the back of her head, but she didn't answer. She stayed in the kitchen for about five minutes while Palmer stood on the stairs, went up for the gloves, returned to his spot on the stairs, and peered warily around the corner. He caught her eye, and she looked up from her sewing magazine.

"What are you wearing?" she chuckled. Her eyes shone amusedly in the sunlight pouring through the window. "Going to a leather bar?"

"I don't know," he said, waving his gloved hands. Relief coursed through his chest and cooled his neck. *She'd seen what was happening, how deeply it scared him.* "I was trying to protect myself." Then, more direly, "Do you think there might be more than one?"

She returned her gaze to *Sew News* for a moment, then looked up and said, "Probably. Why don't we get traps and put them out tonight?"

Palmer felt a pitiful sickness at having to see the mouse's jellied eyes expelled from the head, its tiny mouth open with a thin line of blood trickling out. He wanted it gone, erased. Like it was never there. "I don't want to kill it," he explained. "I don't ever want to see it or touch it or know about it ever again."

"You're so squeamish," she murmured, sipping her coffee. "It's not going to leave just because we want it to."

She seemed to be waiting for him to decide what to do, which disoriented Palmer. He remained silent for a beat, then asked, "Do you think a cat would scare it off?"

"Well," she explained. "A cat would kill it. I thought you didn't want that."

Palmer had never owned a cat. He imagined a stealthy feline ruthlessly tracking the mouse and swallowing it whole, never to be seen again. He thought he could probably stomach that.

"Why don't we just get traps?" she urged. "Besides, I thought you were allergic."

Since he was young, cat dander made his eyes swell painfully and nose erupt in violent reaction. Dee waited for his answer. He hated being in charge of mouse disposal, but she seemed too wiped out and exasperated to deal with it. He thought they would fall back into their normal routine after the wedding. He said, "I'll dose up on Benadryl" and attempted a desperate expression. "Let's find one."

She folded the magazine deliberately and spoke to him like she was fulfilling a truly tall order and, nodding, said, "Jeanine Lanz has a cat." He recognized the name as someone Dee worked with at the bank. "Named Meatball or Meathead or some shit."

"Could we borrow it for a couple days?" He was ready to spend big dollars. "Or rent it?"

Her mouth formed a numb smile. "Rent?"

His voice edged a notch higher. "It's going to wax the mouse, isn't it?"

"That's what cats do," she said. "And that's what we want. *Remember?*"

At work, Palmer felt more secure. The men's shop didn't have dusty corners or gaps between the floor and the wall where legions of furry invaders could rally for an attack. Smooth paneled walls lined with dignified suits and ties surrounded long racks of pleated pants and well-dressed mannequins. The orderly arrangement of the shop calmed him, and he supposed he enjoyed working there because it required a vigilant tidiness he'd been accustomed to during childhood. His mother had kept their tiny home Marine-barracks spotless during his formative years. He could not recall any mice breaching her defenses. Occasionally, he'd have to swat flies or crush spiders in a wad of paper towels, but there was never any engagement with more serious wildlife. His mother kept gallons of military-grade cleanser handy to scour and disinfect the eating areas, reminding him that they didn't want to attract unsavory pests. Palmer attributed his deep love of order to his mother, but he suspected her mania had made him lazy in his personal cleanliness and hygiene. He'd never been required to clean up after himself, really, since his mother compulsively, constantly did it. Working at Men's Showroom had brought out dormant neat-freak tendencies.

Palmer knew that Derrick Martin, his only underling, would scoff at his rodent phobia. Palmer had been childhood friends with Derrick, and one summer, when he was

eleven, had gone to the Martins' house in the country to spend the night. Palmer's mom allowed him stay up during the summer months—usually till one. But Derrick's father forced them to get in bed and to shut the lights out just after ten. He and Derrick, nestled on a ratty foldout bed, had giggled, made farting noises, and whispered until Derrick's red-faced father stormed down the hall and bellowed for them to shut the hell up for God's sake. The two boys held their breath until they were sure Derrick's father had settled into his squeaky bed, then began talking again. Used to retiring early, Derrick fell asleep in the middle of a supposedly scary story Palmer had been making up as he went along. Palmer searched for something to occupy his mind, so he mentally cycled through all the states and capitals. He had been struggling to remember Oregon's when a dull padding came from the carpet beside the bed. Something thumped and a horrible scratching racket began in the wall just behind his head.

Derrick's room sat across the hall from the Martins' large kitchen, which had been bathed in a luminous green from the digital clock over the stove, and Palmer heard a scrabbling racket begin in there followed by an orgy of squealing. He imagined a crack opening in the floor with hordes of mice shooting out like a geyser, littering every surface with squealing, dirty vermin. Palmer sobbed incoherently into the living dark of the house, and tried to wake Derrick—who apparently could sleep through a train wreck—by cuffing the other boy on the forehead.

Derrick's dad appeared in the doorway again, shouting, "What the hell's going on in here?" Palmer didn't fear the man's wrath half as much as the thumps and squeaking. He imagined the noises were attempts by mice trying to jump up on the folding bed, but missing and falling to the carpet. Eventually one would make the jump and be on him.

"They're everywhere!" Palmer yelled out. "Please take me home now. Please take me home NOW."

"Calm down, Palmer," Derrick's dad said, holding out a hand and shaking his head. Palmer couldn't be sure if this gesture was to rid the man's mind of fogginess or out of impatience. "You're going to make yourself sick. It's almost midnight, and I don't . . ."

"TAKE ME HOME NOW. PLEASE. PLEASE," he cried as he felt the tickle of a small shape move down his leg. The scream he had then released was so long and piercing that it woke up Derrick and their nearly comatose mother, who'd been heavily sedated with muscle relaxants for back spasms. Derrick's father took him home.

Palmer had blanched when Men's Showroom first made him store manager, but because he constantly reported to the district office in Louisville, he found it wasn't so hard. He never felt like a supervisory figure; Derrick worked the two busiest weekdays with Palmer, allowed him to take two days off, and manned the front on Wednesdays while Palmer handled inventory and deliveries. He hadn't seen Derrick for years until he came in for a job interview a few weeks after Palmer was promoted.

His childhood friend had been a fireman until he accidentally blew off his pinky with a cherry bomb during a Fourth of July safety demonstration and sprayed a horrified group of kids and parents with blood. While he admitted the accident was his fault and claimed the department had fired him for it, Palmer suspected that embarrassment over the pinky calamity played more of a role in Derrick's leaving than departmental mandate had.

His employee reminded Palmer of a creaky old-timer from a Western who delighted in regaling all within earshot with hard-to-believe anecdotes. Usually these involved Derrick successfully threatening someone larger than him or triumphantly defeating a bigger firefighter in a physical confrontation. Despite his overpowering machismo—or perhaps because of it—the guy had a natural talent for haberdashery and could really move merchandise. Palmer knew Derrick had raised the store's returns each month he'd worked there.

Palmer had been thinking about the mouse all day, even asking Derrick if he had one to lend in case Dee's source didn't work out.

"I don't keep cats," Derrick said. "You might remember Boots. It was my mom's when we were younger, but I made it eat my brother's toy-parachute string to see how soon it would crap it out. I thought if just the little plastic shoot was hanging out the butt, then I could throw him out of a tree and he'd float down like an Army guy." He chortled and jammed his hands in his slacks. Then he smiled ruefully and said, "Boots did not survive the experiment." He made a clicking sound like he was cocking a revolver. "The old man wouldn't let us have another."

"Do you know anybody who has one?" Palmer asked.

"Why do you need a cat so bad? Rodent problem?"

"Yeah," he said, trying to be nonchalant. He was tempted to tell Derrick everything, out of sheer desperation for someone who would listen, but he held back.

Derrick watched him carefully. Then grinning, he said, "Just get some traps or poison. Poison's what got rid of my parents' mice." He cracked his knuckles in quick

succession and gazed with satisfaction out the front windows at crisp autumn sunlight drenching the parking lot.

Hot shame pumped through Palmer's face. He found that he'd liked it better when he was manager and Derrick the subordinate. "I just want it gone. I didn't want to have to kill it," he grunted.

"What about one of those humane traps?" Derrick said, propping a foot up on the display of Kenneth Cole shirts. "The ones that just catch the mouse. You could take it out to the woods and release him into the bosom of Mother Nature." Derrick's tone projected his hearty disdain for this suggestion, even though he'd made it. "My dad and me used to just squash the damn things with a boot heel or a broom."

Palmer nodded. "As long as I don't have to touch it," he ventured and immediately regretted it. He bent to the ties.

Derrick snorted. "There was a guy over at Jennings County R.F.D. who was afraid of cotton balls, and we'd put them all over his locker and in his stuff. He couldn't stand to touch them with his bare hands. He had to wear gloves to throw them away." He looked over at Palmer, who concentrated on counting silk ties. "Pussy, huh?"

Palmer stared up at him, hot resentment flushing his cheeks. "What'd you say?"

He snorted again. "You looking for a pussycat, right?" he said, clapped Palmer on the back, and stepped out to the loading dock for a cigarette.

After work, Palmer went to the Tilson Wal-Mart for a humane trap, but he came to suspect that a Midwestern small town must not be the market for non-lethal animal control devices because he only found the killing kind. He stood under the bright fluorescents beside a woman who pulled out three huge rattraps. "They's in our

basement again," she said as Palmer eyed the deadly mechanism. "These suckers," she said, indicating the traps, "take their fucking heads *right off*." Palmer left without buying anything.

He returned home but had trouble going in the kitchen. He wanted to warm up some leftover taco meat and a tortilla in the microwave, but that would mean waiting in the kitchen. He felt relatively protected in his jacket and tie from work so he went in, heart thudding. There were no mice visible, though there were traces of the creature all over. Droppings littered the sink and countertops, so Palmer could tell where it had scurried. He imagined he would feel better with a cat backing him up, so he grabbed the yellow pages for the Humane Society, but the clerk informed him they only kept dogs. Apparently cats had to fend for themselves in the cruel world.

His mother, at least, had understood the whistling fear and disgust that made him demand to be taken home from the Martins'. When she answered their front door in the middle of the night, Derrick's dad, holding the boy—who'd turned ghostly pale and shook uncontrollably—up by the shoulder, had claimed he'd had a bad dream and was homesick. His mother nodded and told Mr. Martin to bring him into the kitchen. Mr. Martin refused coffee, tea, or warm milk and told her he thought the nightmare was about rats and mice. Palmer stared at Derrick's father over the brim of his warm milk, but didn't challenge his story. The wide man smiled knowingly at him, said goodbye—and that he hoped Palmer could come out and stay with them again soon—and left. As soon as she shut the door, he told his mom about the rodents. He included every detail, even told her mice had crawled over his face and rats nipped at his fingers and toes. Palmer's

lies were never outright, just exaggerations of the truth. His mother shared his flair for the dramatic and found them easy to believe. She already didn't care for his friend Derrick, and when he described the Martins' house as a vile trough of garbage and old food, she declared that letting her son sleep in "a cesspool full of rodents" was almost criminally negligent. He'd had to plead with her to not call the Martins and give them a piece of her mind.

"You won't be going over there again," she said with finality. As she cupped his head in her arm and kissed his temple, he thought then he would never want to go back.

A few weeks later he and Derrick were back at Haskins Elementary in Mrs. Gill's sixth-grade class. The raging army of mice had become a distant memory. As they sat in orderly rows before the first bell rang, Derrick wouldn't look at Palmer. When the class let out for recess, his friend hung around the jungle gym with Roger Keck and Jason Hines, other country kids. When Palmer approached, Roger called out: "Hey, there's Ruthie. Watch out for the mice, *Ruthie*." The boy pointed at the ground.

Palmer had been teased before; this was nothing new. Some kid always called him "Baby" or "Ruthie" since his last name was Ruth; it went with the territory. But he knew Derrick *had told* the boys about his screaming and demanding to be taken home. Palmer looked at the other boy, who finally faced him, his eyes mean and unfamiliar. "Get lost, queerbait," Derrick called.

Palmer just stared at him.

"Omigod!" Jason Hines, a longhaired kid who could belch on command, screamed in mock terror and pointed at the ground by Palmer. "There's a mouse on your foot."

"I said get out of here." Derrick seemed *strange* to Palmer. Like someone else had taken up residence behind the other boy's eyes.

Roger Keck said something about him being a green weenie, but Palmer couldn't fathom what this might mean. Derrick turned his head, with deliberate slowness, toward Roger. He shook his head in a way that Palmer had seen Derrick's father do when he issued a correction. "He's not a weenie," he said. "Palmer's a faggot. A pussy-faggot." Palmer walked away from the boys perched on the bars. When Derrick came into Men's Showroom for an application fourteen years later, Palmer felt twinges from that day. The twenty-five-year-old before him only dimly resembled the ignorant kid on the playground, and when Derrick handed him the application and said he really needed a job, Palmer began to feel the satisfaction of his promotion. He planned to chuck the application in the trash after Derrick left, but he held on to it. The idea that he could throw the application away made his afternoon, and he supposed he might like having that feeling every day. Palmer offered him the job.

In his kitchen, Palmer thought about how Derrick wouldn't have flinched from killing the mouse, and neither would Dee. Both of them would have chosen the decapitating traps that he couldn't stomach. It wasn't Derrick's (or Dee's) bloodlust that bothered him. He wanted a little for himself. He didn't *want* to pity the mouse; he just couldn't help it. He'd tried forcing himself to warm to the idea of killing the damn thing, and he almost had it. He figured that as long as he didn't ever have to see the mouse again he could sentence it to death.

He was haunted by Derrick and Dee's complete lack of understanding of his fear of mice, something he saw as a perfectly acceptable human failing. Dee seemed unimpressed with anything short of a beheading or a complete mental breakdown, and Derrick was too macho. He tried to imagine what might elicit some sympathy from these two.

A skittering noise came from the cabinet above the sink, and he jumped away like it had burst into flames. He went out on the back stoop and waited, watching the yellow afternoon die. Palmer felt gloomy at his prospects for sleep that night. His nerves were a shattered mess. He gazed out across their puny backyard to the fence that separated it from the Nances' and noted that he would need to mow again soon. This wasn't a rural setting. He lived in town, not in some nature preserve, and he felt strongly entitled to a *mouse-free fucking house*. He'd risen to get his keys and return to Wal-Mart for the lethal traps when Dee bumped up the driveway in her Corolla. His heart soared when she hefted a cat carrier from the passenger seat. Palmer practically hooted in joy as she toted it to the stoop. The wicked-looking green eyes of a gray feline moved behind the cage door.

He excitedly asked, "Who's *this*?" He couldn't believe how happy the cat made him. He felt real gratitude to Dee and kissed her vigorously.

"Let me get inside, Casanova." They went in, and Palmer felt indestructible. Dee set the box of cat on their kitchen table, and he made sure the screen door was shut before she opened the carrier. "This is Meatloaf, my boss's cat." She reached inside, and the cat screeched and hissed. Dee jerked her hand out and brought it to her mouth. "Ouch. FUCK."

Palmer squatted to look in the carrier. Meatloaf had backed up to the rear and puffed out menacingly. He tried to coax him out by cooing, "We have a mousey out here for you. Come *on*. Come *on*."

"It's a cat, Palm, not a dog," Dee said, nursing her wound. "A bastard cat that scratched the shit out of my hand." She ran water over her wound.

"He needs to get out here and help us," Palmer said, still gazing into the carrier. "I think there's some salmon in the fridge."

"We won't feed him until he kills the mouse," she said. "That should motivate his furry ass." She winced while scrubbing hard at her finger. Meatloaf made another low crying sound. Dee dried her hand and said, "Jeanine says it's a merciless killer."

Palmer, wearing a pained expression, said, "We'll just let nature take its course. I guess cats have to eat, too." He felt genuinely sorry the little mouse had to die; after all, it only wanted food. It wasn't terrorizing him on purpose, he knew. But his fear darkened everything that day and he knew another night of flailing might jeopardize his relationship, job, and sanity. He kept looking at the "merciless" cat plastered against the back of the box. It had stopped making noise, and he reached in to pet it. Meatloaf swatted and hissed at him. He felt the first burning lances of a reaction brewing in his sinuses.

"I'm going out for some Benadryl." He left Dee and Meatloaf in the kitchen.

After his first day of sixth grade, he'd trudged glumly around his house until his mother returned from work. While she stood cooking Rice-a-Roni, he related Derrick's behavior.

"I don't want to be afraid of mice," he'd cried. "But I can't help it." His mother had moved to hug him, but he shrugged out of her grip. "Don't baby me anymore," he'd said and scowled at her.

She let her jaw drop open at him. Then she'd straightened up with an expression of recovered dignity that Palmer easily noticed and understood. "Okay, young man," she'd said. She sniffed with dignity. "No more kid stuff."

In the weeks following, she'd refused to turn on closet lights if he felt unsure at night. She made him kill every insect in the house. He was commanded to carry garbage to the dumpster in the alley behind their house, a place rats frequented in the twilight hours. Palmer did all this without complaint, and began to feel a pride in himself that resembled nothing he'd ever experienced before. He felt heavier, more substantial.

One Saturday morning a couple weeks later, his mother took him to his Uncle Drew's farm two counties over. They arrived around lunchtime, and his mother's brother waved and coasted to a stop on his tractor beside his barn as they pulled up. After a pork and beans lunch, his mother and Aunt Bess talked while his Uncle Drew took him to the barn. His uncle didn't raise any livestock but used the barn to store his tractor and lawn mower. "Your mother wanted me to show you something," he said, leading Palmer up the wooden ladder to the hayloft. Uncle Drew gestured to a wood feed box with a shaft in the bottom opening to the lower floor. The sides came up to Palmer's chest. "Climb in."

"Into the box?" he said, looking in the empty square space. Palmer was puzzled. Every time he'd come to Uncle Drew's before, he'd only sat beside the middle-aged man on the couch and watched football or basketball. Palmer assumed his uncle didn't like

him since he'd overheard him tell his mother that her son would probably "end up with a cock in his mouth."

"Yep. Get on in," he breathed, going to a stack of metal boxes that lined the far wall beside the mountains of hay.

Palmer climbed in. The floor was littered with bits of hay and dust and made a delicious crunch under his sneaker's sole. His uncle had laid a sheet of particle board to cover the hole to the feeding trough below.

"Now, just stay in there," Uncle Drew said and grabbed a box. He checked under the lid and carried it over to Palmer. The container reminded Palmer of what people left empty bottles in for the milkman. He was about to tell Uncle Drew this when the man upended the container and several dark objects fell into the feedbox. When they hit the dusty wood at the bottom three of the five sprang to life and darted around his tennis shoes. The other two lay still, curled in on themselves. Palmer launched himself out of the box, but his uncle shoved him back down. He scrabbled hard against the wooden sides as the mice darted back and forth around his feet. Far in the distance, he heard a high-pitched laugh that sounded like the incoherent babbling of his grandmother in her nursing home. His Uncle Drew just kept saying "Stay" and shoving him back down in the feedbox, with a mild expression on his face like he was shuffling cards for euchre.

Years later, he couldn't recall a lot of that day at Uncle Drew's, but he did know (from his mother's account) that she and Aunt Bess had heard the screaming when they'd stepped outside for Bess to sneak a cigarette. They'd run to the barn, and Drew had called down that he and Palmer were just playing around. When Bess came up the ladder and found Palmer white-faced, shuddering, and gibbering in the feed box, she'd made her

husband release him. She stood by with her hand at her mouth as Drew fished him out. Palmer's mother had rocketed up the ladder and brutally castigated her brother for what he claimed was a homemade shock treatment. He'd said it would help Palmer get over his fears.

"He pissed his pants, Drew," his mother had said through gritted teeth. "You owe me some Levi's."

"Carolyn, he's growin' into a mama's boy," his Uncle Drew had pleaded. "He's pissing his pants over *field mice*."

As his mother conducted Palmer to her car, Aunt Bess had kept apologizing and shouting over her shoulder that she "couldn't *believe* that Drew" so his uncle could hear it. Bess also offered his mother a towel for Palmer to sit on during the ride home, which she accepted. They left without a goodbye, even though Bess waved desperately.

As they pulled out of the long driveway, Palmer's mother turned to him, her gaze darting from the road to his face and back again. "Palmer, that was my fault what Uncle Drew did," she said. "I told him you were afraid of mice and could he catch some to show you, so you wouldn't be scared." Palmer had returned his stare to the road curling through the autumn countryside. He couldn't remember how they'd gotten to the farm in the first place. In fact, everything that had happened that day before being in the box with the mice felt like a dream he'd had a long time ago. "I'm really sorry. I didn't know he'd do that, but I should have expected it. He's never had any sympathy."

Palmer nodded. He felt numb and the urine-soaked jeans made his thighs clammy.

"Please tell me you'll forgive me."

Palmer nodded, but not because he felt forgiveness. He felt mute and almost deaf. He nodded only because his mom wanted him to.

When he returned a half-hour later, bearing generic allergy medicine and NyQuil to help him sleep, Meatloaf the Killer had not moved. Palmer positioned a chair opposite the cat carrier in the kitchen and sat there, administering the medication. He talked to the cat, reasoned with it, and dangled a shoelace, hoping Meatloaf would take a swipe. Finally he got tired of waiting and set the carrier on the stovetop so the killer could see his prey; then he shut the kitchen door and left the cat in there.

Between his massive dose of NyQuil and the poor rest he'd gotten the night before, Palmer fell into a nearly impenetrable sleep. In the morning, Dee had to shake his shoulder violently two different times and threaten an ice-water soaking if he wouldn't get up. He went down to the kitchen, removed the brace from the door, and entered, unafraid of the mouse, since Meatloaf had been on duty. The carrier was empty and a quick survey of the room yielded no Meatloaf. Palmer started to worry the cat had gotten out of the house, which could be fatal for an indoor cat. After a few minutes he started opening the cabinets, thinking the cat might have pawed one open when he heard scratching. He found Meatloaf below the kitchen sink, perched like a sniper above a field of cleansers. He hailed the cat, and it mewed demurely. He tried to coax it out, but to no avail, so he left the cabinet ajar. As he brewed coffee, Palmer noticed the mouse had most assuredly been out the night before. Trails of shit crisscrossed the countertops.

Dee came down, already groomed for work. "Did he get the fucking thing?"

"I don't think so." He gestured to the open cabinet, and she looked in.

"Hey, you little furry shithead. What's the deal?" Then to Palmer, she said, "No food until he kills the mouse."

"I know, I know."

She leaned back down and shouted alarmingly at the cat, "Merciless killer, *my ass*."

He was fifteen minutes late arriving at Men's Fashion Showroom, and since Thursday was payday, Derrick was lounging around the tiny back office wearing jeans, rubbing the stump where his pinky had been. He switched on the sales floor lights and Derrick, off the clock, graciously helped him get the place ready so he could open on time. Once they unlocked the front doors and switched on the sign, they relaxed in the back and kept an ear out for the tones that sounded when customers came in.

Palmer opened the envelop with their paychecks and handed one to Derrick, who asked, "Did you get a cat?"

"Yeah," he said. "But it's kind of a bust. The damn thing isn't a killer."

"Still having rodent problems?"

"It's like the cat's afraid of everything. First it wouldn't come out of the carrier. Now it won't come out of the cabinet."

"I'm sure it'll eventually come around. They almost can't help but chase mice," Derrick said and rose to leave. "But if you need a better cat, I can get you one."

"Oh, yeah?"

"This babe I'm poking over in North Vernon's got one. Still has claws that'll scratch you to death. You should see my leg where it got me for accidentally kicking it."

"You accidentally kicked it?"

"Accidentally on purpose."

He assured Derrick that Meatloaf would do the killing and thanked him. Palmer went out to help a bearded man who came in with his fiancée to pick out wedding tuxedos. Derrick left through the backdoor. After the couple finished their order, Palmer browsed through tuxes for his wedding, which he needed to order soon. Though Dee had picked out a fancy looking black thing for him, he thought a less traditional one might look great on him. Then Dee called from the bank and told him Jeanine didn't know what was wrong with Meatloaf, but that she'd let it slip that they weren't feeding him. Now this woman wanted the cat back because she thought Palmer and Dee were abusing it. He mentioned Derrick's offer of the use of his girlfriend's cat, and Dee said they should just go get traps.

Palmer argued for Derrick's cat. He wanted to show his coworker that he wasn't afraid to get rough with the mouse. Dee said, "All right. Whatever. Just see if you can get the cat to the house tonight." He called Derrick after they hung up, and he agreed bring the cat over after Palmer got home.

The rest of the day went well. Palmer's customers were pleasant and numerous, giving him some nice commissions. He even managed to sell some cufflinks and a chrome-plated flask to another guy who came in to look at tuxes, items Derrick could easily move but that he'd never had any luck with. There was a delivery that was mercifully free of errors, an anomaly given all the tux fuck-ups that summer. He felt liberated. Surely, two cats in a row wouldn't peter out on him. As he locked up for the evening, he reflected how much seeing the mouse had bothered him. It seemed silly now, and he wished he'd comported himself better.

He felt energized when he got home and planned to get the back yard mowed before dark. In the kitchen, he found the same animal détente that had been in place when he left that morning: new mouse droppings present and Meatloaf sequestered with Cascade below the sink. He decided to leave Meatloaf's collection and detainment to Dee. He changed into grungies and filled the mower with a gas can from the basement. He was doing the little strip along the driveway, the machine throwing clippings in blurry green arcs, when Derrick and Dee both tried to pull in the driveway. Derrick held back and followed Dee in. He stopped the mower and hailed the two as they exited their cars.

Derrick quickly shut the door of his Malibu and glanced in through one of the rear windows. "I had to put Mr. Peeve in back. We didn't have nothing to carry him in."

Palmer introduced them, and Dee smiled, shaking his friend's hand. She asked, "Why do you call him Mr. Peeve?"

"Lori calls him her pet peeve," he said, and Dee giggled. "She's being nice, though. He's a mean fucker."

Dee and Palmer gazed into the car to see a corpulent calico lolling in the rear window between the stereo speakers. His expression seemed magisterial and unapologetic, and he stretched in the sun. Dee pointed at his rear and said, "He's got enormous testicles."

"Maybe that's what's wrong with your other one," Derrick said. "No balls." Then he guffawed, and Dee cackled along with him, laying a hand on his sleeve. Palmer watched them laugh. Derrick looked back at the feline and said, "Had a hell of time getting him in the car. Check these out." He displayed raised, red scratches on his arm.

"My God," Dee said, examining the wounds. "He got you good, didn't he? We should get you some alcohol."

"He ate my finger, too." He held up his four-fingered hand, and Dee shrieked in surprise. Then she beamed in delight as he started regaling her with how he lost the digit.

Palmer loudly asked, "Why don't we use Meatloaf's carrier to get him inside?"

"I'll go get it," Dee said. Then to Derrick, she said, "Palmer's afraid of the kitchen," and started toward the rear of the house.

"I'll help you," Palmer offered, but Derrick came up right beside him. "Just go back to your mowing. You don't have to keep me company." He pointed to the low orange sun below the treetops. "You're almost out of daylight."

"Do you want anything to drink?" Dee asked, and Derrick followed her around the corner.

Palmer watched after them for a second then started the mower and pushed it around the curve of the yard to the back, where he began a series of rows just past the back door. He didn't want to go in the kitchen, but he bristled thinking about how she'd spoken of him.

He was about to suck it up and go in when Dee and Derrick, grinning and talking, exited and passed him with the empty carrier, saying something he couldn't hear. He moved to shut off the mower but Dee waved to him that it was okay. She was mouthing, *Just keep mowing*. A minute later, as he passed the back door again, he saw her leading Derrick with Mr. Peeve in the carrier. She had her neck craned back, talking to him, and her hand held out, pointing at Palmer. They were faces were crimson with laughter as they reached the back stoop.

Two blurs erupted through the door when she opened it; a brown mouse-blur and a gray Meatloaf-blur flew toward him. With a furious scream, he jerked the mower toward their shapes, and both went under the machine, which started banging and rattling heavily on its wheels. A fine mist of cat and mouse blood sprayed across the back of Palmer's house, coating Dee and Derrick's faces and covering Palmer's shoes with bits of carnage. He released the handle and the engine ground to a halt, cat bones racketing around with the mower blades. The blood-spattered people gaped for several seconds at each other. Before anyone spoke, Palmer realized he enjoyed how the two others stared at him.

Donkey Basketball

Though my father spread his arms for a hug, I extended my hand. We had agreed to meet under the buzzing sign for Smost's Breakfast N-E-TIME along Route 92 in Rockland, Iowa because Dad said it was the town's easiest-to-find landmark. He stared at the hand, shook once, and our arms dropped. An awkward second coasted by. "Weather couldn't be nicer," I said, tenting a *USA Today* over my head to shield me from the February rain.

"Let's go inside," he said. Under the diner's fluorescent lights, he looked more deflated and fragile than when he'd visited me three years ago in Jacksonville, Florida. We were supposed to spend a weekend together then and take in a Jaguars game, but he ended up sitting in my apartment both days because I had to put together a last-minute story for the *Times-Union* on this local Catholic school running back who wadded up his signed letter of intent to attend Florida and was going to Georgia. I apologized to Dad repeatedly, and though he nodded and told me he didn't mind, he had not been back since.

At the counter, we wedged between two truckers shoving forks full of pancakes into their mouths. A waitress worked the line of customers down to us, pouring coffee without asking if we wanted any.

"Thanks for coming," he said, blowing into his cup. "I really wanted you to see this kid. He's amazing."

"Runs like a gazelle?" I asked. This was his favorite cliché for swift basketball players, and I'd made a point not to use it in my column.

He knew I was joshing him "Can't tell. Remember—he's on a donkey," he said, sipping and winking. I'd flown up to cover this weird pastime called donkey basketball, a goofy farm-burg stunt to raise money for high-school sports programs. Dad had been going to these games ever since retiring last year as head basketball coach of the Keokuk County Warriors. Since then, he'd been driving two or three hours to out-of-the-way gyms for these events. I was worried that his obsession might be an early sign of senility. Not long after turning sixty-five, my dad's sister Trish had filled her house with tall, unsteady stacks of fast food containers because she claimed they were breathtakingly beautiful and bore coded messages from God. He'd also left my mom a tearful voicemail message the previous week, though they'd been divorced for ten years.

"That's right. A donkey," I said. "I forgot."

He looked at my hands curled around the mug. "Shouldn't you be taking notes?"

"I'll jot some tonight on the plane."

"You're not staying?"

"I have an editorial board meeting tomorrow," I said, layering a smaller lie on top of the whopper I'd told him about writing an article on this kooky sport. Last December, Dad had emailed me about this donkey basketball phenom named Craig Wietse attracting huge crowds; he wanted me to cover him in my column. I took a pass on the idea, and he told me it would be damn shame if I didn't cover it. He warned me that I'd regret missing out on a true piece of Americana.

Then my mother phoned. She'd lived in Largo, Florida, with my stepfather, Murray, for years, but apparently Dad still clung to some sentimental hope of reconciliation. He'd call her every six months to see how she was, but this time she said

Dad had pled for her to leave Murray and come live with him again.

"Did you call him back?" I asked.

"I wanted to, but Murray said it would probably just make things harder." She paused. "Would you call him?"

"I don't know what to say to him, Mom. It's not like we're close anymore." I resented that I had to counsel my dad on his love life, thinking it should be the other way around.

"I worry about him," my mother said. "But I don't want to encourage this sort of thing." She sniffed. "Could you please find out if he's okay?"

So I called him, and when I asked, he made it sound like I'd accused him of stealing. He said: "I just wanted to see how she was."

"She told me you wanted her back."

He breathed loudly into the phone. "This is just a misunderstanding between your Mom and me," he said. "We'll work it out."

"What's to work out?" I asked. "She's been remarried for nine years. She's not coming back." I instantly regretted being so blunt. "You need to move on. Don't sit around pining for her."

He remained silent for a few seconds. "Hey," he said. "I do plenty. I'm following donkey basketball. Playing in a game next month." I was about to apologize when he asked, "Why don't you cover it for the paper?"

"We've been over this," I said. "No one here wants to read that."

"How do *you* know? I might get something going. Set a trend," he said. "You gotta see this kid play—he's incredible. They call him the Amish Rocket."

"I thought the Amish shunned technology."

"What's technological about a donkey?" he chuckled. Then, more seriously, he said, "You've never been up to see me. Not in ten years."

"*Dad*."

"Come *on*; it'll be great."

I rolled my eyes to my apartment ceiling. "If you stop pestering Mom to remarry you, I'll do it." Dad knew I could get the *Times-Union* to print an article if I wanted, but I didn't have any intention of writing anything. So I told him I'd pitch it to *USA Today*. When a piece on the Amish Rocket didn't materialize, I'd complain that they'd cut it for something else.

"*USA Today*?" he said. "Wow." I winced when I realized how much it impressed him.

"No more begging Mom to come back. All right?"

"It wasn't *begging*, Dan," he said. "I have every right to call her."

"I know," I said. "But no more proposals. Okay?"

He said "Okay," and I hung up to arrange a plane ticket.

My mother left him soon after I turned seventeen, and her decision surprised me as much as Dad. She'd come out of a self-help course at the state college extension in New Albany talking about empowerment and "allowing her desires to breathe." She began lifting weights, buying only organic produce, and started a women's book club called "The 40-Plus Bitch Goddesses" (I was unsure if this referred to the number of club members or the median age). She claimed Dad needed to get in touch with his ambition.

If he didn't, she warned, he'd never be capable of fully connecting with her.

Like shell-shocked veterans avoided reminiscing about combat, my father and I avoided talking about the separation. He never said whether he thought she was being selfish, being terrible, or being truthful. Even the day she moved out, he stood silently on our front lawn, staring into the distance, as if watching a sunrise. Movers in grimy overalls trucked past him with my mother's possessions, and he seemed as oblivious to them as to the sprinkler soaking his shoes. I stayed because, like Dad, I expected her to return. I also knew that she'd given him some hope, a way to patch them up, and I thought my dad could make it work.

Not winning enough basketball games, Mom claimed, made him unhappy even though he wouldn't admit it. She seized on his dearth of sports glory as evidence that he lacked ambition, telling him, "You need to be more assertive, Carl." My father was a competent, if largely unsuccessful, coach, a student of the game but not much of a competitor. He treasured balletic gestures and the clockwork smoothness of a well-practiced play, but his skills only allowed him to keep Tilson High School from being profoundly embarrassed each season. Mom suggested Dad try what she called "metaphysics," which emphasized the power of positive thinking and self-actualization, to remedy his apparent lack of drive. To get her back, he threw himself into researching these concepts. During lunch, I'd see him studying in the teachers' lounge, his face hidden behind the open cover of a book called *Mind Mastery*.

Mastering his mind wouldn't make Dad more assertive. I'd inherited his distaste for competition so I knew. I was a mediocre player at best, and though I had height, I possessed no toughness or quickness. I didn't have the competitive fire like Randy Otte

or Jim Ladd, our power forwards, whom I relieved once or twice a season. I enjoyed practicing and playing, but I didn't care if I got any better. My mother hoped to motivate Dad, but I knew he was satisfied with his level of zeal. But he wanted her back, so he tried.

A few weeks after she left, our team was getting shelled by the Jasper Panthers, who were up twenty-six at the half. In the locker room, my dad didn't begin sketching plays on a chalkboard or pointing out weaknesses in our defense like usual. He quietly told the assistant coaches to leave then deposited himself on a stool.

"All right, guys," he said. "I want you to close your eyes for a minute." We stared at him and each other. He had always talked with his hands, always wanting to *show* and for the players to *look*. "Come *on*," he said. "Don't be afraid." My father shut his eyes.

Lids fell all around the room, except for mine. Our team looked like a prayer circle. "I want you to see the court and see the ball in Jasper's possession," he said. Several of my teammates grunted in discomfort, but some had their eyes scrunched shut, desperate to thwart the public caning. "Now imagine them dropping it!" he said in what sounded like awe, his arms raised as if to conduct a symphony. Like schlock movie zombies, Jason Stern and Mike Freely extended their arms to pluck the ball from thin air. My friends Larry Franke and Jim Ladd opened their eyes, their gazes oscillating from my dad to me. I shrugged.

"Now you, *Jason*, you get it. Bring it up the court. Dribbling confidently." Stern air-dribbled and wobbled his legs as if running, appearing to mime an epileptic fit. "Get

set in the swinging-T. Jim, Jamie, and Mike, that means you." He gestured to the wrong players because his eyes were still shut. Mike rolled one panicked eye around to look at the others. Jason continued dribbling the phantom ball up the imaginary court. Jim and Mike looked at me helplessly. More players opened their eyes in confusion.

Dad, oblivious, continued, "Jason, pass it to Mike. Mike, cut inside and dish it off to . . . Jamie!" My dad sounded enraptured as he indicated Jamie Winkleman, a wide second-stringer who played center like the left tackle he more properly was. This boy, a true believer it seemed, had his eyes clamped shut, his face a rictus of concentration. "Jamie backs that big kid they got at center out of the key and passes back to . . . Jim . . . who's been scoping for opportunities in the back court . . . and he shoots." Dad grinned joyfully, his eyes still closed. "Swish!" Then he raised his arms like he'd won a title fight. "Three points! Yeah!" he shouted. Jim Ladd lifted his fists in uncertain triumph.

He imagined several more plays. We mounted an impenetrable defense; there were numerous turnovers by them and steals by us. In his mental game, Jasper never scored. When my father opened his eyes they looked glazed, and we rose—doubtfully—for the second half. "Just see it before you do it, boys," he said and reminded us that we'd already won the game mentally, so we should give ourselves a round of applause. There were a few half-hearted claps, and we fell silent when an assistant came in, followed by the roar of the crowd through the open door. Jamie Winkleman squeaked with fear.

Jasper flattened us by forty-four points. When the final buzzer declared an end to this disaster, my dad trotted down the sideline. He grinned professionally and

congratulated Jasper's coach, acting like he took it all in stride, but sadness radiated from his droopy-lidded eyes.

I eventually came to see that my mother was not entirely correct about my dad, but then, as now, I could see why she stayed gone. It's not that my father lacked willingness to succeed; it's just that he lacked aptitude. He *wanted* to win that game; he *wanted* her back but did not possess the ability to make these things happen.

After the loss to Jasper, the other boys on the team asked me if my dad was going to coach every game that way. Then the assistant coaches and other teachers inquired about him. My guidance counselor called me to the office during study hall to see if my dad was on medication. I told them all that he was fine. All my friends watched me closely for similar signs of family psychosis and judiciously avoided mentioning my father.

Then the story of the mental exercise filtered out to the more conscientious basketball supporters—mostly parents of my teammates—who called the principal in an uproar. Officially, Dad was relieved of his coaching duties for failing to *stress fundamentals*. Anyone who followed high school ball in Indiana believed in stressing fundamentals the same way Marxists believe in revolution. Dribbling, passing, shooting. Just sound, biblical *ball skills*. And my father had departed from this sacred formula, so assistants filled in for the rest of our rotten season.

Dad now came home immediately after school to read his self-help books and cook dinner, which was a dicey affair since he couldn't cook. We had wildly unbalanced meals, like entrées of mashed potatoes and frozen vegetables, with a side of pasta. Everything that wasn't underdone was burned, and his chocolate cake tasted like a block

of rubber cement.

A few days after he was canned, I asked over a plate of mushy lima beans and watery chicken dumplings if I should quit basketball out of solidarity. "I'm not getting any playing time," I said. "They know I suck."

"Playing time isn't everything, Dan," he muttered. "Or maybe it is. Hell, I don't know." Then he said he'd lost his appetite and left the table.

I broached the subject a few more times, but he was no help. "It's not up to me to define *you*, who *you* are," he said, quoting a book called *Defeating the Anger/Self-Pity Juggernaut*.

I decided to quit, and when I informed my mom, she said she understood. Then she asked me to come live in her apartment. She said my dad was just too confused to parent effectively right now. "I'm moving to Florida in June," she said. "I think you should move with me. You can do your senior year at a school down there." I longed to put this whole fiasco behind me, so I agreed, but I didn't like breaking it to my dad. I told him as gently as I could—that I thought it would be easier for both of us, and he just nodded like he'd expected it all along.

It turned out I would've had to move anyway. At the end of the school year, my dad's teaching contract was not renewed for the following fall. He would have to find work elsewhere, and a coaching friend suggested he apply to Keokuk County, a state and a half away from Tilson High School.

Outside Smost's, snow collected on my rental car, and I said, "I wonder if they'll cancel the game."

"No way, my boy," he said, grinning. "A little snow doesn't scare us Iowans." He gestured to his Oldsmobile. "Let's take mine."

"Since when are you a native?" I said, sliding into the passenger's seat. I uneasily searched his face for hints of loneliness and desperation. His jovial demeanor looked strained; he was a barrage of smiles and winks.

"They make you an honorary one after five years." He couldn't wait to get to the game.

As we cruised through town, my father indicated other important landmarks, and I noticed two liver spots on the back of his hand. This was a tour of his last ten years in Rockland, a part of his life I didn't know. I'd come to think of Dad as an errand I'd meant to run but never got around to. After I left with my mom, I never visited. Except for a couple of my graduations (from high school and from Florida State), his awkward visit three years ago was the only time I'd seen him since leaving.

"Donkey basketball," I said, and burped into my fist. "How much time are you spending on this?"

His festive demeanor evaporated. "What do you mean?" he said then pointed to a plowed field. "They're putting a Wal-Mart distribution center there in April."

"I mean," I said and exhaled, unsure how to proceed. "How many hours a week do you . . . you know, go around to this stuff."

"Is this for the story?" he asked, glancing at me. He knew I was thinking about his sister and her food boxes. "I try to go if it's less than a hundred fifty miles." He returned his gaze to the road.

"How much time?"

He turned his head again, but now his eyes seemed to fall on the landscape passing in the window behind me. "I *assure* you, Daniel, that I'm not squandering your inheritance on my hobby."

"That's not what I mean," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Did your mother want you to come up here?" He spit the words like they tasted awful. "Does she think I'm going to end up like Trish?"

"No, I came of my own volition. I wanted to see you."

He gazed out his window and then nodded at a street leading away from Route 92. "I lived down this road when I first moved out here."

"You have to know that she's not coming back. You've got to accept it."

"I'm not hurting either of you by calling." He dusted the Oldsmobile's dashboard. "I just wanted to talk."

"You asked her to leave her husband, Dad."

He pounded the steering wheel. "*I'm* her husband!"

"If you keep this up, she won't take your calls anymore."

"You two are just alike. I'm never enough; I can't do anything right."

"But I don't think that," I said. "Not at all." I remembered how, in high school, I'd concluded that he was hopelessly ineffectual, which he was. But I still regretted thinking it.

"I know that's why you went with her," he whispered. I remained silent the rest of the way to the school where he guided the Oldsmobile through a snow-blanketed lot full of pickup trucks. He pointed at the donkey wrangler—a lean man in seed cap—leading a line of the animals through double doors. They came from a trailer, which said:

"Have donkeys; will travel" below the wrangler's name and phone number. The donkeys were soft-looking, gray, and sported the requisite long ears and moist brown eyes. Their ears flopped over comically as they trailed in, heads bobbing. I wished then that I *had* arranged to write a story for him or at least remembered a pen and notebook.

As he did with the town, Dad gave me a tour of the school, and I started acting journalistic, following up his every comment with another question. I breathed in the humid gym air and heard the hollow tromping of feet over the wooden stands. He proudly recited my credentials to a group of faculty members in the sea of high schoolers: "Here to cover us for *USA Today*!" Knots of queasy guilt tightened around my stomach.

He wanted me to meet his replacement and introduced his former assistant, Coach Martin, who shook my hand. All these coaches were interchangeable: gray hair, big shoulders, torsos layered in fat, large watches on their wrists, and raw red complexions. I watched in mute astonishment as Dad started stretching and doing wind sprints up and down the sidelines in his khaki stretch pants. A "Dream Team" of teachers, coaches, and local sportscasters were playing the Amish team. The donkey wrangler, over the P.A., instructed players not to kick, hit, or scream at the animals. As he stretched, my father recited, in unison with the wrangler, what was clearly an old joke: "You can abuse the other players but not the donkeys."

I sat in the front row, and the bleachers behind me started filling, thick-necked farmers and their wives squeezed between clumps of high school students. I couldn't believe that folks really turned out for this. Donkeys! This rinky-dink county's entire population jostled for seats.

Then the Amish came in. And kept coming in. And *kept* coming in. Women in translucent white bonnets and plain dark dresses. Men with long beards and no mustaches. Suspenders. Hundreds of jolly, wind-burned faces.

My father trotted over, huffing, and pointed across the court. Long-haired boys in tennis shoes passed the ball around at one basket. "That's them," he grunted. "The Amish team." They weren't impressive—short, skinny kids with bad skin. I hadn't thought they were Amish because of the untraditional clothing, but—I reasoned—they probably couldn't go out there in suspenders.

"Which one is the Rocket?"

"The one in the black T-shirt there," he said and pointed to an unremarkable kid with dark features. "Maybe you should go talk to him."

I pursed my lips. "I think I'll wait until after."

Dad nodded, confident that I was writing a story and clearly willing to defer to my expertise. I rubbed my damp hands on my jeans, and he left to track down his donkey.

As the players mounted up, I noticed that the Amish boys did so with ease, their five donkeys moving placidly towards one end of the court. The players handled the ball well, passing it back and forth quickly. The Amish crowd hooted and yelled for the game to start.

Meanwhile, the "Dream Team" was having trouble with their donkeys. The sportscaster with immaculately coiffed hair did a strange, cantilevering dance across the gym floor with his. Whenever he threw a leg on the thin saddle, the donkey shuffled forward, and the sportscaster bellowed "Whoa!" and pogoed on one leg to catch up. The football coach made a high-pitched and womanly noise as his donkey charged forward

with him clutching the animal's neck in terror. My father had managed to climb on, but his donkey orbited out of bounds. He leaned forward, attempting to whisper in its long ear as he cruised away from me.

I wondered what attracted my father to this bizarre pastime. His ideal version of basketball resembled a catapult tightened to maximum tension and released in a wonderful, powerful sweeping motion that launched something far and fast. Donkeys made this sort of operation impossible, so it wasn't the pleasure of a well-run play that made him trek all those miles. Their infamous stubbornness made most people look like terrible and ridiculous players. No matter how much you begged, yelled, cajoled, or threatened, the donkeys could not be forced to do anything, and my father seemed infatuated with their obliviousness. They also possessed the absolute opposite skills one would want for playing basketball. They walked slowly and changed directions unpredictably, often without provocation, wandering on and off the court.

But watching the Amish made me acutely aware that riding the donkey was more like cooperating than commanding. The Amish riders folded their agenda in with whatever the donkeys wanted to do, becoming perfectly unified.

The so-called "Dream Teamers" took almost fifteen minutes to get control of their animals. My dad piloted his, in a zigzag path, over to where I sat in the stands.

"What do you think?" he asked, clearly proud of his ability. His donkey started stepping backward; though Dad bellowed for it to stop, it hauled him out to mid-court. "Am I ready for *USA Today*?"

"I think you make a formidable player," I yelled as he floated away. He finally waved me over to help. I hooked a hand through his donkey's bridle and drew them both

back to the bleachers.

"Ready to try it yourself?" he asked, indicating an available donkey beside Coach Martin. "I had them save you a spot on the roster; our team needs a good center."

I actually did the maneuver where I pointed at my chest. "Me? Why did you do that, Dad?" I thought of myself gallivanting up the court, berating the donkey while the Amish whooped it up all around me.

He looked crushed that I didn't want to. "I can't think of a better way to cover this sport. Plus, you're kind of a celebrity."

This was getting out of hand. "I'm not a celebrity. I'm not writing anything for *USA Today*."

His eyebrows rose. "No article?" His shoulders hunched as they had in the car when he claimed he'd never been enough.

"There's no article; I wanted you to stop bothering Mom," I said. "I'm sorry, though. I'll write a piece for the *Times-Union* when I get back; I promise."

He cleared his throat and gazed down at the floor. "Have I been *this* much of an embarrassment?" His mouth had condensed into a furious white hyphen.

I clapped my hand over my eyes. "I also came because I was worried. I don't want you to end up like Aunt Trish."

He sighed. "Dan, I'm not senile or crazy, okay? Look at me."

I removed my hand. He and the animal were perfectly still; the donkey blinked. "All right, what am I seeing?" I said.

"A man in complete control."

"You're sure about that?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Not entirely," he said. "But you should see what it's like up here."

"You still want me to play?" Another donkey brayed and my father's moved away from me.

"When's the next time you'll do something like this?" He patted his animal to calm it. "Come on."

"All right," I said and jogged across the court. Coach Martin introduced me to a silvery wisp of a donkey named Selma, whose smooth fur felt good. I was too tall to ride Selma, so I kind of straddled her, like an adult on a kid's bike. She smelled like hay, rainwater, and dusty fields stretching to the horizon.

My father beamed. Coach Martin held Selma's reins; he leaned in close so I could hear over the cacophony in the gym. "You're the tallest on the squad. Want to do the tip?"

I nodded, and he guided me to midcourt. Then I was next to Craig Wietse and his donkey, whose saddle read: *Charlene*. He sat phone-pole-straight atop her. The kid was there to play. I itched for the tip-off, an anxious current coursing through my shoulders and back. I glanced over at my father, and he gave me, of all things, a thumbs-up.

The ref appeared, bent his legs, and sent the ball up. I swatted at it desperately. Craig Wietse snatched it and rode down the court, his donkey seeming to shove Selma out of the way. I tried to get her to turn and follow, but nothing doing. Instead, she walked to the side of the court and nosed around the team benches. The Amish screamed in triumph as their team scored. The sportscaster and the football coach yelled at each other. I told Coach Martin to get the ball, but his donkey was busy chewing on a towel it

found on the sideline. My father cackled like a schoolboy, his steed thundering down the court in the wrong direction. The Amish Rocket waited with the ball beside our goal for someone from our team.

I giddy-upped and squeezed Selma's sides with my thighs, and she started toward the boy. Two of our team's donkeys had stopped: the big football coach howled in rage at his poor animal, and the sportscaster shouted "Get-along-there-mule!" My father's donkey rotated like a weathervane, and he turned pink with utter delight as Amish boys glided by like ships passing a lonesome iceberg. I rode up to Craig Wietse and turned Selma around—I thought—impressively. Dad had wandered to the half-court line. I yanked the ball from the boy's hands and chucked it to Dad as hard as I could. He reached out and almost toppled off his donkey as it careened out of bounds.

"Nice throw," Wietse said and smiled what appeared to be a genuine smile.

"Thanks," I said. I nudged Selma, and we started down the court. As I passed my father, he was nodding and pointing. Then he made a megaphone with his hands and shouted something. I cupped a hand around my ear.

"See it before you do it," he called and closed his eyes. I shut mine and saw the rest of the day ahead: the defeat by the Amish Rocket, the cheap trophy we'd all get for participating, my dad's face when I left for Jacksonville, the lights of gratitude in his eyes.

Nomads

The beefy tire-store attendant has about the worst-looking mustache Tammy's ever seen, insinuating itself under his nose like mold. He hands her a repair estimate. The charge for towing the R.V. and sausage booth—after her flat tire on Interstate 65—turns out to be hideously expensive, over $250. Her credit card is beyond maxed out. A dull pain spreads through her forehead. She considers writing a bad check, but it will be a $20 charge from the tire store and another $35 from her bank. She bites the inside of her cheek and asks the attendant, "Will you take a credit card number over the phone, sir?"

He snorts. "No one calls me 'sir.'" He screws his pinky absent-mindedly into his left ear and glances over his shoulder at the manager's open door. "Just call me Lonnie," he whispers. "And, yes, I'll take a c.c. over the phone." He grins like they're both kids up to some mischief. Tammy's certain he's about to wink and chortle obscenely.

"Well, it's not mine," she says. "It's my father's card, okay? He lives down in Florida. Can I sign for him?" Her eyes range over to her fourteen-year-old daughter, Jo, who watches *Judge Judy* on the staticky television in the waiting area, her coltish legs hiked up on an armrest. She spreads all over whatever she sits on, like a spilled milkshake. She waves at Jo to put her feet down, and the girl rises and comes to the counter.

"I won't tell if you won't," Lonnie says. Tammy braces for the wink, but it doesn't come. His eyes swivel to Jo.

"Mom, I'm starving to death," the girl announces.

"Don't start," Tammy says. "We'll get something when we're done. Go watch T.V.; I need to make a phone call." He catches Lonnie watching the girl huffily tromp back to the waiting area.

"I can use your phone, right?" she asks loudly.

"Sure," Lonnie says, facing her again. He gestures to the phone on the counter, grabs a set of keys from the wall, and leaves through the glass doors.

Her fingers punch the digits slowly; she hates asking her daddy for more money. Fourteen years ago when she returned home to Muncie totally broke with a squealing infant, he gave her the R.V. in exchange for a $2,500 I.O.U. Her daddy demanded gratitude for this. And she had tried to be grateful—tried *hard*—through the years.

But her father called the shots. He wouldn't allow his granddaughter to live in the R.V. like "a goddamned nomad," he said, so the infant Jo stayed with him. Tammy was in no position to complain, and he took excellent care of the baby. She didn't miss the implication, though, that he thought the R.V. was perfectly fine for her, *his daughter*. He told her living in the R.V. would build her character. Even though she couldn't afford an apartment for the first two years, she found it difficult to be grateful for the tiny motor home when there was plenty of room at his house. Still, he paid Jo's medical bills and kept the girl in diapers, so Tammy went along with it. Even after she earned enough to rent a closet-sized apartment, her father insisted Jo stay with him, and Tammy felt she couldn't deny her daughter a roomier place to live.

She calls his house in Miami, where he'd moved with Jo in 2002. Before the move, Tammy had wanted her daughter to come live with her, but she was in too much debt to rent a larger place to accommodate Jo.

"Lester," her father says, answering like he's spitting seeds against a concrete wall.

"It's me, Daddy," Tammy says. The sound of her own pathetic voice almost chokes her. "The cash drawer got stolen, and we're stuck in Wayneville with a goddamn flat." She doesn't want to admit she was napping when the drawer got lifted. Jo was running the sausage booth during a slow stretch that afternoon while Tammy conked out in the R.V. Jo said she went to the bathroom, and when she returned the door hung open and the cash drawer—fat with four days' proceeds from the Tippecanoe County Fair—was missing.

"Is Jo okay?" he says. It's always the same, she thinks. He only cares about Jo, the golden grandchild. The main reason he gave her the R.V. and booth, he told her, was because he didn't want Jo to have a deadbeat mother.

"She's fine. But the fair board kept my check for the lot deposit since I couldn't pay it off in cash. I'm pretty short right now, but I can make it up in Tilson if I can ever get there." She watches Jo flip magazine pages in the waiting room, twisting her long blonde hair in an attempt to stave off hunger and boredom. She had to buffalo both Jo and Lester into agreeing to the visit. Jo seems to regret coming, and Tammy can't blame her. The poor girl is spending a perfectly good vacation either slaving over a hot fryer with her mom or being bored to nausea in a podunk tire store.

"I suppose you need another loan from dear old dad." He sighs. There'd been eight loans like this in last few years, as she tried to keep the booth going. She'd never given him anything for the expenses for Jo, though she'd repaid the loans when she could. But she always needed more.

Tammy closes her eyes. "It's been a shitty day, Daddy." She rests her head on the counter and talks quietly. "Please just do it. I'm good for it, you know."

"Do you want me to wire it to you?" he says gruffly.

"The tire place can take your number over the phone."

"How much is this going to run me?"

"Two hundred and fifty-seven fifty."

"*Dollars?*"

Through gritted teeth, she says, "You'll get it back right away." But she's not sure she can make enough at the weekend festival to keep the booth in the black and repay the loan.

Her daddy reads the numbers, and she carefully copies them on a piece of stationery. A familiar dread washes through her. He records every loan he's given her, every favor he's done for her. Tammy has repaid all the little loans, but she still owes him for the R.V. Plus, he's never asked for financial support for Jo. If she wanted to bring her daughter up, she knew he'd demand money for raising the girl.

Before she hangs up, he says, "Barrett called for you. He thought you and Jo were staying up in Muncie. I told him you were on the road."

"But not where we were going, right?"

"No way in hell."

She thanks him as profusely as she can manage and hangs up. She notices Jo gnawing on a chicken leg in the waiting area and Lonnie reclining in the chair opposite her, a bucket of KFC in his lap.

"Hey, look," Jo says, waving the leg. "Lonnie brought us some food." She waves the chicken at him. He guffaws and stares at her tan thighs. Tammy digs out her pocketbook to find it only contains a ten.

She offers it to Lonnie, and he waves the bill away like a gnat. "It's no trouble, baby," he says, and hands her a warm box of fried bird.

She grabs his hand and shoves the money into his greasy palm. *Thank you*.

Tammy came to think that she'd traded Jo to her daddy for the stupid R.V. and booth, which read HOT ITALIAN SAUSAGE, LEMON SHAKE-UPS, and SPICY FRIES in jubilant script down the side. Tammy had been trying to get the booth to turn a profit—and working full-time—for almost ten years when her daddy announced his decision. He argued with reason and insistence for taking Jo with him to Miami. Tammy didn't have time to raise her, he claimed, and Jo would be sent up to visit routinely; Tammy was welcome anytime down at his house. It was best for Jo, he argued, that she have a stable environment. She really couldn't support Jo, could she? Not by herself. Maybe once she could get a house to live in, maybe get a better job, maybe pay off her debts. *And any I.O.U.'s*. Going to Florida with them was out of the question; it meant she'd have to start over completely. She didn't know the festival circuit or have a full-time job down there.

"I can barely make any extra money with the booth here," she told him one afternoon in his kitchen. "I won't be able to take trips to Miami."

"I just can't understand why you don't make more," Lester said, shaking his white-topped head. "I did very well with it."

"Well, you had advantages," Tammy murmured, moving the salt and pepper shakers around on his kitchen table table.

Lester gazed at her incredulously. "Like what? No one *gave* me me a booth. I had to buy it." He thumped his fist on the table.

"You know I'll pay you when I can, Daddy," she sighed. Her father was agitated and she didn't want to get into it about money with him again. They'd fought hard in the first few years she'd been back.

"What advantages?" he asked. "What so-called advantages did I have?"

"None," she said. "You didn't have any."

Lester nodded, his ire quelled. But Tammy knew his advantages well. Sure, he'd purchased the booth and R.V., but it was with the award from her mother's life insurance when she'd died of cancer. Also, when he ran the booth, it wasn't in disrepair. She had to spend four hundred dollars on it the previous year to get the electrical system working again before the Indiana State Fair. And the job was too hard alone. Her father logged mile after profitable mile in the damn thing because she'd been his unpaid employee when she was growing up.

Tammy also knew if she ever pointed out these advantages, he would accuse her of being an ingrate. He'd remind her that he could have sold it to someone for a handsome fee and that the reason it didn't earn more was because she didn't hustle enough. She worked five days a week at a printing press that made church programs, then hauled the booth to various fairs and festivals on the weekends. There wasn't much hustle left when she got where she was going.

So she'd let her eleven-year-old go with him. Lester treated her like a queen, and Tammy worried Jo would grow irrecoverably distant. There was also the nagging fear about what would happen when the girl grew old enough to date. In three short years, Jo would be the same age she had been when she'd left with Barrett for Memphis. She wanted to make sure Jo knew the consequences of her father's anger before anything happened. She barely got to see Jo anyway, especially during the summer when the girl was off school. Tammy told herself that it was easier for her daughter to be away. She reasoned that it might make it easier for them to eventually be together, once Tammy could afford a house.

But the four years since the move had passed in what felt like a few months, and the booth wasn't earning as much as she'd hoped. She knew she couldn't afford to make the trip to Miami that upcoming winter. So she'd pleaded with her daddy to let her daughter come to Indiana. And it would have to be a working vacation.

When Tammy and Jo arrive in Tilson at one a.m., the other booths already crowd the streets of the puny downtown. A Chamber of Commerce volunteer passes a map with numbers through the window; Tammy is number 63. She backs the booth into the spot quickly—she's had lots of practice—and leaves Jo to watch it so she can park in a designated lot.

On her way back, she appropriates a city-provided hose to wash the booth. Cold water trickles down her arm as she sprays the sides. Exhaust stains start dissolving but don't disappear completely, and she scrubs. One of the cabinets has come open during the trip, and Jo gathers fry containers off the floor. They didn't wipe the counters before

leaving their last stop, so the whole place is coated with a dime-thin layer of goo. She hands the ammonia cleaner and a rag to Jo, who feigns delight at the assignment. Tammy arches her back, wondering how their episode at the tire place could have made her so damned exhausted.

Even though it's July, she sees Jo shiver in the late-night air drifting through the door. Tammy can tell the girl feels worn out and greasy. But they both work quickly, getting the freezer and refrigerator hooked up so the meat doesn't spoil. Tammy walks around the outside of the booth, checking for any chores that can't wait until the morning.

In a few minutes Jo's standing in the doorway, saying she's done. Doors locked, gear stowed, lights off, and they trudge back to where Tammy parked. It takes another half-hour to get the R.V. plugged into an authorized electricity source. Tammy turns on a fan, checks the water level, and lets Jo take a shower. She has a cigarette, blowing smoke through the screen so her daughter won't complain.

Jo finishes quickly and bumps around in the tiny bathroom, drying off. Lester had to foot the bill for the plane ride, and he complained. But it was part of their agreement, and he wouldn't ask for repayment. She can tell, though, the newness of the trip has worn off for Jo, and it's only been four days since she picked her up at the airport. She might get sick of all this work and not want to come up next time. If there even is a next time, she thinks. She will start high school this fall, in Miami, and she won't want to move once she starts.

She comes out in T-shirt and sweatpants, two dark half-moons under her eyes. "I hate cold showers."

"Do you want anything to eat, hon?" Tammy asks, stubbing out the cigarette and cranking the window closed.

Jo shakes her head. "Can we stay in a hotel tomorrow night?"

"Not this weekend," she says. Jo makes a disgusted face, and Tammy abruptly becomes aware of how old her daughter is. There's the flashy makeup and nail polish she had on when Tammy met her at the airport. There's the attitude that sometimes surfaces. "I don't have any extra money after the tire and cash-drawer fiasco today." Tammy desperately doesn't want to hold the missing drawer against the girl, but it was all the money they made that week, and Tammy can't afford to stay in a hotel *and* pay her Daddy back.

Jo slouches into the minuscule back bedroom of the R.V. Tammy calls down the length of the trailer: "You remember my friend Gina? She'll be here tomorrow with her two boys."

Jo doesn't answer.

"All right, I promise we'll go next week, once I get my check back from the fair board. Okay?"

"Okay," Jo says from the back. Tammy knows she shouldn't have promised this; she'll never save enough to get Jo back if she keeps spending it on her.

In the bathroom, she washes quickly, wiping her face and armpits with a soapy washcloth. Her daddy called it an Irish shower. Just hit the high points. His instructions sounded the same regardless if they were about personal hygene or running the booth. There was always a lot to remember: Go to the Randolph County Fair, but leave before the last night; come to the Jackson County Fair three days late; sleep in the R.V. to save

money, and don't ever run the air conditioner; keep trays filled with clean condiment packets; wipe up messes as soon as they happen because a clean booth beats a dirty one every time. Keep working harder than the other guy.

After cleaning up, Tammy feels better, but worn to a nub. It's 3:17 when she puts on her nightgown and collapses beside Jo. The scent of apples drifts from her daughter's damp hair; she snores quietly. Tammy grabs the battery-operated clock and sets it for 6:30.

Jo doesn't move when the alarm goes off. Tilson Oktoberfest, which is, strangely, in July, begins at noon today, and prep starts early. There's going to be something called a Seed Spitting Contest that promises to be "Expector-tastic" to kick off the whole thing. Friday crowds during the day are usually pretty small, but she needs the money. Plus, she wants to be ready to sell hot sausage and fries in case a lot of folks turn out for lunch.

Tammy, climbing in the booth, feels Lester ticking off the tasks right behind her: the shutter needs hammered back into shape so it'll open; two lightbulbs need replaced over the work area; the fryer needs to warm for at least sixty minutes before they drop any fries; ketchup, mustard, salt, and pepper packets have to be set out on the counter; the grill needs to be assembled and lit so the vegetables and sausage can thaw. It's all happening. Go, go, go.

Boy Scout Troop 529's booth stands next to hers. Two boys and their dads spread gingham-patterned vinyl over picnic tables and tape it down. She has a good spot, adjacent to an intersection, near the spitting contest. Maybe a lot of hungry people will be milling around the big Ford F-150 raffle prize. On the other hand, a spitting contest

could put them off food. At least they didn't put her at the end of the block with the Calvary Baptist Cake Walk—she knows from experience few will buy chow from her if they stand a decent chance of winning a pineapple upside-down cake for a dollar.

She notices flames licking the grill at the Scout booth; it's almost nine-thirty. She stops working on the shutter to assemble her own grill—a metal half-barrel with legs that screw on. While fire consumes the newspaper and charcoal heap, she sprays off the grate and drops it with clinking thud on the column of flame to get the metal rods nice and hot.

Ice! She should have done it first like always, just fill the big trays with water from one of the hoses. But she'd been grappling with the dented shutter, and now needs Jo to count out money, to finish prepping the cooking area while Tammy thaws the food. She is reluctant to leave after the theft yesterday, but she has to. She thinks of asking one of the Scout leaders to watch the booth. They would do it, Tammy imagines, out of a sense of service and obligation, with bright smiles on their faces. And she is right; the Scout leader tells her he doesn't mind a bit. She strides through the slowly thickening crowd, feeling the booth pull at her like a magnet; she's already been gone too long. She suspects the Friday crowd will be small, and she needs every dollar she can get.

When she gets to the R.V., parked behind a savings and loan lot, she finds it empty. She thanks God that the girl remembered to lock the door. She goes back to the booth—hoping she's passed her and not noticed. The Scout leader is there in his ridiculous knee socks. She thanks him profusely and turns to go inside. But someone is perched on the little wooden steps at the back.

"Hey, hey," Tammy cries. "Look who it is!"

"Hey, hon," Gina says, grinning and rising. She holds out her arms for an embrace.

Tammy almost collapses into her meaty chest, saying, "It's so good to see you." She wipes a tear away as Gina lets go, thinking how old Gina looks in the summer light. They were close growing up. Gina's parents ran an elephant ear and funnel cake booth, a staple of the festival circuit just like hot Italian sausage. Like Tammy, Gina was enlisted by her parents to help run their booth, and they'd been friends over the course of several teenage summers until Tammy left at seventeen.

Three years ago, at the Jackson County Fair, she ran into Gina, who'd inherited her business from her parents and ran it with her twin sons. They'd had a tearful reunion on the midway. Gina had been hitting the southern Indiana-northern Kentucky festival circuit pretty regularly, though not every single year. Since Tammy stuck to the circuit in northern Indiana and Gina the south, their paths hadn't crossed. For a while, this friendship sustained Tammy from week to week. She knew she'd see Gina and the boys at some of the events. Then at the end of last season Gina revealed that she was leaving the business, after getting engaged to a man she met at an AA meeting named Glen. A simple wedding invitation arrived in Tammy's mail in December, but the ceremony occurred while she was in Miami seeing Jo so she just sent a Wal-Mart gift card. They'd talked a few times on the phone, but the circuit was harder this year without Gina. Tammy said she wanted to have Gina's boys meet Jo, so they agreed to meet at Tilson.

Tammy holds the other woman's shoulders for a moment then releases them. "How was the move?" she asks, hopping into the booth so she can continue prepping.

Gina leans against the doorway and digs a cigarette out of the pack in her purse. "It was an ordeal. The boys are so disorganized."

"How's New Albany?"

Gina shrugs and wrinkles her nose. "I liked Jeffersonville better. It was bigger." She puffs on her cigarette. "How's business?"

"Not good," Tammy says. She thinks of how light she would feel if she didn't have to haul her booth around and didn't have to worry incessantly about the till. "Joanne is up from Daddy's in Florida. It's tough to keep an eye on her and get a lot done."

Gina nods and flicks ash out the back door. "You know Barrett called me a few days ago—God knows how he found me. He says he wants to see Jo."

"Did you tell him I'd be here?" she asks. She hopes Gina didn't, but her friend nods, and Tammy feels an unexpected calm. Let him come, she thinks. Gina must have noticed Tammy's shoulders fall.

"I'm really sorry," Gina says. "I didn't know you were trying to duck him."

"I'm not. He called us a few months back, wanting to see her in Florida. Daddy wouldn't let him. I'd just as soon they didn't have a lot of contact, too." She remembers her daughter is still M.I.A. "You seen her around here?"

"My God, I haven't seen that girl since she was little. I wouldn't know her if I saw her."

"She looks about the same. Taller." Tammy smiles. "Where's your boys?"

"Oh, hell," Gina says. "Summer school. They flunked every goddamn class their freshman year." Gina grins around the cigarette as she says this, amused and ashamed at

once. Dale and Dan are a year older than Jo. Tammy remembers she was Jo's age when she started "acting up," as her father put it. Her partner in crime stands in front of her now. She is here, and worn—like Tammy feels—but not dried up or burned out. She looks healthy and middle-aged, more than a little surprised that her life has brought her to a comfortable place. Tammy tries to ignore the thin spike of jealousy rising through her chest and surveys the street through the front window for any sign of Jo.

"Gina," she says. "I hate to ask, but she's out here wandering around. Could you go look for her?" It's almost lunchtime. Two men in suits slowly pass the booth, gazing in. Maybe looking for food.

"Why don't I man the stand here and you go find her?" Gina pats the siding like she would an old farm animal. "Like I said, I wouldn't know what she looks like now."

"I couldn't ask you to do that."

"Oh, hell. It's no trouble." Gina looks into the booth. "It couldn't be any harder than elephant ears and funnel cakes. What'cha need done?"

She explains to Gina: how to make more ice; how to pull out a coil of sausage like a pink rope and set it on the grill; how to slice onions, green peppers, and red peppers and pile them on the grill with ice to get the steam rising; how to drop fries; how to season the fries in a plastic container; and how to make a lemon shake-up with ice, water, lemons, and sugar. Gina says she'll manage; just go find Jo and hurry back.

Tammy walks out the back door and looks over her shoulder. An overweight woman standing in good clothes works in Tammy's place, filling ice tray after ice tray with city water. A nice woman who—without saying anything—makes Tammy feel ground down and sick of this business. She needs to get out, just like Gina. Her daddy

ran the booth successfully, but that was different. The more she pushes herself, the harder she works trying to get her father's booth to turn a decent profit, the more she needs help. And with help, even Gina's, comes the guilt—pulling her groundward like a suit of iron.

She trots between the booths. Clumps of people browse the arts and crafts: shellacked clocks, custom carved farm animals, and original barn paintings. She reaches the end of Walnut Street, where a sizable group crowds around the Cake Walk. She immediately notices Barrett among the young mothers surrounding the chalk circle, watching Jo as she tracks around it to the beat of the music. They play "Hang On Sloopy" through the tinny sound system. The music cuts out, and Jo pounces on lucky number seven. Her hair hangs lopsided in its ponytail. She laughs as little kids scramble around her to get to the other numbers; it's a high, silvery sound. This is the first time she hasn't looked tired since she got off the plane. A woman calls out fifteen through the P.A., and Jo runs over to Barrett for another dollar.

Barrett is tall and lean, as usual, and already deeply tanned from motorcycle riding. She watches him charm his daughter as he once charmed her. He offers Jo the dollar in exchange for a peck on the cheek, which she accepts and gets into starting position for the next song.

She'd met him sixteen years ago on the midway at Randolph County Civil War Days. He gave Gina and Tammy free rides on the glistening Lolly-Whirl he operated for Poor Jack Amusements. Young and clear-eyed in his blue bandana, with a complete set of teeth, he wasn't like any of the other carnies she had seen. His narrow waist fit in his

tight jeans, rather than spilling in a bulbous mass over the belt buckle. She thought he smoked his cigarette coolly, and was impressed he didn't seem to mind that his stepdad had thrown him out to make room for his half-siblings. He told her the carny thing was only temporary, and she told him about how she had begun to hate the smell of cooked sausage, how it seemed to seep all the way into her skin. She complained that her Daddy only wanted her around because he needed a worker for the booth. He nodded; she knew he understood.

She saw him at every festival, carnival, and county fair in the summer of 1990. Their late-night talks over the rumbling Lolly-Whirl motors continued for two months before her Daddy mentioned the skinny kid. Barrett had walked her back to the booth so she could work that afternoon. If Lester saw him, he didn't give any sign. After the rush of a two-for-one-ticket ride night, she and her wiped down the booth, he said, "You shouldn't be talking to him. Those carnies are pure trash."

The violence of Tammy's reaction surprised her. Her father had always exasperated her, and his sausage stand lately inspired a palpable dread. But until now he never moved her to serious anger. "He *ain't* trash," she shot back.

Lester seemed taken aback by the heat of her response, too. He regrouped quickly, though. "You think he's just like us, but he's not. He's trash," he said, gripping her arm so forcefully that she cried out. "All them carnies are trash."

Tammy felt hot and scared. She verged on tears. A feeble "Fuck you" dribbled out, and Tammy couldn't believe it.

Lester seemed to swell in size as he shook her, his grip tightening. "Your mother would be ashamed, hearing you talk like that." He released her and she half-collapsed

against the rear door of the booth. "You stay away from him, or I'll jerk a knot in your ass." He shoved past her out of the booth, and she watched him go, feeling a fluttery panic in her chest. He'd never spoken to her like that before. Gina stopped by to say goodnight, and Tammy cried bitterly to her. She *liked* Barrett and wanted to see him. But her daddy was so adamant. She didn't want Barrett to think she'd just deserted him, so she went down to the midway to tell Barrett that Lester forbade her to see him. It all seemed gigantically romantic to her.

"Don't take it so personally," he said when she told him. "Your dad's just looking out for you is all."

"I hate him so much," she said and felt feverish resentment for Daddy and his goddamned booth.

Barrett took her hand. "Hating your family is a shitty hobby. Lots of guys out here on the midway piss and moan about their parents until they get married. Then they piss and moan about their wife and kids." He smiled and tried to draw one from her by winking exaggeratedly.

When they parted, she kissed him hard. She returned to her father, and he grounded her for three weeks. Tammy wasn't allowed to leave the booth without him, but she didn't want to. She'd grown used to the idea that her daddy would never let her go, that he'd keep her working in the booth indefinitely. Nights in the beat-up Westline Seven they traveled around in, her Daddy snoring in the back, she fantasized that Barrett was pining for her. She went through the rest of the summer and the school year thinking about him.

Their first festival the next season, in May, was Randolph County. Her dad gave her an hour to walk around the midway with Gina. One of the few rides jammed into the Randolph Library's parking lot was the Lolly-Whirl. A middle-aged man with a horrendous goiter worked the controls, taking swigs from a 2-liter of Mountain Dew. They surveyed the little midway for Barrett, but he wasn't there.

"Maybe he quit," Gina said.

"Maybe." Tammy felt adrift in the fragrantly sweating crowd. Her insides felt squished down into the bottom of her belly. Every time she saw a blue bandana, she gasped and felt a ticklish excitement slither up her spine, but it was never him.

Going into the booth felt like going into prison for the rest of her life. She found, though, that her daddy had burned his hand horribly on the grill and needed go to the first-aid station. He told her and Gina he would go back to the trailer after the docs dressed his hand, and she needed to do cleanup for the night. Eventually, the crowd became sparse and the other joints shut off their outside lights and started packing. Tammy counted the money, and Gina kept her company.

Barrett came out of the shining street like a ghost. "Hey you," he said through the window.

She leaped out of the back of the booth and sped around to him. She couldn't think of the right thing to say. So she said, "It's been a year."

"I'm moving to Tennessee," he said. "Got a job waiting down there. I'm through with carnie life."

"You're not going around with Wagon Wheel anymore?" she asked, referring to the company that ran the rides. She didn't want to stop touching his shirt, a dusty black

T-shirt with frayed sleeves. She snaked her hand up over his shoulders and pulled him against her neck. She wanted to be with him, for five minutes, before he receded from her life forever.

She told Gina that she was going to the parking lot to say goodbye and asked her to watch the booth. She said she'd be back in five.

He took her to his station wagon, parked in the field where 150 Civil War buffs had waged simulated bloodshed earlier that day. His lean body felt exquisite under her hands. She dozed next to him in the deep humidity of the car. Her eyes flew open when the rear door groaned open. A hand clutched her ankle and dragged her roughly into the grass.

Her daddy said nothing during the beating. Barrett yelled for help while Lester smashed his fist against Tammy's head. He quaked with inarticulate fury, and the blows from his unburned left hand fell hard if unevenly. Barrett grabbed her dad's ruined left hand wrapped in gauze and squeezed. Her daddy screamed in pain and shoved the skinny kid to the ground.

Then Lester turned on her. "Let's go, Tammy," he whispered. "Get up."

She pressed herself against the bumper to keep away from him.

"Now." She shook her head. Lester's eyes narrowed. "I hope your cunt rots out, you little whore," he said and stalked away into the dark.

"Jo!" Tammy calls. Her daughter looks over from her spot on the Cake Walk. "Come on, now. We gotta get back to work."

"Dad's here," Jo says, and points at him. He waves good-naturedly across the space cleared for the game.

"I know it," Tammy says, forcing a smile and directing it at him. "I saw him. Now, come on." She wants to be gentle with Jo. She won't reprimand her for leaving the R.V. without asking, not in front of him.

"Hey, Tam," Barrett says as they leave the Cake Walk. He reaches for Tammy, and she returns his hug in a half-hearted way. She would have pulled away if Jo hadn't been there. "It's good to see you both."

She doesn't say anything.

"We're going to stay at a Holiday Inn tonight," Jo sings. "No R.V.!" She leads them down Walnut, bouncing on the balls of her feet, back to the sweltering food stand.

"Thank you, but we need to be here with the R.V. and booth and stuff," Tammy says.

"Come on, Mom," Jo whines. "It'll be fun."

"Yeah," Barrett says. "It's just the little one out by the interstate."

Tammy cuts her eyes over to Jo's father. His lean, muscular figure is giving way to paunch he probably never thought he'd have. If he resents that she was keeping Jo away from him, nothing in his demeanor betrays it. "No, no," Tammy insists. "We gotta stay down here."

The girl gazes down at her Keds. Before she can object, Barrett adds: "You're welcome, too."

"I don't think so."

Gina has the booth in order. A pile of onions, peppers, and ice crowd around the coil of sausage. It looks appetizing with steam rising off into the summer air; it has *flash*. Gina and Jo and Barrett commence hugging and talking. Tammy makes a lemon shake-up for a kid in an Incredible Hulk hat, but the lunch hour is mostly a bust. Only a few businesspeople stroll by. Most get grilled burgers from the Scout troop; some come over for hot fries instead of the Boy Scouts' potato chips.

The grill is positioned so the crowd can see it between the booths. They will want food if they can see it. Columns of steam rise over many of the booths; her phantom Daddy—right behind her—whispers that she needs to be in there competing. The voices of her daughter, Barrett, and Gina are so happy and light she wishes she could walk around in the voices, live in them.

She notices she used too much ice on the grill and sends Gina and Jo to get more. They walk off; Jo nods along politely as Gina rattles on about Dale and Dan. Barrett surveys the counter from the doorway and says, "I forgot how small it was in there."

"Look, Barrett," she begins. "I want to know . . . I just wondered why, all of a sudden, you wanted back into this family." Tammy congratulates herself on this. She always regretted it later when she wasn't stern enough with Barrett, and it now seems the right question to ask him.

"Me? What about you? I didn't hand Jo over to her granddad." He leans toward her. "I mean, are you sure she's safe with him?"

"Since when do you care about her safety? I don't remember you being too broken up about us leaving." Barrett had guilted her into a couple of awkward visits since she moved back to Indiana. A few years before, they took Jo to Holiday World

once, and Barrett rode the dinky roller coaster with the girl, scaring her so bad she refused to go near one again. He only seemed to want to see her when it was convenient for him. Though he fawned over Jo—and the girl loved the attention—Tammy knew to watch him closely.

"I didn't know where you went," he says.

"I notice you had no trouble finding us today."

"Your dad wouldn't tell me. I had to look up Gina."

"I know it," she says and perches on the little stool beside the steam table.

"You're the one who left." Barrett jams his hands into his pockets to keep from gesturing wildly. "Don't hang it on me."

"Well, I didn't want you around. I came home from working at the shitty-ass brewery to find you toking up and blowing it in her face. I couldn't keep her around that." Tammy feels like she's about to fall to the floor from exhaustion. "I'm clean now, and even if I wasn't, I wouldn't do it around Jo."

Barrett looks down at his boots just like Jo stares down at her Keds. "We both made mistakes," he says.

"Look, this is all I want to know: Are you dealing? If you are, then Jo isn't going anywhere with you." Barrett starts to say something. "I swear to God, Barrett, I'll call the police if you are dealing around my daughter."

"*Our* daughter," he corrects her. "And I'm not. I'm done with that." She faces him fully and surveys his form in the doorway. She hopes she looks skeptical and imposing. "*Really*, I'm done," he says.

After she'd come back from Memphis, she'd told Lester everything. How she'd found Barrett stoned with his friends in their apartment. How he'd been clamping his mouth over Jo's six-year-old mouth and breathing a cloud of smoke in, saying, "She needs to have some fun, too."

Her father would probably crap an eggroll if he knew she was thinking about letting Jo go to the hotel. She ought to go with them, she thinks, to make sure he isn't dealing. But she doesn't want to; she wants to sleep alone, all night in the R.V. Jo's been with her constantly for the last five days, and Tammy relishes a chance to be alone and away from the girl. Plus, she doesn't owe Barrett anything and letting Jo be with him feels like *she's* the one being charitable.

"Okay," Tammy says. "You come and get her around nine. She needs a night away from this fucking circus anyway." She pushes past him to get to the grill again. Clouds have rolled in, blotting out the sun. The street has almost emptied of customers. She piles the sausage and vegetables on the steam table inside. A lot of food will go uneaten if it rains, and she could take a sizable financial hit. Barrett scans the sky and hums to himself. "Make yourself useful and buy a sausage," she says, and he digs in his jeans for the money.

Gina and Jo return with two gigantic bags of ice that don't fit in the freezer, so they dump the excess in the gutter. Jo is elated when Barrett tells her that her mom has agreed. Gina says she'll be back on Sunday with Glen and her boys.

Tammy reaches into her purse to pay Gina for working but finds it empty. She then goes into the shoebox she's using as a cash drawer for some money.

"Don't give me that," she says, looking down at the wad. "I don't know what I'd do with that."

"No, really," Tammy says. "I need you to take it." And Gina seems to understand for a moment. She starts to reach for the crumpled bills—to give Tammy something she can only get by thanking with money.

But Gina's hand stops. "Why don't you just make us some good food on Sunday?" She grins. "I'll accept the family discount." Tammy feels helplessly pushed along. Gina kisses her and leaves. Cool air rushes in the booth window, and raindrops pepper the street with tiny dark specks.

Barrett, following Gina's lead, says: "I'm going to go out and get a room. I'll come back and pick you up tonight, Squirt." He tickles Jo's ribs, and she squeals like a four-year-old.

Tammy stops him. "Hey, Barrett." The rain starts coming down in sheets, and steady streams fall from the booth's metal awnings. He jumps back in the rear door, out of the burst. The few people left in the street run for cover with newspapers tented over their heads. "Now's as good a time as any. Why don't you take Jo with you?"

Jo looks up, surprised. Tammy's surprised she's saying it, too. "No, Mom," she says. "I'll stay here. You need help."

Tammy feels like she hits a wall in herself. This is the end of it and, regardless of what happens, she will not accept her daughter's help.

"No one will be out until this is over. I can stay here until it clears up." The dull cold smell of rain drifts in the back door. "I can handle it."

"This'll probably pass in a little bit," Barrett says.

"I don't think so," Tammy says. The street is empty now; all the booth owners peer out from under awnings. "Go on, hon. I'll be out to see you tonight."

"But, Mom," she says, still baffled. "Don't you need me?" She notices Jo's concern. But she also knows her daughter wants to stretch out in a bed, take a long shower and maybe a nap. Then go down to the pool. It would be fun, something a teenager should do. Tammy thinks that some part of her desperately wants to be rid of the girl for tonight. Maybe from now on.

"It's okay," Tammy tells her. "It's *okay*." Barrett waits beside Jo, his sunglasses still ridiculously on. "I'll be fine here."

She watches them run through the rain to parking lot behind the savings and loan to get Jo's change of clothes. The rain makes a watery racket on the metal awning and sluices down the empty street. Tammy makes a sausage for herself, loading it up with onions and peppers. When her daddy first bought the booth, she was eleven years old. All she was allowed to do was make change for customers while he cooked. The first sales pointer he ever taught her, as he prepared some sausages for their dinner one afternoon, was to limit herself to only two a day. "Otherwise," he said between bites. "You'll eat up all the profits." He'd grinned at her, sipped his lemonade. "Also don't forget that it's never crowded along the extra mile."

She watches the street. Jo had wolfed down three sausages at lunch yesterday. Tammy had told her not to eat so many, but it was cheaper than getting food from another booth. She'd never be able to deny the girl anything. Her father wouldn't let the girl return to Indiana if he found out that she'd been spending time with Barrett. There would be no guilt trips or finagling. If she wanted to see Jo, it would have to be in Miami.

And Tammy wants Barrett and her father fight it out. She cranks the shutter closed, and making sure she has her calling card, she steps into the stormy afternoon.

Cutting Season

Once I cut the ears off Willow Amanda Mosier's dogs, I knew I'd never make love to her. I've been a confessor once or twice in my time, and who among us doesn't get a perverse thrill out of hearing the admitted wrongdoing of others? Confess something horrible; admit unimaginable misdeeds, and the confessor will lap it up like hungry dog. So get ready for a feast.

Besides the absolution of the guilty, I've been thinking about another power of confession. Clearly, some people want to be absolved, but not me. I want the guilty parties (which include every person in the following) to know what was done, how, and especially why.

My sad realization about Willow came at the stroke of midnight in Windsor Hills, the snips of my old-fashioned metal clippers echoing off the backs of the dark houses. The Hills, as most townspeople call it, was the best appointed of our fair burg's neighborhoods, full of posh twelve-room McMansions with kidney-shaped swimming pools for the doctors (square-shaped for the lawyers and businessmen) lining streets with British names like Kensington, Suffolk, and Dover.

These dogs were, of course, topiary animals, sculpted from enormously tall laurel bushes that loomed over the miniature estate of Billy Brockton, Tilson's premier real estate magnate, but they belonged—woody heart and leafy soul—to his wife NatalieJane (that's right, all together, *NatalieJane*), who had a twerpy fondness for diminutive, yippy dogs like Pomeranians and Bichon Frises. Several live versions, resembling white and dun-colored pom-poms, ran in a twittering pack around the Brocktons' palatial house, which reeked of dog urine.

I dismounted the portable stepladder and squinted at the topiary dogs in the half-light that glowed softly from the security lamps. The topiary canines were bald, scalped, deformed. I felt only the faintest relief while kicking the twigs that once formed their quizzically raised ears.

The Brocktons were my fourth stop of the night. I'd vandalized (or ought I call it *improved*?) three other places where Willow had worked her topiary white magic. Maybe my carving can be construed as black magic, a manifestation of a rival force to her work. But I'm romanticizing the whole thing, I'm sure.

My first stop had been the Cleelands, who had solemn and majestic Easter Island-style totem faces cut from Common Box in a row across their backyard . . . until I'd visited with my flashlight and shears. Now some of these heads bore expressions of extreme mirth and others erotic longing, toothy grins spreading and tongues lolling. Then it was to the widow Shantz's, her little cottage behind her daughter-in-law's sprawling manse, with her myrtle Christ child nestled in swaddling clothes. I had worked at the fingers of Jesus' right hand for an hour, and the infant fingers, once curled delicately around His blanket, now contained a Colt revolver with a bullet exiting the barrel. Then I arrived at the Hodges' place, which is only one of their many homes. Their Tilson location has extensive acreage, and they wanted a topiary zoo for their drooling, towheaded grandchildren, complete with an elephant, a lion, and a camel.

The Hodges' animals, NatalieJane Brockton's dogs, and especially Phyllis Minton's grand piano were the jewels in Willow's sculpting crown. Each branch of these laurel, box, and yew bushes was trimmed exquisitely, precisely. I could not manipulate the animal-shaped bushes to obscene or humorous ends like the others because the

creatures had been so expertly, so correctly coiffed. So my only recourse was brutal defacement. At the Hodges' zoo I removed legs, exposing skeletons of branch, and sheared off the ends of tails. I plucked hundreds of leaves off the yew camel, leaving curled brown tendrils where there used to be dense animal muscle. The zoo creatures now looked as if they were rusting in spots or dissolving by little spherical sections into thin air.

By the time I'd made it to the Brocktons' I was exhausted because I'd worked the previous day. Maybe I could have done something clever with them, but as miraculous as the dogs were, I didn't have it in me to vandalize creatively, so I just scalped. I did try to make it seem as if the dogs been born earless rather than leaving ragged chunks hanging off their heads. But there was no satisfaction; I didn't feel the happiness I'd hoped for. So I packed my equipment and drove on.

I should say I didn't start out hating Willow or her sculpture. In the beginning, I didn't fathom she could even do topiary. She looked like just another hire for cutting season (the summer months when the landscaping company brings on college-aged help). How could I have known that she was a cruel taunt by fate?

I'd just begun my seventeenth year at Greenscapes when I met her in May. Each year, the beginning of cutting season coincided with the date of my hiring by Greenscapes' owner, José Reyes, back in the late 1980s after my failing freshman year at Purdue. The ad in the paper said Greenscapes wanted college-aged summer help, and I went in for an application one day and got interviewed by José himself, a lumbering Mexican with burly shoulders and a thick black beard. Back then, José was more hands-

on, working the yards with his subordinates. José had three lieutenants—titled "landscaping technicians"—who managed their own platoons of seasonal workers. Mr. Buck was a ganja-toking refugee from the Summer of Love who thought the road to salvation was caring for plant life full-time; Charles was an officious skinny prick who liked to run marathons and half-marathons on his days off, and flinty-eyed Rodrigo was José's cousin, recently emigrated from Guadalajara. Mercifully, I escaped wasting away on the lieutenants' crews, and ended up on José's.

I mowed, clipped, edged, drove the manure spreader, planted flowers, and cleaned up after the whirring blades of José. And I enjoyed the humid mornings, working in the dew-soaked yards and the warm tiredness at the end of each day. In college, I was an awful student, but I learned the physical skills of landscaping much faster than I did abstractions from a book. College had made me feel dumb and incapable, but Greenscapes made me feel creative and important. I blossomed under Reyes' tutelage, and he granted me more complicated jobs. We were busy; by midsummer '89, Greenscapes had more service requests than we could handle and had to start referring customers to the competition.

But fortunes did what they usually do: changed for my employer and for me. José and Rodrigo had an epic falling-out—involving an overcharge of hundreds of dollars on a service request that made its way into Rodrigo's pocket—and José canned his cousin. The company had to do a bunch of work gratis for this business park that Rodrigo had ripped off. Profits drifted lower, and José openly talked about layoffs.

I started putting in extra time off the clock when José's crew needed it. Since I had no aversion to working overtime free, I was promoted to landscape technician to

replace Rodrigo. José stressed to all the employees that mine was a battlefield promotion and a permanent position would be open at the end of the summer. I'm sure this was a ploy to get more work out of us, and it succeeded. Long-timers who'd been jostling for a step up to landscape tech (a year-round position) started gunning for me, trying to do more work. I think many of them hoped our leader would eventually realize my ineptitude and wind up firing me—spiking my ass like a football on the forest-green doormat at the Greenscapes office. I vowed I would not meet this fate, so I spent nights studying landscape books and mastering trimming techniques. My ability to comprehend had been enhanced by necessity; I'd struggled with book study at Purdue, but I could do it easily when I felt it wasn't pointless. I memorized whole sections of seed catalogs and developed a quid pro quo with the daffy counter woman at Wischmeiers' Nurseries, our main supplier.

There were even attempts by the disgruntled to undermine me, like service requests at nonexistent addresses that I'd spend an hour trying to find, leading my crew up and down the streets of Tilson. These sabotages were ridiculously transparent, and José—whimsical and prone to sudden shifts in policy as he was—saw through the others' jealousy and stuck up for me.

Then I took up topiary, which was the showstopper, as far as my relationship with José was concerned. Tilson's landscapers only trimmed bushes into bland shapes, consistent with the blandness of our little burg. I got plant-sculpting books from the library and acquired bushes to practice on from Wischmeiers' using my connection with the counter woman. I won't reveal what I did for her, but rest assured she kept me in box, laurel, and yew for almost two months without charging me a cent.

Most people can do a straight cut across the top of a bush, but fewer can do the protuberant roundness of a globe, the most elemental shape in plant sculpture. I started out clumsily hacking at the branches to make a sphere. I slowly graduated to more elaborate things like waves and figures. Fewer still can do what I taught myself in the dying evenings of late July 1989, the fusion of the two to make exquisite forms and recognizable shapes. After two weeks, I took two of my best efforts—a statuesque face and a jagged lightning bolt—over to José's house, and he was duly impressed.

"These look uptown, man," he said, puffing on his rectangular cigar. He smiled at me, passing a brown hand through the bushes I'd hauled to his front walk. "Absolutely uptown."

"They're yours, if you want them," I said.

His eyes widened. "I think we'll take 'em to the shop." He smiled. "Make a hell of an impression." I could see he was imagining how the money would pile up.

"I can make more for the shop," I said, sliding one towards him. "Put these in front of your house so your neighbors can get a look."

He surveyed them for a moment, smiling. "Take this one," he announced, shoving the face back to me, "and put it in the truck before Juanita sees." He peered in the windows to make sure his wife wasn't watching. "I want you to take it to my special lady." Then he nodded to the powerful green bolt, "This one I'll keep."

He directed me to take the face across town to his girlfriend, who lived in a rented house near the business park Rodrigo had tried to swindle. When I told the little red-haired woman—named Annie—that the sculpture was from José, she lit up like a

Christmas tree and assured me that José would get thanked until he was sore. I was going to make José money, *and* I knew about his girlfriend. Driving away, I knew I was in.

We ran ads touting our topiary expertise in the local rag, and in a few days orders began trickling in. I kept studying at night to expand my repertoire and produced numerous sculptures for our office. Juanita, who ran the office for her husband, had to determine prices for the bushes I brought in because customers would want to buy the floor samples. At the end of cutting season, José indeed asked me if I wanted to stay on, telling me I'd doubled his profits from the previous August, which I already knew. I accepted the job and, despite some minor complaints from my parents about dropping out of college, went to work at Greenscapes full time, year-round.

The years until I met Willow were rewarding as my topiary sculpture became even more popular. Everyone in town wanted one (or more), and José made a small fortune. I got used to the job, settled in; I took to reading in the evenings, an activity I'd been averse to in high school and my single year of college. When I was not plowing through landscaping books, I read biographies: Mozart, Charles Lindbergh, Bill Gates. I didn't fool myself into believing I was a great man like one of them, only a wildly popular small-town artisan. This was enough for me. And I don't understand why fate would send along someone like Willow to disrupt my life and my calling. I didn't need to be the greatest sculptor, just the best in my little corner of the world. Mediocrity, though, is a chronic illness; it catches up with you eventually.

Willow was, like I'd been, one of a crop of summer employees, unremarkable in many ways. I kept an eye out for comely college girls and encouraged José to hire them,

usually embellishing their attributes as he considered the applicant pool. I'm sure I wasn't fooling anyone about the reasons for my advocacy, but José just nodded whenever I suggested he hire some buxom Butler University sophomore. Most times he took my advice, too. But Willow wasn't one I made a case for. She was freckled, tall, and brown-eyed, with lank red hair, totally the opposite of an ample-breasted junior from the University of Evansville named Ashley I'd had my eyes on. I remember telling José Willow might be prone to sunburn and could crap out on us, but he hired her anyway.

A quick digression: I have to admit that bedding bored college girls during the summer was what I did—besides reading—for fun. The more bored they were, the more likely I'd get them—but there were never any messy entanglements. In fall they returned to IU, Purdue, Miami of Ohio, wherever, reuniting with their witless boyfriends, who'd themselves probably spent summer days counseling at a kid's camp and nights between the thighs of some other bored college co-ed. No one got hurt. There was never talk of love or remaining together, and that was fine with both parties. The only thing I didn't like was the other nine months of the year, which I now spent haunting the bleak barrooms and nightclubs of southern Indiana for available women who didn't want husbands. These women, I should say, grew harder to find as I got older.

We divided the seasonal help into teams, as we had every summer. Mr. Buck had retired a few years back, which left only Charles and me. Then we'd hired a moon-faced woman named Greta and a nearly mute guy named Roger to fill in for Mr. Buck and José, who now ran the business end with Juanita some days, but mostly liked playing golf and whooping it up with other members at Darting Egret Country Club on the west end of

town. Charles and I had informal oversight over Roger and Greta, but we rarely needed to exercise it.

I always got my pick of college girls because Charles complained they were bad workers, an assessment I didn't agree with, and I suspected he held this view because he preferred to watch college-age guys on his team peel off their shirts and sweat freely in the Midwestern humidity. But I'm not one to judge, and his prejudice and proclivities only made my pursuits easier.

The girls on my teams were always hardworking, honest, and rarely gave me difficulties. I did have to put some guys on my crew, to handle the heavier work. I always chose pimply geeks or fat boys who majored in information systems at Scipio River Community College, in order to keep competition to a minimum. Plus, I was doing them a favor; they always admitted at the end of the season that it was terrific to be around the delicious-looking co-eds.

All this is to explain how I ended up with Willow on my team. There were only three people left to place, and I still had a spot to fill. I had the big-titted Ashley, a blond twig named Stephanie, and another blonde with athletic legs named Leanne, as well as Curtis and Trevor, my geeks. I needed another person, probably a guy. But the remaining two, Jim and Les, were lean swim-team buddies from Indiana State—so I drafted Willow.

The first few weeks of the summer were boiling and unremarkable, and we worked hard. I never moved on any of the girls until the end of June, because they weren't bored enough. They were still calling their college boyfriends every couple of days, and I had to wait. Our team covered Windsor Hills (where José had sold most of

my topiary), a couple surrounding neighborhoods, three city parks, Darting Egret C.C., and—who knows why they hired us?—Jackson County Rifle Club. Mostly I supervised and did topiary, while the young grunts did the mowing, hedging, edging, planting, and so on, as I had my first year.

One day while the crews were scattered around The Hills, doing different kinds of upkeep, I took a break and drove to Neiman's Truck Stop on the highway for coffee. When I returned I found Willow Mosier passing her hands over the branches of a fifteen-foot English yew in the shape of a treble clef in the front yard of Matt Stuckwisch, the music director for the Trinity Lutheran School.

"Are you done working at the Weitoffs'?" I asked. Her assignment had been to edge a driveway a few doors down.

"How long have you been sculpting?" She circled the note, appraising it. Her demeanor reminded me of an unsure motorist checking her car for dents.

"A while," I said, sipping the bitter gas station brew, which tasted like that metal-flavored water from elementary-school fountains. "Weitoffs' done?"

"No, I was getting some water from the truck and noticed you'd been working on this." She gazed down at the tools gathered in a circle around the enormous musical note. "You do all the topiary, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Do you think you could show me how?" Her voice was softer than I had recalled, and sweetly girlish. "I'm a sculpting major up at Franklin." She touched the clef again. "I'd really like to try this out."

Once another college kid, Leon, had claimed he wanted to learn topiary and asked me to teach him. I was flattered and like feeling professorial, so I agreed to meet him at Wischmeiers'. The first time he didn't show up he said he forgot. Then the second time he didn't show was because of his plans with this girl on our team named Laura, who I had targeted for the summer. The whole thing was so disappointing I resolved I would never offer my expertise again. Only a couple of other guys had asked, and I turned them down. Willow was the first girl to ask. I told her I'd let her know.

A few days after her first request, we were back at The Hills, working in the sloping backyards of houses along Canterbury Road. Three of our customers' houses stood in a row, and our team did them all at once. The middle property, belonging to the Burbrinks, had a majestic set of columns made out of smooth box. During the lunch break, she sat down beside me on the tailgate of the Greenscapes' truck.

"Well, chief," she said gregariously. "You going to show me how to work those shears or not?" She sniffed and turned her head, and I sensed this was some kind of put on. No one got that excited about how I *did* topiary; they just liked the results.

"You mean topiary? I'm going to have to take a pass on that," I said, staring down at my roast beef sandwich. I hoped she'd just get up and leave.

She acted like I hadn't said anything. "I'm on the five-year plan up at Franklin. I need to do my final sculpture project this summer for my degree." I looked at her, and she smiled at me through her sunglasses. "So it doesn't turn into the five-and-a-half-year plan."

"So?" Now I stared over at her.

She watched her grubby knees bent over the gate as she kicked her legs. “I want to make my final project a topiary sculpture.”

I looked around for Ashley, who chugged water from a thermos a few yards away, spilling some on her formidable bust. “Look, I don’t really have time to do this summer,” I said. I put the sandwich in my mouth, stood, and left Willow sitting on the gate.

Over the next week-and-a-half, Willow kept on about the project. She said she needed a new medium to invigorate herself. Then she talked about how wonderful my topiary was, and I thought that she might be developing feelings for me. I hadn’t even baited the hook for the curvaceous Ashley yet. I was not thinking that I’d work my way into Willow’s pants. I had no designs on her at all; I just thought she was another impressed viewer of my work. I was reluctant to broach the subject, though. Usually, once I’d bagged one girl on my team, the others would steer clear, and I didn’t want to waste my summer tumble on Willow. In other words—not to be rude—but why would I gulp down a stringy piece of beef jerky when I could have a thick and juicy steak only a little later?

Finally, one afternoon, she came and offered to do some of the maintenance on my sculptures off-the-clock if I would teach her. This would give me more time to concentrate fully on a certain grunt who was even then sweating through her stretched Greenscapes T-shirt in the next block. So I told Willow to meet me at Wischmeiers’ after work.

She came to the nursery’s main showroom at seven sharp, and I took her back to where they kept the vertiginously tall box, yew, and laurel under an enormous weather

cover. It smelled like manure and summer out in the nursery and was especially peaceful at twilight when the insects whirred and buzzed, with the last heat of the day burning out in the sky. I felt a warmth in my hands as we surveyed some bay laurels as possible media; I noticed that I was trying to impress her, show her the breadth of my knowledge.

All these plants cost money, and I had told Judith at the counter to charge two Common Box bushes to Greenscapes' account. I brought my shears and hedger out of my bag. I showed Willow how I rounded the edges, moving my head to keep a clean eye line with the surface. The most important technique in topiary is maintaining a clean eye line, holding your head so you can clearly see the surface you are trying to make smooth. Spheres were the first step, which is difficult for most people because they have to constantly keep moving their eye lines. She learned with breathtaking quickness and started improvising right away. I commented that her art training made her a natural.

"You probably don't even need me," I joked, and she smiled over her shoulder and went back to her sphere, bending low to do the bottom.

Then she shrugged and straightened to gauge her progress. "We'll see."

I can safely identify this as the moment I became attracted. Willow's rear pleasantly filled out her khaki shorts, and I could see her muscled stomach beneath her untucked shirt. Her complexion was still creamy despite all the sun we'd been getting, but she'd gotten heavily freckled, like a bashful schoolgirl. I think the feature that most interested me were her eyebrows, a vixen's eyebrows to be sure. One always seemed to be arched in skepticism, skepticism of all she surveyed (including me), a skepticism that hinted at deeper mysteries.

I stayed at Wischmeiers' longer than I'd meant to, coaching and marveling at her. I hadn't learned the technique *that* fast. I also didn't have an expert coach and had to rely on instruction books. After we finished—she having carved a nearly perfect sphere and then an impressive bust of a girl with a 1960s flip hairstyle—I asked if she wanted to get coffee. She reacted like I was a little kid who'd spilled a bunch of milk in her lap, gently disapproving.

"I don't think so, chief," she said serenely and left me at Wischmeiers', where I stood aching in the parking lot as she zoomed away in her Nissan. After that, I was on fire for the girl. I assumed she'd declined because she had a boyfriend, but—after some stealthy questioning—I found out from Trevor and Curtis that Willow was single. Bedding Ashley had no appeal anymore; I thought the sculpting lessons would give me an excuse to see Willow. She had to come back and see me if she wanted to know more. And she wouldn't need as much coaxing, since she'd approached me in the first place. Or so I thought.

She never inquired about the learning topiary again. I even asked her a week later as she rode with me to Darting Egret to spruce up the course and driveway landscaping.

"Do you want to do more sculpting sometime?" I asked.

She shook her head, like she was sorry for both of us. Hot embarrassment flushed through my head and neck; I felt ridiculous. "I would like to know, though," she announced, "how to get the Greenscapes discount from the nursery." I didn't really want to help her, but I thought all hope of being with her would be lost. She gave the impression she didn't want any more to do with me than was necessary. College girls had rejected me before, and I'd never felt it like this. I told her I'd let the nursery staff

know that she could use our discount to get cut-rate practice bushes. This was where—I saw later—I made the key mistake.

"Do you mind if we practice together?" I grinned at her.

"If you want," she said breezily, "maybe I'll see you out there."

But I never saw her. After work, I showered and went out to Wischmeiers', hoping to meet up with her. Judith said Willow had come in, bought some Common Box, and left that day after I authorized the discount. She'd not been back since. At work, I asked why she hadn't been out to the nursery.

She looked at me carefully, but kept her tone light. "I found a place I like to work. I keep it private." Then she offered me a smile I'd come to know well. It was friendly, but cautious, like she was saying: *I don't want to hurt you, but please stay away.*

"I wasn't going to invade your privacy," I said. I tried to sound as noncommittal as possible: "I thought we might, you know, compare notes or something sometime."

She winced, and said, "I don't think so, Tony."

I resolved that I wouldn't continue to pursue her after that. I revoked her discount at Wischmeiers' and expected some kind of reaction. When she didn't say anything about it at work—*I* wasn't going to bring it up—I became remorseful and had Judith reinstate it. Then for a couple weeks I tried to shake this weird obsession with Willow. I kept begging myself to let it go and tried to figure out what I saw in this plain, red-haired girl. All the other girls I'd had or could have on my team seemed irrelevant. I only wanted Willow, who'd never acted interested in anything other than my topiary and had repeatedly refused my advances. Whenever I spoke to her during work, her eyebrows arched tiredly, in what looked like extreme exasperation. My heart broke every day we

were apart. I couldn't bear that Willow thought I was a bore and that she wanted to avoid me.

I worried about asking her out again, lest I incur a sexual harassment suit, though Willow had never seemed affronted by my asking. She took it all as if I were a child asking her to play a game she was too bored to play. I was to her only some postadolescent goofball who wanted in her pants. The sad fact is that I didn't even care about the sex anymore—I only wanted to be with her, in her presence, to hold her in my arms. I had visions of the long years ahead, working side by side with her on topiary, trading ideas and showing each other our work. My mania was such that I got to Greenscapes' early one morning and went through her personnel file to see where she lived. I'd have sought out her house and, I guess, mooned around outside, pining over her until she filed charges, if it hadn't been for Phyllis Minton.

Phyllis was a nightmare client, a widow with a small place in The Hills. I rather liked her smallish house and thought about potentially making an offer to buy (at eighty-one, she couldn't be long for this world). She wanted lots of work, and constantly asked for how much it would be, then complained bitterly when given the price. She also assumed that all contractors were shiftless and lazy.

"You won't be sittin' down on the job here, my boy," she'd informed me the first day I came by to get her specifications. We stood on her deck overlooking the hilly backyard, which already had a fountain, discussing what she wanted. She had gaped at me in exaggerated shock when I quoted a price on all the expensive work she wanted. I could tell, also, that she was the sort of client who would be constantly on our backs, inquiring about what we were doing, why, and how much each individual piece of labor

cost to see if any could be omitted to keep the price down. I told her that the best way to stay within her budget would be—instead of doing the outlandishly expensive stuff—making moderate improvements, like rounded European Yews with stone accents surrounding what she called the "servants' quarters," which was only an outbuilding at the edge of her property containing rusty gardening equipment and a family of raccoons.

"No doing," she said. "I want something that jumps off the ground." She took a mighty pull on her Bloody Mary and lit a Kent with an expensive gold lighter. "I want something that announces itself to the viewer, you know." I suggested towering Roman sculptures, lots of thoughtful-looking figures, perhaps a bashful Venus taking it all in near the gazebo.

But Phyllis Minton rejected all my suggestions as vulgar, adding, "We're not a goddamn amusement park." She hobbled through the French doors into her house, waving me along with her wrinkled right claw. In the living room she fetched a huge book of Art Deco designs and building façades from the mantel and handed it to me. "I want things like that," she said, pointing to photos of wall sconces and motifs on New York skyscrapers. She talked of fancy and delicate low bushes designed like a retaining wall. I tried to look skeptical.

"I think all this will probably run more than you want to spend," I said. "At least, that's what I'm guessing."

"I hired you people because I heard you could do the work I want at the price I want," she said. She sloshed some of her Bloody Mary on me, and tomato juice and paper ran down my arm. She then tapped on the pages of the book in my hands. "*This* is

what I want." Then she tapped the price I quoted her for the cheaper improvements, "For *this* price."

I wanted badly to be done from her, out of the fog of her vodka breath. I often deferred to José in these matters. He was always able to cajole customers into spending more. "I'll have to run it by the boss," I said.

"Do whatever," she croaked, moving towards the stairs. "I'll expect you here on Tuesday at nine sharp." She grunted and hobbled up the stairs.

I made some preliminary notes and called up after her, saying that I would see what we could do. She didn't answer. I drove the truck back out to the highway, dreading the job, when a solution rose up in my mind. I could put Willow in charge of the Mintons' project. This old crone would run the girl ragged with demands, and Willow would desperately need my help. Let Willow deal with Phyllis Minton and her swishy Art Deco curves for a day or two, then maybe the girl wouldn't treat me liked I'd been dipped in shit.

When I got to where the crew was working at Darting Egret, I gave Phyllis Minton to Willow, calling the work a special project and giving the girl dispensation to use any team members she needed. On hearing me out, she tucked scarlet wisps back under her hat and straightened. She thanked me courteously for the opportunity and said, "I'll make you proud, chief." I expected her to salute

"Good," I said, and clapped a hand on her shoulder. Though it was the first time I'd ever intentionally touched her, this action seemed naturally free of agenda. For the briefest of moments, Willow accepted my touch and a kind of joy emerged that I thought we both shared. "But if you need help you have to come to me. I want you to do well,

but if you can't handle it I want you to know that you can *always* come to me." Then I got carried away, I guess, and squeezed her. "Anytime."

Willow sort of slunk out of my grip and nodded, displaying her careful smile. "Okay."

"You have three days," I said and handed her my notes.

When she came back to Greenscapes the following afternoon, I asked Willow how it was going with the widow Minton. She said "Real good" and nodded in her girlish and deflective way, which was starting to peeve me because I couldn't read it. Another day passed, and she didn't ask for any help or more team members. I became afraid that she'd lost the account, and I went to Mrs. Minton's unannounced after the second day, and crept into the side yard. When I rounded the house and saw what she'd done, I felt unsteady and my genitals shrank.

Willow had cut a long row of thuja bushes into a gently sloped ribbon reminiscent of a fireplace mantel. It was done so smoothly they didn't even look like seven separate plants anymore, only one continuous surface. She'd taken the shapes from inside the house and brought them to stunning green life outside. Bushes and hedges were worked into lobed tops, a scrolled rococo chair rail, and splayed supports. Bushes and hedges were worked into curling patterns, beaming rays, and intricate furniture accents. Where my sculpture would have been bold and exclamatory, hers was tender, delicate, and ornate. The first stabs of panic pierced my gut as I saw that she'd bloomed into a much better topiary sculptor than I was in a tiny fraction of the time.

As I walked farther I was devastated to see that Willow had totally mastered my strengths as well. She'd taken advantage of a broad and tall laurel bush by carving it into

a beautiful grand piano (perched on its keyboard end), with a long row of terrifically detailed keys lining the bottom. The aristocratic swoop of the piano box, so like a reclining woman, stood glistening in the afternoon light as if newly born.

"Excuse me, sir," came Phyllis Minton's voice. "*Excuse* me." I whirled on her, probably looking like I'd been on a three-day drunk. She glared down on me from her deck. "Are you here to finish up after Willow?"

At first I couldn't speak and only shook my head hazily. Then I blabbered, "We've met, Mrs. Minton. *I'm* Willow's boss." I extended my hand up to her. "Tony Marcaselli?"

"Oh, that's *right*," she cooed, and clutched my hand in her withered fingers. "You came to scout it out for her, right?" The old bird must have been at the sauce for a while already that day; she was actually being friendly and pleasant.

"No, no, Mrs. Minton," I said, clearing my throat. "I'm Willow's *boss*."

"Her boss?" She gazed around at her backyard. "I want to tell you what a *wonderful* job she's done. I couldn't be more pleased." She burped so hard that she wobbled and I thought she'd go ass over teakettle into the begonias. "Pardon me, my boy. I don't know where my manners have gone."

"It's no problem," I assured her. She went on about how much she liked the curving and curling bushes, and how her son Harry had adored piano music as a child and thought the sculpture was divine. And how she'd called all her friends in her senior fitness club, *every last one of them*, and instructed them to get their yards done by Willow. "I told them to take it on good authority that that other guy who does topiary for Greenscapes only tries to rip you off."

I squinted at the old bitch was yanking my chain or really didn't know who I was; her eyes were bloodshot and ignorant. I sensed Willow had a hand in turning Phyllis Minton against me. I glanced around once more, and saw how she'd done it. Willow, that conniving little schemer, had furnished this doddering old drunk with way more service and plant life than she'd actually paid for, I bet. I abruptly thanked Phyllis and started down the patio steps to the east side of her house.

"Tell Willow she's invited to dinner on Saturday," she called after me and belched again.

I checked her work order and saw Willow had obtained all the materials with our discount and ended up making a tidy profit on the Minton job, so I was in no position to complain. From then on, there were two topiary experts at Greenscapes. I guess it makes sense that Willow's work caught on, since these Tilson clowns are so easily impressed. Show the least little flair for the dramatic and they will fall all over themselves to get a piece of it. I tried to emulate her style, but it was too delicate. José was snowed, too. One afternoon, I returned to Greenscapes to pick up another couple of service requests. In the outer office sat an elegant yew angel, perched on a rippling cloud. It was like nothing I'd seen before. Across the room, two foxes made out of holly bushes appeared to run through the air. José, wearing his golf gear, stopped on his way out to ask how my team was doing. He caught me picking at the angel's wings to see how she'd done it.

"Be careful with that, man," he cautioned. "The customers love that crap. Our little Willow is putting us on the map."

"We were already on the map."

"There's twice as many topiary orders as last season," he said, shrugging. "She must be doing something right. She asked, and I'm making her permanent."

"Really?" I gripped the work orders tightly in my fist. "I *thought* she would go back to school."

José didn't seem to notice my perturbation. He examined his golf glove, pulling it tight over his palm. "Oh, she completed her Fine Arts degree." His eyes met mine, and he shifted his feet uncertainly. I realized he was bursting with pride. "You know that piano bush? That was her final project." He giggled a little bit. "She got an A-plus."

"She told you all this?"

He nodded. "Didn't she tell you? I thought everyone knew."

I laughed it off. "I guess she did," I said. "But I forgot." I was about to say that I had enrolled in some art classes at the IU extension in Columbus, when he shrugged, told me to keep up the good work, and left to make his tee time. Over the next couple weeks, José started giving her all new topiary orders, since the customers were asking for her. I was relegated to maintaining the sculptures I'd already done. Busted back to trimming after all these years.

Sure, her work was different, but not *better* than mine, I thought. I frequently led with brooding Greek gods and towering angels. I liked thrones and jagged thunderbolts, lots of broadness and lines. And mazes—I was great at mazes. Primo D'Antangelo's house was famous in Tilson for the wicked maze I did for him, with its brawny Minotaur at the center. But not only did Willow possess the ability to do more delicate work, but her Greek gods were more bold, her lightning was more flamboyant, her mazes more mysterious.

So I confess. I confess I felt wronged. Here was this twenty-three-year-old girl with basically no experience in landscaping and she's suddenly the toast of our shit-eating little town. I'd have to see her work all the time and between the hating kind of love I felt and my envy, I thought I'd die. I confess I couldn't stand it. I couldn't take that she didn't like me, when so many others had. I couldn't stand that she thought—and I *know* she thought it—that I was ridiculous. I was almost thirty-five—I *was* ridiculous, chasing after this dopey college girl. But the main thing I confess to is how much it fucking hurt me to be mediocre again. Her fame spread. I'd be at the grocery store in my Greenscapes shirt and someone would ask me about some sculpture she'd done, usually it was about Phyllis Minton's goddamn piano. José split her off from my team and gave her one of her own, and she made him a small fortune in August. Yet no one resented her; none of the employees seemed jealous. I didn't see any of them trying to trip her up when she was promoted.

So I confess. I confess I followed her one night to her house, unsure what I planned to do. After I sat in my car a block up from her new apartment for about forty-five minutes (during which time I considered juvenile pranks like tire slashing and more advanced vengeance like arson), she emerged, attired elegantly in a black dress that flattered her long legs. I'd never seen her out of her work garb, and I was stunned. I considered prostrating myself on the sidewalk by her car, asking her if anything I could do would make her want to be with me. She was on her way to a date, though. My tender feelings of desire faded to rancid hardness and iron resignation. She would never have me.

Her car glided away, and I followed her through the whispering early fall dark. She headed to Tilson's swanky west side, the side our team covered, and turned left into Darting Egret C.C. I let her get up to the clubhouse and park before I pulled into a spot near the back of the lot. For a moment, I thought all was innocent. Maybe she was meeting her parents to celebrate her promotion or graduation.

I couldn't just stroll into Darting Egret since I didn't have a membership. I'd worked along their drive and done bush trimming along the fairways but never entered the clubhouse or dining room. I wanted to see whose company she preferred to mine. I watched her go inside and thought about going to the staff entrance at the back, but there were sure to be busboys and waitresses puffing into a cloud of smoke on their break. I slipped behind an SUV and turned my Greenscapes shirt inside out. I went up to the stone portico nonchalantly, hands in the pockets of my filthy jeans, trying to appear as if I was waiting for a late dinner companion. The valets eyed me, but none approached. After a few minutes, they started an uproarious game of Texas Hold'em at the valet stand. I crept into the bushes in front of the immense dining room windows and peered in. I surveyed the whole room, which was packed with Tilson's best, many of whom had once been my customers but were now clamoring for her. Her creamy shoulders caught my eye. She was chuckling into her wineglass and staring over a candle flame at a certain burly-shouldered Hispanic business owner. The old man, graying at the temples, looked as ridiculous as I felt.

So I confess. I confess I burst out of the bushes in a huff and squealed out of the lot. I confess I went to the office that September night and culled all the service requests that she'd been handling and took them. I drove out in one of the Greenscapes trucks to

The Hills, with my old-fashioned shears for stealthy clipping, and began my vandalism. Monstrous, yes. But I'd been wronged, and even though I'm not a violent man, someone had to pay. I was alone, and I was ordinary again, like before I came to Greenscapes. I couldn't just wish Willow ill and expect that to take care of this awful sadness. She'd broken my heart in the only two ways I knew it could be broken—and there was nothing left for me but vengeance.

I spent all night committing my crimes, only stopping once to pick up a jug of cheap wine from the all-night market along the highway. None of the vandalisms made me feel better for long. The clownish heads, the gun-toting Jesus, the scalped dogs, and dissolving zoo animals did nothing to assuage my anguish.

By the time I made it to Phyllis Minton's, dawn's rosy blush lay along the horizon. I grabbed the last of my wine, my shears, and a ladder and went behind her house, toward the tall piano sculpture, up on its keys. I remembered how topiary had begun, in Roman times. Then it was an expression of power, to show that nature could be conquered. At the height of topiary in the ancient world, some Roman sculptors could sign their names in leaf.

Then a divine light from the east fell over me, and I hatched a plan. This vandalism demanded special care and demanded an unsubtle statement. Something bold, like I was.

At the top of the monstrous green piano, I started trimming, with pretty substantial snips, down the sides. It had been weeks since I did serious cutting, and it was good, like surfacing from a deep lake and gulping oxygen. My arms and hands ached from all the work I'd been doing, but the pale dawn light invigorated me. I

chopped into the swooping edge of the piano, and I realized that I'd been relying on my trimmers too much in my work. I needed to get back to doing topiary with shears; they were much more exact. I thought of the Romans plucking the laurel leaves away with their hands, hundreds of times, until the shape emerged. I needed to be more exact. My trimming slowed as I worked the long piano frame into a single exclamatory column. Then I smoothed the edges down the whole column, and started putting in rounded bumps and creases. It was already magnificent, more exquisite than I'd ever been capable of before. I worked a broad half-moon into the top of column by carefully cutting away the excess, ecstatic that I could discern the emergent shape within the media like Michelangelo detected his David in marble. About halfway down the column, I sculpted a knuckle and smoothed the areas below and above it. I knew, without reservation, this would be my finest piece. The birds were calling, the sun glinting off the house's windows. Though I was full to bursting with joy and wanted to relish each individual second of my work, I had to hurry. Though she'd not emerged yet, I felt Phyllis Minton's bloodshot eyes on my back. I cut three more wrinkled knuckles across the base—one on the left and two on the right of my column. I threw the clippers down and plucked the laurel feverishly with my fingers; I wanted to holler in triumph. My work had taken a quantum leap; my talent now rivaled Willow's. I distinctly sensed Phyllis's fingers dialing the police and her mouth describing my appearance. I stopped and stood upright before my magnum opus. As the cool shadow cast by the giant green finger fell over my shoulders, I confess I finally felt genuine relief.

A Butterfly, a Cannonball, and a Sneeze: Notions of Chaos Theory in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses*

In his incisive reading of Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses*, "'The hands of yet other puppets,'" James D. Lilley states that the freedom John Grady Cole's character achieves at novel's end is a compromised sort, rife with complexity and ambiguity (272). It is a freedom that "seems, paradoxically, to operate within the confines of necessity" (272). Lilley says that the novel charts John Grady's acquisition of worldly knowledge, which includes an awareness of the inescapability of history, manifested most clearly in Dueña Alphonsa's discussion with John Grady after freeing him from jail. She views history as a series of repetitions that occur because the only freedom available to humans is the ability to repeat our actions within certain confines that are determined far in advance of our existence. Lilley says that John Grady, frustrated with trying to rationalize an irrational experience of reality, understands by novel's end that he can only continue "repeating, reordering, and reinterpreting the given" (284).

I agree that John Grady's consciousness is altered by his experiences in Mexico, but I argue that this change in awareness applies to more than his understanding of what sort of freedom is available to him. John Grady's freedom is limited and ambiguous in a particular way that demonstrates McCarthy's engagement (if not John Grady's) with the complex laws of dynamic systems, or chaos theory. McCarthy is not the first author to engage these issues. Thomas Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, exhibits similar concerns with the dynamic interaction of order and disorder. Though *Horses* is realistic and does not appear to engage chaos theory in an obvious way, as *The Crying of Lot 49* does,

McCarthy's novel can be profitably read through the lens of chaotics, a term I have borrowed from N. Katherine Hayles.

Chaos theory developed on the edges of more normative, institutional-based science, and literary critics like Hayles, Joseph Conte, and Gordon E. Selthaug, as well as *Chaos: The Making of a New Science* author James Gleick, attribute chaos theorists' affinity for the blurring of distinctions to this marginal heritage. Chaos theory holds that chaos and order do not exist in opposition, but that there is an orderly disorder inherent in dynamic and complex systems (Hayles 1). Frequently termed a "postmodern science," chaos theory is often associated with a shift from an old paradigm to a new one, and in this case it is a shift "in the conception of the relation between order and disorder" (Conte 7). This shift is a change from Newtonian physics, in which stable systems operate predictably according to laws: "[L]ike relativity and quantum mechanics before it, [chaos theory] undermines the tenets of Newtonian physics; it collapses the dream of a world forever governed by deterministic predictability" (Conte 18).

In *Design and Debris*, Conte describes how these notions associated with chaos theory developed across disciplines and how ideas about unstable systems and predictable unpredictability have come to permeate the cultural milieu. The beginning of the twentieth century brought Einsteinian relativity and quantum mechanics, radical departures from old scientific modes, and these shifts in thinking yielded more sophisticated understandings of the inner workings of elementary particles and processes; they also led to the construction of the atom bomb, and eventually to chaos theory. Like scientists, early-twentieth-century literary artists were influenced by an intellectual and cultural climate dominated by issues of fragmentation, disorder, and the influence of the

observer upon the observed, and in seeking to plausibly portray the world (or *a* world), produced and reproduced discourse that both derived from and contributed to this *Zeitgeist*.

Conte also proposes that there is "a correspondence between the methodology of postmodern fiction and the two directions of inquiry in chaos theory" (27). He terms one group of writers "proceduralists"—whose novels "express an immanent design that is revealed deep within the chaos of their materials" (27). These literary artists develop "arbitrary and exacting rules" for their fictions' composition that are enacted "in spite of—or in anticipation of—the narrative consequences," where "predetermined constraints . . . are relied upon to generate the content, trajectory, and orderliness of the work" (27). Some books that fit the proceduralist mode are John Barth's *LETTERS*, Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, and George Perec's *Life, A User's Manual*. Conte terms the other type "disruptors," who "fiercely avoid the imposition of a determining structure" (29). He claims that these writers "surrender themselves willingly to, and just as often exploit, the inevitable debris of culture and decay of systems in narratives capable of incorporating the wholly unpredictable," and out of the swirling mess in these fictions, "a capacity for self-organization may emerge" (29). Works such as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, William Gaddis's *A Frolic of His Own*, and Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance* fit Conte's definition of the work of disruptors.

Both *All The Pretty Horses* and *The Crying of Lot 49* have decidedly linear quest narratives that are easily recognizable as such to the reader, making them unable to be defined as works of disruption, but neither novel employs arbitrary formal constraints as other proceduralist novels do. Instead, McCarthy and Pynchon rely on the quest plot in

each novel to "to generate the content, trajectory, and orderliness" of their respective works (Conte 27). Conte describes constraints like the quest plot as "simple, deterministic rules [that] can produce complex results in a nonlinear system" (28). This facet qualifies each book as a type of proceduralist novel in which the plot is imposed on a chaotic reality the author wishes to portray. Despite this imposition, both novels express the complicated negotiation of order and disorder through the consciousness of their respective main characters as they undertake the quests. Oedipa's search for meaning in the holdings of the late Pierce Inverarity and John Grady's trek into Mexico to seek an unrecoverable past allow both protagonists to confront the implications of chaos theory: that there is a nonproportional relationship between cause and effect and that we are all subject to a largely unpredictable determinism beyond our control.

Of the two, *Horses* appears of course to depict a much more conventional quest narrative, one in which the reader finds many of the familiar themes of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American novel (the journey from innocence to experience, the morally inflected retreat into nature, and a confrontation with the harshness of the universe, for example). This looks, at first, like a pretty traditional *Bildungsroman*, but as many critics have noted, McCarthy stops short of the conventional denouement. John Grady's trip ends tragically, and though the ending does not feel withheld or truncated in quite the way that Pynchon's does nor is McCarthy's break as flamboyant as Pynchon's, I argue that the unconventionality functions in a similar way: in *All The Pretty Horses*, too, both protagonist and reader are denied not only ultimate answers but even the possibility of them. Furthermore, what Lilley calls the "paradoxical freedom" that "exists within the inescapable confines and patterns of history" is what John Barth calls, in his essays on

postmodernism, chaos theory, and arabesque design in *Further Fridays*, "coaxial esemplasy." Conte claims that for proceduralists, the text is not "an incidental repetition of some permanent or transcendent order in the universe" or an expression that reflects their own determination (28). Barth writes that coaxial esemplasy is the idea that not only is "the voyager . . . changed by the voyage" but also that "the voyage is also changed by the voyager: dynamic feedback loops." In interpreting *Horses* in this way, we can see in it an exchange that happens over the course of the novel between John Grady and the journey he takes, one that corresponds to one vein of inquiry in chaos theory.

I have claimed that *Lot 49* is more obviously engaged with chaos theory because the novel expressly deals with issues of order, disorder, and meaning. In her book *Ideas of Order in Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, Molly Hite asserts that the terse, economical plot of *Lot 49* is a "commentary on the conventions governing . . . [a] story that gets its main impetus from its sense of an ending" (68). The absence of a traditional ending and overdetermined symbolic order in the novel keep ultimate meaning deferred. Hite writes that Pynchon is mostly interested in a main "by-product" of the quest narrative: a world that "the novelist projects . . . by his refusal to articulate a single comprehensive Word" (92). By withholding an ending, Hite says Pynchon is suggesting there is an absence of "pulsing stelliferous Meaning" (Pynchon 86) and that without meaning, the book is simply debris or waste. Both the novel's own rhetoric and chaos theory insist that waste (W.A.S.T.E.) has significance, giving the disorderly debris an orderly meaning. In the novel, Oedipa discovers the secret mailboxes for the covert and renegade postal system appear to be trash cans with barely visible periods between the letters of the word *waste*.

In this instance, what appears to be waste does have meaning, and on another order of symbolic logic, the existence of the mailbox has meaning for Oedipa in her own search.

Another tenet of chaos theory is the notion of sensitive dependence upon initial conditions, the most famous incarnation of which is Edward Lorenz's example of "the Butterfly Effect," where a butterfly flapping its wings in China would create thunderstorms in New York City. In other words, though the initial situation begins remotely and at first "breaks predictable patterning only in minor ways, it leads to major catastrophe" (Slethaug xxiii). One of several moments in *Lot 49* that recalls this notion is when Mike Fallopian recounts the battle in San Francisco Bay between The "Disgruntled," commanded by the C.S.A.'s Peter Pinguid, and the Russian corvette. Though the two vessels trade cannonfire and escape unscathed, the Peter Pinguid Society claims that this is the initial spark that typifies America's relationship with Russia until the mid-'60s when the novel is set (50). Fallopian's choice of language in telling the tale to Metzger and Oedipa even suggests the idea of initial conditions: "Attack, retaliation, both projectiles deep-sixed forever and the Pacific rolls on. But the ripples from those two splashes spread, and grew, and today engulf us all" (50). Here, some remote exchange—shrouded in doubt and mystery—gives rise to effects greatly out of proportion, riding on ripples through time.

In chaotics, the point at which the characteristics of a system change, from an ordered arrangement to disorderly or vice-versa, is known as the bifurcation point (Slethaug xxii). A common example of a this instance is an obstacle that impedes a free-flowing river of water, where the resulting two streams have both stable and unstable characteristics. Sometimes a bifurcation point, as in the example of a laser used on a

cluster of atoms, sets organizing processes in motion. With this concept in mind, let me turn to the famous moment in *Lot 49* when Oedipa sees the California suburb of San Narciso from the freeway (24). Upon seeing the houses in orderly rows, she recalls "the astonishing clarity" of the circuit and detects in the arrangement of houses—called by the omniscient narrator "less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts"—"a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" (24). Here Oedipa is the bifurcation point in the novel. Before she has her moment of hierophany on the hill, the city is a jumble, a mere collection: "census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (24). But once ordered by her view, it is a powerful sight, ripe with intention and meaning. There is more than a little self-consciousness at work in Oedipa's relevatory moment. She resembles Conte's example of the modernist artist bringing order out of a chaotic world when she establishes this relationship to the landscape. Though Conte associates this action with the program of the modernist artist, the world that Oedipa creates out of the debris she encounters in her travels through California is incomplete, unsatisfying, and—mostly maddeningly for her—absent of ultimate meaning, which marks *Lot 49* as a postmodernist text.

It is this search for missing meaning that propels Oedipa through the novel. As the various theories, interpretations, and evidence accumulates, Oedipa is denied any satisfactory explanation. As I suggested above, the indeterminacy of the plot might suggest that the book is excess information, literally waste. Information theory, a science that developed alongside chaos theory, holds that when something is communicated there are always some byproducts, meaningless information or noise. This so-called

meaningless information can have patterns and design, which might be what Pynchon is suggesting with the arrangement of *Lot 49*. All the labyrinthine plot-twists, false leads, and dead ends in Oedipa's search might usefully be understood as recursions. The recursive nature of a system, for chaos theorists, allows predictable unpredictability (Conte 18). In repeating with a difference, the system incorporates randomness that can be shown to conform to a design that is similar (to earlier patterns) and contains self-similar features, order arising out of disordered waste. Order and disorder, in the repetition of these features, have a dynamic relationship.

Though the information presented to her appears random, Oedipa, as the bifurcation point between orderly and disorderly arrangements of information, serves as the conduit through which the world of the novel is understood. This is not such a provocative claim, since most novels use the consciousness of their characters to make sense of the world presented in the novel. Yet if we take into account the moment when Oedipa writes "*Shall I project a world?*" in her notebook, her function in the novel is more unconventional (87). She writes this note when taking down Stanley Koteks's information about the Nefastis Machine and Maxwell's Demon. From this point in the novel until the final scene at the auction house, alternate interpretations of reality continually surface. In contrast to Oedipa's lifeless repetitions as a California housewife, Pynchon imbues each clue to the mystery of the Tristero with a richness of information that at each turn gives rise to yet more questions. Each time Oedipa discovers an answer, more questions are spawned. This is how the novel plays with self-similar recursion to exhibit the interaction of chaos and order at every level of reality.

Though her quest is left unfinished as she awaits the "crying of lot 49" on the novel's final page, Oedipa has learned to interpret her world with more of an awareness of patterns. Her ability to recognize self-similarity across scale is how the novel plays on these ideas found in chaos theory. In these interpretations she can see the possibility of yet more worlds. The stamp collection, "lot 49" itself, "consists of thousands of little colored windows into deep vistas of space and time: savannas teeming with elands and gazelles, galleons sailing west into the void. Hitler heads, sunsets, cedars of Lebanon, allegorical faces that never were" (45). Some of these windows show an accessible reality, while others show darker worlds. All these recursions and repetitions, even if they are artificial, create instances of similarity and self-similarity across the novel, spawning yet more recursions and yet more similar and self-similar patterns. Oedipa and the world(s) created by the novel are both changed—as in Barth's formulation, the traveler and the journey are both affected.

Likewise, *All The Pretty Horses* does concern the issues of order, disorder, interpretation, and the dynamic relationship among all three, though they may not be as explicitly expressed as the same issues in Pynchon's novel. McCarthy's novel presents a turbulent journey from order to chaos and back to a highly compromised and qualified version of order that manifests an engagement with predictable unpredictability.

McCarthy shows John Grady to be a literal-minded boy, naïve in his romantic ideas about the possibilities open to him. Unlike Oedipa, who has trouble sorting out the difference between real and dreamed events (Pynchon 117), John Grady displays a serious investment in the tangible. Early in the novel, he encounters his ex-girlfriend Mary Catherine Barnett on the street, and when she tries to get John Grady to absolve her

for jilting him, he dismisses the forgiveness as "just talk" (McCarthy 28). Then, when Mary Catherine says, "What if it is just talk? Everything's talk isn't it?" John Grady rejoins with the suggestive line, "Not everything." John Grady's attitude exemplifies his frustration with the modern world he lives in. He's losing what he feels is his birthright because of legal documents that are full of abstract language, and now the girl who scorned him seems to think the world is made of nothing but "talk." It also seems significant that his mother turns to stage acting, a profession heavily invested both in artifice and in communication through language. Later in the novel, particularly in scenes along the journey into Mexico with Blevins and Rawlins, John Grady is shown to be taciturn, as if he distrusts his own mouth. It is language's capacity to have consequences remote from initial causes that he distrusts. While Oedipa wants desperately to discover the functions and import of the dynamic systems of information she discovers just below the surface, John Grady excludes himself by attempting to return in time to an idealized reality where his dreams cannot be undermined by tricky systems like language.

Bearing in mind his interaction with Mary Catherine, I will turn to a moment in *Horses* where John Grady and Rawlins's conversation directly engages an issue at the heart of chaos theory. When Rawlins asks if he thinks God watches over humanity, John Grady affirms that he "guess[es] He does" (McCarthy 92). Then John Grady puts the question back to Rawlins, who provides a context reminiscent of a key notion in chaotics: the sensitivity of initial conditions in dynamic systems. Rawlins says, "Way the world is. Somebody can wake up and sneeze somewhere in Arkansas or some damn place and before you're done there's wars and ruination and all hell. You don't know what's gonna

happen" (92). While Rawlins does agree that God "just about has to" look out for people, his affirmative is couched in terms that recall Edward Lorenz's formulation of the Butterfly Effect. It is also significant that the results of the sneeze Rawlins imagines are "wars and ruination and all hell," and I want to suggest that these three specific things illustrate both boys' worldview (92). The difference in scale between a sneeze and a war is obvious enough, but I think the addition of "ruination and all hell" implies their awareness of nuclear war. Both boys are old enough to remember the end of World War II and the United States' use of the atomic bomb on Japan, and their word choice here belies a fear of nuclear annihilation. The novel also portrays an uncertain time, at the onset of the Cold War, particularly perilous initial conditions that could lead to ruinous outcomes. It is worth noting that one of the early luminaries in chaos theory, Mitchell Feigenbaum, developed some of his ideas as a physicist under the tutelage of Robert Oppenheimer's apprentice at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in the mid-'70s. Perhaps, then, the boys' retreat into Mexico might be better understood as an attempt to escape the looming shadow of nuclear destruction cast over Cold War America, which was fought—significantly—with language: codes, speeches, and manifestos.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of an awareness of chaotics occurs in Dueña Alphonsa's exchange with John Grady after she liberates him from jail. She explains her reasons, notices John Grady's consuming guilt, and, though she accuses him of lying to Don Hector, she concludes that any ultimate responsibility for events cannot be assigned (230). She correctly recognizes that John Grady believes, as the dueña's father did, in "accessibility of the origins of things" (231). This scene represents the fulcrum point of the novel, where John Grady is confronted verbally with the limitations

of his worldview. Given his discussion with Mary Catherine earlier, the verbal exchange puts the young Texan at a disadvantage, since McCarthy has gone to great lengths to indicate that John Grady is a man of action rather than words.

Like Rawlins and John Grady, the dueña's father "claimed that the responsibility of a decision could never be abandoned to blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences" (231). Her illustration of her father's concept of a knowable determinism is, like John Grady's own notions, Newtonian and more consistent with the concepts of Naturalism in turn-of-the-century novels like Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Frank Norris's *McTeague*, and the works of Stephen Crane. This brand of American Naturalism assumes an identifiable origin that might determine the outcome of the coin flip. When discussing by the campfire the sensitivity of initial conditions, Rawlins had traced the source of "wars and ruination and all hell" to a sneeze (92), and though the relationship between the sneeze and the calamitous results is convoluted, both boys affirm that there is a clear reason and that a supernatural intelligence is watching out for them. Also, when confronted with what to do about Blevins and his stolen horse, Rawlins makes a statement that further illustrates his investment in a clear cause-and-effect relationship; he says, "Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I'd made before it" (79). Like the boys, Dueña Alphonsa's father (she says) offered the example "of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed" (231). The exertion of the minter has a clearly delineated affect on the outcome of the toss, whether the tosser is aware of it

or not. These views derive from a Newtonian worldview, where effects can be traced back to causes and physical laws have predictable consequences.

Now let us consider the dueña's view of the world, which, she says, "has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on" (231). It is significant that the dueña, who acts as the hidden hand by plucking John Grady from the Mexican jail, describes remote causes and effects and embraces a view of "the connectedness of things." She believes that reality is all show and even close examinations (looking behind the curtain) yield more frustration. Besides conveying the aunt's hard-earned wisdom, this passage also offers a vision of reality more congruent with systems and chaos theory instead of the Newtonian worldview of the coiner at his press. Perhaps Newton's most zealous apostle was Laplace, an eighteenth-century mathematician and philosopher, who believed that *everything* was subject to Newtonian laws, regardless of scale. He claimed that a supreme intelligence "would embrace the same formula [for] the movements of the greatest bodies in the universe and those of the lightest atom" (qtd. in Gleick 14). Just as the outcome of the toss could be traced to the decision of the coiner in the dueña's analogy, Laplace proclaims, "nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to the eyes" (14).

Unlike her father's, Dueña Alphonsa's view does make the origins inaccessible to a perceiver. But more important, she reveals that while she shares her father's sense of connectedness, she would extend this notion infinitely. The puppets and strings disappear into the hazy heights behind the curtain, without end or limit. The point here is

not that chaos is the "blind agency" her father denied in the first place, nor is it that she subscribes to random chance. The image of marionette strings attached to more marionette strings suggests series of unending connections, rather than a puppet-master above the stage, and illustrates how her view privileges connections over origins. It also diverges from the view Rawlins and John Grady articulated in the scene around the campfire when they affirmed that they both believed in a benevolent God, but the dueña is not saying the world is totally brutal and chaotic. Her view declares that chaos and order both play a role in the nature of reality, that they are connected, and this sense of connectedness aligns the novel with science of chaos and its focus on dynamic systems.

Lilley's interpretation of these scenes is that the dueña's view holds that "we are pawns played according to the ruthless rules of history" and that John Grady's embraces "tacit fatalism" (281-282). While his argument, grounded in Lacanian psychology, deals with fate and determinism, Lilley does not note how the novel engages chaos theory and how this engagement might affect a reading of the novel. By novel's end, John Grady comes to adopt a view more consistent with an awareness of chaotics, a view more like the dueña's. Lilley sees this transformation, too, citing the moment on his return to America when John Grady hears "a steady distant hammering of metal as of someone at a forge" (279). In addition to recalling his conversation with the dueña about the coiner, this moment is also reminiscent of the storm that begins their problems early in the novel. In that scene, they approach a rise in the road and cast glances behind them to see "[s]hrouded in the black thunderheads the distant lightning glowed mutely like welding seen through foundry smoke. As if repairs were under way at some flawed place in the

iron dark of the world" (67). At the conclusion of the novel, John Grady returns to the Texas he left, his paradise still lost.

John Grady's final awareness of the nature of chaotics is that his role is as but one player, limited in his effect, in the turbulent exchange between order and disorder. The novel clearly parallels chaotic Mexico with disorder and Texas with order, though the novel suggests that the places look quite similar. For John Grady, who feels responsible for Blevins's death and for the man he killed in the Saltillo jailhouse, the dueña's words don't seem enough. Though she admits that finding the source of responsibility is natural to humans, she likens humans to "that myopic coiner at his press, taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work, determined that not even chaos be outside our own making" (241). She is saying John Grady is not at liberty just to drift, as Oedipa does in *Lot 49*, but he is also not entirely responsible for the consequences of his actions. The coiner, who cannot see and cannot know the outcomes of some future coin-flip, is both responsible and not responsible for the outcome of that flip. The profound interaction between chaos and order, mirrored in the relation between chance outcomes and direct consequences, shapes his worldview.

But what is the significance of reading McCarthy's novel in this way? The quest plot that leads John Grady to and from Mexico is itself a deterministic structure, which bears comparison to the strange-attractor branch of chaotics, where the constraints of the text produce complex results. According to Conte, the "author may set the rules that generate the text, but he cannot fix the patterns that result" (29). This is true for *Horses*, as well, since the self-knowledge and experience John Grady returns with are not liberating or pacifying. Though naïve, he left Texas knowing about responsibility and

fairness; he was a thoroughly decent boy. The journey changes him and the world reflected in his eyes communicates the compromised and brutal truth of reality that leads him, on the final page of the novel, into "the world to come" (302). His activities in Mexico, too, have pulled strings of consequence that will have results in this new world, which we read about in *Cities of the Plain*.

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