

PACIFIC UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES



SILK ROAD

A LITERARY CROSSROADS

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to our 20th issue of Silk Road. When Kathlene founded the magazine in 2006, she did not imagine that by 2018 we would have published over 300 powerful pieces of writing by outstanding authors from around the world. We are largely student-and faculty-run. Hundreds of students have helped us read the rich array of incoming manuscripts (and debated the merits of each), edited the work we accepted, and spent late night binges laying out and designing our print magazine and website. The faculty and graduate students who have given their time, expertise, and heart include Kelly Chastain, Rusty Childers, Taylor Farris, Aaron Kier, Keya Mitra, Darlene Pagan, Elizabeth Tavares, and John Walker.

Because this is both a retrospective moment for us and a look to the future, you will find in these pages writers whose work we printed in earlier issues: Sarah Brownmiller, Emily Fritzler, Caitlin Hill, G. Elizabeth Kretchmer, Josie Sigler, Rosalia Scalia, Wen Peihong, and Xu Xi.

Since our first issue, we've pushed for a greater range of voices, given readers a wider and a more complicated sense of the world, and presented innovative work that pushes the boundaries of literary art. This year, more than ever, we feel the importance of the writing we publish. Chitra Divrakuni, who we are pleased to feature for our interview in this issue, talks about her evolution as a writer. From her work with women with domestic violence to her portrayals of immigrants, she responds to and informs the moments we're all living in. We can't think of a finer goal for a writer or a literary magazine.

Sincerely,

Kathlene Postma and Katie Fairchild

TO BODY TO CHICKEN

Xu Xi

for Maggie H.

To chicken, that should be a verb,” Teresa said. The teacher asked if she was thinking of chickening out, or even funkychickening, “the dance for losers,” was what he said, chuckling to himself. Teresa Teng Lai-sin shook her head, not comprehending either expression. What she was mulling over at English class that day was the Cantonese verb *jouh*, which the dictionary defined as “to do.” To do chicken, meaning, to be a prostitute, sounded clumsy. To chicken, she decided. That made more sense. She explained as best she could in her halting English.

It was already 2007 when our story began so this was not the famous Teresa Teng, romantic singer of yore, although our heroine’s mother had been an ardent fan and thus her daughter was named. *You’re joking, right?* The manager at Big Boy Massage in Tsimshatsui laughed, the first day she came to work there, not believing it was really her name. Now, everyone at work called her Teng Lai-gwan, the singer’s more familiar Chinese name.

But at English class that afternoon, in an airless office above a noodle shop near her job, Teresa didn’t care what her name was.

The teacher was a young Norwegian who spoke with a clipped, exact accent. “No,” he said. “To chicken is not a verb. What you mean is to be a chicken.” He paused, momentarily flummoxed, and added. “Although in English, that has a different meaning.”

Teresa groaned. "So difficult. Need so many words to say one thing."

At work that evening, things were quiet for the first hour or so and she took the opportunity to review her lesson. If what the teacher said was true, then perhaps "to body" wasn't a verb either. *I body you*, she had wanted to say earlier, when asked to construct a sentence with a newly learned verb, but chose chicken instead because it was provocative, something the teacher seemed to like. *She chicken because she want to make a lot money*. The rest of the class had laughed in apparent comprehension; the teacher frowned.

"Twenty-five," the manager called Teresa's number. "Half part feet and one part body," he instructed in Cantonese. The customer at the front counter was a thin blonde woman. Teresa brought her to the massage chair, where she prepared the water for a foot soak. "It's so peaceful in here," the woman said, as she leaned back into the undulating wooden rollers and dipped both feet into the basin below. "Such a nice way to end a long day of sightseeing." Teresa smiled. "I come back few minutes, okay?" "Okay," the customer said, closing her eyes.

Halfway through her full body massage, the customer raised her head. "Can I ask how you learned to do this? You're very good."

"Thank you very much," Teresa replied. Teresa knew Americans expected thanks for compliments, not that she minded since they tipped generously, but it was just odd. "I learn from Master Teacher."

"Here?"

"Yes. I am Hong Kong girl."

"You speak good English. Did you learn it at school?"

"I take English lessons now, because of job. Many foreign customers speak English."

"Mmmh," said the woman who put her head back down and was silent for the rest of her seventy-five minutes, this one and a half "part" as a session was called, fifty minutes being the unit which cost HK \$225, the equivalent of US \$29, a steal by many standards.

In fact, Teresa had studied English at school, the way everyone else had, something she never admitted to tourists who wouldn't know anyway. Her school had been Chinese-medium, where the English teachers were not native speakers and some might even have considered "to body" quite an acceptable verb.

At each class, since she'd started these English lessons two months ago, her weekly assignment was to use a new word in a sentence. The first two weeks had been devoted to concrete nouns, and Teresa wondered whether "oil" could be considered concrete, given its liquid state. To describe what she did at work she said *I help you push oil*, which was how the industry's language translated from Chinese, but the teacher suggested that "rub" might be a better verb to use for "oil." After four lessons, Teresa concluded that English was nothing like in the dictionary.

But as she signed out of work that night, *I body you* echoed in her head. She had wanted to ask the teacher earlier whether or not this was correct, but he was generally so morose and stern that she felt questions were not very welcome.

Her father was up, unfortunately, when she arrived home.

"Late enough for you, hah? Young lady, one night you're going to be raped wandering around in the city like that."

"Please A-Ba. I'm tired."

"Of course you're tired! This 'night-style' work is always tiring. Lucky your mother's 'passed over life' so she doesn't have to cry in this life for you."

"Shut your mouth, can you? Just for one night? Besides it's late. Come on, I'll take you to the bedroom."

She helped him out of his chair and led her half-blind father to his room. Her older brother was already asleep, but Teresa knew A-Ba sometimes suffered from insomnia and would stumble his way back into the living room just to annoy her. *I body you*—like the ohm of Zen—as she made sure her father was properly situated. *I body you*.

It was around five a.m. when a commotion woke her. Teresa peered out the window of their flat and saw the police leading away the woman who lived two doors down. Her brother joined her at the window. "So finally nabbed, huh? I figured they would."

"What're you on about?"

"Hey, don't you know anything? She's a chicken girl. Everybody knew. She as good as hung out a shingle."

Their father spoke from behind, making them both jump. "How dare she spoil our neighborhood!" He stumbled his way to the front door and opened it. "Chicken girl!" He yelled into the dark of the corridor. "Keep her away!" But the lift door had already closed on the arrested party.

Teresa followed her father out, and placed a hand on his shoulder to calm him. He shook it away. "Don't touch me! My own daughter is just as bad as a chicken girl!" He groped his way back into the flat, and shut the door in her face. Her brother opened it seconds later.

And what would she have done if her brother hadn't been home? On her way to work later that afternoon, Teresa pondered the question. There she had been, in just a thin nightgown out in public, and did her father even care? Her brother, her only sibling, was a security guard who worked varying shifts, often overnight. She dreaded being at home alone with A-Ba and sometimes stayed out after work at the open-all-nights until dawn, her excuse being that work ended late and she was too tired to travel the hour-long bus ride home. Her father believed she slept at quarters at work and she did not tell him otherwise. He wasn't all bad, really, but if only he weren't so unreasonably nasty when he got in his moods. He once told her that at *Dai Gor*, the Chinese name for Big Boy, literally, "older brother," the *dai gors* she'd meet would all be nogood losers who would only be after her body.

I body you. I body you. The bus sped along the highway towards the terminus by the harbor.

The manager buzzed her in the back room. “Twenty-five, will you do a *gwailo*?”

“Feet or body?”

“Both.”

“Do I have to? I really rather not.”

“All the guys have customers. Look, I’ll explain our rules and personally come by to check.”

“Do I get extra?”

“Twenty.”

One of the other girls said, “Go on, do it. If he likes you he’ll leave a bigger tip. The guys always do, just like the women give the guys more also.”

Teresa said okay, but when she saw the customer, she immediately regretted her decision. He was massive, like the Terminator or Hulk. Feet were fine and she had foot massaged many male customers of various nationalities, and even done a few full bodies for the Japanese and Korean men who found their way to Big Boy. This, however, was her first body for a white foreigner since she started here eight months ago.

On top of everything, he was the chatty type, and, she noticed, spoke English with a strange accent, stretching out sounds in a way she hadn’t heard before, not like the English, American or Australian customers she was now used to hearing. He didn’t look European either, she didn’t think.

The customer was saying. “I’m from Tennessee, do you know where that is?”

Teresa was leaning into his back, trying her best to manipulate his waist bone, which was difficult to locate. It wasn’t fat, just muscle, way too much muscle. He probably worked out in the gym all the time, or took steroids, or both.

“No, I don’t know where?”

“In the good ol’ U.S. of A. You been there?”

“Not yet. One day I go. Your home, how to spell?”

He told her, then added. “They’d love you back home.”

The manager called in English from outside the curtain. “No problem in there?”

“No problem,” she replied.

“Miss,” Tennessee asked. “Would you mind using a little oil?”

Dead, she thought, *I’m dead on fire*. And right after the manager had left as well, timing never being his strong suit. “Er, not allowed,” she said.

The man lifted the back of the cover-up shirt all customers were required to wear for cross-gender massages. “My skin’s awful dry, especially in the back.” He pointed at the flaking skin around his waist. “Just a little please.”

Teresa hesitated. Normally, it was no problem if she pushed oil on a man’s neck or shoulders when doing a head massage. For full body oil however, only male staff could do that for a man. He seemed decent enough, though, not a *haam saap lo*, “accidentally” trying to cop a feel. Saying “don’t tell manager,” she grabbed the bottle of oil and rubbed a little on his dry skin, and then quickly covered him up again. “Thank you, Miss,” he said. “I’ll take care of you later, promise.”

He was good to his word too, she decided, when she emptied her tip box later. A crisp green fifty was in there, and she was sure it was from him. Yet on her way home aboard the bus that night, she couldn’t help feeling bad. *I body*. Ohm. *I body*. Ohm. She did not chicken. No, she did not.

Teresa was off the next day and she took her father to *dimsum* brunch at their neighborhood tea house. An elderly couple and several women from their building were at the next table.

“Did you hear?” one of the women began. “Chicken girl made bail.”

The man of the couple snorted. “Police are no good. They make the chickens themselves and let them out! Half her customers are cops, everyone knows that. The arrest was just for show.”

His wife nudged his elbow. “*Wei*, shut up. No one wants to hear your dirty words.”

“It doesn’t matter,” one of the women said. “Speaking ‘white,’ we all know she deserves our scorn. If she didn’t own her place, a landlord would have thrown her out ages ago.” Seeing Teresa and her father, the woman acknowledged them. “Uncle, I hope you weren’t too disturbed the other night.”

He squinted at the next table. “Ah, Mrs. Woo, isn’t it? Kind of you to ask. No, my son and daughter closed the window and kept the noise out. They’re good children, not like that one.”

Teresa nodded and did not say anything.

The rest of the day, she took care of the laundry and grocery shopping for the week. Most days, she cooked dinner before heading out to work which her father and brother could heat up in the microwave, but on her day off she could eat with family. Lately, though, she found this a chore, wanting instead to study her English lessons, see friends, do anything rather than trap herself at home with him. She said so to her brother that night while the two of them cleaned up after dinner.

“I get tired, you know. Massage is hard work physically.”

“Change jobs then if it’s too much.”

“After all the time I spent learning the trade? No way. I like it most of the time, but I’d just like a little space for myself.”

Her brother glanced at their father who was in front of the television. “He’s nodded off already.”

“Typical,” she said.

“So go out. I’ll stay with him.” He handed her a bowl to dry.

“You shouldn’t let A-Ba get you, you know. He’s just lonely. And cranky because he’s arthritic,” he added, grinning.

She dried the bowl and set it back in place on the kitchen shelf.

“Where should I go at this hour?”

“That I can’t tell you.”

She took a walk in the park below of their public housing estate. The evening was cool and winter was definitely in the air. Teresa liked the cold. It was less exhausting at work than in summer. Less disgusting too, what with some of the sweaty customers who came in

when the weather was hot. Big Boy was a good place to work for now, better than the previous center which had been one step up from a chicken farm. Her brother had warned her—*it'll be rough*—when she first said she wanted to learn massage. Then, she had dreams of working at one of the fancy hotel spas or ladies salons, where the rich *tai tais* went, but she soon discovered that the ladder was a long, slow climb.

I body you. English lessons were a step up to a better position.

When Tennessee showed up the next day, asking for number twenty-five, Teresa blanched. The manager accommodated his request without asking her. When she objected he said, “It’s only foot today, and he behaved, didn’t he?” She acquiesced, because business was slow and turning away a customer, no matter how good her reasons, was frowned upon.

“I looked for you yesterday,” Tennessee said as he dipped his feet into the basin.

Teresa set the massage chair on high and pretended to busy herself. “Right temperature?” She asked, not looking up from the tap.

“Just perfect.” He leaned back.

While his feet were soaking, her colleague who had seen the customer follow her, said. “Got yourself a boyfriend?”

“Shut your mouth. You know me better than that.”

“To body is like that. Brings out the worst in you.”

“Get lost.”

But as she began on his left foot, after first wrapping the right in a warm towel, a deep unease cut through her. *I body you.* The words took on new meaning, and she didn’t at all like what they implied.

Tennessee asked to raise the massage couch up from its prone position. “So’s I can speak to you more easily,” he explained.

She knelt beside his head and adjusted the lever. He turned to watch.

“Miss, you have a name?”

“Twenty-five.”

“You’re not just some number.” Because she hesitated, he teased. “Come on, otherwise I’ll call you Fairy Girl, ’cos you’re as pretty as a fairy tale.”

Against her better judgment, but because he hadn’t tried to touch her, she told him. “Teresa.”

“Like my mother.”

She was back at the foot of the couch and had begun in on his left foot. “Really?”

“Yeah.” He laughed quietly. “My sisters and I, we used to call her Mother Teresa.”

That made her laugh too because she understood him. “Is your mother in,” she stopped, trying to remember how to say where he came from. “Ten-Nussy?”

He shook his head. “No, she died last year.”

The customer was quiet for several minutes after that and Teresa wished she knew what to say. She thought of appropriate Chinese expressions—*you have a hard time passing on*—but somehow, when she tried to frame the words in English they didn’t come out right. How did you express sympathy to a stranger in a foreign tongue? Teresa concentrated on her work and remained silent as well.

Finally, she said. “My mother die . . . had died last year too. Cancer.”

Tennessee stuck his head up and looked directly at her. “Oh honey, I’m sorry. You’re much too young for that. My mother, she was just old and it was time. I’m very, very sorry for your loss.”

She nodded, then looked up at him and smiled. “I sorry you too.”

“Thank you, Teresa.”

At the end of the session, Tennessee said he was leaving in the morning and discreetly handed her a folded hundred dollar bill. She hesitated, because it was against the rules. “Go on,” he said softly, flicking it towards her. “Take it. I won’t tell.” She did. Later, she saw that he’d also left her another fifty, one of the old violet banknotes that were gradually being phased out.

She was already on board the bus when her brother's text message bleeped. *Got to work tonight. Someone's out sick. Sorry I couldn't let you know earlier.* Teresa flipped her cell shut. *Dead.* Her father would be in a mean mood for sure.

A-Ba was dozing in front of the television when she returned, his dinner half eaten. Teresa wrapped up the remainder and put it into the fridge. She was about to wake him, but then decided to sit a moment first, before having to listen to him carp. She was thinking how wrong she'd been about Tennessee, who really was just a nice man making polite conversation, and a very generous customer. An extra hundred! And no cut to Big Boy. Nothing her father said tonight should matter.

She glanced at his sleeping form. He looked peaceful, the way he used to when Ma would massage his legs while he dozed. A-Ba's legs tended to cramp. The heavy work at construction sites didn't help although since the accident that nearly blinded him, he'd been on disability. And a royal pain.

A-Ba shifted. A faint smile lit his lips and it looked to Teresa as if he were holding a conversation, his lips moving, then stopped, and then moving again. She gazed at his legs, roughened skin, but muscular, lean, still strong. Then, she began to massage his knee joints, tentatively at first. When he didn't awaken, she pressed harder, working her fingers around the calf muscles, pulling at them, loosening the tightness, expertly feeling for the problem spots. *Lai-sin*, she thought she heard him murmur. Her mother's name, and hers. "Beautiful spirit" was how she explained her name to the teacher at the first English class, although later, when she looked up *sin* in the dictionary, she saw it also meant "fairy."

After about ten minutes, her father opened his eyes. "You?"

"If not me then who?" She pressed his knee joints with both hands and tapped his legs as she would a customer. "There, you're done."

He nodded, groggy, then looked around. Teresa said, "I've put away your dinner already."

“Oh.” He blinked. “I’ll go to bed then.”

“Okay.” She helped him out of his chair and led him to safety.

Before she went to her room for the night, she dusted the altar where the death photo hung. The frame was slightly askew, angling her mother’s face in such a way that made her look especially kind. For a moment, she wanted to play one of Ma’s old Teresa Teng tapes, just like old times, when Ma would sing along. She didn’t though since it was too late and would disturb the neighborhood. Tomorrow, perhaps.

Tennessee, flying home in the morning. Teresa brought her English workbook into the bedroom to study before sleeping. Next lesson was to use a new place name in a sentence. She thought for a bit and then wrote: *The man from Tennessee said his mother had died last year, so I say I sorry him too.*

WARM SAND, ENDLESS WHITE

Fernando R. Manibog

I did not want that elephant on my roof.

After the monstrous snowstorms of February 2010 in Washington DC, I read that three feet of snow was like having a five-ton elephant on a flat roof. That's why gyms and warehouses had been caving in.

I climbed out of my second-floor window to lessen that weight. As my shoveling built up to a rhythm, my toes started feeling wet and cold inside my shoes. I fought back by imagining that I was standing on fine sand, hued pink by the equatorial sun, and my feet were being caressed by warm, salty water.

How far my feet have gone—6,500 miles and nearly five decades away from the tropical Philippines of my birth to where I stand now, alone, digging snow. I thought of the card sitting on my desk before I got scared of the elephant. It was an invitation to come back:

OLMA 1964–1968 Elementary Class Reunion
Come and meet your former classmates!

That was almost fifty years ago. Do I remember any of them?
What have we all become?

O.L.M.A. Our Lady of Mercy Academy. It was my town's only private elementary school, governed with velvety iron fists by rabidly Catholic nuns. The students came from two kinds of broods: the

well-to-do by blood, which my family will never be, and the well-to-do by material acquisition, which we were trying frantically to become.

The Sisters were benign, as long as we followed all their rules. In addition to the Ten Commandments, there were many. Fall into a straight line. No talking in class. Memorize your English vocabulary. Capitalize the Great Truths when you write: Sin and Grace, Heaven and Hell, Mystery and Faith. Respect your elders. Worship the Lord. And if you stray—confess!

So many of the rules were about our bodies. Keep your fingernails clean. Mind your posture. No tight clothing. Don't show too much skin. And definitely—No Touching. I carefully stayed two feet away from Teresa, whom I had to walk to school every day, paired together by my mother, who fantasized about giving me an early start. Two little kids—No Touching. It was only in high school when I learned that the rule applied not only to others' bodies, but also to my own.

Ricardo became my first buddy. Class days ended at 3:00 p.m. with physical education. Ricky and I evaded PhysEd every Friday by climbing over the wall separating the school playground from the World of Sin. The playground was divided into all boys on one side, all girls on the other. No one—but no one—ever ventured across the red line protecting us from the carnal contact we were not yet capable of imagining, but that preoccupied the nuns. No one did, except when an errant rubber ball had been kicked too strongly in the wrong direction.

My day of damnation came. I kicked the ball into the girls' plot. I ran across the line to retrieve it and heard gasps of fear. The ball landed between Virgie's feet. When I knelt to pick it up, Virgie started squeaking. Sister! Sister! I needed to stop her mouth before Sister Aloysius Marie would hear. But how? It was pure instinct. I raised Virgie's skirt and pulled her panties down to her ankles. She froze, dead silent. "Sister's coming!" I heard from behind me. It was Ricky. He had also crossed the line just to be by my side, to protect me.

By the time Sister Aloysius Marie arrived, Virgie had already pulled her panties up and recovered her poise, the tears welling in her eyes held back by a will stronger than the Rock of Saint Peter.

“And what in the name of the Good Lord is the ruckus here?” Sister purred at Ricky and me with the unblinking glare of a panther bracing to pounce. No one dared tell the story, out of respect for Virgie. Ricky and I got two hours of detention. We were forced to spend the last five minutes kneeling with arms outstretched to our sides, precisely to remind us that we should have been crucified.

That last Friday before Christmas break, Ricky and I could not wait for PhysEd and escaped right after lunch. May we be eternally damned in Hell fire, but the circus had just opened in town, and we had to go. Just like in *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, which we read that morning, we were pulled in a trance to the circus gate by the wafting smells of steamed corn on the cob, cotton candy, roasted garlic peanuts, marinated grilled meats, and caramelized bananaques.

We did not have any entrance money, so we crawled under the wire fence. Our first stop was Adorlek, who ate live chickens on stage, first biting off the head and then spitting blood and feathers at the audience. Whenever a lady viewer fainted, he would sadistically shake the cage of cackling, condemned chickens above his head. Dabiana, the Whale Lady, pressed men's faces between her three breasts, two willing idiots at a time who lined up to pay for the privilege. Pakito the Prickster swallowed nails; Vulcan Lips breathed fire; Baby Diaper Man stuck safety pins into his flesh. And the magicians! Their tricks hypnotized us into a suspended state of open-mouthed wonder. For the ultimate thrill, we picked up live cigarette butts, wiped the tips dry, and tried a few puffs.

Ricky and I flew for hours on a carpet of luscious images stitched together by the revelry of our forbidden adventures. We had no money to buy food. Since sneaking in was only a minor Venial Sin, but stealing food would have been a serious Mortal Sin, I took Ricky home for a snack of crispy pork rinds washed down with ice-cold Coke. My mother scowled when we dumped our muddy sneakers,

collapsed on the sofa, and demanded instant food like two machos. She asked where we had been, barging in all sticky and smelling like goats. Ricky and I exchanged glances and chirped in unison—PhysEd! Mother was pleased.

Ricky came to my house often. Our favorite game was to kill each other. We sliced off the tops of avocados, carved out the seed, filled the cavity with fine dust, reattached the tip, etched grid lines on the green skin outside, and called them grenades. Ricky would throw a grenade at me, breaking open and searing my face with dirt. I would collapse and expire. Then I would rise again, in my own reenactment of Christ's Resurrection, and take my turn to kill Ricky.

Our friendship ended very suddenly. Ricky and I had just finished a juicy snack of crimson papayas. He wanted to return to his own house. My mother overheard me begging Ricky to play some more. Leaning unsteadily against a wall, she flew into a rage: "If he damn wants to go home, let him go home." The longer my father was away, the more she took strange pills that turned her into a different person. Ricky lost face and left in shame. As he passed our avocado tree, he pointed two forefingers upward, then made a throwing motion at me. I threw an invisible grenade back. We smiled and waved at each other. I lost my partner in mischief and snack buddy that Friday, our last together ever.

To straighten my ways and convert me into a true Child of God, Sister Aloysius Marie taught me how to be an altar boy in their convent's small chapel. After half an hour of lessons, she half-chanted ominously: "Now we enter the most solemn part of the Mass. This is when ordinary bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, and He comes down from Heaven to be right here with us, in our midst, with you, with me."

I trembled with mystical anticipation of meeting God face-to-face. "You! Pay attention! The priest will say, 'This is the Body of Christ.' When he raises the Host, take the bell with your right hand and ring it continuously. With your left hand, raise his

chasuble— that colorful outer garment covering his white inner garb. Do you understand?” Then in a shrill voice like she was gargling hot ginger water, she aspirated:

“EVERYthing! EVERYthing must go up. Up! Up! UP to the Lord!”

“Now let’s practice. Ready?” She slowly intoned: “This is the Body of Christ.” I got so scared of the blasts of wind, torrents of lightning, and God Himself appearing in front of me that I totally forgot the bell, took the hem of her silky habit with my two hands, and raised all the way up to her waist all the clothing that covered the lower part of her body.

Up to the Lord, I thought, all the way up to the Lord!

I was jolted by her screams. She ran after me around the chapel, almost tripping as her floor-length skirt worked its way back down her thighs and legs. I weaved around the pews and darted through a side door that led to the back of the convent, where my face hit wet fabrics hanging from long wires. It was the nuns’ laundry area. To escape, I had to flap through a forest of freshly hung holy panty hose.

I was in the principal’s office with my mother the next day to face the threat of suspension. My mother pleaded, citing my hardheaded stupidity. I remarked that it was hereditary and got pinched. To win sympathy, she confessed that she forged my birth certificate to add one year so that I could qualify as old enough for daily kindergarten because I was impossible to control at home.

This time, I was suspended.

After Ricky, Thomas became my new playmate. Tommie could sing, dance, and imitate foreign accents. He was more cultured and spoke better English than everyone else, maybe because he was half-American and white, not brown or yellow like us natives. He often talked about our classmate Rex, how handsome he was, and—ooh, Rex!—how he should just simply skip high school, build muscles, and become a movie star.

While obsessing about Rex, Tommie still had enough gluttony left to become jealous of me and my backup friend Lance, especially

after I told him that Lance would grasp my whole body from behind with his arms and legs, and with the combined weight of our enlaced torsos, we would pull sugarcane from the open backs of huge trucks as they idled at street intersections waiting for the green light. While Lance and I sucked juice from woody cane stalks that we steeped languorously inside our mouths, Tommie would hover, his neck arched like a swan, his eyes staring at Lance and me with one accusative eyebrow slightly raised, as if we were all bonded by a secret and would someday be accused of the same crime.

Handsome Rex was the school bully. Taller than me by six inches, he teased me during recess, calling me Shorty. He gesticulated that he wasn't referring to my height, but to the bird between my legs. I ignored him. This made him scrutinize Tommie and me malevolently, searching for some kind of connection that he could exploit. He edged near me, both fists deep inside his pockets, bulging under his zipper. Thrusting his hips forward, he cooed:

"Hello, pretty."

That enraged me. Especially when he added: "Woo-hoo. Look, buddies, he, I mean, she's blushing." Good and Evil divided quickly on the playground, my good apostles hugging around me, his evil dogs circling behind him.

"Didn't you hear me? I said hello, cutie pie," he persisted, feigning a kiss on my cheek.

"Repeater!" I answered, remembering that he had to repeat quizzes he couldn't pass. That lame retort was all I could think of.

"Woo-hoo-hoo! REE-peat-er, REE-peat-er," he taunted me in a high-pitched voice, hands high on his waist, grinding his hips one full hula round at the REE.

I felt fire in my earlobes. I needed to hit him back with something humiliating to show everybody who was in control.

"You have the flat nose and dark skin of a dumb peasant family!" Ethnic inferiority, flawed genetics, low social rank, wounded vanity. I hit the bull's-eye.

Rex scowled at me. His breaths were shallow, lips tight, fists clenched, legs apart. Tommie slinked over and leaned on my shoulder. I wished Tommie hadn't done that. I sensed from the glint in Rex's eyes that he would say The Word, and none of us would be healed. Rex regained his arrogant cool, sneered with reeking disdain, and hissed in his lowest register with a thread of saliva dripping from his lower lip:

“Faggot.”

I lunged my whole body toward his chest. His right palm gripped my forehead and pushed me back. Using his basketball player height, he held his right arm straight out, which kept me about three feet away, unable to reach him with my thrusting fists and kicking feet.

The tribes of Good and Evil were both cheering. Then suddenly, we heard a piercing sound. We all froze. It was Tommie. He planted himself outside the ring, knees pressed together, elbows stuck to his ribs, forearms whisked outward, fingers flailing. He was totally bent as he belted one shattering scream.

Everyone was watching. This scene was entirely new. What would happen next? Unexpectedly, Rex released me and ran away, followed by his rotten minions. But all my ardent followers ran away too. No doubt, only one Terror of Terrors could make everyone take cover—

Sister. Aloysius. Marie.

But she never came. With Tommie and I alone, I held both of his hands and told him, much to his obvious delight:

“Oh, Tommie. God has blessed you with His plans. Someday you'll be a diva.”

Graduation was about to come, and we wanted to give Sister Aloysius Marie a loving surprise. Six years of Catholic elementary school education taught us that the other face of intense fear could be submissive love. How else could we adore a God who so terrified us with His anger?

I hatched the idea and Tommie was the accomplice. We decided to do it during music class on the last school day. Sister Aloysius Marie used a pitch pipe before allowing us to sing. She would blow out a middle C, and we had to hum that one note, just to be sure we all sang on the same scale. Sure enough, she started class by piping out a middle C. But instead of just one note, we regaled her with a full C chord. I hummed the middle C, Ricky the E, Lance the G, and Tommie the dizzying high C. We recruited classmates to join in humming each of our assigned notes. Rex's satanic baritones participated, perfectly complementing my angelic tenors. Tommie was the soprano.

Sister Aloysius Marie was stunned. She kept her reserve by pretending that nothing foolish was happening. Fighting the smile escaping from her lips, she regained control by blowing an insistent middle C into the pitch pipe.

This time, Tommie's artistic direction took over magically. After Sister's middle C faded, the whole class belted out a full C chord, then an F chord, and finally another C chord capped with a high G, which Tommie screeched out with beaming ecstasy. We blended it with a wondrous legato, crescendo-ing as we scaled the heights, sounding almost like the first bars of Wagner's "Also Sprach Zarathustra." Only the timpani was missing. At last, after six years of rancor and mischief, here at the moment of graduation, we were all joined like a bouquet of cherubims clustered on just one cloud, intoning from on high a cathedral of harmonious sound.

Sister Aloysius Marie sprinted out of the room. Her shoulders were trembling from the fit of giggles that she could no longer hide. She was not able to say "thank you" for our many hours of secret practice during recess and PhysEd. But we could all swear we gave her a taste of Heaven that day.

Virgie visited me once in Washington DC. We were already in our early fifties and had not seen each other for almost forty years. She became a fulfilled rural doctor who found joy in her supportive

husband and a horde of children, many of them adopted. We had a heartwarming two hours together at lunch, but I made sure to avoid any playground reminiscences.

It was not as good for the rest.

Handsome Rex died of a heart attack while jogging on his treadmill at home. Bully-turned-Saint, he finished medicine, raised a big family, and had become a renowned pediatrician at the time of his death.

Sugarcane Lance died of a heroin overdose in college.

Comrade Ricky committed suicide. To mask the family's shame, his daughter says he was shot for owing lots of money he couldn't pay.

Shimmering Tommie died of liver failure in San Francisco, where he had lived since finishing high school. The righteous among our classmates speculated that he died of AIDS, and cheered at how blessed they were for conforming to God's design.

And the Crocodile Nun? Sister Aloysius Marie, who mastered the skill of surging stealthily from nowhere to catch anyone in the act, suffered through senility during much of her old age. She died in peace at the nuns' retirement home.

I had allowed my mind to wander too far back in time, slowing my shoveling. I looked at all the snow still left to remove from the roof. It felt like the five tons of elephant were now the nostalgia and loss of childhood friendships weighing upon my shoulders— those early moorings that taught me to believe without questioning, to dare without fear, to be willingly taken by powers greater than myself.

Where did the prankster in me go? As I molded myself into the strictures of adulthood, did I allow him to die?

The cold hounded me as I went back inside the house, leaving a trail of slush and muddy footprints on the hardwood floor. Its emptiness felt ruthless and unforgiving.

I read the elementary school reunion invitation one last time and crumpled it. Was anyone going to be there who made me feel like

I was wiggling my toes in warm, pink sand whenever I thought of them? No one.

As I looked out the window, cursing the cold, I rubbed the itch off my dry skin and heard the muted laughter of faraway children. I wished for them to come and lift me on a luscious carpet back to the carefree revelry of my distant home. Across the silent snow. Away from this endless sheet of blinding white.

SURPRISES

Jacqueline Guidry

Monica sat cross-legged on her bed, snipped the blue thread with her teeth, then extended her arms into a rectangle of sunlight to study the flower she'd embroidered on the edge of a pillowcase. Blue because that was Eddie's favorite color. A pillowcase because before he left, he'd mentioned his parents' sets of linen—hand-stitched by his mother before her wedding, which Monica took for a hint at sets of their own.

You could definitely tell it was a rose, she thought, pulling in for a closer view. Not bad for someone who'd never sewn anything more complicated than a button. She was surprised the online directions were so easy to follow. Then again, she was often surprised and Eddie liked teasing her about that. Once, he'd rounded the corner of her parents' house running just ahead of her, and still she'd let out a tiny scream when he called, "Hey," as she came around the same corner seconds later. "Hey, hey," he said again, a joke worth repeating. "It's me, Moni. Remember me?" He'd spun her around the backyard, strands of her hair escaping the pony-tie and cuffing her cheeks, getting into her mouth, her eyes, blinding her. She'd lost her breath laughing so hard, not caring that her older sister (already married and a mother) had worn that look-at-the-kids superior expression or that Todd (her younger brother) had called out an improvised chant, "Round and round and round she goes," joining in the laughing as if this was a public event instead of a private joke. Todd couldn't help

himself, she figured. Eddie was always good at getting everybody to laugh.

They'd been together as much as possible those last days before he left Louisiana for Georgia. Later, his company shipped out to... Monica never said the word, never allowed herself to think the word. She didn't watch TV news, skipped over Yahoo headlines, and avoided talk show radio, switching car channels whenever she heard anything but music. If someone in the workers' lounge mentioned the place in passing, Monica cut her break short. Better to bus another table or lug another pan of bacon (always popular at Ryan's breakfast bar) than to hear the name again.

She was slow at this sewing business but expected to get faster with practice. She pressed her left thumb against the single rose, sunbeams playing on her silver ring with its miniature bud of an emerald. Not a real engagement ring, not so anyone but Monica and Eddie could tell.

"In my day, we called them friendship rings," Eddie's mother had said when they'd shown off the ring, just before Georgia and the rest that followed. Mrs. Delchamps—"call me Sybil; everybody does, except my kids"—didn't comment on how easily the ring circled that finger, already looking as if Monica had worn it for years.

"My mama said the same," Monica said.

"This ain't no friendship ring." Eddie grinned.

Warmth crawled up her neck and face and Monica felt herself brightening to a blushing bride red. She was too old to fluster so easily, a high school graduate with a full-time job acting like a grade-schooler, awkward and too self-aware. She was a fiancée, she reminded herself, but her cheeks still burned.

"Monica can be friends with other guys." His grin widened as her flush deepened. "Hey, Moni, you want to be friends with somebody, you go right ahead." He pulled her into a bear hug from where she sat on the loveseat next to him.

"Eddie," she squealed, "cut it out." She snuck a peek at Sybil, not

looking any more interested than if they'd been a couple on one of her soaps. "Eddie, your mom." Monica liked pretending her future mother-in-law was offended by too much roughhousing between her son and his fiancée. Not that she seemed to have a clue about Monica's true status. Not that anyone did.

"Mama doesn't care." He went for the back of her knee, her most ticklish spot.

She was squirming now, trying to get away, giggling. "Stop it, I said."

"You said. You said."

Sybil chuckled. Anything her Eddie did was fine. He was her baby, her surprise package arriving after his sisters were already in high school with beaux of their own. Let him tease and tickle, carry on with every girl in the parish. Sybil would think it all to the good.

Monica gave a sudden jerk and was free, jumping to her feet in a quick move that caught Eddie off guard. She rolled on the balls of her feet, steadied herself.

He stretched his arms across the back of the loveseat. Chilling, just chilling. He puckered his lips, threw her a kiss. "Come here, Baby. Come here to Papa."

"You kids are too much for me." Sybil grabbed two empty pop cans from the coffee table, turned towards the kitchen. "Just don't break my furniture."

"Whoa, Mama, when's the last time I broke furniture? Don't be giving Moni the wrong impression."

She shook her head in mock chagrin as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Monica jumped on Eddie's lap, leaned forward to plant a kiss on his lips, backed away before he demanded more. "She doesn't like me," she mouthed.

He jiggled his legs to reposition her. Even through jeans, his thigh muscles felt thick and solid from workouts. He'd leave for boot camp in five weeks and was intent on being singled out as the recruit in the best shape. Eddie believed in being prepared. That's why he'd be such

a good soldier, he told her. If you're ready, he said, nothing surprises you. Monica could only guess at what his face might look like in complete surprise. As long as they'd been together, she'd never caught him like that. Eddie getting himself born was surprise enough to last his whole life.

"Mama likes you fine." He said what he always said.

"Not so loud. She'll hear."

"What's not to like?" He buried his head in the crook of her neck. "Hmmm. Smells good."

"I'm serious, Eddie."

"Me too. I'm serious too." His words were muffled, rising as they did from the side of her throat. He could've been a ventriloquist, she his puppet.

"We should tell your folks, tell mine before you leave."

He straightened, patted her hip. "We've decided this already. Right?"

He stared until she gave a tiny nod.

"Right," he said. "My mama isn't crazy about my signing up."

"We're on the same page there."

"She'll be a wreck the whole four years."

"And our being engaged would make her more of a wreck? Exactly how does that work? That's the part I keep forgetting."

"Who's my baby?" He spread his legs until she sank between his thighs, then pulled her closer. "Moni's my baby." Their breaths flowed into each other and when their lips met, it felt as if they'd been joined forever.

Monica didn't consider herself the kind of girl to eavesdrop, not intentionally, but a person's ears just naturally open wider when she catches her name in someone else's mouth. She was on the Delchamps' front porch swing surfing her iPod, ready for Eddie to take her to a movie and then to their best parking spot, overlooking the Vermilion. Maybe they'd skip the movie. He was leaving Louisiana in two days and entitled to every little thing his heart desired. Monica and Sybil rode the same horse when it came to that idea.

Maybe his mother didn't realize Eddie had left the front door ajar and maybe that explained her not lowering her voice. Later, Monica let herself believe that with only a few insistent prods from Eddie.

"This is supposed to be family time." Sybil had reserved the night before he left for boot camp for a family gathering—Eddie's parents, his two sisters and their husbands and children. She'd cut her hair into a bob that framed her face and frosted it for the occasion. Monica had forced herself to offer a compliment, though the white streaks made Sybil look much older. The woman was already old enough.

Now Monica waited for Eddie to announce their engagement, to say she was a soon-to-be member of the family.

"Come on, Mama." His tone was the half-teasing, half-serious one he relied on to get whatever he wanted—especially from his mother. "Come on, now."

"Come on yourself," Sybil said.

"Monica and I, we've been together over a year."

Here it came. The announcement. She slipped out of her sandals and hugged her knees to her chest.

"She's a sweet thing," Sybil said. "I'm not saying she isn't."

Monica wriggled her toes, pink polish glistening from a morning pedicure. Sweet thing? Was that as close as Sybil could get to saying she liked her, was glad Eddie loved her?

"Not as sweet as my mama," he said.

"Get away, you."

"Ah, look at my mama. Sweetest Mama in all the world. That's what I'll tell the boys in my platoon. Don't be bothering me with stories about your mama this, your mama that. There's only room for one Number One Mama and that's mine. You boys battle for number two."

She was laughing now but softly as if this was the part she didn't want anyone else to hear.

"Battle hard, boys, I'll say. Remember you're fighting for your own mamas."

“I thought you were going to a movie.”

“So, Monica can come?”

“I said what I think but do what you want.” She could never hold out when he wanted something. You’d have to be blind not to see that. “Just give me a little peace.”

“She’ll bring her red velvet cupcakes.”

This was the first Monica had heard of cake being the price of admission.

“Monica makes the best red velvet cupcakes. You’ll be glad you invited her.”

She didn’t think the conversation had risen to the level of an actual invitation, but sometimes a secret fiancée has to settle.

In his truck on the way to their movie, her head on his shoulder, Monica told herself not to bring it up. This was their last whole night together, just the two of them. Don’t start nagging, she told herself as Eddie recited a convoluted story about J.C., a high school classmate who’d also enlisted and was headed to Ft. Benning with him. J.C. had been class clown, was a top candidate for company buffoon, the one most likely to shoot himself, or worse, another soldier. The two of them worked out—if you could call what J.C. did working out—at the same gym. She’d heard so many J.C. stories by now, she didn’t have to pay particular attention. When Eddie stopped talking, all she had to do was laugh. Only this time, she didn’t.

“Hey, Babe, you listening?”

“You think something’s wrong with my ears all of a sudden? I’ve been listening good my whole life, this day included.”

“Yeah?” He was instantly alert.

“I heard you and your mama just now. Heard you loud and clear, thank you very much.”

“Yeah?” he repeated, cautious, knowing anything he said might start trouble.

“Why didn’t you tell Sybil about us?” She enjoyed using his mother’s first name just then with its hint of insult. “The timing was perfect. Family get-together. You and me together with the rest of the family.”

He pulled into the movie complex and parked in the middle of the lot, though there were plenty of spaces closer to the box office.

“It’s just that I want people to know what we mean to each other. That’s all, Eddie.”

“We know.” He wasn’t messing around now. “That’s enough.” Even when he was serious, there was usually a layer of laughter just under the serious. Anyone who knew him understood this. Only not this time.

“It’s not,” she said quietly. “You know it’s not good enough.”

He looked straight ahead but kept one arm draped around her shoulders.

She crossed her right ring finger over the pinky, middle finger over index finger as she had when they’d been in high school. Wanting him to notice her. Afraid he’d notice her. Eddie hung with the hot crowd, belonging even though he wasn’t the hottest guy around. The nicest—that was Eddie and that’s what made him stand out. He found a good word for the nerds and the jocks, the cheerleaders and the drama freaks and everybody in between. Something was wrong with you if you didn’t like Eddie.

He’d caught her eye freshman year. Junior year, she’d finally caught his. Why? She still didn’t know. By the next year, they were a couple like many couples. In the six weeks since graduation, they’d grown past that, weren’t just a high school item sticking together so they didn’t have to dig up a prom date. Weren’t their eyes fixed on a future, the two of them forever? Monica didn’t think her wanting the whole world to see that future was asking too much.

“Look, Eddie,” she tried again, “it makes me feel as if you’re embarrassed to say we’re serious, getting married as soon as you get back.”

“There’s the catch.”

“What’s that?”

“I have to get back, don’t I? Nothing complicated here.”

“You’re getting back fine.” She turned away from him, stared out the windshield too. Despite staying scrunched against him, goose bumps ran along her bare arms. She might’ve stepped out of this early

July evening and into a blizzard, the kind you saw on the news, never in Louisiana.

“When a soldier dies, somebody gets a flag,” he said. “You’ve seen those military funerals. Flag draping the casket, field of stars always on the left. Poor dude’s heart, don’t you know?”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“Ever notice how the soldiers straighten the flag at the gravesite? They’re making sure it’s level and centered. Can’t have a crooked line on that flag. No, sir.”

She should’ve turned back to him then, but she was a girl frozen, a stone, and stones can’t move.

“At the end of the service, the bugle. Everybody knows *Taps*.” He hummed, off-key. “Oftentimes a recording. Not as good as live, but what can you do? The volleys they shoot? Blanks. Did you know they were blanks?” A single finger ticked against her shoulder, counting off each step of the burial. “Soldiers fold the flag into a triangle—each corner diagonal to the center, back and forth, thirteen times. Thirteen, Moni. Bad luck number, don’t you think? Bad luck for that dude for sure. Sometimes a mike picks up the sound of the flag snapping after each fold.”

A hitch in his voice almost made her turn to him but no. She held rigid, as if avoiding his face might shut him down, keep him from saying more.

“One soldier pivots to face the family, steps forward, kneels, leans closer to hand the flag to a survivor. Most times that’s a girl but sometimes a guy. Ever notice, Moni? A final salute and everything’s done.”

Tears blurred her vision but didn’t spill. Eddie hated girls crying. What was ever bad enough to cry over? He’d broken up with a number of girls—okay, only two, but still—because they bawled at every little thing. That’s how he put it. If you flunked an exam, you studied for the next one. If a girlfriend started a nasty rumor, you called her bluff and demanded an apology. Tears? Eddie didn’t believe in tears.

“You learn a lot on YouTube,” he said.

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat. Couldn’t.

“I don’t think fiancées get the flags, but I’m not sure. Most times, reporters don’t say who’s getting it. What do they know?” He spoke so matter-of-factly, they might’ve been debating which movie to see.

“You don’t want me getting your flag? That’s what you’re telling me?” Her voice cracked. “I don’t want your flag. Let Sybil have the stupid flag. How’s that?” Her stomach churned with unaccustomed fury, pushing fear into a far corner where she didn’t have to look at it. She’d never been a girl with any sort of temper, but here she was, ready to pummel the dashboard. Only Eddie was so proud of his dumb truck. Crazy proud. That was the only thing holding her back.

For weeks, she’d pleaded with him to unenlist and he’d said it wasn’t that easy. He didn’t say impossible, so she kept after him. Let others with less to hold them at home take his place. Guys like J.C., thrilled to be getting a new start away from his goofy self. Eddie didn’t need a new start. She piled on reasons for his staying and sometimes he rolled his eyes at an excuse she offered, other times kept a serious expression. But no matter his reaction, he never hinted he might change his mind. She’d come to understand he wasn’t budging. Now this? Where was the fairness in this?

She clenched her jaw, teeth grinding against his daring to think he might die, against the idea of Sybil pressing a folded flag to her breast while Monica stood empty-handed. She threw herself against the passenger door, as far from him as possible. Yet the instant her cheek grazed the window, her anger evaporated as suddenly as it had appeared, replaced by a river of misery she couldn’t hold back despite what her fiancé thought about crying.

For a long while, Eddie didn’t say a word or make a move towards her. The sun sank behind the brick façade of the movie complex. She dug in a jeans pocket for a tissue, blew her nose and dabbed her cheeks before dropping the wad on the floor. He’d pushed up against her again and the two of them had sat in his truck, arm against arm, staring out the windshield until the starting time for their movie had long passed.

* * *

After finishing the first pair of pillowcases with randomly spaced blue roses all along the top band, she had to decide how many to embroider on the flat sheet. Plus, should they be all blue or mixed? She wasn't embroidering the whole sheet top to bottom, she decided; that would take forever. Instead, she'd stick to the broad band across the top, just as she had with the pillowcases. All blue at the corners, she decided, then a rainbow of flowers sprinkled across the middle. Once she chose a pattern, the project went faster. Even so, she'd been at the embroidering for three months before finally finishing two sets of sheets and three of pillowcases—lavender, yellow, and blue. Her fingers held the needle nimbly, the clumsiness from earlier gone and the in-and-out motion through fabric now a reassuring routine. The blue set would be his favorite, but he'd like them all.

Sometimes while giving her fingers a rest, she closed her eyes to see herself and Eddie on their marriage bed, the linen she'd sewn cool and inviting. When that happened, no one would remember much about their engagement—when it started, how long it lasted.

Nowadays, she and Sybil exchanged information regularly, though Monica kept some of what Eddie told her to herself and suspected Sybil of doing the same. At first, Monica had been the one initiating all the calls. "Watch out for my mama," he'd said before deploying. "She looks tough. She's not." Monica was surprised by how much she'd come to like the older woman, closer to her mee-maw's age than her mama's. It helped that for about six weeks now, Sybil was as likely to be the one calling. Had Eddie finally told his family the truth?

"Moni, Moni," he said when she asked. Some nights, like tonight, Skype projected his face and voice so clearly, he might've been in the next room fooling around instead of over there.

"Then why is she over-the-top friendly all of a sudden?" She yawned. It was late in Louisiana, early morning there. All the house lights were off, including her own room where she sat on the bed, three pillows cushioning her back and laptop propped across her thighs. The glow from the screen threw an eerie light on her face and sometimes Eddie made her turn on the overhead so he could see her better. Other

nights, like tonight, he preferred her in shadows, letting him pretend he was with her, about to reach out for her, pull her to him.

“How many times do I have to say this?” He turned from the camera, yelled at someone waiting a turn. “My mama likes you. She really, really, really . . .”

By the fifth “really,” she was giggling and by the fifteenth, was begging mercy. “I believe you. I do. You win. Your mama likes me.” The mike picked up echoes of guys killing time, some of them urging Eddie to finish. She hated these reminders that what they said to each other was rarely said in private.

“Got to go, Moni. Long line this morning. Love you, Babe, I do.”

“Love you, Babe, I do.” She threw back what had become their standard sign-off as if they were a news team. Reporting from Louisiana, land of Fat Tuesday, fat crawfish, slow bayous and slow talking. Reporting from there, land of hot, hot days and cold, cold nights.

Monica woke to her alarm. Never mind that it was Saturday and she was off work for a change. Januarys were slow at Ryan’s, same as almost everywhere else. Good because she was ready for a break after all the overtime she’d grabbed during the holidays. Between her First Federal savings and the money Eddie was socking away, they’d have enough for a set of rings— real rings—plus a down payment on a house before his discharge rolled around. Today, though, Sybil was picking her up for shopping and lunch. They’d meander through Walmart or Penney’s and argue over whether Eddie would prefer the parka or the hoodie, this t-shirt or that. Monica always gave in despite knowing her choice was the right one. Her giving in on every dispute pleased Sybil, and what did Monica care? What was the cost of pretending Sybil knew her boy best? Nothing but the price of gas when Monica made a solo run back to the store to pick up the item she knew he’d opt for if he was here. She figured Sybil’s good feelings were building an investment she might have to draw down one day, same as that account at First Federal.

Sybil had a stack of clothes, tags still attached, piled in one corner of Eddie’s room. Monica had a shorter stack in her own room. Her

fiancé had plenty of clothes and had never been interested in keeping up with the latest fashions, but that didn't matter. When he came home and put on those shirts and sweats and the rest of it, all with their new clothes smell, there'd be nothing to remind him where he'd been.

Despite their frequent purchases, Monica and Sybil rarely included clothes in their care packages. For the most part, civvies were useless over there. But once, they'd stopped at the post office right after a shopping trip and shipped packages of athletic socks, Sybil insisting he needed extras. When she was distracted with writing the ridiculously long address—as if the army couldn't find Eddie without a host of clues—Monica slipped one packet of socks out of the box and into her bag. Later, she embroidered a red rose at each ankle and mailed the pair to him, one of those secrets she kept from Sybil.

"Moni," he said when the socks arrived, "look at me." He held a socked foot, ankle turned, to the screen. "Looking fine, eh, Babe?"

One line of multi-ply thread had escaped the rose and waved at her. Eddie wouldn't notice such a tiny flaw, but she'd check the bedding anyhow, make sure nothing else had come undone.

"My baby's learned how to make herself some flowers." He shimmed his feet at the screen and she promised to send more.

He knew she was working on another pair but not about the sheets. Those were a surprise for the guy who was never surprised. When his head rested on those rose-covered pillows, he'd have nothing but lovely dreams. Sometimes she was tempted to try out a set, to float on a flowerbed all night, but these were for drawing Eddie safely back to her and couldn't be used before he was home. Monica had her rules same as the army, and hers made more sense.

She was watching out the living room window, ready when Sybil pulled up in Eddie's truck, which she'd appropriated as soon as he left. "I'm not vacuuming the inside until he's back," she'd told Monica the first time she drove up. "It smells like him and I'm not washing that away." Monica was surprised Sybil confided this and it made her think maybe Eddie's mama did like her, at least a little. Each time she

climbed into the passenger's seat, she checked for the wadded tissue on the floor and each time, there it was, a good luck charm.

"He didn't call this morning," she said as soon as Monica opened the door and before she had a chance to hoist herself into the truck.

"The line must've been extra long." She swallowed hard and in that way, kept herself from saying more. Not to worry. Not to worry. She silently repeated the mantra Eddie gave her before he left.

Sybil backed onto the street and gave a half stop at the intersection, enough to have something to argue if a cop lurked nearby.

"We talked a few nights ago," Monica offered, "and he was good." That was the set-up. When possible, he called Sybil just before bed, Monica soon after he got up in the morning. Monica heard what was probably going to happen, Sybil what actually happened on a given day. Monica had just about gotten over resenting Sybil getting the better deal.

"Anything special going on?"

"Same old, same old." She tried to call to mind whether he'd mentioned anything to suggest more worry than usual. Mantra or not, underneath all the joking and the complaining was the worrying. They never talked about that part, but it was there all the same, sharp pricks glinting between every word.

Sybil had sped through four yellows, two of them turning before she was halfway through the intersection, when a red light beat her. Eddie learned his driving from his mama and why he was operating a Humvee over there was beyond her.

Bags of Christmas candy were on sale, the store desperate to dump them on customers who didn't mind unwrapping marshmallow reindeer on Martin Luther King Day. Eddie had eaten his way through the peppermint canes and chocolates they'd sent in early December and now Monica thought they should stick with plain candies, gaudy red and green foils looking out of place in January. Depressing. Besides, while Eddie loved his cakes and cookies, he wasn't much on candy. Sybil disagreed and Sybil knew her boy. Yes, ma'am, and don't you forget it. In the checkout line, their cart

mounded like Santa's sleigh on a sugar high, they made their way to the cashier—probably a new girl, she was so slow.

After Walmart, they stopped for gas, then burgers at McDonald's where Sybil reminded that Eddie often missed calling. Patrols ran late. The Skype line was especially long. He couldn't help those snafus. Monica agreed but was happy to switch subjects to the strange snow Baton Rouge had gotten just days earlier.

When they were done eating, they hustled back to the truck, eager to escape a cold wind. Forecasters had predicted a high in the 60s and sun. Fat lot they knew.

Flags whipped around the McDonald's pole. Lots of places flew the stars and stripes, not just fast food joints. Banks. Malls. Discount stores. Office buildings. Schools. Flags everywhere. Once, Monica counted them on her way to work. Thirteen and she'd probably missed a few, what with having to pay attention to traffic.

At her house, Sybil brewed a fresh pot while Monica set out dessert plates for the brownies the grandkids had baked yesterday. By now, Monica knew where just about everything was stored. She liked this kitchen better than her own mama's. One wall was pale green and the other three wore patterned paper with bright fruit—regulars like apples and bananas, and exotics like kiwis and kumquats. Add those colors to the south-facing bank of windows above the sink and you got a room that said come in, come in. One day soon, she and Eddie would be choosing a pattern for their own kitchen walls.

"That Skype makes things easier most days." Sybil pushed the brownie platter towards Monica, who passed on seconds, reminding that she was losing ten pounds before Eddie got back. Four down, six to go. She did take a refill on the coffee. Sybil made a great pot of coffee. "But you get spoiled and any time he doesn't get through when you're expecting a call, it makes things worse." She passed a hand through her frosted hair, set an elbow on the table and let a cheek drop to her palm. She looked every bit her age and then some.

"He'll be home soon." Monica forced her voice into a reassuring register, mimicking those cheerful walls. "Home before we know it."

The shake of Sybil's head looked involuntary, more twitch than suggestion of disagreement.

When the doorbell rang, they both jumped. Another ring and two more starts, though they should've anticipated that second one. Sybil should get up, answer the door. It was her house. Monica should get up, answer the door. She was much the younger and soon Sybil would be her mother-in-law. But when Monica half rose, Sybil grabbed her wrists, pulled her back down. "Dear God, just let him go away," she whispered, chin quivering.

Monica swiveled in her seat, arms still trapped in Sybil's hands, until she faced the open archway between kitchen and parlor. The glass pane of the front door framed the face of a single soldier.

Her heart pounded, as if to break out of its confines, yet when she looked down, her chest was holding steady, not heaving as she'd expected. Just the opposite—very, very still. She yanked free and as she did, Sybil's thumbnail scratched the tender part of her wrist and a drop of blood bloomed.

"No, no," Sybil pleaded.

Monica nodded but stood anyway, the whole time staring at the soldier staring back. She inhaled slowly, exhaled slowly. She was breathing, still breathing, taking one step after another on legs that stiffened in resistance yet brought her nearer and nearer to that front door. As she drew closer, she held on to the soldier's eyes because at that moment, it was all she could manage. Don't think about anything else, she told herself. Look at the eyes. Nothing else. Hold on to those eyes, the color of honey flecked with brown, a shade she'd never seen. Strange, strange eyes and now the center of all she knew.

She turned the knob, pulled the door open. No tears. Eddie didn't like his women crying. Two soldiers, not just the one.

From the kitchen came a loud crash and a groan. The soldier blinked, but Monica held as still as if nothing had sounded behind her.

"It's bad, ma'am, but he's not dead. Eddie's not dead," the honey-eyed soldier promised. No one was getting Eddie's flag.

CROSSING GLACIERS

G. Elizabeth Kretchmer

We were in Paradise, that place on Mount Rainier aptly named for its famous panoramic vistas and wildflower meadows. The sky was clear, the air was warm, and our new relationship was budding like a springtime forest. John and I set out for an easy day hike, dressed in lightweight clothes and carrying a skimpy supply of water, snacks, and a trail map. Neither of us realized that there was more to Paradise beneath the surface. It was, after all, situated on an active volcano covered by a network of deadly glaciers.

I started out in the lead. Like an anxious mare not fully broken, I always had to get there first, no matter where *there* was and no matter who I had to brush aside. I was twenty-eight—that age when you’re still young enough to think you’re hot shit. The problem was this: John had the same notion about himself. So unlike other hikers we encountered, enjoying the landscape at a leisurely pace, John and I practically raced each other up the mountain.

After a while, I stopped beneath a towering hemlock for a handful of what we called GORP--trail mix made of granola, oats, raisins, and peanuts.

“Go on,” John said, trail map in hand. “We don’t have time to stop. Long trail ahead.”

A while later, I paused to inspect some early summer wildflowers brave enough to poke through the hard soil. “Look,” I said.

John checked his sports watch, then placed his hand on the small of my back and gave me a gentle nudge. “Mm-hmm. Nice. Let’s move on. We’ve got several miles to go.”

Although I resented that nudge, I moved on, determined to keep my pace quick so John couldn’t complain, or more importantly, tell me what to do.

Then we came around a bend, saw the snowfield and stopped.

It was a thick, crusty behemoth lazily sprawling across our path. To my right, at a roughly 45 degree slope, it extended up and over a ridge. To my left, it sloped at an equally steep grade down the mountainside. The snowfield was smooth, except for occasional undulations that reminded me of waves frozen mid-crest. While I had seen a sign back at the ranger station about snow covered trails, this was not just snow on the trail. This was major.

“Go on,” John said, as he once again placed his hand on my back and, almost imperceptibly, pushed me.

“Wait a minute,” I said, shifting so his hand would fall. “Just wait.” I studied the infinitely slick surface and knew at once it couldn’t be crossed. Wearing simple gym shoes, we were barely prepared for a hike on solid ground—certainly not for a glacial traverse. “I don’t think so.”

“You’ll be fine.”

I couldn’t imagine how two people looking at the same thing could reach such opposite conclusions. I was certain that I’d slip and slide to my death. John was confident it could be done, quite easily as a matter of fact. As I prepared to launch an argument to turn back, a foreign desire bubbled inside me, like magma building up in Rainier’s volcanic bowels. There was a slim chance John was right, and I needed to try to cross the snowfield as much as I needed to try our this new relationship on the heels of a failed first marriage.

I stepped out onto the blue-white surface. An abrupt chill rose up my bare arms and through my thin cotton tank top. But there was just enough crust to give me traction. I glanced back at John;

he nodded and grinned. I took a deep breath and advanced another step, and then another, moving closer to where the path narrowed and tilted and let out from the forest's shadows and into the bright sunlight.

Right, left. Right, left. I was careful to make sure each foot was securely planted. I moved a little faster. So far so good. The wind was stronger on the ice, but I was feeling stronger too. Then, when I reached the line where shadow gave way to sunshine, I notice—through my worn-rubber soles—how the ground's texture had abruptly changed. The snow's surface was now washed with a micro-thin layer of wet, slippery glacial melt.

I stopped again.

The wind blew. I braced against it while trying to balance heel to toe on a path so narrow that my two feet could no longer fit side by side.

"I told you we should be wearing hiking boots," I said. I had mentioned this to John back at the ranger station. I knew I should have listened to my gut.

"We'll be fine," he said, as he had also said before we started out. "It's just another day in Paradise." This was a favorite expression of his in any sort of outdoor setting. Though it was especially apropos on this day, it was also especially maddening. "Keep going."

I took a deep breath and stood poised on this frozen balance beam like the gymnast I never was. John and I were out there, traversing a tilted, glossy path, exposed to everything and protected by nothing. Along with hiking boots, we should have had crampons, ice axes, trekking or ski poles. I looked down the slope, fanned out beneath us, perfectly smooth and slick, an angled expanse without a single boulder, shrub, or tree. I couldn't see where it ended, and this I knew meant there was a drop-off down there, several stories tall. A single false move was all it would take; there was nothing to stop a freefall. I felt dizzy.

"You'll be fine," John said, when I reached out into thin air to steady myself.

I inched ahead, trying to maintain not only my balance but also my dignity. Although I had not yet slipped on the ice, I felt I was slipping in John's eyes; perhaps he was discovering that I wasn't the woman he'd thought I was. Perhaps he had spotted that dyad of vulnerabilities—panic and fear—poking out from my tough demeanor like the bra straps sliding down my shoulders from beneath my tank top.

If I moved at a careful pace, I told myself, I could do it. After all, this patch of snow and ice wasn't that wide—maybe 100 yards or so from one side to the other. By now, we'd crossed about a third of it, and John was right there behind me. I'd be fine, right?

No necessarily, because we weren't roped together and were otherwise ill-equipped. There was little John could do if I were to lose my grip.

"I can't do this!" I twisted around, not daring to turn my feet to face him fully. "This is crazy!"

He laughed, as a parent might laugh at a wobbly toddler. Lovingly incredulous.

"We shouldn't be out here like this. What kind of place is this, anyway? Shouldn't they have posted a sign somewhere alerting hikers to how dangerous this is? Look at it." I pointed downslope. "If I slip, that's it. I'm history."

John took a deep breath and then he pressed his lips into a forced smile.

"We should have the right gear," I said. "We should at least have ski poles." With a ski pole, I could have poked into the uphill slope for stability. Or maybe arrested a fall if I slipped. Or at least stabbed him for making me come out here in the first place.

"So what do you want to do?" he asked. "Turn back?"

What I heard him really asking, of course, was whether I wanted to quit. Give up. Surrender to a measly little trail despite the other hikers' footprints stamped into the surface, scoffing at me. Go back to the lodge and face him for the rest of the weekend with a big "F" for failure stamped on my forehead.

“No. I don’t want to turn back.” I liked to think of myself as an honest woman, but that was a big fat lie.

“Well then, move along. You can do it.” He looked up at the sky and slight creases surfaced on his forehead beneath the bill of his 49ers baseball cap. I followed his gaze to see clouds moving in. The sun had also shifted closer to the ridgelines in the west.

I thought once more of my ski poles back home, nestled together in the corner of my farmhouse basement. I thought about their sharp tips and how John had taught me to plant those tips when I learned to ski a few months back. I shifted to face the uphill slope, turning my back to my doom. I spread my bare fingers and plunged each of them into the snow.

It was like digging into a tray of ice. But the makeshift ski pole tips seemed to work. I sidestepped along, little by little, hunched over like Quasimodo on the slanted trail. I plunged my fingers into the uphill slope at about thigh-height and then pulled them back out after each step. Plunge, step, pull. Plunge, step, pull. I suspected my fingers would soon succumb to frostbite and I’d have to have them amputated when we got home. I’d probably become a panhandler on the corner of 4th and Yamhill in downtown Portland, holding out my fingerless hands for spare change. Bit at least I would make it across the snowfield, alive. Plunge, step, pull. Plunge, step—

Slip. Slip!

My heart raced. With my fingers still dug into the ice, my uphill foot searched for something solid, reliable, trustworthy. My foot was failing and fingers were turning blue. I discovered what scared stiff really meant.

“Let me lead,” John said.

Still dug in, I tried to play that option out in my mind. If he led, we’d probably get across the snowfield and back to safety a hell of a lot faster. But he seemed almost cavalier, and I worried his speed might make us more inclined to slip. More importantly, as foolish as it now sounds, I was sure that if I let him take the lead, I’d somehow lose his respect. This was back in the 1980’s when women were still

a minority in the business world, when we fought hard for equality, pressing up against that stupid glass ceiling day after day. John and I were peers at the same firm. At the time we had equal standing on the organization chart. If I let him lead, I was sure things between us would somehow change back at the office. I was not about to let that happen.

“If only we could just call for a helicopter to swoop in, drop a rope and lift me out of here. I mean, they do it all the time for stranded climbers.”

He shook his head. “Well, we can’t.”

I scanned the sky anyway.

By then, the sun had drifted further west and shadows were moving across the ice toward us. We still had miles of hiking to complete the trail loop, with minimal food and water and no flashlights. My back ached. I set on knee down on the trail where my foot had been unable to hold steady. My frozen fingers were still embedded in the uphill slope like petrified fossils. I was contorted in a strange position more suitable to the game of Twister than hiking. I must have looked pathetic.

John groaned. “Let me lead,” he said again.

Three simple words that carried so much weight. To *let* him lead meant to grant permission. To let *him* lead meant to allow him down the trail in front of me. And then there was the final word. To let him *lead*, let him develop and implement a solution to a problem. Perspiration drizzled between my breasts even as another gust of wind aroused goose bumps on my arms.

I couldn’t envision how I might let him take the lead even if I wanted to. There wasn’t exactly a passing lane. If he had stepped around on me on my downhill side, he might slip and fall to his death. Or, if he tried to step around my uphill side, he could bump me off balance. I saw it happening. His foot would skim the ice, and then fall into a full-on body slide, my arms chafing, his voice chasing after me, until I’d finally careen off the edge and crash onto a jumble of rocks far below, body splayed, blood splattered.

“No, that won’t work,” I said.

He stepped forward and embraced me. I knew what this meant. He agreed with me, it was over. I sighed into his neck, willing my tears to stay put and cherishing this final instant of calm before certain death. I closed my eyes.

Joan began to shuffle his feet.

I had no time to ask what he was doing. My feet had no choice but to follow his, like a ballroom dancer following her partner, as we pivoted on the ice. Within seconds, John had deftly shifted into the lead position. He released me from his embrace, took one step away and reached out his hand.

“Are you coming or not?” There he stood, ahead of me, grinning.

I was furious. I felt he had tricked me into giving up the lead, humiliated me with his deceit. Like many high level managers in the business world, he had slithered into this position. I vowed to myself I would never forgive him. I was tempted to tell him, no, I wasn’t coming. But fortunately I had another vision. In this one, John simply turned his back on me and hiked down the trail alone, leaving me out there to perish. Would he really do that? I didn’t think so, but I reached for his hand anyway.

Step by aggravating step he led me down the icy path, squeezing my left hand tightly as I continued to plunge my right hand into the uphill slope for security. I hobbled behind him in that ridiculous position, cursing him like a madwoman, although I was far more upset with myself. When we finally reached the solid subalpine forest trail, free of snow and risk, he stopped and let go.

I didn’t know what that gesture meant but had no energy left to analyze it. Tears streamed down my cheeks as my worries and defenses melted away. For a moment, I actually sobbed like a child, and John waited patiently, a few feet from me, until I could collect myself. I fished for a crumpled piece of Kleenex in my pocket and blew my nose. He raised his eyebrows, I nodded, and he led the way down the trail where the forest floor was already consumed by

darkness. I followed him all the way back to the lodge, replaying images in my mind: the slick snow, his slick maneuver, my ineptitude.

Sometimes I reflect on that day, especially whenever a fresh snow blankets the Cascade Range. I ask myself what became of that tough-minded twenty-eight year old woman on the edge of the glacier. I imagine what might have happened had I stood my ground and insisted we turn back. We would have slowed down to study the courageous wildflowers. We would have had a lovely dinner with a bottle of Washington wine. We might even have had rollicking good sex. I might have lost a little pride by turning back, but nothing compared with what actually happened on the ice. I would have maintained some self-respect, knowing John had acknowledged my opinion. Giving in to him on that trail seems like a hindsight symbol of the independence I would eventually give up in our marriage, the sense of security that comes from being in charge of one's own life and making one's own decisions.

On the other hand, perhaps crossing that glacier with John taught me about humility. Maybe, once in a while it's all right to let another person push you beyond your comfort zone, fix your problems and make the difficult decisions.

Whichever way I choose to view that day, there's one thing I've learned for sure. Relationships are a lot like glaciers. They surge forward, they retreat when climates change. They flow smoothly but crack suddenly. For all the power they carry, they are inexplicably fragile. They slant this way and that; they can be slippery and full of surprises. They can easily throw us off balance, and sometimes it only takes one wrong move to end it all.

Crossing glaciers and navigating relationships both demand courage, perseverance, good fortune and probably a bit of insanity, too. Perhaps the only difference, now that I think of it, is that only one of them requires a good set of boots.

22

Mason Mimi Yadira

i assume no one ever remembers me
i'm just as inconsequential to them
as i am to the person in all my baby pictures
the one with wind in their eyes
watering the plants beneath them
sweat pooling in their frilly socks
if i smile i'll choke
my relationships with my mom and my sisters and my grandmas
are all more complicated than female relationships
they're each me changing my name
reminding them i'm not a girl
only feeling comfortable with femininity
when the people around me aren't misgendering me
so i choke
as i pull my arms up walking down burnside
cool off the sweat that's been building up for hours
staring each driver in their small eyes as they pass

i was six when i was in my only car crash
we swerved off an icy road into pitch black winter
red jeep tumbling, three young children and their young mom
years later my sister and i both remember the feeling
of switching seats somewhere in the crash
after learning what a crash can do
we all climbed out of the jeep, walked back to town
leaving me with a scar on my hand that i rub for comfort
and a mother, helping and hurting me in all of my memories
see, we've changed
except our lungs still contract too hard
and our hearts still beat too fast
and our legs still shake

i can't say i'm afraid of car rides
or disappointment anymore
but i still hate driving with the windows down
i can never catch my breath
i can't push my words out when it counts now
but i cried when my mom called me my chosen name
for the first time, after not speaking for years
hurting me, then helping me

THE GOOD SOUTHERNER

James William Gardner

There seemed to be some misunderstanding. Lynwood Ramsey always wore his wingtips to the office. Why didn't this woman understand that? She was darting around the room, chatting to herself, disturbing him and not making a bit of sense. "I must have my shoes," he said once again more forcefully than before.

"First things first, Lynwood," said the woman. She was smiling at him, but apparently not understanding a word he was saying to her. She looked vaguely familiar like he'd seen her before somewhere. Perhaps she had come into the office at one time or another. She might have even been a client. There were so many he couldn't keep track of them all. The important thing now was his shoes. How could he make her see that? "Lynwood Honey, sit up now. Aunt Julia has fixed you a nice breakfast. Eggs over easy just the way you like."

She came over and started tugging on him, pulling his arm and fussing. What on earth was she going on about? "I need to get ready," he said. "I need to go home." That wasn't right. He was going to work. Not to the house. Someone had better call Dianne and let her know he was going to the office first. "Can we give Dianne a call and let her know?" he said to the woman.

"Certainly we can. Where are you going today?"

"Home," he answered. He had to try and get home.

"Here, raise up and let me get these pillows fixed so you can eat."

"You don't seem to hear me, Ma'am. I have a big day today."

"I'm sure you do, but first let's see if you can't eat a little something. Julia's got eggs and grits and those little link sausages you're so fond of." She placed a tray of food in front of him and then pulled a chair up to the side of the bed and sat down. "Here Lynwood, have a bite of these nice eggs. Open your mouth."

Whatever it was tasted good. He thought that he might have time for just a few bites anyway. "Remember, Lynwood, breakfast is the most important meal of the day." That's what his mother used to tell him. Lord, he needed to get home and see her too. What was it that he needed to do? Well, the first thing was to get dressed. He couldn't go out in these.

"Ma'am, could you let Dianne know that I need my shoes, my good shoes?"

"Now, here's a bite of sausage," said the woman. "Chew it good before you swallow it now. That's it."

Just then another woman appeared from somewhere. "Is he eating?" she said.

The first woman nodded. "He's doing right well this morning."

"That's good. Yesterday he hardly ate a bite. Well, I take that back. He did eat most of his pie at supper."

"Dianne, is that you, Honey?" said Lynwood Ramsey. The sun was so bright that he couldn't half see who it was.

"No it ain't Dianne, Lynwood Darling. You know it ain't Dianne. It's Jennifer."

"I need to tell Dianne something."

"What is it?" asked the first woman. "What do you need to say to Dianne?"

He couldn't remember. How was he supposed to remember anything with all of this confusion? He'd just call her from the office. She'd be home.

"Honey, Dianne ain't here. She's gone to be with Jesus. You know that."

He remembered. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. He knew that well enough.

“Now, one more bite of egg and we’ll be done. You ate very well this morning. Aunt Julia will be tickled. Look Jennifer, Lynwood cleaned his plate.”

“Can you tell Dianne that I need to see her a minute?” he said. “We need to go home now.”

“Here, don’t try and get up yet. Let me get this tray off of you. Don’t Lynwood. Hold still a minute. Jennifer, don’t just stand there. Come and help me.”

“Lynwood, listen to us.”

“We have to go.”

“Where? Where do you have to go in such a hurry?”

“We have to get down to the office.”

“I bet he needs to go to the bathroom. Come on, Lynwood. Let’s us go to the toilet. Then we can go down to the office. Is today court day? Here, hold on to my arm. That’s right. We’ll wash up and then get you dressed. Dorothy, hold on to his other arm. He’s kind of wobbly this morning.”

If only he could remember. Where was Dianne? He walked between the two women into the bathroom. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. The words seemed to come from out of nowhere.

“There we are. Now you sit down there and do your business and then we’ll get you cleaned up and dressed. Lord, it’s after nine. Hurry up, Lynwood. Holler when you’re done.” Both of the women walked out of the little room, but he could hear them talking right outside of the door.

“Have you finished?” said one of them.

“I think he’s probably done.” They opened the door and came back in. “Here, let’s clean you off good.”

“Cleanliness is next to godliness,” he said.

“That’s right. You remember that don’t you? That’s what Momma always used to say, isn’t it? Ain’t it funny how he can remember certain things? You don’t never know what he’s going to come up with.”

“Let’s wash off your face and hands and get that sleep out of your

eyes. After all, you want to look presentable. He was always so meticulous about his appearance.”

“Oh mercy, yes,” said Dorothy Hypes. “He got that from Momma too. We all did. I remember when Lynwood used to wear that nice powder blue suit. You remember that? He was mighty good looking. Momma said he used to strut. I can hear her now. She’d say he strutted around like a turkey rooster in the courtroom.”

“He was always a proud man.”

“Yes. Well, he had every reason to be. He was the best attorney in Tazewell County. Here, close your eyes, Lynwood, so we don’t get soap in them. That’s right. Now, let me comb your hair and we’ll be done.”

“Can one of you ladies tell me something?”

“What?”

He tried to recall where he was going. It was home. That’s where he wanted to be. “How can I get back home?” he said.

“Lynwood Honey, you are home. This is your home. You live here with me and Jennifer and Aunt Julia.”

“He don’t understand. He’s thinking about home with Momma and Daddy. It’s strange how they can remember things that happened years ago, but not anything about yesterday. The poor thing don’t have a clue where he is or even who we are.”

“Oh, I think he knows. He might not be able to call our names, but he knows that we love him, I think.”

“Come on over here, Lynwood, and let’s get you dressed. Jennifer, reach in that drawer and get me some underwear. Here, let’s us get these pajama bottoms off first.”

“Is it court day, today?” he asked her.

“I don’t know. Is it?”

“It might be.”

“Well, we’ll need to get you dressed up nice then. Do you have a big case?”

“Yes” he said.

“What is it?”

"I need to be getting on home. Do y'all know if Diane is back?"

"Honey, Diane ain't coming back. She's with the Lord in heaven. You remember."

"I go and prepare a place for you," he said.

"That's right, Lynwood. That's what Jesus said ain't it?"

"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine."

"There, now which pair of trousers would you like? How about these khakis with the cuffs? You like these don't you? Raise your foot up. That's right."

Then the other woman pulled a white shirt out of the closet. "Remember how he loved a white shirt. He used to say that there wasn't nothing like a nice starched white shirt. Here, Honey. Don't that look nice on you."

"You look mighty handsome this morning, Lynwood."

"That's nice. Clothes make the man," he said.

"You know Bobby Ingram said something about dropping by today. You remember Bobby don't you? He's your friend from church. Bobby Ingram?"

"Yes."

"He don't know who Bobby is."

"Well, he'll still be happy to see him. Dorothy, can you button his shirt? I'll get his suspenders. Where are they?"

"Hanging on the back of the door, I think."

"Here they are."

"Now, sit down here and let's get your socks and shoes on. Which pair would you like? You want your brown oxfords or your black wingtips?"

"Wingtips," he said.

STRANGEST YELLOW

Susan Faust

CAST

LOTTIE. Female/female-identifying, age thirty-seven. She's not handling things very well.

BREUGIE BABY. Male/male-identifying, unborn. Pronounced Bro-ygee. The baby that wasn't; he's a troublemaker.

SETTING

The present. The play takes place in Lottie and her husband's bedroom. There is a desk and chair, a double bed, a bookcase, and a closet door. A laptop sits on the desk. When a video is being recorded, a red light blinks somewhere above the set. It stops blinking when the recording is paused or stopped.

NOTES

This play was inspired by and written as a response to the short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. "\\\" denotes overlapping dialogue.

PART ONE

(LOTTIE is seated at her desk downstage. She fiddles with the placement of her laptop, then leans back in her chair. Finally, she takes a deep breath and presses the record button on her screen.)

LOTTIE: Hi everyone—*(She stops the recording. She presses the button and tries again.)* Hi everyone—shit. *(She stops the recording. She steels herself and presses the button to start once again.)* Hi everyone. I'm Lottie. Welcome to “What to—*(She stops the recording.)* FUCK.

(LOTTIE gets up and throws herself down on the bed, violently punching a pillow. Eventually she gets up and heads back toward the desk. She puts a smile on her face and starts recording.)

LOTTIE: Hi everyone. I'm Lottie. Thank you all for being here. Well, I mean, not *here*—yeah, well, you know what I mean. *(Pause.)* Welcome to “What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart! Part One.” I'm guessing that if you're watching me right now, your life is falling apart, or you know someone else whose life is. Falling apart. Like—when the really important things you want—or thought you had—disappear. And you don't know how to get them back. Not things as in objects. More like states of being. Personal goals. That kind of thing. I'm guessing that some of you watch people like me to be entertained. I should probably warn you right now that this may get kind of dark in places. That doesn't mean that I won't try and keep my sense of humor when I can. Gotta laugh at the absurdity of it all, right? This is not a self-help video. I mean, I guess it is my personal attempt at self-help, but it may do more harm than good. So please come for the ride, if you're up for it, but don't expect to get any tried and true advice. And don't blame me if it makes you fall further down the rabbit hole, so to speak! This is just as much of a mystery to me as it is to you.

(The sound of mischievous laughter is heard. LOTTIE looks around.)

LOTTIE: Yeah...Signing off!

(LOTTIE stops the recording. End of scene.)

PART TWO

(LOTTIE sits at the desk checking her laptop. She puts on a smile and starts recording.)

LOTTIE: Hi everyone. Welcome to “What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart! Part Two.” I’m Lottie. *(Awkward pause.)* If you saw my first video, you might be a little...confused. That’s what someone said in the comments. Thanks for that. I mean, I’m glad you commented. I should tell you—I’ve never actually done this before. Surprise, surprise, right? I bet you could tell right away! Anyway, I’m sorry that I wasn’t super clear about the content of my video. Okay, here’s the back story: I’m thirty-seven years old. Married. No children. My work—I had been working at a public relations firm for the last three years. It’s not my identity or anything. I mean, I think I’m good enough at it, but it’s not how I imagined my career—anyway. I hit a bump in the road—I mean, something happened several months ago and—um. My husband—he’s wonderful. I couldn’t ask for a better man! We met at this really terrible party for one of his friends who was getting married. When I tried to leave, he made this funny speech and somehow convinced me to stay. That was six years ago. It’s all been pretty amazing. It’s not that—our life has been very... complete. But we were excited to start a family. Everything was, everything’s been good, you know?

(The mischievous laughter is heard again. Lottie starts.)

LOTTIE: Some of you may—I don’t know what you’re thinking. But I think no matter what, it’s important to feel like your *own* life has value. Not because you’re linked to someone else, but because, independent of everything, your life has meaning. Sorry to get so serious on you. *(She forces a laugh.)* KITTENS IN THE BATHTUB! I mean, cats are cute. Never mind. I had a miscarriage almost six months ago. Wow. It’s been rough since then. This is...hard. It was hard to get pregnant. Not for lack of trying! Four *years* to be exact.

We did everything you can think of! You know. The timing, the tests, the medications, the procedures. When it actually happened, I was thinking: “This is it. *This* is what I’m gonna be really good at. I’m thirty-seven, and I’m finally having a baby!”

BREUGIE BABY: (*Calling loudly from offstage:*) Ready or not, here I come!

LOTTIE: I don’t—I don’t know what happened next—I know I was a wreck, and Jack was. (*Beat.*) Jack’s a software designer. He can work from home, when he needs to. But now he’s—back at the office. So, I’m here by myself a lot. My friend, Cherise, had this idea that I should—well, she thought I could use a distraction. She’s right. I mean—I have to do something! She thought it might help if I committed to doing something on a regular basis. I’m not into yoga. (Why is everyone so into yoga? I don’t get it.) And meditation is a little too close for comfort, you know? I want to get away from myself, not go deeper inside! So, this is what I’m doing. These videos. “What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart!” Part Two: Stop listening to the noise inside your head. STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP JUST STOOOOOOOOOP already! I don’t know about you, but I’m the kind of person—I need to engage with something or I’ll go completely crazy! You know what I mean? If I don’t keep busy, my mind will start spinning.

(*Long pause.*)

LOTTIE CON’T: Yeah, so after losing my job—(*She chuckles.*) My boss actually had the balls to tell me to my face that I wasn’t “fired.” Then he handed me a box of my stuff, and was like, “We didn’t want you to forget your personal items. Take care of yourself!” Aaaw, it’s nice to know people are watching out for you, isn’t it? But the plus side of all this was realizing that I had to stop listening. I mean, I can’t stop the noise inside my head, but I can refuse to listen to it. You get me? What I’m trying to say is that you need to do something that will let you ignore the bad stuff. You can’t always make it go away, but you can give your attention to something better! Okay, so I’m giving

myself these projects every week. To drown out the noise. Yeah, that's pretty much it. I would love some ideas for future projects! Oh, and please give me feedback—assuming you're still here! I promise I'll respond to all the comments! I'm gonna try and upload the videos every Friday, so keep an eye out for them! Thanks for watching, and please “like” this video! Signing off!

(LOTTIE stops the recording and breathes. End of scene.)

PART THREE

(LOTTIE sits at the desk, trying to summon up her nerve. She records.)

LOTTIE: Welcome back, everyone. Welcome back, everyone! WELCOME! Welcome to—welcome back. I'm Lottie and this is “What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart! Part Three.” In my quest to quiet my mind—my first assignment was given to me by my dear friend, Cherise. She asked me to find as many yellow things as I could. Seem kind of random? Yeah, I thought so too. But she said yellow is bright! It's the color of sunshine, and I guess she thought that—it's not like I'm suicidal or anything. Ha ha! That was a joke! Of course I'm not...*(Beat.)* So, you wanna know what I found? I came up with forty-two yellow things. Not bad, right? I'm sure some people could have found more—oh, I didn't count things that are only partially yellow, so, I mean, that limited the number somewhat—obviously I don't have time to talk about all forty-two items or this video would be crazy long...so here are my top seven yellow things: LOTTIE CON'T: The first item is a book from the library. It has a neon yellow binding and it's called *Finding Lost Places*. Doesn't it make you feel happy when you look at it? *Finding Lost Places*. When I hear that, it makes me think of—I guess it makes me wonder. How can a place be lost? Isn't it places which are constant, and people who get lost? Anyway, moving right along to number two. The one and only essential yellow pencil. No explanation needed. This third item

is a pressed flower from Argentina. A couple of years ago, Jack and I were doing some hiking there. One morning we set out in beautiful sunny weather wearing shorts and t-shirts. By afternoon, a biting wind had kicked up and we had to put on all our layers and trudge through an actual snow flurry! A few hours later, we were back in our shorts and short sleeves, hiking through a valley of these bright yellow wildflowers. (*She ponders the flower for a moment.*) I wanted to remember when Jack and I travelled from spring through winter and back again. Together. Sorry if I'm boring you. Feel free to leave a comment and let me know what you think. Anyway—on to number four, which I bought yesterday. I don't know if that's breaking the rules—but who's gonna catch me? It's the *Yellow Submarine* DVD. Jack's been trying to get me to watch it for years. Number five: when life gives you lemons... whiskey sour with a twist, anyone? Who else is already in a better mood?

LOTTIE CON'T: Six is a picture of me about to board a classic yellow school bus on my first day of school when I was ten years old. God, I look pathetic. My mom walked with me to the bus stop 'cause we had just moved and it was a new neighborhood, new school, new everything. I've always liked the prospect of a fresh start. You know what I mean? A chance to reinvent yourself and be the person you always wanted to be. Instead of the person other people think they know. But it's freakin' scary, too. Okay, we've reached the final object. Number seven. This one is kind of strange. I'm not sure how to describe—it's not an object at all. It's a 360-degree video. Of a painting. Or a virtual reality app, depending on what kind of technology you've got. But it's really intriguing. At least to me.

(LOTTIE slows down and lets herself get pulled into another world during the following description.)

LOTTIE: *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, painted in 1562 by Peter Bruegel the Elder. Apparently, you can open it on the YouTube app and use a Google Cardboard mask—if you know what that is—plus your smartphone for the full VR effect. But it works great as a 360-

degree video. The painting is in some royal museum in Belgium. I'm not a particularly religious person, so I don't—I mean, I can't really tell you anything about the meaning or symbolism of the piece. But Christianity was the mainstay of culture during the Renaissance, and most viewers back then probably would have known something about the subject. Anyway, in the video, the elements of the painting actually move! You can see the different layers completely separate from each other. Or together. It illuminates the painting in a way that I can't even—it's like—I was immersed in this completely different world. But, as weird as it was, parts of it seemed so familiar to me. Imagine a swarm of creatures falling down through the sky and getting sucked into a vortex. Yeah, I know. CRAZY! It makes you want to look away and look closer at the same time. These bad angels are part human and part animal—mammal, reptile, fish, bird, insect—everything on the face of the earth! Only all mixed up. It's hard to tell where one creature ends and another begins because their limbs are all intertwined and they're writhing around like a den of snakes, moving as one grotesque mass through space. The rebel angels are fighting with these frail but confident-looking good angels, and they're clearly losing the battle as they plunge down towards Hell. LOTTIE CON'T: No matter how long you look at this thing, there's something else to discover. It's like an entire universe captured in this one painting—or maybe this one 360-degree video. I can't be sure how to distinguish between them. How much is the artist and how much is the technology bringing us closer—maybe even all the way inside the scene itself? And what's going to happen to all these creatures—to you—when you're in there? The archangel Michael is the hero, all in gold armor. He's in the very act of slaying a seven-headed dragon, which is actually Satan. The dragon's stomach is the strangest yellow. It's a vile creature, and I wanted to get out so badly—but I couldn't. Something else drew me in further. It looked like a baby, and I was thinking, how can a baby be part of Satan's army? But when I looked back it was gone. Only then it seemed to appear on the other side of the whole menagerie of mutant angels. Each time I spotted it

in one place, it would disappear, only to turn up somewhere else. It's as if the baby was playing peekaboo! I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing. I mean—in the video, everything is shifting and turning, so at first, I thought maybe it was one of the rebel angels. But no, it was a baby! I know it was. And—I know this is going to sound really weird, but—try to keep an open mind—the baby winked at me.

(BREUGIE BABY laughs mischievously from offstage.)

LOTTIE: I know. But I swear it did. I don't know why it would do that, but I started to wonder if it was—

BREUGIE BABY: *(Entering:)* Hungry!

LOTTIE stops and looks at BREUGIE BABY, who stands there looking back at her. He is smiling like a rascal cherub trying to look innocent. He's dressed in a cloth diaper with a loose, tunic-style gown.

LOTTIE: WHOA! I think I need to—

BREUGIE BABY: *(Laughs again.)*

LOTTIE: Go—

BREUGIE BABY: Bye-bye!

LOTTIE: Signing off!

(LOTTIE leans forward and stops the recording. She sinks back into her chair, dumbfounded, and lets out a massive sigh. BREUGIE BABY laughs but is nowhere to be seen. End of scene.)

PART FOUR

(LOTTIE sits at the desk, focusing intently on her laptop. She shifts and puts a smile on her face. Then she starts recording.)

LOTTIE: Hi everyone. Welcome back! For all you newbies out there, I'm Lottie. I'd like to welcome you to "What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart! Part Four." This is part of a series of videos to distract

myself from—my fallen-apart-life. Yeah. If any of you are facing a similar challenge, please share in the comments what coping skills are working for you. Or if you're trying the weekly projects yourself, tell us how it's going! Before I reveal this week's project, I just want to say that I really appreciated your comments from the last video.

BREUGIE BABY: (*He enters and glances at her open laptop.*) All three of them.

LOTTIE: (*She laughs hysterically but tries desperately to keep going.*)

Ha, ha, ha! I didn't get any suggestions for projects, so I'm actually using one of your comments as my project this week: (*she reads from the laptop screen*) "Try dressing in a cooler way!" Yeah, so, I'm gonna take this helpful comment and—I'm going to design a whole new outfit for myself! What's not to love about that, right? First, I thought about creating a style, and decided that I should—

BREUGIE BABY: Create me.

LOTTIE: Oh, no—

BREUGIE BABY: (*Gesturing to himself.*) Create this.

LOTTIE: No, no—you can't—

BREUGIE BABY: (*Whispering.*) Pause!

LOTTIE: Uh—

BREUGIE BABY: (*Gesturing pressing the pause button while still whispering.*) Pause it!

LOTTIE: Oh—(*LOTTIE stops the recording.*) WHAT THE FUCK!

BREUGIE BABY: (*Holding his hands over his ears.*) Uh-uh-uh, virgin ears!

LOTTIE: WHO ARE—WHAT—IS THIS?

BREUGIE BABY: Ask yourself.

LOTTIE: I have—I have no idea what the hell's going on!

BREUGIE BABY: So?

LOTTIE: So...what?

BREUGIE BABY: So there!

LOTTIE: What...are you doing here?

BREUGIE BABY: Establishing a bond.

LOTTIE: You're making me uncomfortable.

BREUGIE BABY: Hah! Good one! What about me? I'm pretty uncomfortable right now. How about feeding me?

LOTTIE: This can't be—I think I'm gonna—

BREUGIE BABY: Before you go and freak out, would you please give me something to eat?

LOTTIE: What?

BREUGIE BABY: A burger and fries would be nice.

LOTTIE: I need to stick with the plan!

BREUGIE BABY: What's the plan?

LOTTIE: I'm gonna do my video now.

BREUGIE BABY: Oh, that.

LOTTIE: Right, I'm gonna keep going—

(BREUGIE BABY groans. LOTTIE looks sharply at him. He stops.)

LOTTIE: Okay, recording... *(LOTTIE starts recording again.)* So, The Style Project! I'm obviously not in high school anymore...like so many YouTubers are! And I'm guessing that some of you viewers are also much younger and hipper than me—

(BREUGIE BABY gestures to himself. LOTTIE ignores him.)

LOTTIE CON'T: But one thing that comes with age is—well, you just don't give a crap what people think anymore! Which is—

BREUGIE BABY: A load of crap.

LOTTIE: *(She stops recording.)* WILL YOU \ STOP?

BREUGIE BABY: \ Crap, crap, crap.

LOTTIE: PLEASE!

BREUGIE BABY: You care what people think. Trust me, I know crap when I smell it. *(Turns and sniffs his own behind.)* Eww.

LOTTIE: What are you doing?

BREUGIE BABY: Telling you the honest truth.

LOTTIE: AAAAAAAH!

BREUGIE BABY: The truth hurts.

LOTTIE: I need you to go away.

BREUGIE BABY: I don't think so.

LOTTIE: I don't understand.

BREUGIE BABY: If it was true, I'd already be gone.

LOTTIE: What do you want from me?

BREUGIE BABY: Besides a meal, a diaper change, and a place to crash?

LOTTIE: I just need to breathe for a minute. I'm going to close my eyes. *(LOTTIE closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.)* And when I open them again, everything will be—

(BREUGIE BABY shrugs and walks offstage. LOTTIE opens her eyes again. She looks around the room, relieved. She is still for a moment, taking it in, then she starts to record.)

LOTTIE: Wow. I don't know if I can—I mean, this might be an epic fail—I might be in the middle of the biggest disaster video ever. Yeah, I think I am. Damn rebel angel baby! *(She reaches out to stop the recording but catches herself.)* No—even if it is a piece of—I'm gonna do this thing anyway! *(She inhales.)* So, I looked in my closet for inspiration. Okay, that came out wrong. My closet will never be an inspiration to anyone. But I've got this pile of stuff here that I found in my closet. And Jack's. And I'm gonna start putting something together. This is going to be a lesson in resourcefulness. That's right. You do not need to go shopping every time you want a cool, new outfit! See, I'm randomly picking something out of the pile. *(She does this.)* Oh look, what have we here? It's a tie! Anyone who identifies with the male gender out there, I'm sure you're familiar with this—
BREUGIE BABY: *(Entering.)* Not me.

LOTTIE: *(She decides to ignore him completely.)* But let's look at it as simply a piece of cloth and figure out how we want to wear it. *(She wraps it around her neck like a choker and ties it off in back, a little too tight. She looks uncomfortable.)* Not bad, right?

BREUGIE BABY: *(He puts his hands on his neck.)* Can you...?

LOTTIE: Just make sure you keep it loose enough. *(She pulls at it to loosen it and takes a breath.)* Okay, what next.

BREUGIE BABY: Snack break?

LOTTIE: Here we go! *(She pulls out an oversized plaid shirt.)* Something else from Jack's closet. I'm just going to take a pair of scissors and do like this— *(She cuts the sleeves off.)* Hope he doesn't mind! Now, I can slip it on over my t-shirt and it's a vest! Super cool, right? I think it's official: Steal-from-Your-Partner Style! All I need is a hat and I'm good to go. Sticking with the theme, I'm gonna grab Jack's Cub's hat.

BREUGIE BABY: Great, let's go!

LOTTIE: But they lost their underdog status. That's not cool. What about a trapper hat instead? *(She puts it on and strikes a pose.)* And voila! Dressing in a cooler way!

BRUEGIE BABY: Can we get some lunch now?

LOTTIE: The thing is—this has been fun, and I'm really happy to get your suggestions, but I've been thinking—changing your appearance on the outside ultimately won't make you feel better inside. You know?

BREUGIE BABY: That all depends on how dirty your diaper is. Come on, let's eat. *(He exits.)*

LOTTIE: Okay, everyone, that's it for part four of What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart! Thanks for watching, please subscribe to my channel, and don't forget to give me project suggestions! See you next week!

(LOTTIE stops the recording. End of scene.)

PART FIVE

(LOTTIE stands center stage, calling out to BREUGIE BABY.)

LOTTIE: Alright, get out here! If you want something from me, then come out and get it! NOW! *(Long pause.)* Yeah, I kinda thought you wouldn't show up.

BREUGIE BABY: *(Calling from offstage:)* I'll be right there!

LOTTIE: Okay. Good. *(She waits.)* Take your time. No rush.

(After another long pause, BREUGIE BABY makes his way onstage. He has tied a funky yellow scarf around his neck and wears a gray slouchy beanie hat. LOTTIE looks at him, wide-eyed. He does a little pose.)

BREUGIE BABY: You like it? Bummer that your tank tops were all too small. But I followed your example and tried a Steal-from-Your-Mom Style! *(Beat.)* What—yellow's not my color? *(Pause.)* Uh oh, am I in trouble for borrowing your clothes? *(Pause.)* Hey, help me out here. I don't know what—

LOTTIE: Wha—who—how—

BREUGIE BABY: I think it's: who, what, when, where and why.

LOTTIE: You suck!

BREUGIE BABY: I've never actually breastfed, but I'd like to—

LOTTIE: SHUT UP! You think I don't have enough problems without some crazy baby telling me I'm his mom? Christ! Why am I even—I am NOT your mom!

BREUGIE BABY: *(Whiny:)* Will you feed me anyway?

LOTTIE: Shit!

BREUGIE BABY: I already did.

LOTTIE: Damn it! Go sit in the corner. Do you understand?

BREUGIE BABY: *(Getting fussy)* If I'm gonna have to sit for a while, I could really use a diaper change.

LOTTIE: Look, I'm getting tired of this.

BREUGIE BABY: So am I. Maybe it's time for my afternoon nap.

LOTTIE: It's *time* for me to make another video.

BREUGIE BABY: *(Very fussy)* But I'm hungry! I wanna new diaper! I'm tired!

LOTTIE: Stop, please \\ stop

BREUGIE BABY: \\ I'M HUNGRY! I WANNA EAT!

LOTTIE: I don't have \\ anything to

BREUGIE BABY: *(He drops down to the floor in full tantrum mode.)* \\ I WANNA EAT! I WANNA EAT! I WANNA EAT! I WANNA EAT!

I WANNA EAT! WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

(And just like that, he's asleep. LOTTIE crouches down to look closely at BREUGIE BABY, then sits down at the desk, shell-shocked. After a moment, she forces a smile and starts to record.)

LOTTIE: Hi everyone! Welcome to “What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart! Part Five.” I’m Lottie, for those of you who are new to my channel. Which is all about how to deal with the challenges that come up when your life falls apart! That’s right. My life is—broken. Kinda like Humpty Dumpty! If this sounds like a familiar situation, then you’re watching the right video! Today’s topic is how to deal with people who say they want to help but are actually making things worse. We’re gonna try and figure out how to deal with—and possibly get rid of—those pesky people who are making life even harder for us! When we’re going through something difficult—and feeling kind of miserable—other people don’t always know how to deal with that. We’ve all been on the other side of that situation, right? You may not want to call the person who’s struggling, because maybe you’re afraid of saying the wrong thing. But we all know that’s not an excuse. We should still reach out, right?

LOTTIE CON’T: But if you’re looking to make yourself feel better, it’s generally not a good idea to harass the person who’s having a hard time. You know what I’m talking about? Because when you’re the one in the middle of the mess, it only adds insult to injury when someone calls to try and confirm for themselves that you’re okay so that they can stop worrying about you. ‘Cause that’s all they’re really doing. And then you end up having to spend all your dwindling energy consoling *them!* How effed up is that? And when they still won’t believe you that you’re okay and that they should just go back to their happy little lives with their happy little husbands and their happy little babies, you start making stuff up about all the things you have to get done and you tell them that you better get off the phone, and they know it’s all completely untrue but they go along with it anyway,

saying something about how they want you to know that they're there for you if you ever need anything and *please* give them a call if there's anything they can do to help, blah, blah, blah. And then if you actually call them and tell them there's something they *can* do, they say that if it was any other time they would, but you caught them at the worst possible moment and they're so sorry. Is there anyone else you can call? SURE, THERE ARE OTHERS!

(This wakes BREUGIE BABY up.)

LOTTIE: Like the people you aren't even that close to, who pry into your personal business. You know the kind. They're the people who are fishing for the juicy details. Yeah, they want to hear how messed up your life is to make themselves feel better about theirs. First, they'll ask what they can do to help and then not-so-subtly say that they can't imagine what it feels like to be going through whatever it is that you're going through. When you don't jump in to tell them all about it, they give a false apology and say that they don't mean to be nosy, but they want you to know that if you ever want to talk, they're happy to listen. As if they're not the last person you would divulge your real feelings to. What, so they can get off the phone and chat with whoever over a glass of wine about how screwed up you are?

BREUGIE BABY: *(Wide awake by now)* Whomever.

LOTTIE: WHATEVER! *(Lottie sits, worn out from her rant, unable to move.)*

BREUGIE BABY: Oookay, moving on. *(He starts to exit.)*

LOTTIE: Oh, no you don't! You're not going anywhere!

BREUGIE BABY: I'm not?

LOTTIE: WE'RE NOT DONE YET!

BREUGIE BABY: Sure seems like—

LOTTIE: What are some ways that we can deal with, contain, or even completely remove these exasperating people from our lives? I'm gonna make a list of strategies you can consider, and if you have something to add, please do it in the comments! Number One: Don't answer your phone or texts. Or any other type of social media. This

is a very effective tactic, but beware—avoidance has its own consequences. Number Two: Politely let people know you're in the middle of something and will get back to them. Then don't follow up. Also pretty darned effective. Some people make it very hard to excuse yourself. With those people, you may need to be impolite. Number Three: Give them a bunch of complete lies. Tell them whatever they want to hear, only exaggerate it so they can't tell if you're joking or not. This usually makes them uncomfortable enough to purposefully avoid future conversations with you. Number Four: Rave like a lunatic. This method can scare the piss out of a person, so make sure you save it for the real jerks. *(Pause.)* That's all I got. Now we're done. I'm always up for improvement, though, so please tell me how I'm doing! BREUGIE BABY: To be honest with you, I don't think you're doing so good.

LOTTIE: DIDN'T I TELL YOU TO SIT IN THE CORNER?

(He points to the laptop on the desk, still recording. She catches herself.)

LOTTIE: That's another thing you can say to all those annoying people...when you want them to...sit in the corner and leave you alone. *(Awkward pause.)* You just finished watching part five of "What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart!"

BREUGIE BABY: This.

LOTTIE: Hmm?

BREUGIE BABY: This is what you do.

LOTTIE: Signing off.

(LOTTIE stops recording and sighs. A long silence. End of scene.)

PART SIX

(LOTTIE lies on the bed. BREUGIE BABY sits on the floor, his back leaning against the bed.)

LOTTIE: Are you ever going to leave me alone?

BREUGIE BABY: I'll leave you alone.

LOTTIE: When?

BREUGIE BABY: You'll have to answer that for yourself.

LOTTIE: See, that's the kind of B.S. that really pisses me off.

BREUGIE BABY: Yeah, I've picked up on some of that anger.

LOTTIE: If you don't like it, leave!

BREUGIE BABY: But that's the thing. You're the one that came looking for me.

LOTTIE: What are you saying?

BREUGIE BABY: I'm here because you want me here.

LOTTIE: Ha! That's a laugh!

BREUGIE BABY: Yeah, it is pretty funny, isn't it?

LOTTIE: I came looking for you.

BREUGIE BABY: (*Nodding*) Mm.

LOTTIE: What's your name?

BREUGIE BABY: Breugie Baby. You can call me Breugie.

LOTTIE: Breugie?

BREUGIE BABY: Yeah, that's cool.

LOTTIE: No, that's not cool.

BREUGIE BABY: You don't like it?

LOTTIE: I don't think I'd go looking for someone with a name like that.

BREUGIE BABY: What do you mean?

LOTTIE: You're too funny.

BREUGIE BABY: Well...what kind of names do you like?

LOTTIE: There's no *kind* of name that I like—or don't like. Except maybe absurdities like "Breugie."

BREUGIE BABY: Okay, I get it. You don't like my name.

LOTTIE: I didn't—

BREUGIE BABY: No, it's cool. You can change it.

LOTTIE: I'm not gonna rename you!

BREUGIE BABY: Go ahead.

LOTTIE: It's—not up to me.

BREUGIE BABY: Oh, but it is.

LOTTIE: See, I think *you* think that *I'm*—

BREUGIE BABY: And what if I do?

LOTTIE: You'd be wrong.

BREUGIE BABY: Alright, then tell me why I'm here.

LOTTIE: I can't—I mean, I don't—*(Pause.)* What about Zane?

BREUGIE BABY: Are you serious? Please, nothing trendy. In fact, no names containing Z at all.

LOTTIE: Okay, then how's Liam?

BREUGIE BABY: Come on, you can do better than that!

LOTTIE: What's wrong with Liam? It was one of Jack's favorites.

BREUGIE BABY: So, where *is* this Jack of yours?

LOTTIE: Jack...why?

BREUGIE BABY: I want to meet the famous software designer with the cool trapper hat!

LOTTIE: Oh, he's—on a business trip.

BREUGIE BABY: Back soon?

LOTTIE: Um, Friday, I think.

BREUGIE BABY: That's tomorrow.

LOTTIE: Yeah, that sounds right.

BREUGIE BABY: *(Beat.)* So, Jack likes Liam. Any names you're fond of?

LOTTIE: Promise you won't laugh.

BREUGIE BABY: I can't promise that.

LOTTIE: Then I can't tell you.

BREUGIE BABY: You mean all the names you're considering are laughable?

LOTTIE: There aren't that many—we didn't get that far into the process. The one thing we did was paint the nursery yellow. You know, we didn't know the sex yet, so...*(Pause.)* I was only eight weeks pregnant.

BREUGIE BABY: Okay, I won't laugh. Tell me the names.

LOTTIE: I really like Romeo.

BREUGIE BABY: Oh boy, I can already hear the bullies.

LOTTIE: I actually know someone whose parents named him Paradox.

BREUGIE BABY: Poor kid! Liam's not looking so bad anymore. No X's either, by the way.

LOTTIE: That leaves Adam.

BREUGIE BABY: I'll take it.

LOTTIE: Problem is, you're not an Adam.

BREUGIE BABY: What do you mean I'm not an Adam? If you name me Adam, then "Madam, I'm Adam." By definition.

LOTTIE: But I'm not naming you!

BREUGIE BABY: Then maybe Jack will.

LOTTIE: Jack's not naming you! No one is naming you! You already have a fucking name! Okay?

BREUGIE BABY: Okay. *(Beat.)*

LOTTIE: Look, I'm—I need to sleep. Would you turn the lights out when you leave?

BREUGIE BABY: Can I peek in the kitchen for a snack first?

LOTTIE: I'd rather—

BREUGIE BABY: Oh, and if I leave my tunic and diaper in the laundry basket, you wouldn't mind popping them in the washer, would ya?

LOTTIE: Please don't—

BREUGIE BABY: If I rinse the diaper first?

LOTTIE: *(She shakes her head.)*

BREUGIE BABY: *(Exiting)* It was worth a try.

(LOTTIE rolls over like she's going to sleep, but after a while she gets up and sits at the desk. She starts to record.)

LOTTIE: Hi everyone. Welcome to "What to Do When Your Life Falls Apart. Part Six." *(Pause.)* I don't really know what I'm doing here. I mean—I can ramble on about something that I'm doing to keep myself busy, but in the end—it's not about busying ourselves at all. Is it?

(LOTTIE stops the recording and sits back in her chair. End of scene)

PART SEVEN

(The desk is full of all kinds of food wrappers, a box of cream-filled chocolate cookies, lots of beer bottles, a half-empty bottle of whiskey, and an empty carton of milk. LOTTIE sits on the bed, wearing a bathrobe, with a drink in one hand. This is not her first drink. BREUGIE BABY enters, wearing a matching bathrobe.)

BREUGIE BABY: Those Double Delight cookies are frickin' amazing! Can I have some more?

LOTTIE: What are you wearing?

BREUGIE BABY: Jack's bathrobe.

LOTTIE: I can see that.

BREUGIE BABY: Then why'd you ask?

LOTTIE: Just tell me why you're wearing Jack's robe, damn it!

BREUGIE BABY: I was cold! My stuff's in the washing machine, remember?

LOTTIE: I thought I gave you something—to wear, didn't I?

BREUGIE BABY: Well, yeah.

LOTTIE: So why aren't you wearing whatever I gave you?

BREUGIE BABY: You really want to know?

LOTTIE: Yeah.

BREUGIE BABY: Thongs aren't my thing.

LOTTIE: Oh.

BREUGIE BABY: They say ya either love 'em or hate 'em. Now we know which team I'm on.

LOTTIE: That's enough information.

BREUGIE BABY: Want to get some breakfast?

LOTTIE: I can't eat—I feel like I'm gonna barf.

BREUGIE BABY: Then maybe you should stop with the whiskey...?

LOTTIE: No, this—this is just what the doctor ordered!

BREUGIE BABY: Which doctor is that?

LOTTIE: (*She points to her head.*) The doctor in here. It's called self-medicating, and I highly recommend it!

BREUGIE BABY: Okay, give me the glass.

LOTTIE: Uh, uh, no you don't. You can have the rest of the cookies, but I get the rest of the whiskey.

BREUGIE BABY: It's Friday.

LOTTIE: T.G.I. Friday! Woo hoo!

BREUGIE BABY: I thought—

LOTTIE: Yeah, I'll get to it. It's not like I have a million subscribers or anything—hah! You want to know how many subscribers I actually have?

BREUGIE BABY: I wasn't talking about your videos.

LOTTIE: You mean my "vlog."

BREUGIE BABY: Whatever you say.

LOTTIE: It's pretty strange for someone like me to be doing a "vlog," don't you think?

BREUGIE BABY: I wouldn't know.

LOTTIE: But I thought you were the expert on everything! (*She holds her glass out.*) Hey, would you be so kind as to fill me up?

BREUGIE BABY: I was talking about Jack.

LOTTIE: What about him?

BREUGIE BABY: I thought he was coming home today.

LOTTIE: Uh huh.

BREUGIE BABY: Have you talked to him? Do you know what time he'll be arriving?

LOTTIE: Why the sudden interest in—what are you, my—mind your own business, why don't ya?

BREUGIE BABY: (*Long pause.*) He's not coming back, is he?

LOTTIE: Get out.

BREUGIE BABY: Look, I don't mean to—

LOTTIE: I said GET OUT!

BREUGIE BABY: Okay, okay. I'm just gonna—(*He heads over to grab the cookie box, but LOTTIE blocks him*)—leave the rest for you to enjoy.

(LOTTIE looks as if she's about to cry, but instead she sits at the desk and fills her glass up with more whiskey. BREUGIE BABY exits. She starts recording.)

LOTTIE: Hello everyone! All of my many, many subscribers out there...It's Lottie! Welcome back to "What to Do When"...blah, blah, blah. Part...Seven, I think. *(She takes a swig of whiskey.)* I have to say that when your life has fallen apart, sometimes you just need to indulge yourself in some good libations. What better way to say "fuck off" to the world than by drinking yourself into—uh oh, I think I may have broken a rule there. Pretend I didn't say that...okay? *(Beat.)* I guess I need to fess up. That's right. I haven't been completely honest with y'all! I like that. Maybe I should move to Texas. Then I can say y'aaaall whenever I want. *(She takes another swig.)* So, y'all...I've talked about some of the shit that's been going on in my life of late. But I never told you—*(She winks.)* Y'all—*(Pause.)* How come it's so damned hard to say—FUCK! *(She takes a deep breath.)* I'm separated. *(Beat.)* God, it sounds like I've been chopped up by an axe murderer. But I haven't been—Ha ha! Guess y'all can see that! No, what I mean is—Jack moved out. After we lost the baby, he was so sweet—and we were both so sad. But then he stopped being sad. And then it was only me being sad. And then I didn't know how to stop being sad. Or was it angry? And then he was angry. So, we were both angry. But he didn't want to be angry. Only I did—so I stayed angry. Or was it scared? And he couldn't understand my fear. And neither could I. And neither could my boss. And then I got fired. After I got fired, he was so sweet. But both of us were feeling guilty. And then he stopped feeling guilty. And then it was only me feeling guilty. And then he left because he said I wasn't coping. So, tell me, y'aaaall, HOW THE FUCK DO YOU COPE WITH THAT SHIT? Comments, suggestions? Y'all know where to leave 'em.

(LOTTIE stops the recording and takes another swig. End of scene.)

PART EIGHT

(LOTTIE lies awake in bed. BREUGIE BABY enters wearing his tunic and diaper, holding a tray. He sees LOTTIE and gives her a smile. She sits up in bed and groans. BREUGIE BABY loads up the tray with all the garbage and dirty glasses from the desk. LOTTIE throws on a bathrobe and makes her way to the desk as BREUGIE BABY exits with the tray. She opens the laptop and checks in. She sighs. After a moment, she takes a pen and some paper out from the desk drawer and starts to write. BREUGIE BABY re-enters. There is an awkward silence.)

BREUGIE BABY: “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”

LOTTIE: *(Laughs, in spite of herself.)*

BREUGIE BABY: I’m sorry I \\\ asked you about

LOTTIE: \\\ No, you don’t have to—

BREUGIE BABY: I didn’t mean to upset you.

LOTTIE: I don’t really want to talk about it.

BREUGIE BABY: Fair enough. *(Beat.)* Can I help with a project?

LOTTIE: I’m not doing any more videos.

BREUGIE BABY: Why not?

LOTTIE: My last one got reported. It’s been removed.

BREUGIE BABY: Removed from what?

LOTTIE: YouTube. The Internet. Existence.

BREUGIE BABY: That’s mind-blowing!

LOTTIE: It doesn’t matter. No one watched them anyway.

BREUGIE BABY: If you say so.

LOTTIE: Can you leave me alone now?

BREUGIE BABY: If you really want me to, it’ll happen.

LOTTIE: Will you stop with the bullshit!

BREUGIE BABY: What do you want me to say?

LOTTIE: Nothing! Just shut up! Everything was fine until you showed up. We had a nice life together. We were happy. I was happy. If it hadn’t been for you—he never would have left. *(Long silence.)*

Aren't you going to say something?

BREUGIE BABY: I wasn't planning on it.

LOTTIE: Say something!

BREUGIE BABY: Okay. (*Beat.*) You wanna hit me?

LOTTIE: What?

BREUGIE BABY: If it'll make you feel better...

LOTTIE: I don't hit babies.

BREUGIE BABY: I'm relieved. (*Beat.*) But you are angry with me.

LOTTIE: I'm not angry with anyone—no, I'm angry with everyone!
And I'm tired of feeling guilty.

BREUGIE BABY: Feeling guilty?

LOTTIE: Oh, so now you're a therapist?

BREUGIE BABY: I'm anything you want me to be! Just name it.

LOTTIE: I can't—(*Beat.*) I don't know what to do.

BREUGIE BABY: I know it's scary.

LOTTIE: How do you know that?

BREUGIE BABY: I'm a baby, remember? I'm scared half the time!

LOTTIE: You don't act like it.

BREUGIE BABY: Yeah, well that's some superb acting on my part.

LOTTIE: (*Beat.*) Can I ask you something?

BREUGIE BABY: (*Nods.*)

LOTTIE: What do you—remember?

BREUGIE BABY: Remember?

LOTTIE: Do you remember what it was like to be...? (*She places her hands on her belly.*)

BREUGIE BABY: Are you kidding? That's like the best part! How could I forget that?

LOTTIE: Tell me.

BREUGIE BABY: Oh, wow. Well, I guess I'd have to start with your heartbeat. (*He closes his eyes and smiles.*) Constant and strong. Calming.

LOTTIE: (*She looks at him, waiting, wanting more.*)

BREUGIE BABY: Except for when it spiked to like some insane speed! It surprised me every time! I couldn't predict it. It seemed to happen out of nowhere.

LOTTIE: Yeah. I know.

BREUGIE BABY: It kept things interesting, though, that's for sure! *(He laughs.)* But most of the time, I felt caught up in this powerful rhythm, like—this might sound dumb, but—like I was a part of something bigger than myself.

LOTTIE: You were.

(LOTTIE and BREUGIE BABY look at each other; the bond is tangible.)

BREUGIE BABY: Then there was your movement. Like riding a wave. Sometimes you lulled me into total bliss. Other times? It was sort of like... a water slide. You know how they change direction all of a sudden? And you find yourself careening around a corner into the unknown—

LOTTIE: I know that feeling.

BREUGIE BABY: Until it ends with a splash! And then you bob back up and start riding the waves again.

LOTTIE: You make it sound like a good thing.

BREUGIE BABY: Hell yeah! Oh, sorry about the curse word.

LOTTIE: Like mother, like son.

BREUGIE BABY: *(Smiles, then drops the smile while continuing his gaze.)*

LOTTIE: What?

BREUGIE BABY: Don't take this the wrong way, but I didn't recognize you at first!

LOTTIE: Why?

BREUGIE BABY: Your movements and your heartbeat, they were comforting—

LOTTIE: And I'm not.

BREUGIE BABY: No, that's not it. But everything went haywire at the end. It was total chaos.

LOTTIE: I knew I was losing you. *(Beat.)* I'm a different person now.

BREUGIE BABY: No, you're not. I still found you, didn't I?

LOTTIE: I don't want to hear anymore.

BREUGIE BABY: Why not?

LOTTIE: It makes me feel worse.

BREUGIE BABY: Sorry.

LOTTIE: (*Beat.*) Will it ever get better?

BREUGIE BABY: I don't have an answer for you.

LOTTIE: I thought you had all the answers.

(BREUGIE BABY laughs his mischievous laugh. LOTTIE laughs, too.)

LOTTIE: But you're just a baby who barely recognized his own mother.

(They look at each other for a long time. It seems like they might embrace, but they stand rooted in their spots. Finally, BREUGIE BABY exits. LOTTIE stands there, small and alone. End of scene.)

PART NINE

(LOTTIE sits at the desk, thinking. Finally, she starts recording.)

LOTTIE: Hi everybody. It's me again. I've been reading your comments. There's a whole lot of them. Guess I finally learned how to get people to watch my videos! Sorry. Bad joke. To those of you who saw my last video before it got taken off the site—I'm deeply sorry. It's not something I'm proud of. I didn't mean to offend anyone, but I'm sure I did. I wasn't trying to be funny; it wasn't a stunt. Though I almost wish I could say that it was. (*She takes a moment to breathe.*) I want to thank everyone who wished me well and urged me to get help. And all of you who provided me with the phone numbers and websites of organizations which support people in various states of distress. I'm astounded by your responses. Your personal journeys. The stories you were willing to share. Thank you all for your kindness. It feels like stepping into the sunshine. (*She stops the recording and looks out into the audience.*)

APHRODISIAS

Raynald Nayler

In the shifting shade of the agora
we cut the customed square for playing dice.
And in the theater, with a denser stone
we wore down pits in marble for our cups
or for (between the tragedies) a place
to game in bones. Arms tired from carrying
the banner in the procession, we sat down
and found, in a column's shade, a place to sweat
and mourn past strategies. The priest whined on
and we yawned into space. Admired the summer
cling of linen to a quivering flank.
Bored and hot, we waved away mosquitoes
in the stadium. And while the others cheered
we rolled our eyes and counted off the years.

BREAKNECK ROAD

Josie Sigler

Walking home from Country Lake Liquor I see a red something there between the snowbank and the line of grey slush left by the plow: Coca-cola box, the long tail on the “C” poking through the loop on the “L.” I almost kick it the way you do a thing on the roadside, make it fly and hit the ice on the edges of the swamp. But something stops me. Maybe hope gets to me. Even in this weather, a little something sweet to put with the 151. So I go and lift the flap. Even looking at it I don’t buy what’s inside that box: human baby, tiny, almost blue, curled up and no bigger than a skinned muskrat. Dead baby. But no, it’s breathing. The nostrils flare and its hand opens just a little bit and slow like one of those stop-action flowers on PBS.

What can a person do with a baby in a box when he’s no friend to the law? Especially once the thing opens its black-hole eyes and looks right at him like its accusing him?

I don’t even think about Cherry and what she’ll say. I drop my bag and take up the box. The cardboard is wet and collapses where I touch it. I don’t know what women do with babies, but it’s colder than fuck out and the thing doesn’t have a little sweater or anything. I tear one side of the box off quick. And like those climber guys who stripped naked in their tent to save their frozen friend in the arctic and didn’t even care that the whole world saw it on the television, I lift my flannel and press the whole soggy deal to my skin.

Right away the thing starts to wriggle. Then, it expands and yowls fit to beat a bag of mad cats because I don't have tits and that's what it wants most likely.

Shhhh, I say, like it knows how to behave.

I look around to make sure nobody's watching. I've never seen a soul but the plow out on Breakneck this time of year and I can tell that prick Randy's already been by. But sometimes even when you aren't doing anything wrong, you don't want to be seen. The thing's having a hissy fit loud enough now to reach the horizon, all those houses cozied up on real streets, houses for folks who work at Great Lakes Coal, same ones I got busted for three winters back.

My bag's melted, so I grab my rum and the hotdogs Cherry's mom wanted and pick up my pace. I walk that baby right to the trailer, get us in the lean-to, and start stripping off wet layers. And that's what I'm doing when Cherry finds me, standing there in my fruit-of-the-looms peeling red cardboard off this screaming cheesy baby. It's a boy, his nutsack bright pink and enormous, his penis uncut. Where his belly-button should be is a purple snake tied with a yellow yarn. Other than that, he's all set, ten fingers and toes, no frostbite, sticky black hair, and a voice like a damned opera singer. Between the kid and the TV blaring in the back room where Cherry's mom's watching, Cherry can't hear me trying to tell her what happened. Of course she's talking over everything I say, anyway, so it all comes out in a jumble.

Are you insane, Joe? You can't just pick up a baby like a stray dog.

I come into the kitchen, elbowing my way past her. The kid's slippery and I'm trying to figure out how to hold him without breaking him or flopping him around too much. His skin's a hell of a lot colder than a living baby's skin ought to be.

I mean, somebody's got to do it, Joe, but it can't be you, Cherry says. It sure can't be you.

Cherry blows the smoke from her cigarette through her nostrils like a dragon and starts to pace on the other side of the counter. She's

done near worn a hole in the carpet over the last few years between me and her mom.

It ain't legal. It ain't clean, she says.

I know it ain't clean, Cherry, I tell her. I'm about to give it a bath if you'll just give me a hand.

I hold the kid out toward her. His arms and legs fly out like he's skydiving and his cries are fast and raspy. Desperate.

Oh, no, Cherry says. She shakes her head and holds up both her hands palms out, her cigarette ash falling on the floor. I'm not having anything to do with it.

I stop and look at her for a long minute the way I do when I want her to know just how unreasonable she's being, but she's making a point not to look at me or the baby. I shrug. I wad the boy up and tuck him in the crook of my arm like a bundle of firewood. He arches his back and lets out a fresh series of howls. I struggle to plug the sink with my free hand. I turn on the tap. Water's ice cold. Out in the swamp we don't get much hot.

It's kidnapping, that's what, Cherry says. She lights a new cigarette off the one she's smoked down.

Jesus, Cherry, I say. I didn't sneak into its crib and steal it, for Chrissakes.

Joe!

Cherry raises her cigarette hand like she'll smack me. Apparently, there's no situation that warrants taking the Lord's name in vain.

I rummage around in the cabinet for a pot, take a deep breath, and try again: Somebody left it, I say over the ruckus. He was just sitting there alongside—

You go out looking for trouble you're bound to find it.

Yeah, Cherry, I say, practically yelling now, jamming the pot under the faucet. Uh-huh. That's right. I woke up this morning and says to myself, what could make my shit life even better?

I juggle the pot against my hip the way I've seen Cherry do. I slam it on the stove, sloshing water all over. I crank up the burner, careful

not to roast the kid's toes. Then I turn to Cherry like I'm in a soap opera and slap myself on the forehead.

Oh! Of course! A baby. Why didn't I think of it sooner? And so I head out hoping to find one. And lo and behold, there just happens to be a baby freezing its ass off right in my path. Lucky, lucky me!

But the truth is, I do feel a little bit lucky. It's not like this shit happens to just anybody. I look down at the little guy. Cherry's pretty faithful to the pill and we're always broke, so we might not have any of our own. I've never seen a lot of babies up close. Outside of the gunk that's stuck all over him and the noise he's making, he's kind of cool. Hard to believe you could start off like this and end up nearly forty, hairy, drooping, nothing to show for it but a parole officer and a trailer owned by your girlfriend's mother.

I wipe off my pinky finger on the kitchen towel and offer it up to the kid that way I once saw this guy do with his baby way back in high school. When the boy takes my finger, his sound is shut off like a stereo when the circuit's blown. The kid settles in that way, crosses his arms and legs over his body. The roof of his mouth is ridged and he sucks mightily, his eyes wide and hopeful.

I feel you, buddy, I say. I wish I had three arms so I could get to that 151 and have a pull myself.

You could get busted, Cherry says, turning off the tap. You could go back to jail. Or even prison if somebody thinks you done something wrong to it. She glances at my finger suspiciously, preparing her testimony, no doubt. Then she looks away. I can tell she didn't really see the boy, didn't notice how...human he is.

Now that the kid's quiet I can hear the announcer on The Price is Right from the other room shouting: Let's see what's behind door number three, Johnny!

A brand new baby, I say, joking as soft as I know how, stepping into Cherry's path. I just want her to look at the kid, really look at him, at me. Come on, Cherry, I say. Have a heart.

You picked it up, Joe, Cherry says. You're the one that touched it.

What was I supposed to do? He would've *died*, Cherry.

Either due to fear of death or because he's caught on that my finger doesn't make milk, the boy cranks up his wailing again. This time it's a jagged series of cries precipitated by enormous inhales.

What's that racket? Cherry's mom rasps from the back room. The station must be on a commercial break because she's muted it and I hear the creak as she hauls herself up onto her walker.

For the first time, Cherry looks at me. I can see that she's working it out with me, trying to get our story straight. We struggle together like that. The edges of her eyes are like the woods that surround the swamp. You could get lost there if you don't know where you're going. But I can see I'm on a path.

That first summer out of jail Cherry had me trap a mess of raccoons that were raising hell under the trailer nights. She hated them even as she ate the damned stew. Then, when only the one baby raccoon was left, she up and took him in. Just for the night, she said. Thing lived with us for a month or two—until it tried to wash a couple of joints in the toilet bowl. It escaped when I gave chase. The look on that animal's face when it saw there was a whole world outside of the pre-fab one! It gave a little fuck-you-very-much sneer and waddled off into the swamp, no doubt stoned as Steve Miller from the few soggy bites of pot it ate before I caught it. Cherry was heartbroken.

I hold the flailing baby out like an offering, my hands cupped under his butt and shoulders. He claws wildly at his own face and it hits me just how helpless he is, how close the call was. He really would have died out there. Maybe the coyotes would have come after dark. I feel a sick panicky tingle in my bladder. There would have been no trace. A whole life could happen, and never happen, at the same time.

I mean, what would Jesus do, Cherry? For real?

She barks a quick laugh. Then she glances at the crucifix on the wall and clutches at her necklace. The boy's chest rises and falls over his squalling. It's enough to wear on a saint. Even one like Cherry,

who sighs and rolls her eyes, which is always how she starts her giving in. Right from our first time in the back seat of my old Buick it was like this. She shakes her head. Then she bites her cigarette and takes the baby under the arms like he's a cactus or made of toxic waste.

Out the corner of her mouth she says, Fine, then. But you know, you ain't Jesus, Joe. You're gonna have to turn it in to the cops eventually, and that means talking to the cops and that means—

Look, Cherry, I say. Least you could do is find him a towel or a blanket or something. And you want to put out that cigarette?

Who died, she says, and made you the American Cancer Foundation? But she tosses her smoke into the ashtray.

She and the kid disappear together into the hallway, but I can pinpoint exactly where they are by listening. The bathroom door closes and the cabinet opens, muffling the kid's noise further. I hear Cherry trying to soothe him: What's the matter? What's the matter, baby?

Stupid question. He's cold and hungry. So am I, come to think of it.

I go out on the porch to take a leak and retrieve the bottle of 151 I left tucked in the snowbank. I unscrew the cap and drink deep and long. The slight sleet pelts my bare skin. I feel incredibly alive. The snow, the dark break in all the white where the swamp's melted through, it all seems more important now, somehow.

I'm hiding the bottle in a hollow in the siding next to the fuse box when Pauline comes clanking in, dragging her oxygen tank with her. She cocks her head toward the muffled sounds of Cherry trying to sing the theme song from *Gilligan*. Pauline's hair, which is done up in front with lots of hairspray, is flat and matted in the back, the cord from her oxygen pressed around it. Her lipstick is bright red and uneven under the clear plastic mask. I think she's going to ask me what in hell's going on, but she just holds her hand out. I pass her the bottle. She pulls the mask off her face and takes a swig.

Pauline settles the mask over her face, heaving. That a baby crying? she asks between drags of oxygen.

I don't answer. It's best if people handle their own mothers. I tuck the bottle away and secure the latch on the fuse box. I get a dry pair of long johns from the closet and haul them on. I go over and look at the water, but it's not boiling yet. Come on, I pray at it.

Cherry comes into the kitchen. She's got the boy wrapped in my robe. She's looking down into the boy's face. There's something in the flush of her cheeks I've seen but can't place just now.

That's what I thought, Pauline says. She shuffles over to the boy and draws back the folds of terry cloth. No more'n a few hours old, she says. Where'd he come from?

Somebody left him, Cherry says, looking up with tears in her eyes. Can you imagine?

It's love. I'll never know what happened to Cherry in that five minutes she was alone with the kid, but maybe it was like what I felt when I was hoofing it home. The universe chose me. Us.

Truth be told, Cherry's always been a little funny in this way. Example? She knew me since we were kids—I grew up on the other side of Breakneck. Anyway, she must've refused me twenty times in all those years. Then, she shows up at my door one night wearing a triple-fat winter coat over her nightgown. Says her momma's sick and will I drive them to Monroe Mercy because it's snowing and she's too scared. Of course I do. After I drop them off, I leave east and hit all the houses I can find empty down by the riverfront just in case it's any kind of date we're on and I could use the cash. I'm taking a nap in the Buick when she opens the door. She presses her nightgown against me. And two months later I go to jail and even though it goes far above and beyond the call of grateful, she sticks with me through the whole thing.

Sure, says Pauline. People are shits.

Mom!

It's true, she says. She laughs the laugh of the lungless and holding out her finger to shake the little guy's hand.

When the first folds of steam come off the water in the pot I pour some into the cold water in the sink until it's just right, and Cherry hands the baby to me and gets a fresh washcloth.

Watch his belly-button, Pauline says as I slide him into the sink. And support his neck.

The boy's suddenly more turtle than human, his arms and legs coming out one by one as Cherry moves the washcloth over them. He's quiet now but for some small hoarse hiccupping noises. He seems to like the water. When Cherry's gotten all the mess off him, I pull him out and swaddle him in a couple of dishtowels.

Cherry puts the steaming pot back on the stove, finds the hot-dogs, opens the package, and drops them in.

He needs something, too, I say.

Milk? Cherry says.

We ain't got none, I say, feeling bad for buying the 151 when I could've bought milk.

Momma always said sugar water'd keep a little one a few hours, Pauline says. Pauline's from down in Mississippi and she always has ideas like this, pee on your hands for chapping, butter for burns, etc.

How do I get it in him? I ask.

Straw? Cherry says.

Cherry mixes the boy a drink and I sneak another myself. I can't find a straw, but Pauline volunteers a piece of her tubing. I unplug her briefly, cut a bit with Cherry's nail scissors, and go to work feeding the boy. I draw up a few drops of sugar water at a time. I put the tube in his mouth. He sucks again and again and cries between rounds. It takes forever. And the whole while I'm feeling bad that the kid's first meal is so shoddy. Deep inside I hear myself promising him that it won't happen again.

The boy yawns, rests his head on my collarbone, stares at me again with his huge eyes. I watch the pulse in the small sunken diamond on the top of his head. I feel a bit sleepy myself. But the sun is going down. I hear the late plow coming up Breakneck a second time. The boy's pee has sunk through the towels and into my leg hairs real good. I realize no matter what the weather's like and how broken the Buick is I've got to go out and get the things the boy needs.

With what, Cherry says, your good looks?

Money's a rough point between us, especially since Cherry lost her job about six months back and the unemployment's about to run out. I was never able to get in down at the plant or even any of the auto plants up in Detroit. No diploma. Born too late. Last job I had was over a year ago now, painting houses with my cousin. Even he had to let me go. People complained. Seriously, once you figured out I was the one broke into all those people's houses, would you want me to stack all your stuff in the middle of the room under a tarp?

On top of this, I've missed my last two phone calls with my parole officer. I haven't gone to the AA meetings, either. No good reason besides I got traps to check, a furnace that breaks twice a week, and I don't like people up my ass. I know the cops won't come down to the swamp unless I really fuck up or they want to have some fun. If they're looking for fun they won't take me in, they'll just harass me. So I've been pretty committed not to go past Country Lake Liquor if I can help it. But this is going to require a trip up to the Wal-Mart out on the highway because I don't think the liquor store has diapers and even if they do, how would I explain why I need them?

I shift the baby into Cherry's arms and stand up. I walk out to the lean-to and start to get bundled to head back out.

Cherry follows me, the boy passed out on her tits.

Joe, she says.

I ignore her, haul on my boots and rummage around for my hat. I'll miss the plow if I don't hurry.

Joe! she almost yells.

You're gonna wake him, I say. I fumble around on the top shelf for the gloves with leather fingertips and my kit.

Cherry says, Maybe we shouldn't go buying him things. Maybe we should leave him at the church or the police station or something. Maybe we should do it tonight so we don't get too attached to him.

She says all of this looking down into his face like she's the mother of God.

Sure, maybe, I say. Then I wait.

Or maybe we could keep him just one night, she says.

Leaving him in the cold like that, I say. That would make us no better than his parents, right?

She won't say so. She just clutches him a little tighter.

And of course I don't mention that I'll have to hit a house or two over in that fancy Wal-Mart suburb to afford the shit because she'll never have to know. I'll tell you this: almost nobody's as good at what they do as I am. I can slip into an house so seamless that it doesn't matter how many I have to hit in one week. It's because I don't get a thrill out of it like some guys I met in the therapy group for burglars I had to go to in jail. It's just a job. I never take anything big, anything more than I need, anything someone would notice missing until much later. There's a whole class of people, in fact, who are always wondering: where did that last twenty go? And they think they lost it. I'm here to tell you: they didn't. Somebody smoked their last Pall Mall. Somebody made a sandwich in their kitchen while they were in the john. I steal like their own kids, like the wife who needs an extra ten for a dozen eggs and a loaf of bread.

At least, that's how it was before they put Pauline on that coumadin her Medicaid didn't cover. That was right after Cherry and I hooked up for the first time and for two weeks straight I took any dime I could get my hands on. Love-stupid, I guess. But I swore it was my last gig. I was going to look for a real job after I got Pauline in that coumadin and before Cherry got suspicious about how I made my money. Of course, she knew. She always knows.

I walk out to the road just in time. Randy nods at me through the icy window of his truck and swings it toward me. I hop over the plow as it slides past, open the door and climb in. The truck smells of booze and the cheap cigarillo he's got clutched in his teeth.

How's it goin', man?

Good by me, I say. There's nothing else to say. The baby's not really a story I can tell, though Randy and I go way back to grade school. He's always been kind of an asshole, but he was the only one gave Cherry a real hand when I was in the clink, coming over to chop wood and all. Randy's got a record, too. Statutory, about ten years

back. He took over running the plow for the county when his dad died. Cancer in the balls. Must have been a rough storm, too, because my old buddy looks like hell. His stubble is going grey a lot faster than mine and his eyes are bloodshot like he's been drinking heavy. I been there myself, so I don't think anything of it. We used to drink together, sometimes, back when I drank with other people.

Where you headed? Up to Country Lake?

Naw, man. I need to get out to the highway.

Sure thing, he says. Headed out there after I hit Miller one last time. Roads are a shitty mess. Been everywhere today twice.

Gotta grab a few groceries at Wal-Mart, I say. A few things for Cherry, I add. I'm a little nervous.

Gonna hit the parking lot up there later, he says, if you need a ride back.

Be great, I say. Might have my hands full.

Sure thing, he says. He crushes his cigarillo in the ashtray and reaches over my knees to get into the glove compartment. He brings out a baggie of weed and papers and dangles it in front of my face with one hand while he maneuvers the truck at the intersection to shove a new pile of snow against the bank. His fingernails are thick-crusted with power-steering fluid or rust. Seems the dude's truck is shitting the bed on top of I heard he lost his girl, too, a few months back.

Naw, man. It's cool, I say, as he lifts the plow and puts the truck in reverse.

Roll me one?

I take the baggie and get down to business. My mouth waters at the smell of it, but tonight's not the night to get fucked up. If it's my one night to do right by the kid, I'd like to do it. By the time Randy gets us to the highway, I've rolled him an acceptable joint. He lights it right there at the intersection, inhaling deeply. He hands it to me, but I hold my hand up.

You sure, man?

Yep. Cherry'll blow a gasket.

Women, he says, shaking his head. Women, women, women!
He's in fine form. Like I said, I've been there, so I don't pay attention to how off he is. I just ask to be dropped at the gas station. Cherry's smokes are cheaper there, I say.

Cool, he says, holding his breath, skidding into the parking lot.
I jump out.

Meet you up to the Wal-Mart in an hour or so? he says. He blinks like a mole as the stadium lights around the gas pump's island buzz on.

Thanks, buddy, I say. An hour oughtta do it.

I watch as he skids out of the parking lot. I guess he's gotten a little loose around the bolts. I think prison must do that to a guy and I was lucky just to get jail time. I was lucky my dad just up and disappeared instead of dying slowly right before my eyes.

Once Randy's out of sight, I double back, jog across the highway. I walk along the edge of the forest like I'm headed home. When there are no cars, I slip into the trees. It's the first secret of both hunting and stealing, my dad taught me. Think like a tree. Move so slowly no one knows you're moving. Be part of the landscape.

This time of day in winter is amazing because it's already pitch black out and nobody's home from work yet, at least not people in this neighborhood, who have better jobs than down at the plant. This neighborhood's always been a great deal for a thief, too, because it's a cross between what we've got in the swamp, empty land, and what they've got in town: neighbors. You can stand in the trees for hours and wait to make your move, not like the real houses in town, where there's no place to hide. And then you can hit another house.

The backdoor of my first house faces the woods and has your standard pickable locks. All the houses here work pretty much the same and the people are predictable, too: in about sixty seconds, I'm robbing yet another guy who keeps a safe-deposit box in the closet and the key in his bedside drawer. Sure enough, there's an emergency fund. Plenty for me to take forty and not have the family starve if suddenly they ran out of canned green beans and peaches

in syrup. There's no thrill, like I said, just the small joy that comes with returning to an occupation after a long absence. I open the guy's closet to see if he has more than one pair of hunting socks. He does. Score. Mine are full of holes. I sit on the edge of the bed and double up so my feet are warm and snug. I wipe the floor near the door with the hand towel I carry in my kit. I grab an apple from the fruit bowl. Then I get the hell out of dodge.

I slip into the woods and check my watch. Six minutes. Not bad for an old guy. I'm thinking forty bucks will do it when I pass a house with the living room lit up so I can't help but see a woman handing a baby not much bigger than our boy to a man wearing a button-down shirt and a tie, just home from work, no doubt.

I stand there eating my apple, watching. The man makes a big excited face like the baby is the most surprising thing he's ever seen. The mother leans over and kisses the baby's feet. Then they settle into the couch, the three of them. And they look like one body. The guy holds out the remote and turns on the TV to reveal a newscaster standing in front of a giant map of Michigan shoving another big storm forward with his hands.

I walk down to the window on the end of the house, the one I know looks in on the smallest room. I want to see what kind of stuff these people have for their baby. Light from the hallway falls on the crib that looks more like a little prison with a mobile dangling over it. There's a high table stuffed with clothes. I put my fingers on the window and push up slightly. It's locked. These people always think that will stop a guy. Then they leave keys under fake rocks near their back doors. I slide along the edges of the house, gently turning each stone. I find the key under the ceramic sunflower near the back door.

I let myself into the far door, which leads me down into the basement. This one's unfinished, the same kind of dank grey basement I'd retreat to for hours in my twenties waiting for someone to go to sleep or leave again. I take my towel and work at getting my boots dry. Listening to make sure the TV is still on, I creep up the stairs. Stupid as a spring chicken but slick as butter, I go to the kid's room. I check

for a place to hide should somebody come in. No place, so I lock the door from inside. People always think they've accidentally done this themselves, and it gives you an extra minute to get out the window.

I pull the little flashlight out of my kit and look at the stuff that's on the table. Big pink bottle of lotion. Plastic container of wipes. Aloe-scented. On the second shelf, there's a whole stack of tiny shirts, about twenty. I unfold them to see that they have snap-on underwears attached. I pull two out of the stack. Two pairs of socks. Then I hit paydirt—I find a tiny set of red long johns in the very back near the bottom. It's risky, for sure. My dad always said: Never take anything that's one of a kind. But a kid living out near the swamp is always gonna need thermals more than a kid who lives in the land of central heating. On the side shelf there's a stack of small blankets with different animals on them. I pull one from the stack, giraffes. I toss the rest of my loot in it, roll it up, tuck it down the front of my pants, cover my crotch with my flannel, and get the hell out of dodge.

Ten minutes later, I'm wandering the endless rows of diapers in the Wal-Mart feeling like I've got the biggest set of balls in Monroe what with those baby socks crowded into my underwear. I get the diapers that say *newborn*, two blue plastic bottles, *improved natural suction*, and ten cans of formula, *gentle*. I get Cherry a carton of smokes and pick up Pauline's prescriptions. I roll my cart up to a checkout manned by some girl too young to know me and ask questions. By the time Randy's sliding into the handicap space, I'm standing out front waiting with my bag like I'm his wife or something.

Thanks, man, I say, climbing into the cab.

You betcha, he says. He pulls onto the highway, driving over the snow and ice like it isn't even there.

Everything goes along fine until the plow skids out on a patch of ice near Breakneck and my bag tips to the side and one of my cans of formula rolls out onto the seat.

Randy looks down at it. What in hell's that? he asks.

Can of milk, I say, catching it in my left hand and stuffing it back in the bag.

Yeah, but ain't that baby milk? he says.

I pretend to examine it. Shit, I say. I must have grabbed the wrong thing by accident.

Randy shakes his head, shuddering. Weird, he says.

Yeah, I say.

He looks at me funny when he drops me on Breakneck, like he wants to ask me something more about it, but he doesn't. I reach out and shake his hand.

See ya, buddy, I say.

In the house, it's all chaos again. Cherry's pacing by the door. She nearly throws the kid at me when I walk in.

He's starving, she says. You were gone forever.

She and Pauline make the boy a bottle, boiling nipples and warming formula. I get him all dressed up in a diaper, a pair of socks, and one of those T-shirts. The crotch comes nearly to his toes. I fumble with the snaps. Then I pull on his long johns. The arms and legs hang past his feet and fingers. But at long last, the four of us sit on the couch together. I touch the nipple of the bottle to the kid's lips and he hooks right on, sucks wildly, grunts with pleasure.

Pauline pulls her mask away from her face. You ask me, she says, I think it's a message from the universe or something. A gift.

She can't say more because she's choked up. Pauline's lived one hell of a life of drinking and whoring and I've never seen her get weepy about anything. She paid for that trailer with blood and sweat and turned out four decent kids. Her breathing and the boy's suckling make a nice rhythm. Cherry puts her arm around my neck. Everything is so perfect I never want it to end. I keep picturing stripping him back down, handing him over to the cops, trying to make up answers to their questions about something they can't understand.

That night, the boy sleeps between us for the first time, but we don't sleep. We take turns watching him, waking up to feed him. I thump his little back and pace the room with him. Snow and wind rock the trailer, but it's as if we're safe in the hull of a great ship.

When the sun comes up orange in the room Cherry's sitting by the window, staring out at the snow.

He'll end up going to fosters, she says.

After my dad left and my mom died I went to the system because there was no place else for me to go. I remember how one of the fosters liked to whip us out by the leaf-burning barrel in the fall. How I snuck off. How I *could* sneak off because my dad taught me the skills to fend for myself in any economy.

Look, I say. If its own parents did this to it, how do we know some foster family's gonna be any better? The only chance this kid has is us. We're his chance.

They'll never choose us, Joe, she says. She raises her arm and points to the wall, to me, to herself as if our very existence is proof enough. Never, she says.

Yeah, Cherry, but how will anyone ever know the baby's not ours to begin with? You been home now for months. How could anyone say you weren't knocked up the whole time?

I've been thinking about this all night. I've been standing over pans with bottles of formula and dripping some on my wrist and offering it up to the boy and the whole time all I can think is: this is my boy I'm holding, our boy who's waking up again, waving his fist.

I press Cherry to me. She doesn't say anything for a long while. Finally she makes some small noise deep inside that I hear. And I know we aren't going to take the boy to town. We aren't going to sell him out. And in that moment, I love Cherry Jenkins more than I ever have in all the years since I was ten.

For the next few weeks, we hardly do a thing that isn't about the boy. We settle into a real routine with him. Cherry watches him in the early mornings when I go to the swamp to check my muskrat traps. He sleeps on my chest all afternoon. Cherry keeps him in the evenings if I have to go out. I get up with him in the night. I'm hardly drinking at all. Before we know it Pauline's referring to herself, in the third person, as Grandma. As in: Grandma is gonna give the baby

boy a big old kiss oh yes she is! We've tested calling the boy Joey. It hasn't quite caught on, maybe because we're still scared.

The next ice storm is a real doozy and we lose our electric. The plow thrashes outside and I wish for the second or third time that folks would find another way out to the highway, leave Breakneck alone. Finally, on his third pass, Randy parks the plow down at the end of our driveway and starts walking up.

What're we gonna do? Cherry says.

We're still trying to figure out how to introduce the boy in town, get our story straight. In winter, if you live out in the swamp, no one really bothers after you, asks where you've been. You never even see your neighbors. But once it gets to be March, you don't emerge, people might start thinking you've been done in by the gas heater.

Maybe we just tell him, Cherry says. He's not the worst guy to tell, is he?

I look at Pauline, who's got the same gut I do. She hooks her thumb toward the back of the trailer. It's been a rough day for her breathing because she can't do a nebulizer without electricity.

Go to the bedroom, I say to Cherry. I toss her a bottle that's not quite warm, but it'll have to do. Keep him quiet, I say. Your mom and I can handle this.

I nod at Pauline, who nods back.

I know Randy's thinking we'll ask him in and give him a drink and I can't think of a way to say no. Everybody out by the swamp gives the plow guy a drink. It's tradition. So while Cherry scurries off, I open the door and Randy stomps in, tracking snow all over the carpet.

How's it goin', buddy? Ain't seen you in a coon's age!

Good enough, I say, slapping him on the back. It's getting late and we've only got a few candles lit so I'm hoping he doesn't notice all the baby stuff scattered around.

It's a shitty mess out there, he says, slapping me back. When he raises his arm I can smell that he hasn't showered. His beard has grown and there's food in it. Being a bachelor, I think, doesn't suit

this guy. He reeks of booze, but he lurches forward when I bring out cups.

Want a little sniff of something? I ask.

Sure thing, he says.

I start working at the fuse box, rummaging around to find the hollow. But I'm nervous, and I knock the bottle down inside the paneling. It smashes onto the concrete foundation.

A muffled wail goes up in the bedroom.

Randy looks in the direction of the noise. That a baby? he asks, his eyes widening.

I look at Pauline again, but her eyes are turned toward the ceiling as if to say: What can you do? You have to tell him now.

Sure is, buddy, I say. He's a drunk. Maybe he won't remember or think much of it.

A baby, he says. Whose?

Well, ours, of course, I say. Then I yell to Cherry: Bring Joe Jr., out for a minute, hon, so Randy can see.

Cherry comes creeping from the hallway, terrified. I tip my head to the side, tighten my lips. Calm down, I mouth.

Since when you got a baby? Randy snorts. You was in my plow a month ago with baby milk falling out your bag saying you didn't have no baby.

So much for the theory that drunks don't remember things.

I'm fumbling around behind the fusebox again, hoping beyond hope that Pauline hasn't gotten the rest of my stash. But she's shaking her head no, pointing to the space behind the fridge. I go over, start digging there.

Sure we do, Randy, Cherry says. I been pregnant since right around when I quit work.

Let me see him, Randy says.

Cherry holds him up in her arms just as I put a glass of whiskey in Randy's hands. He sips, steps closer to look at the baby.

Cute little guy, he says, absently. He backs away. And I understand this, because I would have done the same thing myself a month ago.

Why didn't you say? he asks, stumbling as he tries to navigate his way to the door.

Insurance reasons, I say. Out on Breakneck, it's a good enough excuse for keeping any secret.

Randy looks confused.

Health insurance, I say. Cherry lost her job, I point out, hoping these random facts will add up to some kind of story in his head.

Oh, he says.

We sit around and try to make conversation, but my old buddy's in such a state with liquor there isn't much to talk about.

After he leaves Pauline pulls her mask off her face and says: County's got no right letting that boy drive for a living.

Next morning at dawn I swaddle the boy in old sweaters and a hat and scarf and rig him to my chest using an old backpack. I put a warm bottle in my hunting sack and we go into the swamp. It's a good day, too. We get three muskrat and locate a new den. I explain to the boy what we're looking for: bubble trails, mud under the ice. We set up a 110 Conibear, wire it up nice and steady. People don't know anymore that there's an art to trapping, but there is. A friend of mine in the clink said that they're even eating raccoon and beaver up in Detroit now that the city's disappearing.

We're headed back to the house for lunch—the boy's cheeks are getting cold, the air picking up—when I feel someone else moving in the swamp. I still myself until I can hear the boy's breathing. I turn. There's someone at the far edge near the road, a figure in black. A man thrashing around, waving something in the air, walking a few feet, then crouching down to touch the ground.

Following the line of trees, I get closer. It's a shovel the man is waving. And the man is Randy. And right away I know what he's looking for. I realize I've known all along. And my knees almost buckle with the weight of it.

I turn and drop the rats and my traps and hold the boy close to my chest and run.

That bastard was looking for the boy, I tell Cherry. The boy's body, I say, swallowing and trying to catch my breath. I crane my neck around to look at the boy's face, as if the very mention of the result of another version of history is enough to turn back time, kill him.

Cherry opens her mouth wide and then covers it with her hands. She reaches out, unclips the clasps, and lifts Joey out of the backpack. She presses him to her chest, kisses his little head over and over.

There's only one way he would know to look there, I say. And what else would he be looking for?

No, she says.

I grab them both and pull them close to me. We're like one body, now, like a real family.

We have to leave, I say. We have to leave Breakneck.

What? she says. Us? I can see the famous Cherry Jenkins rage machine about to turn crank and flare.

I've known Randy a long time, Cherry, and I'm telling you, something ain't right with him these days.

She says, he leaves a baby to die and we're the ones run out of town?

Except, we don't get out of town fast enough because the Buick's a wreck and I have to hit a few houses to afford to fix it and Pauline needs her prescriptions. By nightfall, we've started to doubt. Think it's a coincidence. Maybe Randy was out there after muskrat, we start to say. We have no choice. I can't get us out of there. And you know how when you're helpless you'll convince yourself you were crazy to think you needed whatever you need? That's us. And though for the next five days I work through the night and Cherry pulls the drapes to peek out about four-hundred times, we try to pretend it's all normal.

On the sixth day, Randy shows up, stomping his way onto the front porch, hauling some girl behind him. He's carrying a shotgun and he doesn't knock. They just walk into the kitchen while we're sitting there eating our corn flakes and toast. They stand in the entryway.

This here's Nadene, Randy says.

The girl is skinny and pale with dark circles around her eyes, the same eyes our boy has. She's got two ratty black braids tucked into her faded blue ski jacket. She can't be more than seventeen. She stares steadily but somewhat blankly at the boy, who's snuggled into Cherry's arms taking his after-breakfast snooze. I try to stay calm.

We know why they've come. But Randy's taking deep breaths, searching for the words to tell us, anyway. I wonder if it's so hard for him because he wants the boy back so badly or because he just doesn't want to be the guy who ditched the boy in the first place.

Cherry draws herself tighter around the boy as if to say it will be over her dead body that Randy will touch so much as one of our boy's toes. I feel my heart shrinking. It could get ugly before I have a chance to come up with a way to make everyone happy.

Thing is, Randy says to me, I think you been lying to me.

He punctuates each word with a short, jerky wave of his shotgun, which he's holding by the base of the barrel. People out on Breakneck always think that they need to have a gun in their hand to get their point across. I've never been one of those, so of course, our gun is buried somewhere under the bed. Not even sure if it's loaded.

And I don't much care for liars, Randy continues, his whole enormous body waving back and forth in an invisible wind. He points his finger, trying to think of what to say next.

The girl shoves him aside and he falls into the empty chair at our table. Sit down, R, she says. For Christ's sake.

Watch it, Cherry says, but the girl's got no idea it's about Christ. She thinks Cherry's getting up in her face so she immediately starts bobbing and weaving the way women do when they're in a fight. One of her braids falls out of her shirt. It's tied with a bit of yellow yarn.

That there baby you got. That baby's our'n, the girl says.

I'm thinking I remember seeing her face before. She's not the one I met at the Railway a year or so back, the one I heard left Randy back in September. She looks like one of Con Waverly's daughters, the little

girls who lived in a trailer off Breakneck about a mile out from the one I grew up in. Her jacket's too small, would maybe fit a child. Her wrists stick out, red from the cold.

I'm still trying to figure out what gentle thing to do, but Cherry's already had it, I can see, and she says in a low voice: You always in the habit of leaving your possessions on the side of the road?

The girl heaves a fast sigh and says, You don't know my life, okay? What it's like to be pregnant and not have nobody know! Don't you be all up in here judging me. She turns to Randy. See? she says, I knew they'd fucking leap to blaming!

At the sound of her screaming the boy starts to scream, too, and Randy leaps up out of his chair and shakes the gun at us. Fuck off! he says. It ain't your baby, so you got no right to say!

Well, I say, trying to sound reasonable, like a father talking to a teenager, Just about everybody might have something to say about this, Randy. Just about everybody. Probably the cops, too—

Don't you fucking threaten me, Joe! He reaches up around his collar and scratches at himself fiercely.

I know he's right, so I try to appeal to his sense of fairness. I say, He would have died if it weren't for us.

Yeah, well he wouldn't exist if we didn't make him, the girl says smugly, drawing her lips back and flaring her nostrils.

I get up, slam the chair out of the way, and say, You fucking tried to kill him!

I see, out of the corner of my eye, Pauline raise her finger in warning. He's got a gun, her finger says. He's crazy, it says. She pulls her mask off her face and says to Randy, Would you and your girl like a cup of coffee? Piece of toast?

I see the girl sudden and quick eye the plate, purse her lips. And I stole that damned bread. But here's a reminder that there's always somebody poorer than you.

I hold the plate out to her. Seriously, I say.

Cherry glares at both me and Pauline. And I love her for that fierceness. But Pauline's right.

The girl eats the toast carefully, with her eyes on me, like I might take it back, or maybe laugh at her for wolfing it, which is clearly what she wants to do. I wonder how our boy managed to grow inside of her.

Randy's working up to say something, emitting a whole new series of grunts. He finally gets his shit together and says, I freaked, okay? I didn't know what to do and Nadene, the whole time she was screaming she didn't want it and then she was passed out and I just fucking freaked but I didn't mean to hurt it, Joe. I swear I didn't.

He says all of this, but he doesn't move to put his gun in the corner of the doorframe, which is how someone on Breakneck would say that he was mistaken, he was sorry, he's ready to negotiate without threats. Some kid down the way blew his foot off come tromping in a door where his dad was having a meeting that had gone well.

Once back in grade school Randy and I went hunting for muskrat. We found one that had managed to swim its way out to the middle of the swamp with the trap on its leg. I hauled it in, nine years old and cursing Conibear's bullshit "sudden kill" advertising. But Randy, he laughed, shoved me aside. He tossed the thing out into the water to watch it swim frantically, dragging its cage to its death.

He and I negotiate, with that gun over his knees, what you might call a custody arrangement, similar to something the courts might cook up, similar to being Godparents, and Cherry cries the whole time because she thinks I'm dealing for real. Randy and I shake on it. Like my dad always said: Shake if you have to, but cross your fingers behind your back because the other guy's probably crossing his fingers, too.

I look into Cherry's eyes, try to send her the message. I lift the boy from her arms. She sits totally stunned for a minute. Then she runs to the bedroom, screaming, Go to fucking hell! And that's pretty strong commentary from a woman like Cherry Jenkins.

I see Randy's finger tremble on the gun.

I put the boy in the girl's arms. You know how to hold him? I ask, relaxing his neck into the soft of her elbow.

She pouts when he starts to whimper, says, Got tons of little ones around my daddy's house. She looks down into his face. But he's the prettiest, she says. Ain't he?

I nod. My throat feels like someone's choking me.

They stand to go, and the terrible panic rises. I can't get a breath. I look at the boy, and I try to tell him with my eyes, too, that my promise is true. If there's anything I want my son to know, it's that there is such a thing as a no-fingers-crossed-real-deal between fathers and sons, a deal you strike and keep.

Will your wife be okay? Nadene asks.

She'll get used to it, I say.

But the fact is, she won't have to. Because that whole day while she's crying in the bed, I'm packing the car. Soon as it's dark, I'm outside Randy's windows, looking for one unlocked or loose. When I find it, I let myself into the room where the girl sleeps. She's still wearing her jacket, her leg bent up on the mattress, her hair untied. I wish I had something more for the first mother of my son, but all I can do is slip fifty dollars in the back pocket of her jeans. I don't usually pray, but I say something like a prayer to her for what I'm taking. I know better than to think it's for her own good.

While I'm at it, I thank my dad for teaching me that if I ever needed to get lost fast, I-75 was a straight shot to the Florida Keys where it was hard to find a guy. I thank Pauline for suffering the cold air, for stroking Cherry's shoulder while they wait in the car down on Breakneck. I pray to Cherry because she never asks for more than I can give her.

But most of all, I'm praying to the boy. Because the first time he looked at me, he saw right into my bones. He saw everything about me, how once, after my father left, I punched my own mother in the mouth. He even saw how, for just a minute, I was going to leave him there on the side of the road and let him die, but I didn't. He let me want something better for all of us.

I creep through Randy's dark and stinking trailer to the living room where they've pushed a couch to the wall to make a crib. Randy

sleeps nodding in a chair, guarding the boy, the gun across his knees. The boy's eyes are open in the dark and I can see them shining, like he's been there waiting for me, knowing I would come. He kicks his feet like he always does when I bend down to get him. I scoop him up in my arms. I stand there for a minute in the cold air just holding him to my chest. Then, we take the Breakneck road, get the hell out of dodge.



INTERVIEW WITH CHITRA DIVAKARUNI

Joy Yokoy, Rachel Savini & Emma Roles

We sit in a crowded restaurant, conversations buzzing, waiters whizzing past. The door opens and in walks author Chitra Divakaruni. She warmly shakes each of our hands before sitting down.

Chitra Divakaruni is an award-winning, bestselling author of seventeen books and counting. She has been published in over fifty magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*. She has been featured in *The Best American Short Stories* and *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*. She is a Creative Writing Professor at the University of Houston. When asked if she has a favorite piece of work, she is unable to answer. “They’re all like my children. If I had to say, I guess I love the baby the most.”

She divides her time between teaching classes and stocking up on ideas for her next projects. Between glances at the menu, she tells us how she keeps a writer’s notebook. “Anytime I come up with a writing idea, I write it down there. The wonderful thing about that is when I’m done with a project, I always have new ideas for my next projects.”

Divakaruni has a preferred routine of waking up early to write and meditating to assist her creative process. “Meditation is really good for me because it calms the mind and it’s a good place for creativity.”

Most writers suffer from perfectionism, but Divakaruni seems to have a handle on it, admitting to us that “not everything I write is going to be good, because I have to do a lot of revision and I’ll throw away a lot of stuff.”

She asks us if we are familiar with the phenomenon of the “fictive dream.” She smiles at our puzzled looks and proceeds to explain to us the dream landscape writers fall into.

“Keep in touch with your writing and stay in that fictive dream—that’s what I try to do. Because that world is very real to us and we feel that world if we keep in touch with it. If I do fall out of it, it’s hard; I have to do a lot reading and get into the mindset of the characters.”

Writing novels isn't an easy process. Divakaruni is constantly working on several projects at once. Finishing a single novel—with all the researching and drafting—takes around two to three years.

“What would you say is the most difficult part of your writing process?” we ask.

“Everything,” Chitra says with a chuckle. “And nothing really gets any easier because each project is different.” She thinks for a moment and then continues, “If I were to say one thing, it would be figuring out the voice. In the beginning, I rewrite my first chapter over and over again until I can find the voice. Once I get it, things start flowing and my books become somewhat voice-driven.”

Writing a novel is no easy task. It often requires multiple drafts to get the voice of the characters just right.

“I like to try all kinds of perspectives before I decide on a voice,” she says. “A lot of times, I'll speak out what my characters are saying and hear it out. I tell my students that if you take more time in the beginning, it'll save you a lot of time at the end.”

She also advises her students to step away from their work to get a better idea of what's working and what isn't. “We're too close to our work,” she explains. “Everything seems perfect, but it's good to take a break after a few chapters or scenes and show it to somebody and ask, ‘What are you getting from this?’ and hear them out.

“One of the things that has been really good for my writing is that we have a writers' group,” she says.

“It's really nice because they're all people who went to [University of Houston] so everyone is close and they can be really honest. It's usually a once-a-month conference call over Skype, about one to two hours.

“So first I'll show things to my writers' group. Then I send it to my agent; my agent is very hands-on, and wants to read everything that I write. There's a couple of other readers in her office, they'll also read. Then it'll go to my editor.”

Instead of planning extensively like some other authors, Divakaruni allows her stories to take their own shape.

“When I start writing, I’ll have an overall idea about what I want it to be like, but I won’t plan out the little details because I want those to be spontaneous.” With a smile, she says, “Sometimes I’ll be pleasantly surprised when a new idea comes up while I’m revising. I’m always happy to rewrite it because it’s usually an idea that improves the book or character or scene.”

She takes a bite of her appetizer, fried eggplant and tofu. “I personally don’t like to plan too much, but everyone writes differently. I know some wonderful writers who have to plan everything out. But there comes a certain point where I know what’s going to happen and then I’ll plan it out.” Her face lights up and she eagerly says, “Another thing that I do—and I often tell this to my students—is that when you finish your first draft, even if you didn’t plan before, look at it and make an outline. Because when you make the outline, you will see the gaps and what needs to be added in. It’s like a reverse outline and it’s helped several of my students.”

Divakaruni’s stories have a big focus on family. Her stories are inspired by the merge between Indian and American culture, often playing with the tension in mother/daughter relationships. But her favorite familial relationship to write about is the grandparent/grandchild relationship. “That’s important for me to explore,” she explains. “I’ve written about it several times. Or between cousins, as in *Sister of My Heart*. Or the joint-family structure. What’s the bride’s relationship with other women in that family?”

She enjoys the freedom that comes with being a fiction writer, especially when it comes to writing about families. “When I’m writing a family story, it’s not my family. So I can make them go through whatever terrible or wonderful thing they need to go through and they can be as complicated [as they need] and make wrong decisions if they need to.”

Many of Divakaruni’s writings have been adapted into films and plays. Between sips of hot jasmine tea and waiting for our food, she tells us a little bit about her experiences.

“One of the things that I had to learn early on was to let go,” she says. “The book is mine, but everything else that is a spin-off is someone else’s creative understanding. Once I figured that out I was perfectly fine. I like to talk to the directors early in the process to tell them what was in my mind and to hear what’s in their mind, but I’m never invested in those things creatively.

“I’m always happy because it brings the book to a different audience. Now sometimes it’s problematic . . . At the end of the day, what’s the worst thing that can happen? People will go see the movie and people will say the book was—”

Laughing, we say in unison, “The book was better!”

“And if the movie was better, then great! It will make lots of people buy the book!”

As successful as her career has been, she didn’t always know that she wanted to be a writer. “I only started writing after I got to [the United States]. I think the process of immigration really made me become a writer. I wrote to make sense of this whole new world.”

As Divakaruni comes from a traditional Bengali family, the move from India to the United States was drastic, which she remarks on as we shuffle our plates around to make room for all of our steaming dishes. There were very few Indians in Ohio when Divakaruni’s family moved there, and it redefined the way her family saw success.

“When I was brought up, what my mother wanted for me most of all (although she did want me to become educated) was that I would have a good marriage, a good family, and bring up my children well.” She jokingly adds, “And of course, get along with my mother-in-law.

“My mother wanted to become a writer, but she never did. She was never able to complete her education, and she was also expected to take care of the family. After we were all grown, she started writing little things and getting them published in the local Indian magazine. I think that made her happy.” Divakaruni smiles warmly. “She was a good writer. She wrote in Bengali, her mother tongue. I think she

was pleased that I became a writer. But we didn't ever talk about our writing, which was probably a good thing.”

“My younger son actually writes,” she says, “but he has told me that he doesn't show me most of it. And even the things that he shows me he tells me, ‘I don't want comments, I'm just sharing,’ and I'm okay with that.”

Not only is Divakaruni a talented and prolific writer, she is an active advocate and ally for survivors of domestic abuse, especially women belonging to her own culture.

“My early writings like *Arranged Marriages* and *Mistress of Spices* are stories about domestic violence. It's intense working with domestic violence, so it's bound to influence you as a person and as a writer.”

She leans in. “It's made me want to write more and more about womens' issues and women who undergo a lot of challenges, not always just domestic violence. Generally, the women I write about are going through challenges, which in terms of story is also good. It's dramatic.”

Yet such complicated and dark subject matter isn't always easy to work with, she explains. “It's difficult to write about, especially when you've worked in the area and you've seen so many bad abusers who in fiction we're always saying—which I'm sure is true in real life too—that people are complex. People aren't just good or bad. You see some of those perpetrators and you can't think anything good about them. But to write about it, you have to overcome that and they still have to be complex. That's a challenge.”

She goes on to talk more about activism and writing and how the two come together for writers. “. . . [I]t's a fine line. We want to write about issues, but we want to make it complex. And those two things are fighting against each other. When you speak about an issue or maybe write a nonfiction essay about it, you are trying to get people to change their minds about it, and they need to understand what really goes on. Literature works differently from that. In literature, we

want people to make up their own minds instead of telling them what to think. You'll always have to walk the tightrope between the two."

We take a few moments to enjoy our dishes before Divakaruni tells us about a current social issue that is prevalent in her work, both in the beginning of her career and now. "I want to write good stories about immigrants. I want to show they're human and they're not perfect, and neither should they be asked to perfect. I think the answer is to make those characters really compelling and complex so that even though they are not perfect and have problems, readers can be sympathetic to them. It's tough to do."

She takes another moment, scooping up the last morsels from her plate.

"I haven't solved the whole conundrum," Divakaruni admits.

As our time with her comes to an end, she insists that we all get take-home boxes, as she hates to waste good food. We scrape our leftovers into the paper boxes, and out of curiosity we ask what her Hogwarts house is. She laughs. "I think I am Gryffindor. If I were Slytherin, would I tell you?"

FICTION

Emily Fritzler

What if I told you
this is a hallucination?
The rain you feel
Dripping on your face as you sit on a park bench
Is actually the feeling of concrete
Showering over you as everything is torn apart?
Are your surroundings changing?
Are you coming down?
Everything is conjured and manipulated to suit the plot.
Nothing you see is real.
But you're still you.
You're exactly you.
Just the way it was written

HOME IMPROVEMENT

Caitlin Hill

Smokestack Ash

I grew up watching paint dry. Jungle Trail, Oat Straw, Basic Khaki, Morocco Red, Preservation Plum—every spectrum of the color wheel has made an appearance on the walls we declare home. No matter how long or short its stay, color became our sixth member. And the heavy catalogue books that held the uncountable shades became my mother's favorite child.

To her, painting is a sport—a marathon of trial to avoid error. The overwhelming possibilities keep her awake well into the night while she flips through books of rainbow. She squints at her test squares against walls at different levels of light. The calm and relaxed greens prompt screaming-matches and sudden fits of hysteric tears. The somber, natural beiges threaten divorce. And the day that her yellowed-white sensible sneakers and blue tattered, oversized Butler T-shirt—both streaked with years of paint—make their way down from her closet is the same day her family slinks away, making space for the relationship that is my mom and her colors.

The process takes months, beginning by meticulously picking out the perfect color. She has a three-step system: shade, tint, and temperature. During any of her projects, we witness rectangular color samples stuck in random nooks of the house, and taped in rows along walls—an army of tints that are so similar, an untrained eye could not

see where one color stops and another begins. But to her, the dividing line is glaring. And the single drop of white or black or red or blue that alters these colors is the slight amount that occupies her nightmares, haunted by the idea that all of this is permanent.

I spent the majority of my childhood in the house my family moved into a year before I was born, and it was in that house that my mother's obsession flourished. She tolerated the past residents' wallpaper, musty drapes, and stomped-on carpets before she was able to slowly begin making the house her own. My dad knocked down the north-facing wall to add on a larger garage, a laundry room, office, and bathroom once my siblings and I were all able to walk and entertain—though not the wisest choice, as each of us explored the construction zone and received injuries that would be our permanent scars of the remodel. Mine is on my toe from stepping on a nail, holding the memory of my holding up building progress while my tears soaked into the plywood and the dishwater blond hair I inherited from my mother.

Gradually, the existing structure fell victim to my mother's eye. She only installed new carpet in the addition, but what she lacked in fresh fabric, she gained in fake hardwood and a faux marble entryway. New cabinets were installed, which she adored. New countertops were set, which she hated. She ripped into the navy wallpaper in the dining room, replacing it with clean strokes of lust-filled burgundy. She slashed the purple wallpaper in the bathroom and covered over the musty white bedrooms. She experimented with dark green accent walls in the living room.

She combed over that house, piece-by-piece. New furniture trickled in, rooms were rearranged, and the fresh-paint smell was constant. But not once did she ever claim that house as perfect.

Electric Sunshine

We alternate Thanksgivings and Christmases between my father's family in the hometown he never left, and my mother's family in her hometown—a small riverside community in North Dakota that

worships Lewis and Clark. It became tradition to spend the Christmas Eves we were in North Dakota with my aunt and her family in her suburban home eating their “famous” chicken wings and chili, awaiting the wrapping paper warzone.

As my aunt’s kids gradually moved on, she and my uncle started their own remodeling. In the time between my family’s visits, the rooms of that house evolved and square footage accumulated. The abrasive, masculine blue theme I had grown accustomed to slowly mellowed out, making way for an established melody of sandy tones in a house that used to barely hold the entire family. Now it has a room just for a Baby Grand piano.

I was a high school freshman during the first Christmas Eve after the addition, and my aunt gave my mother a tour, with my grandmother at their heels. I studied the trio from my claimed spot on the leather couch, braiding my bright yellow hair as I observed. I watched my mom brush her fingers along the walls while she commented on the texture and the color’s congruence with the shag carpet.

“Did you paint this yourself?” my mom asked.

My aunt chuckled. “No way, we hired painters for the whole house.”

“They did such a nice job,” my grandma commented. “Don’t you think so, Connie?”

My mom looked at my grandma, and then glanced over the walls. I didn’t have to be next to her to tell that she was looking closely at the corners and edges, searching for mistakes and remnants of an accidental collision of brush and ceiling. None of those things would be there. I knew because I had looked for them myself.

“They did,” my mom eventually answered.

Red Hot Rhythm

A large, framed family photograph we took when I was 16 is perched atop my parents’ entertainment center. I look at it every time I go home. All three kids are aligned behind our parents. The entire family is smiling and relaxed, my sister’s arm leaning on our

father's right shoulder, my mother's hand on his left. The scene looks natural.

But the reality isn't natural. The day of the photo, my brother was laughing obnoxiously, as he always did. My sister stood there quietly, making sure her hair was parted exactly right. And then there was me, in the middle. While trying to ignore my brother's comments and my sister's chatter, I tugged at the clothes I was forced to wear and positioned myself so I was nearly hidden by my father's head.

My mother was facing us until the last second of every shot, doing a final check of her wardrobe selection. She had the pieces laid out on her bed for weeks to match up the turquoises and browns and burnt oranges that her family would wear. We were a perfect blend of the peace and love of the blue, and the optimism and enthusiasm of the orange. The only anomaly was the glint of unnatural apple red atop my head, standing out like a stoplight during rush hour.

After a few test shots, my mother darted behind the camera to see if she needed to make any adjustments. She glanced at me and noted offhandedly how much nicer my smile had become, less strained and toothy. And for one beat, my heart dropped in anger while springing up in joy, the emotions colliding and leaving an ache.

From the moment I was pulled into this world by my feet, I didn't match. Backwards, upside-down, and breathless for fifteen seconds, I was not the model birth. I was not my brother before me, a blond-haired, blue-eyed, perfect bundle of joy. And I was not my sister after me, who nearly fell onto the floor of the Emergency Waiting Room. I was the one who left the hospital with physical souvenirs from my roller-coaster ride through the birth canal—ears that didn't match, ballerina ankles, and claustrophobia. I was difficult.

As I grew up, I felt my mom's eyes—trained with years of distinguishing right from wrong—zero in on me. My mother knew how to study, select, perfect. Anything less than flawless needed to change. When it came to who I had the potential to be, she often flipped through her book of remodeling possibilities and picked her favorites. But she was stuck with the one she had—a room she could never

paint, no matter how much she wanted to. A whole book of colors she could merely look at, never own. But being immobilized never stopped her from trying.

I practiced that smile to myself until I had the muscles it required memorized, so within the split second it took for the camera to capture a moment, I could smile for her how she liked it best—jaw unclenched, tongue pushed to the roof of my mouth, heart burning.

Warm Mocha

Buying a 1970s farmhouse when I started high school was both my mother's greatest dream and most stressful nightmare. This building was her chance to gut and remodel layer-by-layer to match her vision. Pyramids of paint cans piled as she perfected the art of complimenting and placing accent colors. She textured all the walls the way she had always envied in other homes. She finally had carpet from a decade that didn't hold her birth year, and countertops that she moderately enjoyed.

My high school graduation was my mom's chance to show off all of her improvements. In a lull between guests, I checked my appearance in the mirror in the deep burgundy entryway. I pulled my fingers through my curled brunette tresses, placing the stray strands back into position while I noticed my grandmother sitting at the same table I had left her at hours earlier. She sat still, silently sipping her fifteenth cup of coffee as she watched us. In those eyes was familiar calculation.

My mother had given my grandmother the grand tour of the dream home when she arrived the day before. Mom anxiously shuffled her around every room, using the voice she used only in my grandmother's presence. I observed my mother quietly from the sidelines—she hung around a room just a beat too long, waiting for words that would never come.

The tour ended in the basement. "I just continued the same color from the stairwell down here—it seemed to flow a lot better than doing something different. And we're going to be putting a bathroom

over there,” she said, eagerly pointing out the far corner near the entrance to the crawl space. “Someday,” she tacked on.

Grandma nodded, and repeated the only thing she had said the entire tour, “Mhm, very nice.”

The corner of Mom’s mouth twitched downward, working to stay expressionless while she ushered everyone back upstairs.

Gold

That “someday” basement bathroom was constructed the summer after my freshman year of college, the same year my mother was suddenly a prisoner of her own body. For months she nursed a series of health complications that often left her immobile. Her back cried, her thighs tore, and her knees buckled. Her sole position of comfort was lying atop her exercise ball while she worked to convince us of wild diagnoses.

Painting was impossible, though this didn’t stop her from trying. She only surrendered upon my arrival in May—a pair of able hands with nothing to do for the next three months, exposing her limitations.

“What color did you pick? Tan?” I asked, a stab at the rest of the basement’s recurring color scheme—tan, lighter tan, and beige. But she would never refer to them as such; they were probably Pacific Beach, Prairie Dog Brown, and Camel’s Hump.

“No,” she replied, ignoring my sass. “An off-white called—.”

“She kept debating between splotches that I swore were the same,” my father interjected.

“They were so different,” she shot back. “Some were warmer, some were cooler. It’s so subtle that it makes it hard to pick the right one, especially with the blue linens. Vanilla Custard is my best shot.”

“Sounds white,” I muttered under my breath.

She took me down to the basement to coach me through her step-by-step pristine painting method, starting me off with a primer. Even though it was a brand new room, she insisted that the texture material on the walls was yellowish and needed to be primed. I had a laundry list of precautions—always cover the floor with a blanket

or a towel, go around the corners and edges with a brush before the roller, watch out for the toilet hookups and exposed light, don't get paint on anything wooden. Although I was holding the paintbrush, I felt her grasp around my wrist, untrusting. I felt her when I didn't have the floor completely covered, I felt her when I got paint on the toilet hookups, and I felt her in the closet. The closet was too large for such a small bathroom, yet too tiny for a person to comfortably paint in. I painted myself into a trap, unable to turn, bend, or reach without scraping some part of my body along wet paint.

My mom came down to watch when I got to the second coat of Vanilla Custard. "I'm not really sure about this color anymore," she said, squinting at my strokes. "It looks too cool. Kind of blue."

I bit my tongue. I shouldn't have been surprised; she would doubt any color selection halfway into the first coat. We still don't talk about The Actual Mistake of 2007—the only time she completely changed her color after she had already started.

She sighed, either at her decision or at my lack of response, and continued to watch me roll on the paint. The roller—where most painters allow themselves some freedom—is just as meticulous. Up, down, and repeat until the surface is entirely covered. There cannot be one drop out of place, one nick, a skewed stroke, or a mere hint of a missed spot.

"The second coat is always the worst," she commented. "You can't tell where you've been."

But she didn't hate the second coat as much as she let on. Applying the coat is arduous, but the difficulty is a sign she's succeeded. The near inability to distinguish where she has and hasn't painted means she can no longer tell where these walls have been before her brush touched the surface.

My dad took me down to the finished bathroom once he put in the toilet and vanity, and my mom had arranged her towels and curtains. With everything in place, it was hard to imagine that the bathroom wasn't always there, just like this.

"Wow," I said. "It looks amazing."

“It does,” he agreed. “But—,” he started.

“But.”

“She thinks it clashes with the white in the shower curtain and the threading on the towels,” he sighed.

“I would really like to know where she gets this stuff.”

“She knows what she’s doing. Even if she doesn’t think so,” he said. “She always gets it right, she just has to go through her process to get there.”

I nodded, hardly listening. I was busy taking in all of the things about my parents’ new bathroom that my mom would eventually notice, like she always does. The light fixture she picked was matted in a way that made the bulbs inside glow like lit icicles. The rays vibrated off the walls, bringing out its cool tones and making the small room seem larger. The beams of color found their home in the shower curtain and towels, the various shades of cobalt within them mixing with the accents of brown and tan, becoming the perfect supporting colors in the harmony. The Vanilla Custard screamed happiness, purity, and sincerity. It was impossible to remember the space as an empty cube made of sheetrock.

This color did for this room what color does—covers up anything from old, shabby chairs and ugly, overbearing walls, to the white nicks and dirt in our fingernails. A tin pail of thick paste that we can alter however we choose gives us the chance to make something beautiful. Fresh, clean, and—for a moment—completely untouched. The selection is a process of learning who we are, searching through a plethora of paint splotches and tears for that one that cries out our name. And we can keep remodeling and repainting and nitpicking and fixing, but out of all of those ridiculous paint names, none are titled “The Perfect Color.” Defining what that color is and giving it a hex code is impossible. No matter how many words we speak for it, or however many affirmations we seek, everything falls on what the color says for itself. The subtle notes that bring the variety of tones and temperatures and feelings together make a song, blending into the walls and furniture that are the background of our lives and becoming our soundtrack. One of those

unbroken compositions where we can't tell where one chord ends and another begins, blurring the line between who we were and who we are.

So maybe that perfect color will be a yellow? Linked to releasing Serotonin, it makes our brains happy and improves concentration. But if it's too strong, it can cause fatigue and short tempers. Then, if not that, possibly a red—the color of love. So strong, it stimulates the heartbeat and quickens our breathing. But it leads to stress when heavily exposed, causing frustration and provoking anger. Or maybe brown. It's earthy and deep, solid and reliable. Rugged. But try too hard, and it leads to sadness.

My dad stepped out of the bathroom, leaving me alone in the room that shone like the Arctic and rang like Mozart. While I scanned my eyes around the walls, I caught a glimpse of my hair in the vanity mirror, framing the face of the painter. From bright blond to blinding red to brazen brunette, my mother could tell where I've been. And with the eyes she trained me to have, when I looked back at the colors, all I saw was sloppy craftsmanship, misaligned strokes, and the lack of even coverage. With each new shade, what I was trying to cover up still hinted through.

But this last color sank into my natural ash and highlights and interplayed with the years of residual dyes. It created a color that now, finally seamless, leaves the dividing line between the shade it was and the shade it is now.

Turning my head and watching the strands pulsate in the light, I thought back to the day I picked the shade before leaving for college. I settled into the hairdresser's chair that has been the location of my remodeling decisions. I donned the cape that had collected scores of colors, fading into each other so completely that it created a shade all its own—a color that screamed of the desperate search for identity.

I watched my hairdresser pull out the card that listed my colors, flipping it over to find an empty line to write the date. "So," she began, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "What are we doing this time?"

I looked back at myself as I brushed my fingers along the color stains on my cape. "Make it gold," I told her.

MIN RIVER FLOWS TO THE SEA

Yangzi

Translated by Wen Peihong

Portrays and enhances joy. Illumination. A partner to power. Associated with growth.

Min River flows on through the Yangtze River into the sea, takes ahold like starlight, an endless persistence and exploration.

The Min flows into the sea,
follows the instinct of rock and water.

The Min is a source of the sea, feeds the sea,
and the sea submits to the shape and inclusion of flow.

The Min is the flow joining the sea,
authentic flow feeding the Yangtze,
a flow to its tributaries, celebrated and unknown,
so small they are too much trouble
to mark on maps.

Just like the ancient people fed along the banks
overhanging the river, the Qiang were
once nomads, their fates inseparable from their sheep.
They now slash a herding whip and grip a plough handle.
In the shadow of the tempestuous mountain, its clouds and singing birds,
one thousand years have passed,
suppressed by yet another thousand years of silence.

The Qiang tend the grains' color and luster.
 Their eyes, once accustomed to melody of open spaces,
 have adapted to the rhythm of the terraced field,
 their riding feet to walking the rough road,
 their stomachs to the five grains.
 At last they forgot the milk and dense and fragrant beef
 of their once ranging cattle.
 Memory fades from the eyesight of the elders
 and is lost in the howling valley.

Min, one immense and silent flow,
 wears away, one by one, opulent imaginations and expectations.
 Of benefit to the people in the Heavenly Kingdom, the Min flows
 A civilized and barbarous flow, choked by the Du Jiang Yan Dam,
 the Min that unveiled the mysterious gold stars,
 the ruins of Sanxingdui, the 9th wonder of the world.
 For centuries, the Min sowed their bronze and jade into the earth.
 The relentless flow still sweeps the great plateau and basin,
 over the land, across to the Pacific Ocean, from then until now,
 flows into the sea, the flow of the Min, great with voice and essence,
 this flow passes through my heart, my life.

This is the stream of my hometown, garnered, linked and gathered
 around the singing Taoping Village, Gucheng Village,
 Mianhu Village, and Yingpan Mountain, murmured
 from the ploughing cow and father's fingers washing his feet.
 It is the flow under the walnut tree, apple tree, peach tree.
 From the villages of Black Tiger, Chibusu, Yanmen Trench, West Qian,
 it flows, murmuring under the mill of stone blockhouse
 and the shadow of the Qiang tower.
 Hand in hand with its brothers and sisters, it flows, triggering sluggishly

the paradise of the flying phoenix and dragon dancing upside down.

Min River gives itself to the sea.

A universal flow, with no beginning and no ending,
 a flow bred by Min Mountain and back from Heaven,
 an overall flow, a creative flow, an original flow,
 the great flow cut through Longmen Mountains,
 the flow of life and death where King Yu the Great grew,
 an authentic flow, a self-conscious, deep-rooted flow,
 an ethnic flow, through numerous numbnesses, a never covered
 deep-rooted flow,
 a flow, breaking through clouds and fogs, never allured and
 detained by ditches,
 a forever flow, a never-ending flow, an always-rushing-to-the-sea flow.

Translation Note:

The Qiang people, the oldest minority group in China, live upstream of the Min River, which the poet Yangzi celebrates and eulogizes in this poem. The pictographic character (Qiang) suggests that the Qiang people live on either herding (as the stroke looks like a herding whip of a shepherd), or farming (as the stroke looks like a plough handle of a farmer.) The force and endurance of the Min symbolizes for the poet the determination and perilous existence of his people as their population, language, and culture faces erosion in the contemporary world. The word “flow” is an approximate translation of the Chinese word “liu.” Both a noun and a verb, the word means to move vigorously and with determination and denotes a current. This poem is meant to be chanted or sung with a forceful stress on the word “flow” in the presentation.

SUBARCTIC FRUIT

Sarah M. Brownsberger

You enter a rocky valley and notice the scrub. Crouch down and berries come clear: pink, green, glaucous blue. The sun will move on before you do. We are born to hunt for globular things, from speckled eggs to burls and even misty gobs of beach glass.

Pulling berries from a bush is a form of wealth-getting. “We will take our berries home and can them,” says the mother in McCloskey’s *Blueberries for Sal*. Today we think of wealth as the result of clever dealings with man-made systems, but until recently everyone knew that economies grow from habitat. Prosperity hinges on territory. Hence trade. Hence war. We wear diamonds or amber to flaunt the wealth of our habitat: we flash the appearance of sparkling water and glowing fruit.

My current habitat is near Reykjavik, Iceland, at 64° N. Here, edible produce grows mainly offshore, silver and scaly: fruits de mer. On shore, no fruit bigger than a dime grows unassisted.

For fruit you need soil, but for soil you need organic matter. Rich dirt is the fruit of eons. The town where I live rests on 7,000-year-old lava, a riot of basalt folds and twists and pinnacles. Gray *racomitrium* moss lies over it like frost; grass and flowers grow in rifts. East of town the rock is still younger and utterly bare; near *Eyjafjallajökull*, it has yet to cool. Newborn rock is barren as the moon. Though rich in water, Iceland is Europe’s largest desert.

Life likes to appear. Lichen blooms on basalt in rusty splotches. Where erosion mingles clay and lichen crumbs, low plants like campion and thyme crop up. Mosses thrive in crannies and nourish each other until they can support flowers big enough for a bee to land on. Slowly heath comes into being, a sweet-smelling carpet of plants so tough you can scour pots with them.

A classic Icelandic children's book frankly explains, "We live in a cold place, where only grasses can grow. We can't digest grass, so we eat animals that can, such as sheep and cows."

But Iceland does have native trees, low and gnarled as they may be. Scrub willows crouch by mountain streams. The local birch, or "perfume bark" in Icelandic, is as sweet-smelling and as tough as heath. After the recent eruption at Eyjafjallajökull, a ranger surveying the gray devastation stood amazed as a tinkling sound, like ice cubes in glasses, began all around him: the birch buds were breaking through glassy coats of ash to leaf out.

Unaware of the fragility of volcanic soil, Norse settlers cleared the native trees and let their stock range free, nibbling saplings. Now wind skirls up loose soil. In *Collapse*, Jared Diamond calls the Icelandic environment one of the most degraded in the world. Elsewhere one flees the city in search of green; in Iceland, the greenery is mostly in town.

Transplanted from New England, I sometimes wake from dreams of hardwood trees. I pine for canopies of chattering life. In the hills of Reykjanes you are lucky to see a raven. The only mammal native to Iceland is the fox.

But not all our aesthetic joy stems from fertility. The deep slant of northern light makes whole days pink and gold. The sun smolders on snowy peaks as sharp as fish spines. Auroras, ice castles, and nacreous clouds ache with a high-lonesome beauty. Coming back from a trip home I once closed my eyes against the sight of Keflavik's barren plain, only to reopen them at a gasp of pleasure from my fellow passengers: the plane was taxiing through a lake of violet fire, a field of lupine.

In April, between sleet squalls, I walk the cobble shore and eye the tasty-looking vermilion nodes that grow on kelp roots. In May I nibble scurvy grass. Then suddenly it's June, night is vanquished, gentians riot, spirits soar; the radio declares, "Sun holiday, sun holiday, this factory is closed due to good weather." By late August, the endless light has conspired with stonecrop, bartsia, sedums, ling, bearberry, and other sisters of the moor to produce *vaccinium myrtillus*, bilberry, or "chief berry" in Icelandic—blueberries to any tongue.

My mother-in-law has a berry scoop that is an antique tin can with tines soldered on, painted a durable lead-green. For years she and her husband picked each fall in a certain Happy Valley they had found, in a fjord facing due north on the Arctic.

Recently four generations of our family met there. We spanned eighty years to eighteen months, false teeth to milk teeth. The oldest struggled down on her knees and the baby sat chest-deep and picked and ate with no instruction. The haze of next winter lay far out to sea. We brought our treasure home, picked over and stored it, and then hurried, sunburnt, to the hospital where my father-in-law lay stunned from a stroke.

We told him we'd been berrying, and where. His eyes grew canny and interested. "Gobs of berries," we told him. "We picked all day."

"Good," he said.

TSUNAMI

Sandra Gustin

On one beach where the ocean unhinged,
where it left bricks, wood shutters, bent metal, shards
of plaster and cement instead of shells or starfish,
someone has gathered a shrine from the offerings,
balanced the grouping on cinderblocks: a Buddha,
orange robe in need of new glaze; two smaller ones,
the green headless, the white without legs; before them,
a porcelain pitcher, inexplicably intact, and a metal cup,
as if the holy act of giving a drink were the most normal
thing in the world, maybe especially the shattered world.
Months from now, all debris gone, outsiders will walk
clean-swept sand, pick up trinkets left by the tide,
look close and find some to be bits of polished bone,
this white piece a vertebra, this a phalanx from a hand.
They'll stand torn, not knowing whether to take
them to some authority, or return them to the sea.

HENRY'S FALL

Rosalia Scalia

The problem, the way Henry Pinto saw it, began and ended with the pig. He hated the pig with the same intensity that his fiancée, Clara Brumster, loved it. Or the problem, he mused, could be that he loved Clara with the same intensity that she loved the pig. Either way, she loved the pig, and the problem was that Clara loved the pig more than she loved Henry. He wanted the pig gone from Clara's life and, subsequently, his life.

Standing in his underwear at the threshold of Clara's bedroom after a long Saturday spent accruing billable hours at work—a law firm located a mere spitting distance from Clara's house, though not too far from his either—he just wanted to climb into bed next to her and sleep, ending what had been a brutal day. He hated working on Saturdays because it made him feel like a slave, albeit a highly paid slave, but he was up for partner and Saturday hours came with the territory. He longed for a peaceful night with Clara in her bed, her pillow faintly smelling of roses, lilies of field and jasmine. Stuck at the threshold, he imagined Clara reading next to him, something she often did long into the night, her right foot gently pressing against his left calf, a way to stay connected, he thought, even if she didn't want to sleep at the same time he did. On the bed in nearly sheer black lingerie, she flipped through a magazine, oblivious to the stupid pig oinking and squealing at him, giving him the stink eyeball as if he Henry, rather than it, belonged elsewhere. It oinked and squealed

louder with each step Henry took into the room toward the bed. Henry wanted to kick the thing, kick it like a football, this black-and-white pig with an annoying giant red-bow collar, with the utterly ridiculously elevated name, King Charles, but Henry knew that at 360 plus pounds, the pig wouldn't exactly sail across the room. Why couldn't Clara have a normal pet, like a dog? A cat? Or a guinea pig? Or goldfish.

"Clara, do something about the pig," he said, sounding annoyed.

Clara glanced at him and back to her magazine. "You started this row," she said, her a sweet soprano. "He wants an apology."

"I'm not apologizing to a pig," Henry said, crossing his arms.

"Why not? You hurt his feelings."

"Since when do pigs have feelings? I smacked his snout for pissing on my rug—and that was two weeks ago," Henry said. "He can't possibly remember."

Two weeks ago, the stupid pig had pissed on his new Oriental rug. Henry, who didn't own pets or want children because chaos and mess associated with them, considered a pet pig unnatural. Never mind the stink of porcine urine still assaulting him at home. After soiling his prize Oriental rug, Henry's intolerance bloomed into outright hatred. He wanted Clara to get rid of the pig. "It has to go," he'd screamed at her while he beat the pig's nose, not expecting her to gather her things and leave in a huff. Things between them had not been the same since.

"King Charles is a smart little piggy," Clara said, baby-talking the pig.

"Nothing's little about that pig. Can't you see this is ridiculous?" His voice sounded whiney—not what he intended. Oinking, King Charles blocked his way.

Clara went to the pig, rubbed its neck. "He didn't mean it, KC. He's sorry," she baby-talked. "Come on, baby!" she cooed. Henry's stomach lurched when she began singing a Bocelli tune to the thing, leading it into its round bed. He could feel his face reddening, his

neck muscles pulsate because Clara should reserve love song lyrics for him, and not a stupid animal, especially not a pig. Once it settled in the round bed, Henry dashed to Clara's bed before the stupid pig noticed. Henry's eye twitched as he watched Clara's tiny, soft hand rubbing King Charles' belly and not his own.

"Can't you put him in another room when I'm here?" he asked.

"He's always slept in my room, Henry." Clara said, climbing back in bed.

Henry grunted, vowing that once they were married, things would change: He'd lay down the law, assuming that he'd sell his house and move into hers. The first change to go would be the towel-covered boudoir chair Clara had placed at the foot of the bed so that the pig could climb onto it and then onto her bed, an open invitation. More than a few times, the pig had edged Henry off of the bed and onto the floor because it wanted to be next to Clara, and invariably when Henry, bleary-eyed and dazed, struck his toes on the chair's leg, he staggered half asleep to the guest room. Second, he'd banish the pig first to the guest bedroom, then to the kitchen, then to the yard, and then to a farm somewhere in exurbia. King Charles had strenuously objected when he and Clara became intimate, oinking and squealing his distress, ramming the bedroom door whenever he was locked out. The once-perfect door sagged in the middle from the battering, and Henry resented having to take the pig's sensitivity into account by being extra quiet when he and Clara were intimate. When he'd first met Clara three years ago, the pig slept in her bed all the time, and the round bed under the window became a concession she'd made for Henry, a concession that would lead to others.

Henry snorted. "The pig goes in the guest room—when I'm visiting."

"He's never been alone at night."

"No time like the present," Henry believed the pig understood every word he spoke and even could read his mind because King Charles glared at him from his round bed.

“It’s giving me the hairy eyeball,” Henry said.

Clara scoffed. “You brought this on yourself. He knows you don’t like him.”

Now that Clara’s finger sported the magnificent diamond ring he gave her, it was time to assert his feelings. King Charles belonged on a farm, being prepared for his true purpose as bacon or ham. To Henry, the pig symbolized a salient reminder of Clara’s late husband Peter. She and Peter had adopted it as a piglet—naming it King Charles, raising it like their only child for one year and one month before Peter and seven others were killed in a freak beltway accident caused by a tractor-trailer hitting a pedestrian bridge. Peter and Clara had shared more than the pig. They’d shared this house and a career. Peter had been a tenor in the same opera company that still employed Clara. After Peter’s untimely death, a then smaller King Charles had moved into Clara’s bed, Clara holding it instead of Peter, Henry imagined her crying herself to sleep hugging the pig. Henry believed that the pig channeled Peter from the Great Beyond to interfere with their nuptials. The sight of the pig sitting in the front seat of Clara’s car had nauseated him, and when Clara brought the stupid beast to his house when she visited, he imagined transforming it into something useful. Like sausages. Or bacon. Or ribs. Barbequed.

“It’s like a retarded kid that pisses rivers and shits boulders, who’ll never grow up and leave,” he said, making himself comfortable on the bed. “It belongs on a farm, Clara.”

“He’s a he and he’s my pig,” Clara said. “I can’t believe you’re jealous of a pig! Go home!” She pointed to the bedroom door.

Henry refused to budge. Through her thin, black, lacy lingerie, Henry could see the silhouette of Clara’s body, the outline of her thighs, the indentation of her waist, the slope of her breasts, breasts he would be touching, if it weren’t for King Charles. Why didn’t she agree that the pig stay in another room when he visited? Why didn’t she just get rid of the thing? “It doesn’t belong here,” he said, laying down the law.

Clara pushed him off the bed. “Neither do you. Why don’t you just settle it, give him an extra treat, or do something conciliatory? Isn’t that better than going to war with a pet? You don’t have to win every battle, Henry.”

“You’re missing the point.” Henry glanced uneasily at the pig. King Charles’ hooves scratched the wood floors, and squealing and oinking, it rushed him, Henry dove back onto the bed. When the pig nearly flew onto the boudoir chair and faced Henry, oinking him off the bed, Clara began laughing. She laughed so hard, she doubled over. King Charles squealed louder, butting Henry backward away from the bed, out of the bedroom. Henry imagined bashing its head with a baseball bat. He imagined stabbing the animal in the eye with an ice pick. He imagined all sorts of ways to separate the pig from Clara. King Charles stood in between them, squealing and oinking at Henry until he backed down the hallway, down the stairs, step by step into the living room. Following his descent to the first floor, allowing the pig to humiliate him, Clara laughed uproariously.

“This is no small beer,” Henry shouted at the front door. “It’s a P-I-G.”

Clara sighed. “All he wants is to be loved.” She handed Henry his clothes, his car keys, and his shoes. Henry refused to apologize to a pig that pissed on his rug. Not now, not ever. Grabbing his things, he vowed to find another fiancée who wasn’t devoted to a pet. Damn it, he’d bested the keenest legal minds in the city, and he wasn’t going to allow a stupid pig to defeat him. He drove down Key Highway around the Baltimore Inner Harbor to his perfectly coifed Canton house. The pig had won a battle, but Henry would win the war.

At home, Henry sulked. A TV chef on the Food Network demonstrated how to prepare salmon, but Henry imagined pork chops instead. He imagined King Charles neatly roasted with an apple silencing his oinking, squealing mouth. He imagined Clara alone, minus the stupid porker channeling Peter, but awoke Sunday morning, still on the sofa, still alone, the television blaring.

All week, it irked Henry that Clara allowed the pig to oink him out of the house. It irked him that she was too busy to see him any night this week, blaming rehearsals for the new opera season, and it irked him that his boss showed disdain when Henry asked for Saturday off. He wanted to catch up with Clara to settle things. And now Saturday, Clara claimed another rehearsal would run all day. It irked him that he had to invite himself to her house for breakfast since Clara had declined his invitation to meet him at Jimmy's in Fells Point. And now sitting in her kitchen, it irked him that she poured pig chow into King Charles' purple, monogrammed bowl. She served Henry only a mug of instant coffee. No breakfast, no French toast or pancakes, no eggs, and definitely no bacon. Henry half-smiled at the thought of King Charles eating bacon and ham. Like a cannibal.

"Why couldn't you come to Jimmy's?" Henry asked. He refrained from oinking at the pig. "No breakfast?" He watched the pig chow down.

Wearing a jean skirt and a black sleeveless knit top, Clara slipped into a pair of black flip-flops. Henry admired her killer legs, legs he wanted wrapped around his like snakes on tree limbs. "I told you already. Rehearsal. You're the one who invited yourself to breakfast," she said. "Why do you think I'm supposed to serve you breakfast when you invite yourself?"

Stupid pig was a royal, all right, Henry thought. A royal pain in the ass.

"Plenty of stuff in the fridge. I have to walk KC, and then I need to leave for work."

"But I took off today," he said.

"Enjoy your day off!" she said.

Henry wanted them to sit down to a rare Saturday morning breakfast on a Saturday he didn't work, a breakfast that preferably Clara had cooked. And it irked him she tended to the pig like a disciple.

"I'll come," he said, keeping the exasperation out of his voice. He imagined their Saturday and Sunday mornings sans King Charles.

Would they linger in bed over the morning newspapers? Maybe make love again before finally starting the day? Would they stroll over to Mike's in Canton, Jimmy's in Fells Point, or to the South Street Market in Federal Hill for fresh berries and bagels? Since they have been together, the pig grew from a cute, exotic curiosity to a fat, intolerable pest. The thought of her dead husband using King Charles to interfere with their relationship occurred to him more than once. Henry wondered if he'd hate King Charles if it were a dog, or a cat—God how he hated sneaky, aloof cats—but then a dog wouldn't have held a grudge against him for a bit of disciplinary action. But dogs are labor intensive. No better. Henry wondered how much the pig would fetch in a sale, certain he could unload it for a tidy sum to Hispanics populating Fells Point. King Charles, the second main attraction to a quinceañera birthday party.

"I'm looking forward to the new season," Clara said. "Maybe you can come to a performance this year," she said as they ambled toward the Inner Harbor.

Preoccupied, Henry said nothing. Instead, he decided he could kill the pig by making it run. Death by heart attack.

"Look at that cute pig," said a woman to a man wearing a straw hat, who approached them. Obviously tourists. "How adorable is that?" she said. Baltimore's own Mr. Piggy, Henry thought, his stomach churning.

"May I?" the woman asked, extending her hand.

"Oh, sure," said Clara. "He's a lover—aren't you, boy?" Clara baby-talked the pig, and Henry clenched his fists. The pig grunted, squealed, and appeared to smile as the lady scratched its neck.

"Oh so adorable! What's his name?" the lady asked. Probably a PETA member, Henry thought.

"King Charles," Clara said with pride.

"Kaycee. Hey, your highness," the lady cooed, petting it. "Wow, solid—what does he eat?"

"Everything," Henry said. "He's a goddamn pig. What do you think pigs eat?"

Clara glared at him. "Pig chow. And treats when's he's a good boy." Clara's eyes hurled daggers at him even while she kissed the pig's snout. The woman pulled out a camera.

"May I?"

Clara smiled at the lady and her camera. "Oh, he's such a ham-bone!" she said, laughing, and the lady clicked her camera.

Henry stomped ahead. More photos of Clara and King Charles graced a mountain of travel picture books than did photos of the Constellation, a Revolutionary War ship sitting in the harbor, or any of city's other historical landmarks. He headed for the Light Street Pavilion, conscious that, once again, this tourist, like the entire parade of others before her, neglected to include Henry in any photos—as if he were the invisible man. Obsessing over the injustice, he sat on a bench opposite the dinner-party tour boat and stared at the bobbing sailboats.

"I hate when you walk away like that," Clara said, the pig beside her, blocking Henry's view. "It's rude."

"Rude is a million people always snapping yours and the pig's photos and never including me," he said, pointing his index finger at her. "The pig has to go." King Charles looked at him, grunted in a way that sounded like a laugh and fixed a porcine smile on his lips, holding it like a fixture on his snout. "And now he's mocking me!" Henry shouted, his face flushed, furious the pig belittled him.

"Ridiculous," Clara said, rolling her eyes. "You're not exactly Mr. Personable. Especially lately. How will you behave with children? Let's go, King Charles," she said.

"Children?! Who said I want children? They're as messy and demanding as that pig. It's the pig or me," Henry yelled. "I'm damned sick of Peter Pig!"

He didn't know why, but he felt a little joy, confident that the gray look on Clara's face indicated that she'd get rid of the pig; he was winning. He imagined comforting her when she missed the stupid pig.

"Peter Pig?" she asked. She waited for an answer. Then she began walking away.

“You’re choosing the pig?” he yelled. Henry sprang to his feet and followed them. She was ditching him for a pig!

After Clara handed him his CDs and clothes, after she thrust a bag of his miscellaneous belongings at him, after she returned the magnificent diamond, he filled Clara’s doorway, holding everything in his arms. “It doesn’t have to be this way,” Henry said. “A good farm would be best!”

“You don’t get it,” she said. “He’s my pet. King Charles has been with me four whole years longer than you have. He peed on your rug. I paid to clean it, so what’s the big fucking deal, anyway? It isn’t just the issue of the pig, Henry. It’s everything,” she said.

Clara shut the door with a thud. She didn’t say good-bye, wish him a happy life, or thank him for the wonderful times they’d shared.

“You picked a goddamn pig over me!” he shouted through the door. He heard the tumblers of the lock click into place. He walked around to the back of the house, where he heard Clara and King Charles in the yard. From the water streaming into the gutter, he knew that the Clara was filling the child-size pool she kept in the backyard for the pig to cool off in. He knew she allowed the pig to play in the water while she dressed for work. Henry clenched his teeth, his jaws, his fists. He would not suffer defeat at the hooves of a pig, especially not a pig that laughed and mocked him. Damn him, Peter Pig!

Without work to occupy him, Henry leaned against the bar in the Blue Crab Pub with its owner Rick, a burly, blond, former college football star, who’d never advanced beyond his glory days as a Terp quarterback. The Blue Crab Pub overflowed with Terp memorabilia. Steamed blue crab carapaces painted with football scenes dangled from the ceiling on fishing lines. Wanting to avoid being in an awkward position of giving Rick, actually his client, unbillable advice, Henry hardly ever stepped into the Blue Crab Pub, but now, in the pub’s dim light, he fingered the engagement ring, a good-size rock in his estimation, repeating, “She picked that goddamn pig over me. A fucking farm animal.”

“You’re a free man now,” Rick said, sliding a draft beer in Henry’s direction. Rick pushed his aviator glasses back up his nose and ran his fingers through thinning hair. “Celebrate!” Rick signaled the bartender to bring another two beers. “On the house,” he told the barkeep. “Just keep ‘em coming.”

They already killed a six-pack each. The TV above the bar beamed a Terps game, and Rick kept an eye on the play. Henry surmised Rick was betting on it and winning. Henry had no one else to call. His friends stopped calling him long ago, jealous of his upward trajectory at the firm.

“She dumped me for a pig,” Henry slurred.

Rick laughed. “No pig shit for you, my friend!” Rick laughed, slapped him on the back. “Let’s toast. To new beginnings!” Rick sounded jovial and proceeded to grow more jovial with subsequent beers, whereas Henry grew more sullen and angry. “We’re both free men now. This is great news, my friend!” said Rick, whose third divorce was just final, raising his glass.

“I wish that pig were dead,” Henry said.

“Meh. Think of all the babes you can test-drive now.”

Henry didn’t feel any better. “I hate that pig. King Fucking Charles.”

“Give it up, Henry. Terps are up.” Rick commandeered two bowls of peanuts. “I’ve been married three times already, and all three times went south faster than the New Year’s Ball at Times Square. Consider yourself spared the pain and aggravation, not to mention the cost of getting divorced. Whoa, touchdown! Yeah, baaaaby!” Rick pounded the bar, yelling at the TV, pushing his glasses back with his right hand before raising it into a victory fist.

Henry didn’t care about the game. Nor did he consider himself spared. He wanted Clara to agree with him: that the pig had to go, that he was more valuable than the pig, that he knew what was best for her, for them. He had to convince her.

Henry stumbled off the barstool and threw some bills on the bar. “Hey, thanks bro,” he slurred. “I gotta go.”

“Beer’s on the house, and the game’s not over. Where’re you going?” Rick said, shoving the bills back at Henry.

“I gotta convince Clara I love her and that the pig hasta go,” he slurred.

“Not a good idea, Henry,” Rick said, shaking his head. “Let her and the pig go. Plus you’re too drunk to drive.”

“Be defeated by a pig? You’re outta your mind?”

“Let’s just wait until the game’s over,” Rick said. “I’ll drive.”

Henry could live with that and lost count of the beers that kept coming. Just after midnight in Rick’s silver BMW, Henry directed him toward Clara’s house in Federal Hill. A dim light glowed in Clara’s living room, a sure sign that that she wasn’t home. Where did she go after rehearsal? he wondered. He wanted her to be home crying, but Clara always demonstrated an unsettling independence—perhaps honed after Peter’s death—with an endless list of places to go: plays, movies, art shows, literary readings, nightclubs. Where could she be late on a Saturday night?

Rick glanced at his watch. “She’s not here. Let’s roll, Romeo,” Rick said, slurring.

They both slurred. “Don’t you want to see the fucking famous King Charles?”

“Not especially,” Rick said.

“The damn pig’s probably sleeping in the back.”

“Then we gotta get outta Dodge,” Rick said, parking the car at an angle in the alley next to back of Clara’s house, an end house before an alley large enough to drive through.

Peering through the wooden fence and seeing only blackness, Henry threw himself against the fence with a crash, inspiring the neighbor’s dogs to bark.

“King Charles,” he called, certain the pig was in the yard. “He’s probably afraid of the barking dogs. Clara said dogs and pigs don’t mix.”

Henry stood on a trash can and heaved himself over the fence, landing with a thud, and opened the gate for Rick from the inside.

"It's not in the yard," Henry said. "Let's go in."

"Are you fucking nuts or something?" Rick said in a loud whisper.

"I'll bring the pig out," Henry said, wanting Rick to see the pig.

Henry broke the basement window with his shoe, thrust his arm in, unlocked it, and shimmied in, leaving his shoe outside.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Rick asked through the broken window.

"I'll be right back," Henry said, disappearing into the basement's darkness.

"Where are you, you fat fucker?" Henry called before hearing hooves on the floor upstairs. Henry grabbed the pig chow from the hallway closet and made his way upstairs. "Peter Pig!"

In Clara's bedroom, the pig stood half on the bed and half on the boudoir chair, its beady eyes fixed on Henry. Then on the bag of pig chow.

"Come on, you fat fucker, Peter Pig," Henry said, placing a handful of pig chow on the floor to lure the pig, bite by bite, downstairs and out into the yard, grateful the food distracted the pig from rushing him.

"What a huge fucker!" Rick said, petting King Charles behind the ears. "It's kinda cool. Why do you hate him so fucking much?"

Henry shrugged and didn't answer.

"OK. Let's go now," Rick said, opening the gate wide.

King Charles dashed out of the yard, faster than Henry had ever seen him go. "Holy shit," Rick said as the pig charged past him into the darkness of the alley behind Clara's house. Henry, still holding the bag of pig chow, laughed so hard, he couldn't stand up.

"You should catch that pig now. By its toe," Rick said, also laughing uproariously. "Clara's going to be pissed as shit." Rick and Henry roared with laughter, the gate swinging on its hinges.

"Fat fucker won't be going too far. He'll probably be eating something crappy outta a trash can at the other end of the alley or something," Henry said, heaving himself up.

"You got a pig problem," Rick said, trying to catch his breath

between guffaws. “Clara’s going to kick your ass when she finds out.”

“Find out what?” Wearing a black cocktail dress, a pearl necklace, and stud diamond earrings, Clara glared at them from the back door way. “What’re you doing here? Who’s that with you? Where’s my pig?” she asked. Henry couldn’t stop laughing. The way Clara said the word “pig” struck him as funny.

“Piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiig,” he said, the sound of the word coming from his throat instead of his mouth. “Piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiig,” he repeated. “Where’s my piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiig?” he mimicked her.

“You’re wasted,” she said. The last thing Henry wanted was for that damn walking set of pork chops to be found. His head still felt blurry.

“We can get the pig tomorrow,” he said, slightly less drunk. “I mean, how hard would it be to find a fucking three hundred-pound pig in downtown Baltimore? He can’t hide anywhere, and every damn body in the neighborhood, in the city, in the whole fucking world knows it’s your pig,” he said.

Clara glowered. He either helped her find the pig now—she emphasized the word by slapping the fingers of her right hand onto the palm of her left hand, as if she were counting out a rhythm—or she’d call the police and report him for breaking and entering. He was an asshole. Pig chow in hand, Henry shuffled down Riverside Avenue, Rick following behind, both merry, calling the pig.

Clara, who switched into her sneakers, trailed behind them, checking all the alleyways, calling for King Charles in her soprano as melodic as an angel’s. They searched Riverside Avenue, William and Montgomery Street. King Charles vanished, Henry growing happier at the prospects of it being gone. They searched Federal Hill Park, and at the park’s north side, Clara began shouting.

“He’s in Rash Field!” she yelled, pointing. Clara clutched her gown and ran down steep concrete stairs toward the street, toward Key Highway, toward that damn pig. Rick, more athletic than Henry, bounded down the steps like an unsteady gazelle, and Henry, who gingerly navigated the steps individually, prayed the animal would

panic and fall in the harbor. Henry ambled through Rash Field toward the Scupper Restaurant at the end of the harbor's walkway. Ahead, Rick sprinted, making oinking sounds, and attempted to tackle the pig, inadvertently driving it closer to the walkway's edge. Hurrying now toward the pig, Henry was determined to get to it before Clara; he wanted to give it an imperceptible push over the edge. Henry approached the pig from behind, while Rick bellowed pig calls.

"King Charles," Clara sang out from behind, her dulcet soprano, reverberating through Rash Field like a gorgeous bell. "Come, boy, come, come, come. King Charles, come to mama!" Clara held his leash in her hand. The pig's beady eyes searched in the darkness for Clara, avoiding Rick's awful oinking bellows, and edging away from Henry, holding the pig chow bag, toward the walkway's edge. Henry darted toward King Charles who had nowhere else to go except over the walkway's edge into the harbor's water. Henry slowed. Standing a foot in front of the squealing, oinking animal, Henry poured pig chow onto the pavement, the disgusting smell of the stuff assaulting his nostrils, while Rick continued the oinking calls. "Shut the fuck up already!" he yelled at Rick.

"Who'd believe we chased a pig all over Rash Field?" Rick said, exuberant. "This's the best fucking night ever!"

Staring at the pig chow, the pig refused to budge. Hoping to grab the pig's collar, Henry stepped sideways away from the pig chow. With Clara so close, he couldn't push it over the edge and decided to drag it to Clara. Henry gingerly moved closer to the pig just as Clara stepped forward. "King Charles!" she sang, joy and love in her voice. Squealing, oinking, King Charles turned his entire piggy body toward the musical sound of his mama, and that's when Henry felt it: King Charles' 350-pound porcine ass pushed him over the edge of the walkway. "Holy shit!" Rick bellowed. Startled, Henry cursed "Peter Fucking Pig," as he fell sideways. Panic cleared his fuzzy head. King Charles' curly black-and-white tail was the last thing Henry, who never learned to swim, saw before plunging into the dark harbor waters.

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