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Hair Trigger 41

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HAIR TRIGGER 41

41 Hair Trigger

A Student Anthology

Columbia College Chicago • Chicago 2019

English & Creative Writing Department
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Hair Trigger is a student anthology published annually in the spring of each year by the English & Creative Writing Department, Columbia College Chicago.

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Hair Trigger 41

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THE DAVID FRIEDMAN MEMORIAL AWARD

The David Friedman Award offers a cash prize to the best story or essay published in *Hair Trigger* each year. Our thanks go to David Friedman's family, who established this fund in fall 2002 as a memorial to their son, a talented writer and painter, as well as an alumnus of Columbia College Chicago and a great friend to the English & Creative Writing Department—Fiction Program's students and faculty.

Congratulations to Carolyn Boykin for her story, "Ugly," the 2019 winner of the David Friedman Memorial Award.

Letter from the Faculty Advising Editor

The Fiction Writing Program of the Creative Writing Department at Columbia College Chicago is pleased to bring you the forty-first edition of *Hair Trigger*, our annual anthology of student prose writing. The collection of stories are among the strongest writing produced in Story Workshop® and other writing classes, in both the undergraduate and graduate programs, and showcases the diverse voices, subject matters, and varied narrative styles that mark our writing community.

Since its early years of production, *Hair Trigger* has received critical acclaim. Its celebrated history is decorated with numerous awards, including first-place prizes in national competitions from some of the most prestigious organizations in the industry: The Association of Writers and Writing Programs, The Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, and the Columbia University Scholastic Press Association. We are also very proud, of course, of the students whose work has been introduced through *Hair Trigger*. Many of them have won individual awards in virtually every competing category from said national organizations: top prizes in the areas of traditional fiction, nonfiction and experimental fiction, and they have gone on to successful careers in writing, publishing, and a variety of other professions.

An exhaustive and rigorous selection process is used with *Hair Trigger* to ensure that no excellent story—whatever the voice, subject, or approach—will be overlooked. *Hair Trigger* submissions are numbered in the hundreds. Our appreciation goes to the student editors, chosen for their own ability as writers and readers, who work tirelessly to ensure the highest quality of this literary journal. The acquisition editors are charged with the task of closely reading and evaluating each story; they help to comprise a collection that reflects the broad range of writing creativity in our workshops, and stories that meet the standard of excellence that has become the hallmark of *Hair Trigger*. Respect for the writer, for content, for form, for point of view and language, and vividness of telling, characterize the selections printed in this volume. With the selections made, the *Hair Trigger* production editors assume the work of proofreading, copyediting, and composing the narrative arc of the anthology. Their process involves collaborating with the contributing writers with the goal of realizing the fullest potential of each manuscript, while honoring authorial intent, voice, and overall impact.

We are also pleased to bring you the evocative photographic work of Donna Baiocchi.

A publication of this scope and merit relies on the support of many people. Thanks to all of the Creative Writing faculty, particularly those of the Fiction Program who inspire and nurture the talents of our students, and help them to write the amazing stories that distinguish our journal. Gratitude and thanks go to Randall Albers, who for many years served as chair of the former Fiction Writing Department and has been a mentor and friend to faculty and students alike. We remain forever appreciative for the innovative work of the late John Schultz, the originator of the Story Workshop® approach to the teaching of writing, whose early vision for the program included the *Hair Trigger* anthology. Particular thanks must go to Cora Jacobs, Managing Editor for *Hair Trigger*, for her stellar service and commitment to the highest quality of work on the journal. We are grateful to the members of Columbia College Chicago's administration who continue to support this award-winning journal: Dr. Kwang-Wu Kim, President and CEO; Suzanne Blum Malley, Interim Provost; Steve Corey, Dean, Liberal Arts and Sciences; and Ken Daley, Chair, English & Creative Writing Department. And most certainly, our audience deserves many thanks. Your readership is an inspiration. We certainly hope you will find the stories in these pages of *Hair Trigger 41* entertaining, engaging and memorable. Enjoy them all.

Alexis Pride, Faculty Advising Editor
Associate Professor
English & Creative Writing

41 Hair Trigger

2019 Student Anthology

“When stuck, write. When stuck, start telling your material to yourself and to the page. When stuck, make the pencil move, the fingers type. When stuck, sleep on it, but always come back to the writing, for it is in the writing that you will discover the subconscious solutions that are coming to you.”

—John Schultz

Ti Zwazo

Haydee “HR” Souffrant

SITTING IN THE PEW, JESLYN PICTURED HOW THE FAMILY, LIVING, AND DINING ROOMS were littered with plastic bags, receipts, and cheap *mallettes* no one wanted to bring back on the return flight home. It was her parents' turn to send what was needed. The suitcases bearing the fruits of U.S. money had been packed: candies for the children, nightgowns for *Gran*, batteries and bottles of aspirin for *Ton* Whitney and *Tant* Lorette. She had to remember to sneak a few celebrity magazines into the suitcase while no one was looking; *Tant* Lorette liked to talk about how even money never made those people happy.

The days leading up to the funeral grounded themselves into everyone's reality, growing shorter the longer everyone talked about how much *paté* to bake, who would bring the sodas and juice, or who was going to stop by the outlet stores to buy trinkets and other goods to ship back to Haiti. Unless it was absolutely necessary, her father remained quiet during the whole affair. Whenever he broke the monkish silence, it was only to confirm the practical matters of the funeral: the burial plot, the location of the funeral dinner, the casket size, and who was strong enough to carry the casket to the cemetery. If it had been anyone else, one would've thought her father was simply going about his day-to-day chores, indifferent to the event taking place around him.

After all, Jeslyn thought, a practical grief for a practical man.

“And may the dead rest among us, not simply in body, but in spirit, and may their soul take. . . .”

Jeslyn had fallen asleep at some point during the bishop's prayer, his voice droning inside the sweltering tabernacle. Partway through the service, it was requested that the windows be opened. But the tiny one-level church building held too many bodies in it, the heat sticking to everything, including the white chiffon curtains that covered parts of the walls and windows laid heavy. Even the bishop began to wipe his embroidered handkerchief across his forehead and upper lip repeatedly, often muffling his sermon as he did. His already low voice competed with the chops and clicks of the old ceiling fans. She noticed that every time the bishop withdrew his hand, the once cream-colored handkerchief turned a slight shade grayer.

Ton Maurice's death was that peculiarly sharp tear that pressed its way

throughout the Arneau family. At the mourning session earlier that evening, she stared drowsily as her paternal *taties* wailed in front of her and the pulpit—moaned while they clutched cracked plastic bibles to their chests and bent over each other. Jeslyn tried not to roll her eyes as each aunt took their turn to howl grievances at God. If her sister were sitting next to her, Jeslyn would have whispered how Haitian women can turn grief into an art form.

While prayers echoed around her, Jeslyn reflected on how *Ton Maurice* had been the brother that raised her *papi*, both in Haiti and in the U.S.

Ton Maurice taught him English.

She began to imagine them practicing the way the foreign words stung the rooves of their mouths—father-brother/brother-son huddled together—when the church broke for refreshments. Everyone would need energy as they resumed the next round of mourning. She didn't know if she could stand to watch more grief bleed into the air as she made her way into the aisles, everyone talking and stifling tears, while hungry hands reached for cookies, *patés*, and cans of soda. She wondered if they had brought enough food, already hearing the complaints of not enough this, not enough that, as she took a *paté* and two waters.

Jeslyn's father had been standing by the exit when she finally reached him, brushing flakes of the meat pastry from her mouth. Beads of sweat dislodged when he ran his palm over his beard, one of them flicking her face when he dropped his hand to take the bottle she offered. He signaled it was time to leave the church by handing her the car keys and walking out of the building. The air outside was as thick as it was in the church. Her fingers fumbled when she tried to key the ignition after entering the car—her father never let her drive. The wheels shifted slightly on the uneven gravel from the parking lot to the paved road. As the tires rolled, she remembered the way her father sat uncomfortably in the pews during the hymnal chanting—the last time he entered a tabernacle had been over twenty years ago for her baptism. The straight line of his shoulders made her wonder if his back had begun hurting from where they operated to correct the hernia.

Because the women had been separated toward the left side of the church, she was only able to see the side of her father's face, ombré cheeks slowly growing more ashen as the hours passed. He hadn't cried, not once over the three days of the grief rites. Tomorrow the family would ship *Ton Maurice's* body back to Haiti and bury him properly; the remaining siblings would follow like birds.

When the car pulled up to a red light, Jeslyn took a moment to look at her father. She inhaled, smelling his peppery cologne that had filled the car. *Ton Maurice's* house always smelled like it. She hadn't noticed he wore the same cologne until then.

"Papi—m' kay posé yon question?"

The silence stretched further down the dark street.

"Palé non, Jes."

The skin on her knuckles tightened, stretching over the steering wheel.

"How are you doing, Papi? Ou pre pou n'alle Ayiti?"

He glanced at her, his eyes so black she finally found where the recesses of him had been hiding all these years.

"M'ap reté."

"You're staying? Why?"

He turned his head toward the window to watch the rainfall that started. *"Ti zwazo. Ti zwazo . . ."* stumbled out of his lips from the passenger seat, falling in time

with the droplets that drummed on the hood and glass.

Green light filtered its way over them both as she slowly accelerated home.

The air felt frosty, looping itself around her body like past lovers. She had never gone this high before. The sensation drove the tightness that had been living in her belly further down. The wind plugged her ears but her nose picked up scents both foreign and familiar. Cocking her head, she smelled something bitter—

She peeled herself upright from the three-seater couch and sneezed. Jeslyn didn't know how many times she'd had the dream now, the one about the bird, since she made the decision. The bitter smell of coffee hung heavy as it wafted from the kitchen. Jeslyn hadn't told anyone she left her job yet—that part could wait. *She* could wait. Her feet sank into the warm brown shag carpet that ran throughout the family and dining rooms. Her hand ran over the couch material; a portion of it had gone lopsided, caved in from years of her reading in the same spot. The clock on the porcelain side table read 5:06 a.m. Reaching for the lamp that sat atop the table, a small thud pierced her ears, rocking the heavy weight of sleep forward behind her eyelids.

The small picture frame lay face down. Moving to re-stand it on the table, Jeslyn found the glass cracked. Beneath it was the sun-bleached photo of her father and *ton* Maurice, taken in Miami in the late '70s. They'd worn matching sky-blue shirts in this one: *Ton* Maurice's arm draped around his younger brother's neck, his face radiating the essence of the American dream as brightly as the three gold rings on his hand. Her father beamed into the camera, happy to have left behind the island. She had stopped trying to ask if something had happened to him, made him vow never to go back. Jeslyn held the photo and edged through the dining room toward the kitchen.

Her father stood near the sink looking out the window, dressed in a starched blue-gray uniform and he smelled faintly of Pine-Sol and clove, though the burnt coffee masked everything. He chose not to take bereavement time at work. *Besides*, he had explained the night after the grief rites, *it made no sense to stop life for death*. His brother was already gone. It never occurred to her then that going to work gave him the chance to avoid the calls.

From Haiti. Canada. Florida. New York.

He cradled the reused canister of Bustelo—hand frozen on the split yellow lid. He had been staring out toward the acorn tree, watching the black birds drift between the branches. Jeslyn slow-footed her way next to him, opening the cabinet door that was overhead. He jumped slightly, before realizing it was his youngest. After an awkward silence, she found the cup she made for him years ago in a ceramics class and withdrew it from the wooden abyss—a dark indigo mug covered in tiny yellow stars that glided above tiny mountaintops. She took a plain white one for herself, setting them down on the counter.

"Papi, let me make the next pot."

His head tilted when one of the birds danced from one tree limb to a higher perch. She wasn't sure if he heard her.

"Ou changé ki gen pou fel Jes?"

"Oui, Papi, I remember how to make it."

He relented and passed Jeslyn the tin can. She looked over her shoulder at her father as he spilled himself into one of the wooden chairs behind her. She always thought the kitchen table was too round, too big for the room, that it stretched across

the room like a galaxy. After making sure he wasn't watching, Jeslyn dumped heaping spoonfuls of the dark coffee into the filter, rendering this second pot as undrinkable as its predecessor. From behind her, his voice drifted through the heavy dawn that had settled:

*Ti zwazo, ti zwazo
gadé ki jen nou la
Ti zwazo, ti zwazo
gadé fré'm ki vin la*

He must've forgotten she was in the kitchen, but she didn't mind it. Her father hadn't spoken, much less sang, in weeks. Between the surgery for his hernia and her uncle's death—it was like his vocal cords had been paralyzed.

"*Papi*, why won't you go?"

"*Eh pou kisa m'besoin retouné? M'gan tout affai'm isi. Egal, tout moun Ayisyén kon volé tout bagay bèl.*"

"He was your brother, *Papi*. You have to go."

His eyes sliced to her. She knew she had stepped over a line, questioning her father's actions. Their eyes remained locked for so long that, had she been younger, she would have been risking a good session of *ajenou*. The sound of the coffee maker clicked on; her eyes began to burn before she lowered them.

"*Padón, Papi*," Jeslyn conceded.

The cold formica pressed into her back, adding to the tense chill that grew between them. He sat back in the wooden chair, the creak announcing itself across the room. They sat in silence, minutes feeling like hours. What he spoke next surprised them both.

"*Krik.*"

He hadn't said that word to her in years. Each time he would say *Krik!* as a child, she would answer eagerly, no matter where she was in the house. A sign he had finally opened, morphed into a gateway to a country she knew through half-truths. A story for a story. First his, then hers. That was the exchange. It would be one of the few times her father would speak fully in English. She never decided if it was because he didn't trust her understanding of Kreyol, or his mastery of English.

"*Krak,*" she responded, lacking the luster of an eager child.

"I had a dream last."

"What did you see, *Papi*?"

Her father once explained to her when she was young that dreams meant more to people *lòt bo* than they did in America. *Dreams have that way of telling you about the things that could pass*, he would whisper, shushing the tears with his truth after her night terrors would scare her awake.

He hadn't replied. Instead he puddled inward, rubbing signs of his indecision to speak deeper into his cracked hands. Tiny streaks of white wormed their way over his fingers and palms, lines he inspected before settling on how to begin.

"It was like this: the sun curving over the sky."

"Like '*Tatou Zo Flungo*'?"

"*Mé wi,*" he chuckled, memories of that story slipping into his mind. "You know that story."

Jeslyn chuckled with him, remembering how she finished that story so many times she would end up half telling it, her father grinning while she got lost in the trees following *Tatou Zo Flungo*. The laughter that trickled between them stilled, replaced by

the low bubbling of the coffee maker's steam. She waited for her father to continue, since it offered the chance to prolong her own story.

"I had it for several days."

"How many, *Papi*?" He gave no mention.

"The tree was always the same, the morning slow and bright. *Un zwazo tap- ou koné kisa sa yé, yon zwazo?*"

"No, *Papi*, what is it?"

"A bird. *C'est yon bird.*"

After some time the only thing that could be heard was the soft hissing of the coffee. The heady smell, not quite burnt, moved across the room like a haze from one corner to the other. As her father drifted elsewhere in front of her, she waited. Her feet were bare on the cold linoleum tiles marked with years of chair scrapes, laughter, and cooking accidents that should have been worse. She blinked her eyes, tried to refocus the room. There, on the yellow countertop sat the bread loaf from last night's dinner, unwrapped, a crisp brown that stood out against the pale yellow walls. Her eyes eventually found the kitchen clock that sat next to the small television tucked in the kitchen nook. 5:31 a.m. She should've gotten more sleep—the flight was later that day. There was still so much packing left to finish.

"What happened after, *Papi*? *Avek l'zwazo?*"

He glanced at his youngest, wondering if the story was worth sharing.

"I was walking in a field, *soleil en pa ko monté*, and I would come to the front of a *mapou* tree. One version, *mwen te essaye maché alantou mapou*, but it was too big to see where it started and where it ended. But I would always find a bench near the *mapou*, underneath one of the branches."

"I thought you weren't supposed to sit under a *mapou*."

"*Mé wi*, it holds too many spirits. It was just a dream, Jes." She noticed his pause didn't match his words.

"The *zwazo* . . . I would see *yon ap chita ret tann sou yon branche* above me, and would watch it waiting till the sun rose. *Apré sa, yon lot zwazo*—a black crow like its friend, came and joined it in the tree. They watched the other birds chirp to the sun, when one of them cleared its throat, *ey pres li kommensé chanté*:

Ti zwazo, ti zwazo
gadé ki jan nou la
Ti zwazo, ti zwazo
gadé fré'm, li vin la

You know what the song means, Jeslyn?"

She shook her head no. It wasn't that she didn't understand the meaning; she wanted to hear him say it. She watched his face as he translated the song line by line.

"Ti zwazo, ti zwazo / Little bird, little bird
gadé ki jan nou la / look at how we are here

Ti zwazo, ti zwazo / Little bird, little bird
gadé fré'm, li vin la / look at my brother, he has come"

"I have had this dream night after night since the surgery, *le'm tap kouché*. Each time, the two crows would sing to the smaller birds. They would laugh and hop from branch to branch. But the night before *Fito* . . . it changed. I had come back to sit on the bench near the *mapou*, and watched the *zwazo* wait, and wait for his friend. *Evantyèlman*, the *zwazo* sang:

"Ti zwazo, ti zwazo / Little bird, little bird

gadé ki jen m'ret la / look at how I wait here
Ti zwazo, ti zwazo / Little bird, little bird
koté fré'm? Li té la / where is my brother? He was here"

"*Papi. . .*"

The small click broke her thought before she could continue. She poured the Bustelo into the mugs, watching the wells fill to the brim. Jeslyn realized that if she had said anything of comfort to her father just then, she would've found wave after wave of black-coffee teardrops spilling from him, the black liquid having replaced his red blood years ago as payment for coming to this country. She finally understood why he didn't, more so, couldn't go to Haiti—the split between what was a dream and what could be reality shook him to the core. But also, she knew exactly what would happen if he didn't.

The tips of her fingers started to burn carrying the mugs to the table. Wordlessly, she set a mug down in front of her father, the one covered in stars. He looked up at her, thanking her with a small nod as she left the kitchen briefly to bring a few items from the living room. Slowly passing by the wall of mirrors that stretched the entirety of the north side of the room, she had been most surprised that her father's dream had, of all things, a bird like her own. She knew it wasn't the same dream, yet, as she collected her glasses and other things, she couldn't help but see them as connected. Hers was something less direct.

When she made her way back to the kitchen, she found her father standing near the coffee maker. He peered into the open lid, his face edging closer to the murky grit left in the filter.

"Jes, *ou pat fe kafé a byén*. It's too strong. Let me show you again."

He beckoned her to the machine and began to show her how to make it properly—two scoops of Bustelo, one piece of cinnamon stick. She knew she made it wrong, but how else would he talk? Coffee was the thing that loosened the reservoir behind his lips. He made her pour the water in front of him, waiting to see if she would know the moment she poured too much in. Jeslyn's father nodded when she stopped before he felt the need to say anything. When he sat down, she knew he'd be waiting for a story from her as well. She remained standing, facing the window, looking at the tree outside. The sun finally began bleeding through the branches.

"*Krik*," she finally said.

"*Krak*," she heard. Her father suddenly felt more awake, alert.

"I dreamt about a bird too."

"*Se vré?*"

"Mhm. But it's always different. Last night I dreamt I was walking on the beach. Like yours, the sun wasn't ready yet. The water came into the beach, reaching for me, wanted me to come closer, and I started running. *Kouri m'tap kouri*—I ran so fast the sand floated off of my feet. And when I ran, my body started to change."

"*En kisa?*"

"I changed into a bird and started to fly into the sun."

"*Ki koulé?*"

Jeslyn paused, trying to remember the color her wings had been.

"Red. They were red, with blue tips. *Papi. . .* my wings were beautiful."

Her father remained quiet, thinking over her dream. He was staring at his hands when he finally asked her the question she was hoping.

"*Kisa wap keté?*"

The coffee maker was insistent on announcing itself. Taking the mugs from the table, her father watched her pour fresh coffee for them both. No matter how much milk and sugar she would pour into it, the sharp edges of flavor would still peck at her tongue. *A coffee like Papi*, she thought to herself. She moved toward the bulletin board that rested above the microwave.

“My job. I’m leaving my job, *Papi*. If I stay, I know I’ll regret it.”

Two plane tickets hung by their corners off the perforated cork. Jeslyn gently unpinned them and stood, rubbing the holes where the thumbtack had punctured the boarding passes back into place. When she sat across from him, she slid the tickets next to the photograph. She watched his fingers tremble as he slowly took them into calloused hands. His movements grew heavier; the weight of the tickets dragged him down. Jeslyn’s father set the tickets down near the frame of him and his brother, brushing a finger over the splintered glass.

The silence that had engulfed them before shifted.

“Birds of a feather, *Papi*.”

“*Gadé ki jan nou la pitit mwen.*”

The Unit

Jeff Hoffmann

ARLO STANDS IN FRONT OF THE SIGN, EXHAUSTED, HIS HEAD BUZZING. ADOLESCENT Behavioral Unit. Bad behavior is dirty socks on the couch, Xbox instead of homework, arguing at bedtime, not blood on the tile.

He pushes through the door and sees Denise next to Ron, her tan darker, less orange. Highlights snake through her black hair. He threads his way through the waiting room past the other parents. Ron stands, looks down at Arlo, crushes his hand without malice. Arlo doesn't touch Denise. Her perfume, the smell that once rendered him foolish, mixes with the hospital disinfectant and burns the back of his throat. He sits across from them and tries to quiet the bees at the base of his skull so that he can hear what she says.

"What took you so long?"

At the tail end of their marriage, Arlo would tell her about the delays, the detours, the hundred-car freight train down by the Texaco, until her blank stare reminded him that she didn't give a shit about what took him so long—she just wanted to remind him that he was late.

"I left when you called."

Denise scowls at her watch and then at Arlo. "That was six hours ago. It usually takes you four and a half."

She's right. Twice a month, except in the summer when Cole comes home for two weeks, he usually fills the tank of his Corolla before he leaves, stops only once to pee, and avoids the Chicago rush hour. He usually doesn't stop four times to shit himself. He usually doesn't pull over to weep.

"How is he?"

Denise shrugs. "They stitched him up in the ER. Said that he didn't lose too much blood. We haven't seen him since they brought him up here."

"When can we see him?"

"Four."

Arlo glances at his own watch. Thirty minutes.

"You know why he's doing this don't you?" she demands.

Ron shifts in his seat. "No," Arlo says. "No, I really don't."

She eyes Arlo like he's a stupid child or a wet dog. "He wants to fuck up the wedding. He wants to fuck up everything."

She says something else, but the buzzing has become a roar and he can't hear her. He leans forward and stares at the carpet, tries to focus on the straight lines of the pattern. When he stands up, her mouth is still moving, but he can't make out the words. He walks toward the door he just came through to look for the bathroom.

Arlo sits on the other side of the waiting room, gripping the wooden arm of the chair. It's the same wooden arm, the same blue padded seat as the chair he slouched in while his dad died. And the carpet's the same: dark blue and brown, designed to swallow dirt and coffee spills with the odd splash of blood. And the pictures are the same: abstracts of lilies and orchids and flocks of birds, intended to lend him peace, to distract him from the fact that his thirteen-year-old son is locked behind that door.

The pictures don't succeed, so to avoid thinking about the only thing he can think about, he studies the faces of the other parents. Unlike the chairs, the faces are arranged differently from other hospital waiting rooms. Most wear the hollow-eyed look that stared at him from the bathroom mirror, entirely lost and confused like refugees or dementia patients. Some manage a stoic resolve like they've begun to accept that this is just another misery they must endure, like a tooth extraction or a colonoscopy. The couple by the potted plant smile and talk. He wonders how many times they've sat in these chairs, or the same chairs in other hospitals, to get to the point where they can smile before visiting their child in the psych ward.

Arlo's gaze falls on Ron. He's everything Arlo is not, but Arlo can't manage to dislike him. He's big; some might call him ugly. His company sells luxury cars over the Internet. Arlo thinks the marriage might work out, partly because Ron's got the requisite house, cars, and money, partly because Denise will make a good trophy, but mostly because Ron brings a take-it-or-leave-it (no, I *am* the sales manager) attitude to their relationship that Arlo never could manage.

The door to the unit swings open, and a heavy woman with a bowl cut tries a bored smile. All the parents heave themselves up from their chairs and form a desultory line. Ron has the good sense to stay put and Arlo takes his place next to Denise.

"Sign in at the desk and then put all your belongings—purses, wallets, keys, cell phones—everything in the lockers."

Denise digs her phone from her purse and checks her messages. She types a response, then turns off the ringer and slips it into her pocket. They reach the desk and Arlo writes both of their names on separate lines. A nurse in scrubs checks their names against the list of patients. Her smile withers. "Mrs. Fratelli?"

"Ms."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's Ms. Fratelli."

"Oh. Right." She pauses. "I'm sorry, but Cole has asked not to see you."

Denise pulls herself up straight, glances at the people behind her in line, leans toward the nurse. "I'm Cole's mother. I *will* see Cole."

"I understand that this must be upsetting, but our unit has a policy."

"I brought him here," Denise snaps. "My insurance pays your salary. I will see Cole."

The parents behind them shift impatiently but avoid eye contact. The nurse's face goes blank. "All patients older than eleven can choose whether to take a visit."

Denise's hands shake as they grip the nurse's desk. "I'm his moth-er."

"I understand, Ms. Fratelli. If you could step aside for a moment so that I can check these other folks in, I'll call the director of the unit so that you can discuss it with her." The nurse turns to Arlo. "Mr. Fratelli, the lockers are through the first door to the right."

Denise pushes off the desk and spins to face Arlo. The heat blooms on her neck and her eyes have gathered to slits. For the first time in a decade, Arlo feels sorry for her. But then she hisses, "Tell him to get his shit together."

Arlo is shown to the day room and Cole slouches on a sofa at the far end. He's wearing a Space Invaders t-shirt, jeans, flip flops, and a blank stare. Arlo's hands feel big, his legs heavy. He must concentrate to avoid the tables as he weaves through to his son. His eyes look bruised and his mouth hangs open; he seems thinner than usual. An empty chair faces Cole, but Arlo sinks into the sofa next to him. Cole doesn't move. Both wrists are bandaged up like a featherweight before the big bout and Arlo wants to ask *why*.

Arlo puts his hand on Cole's, feels the bandage against his own wrist, and tests his voice, "I love you."

Cole says nothing. Just stares at the opposite corner of the room. Something in that stare tells Arlo that they've fed him meds, that it's not time for questions.

"You don't have to talk. I'm just going to say a few things. Is that OK?"

Nothing.

"Whatever it is, whatever made you do this, we'll work through it."

Arlo wants to hug him, squeeze him, shake him. He wants to tear the bandages from his wrists because his son would never hurt himself; it's all a mistake. He sneaks another look at Cole, but Cole just stares into the corner and this isn't the Cole that used to save turtles and collect matchbooks and wear pajamas with the feet attached. It's not the Cole that came home just two months ago and paddled with Arlo down the Meramec, screaming with delight as he jumped from the cliff by the bridge, slapping those delicate wrists on the river's surface.

"You're the most important thing in the whole world to me."

Cole's hand twitches under Arlo's and Arlo gives it a gentle squeeze. They sit. The kids with no visitors play Trouble at a far table, the dice popping. The tears that he thought were spent entirely at that truck stop in Dwight return, and through the tears he tries to make out the tattoo on the kid with his back to Arlo, a tail or an arm or some meaningless design snaking from the collar of his t-shirt, and Arlo can't figure out why his eighth-grade son is locked in a unit with a tattooed college kid, and he gets angry, but then he sees the tears puddled in the eyes of the kid's mother, and the anger leaks away, and he wants to know *why*. But then he looks at Cole and knows that Cole doesn't have the words to tell him, and so he doesn't ask, and he holds his son's hand and tries to ignore the scratch of the bandage, and this is how they spend their hour together, but it feels like seconds.

A nurse appears at the door of the day room. "You have just a few more minutes. It's time to say goodbye."

Arlo squeezes Cole's hand again. "I love you, bud."

He starts to get up, but Cole whispers, "I can't do this anymore."

Arlo sits back on the sofa. Cole continues to stare into the corner. "I won't do it anymore."

Arlo's hair tingles and his teeth hurt. "Cole. What do you mean by that?"

Cole closes his eyes and leans his head back against the couch. *I won't do it anymore.* And with that, this whole mess is no longer about the past and what happened; it's about the future now, and Arlo's elbows ache and he wants to scream *why* and squeeze Cole and take him away from this place.

"Cole."

Cole doesn't move. He doesn't speak.

"Cole. What did you mean by that?"

"It's five o'clock, everyone." The nurse now stands at the door of the day room with her arms crossed. "I'm sorry, but it's time to go."

The waiting room is empty when Arlo returns except for Ron reading *Car & Driver* and Denise jabbing at her phone with her thumbs. She looks up as Arlo approaches, glares.

"I'm his mother," she spits. "Who the fuck do they think they are?"

Arlo sits down. His eyes itch and his shoulders hurt. He knows to say little when she's like this.

"What did he say?"

"He seems out of it." His own voice sounds hollow. "Did they put him on meds?"

"Yeah. They gave him some pills in the ER." She looks at Ron. "You remember what they were?"

Ron shrugs.

"I wrote it down somewhere, but that's beside the point. What the fuck did he say?"

Arlo considers telling her the truth, that their son borders on catatonic, that he only said two sentences, neither of which will satisfy her, that he didn't ask Cole any questions, didn't demand any explanations, just held his son's hand and told him that he loved him, but he knows what this will get him, and he doesn't want to cry in front of Ron.

"He seemed to be doing better last time I saw him. Any idea what brought this on?"

Ron turns a page. Veins stand out on Denise's neck. Her voice comes low, like a dangerous dog straining at a leash, "What. Did. He. Say."

Arlo looks past Denise and catalogs a few of his many mistakes. Their marriage started like an amp turned to eleven, but he should have known that Denise was marrying the bass player that he'd never really be, not the restaurant manager he was becoming. He probably should have accepted the death of his marriage when the corpse began to stink; he shouldn't have clung to it so desperately. He definitely should have ponied up for a real divorce attorney rather than hire Kevin, his brother's friend, and he never should have agreed to let Denise move Cole back to Chicago.

"What did he say?"

Best to lie. "He said that he's sorry."

Four o'clock in the day room. Cole sits at a table this time and Arlo joins him. He's drawing geometric designs on a pad of paper with a dull pencil. Mostly triangles.

"How you doin' today, bud?"

He shrugs. A response. An improvement from yesterday.

"Your mom told me to tell you that she's thinking about you." Another lie.

Smirk. Eye roll. More signs of life.

"How's the food?"

Another shrug. "Fine."

Arlo waits for a long time before he asks the next question, the only question. He must will himself to ask it, uncertain that he's ready for the answer. "What happened?"

Cole's hand moves more quickly. Squares now. Octagons. Spirals.

"I need to know what happened so that I can help."

"You can't help."

The answer comes too fast. The certainty in Cole's voice chills Arlo. "I can at least try to understand."

Cole draws for a long time, pushing the pencil firmly into the pad, almost tearing the paper. Arlo watches, hoping that Cole will give him something, anything. And then he does: "You're too late."

Arlo lays on top of the bedspread at Extended Stay America with the light on in the bathroom and white noise spitting from an app on his phone. Despite his exhaustion, it takes more effort to squeeze his eyes closed than to let them fall open, so he stares at the textured ceiling, bumps made long by the light from the bathroom.

Cole showed him his room today: a bed bolted to the floor for the violent, a plastic mattress cover for the bedwetters, a metal screen fastened to the window for the jumpers, a door within the door so that the staff can check on them all. He imagines Cole awake, lying still on the crinkly sheet, careful not to disturb his roommate.

He wonders whether the gashes on Cole's wrists hurt and he tries not to imagine his timid son slicing those wrists, but he fails. He tries to imagine what could be so bad that he'd do that to himself, but then Arlo remembers his own angst at that age, with half the problems, and wonders what got to him first. Four middle schools in two years? Ron's sons and their quiet aggression, like feral cats or raccoons? His mother's careless, possessive neglect, or something worse? It feels like something happened, the way Denise keeps asking what Cole said.

Tonight will not bring sleep, because in the end, whatever the reason, the blame falls on Arlo. It happened slowly, but he saw it happen. When Denise first moved back to Chicago, her life centered on Cole—she couldn't have lived without her son any more than Cole could have lived without her. When he dropped Cole off after a weekend visit, she had a certain desperate, thirsty look in her eyes. But then two long-term boyfriends became ex-boyfriends rather than husbands, at some point Cole became a distraction, and Arlo started to feel the thirst in Cole. Every time he even brushed against the idea of tweaking the custody arrangement, Denise snapped at him, making it clear that she still wanted to *be* Cole's mom, even if she'd run out of the time or patience or energy to mother. And she's like a rottweiler with a rope in its mouth when she decides she wants something. Arlo never did have the balls to pull on the other end of that rope, and the something she wanted was Cole.

Two weeks every summer and twice a month in a Chicago hotel room just wasn't enough. But that's just an excuse. He saw all the signs: the moodiness, the bursts of anger, the evasive answers to direct questions, the dense silence where before they had talked. In retrospect, they were all muffled cries for help, but he chose not to hear them, chose to chalk them up to puberty, a phase, and now Cole's locked up with bandages on his wrists. Worse, he can tell from the set of Cole's jaw, from his quiet eyes, that he'll try again.

Ron's at work when they talk to the psychiatrist. The doctor, a tall Pakistani man with

glasses and a gentle voice, meets them in the empty waiting room, mistaking them for husband and wife. Denise sets him straight.

"He seems to be suffering from generalized anxiety and a potential depressive disorder. We started him on ten milligrams of Sertraline the day we admitted him. With your permission, I'd like to titrate that to twenty milligrams over the next several days."

"That's fine," Denise says. "Do you know why he's doing this?"

The doctor blinks. "I was hoping that you would have some idea." He pauses. "The notes tell me that he's been rather non-responsive in group."

"How long until the meds get him normal again?" she asks.

The doctor studies Denise more closely. "This is more of an art than a science, I'm afraid. Have you considered aftercare?"

"Aftercare?" Arlo asks.

"The insurance company will determine this level of care medically unnecessary after tomorrow. Thursday at the latest. There are programs." The doctor checked his watch and stood. "They should have given you that information during intake."

The doctor leaves, and Denise sits across from Arlo, looking as overwhelmed and confused as he feels. He softens just a little. Titrate? Aftercare? Sertraline? It's like the first chapter of a sci-fi novel: a strange world, an ominous and bewildering system, incomprehensible language. He always puts the book down, never makes it past those first few pages, never trusts that he'll figure it all out, but Cole's name probably just appeared on a list on a claim adjuster's computer screen, and something's about to happen, and he can't just close this book.

"Did they give you anything about aftercare programs?"

"I don't know," she says. She pulls her phone out of her purse. Reads her texts. Responds to one. "They gave me a whole bunch of crap."

A whole bunch of crap. Heat rises up Arlo's back. The tiny puddle of empathy from a moment ago evaporates, but he keeps his voice even. "Can I see it?"

She looks up, her mouth open. "He's going back to school when he gets out of here. I'm getting married on Saturday—I will not be driving him to god-knows-where so that he can talk about his feelings."

Denise hoists her purse to her shoulder and Arlo tries to formulate the words rattling around his brain since just before dawn into the sentences least likely to provoke. "I've been thinking."

"About what."

"After the wedding, he should come home with me while you're on your honeymoon."

She becomes still, eyes alert. "We'll only be gone a week. He's staying with my sister."

Along with the raccoon-like step brothers, she doesn't say. "Maybe the change will do him good, help him find his footing."

"He'd miss school."

"That probably wouldn't be the worst thing for him right now."

"He's my son. He lives here. You get your two weeks every summer just like the agreement says. Don't try any of your bullshit."

Arlo forces himself to look at her, direct in the eyes, wills himself not to blink. "Denise. He sliced his fucking wrists. He'll probably do it again as soon as he gets out. Or worse."

Denise considers Arlo warily. "Why do you say that? What did he tell you?"

"Nothing. He's my son, too. I can tell."

She waits for more, her phone slack in her hand. "If you want to change the custody agreement, hire a lawyer and have him call mine. We can fight it out in court. Until then, my son lives with me."

They play gin rummy for most of the hour. Cole seems more alert but he says little. Arlo lets him win, but not so often that Cole can tell that he's tanking. Arlo keeps one eye on the clock. Ten minutes before the hour's up, Arlo asks while he's dealing. He tries to sound casual.

"Was it Evan and Tony?" Ron's boys.

Cole's eyes flick from the cards to Arlo's face. Fear leaks from his wide-eyed stare. He looks back down at the cards, hesitates, then picks them up. He says nothing.

"What did they do?"

Cole shakes his head, answers more quickly than Arlo expected. "I have to live there. You'll go back to St. Louis."

Cole picks up a card from the deck, discards another. Arlo stares at his own cards but doesn't see them. He tries to decide whether to press. He's not sure that he wants to know.

"I'm going to ask you to do something and I need you to trust me."

Cole looks up, wary.

"I want you to tell the staff that you're ready to see your mom."

Cole's face crumples and he pushes back from the table. "No. No way."

Arlo puts his cards down, leans forward.

"I don't want to see her."

And he shouldn't have to see her. They've asked him for so much, to shoulder their mistakes and their weaknesses, to clean up their messes. "I know you don't."

"I don't have to see her. They said so."

Arlo wants to take him into his arms and ask him for nothing and tell him that he'll take care of it, that he'll take care of everything—but he can't. He must ask him for this one more thing. His tongue thickens with the asking, and he shouldn't ask him for it, but he must. "You're right. But this isn't about her, it's about us." Arlo glances down at the table, blinks away the burn, and then looks back up at Cole. "I know that I've let you down, but I need you to trust me."

The waiting room nears capacity and Denise barks into her phone, berating the florist about the topiary trees at the reception. She finally hangs up. "Cathy's an idiot," she mutters to Ron.

Ron grunts, not looking up from *Luxury Auto*.

Denise checks her watch, looks toward the door, checks her watch again. She demanded to see Cole by herself, without Arlo. The door opens and she hands her phone to Ron.

"Wish me luck." She smooths her skirt and joins the anxious line.

Soon, only Ron and Arlo remain. Arlo licks his lips, steels himself. "How's she doing?"

Ron looks up, surprised. "She seems OK, but it's hard to tell with Denise. She was the one that found him. She blames herself."

Ron goes back to reading. *She blames herself*. Arlo considers this possibility for the first time. Ron's not the type to embellish, and Arlo knows from long experience

that no matter what level of culpability Denise accepts, she'll never show it; she'll bluster through it. It doesn't matter, though. It can't matter anymore.

"How are your sons doing with all this?"

Ron looks up too quickly, holds Arlo's gaze too long, confirming what Arlo already knows.

"They're fine." His eyes flick back to the page.

"Seems like they shouldn't have to deal with it. It would be horrible if they found him."

"But they didn't," Ron says quickly.

"I mean next time."

"What did he tell you?"

"Nothing." Arlo tries to look Ron in the eyes but settles for his forehead. "Not yet."

"Listen." Ron rolls the magazine and leans forward, filling the space between them with his bulk. "If you've got something to talk about, then maybe you should talk about it with Denise."

Arlo shakes his head. "Denise doesn't listen to me. She only talks."

A smile tickles the corner of Ron's mouth.

"He's going to do it again."

The smile disappears and Ron studies his hands, chews his lip. Arlo can feel Ron's weariness, can see that he's tired of the whole damn thing, wants it over. Arlo is counting on that weariness.

"So, let's say you're right," Ron says. "What do you want me to do about that?"

Arlo takes a deep breath. "Denise wants two things right now—she wants Cole to live with her and she wants to marry you on Saturday."

Ron allows a slight nod, his eyes intent.

Arlo tries to make it sound like a demand, but it comes out a whisper. "You can tell her that she can't have both."

Arlo holds his breath and watches the gears turn as Ron evaluates the angles, the upsides, the risks, the cost, and then he unrolls his magazine and continues to read about cars.

Fifteen minutes later the doors open and the parents stream out with their tears and their awkwardness. Denise is one of the last. She walks in a daze to where they sit and lowers herself into the chair next to Ron. She balls the hem of her skirt in her fist.

"That wasn't what I expected," she says quietly.

"What did he say?" Ron asks.

"Nothing. He didn't say a fucking word."

Arlo and Ron wait for more, but the tears come first. Denise digs a tissue from the purse at her feet and tries to dab at her eyes without ruining her makeup, but she soon gives up and wipes and smears the whole wet, black mess.

"There was a guy sitting next to him," Denise says. She sucks a breath. "An orderly or whatever they call them. I told him to leave us alone but he said he couldn't because Cole's been trying to tear the bandages off his wrists."

Arlo's stomach churns and his own eyes cloud with tears. He asked too much. Again, he asked too much.

"I expected him to be angry." Denise looks at Arlo instead of Ron. She looks at him in that way she almost never does—like she wants to be understood, not just listened to. "I'm used to him being angry. I wanted him to be angry, but he was just. . . ."

Her mouth works as she stretches toward the right word but she can't find it.

Ron puts his arm around Denise. It's the first time that Arlo's seen him touch her. "We should go," he says quietly. He looks at Arlo then, nods slightly, even as he whispers to Denise. "We need to figure out what we're going to do."

Penny Candy

Brie Garrett

AFTER SCHOOL, THE STUDENTS OF ROSE HEIGHTS ELEMENTARY LIKED TO WALK DOWN the street to the corner store and buy candy, despite their parents always demanding they come straight home. They didn't like the idea of their children walking into the corner store that smelled of alcohol and was littered with loitering neighborhood drunks and deadbeats. Nevertheless, the children snuck over to Rose Heights Liquors and Spirits with lunch money from their parents or guardians jingling in their pockets.

At just eleven, Cree Johnson learned you could get a lot at the corner store for \$2.00. Her favorite thing to get was a \$0.75 bag of chips with cheese and meat and two plastic sandwich bags of fruit punch Frooties. Cree would rummage through the bags in the bin for the ones that had the most, her mouth watering at the thought. Then, she'd go to check out with the hot cheese and meat, making the Doritos bag burn her fingers, and she'd slide the owner her \$1.75 under the bulletproof plastic that separated him from the customers (she'd take her quarter to use for the next day).

The store owner was a tall, heavy built man. He had a thick black mustache, pale skin, and hairy knuckles. The hair on his head was thin enough that you could see his scalp, fine enough that the strands stood straight up, and silver enough that it was practically invisible. He was covered with wrinkles and liver spots, and when he leaned into the mic to let customers know how much they owed, a glimmer of a gold tooth peeked out between his lips. The children had never seen him come out from behind his counter. Cree and her friends were sure that he lived there.

He didn't roam around the neighborhood like everyone else that went to the corner store. And none of the adults in the neighborhood ever told stories about him like they'd do all the other adults. Old Man Jeter always played chess at the park. Miss Stefanie went everywhere in her hair bonnet. Uncle Tyrone was no one's actual uncle, but lived in the neighborhood long enough that he was everyone's uncle. Cree wasn't even sure of the store owner's name. Whenever she paid for her stuff, she'd stare at his name tag and try to make it out. He was a Mister something, but it was so faded, covered with so much grime, she could only make out two letters, an 'R' and a 'U'.

For a while, she guessed maybe it was something like 'Rutabaga,' 'Rumble,' or 'Ruckus.' She liked 'Ruckus' best; he looked like a Mister Ruckus.

"Come on, we gotta hurry before the bus comes," Cree's classmate, Megan, said as they walked in. The entire corner store was a weird olive color. The windows, barred

with black metal railings, all plastered with poster boards and alcohol and cigarette advertisements, let little to no sunlight inside. Instead, the whole store was lit by dull fluorescent lights that had been hanging on to their last shred of light for at least ten years now. Sometimes they'd flicker repeatedly, and the children would joke that they were in some horror movie.

"Man, I swear our bus never be comin' on time, we a'ight," Man-man, a small dark-skinned boy with big white teeth, shrugged.

"Watch this be the one time we miss the bus now," Cree laughed, switching the weight of her body from one leg to the other.

Lydia, a light-skinned girl who thought she was so cool because she was the only sixth-grader whose mom pressed her hair and let her wear it down, sucked her teeth. "Imma be so mad if we miss our bus now because y'all talk too much. Let's just get our stuff and go." She ran her fingers through her hazel-colored hair and walked past the liquor and paper towels, heading straight to the Doritos like she owned the place. Cree and her classmates looked at each other. Lydia always thought she ran the sixth grade. But they followed her to the Doritos anyway.

Mister peered at the children through his bulletproof glass. He had a tiny black and white television with antennas sticking all the way up, sitting on his side of the counter. Cree stopped at the chips, looking back at Mister to try and make out the sound. She couldn't see far enough to know what he was watching. From the sounds of the screaming, cussing, and cheering, she assumed it was something like *Jerry Springer* or *Maury*—or one of those other bad talk shows she'd watch when she got to stay home from school because she was sick and nothing else was on TV. She looked away from the television to look at Mister, who stared straight at her. He sharpened his eyes and she quickly looked away, putting her attention back on the group. Cree grabbed herself a quarter bag of Doritos and scurried over to the cheese and meat table.

"What got you so distracted?" Man-man turned to her.

"I feel like he keep looking at me," Cree responded.

"Who?" Man-man looked around the corner store. "Crown?" Man-man pointed to a thin young man in baggy clothes slouched against a liquor fridge. He wore a black du-rag and had a coarse, patchy beard to match his white t-shirt which was stained a permanent dingy yellow. Once upon a time, he was the neighborhood's best basketball player, the prince of the court who would play for the Bulls. Now, he was called Crown because he always reeked of whiskey and always had a bottle of Crown Royal in his hand, the purple velvet cover poking out of the back pocket of his jeans.

"Not him, the owner." Cree nodded her head in Mister's direction.

"He always lookin' at people like that, it don't mean nothin'," Man-man said, stepping up in line and handing the cheese guy his bag of Doritos. "Lemme get the cheese with meat and the jalapeños please," he smiled with his buck teeth. The guy bobbed his head and opened the bag. He dipped the spoon in the meat, grease dripping off the rim, and poured it over the chips. With a slight shake, he let the extra grease plop into the meat Crock Pot then dipped the spoon in the Crock Pot with cheese.

"Y'all hurry up, the bus probably here by now!" Lydia shouted across the store from the checkout counter. Mister slid Lydia her change and she gently put her dollar and can of Arizona in her bookbag. She flung her hair back, tapping her ballet flats on the floor impatiently and taking her Doritos from Megan.

The cheese guy dumped a spoonful of jalapeños into the bag and handed it to Man-man. “Thanks, foe.” Man-man stepped to the side to let Cree hand the guy her bag.

“Just cheese and meat for me, please.” The man bobbed his head, going back through the routine and handing the bag to her.

Man-man ran over to the cash register. “Cree, come on,” he rushed her, slamming his money on the counter without paying any mind to Mister. Mister snatched the money, eyeing Man-man hard.

“Okay, gimme a second, I want Frooties,” Cree shouted back, zooming over to the cardboard bin of penny candies in the middle of the store. Her pitch-black box braids flopped like jump ropes as they tapped the shoulders of her white uniform polo.

She bent down, extending her left arm out to keep from dropping her chips, and nearly dipped her head into the pile of candy to find her bags. Cree clawed through them, tossing the bags with mainly blue raspberry and grape to the side. The cardboard started to bend and bags of Frooties hit the floor.

“Girl, hurry your butt up!” Lydia huffed.

“Alright, alright!” Cree screamed back, focusing only on the candy. The creases of the cardboard started to tear, and she thrust herself further down. She found one bag full of the bright red fruit punch wrappers, snatched it up, and put it in the water bottle side pocket of her book bag so she didn’t forget.

“Hey, li’l girl, you better stop tearing up my stuff!” Mister shouted, watching her small brown body in his things.

Cree’s shoulders hunched up at the sound of his voice. His heavy, steel voice boomed like lightning striking a tree or a hammer knocking through a wall. She stumbled a little into the bin. “Yes, sir,” she replied, her voice like the creaks under your feet when you carefully tiptoe around the house late at night. Cree snatched her second bag and stood up.

“Got it!” She smoothed her navy blue pleated skort down and dashed over to the register. “Sorry, sir, the box is kinda old.”

“Well, it didn’t tear there by itself did it, little girl?” His eyes burned into her and she could see him balling his fat hands into fists, the skin turning red under all the hair. She put her Doritos and bag of Frooties on the counter and took a step back out of fear. “I work hard for my store and the stuff in here and I don’t need you ungrateful, loud thugs here—”

“Okay, I’m sorry. . . .” Cree kept her eyes down, refusing to make eye contact. Her heart leapt out her chest and there was something about him in this moment that made her want to run out and keep running.

“Well what are you waiting for, huh?! You gon’ pay for your stuff or just keep staring at me?”

“Oh, right . . . sorry. . . .” Cree looked over at Man-man, Megan, and Lydia who stood over by the door, their hands still and by their sides while their heads hung down low. Their parents had given all of them the “talk.” Cree slowly reached in her pocket for her money, an attempt at submission from a harmless, eighty-pound girl.

“Hey, wait a minute, you stealing from me?!” he shouted.

“Huh? What you talking about?” Cree looked up, her money dropping out of her hand. She didn’t know whether to pick it up or stay looking at him. “I ain’t stealin’ nothing!”

“You think I’m stupid?! Huh?!” His voice rumbled. He stormed from behind the counter, and it occurred to Cree that he was much bigger than she thought he was.

Against the instinct her momma raised her to have, she turned to run. Man-man, Lydia, Megan, and all the other children stood and looked at her, shocked. For a split second, they believed she could. And then Mister reached his hand out, grabbed as many braids as he could, and yanked Cree back until he could grab hold of her body.

Cree's first thought was how the fluorescent lights burned her eyes when her head tilted back. Her second thought was how fast the world spun as he turned her around; that's when she felt the throbbing in her scalp. She smelled how much Mister stank of sweat and anger and cigarettes. And his eyes were a piercing blue she never noticed before. They were the light blue eye color she was always told were beautiful and calming, superior to her own mud-colored eyes. But she saw nothing beautiful or calm about them. They weren't superior—they dominated over her by force.

"So you try to run but you not stealin' from me, huh?" Cree shook her head no, unable to verbally form words. Otherwise, he would have gotten an earful. She grew angry, but she couldn't do anything. Her momma taught her not to do anything.

"Then what's this?!" Mister pulled the bag of Frooties out from the side pocket of her bookbag. "You thought I wouldn't notice huh, ya nappy-headed little girl!"

"Don't be calling me that! You just mad cause you ain't got no hair!" Cree screamed out. Her classmates gasped. Cree regretted it instantly. But she was mad and she was scared and being quiet didn't help, so maybe she had to be loud.

"You steal from me and then you raise your voice at me?!"

"I ain't steal from you! I was gonna pay for it but you made me drop my money!" She moved her head, trying to show him the scattered money on the floor.

Mister clutched the collar of Cree's polo, getting a strong grip on the fabric, and pulled her body close to his, making her stumble into him. Cree flushed with anger and fear and embarrassment. He lifted his beefy right hand and struck it across her brown face. It stung on contact and she glowed red.

"Now, I'm going to ask you again. Did you steal from me?!" he yelled. Cree looked at her peers who watched in shock but said nothing. She imagined they were speechless. She put her hand to her cheek to rub the pain away, but Mister squeezed her wrist and yanked it down.

"So help me, little girl, if you don't answer me. . . ."

"I already did!" Her voice cracked and tears were flowing from her eyes. "I said I ain't steal from you!" Cree prayed for a savior. For someone in there—anyone—to step up and protect her. To say they had her back. To say she mattered enough that they could step out of shock and save her.

Mister stared at her hard. "I oughta call the cops and let them handle you," he huffed, giving a side eye to the cheese guy to call immediately just in case. "I'm gonna give you one last chance to fess up and admit you tried to steal from me."

"Man, what do you want her to say?" Man-man sucked through his teeth. Mister whipped his head up to look at him. "She told you she ain't steal nothing and never stole nothing before." Man-man stepped up and the students gasped. Cree could see Man-man's nervousness in the way his knees wobbled.

"Boy, do you wanna be next?" Mister snarled.

"Nah," Man-man took a small step back. "I just want you to let her go so we can all go home . . . sir."

"I'll let her go once the cops get here," Mister grumbled. He pulled her by the arm, putting her behind the checkout counter with him until the cops came minutes later. They usually came fast when they were ready to arrest somebody. The officer's

name was Kurland. He was a young white man with a full head of brown hair and a look in his eyes like he was never expecting to get a call so soon on the job.

Besides Mister, everyone else stayed frozen, letting him do all the talking. Cree refused to meet Kurland's eyes as Mister told his version of the story, omitting that he hurt her.

"Why is her face red?" Kurland asked, barely paying her attention and instead inspecting the store.

"She's fine," Mister brushed it off.

"He hit me after he accused me of stealing," Cree mumbled.

"Excuse me?" Kurland asked.

"The girl said he hit her." Crown's voice shocked the space. No one had even noticed him get up from his spot in the corner.

"He's drunk, he doesn't know what he's talking about." Mister gripped Cree.

"I know what I saw and I know what I see on that girl's face." Crown lifted his hands up and walked slowly to Cree, Mister, and Kurland. The men tensed. "Look at this girl's face. Don't you know fear when you see it?"

As Kurland stared, Crown straightened up, straighter than any of the school kids had ever seen him stand. For the first time, they saw what all the adults used to see in him: a neighborhood all-star.

"Hey man," Crown slurred, his arm flailing as he tried to point. "If I had slapped some ol' white child, I betcha I'd have umpteen bullets in my back right now before I could even move my hand away from they face."

Crown peered at the officer and stumbled as he tried to walk. Kurland flinched. "Now wouldn't I?" Crown asked, spit spraying. He grabbed hold of Cree, holding the little girl tightly to him. It was the safest she'd felt since all this started.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to let her go," Kurland demanded.

"I'm less of a threat to her than that man," Crown pointed at Mister. "Hell, at least I ain't slap her across the face."

Cree stood closer to Crown, the sharp whiskey smell from his clothes and his body stinging the inside of her nose. She felt dizzy, her senses growing muddled.

Kurland looked at Crown and then at Mister, completely disregarding Cree. He went back and forth like he was trying to figure out the story. Like there was another side to the story that hadn't been told when he knew good and well there wasn't.

"Alright," he sighed. Unlike Mister, Kurland didn't have the same strike of authority in his voice, but he still held the room. He rubbed the space between his eyebrows and turned to Mister. "Did she make it out the store with the candy?"

Mister looked over at Cree who clung to Crown's shirt. "No, because I stopped her at the register."

All eyes went on Cree. First the children, then Crown and Mister, and then finally Kurland who seemed surprised she was still there. Cree looked at Crown who gave her a small nod.

"I put the candy in the pocket of my bag so I didn't lose it," Cree spoke softly. "But I was going to pay for it. I was pulling my money out my pocket when he accused me."

"Are you sure?" Kurland asked. She looked at him. Cree wasn't sure how to answer that question. Did he think she would have willingly gone through all of this?

"Is this her money on the floor?" Kurland pointed to the money Cree dropped.

"Yes," Cree answered when Mister said nothing.

He looked around the store to try and make the call. "There's just not enough

evidence to prove that she had intent to steal," he sighed.

"I said she was trying to steal!" Mister replied, like that should have been enough.

"From all accounts, it seems you illegally detained her since she never left the store and allegedly was going to pay."

"And he put his hands on her," Crown reminded him.

Kurland nodded, forgetting that detail. He bent down to Cree's level. "Where's your parents, little girl?"

"My mom is on her way home from work. She works downtown." Cree played with her fingers.

He turned to Mister. "Listen, I think we can just drop this since nothing illegal happened." The group looked at Kurland in disbelief at how he made all of this seem like just a burden on Mister. Crown pointed to Cree's face. Kurland swallowed. "Or I'm afraid I'd have to take you in for assault and battery."

"What?!" Mister hollered. "You let these people scare you into not doing your job? What you arresting me for? Serving and protecting my store?!"

"You hit a child," Crown intervened.

"That girl ain't no child," Mister resisted.

Kurland sighed, walked over to Mister, and grabbed his wrist while reading him his Miranda rights. Cree noticed he wasn't nearly as aggressive as Mister was to her. Still, Mister objected even as the handcuffs clicked behind his back.

"Just know I'm filing a complaint against you once I get outta there!" Mister yelled. "Obstructing justice and protecting thugs." He shook his head. "System really is broken. . . ." Kurland said nothing, instead just walked Mister and Cree out of the store. Her classmates and Crown walked behind her. They were stunned to see the whole neighborhood standing outside, waiting.

The children looked around for their parents and saw nothing. Instead, backup stopped them to ask questions. A crowd had gathered, barricaded from the store, and had no way of really knowing what happened—but still, somehow, they knew. That's the thing about black neighborhoods: somehow everyone always knows what happened without stepping foot in the place.

Kurland handed Mister to another officer and walked Cree to a bench. "Miss, I'm going to need your mom's phone number to call her." Cree wanted to beg him not to, but she also wanted her mom. She wanted a safe hug by someone who smelled like sweet pea. She scribbled her mom's phone number on a piece of paper, then handed it to him. "OK, wait here with everyone." The cop cleared his throat, stepping a couple feet away to make the call.

"I see they finally got that bastard out of here," Miss Kim said, folding her arms. She was a small, thin lady with olive skin and pitch-black hair that stopped directly at her shoulders. She and her daughter owned the neighborhood nail salon. "I never liked that son of a bitch," she said under her breath, narrowing her almond-shaped eyes as Mister ducked into the cop car.

"No one did," Uncle Tyrone said, his voice husky and filled with phlegm. He shook his head at Mister in disgust. "Maybe now someone with some decency will run that corner store."

"We don't need no one running no corner store. That's the whole damn problem," the nosy neighborhood lady, Mrs. Crenshaw, chimed in. She waddled her way up to the group, pushing past Miss Kim. She was a thick, medium-sized lady with

warm brown skin and cold brown eyes. Her glasses always sat on the brim of her nose, so her head stayed tilted down like she was judging you. "None of this woulda happened if them kids stopped going in there. They gon' end up just like all the drunks that be in there if they keep playin'."

"Now, Maybelline, you know you don't mean that," Uncle Tyrone huffed, looking over at Cree. Cree sat on the bench watching her feet hover over the ground, but listening to everything they said. Was Mrs. Crenshaw right? Was it Cree's fault? If Mister wasn't afraid to strike her, clearly he wouldn't have been afraid to strike anybody. But he didn't just strike anybody, he struck her. And for that, Cree figured, it was her fault.

"I damn sure do," Mrs. Crenshaw turned to him. "You know good and well we all be tellin' them kids, 'Don't you go in that corner store. You take ya ass home and do your homework.' And what they do?" Mrs. Crenshaw glanced at Cree. "Y'all hardhead. That's the problem. But a hard head make for a soft behind. I guess you know that already now though, huh?"

Cree kept her eyes down. Her mamma always told her it was rude to roll her eyes at people. It was disrespectful. She'd tell her, "Cree, I bet not catch you rolling your eyes at me or no one else. You not about to have anyone thinking I ain't raise you with manners." But her mamma wasn't here, and Mrs. Crenshaw was working her last nerve.

"Oh, so you can't talk now? What, when he popped you he popped ya voice out, too?"

"Come on now, Maybelline, leave the girl alone." Old Man Jeter looked up from his chess game, frustration on his face.

Cree felt her face get hot. She clutched the bench and focused her attention on the swaying of her feet.

"Ain't my fault she got a attitude because she don't wanna listen to her mamma. I know for a fact her mamma be telling her not to go to that corner store. God be working in mysterious ways, child, lemme tell you. You better listen to Him."

Cree rolled her eyes. "Yeah, okay," she mumbled.

"Excuse me?! See that's what got you popped in the first place, that li'l smart mouth of yours."

"You weren't even there," Cree exclaimed, looking Mrs. Crenshaw dead in her eyes.

"But I see how you actin' now," Mrs. Crenshaw responded.

Uncle Tyrone put his hands on Mrs. Crenshaw's shoulders. "Don't you have to pick up your granddaughter?"

She looked down at her watch. "Oh, shoot . . . you right, I do. That child over there 'bout to make me miss picking up my grandbaby. But I bet I won't find her at some corner store because she know how to listen." Mrs. Crenshaw wobbled away before looking back at Cree. "And I'm sorry about what happened to you, Miss Thing, but you better watch that mouth of yours when you talk to me or you'll be getting popped again."

Cree sank back into the bench, her shoulders hunched in. "Yes, ma'am," she mumbled, waiting for Mrs. Crenshaw to walk away before rolling her eyes again.

"Cree?! Where's Cree?! Have you seen my baby?!" Cree looked around for her mamma, hearing the frantic breathing in her voice.

"Momma!" Cree called from the bench, standing on top of the old wood and peering through all the people. Ms. Johnson rushed past the cops, trying to explain to

her what she already heard on the phone. She was a medium-sized woman with her peppered twists pulled up into a bun. Parts of her blouse poked out from her slacks; normally Cree knew her momma would have tucked them back in right away, but her focus was on Cree and Cree alone.

Cree ran over to her momma, ready for a hug, but instead was met with, “Girl, what is wrong with you?”

Her momma bent down to be eye level with her. Her eyes were wide, scared, and there was fire floating in them, but Cree couldn’t see anger—at least none directed at her. She could see her momma darting her eyes at Mister in the cop car every once in a while and shaking her head.

“Are you OK?” her momma asked, looking Cree up and down. Cree didn’t know how to answer. She was alive, that was for sure. But was she OK? She didn’t know. So instead of answering, she looked over at the neighborhood, standing and staring at the two of them. They formed a wall between them and the world. Her momma looked too, feeling embarrassment, standing there. “Come on, go get in the car.”

Cree couldn’t read her momma. Not as good as she usually could. She didn’t know what she was feeling, she didn’t know what to expect. The two walked through the crowd, adults assuring Ms. Johnson that if she needed anything, they’d be there to help her. She gave them thank yous out of courtesy, holding Cree close to her like she could lose her at any moment. They got in the car and rode all the way home in quiet—no music playing, no discussion about anything that happened. Instead, they just focused on the road ahead. Distraught, they took deep breaths of the silent air until they finally pulled up to the driveway, parked, and crossed the threshold of the house to the living room.

“How many times have I told you not to go to that corner store?” Ms. Johnson finally broke the silence.

Cree jumped at her voice. “I’m sorry, Momma.”

“That’s not what I asked you.” Her voice was tired but firm. “I said, how many times have I told you not to go to that corner store?” She leaned against the table with her head low.

“A lot . . .” Cree mumbled. “But I didn’t know that was going to happen! If I knew he was going to . . .”

“You’re never going to know, Cree!” She turned around, her eyes watery. Cree always cried when her mom cried and she felt the tears well up. “You have to be more careful than that. Now, I told you not to go in that store. And I’m your momma, you should have listened to me. You should have known I was telling you that for a reason.”

“But he’s never hit me before. And I did everything you told me to, he just wouldn’t listen and he hit me.”

“He could have done way worse than hit you, Cree. Do you understand that? You could have ended up just like Latasha Harlins.” Her voice cracked and she swallowed the lump in her throat as her tears fell. She walked over to her daughter—her sweet, small, hardheaded daughter—and pulled her close, wrapping her arms around her. “When I got that phone call, I didn’t know if I should be angry or sad or just relieved that at least you were still alive. That at least he didn’t. . . .”

Cree squeezed her mother tight, tears dampening her shirt. She shushed her mother, trying to console her the way she did for her so many times. But she couldn’t think what to say, so instead all she said was, “I know, Momma, I know . . . I’m sorry.”

They stood there in complete silence with the sound of nothing but their tears

and staggered breathing, until her momma could muster up enough strength to finally say, “It’s not your fault, baby girl. It’s not your fault.”

Before the Eyes

————— Jack Nothwang —————

DARBY HAD THE MOST BEAUTIFUL EYES TO ANYONE WHO SAW THEM. SHE HID THEM behind thick-rimmed glasses and overgrown bangs. She kept them to the ground and she kept them to herself. Slender of frame with tight olive skin, her smooth neck transformed harshly into a sharp jawline. The thick hazelnut mop of hair that draped down her spine, hung down to her eyelids, and concealed the distinctly soft features of her face. Her mother once told her that all you would ever need to know about a person is hidden in their eyes, this being especially true for Darby. They were a rich cinnamon, so deep you could fall into them. Darby was a streetlight—a bright, subtle beauty, often overlooked.

Darby spent her hours alone with Waylon Jennings and Woody Guthrie to keep her company. She loved those simple folk songs fetishizing a sober and simple kind of life. She wanted a life like one out of an old country song, one with solitude and humble sorts of love to be had. The songs were a home in a world in which Darby was—as much as anything—out of place. Despite how she longed, she did not belong. The lowly daughter of a lumberyard worker, she kept her head down and spoke only when spoken to, if then. In spite of wanting everything to do with the world, the world wanted nothing to do with dear Darby.

At the ripening of teenage years, Darby had begun to experience sharp and chronic headaches, which her mother wrote off as a simple part of her blossoming. The headaches persisted and worsened until her parents at last decided to take poor Darby to a doctor. She neglected to mention, until this point, the bumps appearing on each of her temples until what seemed to be bone had broken through her skin. The mere existence of the bumps baffled doctors and scientists alike. The bumps left everyone speechless as they continued to grow. The girl's father, a devout Catholic and regular Yon Yonson, became horrified by the thought of Satan having his hand in his dear daughter. The stubs on each side of the girl's head grew and grew until, by the end of her freshman year, Darby had grown a full set of antlers.

The girl often wondered how many times she was the punchline of a stranger's story. How often a passing stranger made note or took a picture of her to show their peers later. How often a flamboyant man might have told a story to a group of partygoers, only to end his story with an overdrawn “. . . with *antlers!*” It was likely more than the girl could reckon, though, the girl reckoned a lot. Beer, football, and

cheese only curated so many stories. There was little else partygoers had to mention in rural Wisconsin.

Once, Darby overheard a physiology teacher discussing her *condition*, as it were, with a biology teacher. The two quickly agreed that they were truly baffled and discussed a new topic: her behavioral issues. They were only a few, but the conversation would not allow one to believe as such. Darby found that her science teachers often looked for reasons to dislike her. They often looked for excuses to bring to the attention of a class that, in most breeds of deer, it's only the male that grows antlers. Perhaps they were afraid of her; scientists who'd found something that simply could not be explained. She felt, perhaps, her mere existence questioned the validity of their fields. All things considered, it was rather flattering that she held such a power.

Darby never gave nor received much affection from the other sex. They didn't mesh well, the boys she knew and herself. She was never too bothered by this. *Boys are overrated*, she often thought to herself. It wasn't just her antlers that kept the male gaze clear of her, though they did play an important role in the matter; of course, she knew, they weren't gawking in the halls due to her devilishly good looks. She was too Angel Olsen for the boys that liked The Killers, she was too Brandi Carlile for the boys that liked Luke Bryan, and she was far too Courtney Barnett for everyone else. Her presence was a welcoming mat and her demeanor was a tablet of anxiety medication.

She acknowledged the lack of interest and never gave it much more thought. Her disinterest had been greater. There had seldom been boys whom she cared much for. There was a young man, once, who said to her, "You have the most beautiful antlers," and showered her in other such compliments. Darby kept him around for some time as he kissed the top of her head and hung Christmas ornaments from her branch-like defects. They held hands, went to movies and to school dances together. The people would still point and stare, but their attention felt more welcoming with him. His family was so proud of him. His friends were also so proud of him. The entire world was proud of this able boy for loving the deer girl.

Months came and months passed, and Darby had come to feel like the boy's charity case. Less like a circus character and more like a cancer patient. She was a poor, underprivileged child and he was a rising Hollywood star, posing with her for pictures to show the world how wonderful he was. His love for her was a novelty. In a different way than his woodland hunter of a father, the boy saw Darby's antlers as a trophy. It was all he saw. Darby never truly loved him either, and neither did she care for the way he paraded her any longer. She left him alone and he soon took a blind girl to the prom.

Darby's father introduced himself to everyone in the dorms the day he dropped her off for college. Despite his deep-rooted fears, he had grown to love her more than anything. He couldn't face the idea of living without her yet; the streetlights in his neighborhood just weren't bright enough. He wanted to protect Darby from the world, though she came with built-in self-defense tools. He introduced himself to every other father in the halls, as one does. They all offered a similar, military-esque opening statement of their name, hometown, and occupation. "My name is Yon Yonson," they would say. "I live in Wisconsin," they would continue. "I work in a lumberyard there," they would conclude. Darby found comfort in her father's attendance if for no other reason than he presented something more embarrassing than two full-size deer antlers growing out of one's temples.

Darby thought this while standing near a girl with wonderful hair. It was jet black

with amber highlights and grew outward in natural curls. The girl let it out on top and kept the sides maintained with a warm red and yellow head wrap. The fabric had the additional benefit of holding up her thin, circular glasses. The girl's hair had entirely distracted Darby from the shiny scales that layered her skin.

"Your hair is beautiful," Darby couldn't help but announce to the girl.

"Thank you." Her face lit up. Her forked tongue stuttered as she responded. She stood close and tilted her chin as she complimented Darby on her lovely eyes.

Andrea the Secretary

Drew Renner

WHEN I WAS IN MY OXFORD YEARS, I TOOK IT UPON MYSELF TO HEAD A FIRM OF publishing. The money had come over from America—the last of Grandmother’s wishes, the pomace of her bladder press, the final pittance she ordained for me—and in my youthful foolery I thought it prudent to assume *le classe bourgeoise*. And in this foolish journey, I encountered men as vernal and as callow as myself, abreast in senselessness and studied in twaddle, fluent in rancor and eloquent in scorn, inflamed with juvenile ambitions to undertake the class, but not positions, of their fathers. But to send for a scrivener to copy down the times I spent with my aforementioned business partners would be to pen a memoir of another name. My current task requires of me to tell of my encounters with a woman named Andrea, who served as secretary and assistant in the breath between the autumn and the winter. The weeks I spent with her, which now have turned to years in the probing of my mind, have culminated in a wellspring bursting forth with intrigue and with doubt, perhaps to serve as my only contribution to the realm of literature.

I can recall the whites of her eyes—almost inhuman—resembling eggshell-colored plaster against her irises, which were to me indistinct from her blackened pupils. A look into her eyes was like a look into a darkening tunnel. Eyes that brimmed and brewed and steeped inside a quiet intelligence. Intelligence—and something else. Something more. But nothing I could see or hear or name, only something I could feel. Though on the surface her glance was flat and vapid, there was a deeper, terrifying omniscience to it. There was something all-knowing in the gentle curve of her thin, colorless, sneering lips. Those same few words she often uttered between those lips will never escape me. . . .

I must, however, enter on a brief account of three associates of mine, my fellow capitalists, my partners in this firm of publishing. I wish, for both the reader’s sake as well as mine, that this account were inapposite and thus omitted. Nevertheless, I must present to you this canvas before I can endeavor to paint, in order that you might observe my secretary with the sympathy that she deserves.

But in the first place: I am an Oxford man of favorable breeding, favorable though my mother bore me in the Colonies. It was here that I continued in the discipline of Classics, Greek and Roman, in the days before they made you choose. I outperformed my friends and tutors, and though they would refuse to say so, my professors. This, of

course, did nothing to curtail my cultivated hubris. Hubris, though, more resembled a way of life than a simple attitude at Oxford. As much as I became a man of insufferable arrogance, such was also true of my classmates. Perhaps the proudest three became my dearest friends, the three of whom I mentioned earlier. From all the hours we spent with one another—drinking in pubs, competing in tutes, sparring in lectures—arose our talk of doing business together. Home we wrote to acquire the proper funds. My correspondence was met with news of Grandmother's death and the money left to me within her will and testament. We pooled our funds together, we four, and within the year beyond our graduation we had founded and installed our house of publishing, and nameless henceforth it will remain.

Before I venture further into the woeful wastes of space that were my colleagues, I ought to recount here the space in which we worked. Now, around this house of publishing, there was an air of schizophrenia. Like much of southern England, the town in which the house had stood, N-----, had strewn within it buildings with foreboding High Gothic façades. This one was, in fact, no exception—on the outside. The inside, however, had been rebuilt from top to bottom after a devastating fire that ravaged the place in the eighteenth century. The landlord at the time, rumored to be an idiot harlequin (judging by his lack of taste, I do not find it difficult to believe), had thought it prudent to remodel the building in the style of the age.

This is how it came to pass that our publishing house, with an exterior façade fit for some medieval queen, had an interior which appeared to every eye as the tartiest brothel in all of southern England, luring men with fetishes for bulbous wainscoting, red velvet sofas, and portraits of unnamed military men standing in redcoat dress by their steeds—watching you. When meeting with authors or editors, I could read on their faces before they would sit: “How many people have had intercourse on this chair?”

Red plush carpeting and thick, heavy drapes; burgundy lampshades laced in black, hinting at sex; mahogany dromedaries and mahogany walls and mahogany bookcases. Even at the hour of noon the corners of the rooms retreated into shadow. The carpet had a thickness such that you could move about without a sound. Always I was startled out of my wits with Andrea's silent approach; she would venture down that long, narrow hallway from her desk to my office, to appear soundlessly out of nowhere—like death.

Andrea. . . .

Now together, we four, had been in operation for a time: myself, a second named Winthrope, a third named Morton, and a fourth named Whitaker.

Winthrope was a portly man, and fond of port. Cigarettes before noon and port and whiskey after. I do not think I need to mention that his temperament would soften quite a bit when noon had passed. The man was a dog in the hours of morning, snoring when he slept at his desk and barking while awake—the mad kind of barking.

Because of this madness, I had relegated him to the task of typesetting, and he was quite good at it. He could typeset twenty manuscripts a week. If he could sit at his desk and tinker with margins like a machine, while keeping at a safe distance from the realm of anything interpersonal or creative, the rest of us there were happier men for it. He had asked me, as a sort of payment for his relegation to the most menial of work, that his duck should have free reign of the office.

Winthrope had named her Sharon, and he had grown quite close to the poor thing. Sharon, with feathers the color of sullied snow, was perhaps the only living thing who would allow him such closeness. I had shuddered at this proposition, but she

proved herself to be quite a docile creature, content to wander the halls alone with her thoughts. Except when the hour approached that it was time for her walk, when she would hem and haw like a horse.

I remember the first time I encountered the duck. I was sitting in the atrium, waiting to meet with the barrister to go over our affairs, when from above I heard what sounded like a mare trapped in the attic.

"Thaaaaat'd be Sharon." Winthrop waddled out of his office and across the atrium toward the staircase.

"*Sharon?*" said I.

Winthrop returned my query with a glower of annoyance. "The duck, man. The duck."

I resigned myself to the fact that it was better to have that mad, mad man locked in a room away from our clients. As long as the duck received her daily walks, we could keep her at bay. However, I could not imagine taking that red pen out of Winthrop's hand and sending him off to meet with an editor. The rest of us agreed in silence that we would all have to contend with Sharon.

Now the man I really wanted present at every meeting was Morton. On the mornings we had a scheduled breakfast, Morton would arrange the conference room with an expert diligence; he would set out the tea and pour the proper amount of cream into every teacup, always yielding a perfect biscuit-colored Builder's. The cakes he would set out were divine. I later learned he baked them himself the night before and warmed them up in the mornings—and he always knew the proper amount to prepare. Morton had a vast collection of eclectic music, and he was excellent at reading the attires and personalities of our guests in order to make an informed music selection. He had a perpetually cheery face, one that seemed untouched by adulthood, and always wore it when the biggest authors came around.

However, this cheeriness served as a front for Morton's fragility, and a full day's work of editing or contract negotiations would have killed him. "I just . . . I feel like I'm going to faint," he would say after half-a-day's work. "I'm going to the upstairs hall to lie down." And lie down Morton would, for the greater portion of the day.

I did not allow Morton's fragility to trouble me terribly; after all, most of our business was conducted in the former portion of the day, when I needed him most. His was an amicable, comfortable, professional countenance for our clients. Even at Oxford, where everybody despised everybody as the custom went, Morton had had a lively circle of friends auxiliary to ours, though perhaps many of them have long forgotten his name. This went for our clients as well, as their primary mode of address for Mr. Morton was, "Excuse me. . .?" However, I did not need for them to remember his name; I needed them to remember the comfort they experienced in his presence, and if the price for this was catching him mid-fall with his fainting chair at thirteen o'clock, I was willing to pay it.

If Winthrop supplemented Morton's miserableness with grunt work, then it was Whitaker who brought up the rear with his expert negotiation prowess. Whitaker rivaled even me in his discipline, in his quiet determination, shutting his door from eight in the morning 'til long past eighteen o'clock at night and spending hours combing over contracts, reviewing sales, and calculating book advances. Whitaker had a mythical, indefatigable quality to him, a quality that rendered him unfazed by any work, without regard to its volume or intensity. What was wrong with him? The man smelled like a pyre.

Whenever I walked into Whitaker's office, it smelled like he was burning a village. The thickness of the smoke was such that I could almost hear the screaming children. He had a drawer in his desk overflowing with cigarette butts; each butt had a puff or two left on it. He smoked a chain of these when he did not want to leave the office for more. I offered on several occasions to send Morton out for fresh cigarettes, but each time he responded with some variant of, "Nah, we wouldn't want to twist his nappy."

This brings me to his second fault: Whitaker was incredibly crass. I approached him with a firmness I had not used with my other employees because I knew he was strong enough to receive it. "This isn't Oxford anymore," I said to him. "I cannot have you speaking around our clients in this way."

"Then perhaps I won't speak to them at all," he replied. "Does the Queen get shitfaced at the pub?" He lit up a cigarette butt from his drawer and said, "You want somebody to make nice, then hire a secretary."

I had not thought of seeking a secretary before; I had always greeted clients and fielded calls myself. However, I was so relieved at the thought of acquiring one that I did not heed Whitaker's subordination.

I turned to leave his office, and as I crossed into the hallway, he said, "And make sure she looks good in a dress! Not like Morton last Christmas all over again!"

We did need for another friendly face in the building, a face that could last past midday. Our house had started to gain more attention, and I feared I could not field all the calls alone anymore. So I phoned a secretary agency and they sent me Andrea.

On a sultry September morning, she crept into my office, carrying her papers and a piece of sweet-smelling coffee cake. "A Mr. Morton pointed me in this direction," she said in a voice so weak I could scarcely hear it. "I'm from the agency."

Andrea's appearance at once disarmed me. Dressed in periwinkle from head to toe, she looked like a pygmy in her oversized vest, but her thighs were bursting out of a skirt two or three sizes too small. She wore a periwinkle broach and periwinkle shoes, and affixed upon her crooked nose were periwinkle bifocals.

I am unsure at how long I sat there silently, taking it all in, thinking, *My god. . .*

"I can leave?" She timidly fiddled with her sleeve before she turned. "It's a shame. I wore my best clothes."

I nearly leapt from my chair. "No, no, please! Of course!" She moved with disquieting reluctance toward the plush velvet armchair across my desk. "My sincerest apologies for the state of the place," I said as she sat. "We will be undergoing a renovation."

"I like it." Her black eyes burrowed into me from behind her glasses. "It reminds me of my mother's house."

We had nearly finished discussing her qualifications when I noticed Winthrop's door across the hallway—it was closed and it was nearing the hour for Sharon's walk.

"Well I certainly do hope you enjoy it here, Miss Clark. We'd love to—"

Hhee-HAWWWWWW!

Sharon had begun her braying upstairs.

Hhee-HAWWWWWW!

Andrea inclined her head to the ceiling, watching and listening intently.

Hhee-HAWWWWWW!

"It sounds like my sister," she whispered, looking up.

Drowning in a pool of my own sweat, I managed to reply, "I . . . I'm sorry?"

Andrea looked back at me. "She's dead."

Hhee-HAWWWWWWW!

"Aww piss off, you bird! I'm coming!" Winthrope rushed from his office and lumbered upstairs to fetch his Sharon.

"We . . . would . . . love to . . . work with you." The terror and embarrassment known only to the English overtook me.

"Oh, wonderful!" Andrea ate the last half of Mr. Morton's coffee cake in one whistling bite. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Remarkably, I did see her tomorrow. What had possibly influenced her to accept the position I could not fathom, but I was thrilled to find my new secretary sitting at her post in the atrium when I came in that morning. Rose was Andrea's color for the day, except for the same pair of blue-colored glasses she wore the day before.

And from that morning on, Miss Andrea Clark did fascinating work. I moved the phone from my office and placed it at her post, and she never let it ring more than twice before answering it. On her third day, I had noticed she had completely reimagined our filing system. She showed our clients with pleasure to the conference room, where they were met by Mr. Morton. She always returned to her post with a cake or a pudding he had prepared.

It had been a fortnight since she began working with us when I asked her to call an editor to reschedule our meeting. She turned her head from the atrium to meet my eyes; the two black holes saw deep into my past, and at that moment, I felt she knew my darkest secrets.

"Oh my dear, I'm afraid I shan't."

I stood awhile enraptured in her trance. When I awoke, I had to confirm what I had heard. "I need for you to call Mr. Orwood and reschedule our meeting."

She did not blink and whispered, "Oh my dear, I'm afraid I shan't."

At that moment, Mr. Morton came into the atrium from the conference room. "They would like to have a word with you, if you please."

I found myself swept up in the urgency of the moment, and in my journey from the atrium to the conference room, I decided to set the matter aside. I would call Mr. Orwood myself on the new phone I had arranged for my own use.

Throughout the next week, Andrea arrived at work promptly as always. She fielded the calls and kept up with the cleaning. She kept detailed records of who had called and who had paid a visit. Everything was well in order until I asked her to walk Sharon, as we were expecting guests and Winthrope was caught in a slumber so deep that none of us could wake him.

"Oh my dear, I'm afraid I shan't."

I mustered up the little confrontational ability I had within me. "I'm sorry, Miss Clark. What do you mean, *you shan't*?"

"I shan't. I couldn't."

The clock was approaching the braying hour, and Miss Eleanor Waits herself was stopping by to discuss her contract. Miss Waits was the biggest literary name to grace those halls, and I could feel my bones boiling.

I took a deep, powerful breath. "Miss Clark. Miss Waits and her editor are to meet with us. And she will not be meeting with us while Sharon goes into hysteria. I need you to take her—this instant!"

"Oh my dear, I'm afraid I shan't."

I swallowed. "You are refusing to take the duck?"

Miss Clark continued to stare into my soul. Out of self-preservation, I stole down the hallway and knocked on the door to the burning village. As I helped Morton prepare the conference room, I could hear Whitaker in the garden, through a cigarette pressed between his lips: "Stupid bloody bird."

It happened that our publishing house acquired the rights to Miss Eleanor Waits' newest novel, and the four of us ventured out to a pub that night to celebrate.

"What do you think, gentlemen?" I asked over my fifth beer. "What am I to do with Miss Clark?"

"I think you should throw her out!" Winthrop said. "Throw her out right on her thighs!"

"Stop it!" Morton cowered at Winthrop's cruelty.

"She'll be fine, mate," Whitaker said. "Those thighs would cushion the fall! Have you seen those thighs? Those are birthing thighs!"

In our drunkenness we laughed, except for Morton, who began to cry.

"*Oh my dear,*" Whitaker loudly emulated, "*I'm afraid I shan't draft those contracts by Thursday.*"

"*Oh my dear,*" Winthrop joined in, "*I'm afraid I shan't get the manuscript back to the editor by tonight.* I don't want that rubbish-clad pygmy woman anywhere near my darling Sharon!"

"Well, I don't want that thing's muddy-feathered fanny anywhere near me!" Whitaker said. "Contain. The. Duck."

"Well, I never—!"

Morton's eyebrows wrinkled in distress. "She's turned us all against one another!"

"I thought you were sweet on her," Winthrop said.

"What makes you say that?" Morton cried. "What has come about to accuse me of such a childish thing?"

"Every day of your life," Whitaker snapped, visibly withdrawn from his tar-laced lover.

Although inebriated, I knew in that moment I had to terminate Miss Clark's employment. Even Whitaker's productivity had been on the decline for weeks. In my fear of Miss Clark, I had neglected my colleagues and friends. It would have to be done, and it would have to be done the next day.

"Good morning, Mr. -----!" Miss Clark beamed at me the next morning. "Morton is in the conference room now. Such a darling little thing. . . ."

Unsure of how to respond to this dramatic rejuvenation of exuberance, I simply scanned the reception area. The carpet had been vacuumed, each line perfectly overlapping the next, like a professionally cut garden.

"So you've . . . vacuumed then?" I said.

"Yes, sir," she said cheerily. "Came in a few hours early this morning."

The bulb that had lain dead for ages—in the sconce upon the wall behind her desk—had been replaced. The days of accumulated dust were in the past.

I stood there silently.

"Are you quite alright, Mr. -----?"

I shook my dazed head. "Y-y-yes. Yes, I'm quite fine, thank you. I suppose I'll just . . . pop off into my office."

"Right then!" Miss Clark beamed again, her smile broadening.

For the next few weeks, we had returned to us the old Miss Clark. Her filing was impeccable. Her phone manner was welcoming, rather than deadened and repellent. Miss Clark had even taken a liking to Sharon, and took her round the grounds regularly.

At first, I had grown fond of Miss Clark's fondness for Sharon. However, in the ensuing few days, I found myself deeply disturbed by her behavior.

One afternoon, I emerged from my office to inform Miss Clark of another visit from Ms. Eleanor Waits. I found her with the duck clasped firmly to her chest. She was mumbling to it. Despite the severity of her grip, Sharon did not seem to mind.

"I promise, little darling," I heard her whisper. "I'll nuzzle that noble nose the most."

"Miss Clark?"

Her neck snapped upward, her eyes looking deeply into mine.

"Miss Clark, the duck is meant to stay upstairs."

Miss Clark tightened her grip upon the creature. She cracked her neck on either side—*crack, crack*—and she hissed at me through her greying teeth: "My sister. Sits. With me."

I swallowed. "Miss Clark. Please return Sharon to her quarters."

Slowly she shook her head, her lips hanging on her every word: "Oh my dear, I'm afraid I shan't."

I felt my face flush. I clasped my hands into fists until my knuckles went white. *It has to be done*, I thought. *Even if it shall kill me.*

I swallowed once more. "Miss Clark—you have been relieved of your post."

She said nothing. Grasping the duck. Staring at me.

"Please . . . please gather up your desk at once."

Then she smiled at me. The darkest, most malignant smile I had ever seen. She chuckled. "Yes, Mr. -----."

She left at once, and the next morning Sharon had gone. Winthrop was bawling on the stairs. Whitaker was rubbing his temples profusely at the cries. Morton had fainted, cried, and fainted again.

When at last the latest from Eleanor Waits was published, I took it upon myself to swallow my dread and pay a visit to Miss Clark at the prison; she always loved the work of Eleanor Waits.

The truth is, even though she threw the office into shambles and made off with Winthrop's darling thing, I must say I felt indebted to her. I have since then thought long about why I had felt this way. Finally, I decided upon the following: Miss Clark had given me perhaps the only memorable experience of my life. And upon returning to my affairs, I wished to experience something—anything—once more. When I approached the desk, the guard met me with a look of grave concern.

"I'm sorry, is it the book? Are books not allowed?"

She smiled sadly. "No sir, books are indeed allowed. I am simply concerned about your visiting her. She's completely unresponsive. We can deliver the book to her if you'd like."

As if pulled by some invisible string, I said, "No, I'd quite like to see her."

They led me to a large room bisected by a glass partition. There was a cubicle with a telephone receiver in it, and I could see through the glass where they would direct Andrea to sit.

They led her in, and when she sat I passed her the book through a small opening in the partition. She was emaciated. Her periwinkle prison gown hung around her, barely clinging to her body. Her bones protruded from her face; her eyes had sunken in. She took the book and slowly placed it at her side. She picked up her telephone receiver and looked at me, looked at me with those eyes.

I picked up my end and began speaking to her. About what, I cannot remember. I got lost in her two black holes as I spoke. In response, she said nothing. She kept eye contact, but said nothing.

I had heard of her incarceration from Winthrope. Sharon was returned to his care, and he stood at his door while the authorities explained to him Miss Clark and Sharon's vandalism escapades all over town—Sharon always perched in the front seat—which culminated in the murder of the night watchman at a car park. According to the authorities, Miss Clark had committed the act without hesitation.

Without warning, she took up the book, hung up the receiver, and walked over to the guards, who led her out of the room. The poor thing never uttered a single word.

Two days later, I received correspondence from the prison:

Dear Mr. -----,

As Miss Andrea Clark's only visitor, we thought it necessary to write you this letter. She must have meant a great deal to you.

We regret to inform you that Miss Clark died yesterday at 11:08 AM. She died due to starvation and exhaustion.

Throughout her time here, Miss Clark refused to eat. She simply refused anything we put in front of her. At last her refusal caught up with her as she collapsed outside on the concrete, exhausted.

We wish you comfort in this trying time,

From all of us here at ----- Prison Center.

Much later, in my third career as a barrister, I met a colleague who had done business with Miss Clark. She had transcribed his dictations. This particular colleague often dealt with the macabre—gruesome, horrible things that were done to good people. Dismemberings, rapes, beheadings. . . . Perhaps to hear these things and to write them down consumed her and left only darkness in her eyes.

I have washed my hands of many a career. But to wash my hands of Miss Andrea Clark? Oh my dear, I'm afraid I shan't.

We The People

Donna Baiocchi



Dream Big America!

The importance of politics and public policy decisions in a democracy cannot be overstated. Given the current political climate, these images are meant to amplify the voices of those who choose to march for equality and human rights.



Vote the Trolls Out!!



We Are All Immigrants



Old White Blue Collar Man for Change



For Asian American Women



Hey White Ladies



Take Action Not Children



This Is My Time

Feeling Fine

Matthew Hernandez

THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME AND IT HAD TO DO WITH MY MIND. THE shelter's night manager, Ms. Shelly, told me so each time she stared, bug-eyed—index finger rotating inches from her temple—and whispered, "It's all in your head." We called her Bozo, because of her uneven tufts of bright red hair and manic gestures, but she signed my community service paperwork. She let me do my work without interference.

Every Tuesday evening, men and women entered and encamped in dull metal chairs around wood tables covered with cheap yellow tablecloths. We called them our guests. Minutes beforehand, we scotch-taped fliers advertising disease-free syringes and complimentary blood tests. The regulars helped stack chairs or fold tables, while others came and went. The whole thing took a half hour to assemble but less to tear down. Dry skin clutched white picnic tableware until it was time to line up and they jostled, pushed, and shoved into order. Behind the kitchen bar, we dropped chicken thighs onto paper plates, brown grease slowly dripping from our stainless steel tongs. We dumped mashed potatoes on their plates, deposited peas, and balanced cornbread nearby.

Next came the dessert table, where I stood with a steel ladle full of strawberries or dense chocolate pudding. If a guest asked, "Do you have any sugar?" my hand pressed a dime bag into their palm, while their fingers pushed crinkled fives or crumpled ones into mine. Like the shelter, I had rules. I didn't do change. I didn't negotiate. I didn't do favors. You had to finish your meal. If you left early, if you acted weird, if you told anyone, you were done. You weren't tasting my sugar and you definitely weren't eating my strawberries.

I rarely had problems, although occasionally you'd have a Wendy. She was loud and combative and had this voice that sounded like steam from an engine, but with less purpose. She wore parkas in the summertime and tank-tops in December. The split ends of her sandy blonde hair were always lightly caked in dirt or foliage: one week on the right side, the next week on the left. Her bright blue eyes flashed nervously from her pale, wrinkly skin, pocked with bright red scabs.

One Tuesday, Wendy passed me a wad of pesos. That night, I pulled reddish-brown dog-eared paper from my pocket and wondered whether Wendy knew how poor the exchange rate was. I confronted her the following Tuesday. She denied it, but I knew better. I had felt something odd when she handed me the bills. They were also

stuck to a folded adhesive with “Wendy” written in red marker. I tossed the pesos at her feet and told her that she shouldn’t be coming around the shelter anymore.

Everything went smoothly for a little while. I first saw the patrol car idling out front. Then I saw a uniformed moustache with hands on hips. Then I saw Wendy. I slid behind the kitchen bar and out through the back door. I power-walked through the alley and skipped into a McDonald’s. Head lowered, I sauntered casually into a bathroom stall. I stood there and thought about alibis. I didn’t know for sure, but I thought entrapment might apply. I waited things out. When the wood handle of a mop violently rapped the peeling vanilla paint of the top of the bathroom stall’s door, I accidentally confessed. I thought about the need to silence witnesses, but the employee holding the mop and his irritated Spanish convinced me otherwise. I cautiously stepped out the side entrance and hurried head-first towards the bus stop and eventual refuge. I made it home later that night to my studio apartment. It was just off Western Avenue, near that little Mexican *asado* place south of Cermak. The one with that phallic drumstick shading the entrance. I would no longer be welcome at the shelter. Cost of doing business.

To supplement my income, I started working as a patient care specialist at Swedish-American. I worked four days a week. Checking in patients for their appointments, checking them out. That kind of thing. I scheduled appointments and slid insurance cards underneath a giant scanner. I sat behind a desk that separated me from a lonely fabric chair. My station was assigned a number. It was partitioned from the other numbered stations by a small divider on my side, and a frosted thin piece of glass on the other side. When you entered my space, we were separated only by health, wooden clipboards, and a medium-sized dispenser of hand sanitizer.

After my first month at Swedish-American, I achieved the fourth highest score on the Patient Pamper Pledge, mostly because I told everyone they didn’t owe co-pay. The hospital eventually billed them anyway. Things sorted themselves out. At least this way, they walked out with a little more pep in their step. I was doing okay for myself. My parole officer even said as much.

That’s what scared me. Things go up, things go down. I was used to down. I liked up. I started to see the uniformed mustache waiting outside my building. I saw him drinking coffee and eating pastries, winking at me, daring me, anticipating my recidivism. I dropped phones every week. I installed three new deadbolts on my plain green door. Sometimes I saw Wendy and I crossed the street. I looked for my would-be captors in window reflections. On Tuesdays, I wore a blond wig, snug turtleneck, and thick brown glasses.

But I also started vomiting each morning. At first, I tasted burnt sienna crayon bubbling in my esophagus when I awoke. Acid reflux? I asked the younger lab coats at work. They didn’t think so. It soon got so bad that I awoke pre-dawn with a jog to the toilet. When I fasted, I produced fluorescent bile. When I ate, my pre-dawn jog repeated itself at dusk. As my calves firmed, my ribcage poked outwards.

My diet didn’t matter either. I tried quinoa and gnawed lettuce wraps for lunch. Steamed kale and butternut squash for dinner. In the morning, I pushed probiotics down my gullet. And some of that stuff I couldn’t find at the Jewel by my apartment, so after work I’d take the bus over to Whole Foods. And between paying Whole Foods prices and the extra CTA fare, I was forced to increase sales. I met underneath train tracks. In the parking lot of Old Navy. It was tiring. When I saw lip hair, I ran.

I also started to foam at the mouth a little. It was barely noticeable but, on

occasion, a little spittle would oxygenate above the corner of my lower lip. The only way I could get it to stop was to meditate and mouth-breathe. The foam cut down on my patient wait times though. Patients stood at a distance and took the “first available.” I soon achieved the second highest score on the Patient Pamper Pledge and was awarded an extra thirty minutes of break each week. I normally used that time to vomit in the reception area restroom. I started to use all my breaks to vomit in the reception area restroom. I filled toilet after toilet with stomach acid and semi-digested chia seeds.

I finally saved enough to go see the doctor. I didn’t go to Swedish-American though. I didn’t want to sit in one of the examination rooms with my spine hanging out the back of my gown and have Mark, Kelly, or Erin cuffing my bicep. I didn’t want to sit in the same stained purple fabric chairs that I pointed at all day long. So instead, I took a sick day and ambled over to Mother Mercy.

I sat there barebacked for the next forty minutes on a thin white sheet of paper covering the maroon exam table. I tried to keep my ass cheeks from touching the vinyl on either side of the aisle of thin white paper. Fixed to the wall near the light brown stool with wheels, was this chart displaying a cascading rainbow. I was underweight. Which made me think about relative extremes. I wondered whether the “underweight” 6’10”, 120-lb could ever love the “extremely obese” 4’5”, 330-lb and vice versa. How many boxes could one move across the grid romantically? If unrecognized by the grid, were you more or less human?

I heard knuckles on wood. The door swung open and white lab coats filed through. Three of them. The eldest, a burly man with large meaty hands, shook my hand before placing them directly underneath a faucet. With a booming voice that seemed to sweep his gray hair to the side, he introduced me to his colleagues. A younger man. An even younger woman. They smiled and reached forward to also shake my hand. A business transaction. So far so good.

“What brings you here today?” he asked, the younger lab coats settling in to observe.

“My mind, doctor.”

“What’s wrong with your mind?”

“I can’t stop it, sir.”

“Have you tried exercise?”

“I curl 10-lb weights.”

“What about your diet?” he asked as the top of his face and the bottom of his face inched toward each other.

“Impeccable diet,” I answered.

“Physical symptoms?”

“Vomit, doctor. I vomit, and I can’t stop. It’s like my mind is trying to escape through my gut,” I sobbed.

“I think I can help you,” he said firmly.

It turned out my anxiety was eating my stomach lining. The good news was that it was all in my mind. My mind, it was treatable. Medication and meditation. Drug of choice was Anxblaster™. Few side effects. Certainly nothing as bad as foamed mouth. Probably less mouth breathing. There were no generics on the market. Other options? Yes, several. Defexor™ and Tulbopin™. Also effective, and cheaper. Most common side effects were dry mouth and constipation. At worst, my penis would experience hair growth with sudden and unpredictable retraction. Scared? Yes. Ingrown hairs? Unlikely.

I didn't see many other options. My throat was starting to burn. I agreed that Tulbopin™ was probably for me. I shook the lab coat's hand. I felt relief. I now knew my enemy.

I dressed and stopped to get my paperwork at checkout station number three. Today's visit was expensive. Insurance? No insurance. I spoke in dulcet tones with the patient care specialist on the other side of station number three. I tried to speak to him as someone who had worn the vest, but he didn't hear me as such. I would later rate him a zero in both Compassion and Communication on Mercy's Fulfillment Focus. My Tulbopin™ was costly. As I handed the hospital pharmacist my credit card, I started to think about Wendy's pesos. I would work harder, sell more weed.

My appetite soon returned, and the vomiting tapered. The side effects were manageable although I began to have strange recurring dreams. In one dream, I was a dairy farmer on a farm with rolling hills outside of Madison, Wisconsin. The farm's pasture was full of beautiful Holsteins grazing peacefully. It was God's green prairie grass, a smattering of these beautiful gentle beasts, and me in a pair of faded overalls in the cool, quiet breeze. As I milked each one slowly in the warming sun, they thanked me individually. Except the last one, a heifer named Gladys. I would squat underneath Gladys with my damaged milk pail and grass-stained knees and beg, but she resisted. Her udders always felt cold and dry, her massive head turned sideways to smirk at me. And then it would happen, every time the same way. Gladys suddenly stood upright, loomed over me on her thick brown hind legs. She removed the cowbell from her neck with both front legs and placed it around my paralyzed head, giving it a little tap with her hoof once it was secured around my neck. She then turned me over and milked me. Squeezing me harder and harder until I cried out, "I'm dry, Gladys. I'm dry!" She would then guide me over to the dairy, the bell clanging around my neck, stupidly bent in shame. When we got there, there would be a line of customers ready to buy my milk. And we sold it to them. And sometimes they would drink the milk right from the bottle in front of us, their upper lips frothy with delight, and I woke up in tears. I felt a little fuzzy sometimes, but as long as my penis remained external, I was willing to manage.

After three months, the price of my Tulbopin™ doubled. I was moving an ounce per week and working thirty hours, but it wasn't cutting it. Pretty soon, they canceled my credit cards and I started to get calls from collection agencies. I avoided unknown numbers. I slinked furtively into my building at night. One evening, a woman named Deborah called. She wanted to talk to me about garnishment. She wanted to talk about my property, what I owned. I made another appointment at Mother Mercy. There must be another option. This time, back in the exam room, I found myself squarely within the grid. Green even. I took several deep breaths. I would get through this.

The nurse abruptly entered my room, her face petite and canary-like, but not uncaring. She questioned me about my symptoms and my dreams.

"What do you mean, she milked you?"

"I don't really want to talk about it," I told her. "It was very unpleasant, I'll just say that."

"And her name was Gertrude?"

"Gladys, her name was Gladys."

"What's your mother's name?"

"Dorothy. Why?"

"Nothing, nothing. Any other symptoms?"

"No, things are fine, Nurse. The Tulbopin™ makes them fine. But I can't afford it anymore. What else is there? Is there something cheaper than Tulbopin™? Nurse,

please help me.”

The nurse nodded. She understood. I needed more Tulbopin™ and I couldn’t afford it. Her concern seemed genuine.

“Are all of your limbs functional?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your limbs, do they work?”

“Yes,” I said.

“The doctor will be right in.” With that, the nurse turned and fluttered out.

I started to worry that maybe there had been a mistake. That they had confused me with another patient and the doctor would come in with a table saw churning. I wiped a smidge of foam from my mouth with the short sleeve of my gown. When I completed the questionnaire, I didn’t check any “yes” boxes concerning my limbs. When I indicated my discomfort on the androgynous jumping jack instructor, I circled the head and stomach three times each with tight concentric circles. My limbs were virginal. My hardware was fine.

The door burst open. My medical team arrived.

“You seem to be doing much better,” the large gray lab coat announced. There was no handshaking this time. No handwashing either. The younger lab coats shook their heads in agreement around me.

“Yes, doctor. The Tulbopin™ has worked. Except for the cow dreams,” I said.

“The cow dreams?” His face once again scrunched into itself.

“Cow dreams, doctor. But I can live with those. The problem is I can’t afford my medication,” I sighed.

“Young man, I’m afraid that Tulbopin™ is the cheapest medication currently available. There are no cheaper alternatives. There is good news though,” he told me.

“Yes?”

“Yes. The hospital has started a new initiative. Innovative, to say the least. I tell you, you came to the right place. We are at the forefront of medicine each and every day here.” The younger lab coats started to nod once again. “There exists an experimental payment plan that I believe may be a good fit for you. We call it the Plan.”

It turned out that the Plan involved voluntary surgical donation. The lab coat handed me a yellow worksheet with different columns. The first column had words like “pelvic girdle” and “humerus.” The second column had words like “hip” and “forearm.” The last column had prices. Reproductive organs were valued at weight and market price. The Plan covered the cost of surgery, follow-up appointments, and necessary medication. Payment was immediate, and all donations were recognized with a thirty-second web promo video with credits. I watched one. A one-eared child smiled toothily into the camera and leaned forward as his mother gushed about the family’s prayers being answered.

I vomited twice during the explanation, acidic bile dripping down my chin, so I didn’t remember the rest of the consultation. I clutched a glossy pamphlet and worksheet as someone’s hand guided the small of my back toward the reception area. I walked past station number three and moaned for someone to “please bill me.”

I returned to my studio apartment that afternoon and collapsed into my bed, the mattress gently rolling me toward the middle. I stayed there the rest of the day and all night, the outline of my body stained in sweat against the cool blue cotton sheet, looking at the ceiling and my bare surroundings: the refrigerator filled only with butter and baking soda; my threadbare jeans, my purple vest, strewn and stacked around

a scuffed wooden desk with matching chair; my scale, my baggies, my small empty safe. The wind rattled the fire escape outside of my window. I barely slept. The next day, I went to work but I accidentally rocked one of my cuspids out of place with my tongue and it fell on a patient's chart. That week, for the first time, I received negative Patient Pamper Pledge points.

I also started to vomit again. Periodic dry heaves became far-flung projectile. I reviewed the worksheet, thought about my appendages. I wasn't a piano player or a tap dancer, so there were no obvious choices. I wasn't ready to give up on my reproductive organs yet. I scheduled another appointment and took the bus back to Mother Mercy.

When I arrived, I enrolled in the Plan and signed the requisite waivers. I understood the contractual terms and completed the yellow worksheet. I circled a left arm on the chart and confirmed my choice in cursive. I was then transferred to Surgery. An anesthesiologist came by and poked me with some opiates. I don't remember much after that except a videographer visited my room with a short script.

I was discharged several hours later with a small bag of pain medication, anti-inflammatories, and a thousand milligrams of Tulbopin™ (an advance) slung over my right shoulder. I felt content knowing that my donation would assist some unknown armless man or woman. I started to think about *The Fugitive* but with my breath, pushed those thoughts away. My donation was also handsomely rewarded. It would be months before I made another. As I stepped through the sliding glass doors, the afternoon sunlight filled my body. I felt lucky.

Dog Spelled Backwards Is God

Kala Frances Wahl

"WHAT?" I COUGH THROUGH A CLOUD OF SMOKE. NOT JUST ANY KIND OF SMOKE: *vape* smoke. The smoke that comes out of those sleek little pens, all shiny and in assorted colors. It smells sticky and sweet, and when I rub my index finger along the top of my thumb, I swear I can feel a gooey liquid on my skin—like a melted Jolly Rancher. It is blue raspberry, and I can just see it, dripping there from my thumb onto the couch. . . .

"You heard me," he sighs. "Dog spelled backwards is God."

I look up from my fingers. My eyes find his, straight ahead of me; his body is slouched over a brown recliner. My pupils are so dilated, he can probably crawl right into the blackness of them, his knees digging into the waterline of my eye and his palm reaching out before he falls in and my pupil swallows him whole. But *dogs*. God. Dog spelled backwards *is* God. And *he* is so smart. Not God, but Billy.

"You're right," I mumble, "You're absolutely right." I repeat the word fifty times in my head. *Right. Right. Right. Right. Right*. I count that exactly. Fifty.

"Dogs are like God, you know what I mean?" Billy exhales a stream of smoke—it comes up from his throat, fills the rounds of his cheeks, and spills out smoothly between his lips, moving over the coffee table before him like fog over a pond. It is mystical, and as his vape pen retreats away from his mouth and back in between his fingers, I feel as if I'm in the presence of an oracle. "Dogs are righteous. They could never do wrong," he breathes.

Right. Right. Right. Right, I think. Fifty times more. I never used to think Billy was so smart, so wise. This is, in fact, the kid notorious around school for purchasing goldfish just to place in his bong water and suffocate through the marijuana smoke. My friends and I have contemplated giving PETA his information on several occasions, being the pious goldfish activists we are. But with four tabs of acid dissolving on my tongue and the sensation of bubbles riding my stomach lining . . . Billy is just the *smartest*.

The smartest, the smartest . . . ZAP! The loud ringing noise hits my head like the butt of a gun, my body slamming into the cushion of the couch and my head rolling from shoulder to shoulder like a pinball against the bumpers. *Left, right, left, right*. The large television screen flashes with bright colors, lasers darting from every corner and piercing each player on the screen. Blood splattering, squishy noises and gurgled

moans. The boys, surrounding me with their sweaty palms clutching the legs of their gaming controllers, laugh violently. Their mouths are dry and their breaths stink, and as they each take a hit of their vape pens, I am reminded Billy and I aren't alone. But just staring at him in the chair across from me, I feel as if we are.

The TV in this living room is very large, and the bright colors from the video game make my fingers twitch and my shoulders force themselves even farther back into the couch; if I wasn't actively thinking about not peeing myself, the intensity of the screen would undoubtedly make me pee myself. Wide and crystal clear like the ones in the movie theaters—the really fancy movie theaters with the big recliners—the TV in this house commands you to look at her, and acknowledge how expensive she is. Surrounded by fake potted palms, a slew of golden-framed fruit still lifes scattered along the walls, and a coffee table toting hardcover books filled with 'tasteful' pictures of naked people, this flatscreen TV is everything you wish you could be. But I know about those fake plants; I had gently grabbed one on my way to the front door, placing my fingers on the tip of the palm as if to give it a handshake, and I could feel its disparity. It was made out of fabric. My mother and I have one plant in our house, a real one she bought from a Lowe's in the city and waters everyday herself. I always tell her more would make the house look nicer, like the mansions in reality shows, but she insists she's too busy to water any more flowers. So I once asked her, what about plastic plants? And she looked at me, frowned, and said, *Do I look like a fucking Ken doll? If we're not plastic people, why would we need plastic plants?* But in this living room, the towering fake palms and plug-in scent of cinnamon feels off-putting amongst this group of kids, with their shaggy hair and dirty t-shirts. I guess that's Diamond Cove for you. Diamond Cove is the rich neighborhood here; it's gated and has a security guard at the entrance, and if you were to TP anyone's house here, you'd probably be arrested within the same minute of even flinging the toilet paper. I'm not quite sure whose house this is, or what anybody's names are, but only that Billy picked me up in his dove-white Jeep two hours ago, almost knocking my mother's concrete flamingo down from alongside the mailbox when he backed out.

It'll be fun, we'll hang out with my friends. Maybe smoke a bowl or two; I heard somebody's got acid. Would you want to do that? Acid? he had asked, one hand on the wheel and the other out the window . . . like a bad boy. *I've never been to this part of town before, he had trailed off, you always lived here? Isn't this where they busted those tweakers last week for cooking meth in some kindergarten teacher's garage?* My fingers had begun to tap anxiously against the ridges of the leather passenger seat, *Yeah, it exploded. The debris is still all over the road; sometimes on my way to school if I'm not looking so good ahead of me I'll run over this big chunk of plywood. It bounces my car right up and sends the top of my head to the roof,* I said. *Hmm,* he offered, *that kind of stuff doesn't happen on my side of town.* And that was all he said about that.

Do I want to be alone with Billy? The smoke, so sticky and sweet around me in a fluffy cloud. *ZAP ZAP ZAP* goes the TV.

"You want a rip?" Billy's arm extends out, his vape pen held between his fingers like the communion wafers at church. He's handing me his pen. I used to think Billy was a pussy for not smoking cigarettes like the rest of us, but to not accept Billy Benson's pen feels criminal. From what I know, the other girls whose lips have touched that very mouthpiece have also coincidentally wound up placing their lips on his. . . . This isn't my goal. But he asked me to hang out, and he has drugs. And he's more popular than me. I actually think he's cute. I like looking at him right now—his hair, longer than

most boys his age, the kind his grandfather probably looks at and calls “lady hair” or something else offensive. It’s brown, a beagle brown as I classify it, light and soft . . . all tucked into a limp, red baseball cap that reads, “Las Vegas, Nevada.” I wonder if he’s actually visited, or maybe he just yanked it off the rack of Goodwill . . . like I do. I’ve never been to Lake Tahoe, but I have an XL shirt that says it. And I’ve most certainly never seen Duran Duran live in ’86 at a Canadian amphitheater . . . but I have a hoodie that says I did. I hope he got that hat at Goodwill, because then perhaps he wouldn’t seem so untouchable to me. But I’ve never seen someone like him at a Goodwill around here. Maybe sucking his dick *is* my goal.

My hand slides over his as I accept the pen. He tells me how to hit it, his words are slow, and all three of his mouths move. I laugh and I tell him to shut up, that I only want one mouth to move at a time.

“What?” he coughs.

“You have three heads, I only want to hear one.”

“You’re trippin’.”

“Oh my god, and you’re fucking annoying me,” I laugh. “One. At a time. Thanks.”

Where did you get this one from? Nah, I’ve seen her around school. You likin’ that acid, honey? I didn’t know pretty girls could live in Humble Homes trailer park. I’m not sure who said what, but I turn to the boy next to me. Blond, greasy hair. There is a mustache coming in, a *crustache*. Could this be his home? I’m not sure. But I bet his mom would be embarrassed of that furry thing above his top lip. I’d make out with him right now. I’d make out with everyone on this couch. Billy’s pen slips out from my fingers and onto my thigh. If I were naked, I’d do anything. Anything they wanted. My fingers clutch the edge of my denim shorts, and I want to tug. *Tug, tug, tug.* I want them down. But Billy asks for the pen back.

ZAP, ZAP. The laser sounds make my head twitch to the side. Each *ZAP*, I twitch. I feel the gooey liquid again as I inhale the smoke; it’s still on my fingertips, it’s cherry red this time. And it drips right off, down onto the couch, staining the brown suede. The tip of my thumbnail is coated in the liquid, and I push the nail further into my skin as the goo continues to come out. *Hey, wanna go somewhere more private?* Did somebody say that aloud? Was it in my head? *ZAP, ZAP.*

I turn to look at the blond boy next to me and I smile. “I feel good,” I tell him. Hands clutch my upper arms and I lift upwards, but I still look at the blond boy and repeat, “I feel good.” My body falls into the chest of another and the cloud of smoke suddenly disappears.

The caps of my sneakers drag along the wooden floor of the hallway. Door *after* door *after* door passes as I slide along, some dude’s forearms pressed into my armpits, my back to his stomach, and his feet shuffling—*left, right*—as he maneuvers me, like a man hauling a corpse to a lake. I just hope my lake will be nice, lukewarm, and free of algae and leeches. We finally come to a stop and a door creaks open. My vision is sprinkled with little white specs—fairy dust kind of specs. How magical acid can be. The door shuts. The constant zapping, *ZAP ZAP ZAP*, knocks gently on the other end.

“If you tell me to stop, I’ll stop.”

The voice is Billy’s, and my eyes flutter open and closed. *Open and closed*, like a clam’s mouth or a child playing with a door. I’m on my back, the softness of a silky comforter beneath me, and Billy on top of me. I smile. His hands graze over the sides of my bare waist and his lips press against my cheek so tenderly. I want it. I want it bad.

“Ye . . . ke . . . go . . . in.”

He brings his face up from mine abruptly, looking down at me. My vision becomes so blurry, even more speckled with fairy dust, and I can't read his face . . . but I grab his hair and force him down.

"Do . . . be . . . sc . . . rd."

His head darts back up, and although my vision is now only a blur of colors, I feel for what I can on his body and try to push his head back down to my cheek...but he only tenses.

"Wh . . . ar . . . yo . . . d-ing?"

"What are you trying to say?" His voice is cold. Ice cold. Statue cold. Cold like my grandmother's hand that I had grabbed as a child looking down into the open casket, my mom swatting at my wrist and pulling me into her side, insisting that, *Grandma can't grab back anymore*. I don't understand why Billy's pulling away, especially after I told him exactly what I wanted him to do.

"I . . . wa . . . yo . . . to—"

"Do you realize you're not speaking right?" He panics. But now I can't even see the colors of him, the tan of his skin and the reds and blues of his shirt. I can't see anything at all.

"Fuck! Chris! Alex!" I can feel Billy jump off of me, and I hear his rough feet nervously scratch against one another atop the bed.

More feet sound, shuffling in through the doorway and onto the carpet. Scratching, constant scratching . . . against skin, against the carpet.

"Yo?" someone asks.

"What's going on?"

"I think she's fucking seizing," Billy exhales frantically, "She's fucking seizing. What do we do?" His voice shakes. *Shakes, shakes, shakes*.

I extend my arm, trying to feel for Billy, "Wh . . . is . . . ha . . . in . . . to. . ."

"What the fuck is she saying?"

A hand gently slaps my face. "Can you sit up? Come on, sit up."

"Bu . . . I . . . ca . . . 't . . ."

More feet shuffle in through the doorway. *Scratching, scratching, scratching*.

"Her body's fucking locked up, she won't fucking move."

"Try bending her knee!"

"It's not fucking bending! Did you not just hear what I said?"

I can't tell you how many people are even in the room. It is just a barrage of voices. *And scratching*. Nails against skin, feet against feet, shoes against carpet. . . .

"Did she bring a bag or something? Somebody go grab it! She has to be on something. . . ."

"I mean, she's on acid," someone stutters.

"I fucking know that! I'm talking medication!"

"Yo, what the fuck is that shit coming out of her mouth?"

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," Billy stammers. "Come on, sit up!" He yanks at my shoulders. I want to tell him I can't move, but the words won't come out and my heartbeat quickens. It's beating so fast and I can't even curl my toes to respond to it. My chin is damp and a liquid pours off of it and onto my naked chest. Maybe it's the melted Jolly Ranchers again. I wish I could see what flavor it is this time. . . .

"This chick's fucking crazy, man. I found Lithium!" Someone shuffles in. I hear the pills rattle within the bottle. If I could move, I'd curl my fingers over my face and tighten my knees into my chest. *Rattle, rattle, rattle*. Am I blushing? Because I feel

really hot in the face. Now everybody knows, and I can't say anything to defend myself. The warm liquid spilling over my bottom lip continues to pour down my chin and I've never felt stupider. I feel so stupid.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" I had cried to my mom—on my knees—from the floor of our kitchen, her hands digging into my ribcage and her chest towering over me as she leaned down and held my head to her breasts. How could I not feel stupid? Screaming at my mom one minute, then immediately falling to the ground and crying the next, like a child who never gets her way. I dug my fingers into my hair and pulled. I felt frustrated and my body began to hurt. I knew I'd feel it the next morning; I always felt a bipolar episode the next morning. It burns in your body like a good workout, except instead of waking up to a toner ass, you wake up with potentially one less friend and a plethora of things to apologize for saying.

"You're not stupid," her voice shook. "You're not crazy. It's just one screw loose, just one, out of so many up in that head of yours."

She grazed a finger from my right temple to my left, "When you were little we'd take the long way to school. Remember that? There was that big farm with all the cows. You had this thing with cows. You'd press the tip of your finger against the passenger window, and you'd just point at them and laugh. Your little tongue would slip through the gap of your front teeth." Her mouth was to my ear. "Remember? I'd never seen something so small make someone so happy. Who'd of thought? Cows," her voice grew tired. "I'll always remember the day you stopped smiling at them. My own smile faded and I shook your arm, I said 'look honey, the cows—your cows.' But your face was just blank . . . you didn't even look at 'em. Your lips were in a thin line and you just stared forward. I've learned to get used to that face, I guess."

It was her expression that hurt me the most. Her bottom lip quivered and her jaw tensed, but her eyes just stared forward. My mom was trying to keep her poker face. She was constantly trying to keep her poker face, as if she was stuck in this never-ending card game with my bipolar disorder and me. Because my mom knew she had to keep her head—it had always been just her and me, and that meant there wasn't room for two crazies. It was the same expression she had sitting next to me in the hospital after my suicide attempt. IVs poked in my veins and half-eaten saltine crackers next to me, my mom held the same face and asked me why I did it.

"Did what?" I had asked, propped upwards against the stiff hospital pillows like a prized pumpkin in a fall festival.

She clarified: "Suicide. Why did you do that, Lexi? Why would you want to do that?" I had sighed, picked up a cracker, and told her I didn't know. And I really didn't. Because I had felt completely fine laying in that hospital bed; in fact, all I could really think about was whether or not my mom would be willing to drive me through McDonald's after I got released. But they didn't release me; they just transferred me to a loony facility for a week. And I got to eat cheese sandwiches there.

Her cleavage grew damp with my tears, and through gritted teeth, I stammered, "I just don't wanna feel so angry anymore, Mom."

She fell to her knees, the palm of her hand pushing my head to her shoulder, her hands smoothly rubbing my upper back. And she sobbed. That was the first time she had ever cried in front of me.

I remember seeing the bottle of pills on the kitchen counter, right behind her, the Lithium. The doctor said to take them; it'll make me better. Better—no more intense

mood swings. No more slamming doors, no more locking myself in my room and crying on the floor of my closet. No more picking fights at school, no more friends telling me they can't stand being around me, no more yelling at my mom that I wanna kill myself, no more boys telling me that I'm *too crazy* . . . and no more pain. The kind of pain nurses ask you to rate on a scale: "On a scale of one to ten, with one being the least amount of pain and ten being the most, what number are you?" Ten. It was always a ten. And then they'd ask, "And where does it hurt?" My fucking head, that's where it hurts, lady.

But the whole *better* thing sounded real nice.

Make me better, I repeat in my head. *Better*, like a new and improved microwave model or A-cup breasts after plastic surgery. Or like the tabs of acid in Billy's sweaty palm earlier tonight, practically melting on top of his skin. "Take this. They'll make you better," he smiled. "Better, how?" I asked. "You'll see." *Rattle, rattle, rattle*. Someone continues to shake my bottle of Lithium.

"What is that?"

"It's a fucking anti-psychotic: pills for crazy people! Schizos! Bipolars! This shit is an ingredient in batteries . . . Billy, what the fuck were you giving her acid for?"

"Man, I didn't know!" Billy shouted. "What the fuck do we do?!"

Air hits my skin sharply as the boys scramble around me, I can feel it . . . their bodies scurrying from one side of the bed to another like mice. Their fingertips poke at my skin: they shake my thighs, gently slap their palms against my cheeks, tug at my hair as if I'm a ragdoll. I don't hear any fingers mashing against buttons, worried voices to the police or sirens blaring from the outside of the house. It was just them, scrambling.

"How many tabs did you give her?"

"Four?"

"Fuck!" someone yells. "What if she fucking dies, dude? You can't mix that shit! You just can't!"

"I—I can't have cops rolling in here, man," Billy stutters. "Do you know how much shit I have on me right now?"

"Okay, but *that* shit keeps coming out of her mouth! We have to do something!"

The liquid bubbles against the skin of my collarbone, like foam out of a can of mousse. My body shivers all over. I don't really know what Billy means by *better*. I don't know what anyone really means by *better*. Perhaps I felt it on the couch, surrounded by people yet feeling as if Billy and I were the only ones in the room. The excitement of the other boys staring at me, the attention they gave me as Billy's plus-one, the bubbling sensation of the acid in my stomach—unlike the sickness I feel from the Lithium residue crawling up my throat each night and forcing my head over the toilet. Is *better* the little things? Stuff you miss if you're not looking around for it? But that's ridiculous . . . life can't be that simple. Surely not when your head's constantly working against you.

"She won't fucking respond to me! Look at her face, it doesn't even look like she's conscious anymore!"

"Do you think she can hear us?"

"CAN YOU HEAR US?"

Yes, and if I could speak, I'd confirm that something's really wrong. That I'm scared, because I don't know what's happening, and I may be seventeen but I really

want my fucking mom.

"Her whole fucking body is shaking now."

"Oh my God. What is she doing? Convulsing?"

"Wait, it stopped."

"What? The shaking?"

"She's just fucking limp now!"

The boy's hands slap against my stomach, frantically shaking me.

"She's not fucking conscious, man!" Billy grits his teeth. Fingers cram into my mouth, poking furiously at my uvula, as if the acid will magically regurgitate itself from my insides and reappear like nothing ever happened. Like some kind of Houdini magic trick.

But he's right, I'm not conscious.

I shovel the green Jell-O in my mouth, one spoonful immediately after the other, as if I haven't eaten in days. I can't remember when I last ate. It had to have been before Billy gave me the tabs. . . .

Billy is nowhere in sight, and neither are any of the other boys from the house in Diamond Cove. But I don't feel totally bothered by that. The one silver lining to hospitals is always the free snacks, and while green isn't my Jell-O flavor of choice, it still feels really nice sliding down my throat.

I had woken up here maybe five hours ago. Nurses' heads hovered over me like government officials dissecting an alien as they poked and prodded my arms with needles. My body had been stiff and sore from seizing. And when I had frantically looked down at my legs, despite one nurse struggling to force my shoulders back so I'd stay relaxed, I saw red splotches covering my skin. I kept mumbling, "Am I gonna die?" I probably repeated it like fifty times. But they ignored me every single time I asked. I must have still been high.

But now I'm alone in my hospital room—I mean, not totally, there are three empty plastic Jell-O cups next to me. My mom isn't here this time, though, and that's probably a good thing . . . because I don't want to see her cry again. She's on a cruise with her new boyfriend, Dan, on his Costco stock boy salary. I'm not sure when I should call and tell her I almost died because I forgot you can't do hallucinogens on Lithium. I didn't completely forget. In my defense, my psychiatrist just said *no drugs*. But I always did drugs on the other medications I had and nothing ever happened . . . how was I supposed to know Lithium is the exception? She could have been more specific.

My mom would tell me I'm not caring for myself enough, that I'm not "putting my mental health first." I hate when she says stuff like that. I'm a teenager—this is when I'm supposed to be able to do acid when I want to. Everybody else does it. Especially the kids from Diamond Cove. Does she just expect me to spend the rest of my youth waving to the old men on the porch of the trailer across from ours? I can only hear geezers wearing overalls tell me I've *grown into such a beautiful young woman* so many times. I want to be able to do what other people my age are doing. I don't want to feel fucking disabled, because that's what bipolar disorder qualifies as: a disability. My mom told me I should start checking off the *disabled* box on job applications, because employers are required to hire a certain amount of *disabled* people, so it'd make me a better candidate. Would that make me a token? I don't feel like a good token. Like the ones in Chuck-E-Cheese's that give you access to lots of games. I feel like one of those shitty chocolate ones wrapped in gold foil that people hand out on St. Patrick's

Day. That chocolate always tastes horrible.

A nurse brings me another Jell-O cup; this time it's red. I wonder what Billy is up to. *Dog spelled backwards is God. Dogs are like God, you know what I mean? Dogs are righteous. They could never do wrong.* His words echo in my head like a Gregorian chant. I wonder if he'll still wanna talk to me when I get back to school. I may be negligent of my body, but I'm not stupid. I'm sure everyone will be talking about me; they'll talk about the acid, the seizure, the Lithium. I'm not sure if that's any better than when the whole senior class was calling me *Chinese finger trap* after the captain of the track team told everyone about my abnormally tight vagina. But I can't really control what people say, can I? Does Billy remember my name?

But I know I'll only care about that for another couple of weeks. Because then my Lithium will kick in again, and I won't be caring about much of anything. But hey, it's better than caring *too much* about everything, right?

At least the doctor specified for sure this time that hallucinogens have to be out of the picture. So, I can't really use that excuse on my next hospital visit.

King Rat & Co.

Zoe Raines

EVERY MONDAY NIGHT, MY UPSTAIRS NEIGHBOR, JEFF, CARRIES ALL THE PARTS OF his drum set down the four flights of wooden stairs behind our apartment building. At each landing, as he rounds the corner to take on the next winding flight, he must be hitting the top of the drum on the corner of the railing. Four flights of stairs, meaning eight corners. The whole procession takes about ten to twenty minutes, so each Monday night it sounds like a marching band is falling down the stairs behind our apartment building really, really slowly. After the first trip down with the snare drum, he comes back down again—with the cymbals.

One day, Jeff gets to the second landing—my back porch—and he heaves his snare drum down on top of the low ping-pong table where my feet are resting.

“Did you kill my rat, man?” He doesn’t even say hi.

“Jeff, what’s up man? What are you talking about?” I’d offer him a beer, tell him to chill out, but I don’t want him to hang around. I don’t want to admit it, but I do know exactly what he’s talking about—at least, I know about him and the rats. Earlier this month, I noticed for the first time his lanky body crouched at the bottom of the stairs. He was hunched over something in the alley, whispering to it. I saw him again, in the same spot at the bottom of the stairs, later that week. He was clicking his tongue against his teeth, as if calling something to him. Ever since, I’ve kept coming out to my back porch to watch him each night. I know tonight’s drum night, but I’d be lying if I tried to claim I wasn’t out here tonight waiting to watch.

Jeff has never seen me watching him, has no idea I know. He says, “My alley rat. I call him King Rat, ’cause he’s got this cute tuft of hair on top of his head. Like a crown, y’know?” I’m watching his wet lips as he talks. You know how some people always look like they just took a sloppy drink from a drinking fountain? His lips are red as blood, looking moist and shiny. He spits a little bit when he talks too. A real all-around wet kind of guy. My roommate was clattering around in the kitchen but I hear him go still behind the screen door. I know he’s listening.

Jeff goes on, “I leave my dinner scraps for him each night, but tonight he’s a no-show. Didn’t call or anything.” I honest to God can’t tell if he’s joking with that last bit. His wet lips don’t crack a smile. I haven’t told my roommate either, but it’s like the guilty pleasure of watching someone through their window, of witnessing a secret part of someone’s life you’re not supposed to see. I knew Jeff brought down his dinner

leftovers and fed them to the rats, but I didn't know he'd, like, made a pet of one of the rats specifically.

"I don't really mess with those alley rats, Jeff. Don't you read the signs?" I'm referring to the yellow metal that glows at night, depicting rabid rats like some sort of sewer mutants.

"He's a good rat, Sam. He doesn't mean anyone harm." Jeff is like a puppy dog, pouting his wet lips. And his lower lash line looks almost like it's been flipped inside out, like he's been tugging at the soft skin and lashes in some sort of nervous fit. It's the same wet blood red as his lips and I can't stop staring at it. I wonder if he really thinks it's the same rat every time. City rats are all pretty mangy looking, any one of them could have a tuft.

"Look, Jeff, it wasn't me, alright?" I want this to be the end. I want him to take his snare drum down, come back for his cymbals, clatter around all he wants, but to leave me alone. It's interesting watching him, but it's another thing to be face-to-face with the guy. I feel bad for him, and I feel bad for watching him, like he's just a fish swimming around in a tank.

His eyes are glossy like pearls, and he blinks like he might cry. "I just know somebody got to him, Sam."

I watch him each night with an impossible sense of trying to figure him out: why he does what he was doing. Beyond feeding the rats, I don't really know what he does with his life, like what his job is or anything. Some people say he cooks meth up on the top floor, but I know that's just people talking. He could sell skunky weed, maybe, that seems more up his alley. All the flats in the building are three bedrooms, and he doesn't have any roommates, so he must be able to swing paying the rent all by himself. My roommate, Hurley, has this theory that his mom pays his rent. He says she's probably willing no matter how steep the price, like even a three-bedroom in Wrigleyville for nearly three grand, if it means Jeff's not living in her basement forever.

Hurley kicks open the screen door and it swings out on the porch. His one arm is wrapped around another box of beers, while his left hand holds a big cardboard box of Goldfish crackers.

"Jeff, buddy, welcome to *mi casa!*" Hurley burps for enthusiastic punctuation. His burp is wet and rumbley, a few beers deep.

"Pop a squat, have a beer. I want to hear all about this rat." Hurley flops himself down onto the couch next to me, the cushions sagging when he does. He's not fat or anything, just, like, near seven feet tall. Hurley's my roommate and one of my closest friends, which is why I'm able to admit to myself that he can be a jerk. He's fun to be around, but he's not necessarily *nice* to be around.

"I don't drink," Jeff says, but he moves from being across the table from me to the lawn chair on a perpendicular side. He sits awkwardly, which is hard not to do in that chair because it's kind of small and the plastic weave is uncomfortable, but somehow he manages to make it look worse than most. His toes bop together like he's knock-kneed, and he clasps his hands in his lap, hunching forward like suddenly he's nervous. I bet Hurley freaks him out, honestly.

"Tell me, Jeff, what seems to be the problem today?" Hurley crosses his legs and pouts his lower lip, feigning concern.

"This rat, he's kind of like my pet, and he lives in the alley. But he's gone missing." Jeff has definitely gone from being on the offensive with me to being on the defensive with Hurley.

Hurley leans back and uncrosses his legs, reclining to get comfortable. He's settling in to put on one of his shows, I can tell. He casually stretches his arms back, resting them on the back of the couch, one hand nearly brushing my shoulder. I edge away from him. I don't really want to align myself with him here, because I know he's going to act like a jackass to Jeff.

The thing about the rat is that I don't believe it's always the same one. I wonder why Jeff has put so much trust, so much belief, into thinking that one particular rat comes back, night after night, to him. I could maybe understand the impulse to feed them—I had hamsters when I was a kid. There's something about small animals that makes you want to take care of them, even the ones like rats with beady eyes.

I try my best to offer both Jeff and I an escape. "Jeff, don't you have somewhere you need to be with your drums?"

"It doesn't matter, Sam." Jeff casts his eyes down for a second. "I just go to the comedy club down the street on open mic nights and use 'em as part of my one-man stand-up set."

I figured he was in a band, like four pasty white dudes covering Rush songs in a dive bar in Uptown or something. It would've been better if he had a band behind him.

"That's dope, man. You'll definitely have to do some standup sets for me sometime. I fucking love comedy." Hurley is entirely nonplussed by this admission. If anything, he might even be a little bit gleeful. I know that when he says he loves comedy, he actually means he loves giving shit to guys like Jeff who can't and won't give him shit back.

"Look," Hurley steamrolls right on, "I'm going to tell you a story about a pet someone once had in this alley . . . this guy, his porch is like, almost visible from here." Hurley stops to point at a porch across the alley covered in string lights. The whole alleyway is lined with multilevel wooden staircases with porches. On nights when there are games, everybody's shouting across to each other, cheering together when we hear the roars erupting from Wrigley Field.

"Yeah, you see it over there, that one." Hurley drops his arm. "The guy who lives there—his girlfriend worked at an elementary school out in Pilsen, and she wanted her students to raise chickens as a homework assignment." Jeff is transfixed on Hurley. He wrings his hands where they're clasped in his lap. He keeps cracking his knuckles, tightening the skin until it's so white that it's almost green. I look away and focus on my beer.

I know hamsters aren't rats, and I know Jeff is a grown adult and not a kid, but he reminds me of one. When I was a kid, and had my hamsters, my parents always pretended it was the same hamster the whole time. Princeton, a teddy bear hamster, was the first. I ate apples as an after-school snack and fed him slivers. His buckteeth climbed up the crisp fruit so fast that he always ended up nibbling on my fingers. But one day, Princeton looked different, and he wouldn't eat the apple slices. His fur was shorter, less orange. He might've not even been a teddy bear. Even at seven, I was sure that my parents had bought a new hamster and replaced the old. I'd heard of them doing that at SeaWorld with Shamu. Each whale killed just got the same name tacked onto it, over and over. No hamster lives for five years—because that's how long my parents kept replacing Princeton. And I kept pretending, maybe for them, maybe for me, that he was the same.

In a way, I'm like Princeton to Hurley. He calls me Tommy by accident sometimes, the name of his old roommate. And maybe King Rat is like Princeton to Jeff.

Hurley's not thinking sympathetically. He's still going on with his story: "So the guy's girlfriend ordered a box of chicken eggs online and they delivered that shit right to the front door of the school. Funny that you can get live shit delivered to a school. Not like the eggs were hatched yet, but they had the potential for live shit in them, you know?" Hurley stops for a second and scratches the stubble on his square jaw. The stubble is a few days' worth of five o'clock shadow, just long enough and the hair just thick enough that when he scratches it, it makes a sound so audible and loud that I see Jeff's watery eyes wince a little bit, as if he just kissed Hurley and got the sharp stubble rubbed on his own baby-soft cheeks like steel wool. "I mean, I guess my kindergarten teacher once ordered us caterpillars in the mail, and that's sort of the same concept. . . ."

Hurley stops his scratching and Jeff fills the momentary silence. "You can buy fifteen-hundred live lady bugs on Amazon for \$19.99 plus shipping." I wonder briefly if he's done that before. Maybe his top floor apartment is actually filled with thousands and thousands of lady bugs, all flying around and crawling on the kitchen cabinets and in the two empty bedrooms.

"Okay, Jeff, that's fucking weird that you know that." Hurley snorts air out of his nostrils, his way of a short, dismissive laugh. "Anyway, the guy's girlfriend brings home one of the chicks for herself. It grew up loyal to the couple, and that chicken thought it was a cat, I swear to god. Sometimes it hung around their apartment, the guy told me, bopping its head and clucking at this and that. But they also had a cat flap on their backdoor, and the chicken would, no joke, go out the cat flap and hop down the two flights of stairs to strut around the ol' alley back here." Jeff peers over the edge of the wooden railing on the porch, since it's right up against his back, as if he's trying to imagine the chicken in the alley.

"You wouldn't remember him, Sam, it was before you moved in here, back when Tommy lived in your room. But I remember him, man. That funky little chicken. I'd see him strutting around in the alley down there like he owned the joint. On game days, the guy put a little blue bandana on him, I think made for dogs, with the Cubs' logo on it. All the people up around the alley went nuts watching him strut around in that shit. When they were all out back barbecuing and drinking, they'd shower him with torn off pieces of hamburger buns, and that chicken would peck around in this bread crumb-filled alley, and man, he really did own the joint on those days. He was a neighborhood celebrity. Even with free reign inside and outside of their apartment, that chicken always went bopping on back up there, loyal as shit." I would think that Hurley is making this whole thing up except that I don't think he has that sort of creativity in him. I'm stuck thinking about Tommy, his name coming up again. Hurley never mentions why, but I know they had a falling out.

Jeff is enraptured in Hurley's story now. He's stopped fidgeting his hands and instead he's got both elbows resting on each respective knee, his fists pressed together like a gleeful kid, his chin resting on top of them. His whole body is leaned into the story, caught up in Hurley's gravitational pull. The guy's a dick but there's something about him that does that to people, draws them in and keeps them there.

"Anyway, one night, the chicken doesn't come back. The guy's not too worried, but his girlfriend is flipping her shit, you know how girls get. She's panicking, saying they need to go out and look for the chicken, that maybe he wandered over to Clark Street and got hit by a car, or who knows what. The guy convinces her they can at least wait until the next morning for daylight.

"So that next morning, just as they're getting ready to go out, their upstairs neighbor knocks on their door. He says that sometimes, when he gets to drinking whiskey at night, he likes to go out on his back porch and he tees off golfballs. He hits 'em in a way so that they just whizz way high in the air and land on the roofs of the buildings; they'd never hurt anyone. He had a little patch of green rolled out on his back porch, but he's long since taken it off because of what happened to that chicken." Hurley pauses, as if sensing doubt. He points at the back porch from before, the one with all the string lights hung. Then he raises his finger one landing higher. "But you can still see one of his golf clubs resting on the edge of the porch, rusting each time it rains," and he grins a slow, sneaky grin, one corner of his mouth creeping up the side of his face while the other stays cool and poised. He's right, there is a golf club resting on that landing.

Jeff's eyes are darting all over the alley, and then he points in a different direction, and says, "Look, there's a golf ball on that roof there! And that one too!"

Hurley nods his head in mock solemnity. "Right, boys. So the upstairs neighbor likes to drink whiskey and get golf happy, and one day he hits a ball wrong. Would you believe it that he hit a ball, and his club mucked up by a long shot, and the ball whipped at a downward angle into the alley, followed by a loud clucking flurry. Bocks of panic rang out through the night. His golfball whipped straight into that damn chicken, into its scrawny leg, and snapped the bone clean in half."

I wish Hurley would swallow a goldfish again. There's one story he told me once—the most bashful I've ever seen Hurley be—about this time he swallowed a goldfish at a party. It was back when he and Tommy were in college together, and they were at some chick's house party. Somehow, Tommy had brought up the urban legend that you can't throw up a live goldfish. Hurley, the way he tells it, initiated the dare himself—said, "Someone dare me to swallow a live goldfish for twenty bucks, I'll do it."

I'm half listening to Hurley's story, half lost in my own reverie. He's going on with the chicken's story: "The neighbor tells the guy and his girlfriend that he ran down the stairs to see what he hit. He carried the chicken back to his top flat, thinking that as soon as he sobered up a little, he'd drive it to the vet, patch it up, and then bring it back to the couple, no harm no foul. But he brought the chicken upstairs, sat next to it on the couch, and passed the fuck out, deadass in drunken slumber."

Jeff has moved his chin off of his hands so that he can instead chew nervously on his fingernails. His eyes are moony and wide, transfixed on Hurley.

In my head, I'm imagining the swarm of people standing around, watching as Hurley scooped the goldfish out of the fishbowl using a soup ladle, and tipped it down his throat. He said it was like eating a big glob of nigiri sushi, except that it wiggled. Hurley thought he might've been the exception to the legend, but he wasn't. He leaned over the toilet, now with a smaller crowd at his back, as he shoved his finger down his throat, but the goldfish never came back up.

"Anyway, he woke up the next morning, and the chicken was dead. It couldn't handle the pain, or something like that, I guess, I don't really know. All I know is, the guy told me that when the neighbor knocked on his door, he delivered them the dead chicken's body wrapped up in a sweatshirt. He apologized profusely, said that if it would help, he would grill up the chicken real good for them, and they could have a proper memorial service feasting on its breast. Can you believe that shit?"

At this last part, Jeff looks like he could cry.

Hurley spent the rest of the party with a goldfish swimming in his beer-filled

stomach. He said it kicked like a tiny fish pregnancy. Everyone at the party wanted to rub his belly like he was some sort of lucky Buddha, but he told me it was the worst feeling he'd experienced. Physically or otherwise, I don't know.

"Hurley, why are you telling Jeff this? He's looking for his rat, he doesn't wanna hear about some chicken that got murdered by a drunk dude putting tee." I pinch my brows together with my clammy hands, scrunching up my face to try and understand him.

Hurley seems satisfied with the end of his story. He's ripped open the top of the cardboard Goldfish box, and has his hand plunged in there, reaching for a handful. He shoves his hand against his mouth, consuming it all at once, and talks with his mouth full of orange mush. "I'm just saying accidents happen. Sammy boy didn't kill your rat, Jeff. It could've just been an accident." I try to tell myself that maybe this is Hurley trying to reassure Jeff after all.

"You said the guy stopped golfing," Jeff protests. He's focused his attention on biting at his cuticles. I watch his eyes cross as he hones his gaze in on one hanging flap of skin, bites it between his front top and bottom teeth, pulling it back to reveal wet, red raw skin beneath it.

"I'm saying, accidents happen. And uh, I didn't know you had befriended one of the alley rats, man. We had rats crawling up the gutters and I found one in our kitchen last week—"

"You didn't tell me you found a rat in the kitchen," I interrupt Hurley. This seems like the kind of thing he'd tell me within a minute, more so than his goldfish humiliation.

"I was taking care of it, Sammy boy. Like I'm trying to say, I found a rat in our kitchen and I was worried about infestations and all that shit. My boss just had to move out of his two bedroom in Ukranian Village because his house was overtaken by rats and the exterminator said it wasn't an easy fix and—"

"Taking care of it?" It took a minute to register with Jeff, but he's the one to interrupt now.

"Yeah, okay, so I set some rat traps down at the bottom of our stairs." Hurley flops his hands down from the back of the couch and slaps his thighs.

Jeff gets up so fast that he knocks over the lawn chair. His feet thunder down the stairs until he's on the alley ground. I follow Jeff, and Hurley follows us with an unaffected gait. Maybe I'm as invested in this as Jeff is, after watching him this whole month. I didn't believe that it was the same rat every time, but if he did, I know what it must've meant to him. I wonder if things would be different if I had told Hurley to come watch Jeff's strange ritual with me. Would he have cared?

Jeff is poking his head around the posts at the bottom of the stairs, looking for the rat traps. I lean against one of the posts. The guilt manifests like nausea. Hurley stands a few steps from the bottom of the stairs, keeping himself out of arm's reach of Jeff.

"Where are they?!" Jeff is frantic, pacing. He looks up at Hurley moon-eyed, wild, and glowing near orange like the harvest.

"Just between the weeds, there, by the fence." Hurley points, but doesn't walk closer to show where, leaving Jeff to walk over to the fence and away from him. I'm still leaning against one of the stairway posts, my hands wrapped around it like I'm wringing its neck. I realize I'm fidgeting my hands nervously like Jeff was earlier up on our porch when I get a splinter from the wood.

Jeff is on his hands and knees, brushing aside weeds. It doesn't take him long.

He stands up slowly, holding the limp body of a rat pinched between his thumb and forefinger at the neck, carefully avoiding the metal wire that snapped around it. The wood base of the trap pushes up against his finger, but he stubbornly holds the rat's body rather than holding it up by the trap. The rat's head droops, his nose pointing toward the ground, so that I'm getting a bird's eye view of the tuft of hair on the top of his head, like a crown, just like Jeff said. Is it King Rat? Has it been this whole time?

Suddenly Jeff throws the dead rat at Hurley.

"What the fuck?!" Hurley ducks, but doesn't retreat, and he should have. Jeff starts kicking at the weeds, kicking violently like a kid throwing a tantrum, and Hurley had lined the entire fence with rat traps. So with the toe of his shoe, maybe intentionally, maybe not, Jeff's flipping up rat traps into the air, kicking them in Hurley's direction. One smacks Hurley in the kneecap, springing shut on his jeans. Hurley raises his hands to defend himself from the pelleting outpouring of rat traps launched his way. One hits him right in the hand he's held in front of his face, springing shut on two of his fingers, one just slightly hanging out of the trap. He shakes his hand wildly in the air, and the one finger manages to escape, but the other is really in there, bleeding from the impact of the wire. I wonder how deep it cut. Jeff's still kicking—one more rat trap hits Hurley square in the center of the face, clamping down on his nose.

I don't need to know why Tommy and Hurley had a falling out, why Tommy moved out after, to know that I should get going too. Not just from the bottom of the stairs, right now. I run my hands along the railing as I'm climbing up the stairs, and I can still hear Hurley's cries of pain and Jeff's shouts of anger. The last corner of the railing on our back porch has deep scratches from Jeff's drum set. In one of the score marks, where the flesh of the wood is raw and light, a ladybug climbs up a splinter.

These Gentle People

————— Jessica Powers —————

IT WAS EARLY IN OUR AFFAIR AND I DIDN'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HER. I WOULD GO to her office hours or stay after her Introduction to Law class to talk with her. She had a classic mahogany office that smelled of wood, paper, and cigarettes. Our meetings were usually lit by a single desk lamp, starting with her bulky desk between us. We would always somehow end up with our clothes askew on the chocolate leather couch. Sometimes we were naked. I disliked the leather couch and its tendency to attach itself to my sweaty skin. It was on this couch that I came to know her.

One night, after we had shared a bottle of merlot and many kisses, something changed between us. She was holding my freckled face in her delicate hands, slowly moving her fingers over my body. When she reached my breasts, she cupped them in her hands tenderly and I sighed like a dehydrated alcoholic getting their whiskey fix. Her mouth moved to my neck. Kisses like small suction cups tickling my skin.

She whispered into my neck without thinking. "I remember when I was you." After the words exited her mouth, she hesitated like she didn't mean to say them.

My eyes suddenly opened and my hands reached for her face and I brought her mouth to mine to kiss it. I made it quick but with lots of sound before scrunching my face together in a question.

"What do you mean?"

She grinned absent-mindedly and kissed my cheek.

"Oh well, I . . . I just mean I was once the girl who fooled around with my professor, but uh . . . high school teacher, technically."

She continued to kiss my neck but I went stiff for a moment. I was suddenly aware of our differences as she said this. I needed more.

"Really? You've never told me that."

"Yeah, well it ended badly so I try not to think about it." Her green tea eyes met mine. Something I did not know was hidden in them—I ached for her. I moved my thumb gently, outlining her bottom lip and looked down shyly.

"Why did it end badly?" My eyes looked for hers at the end of my question.

She sighed, and her hands moved from my body; my skin immediately felt cold without her touch. She kept her eyes from me before finally giving me a reassuring glance up.

"I thought I might have to tell you this. . . ." She gave me a sad smile and her

hands held mine. Her thumbs moved over my knuckles with great focus, her eyes resting on this movement. “Do you really want to hear it?” I thought for a moment and removed my hands from hers, taking her face nervously into my clammy palms.

“I want to know everything about you.” I bit my lip, hesitating before kissing her with an anxious mouth. She returned my affection and we got caught up in ourselves. She pulled away and untangled her body from mine. We sat on the hot, sticky couch in the dim office, facing one another, our hands still intertwined.

She paused, her eyes looking for words around the room, before she spoke slowly, gently.

“When I was growing up, I never quite knew what my father did, but it didn’t matter because we had money. He always bought me, my mom, and my sister the nicest dresses. My mother always smelled of expensive perfume.

“I never asked, I never cared all that much. He was home for breakfast and came home for dinner at night like any normal dad. Sometimes he would say he had some more work to do after dinner and he would go off again, but still, he was always back in the morning. I remember some nights when I heard him come home late at night. Sometimes he was joined by other voices, other steel-toed footsteps. Some of these nights, if I was up and moving around the house with the lights on, I would see my father and a co-worker or two, all dressed in black, enter the garage. I never stuck around long enough to see them leave. Like I said, I didn’t care. When you’re young, you accept things as they are much easier.

Our garage always seemed to smell of wet iron, the floor stained with patches of a rusty red color and permanent dirt. I didn’t find out what exactly my father did as his profession until high school. You could say it was a bit of an accident, or maybe I was meant to find out sooner or later, but I don’t know. I wonder if I will ever really know, but something tells me I won’t.” She looked so sad for a moment, her eyes locked on our hands holding one another.

She looked at me for reassurance. I squeezed her hands and she looked down again—I was on the edge of her pause, eager to hear the next words she might speak.

“Don’t worry, I’m listening.” I smiled without teeth at her.

“I know, I just, I don’t. . . .”

She couldn’t finish her thought and I just said, “It’s okay,” and she took a quick breath and continued. I wanted to kiss her but something about the way her neck and shoulders hung low told me now was not the time.

“The first girl I ever knew I liked was Mrs. Westin. She was my high school history teacher. I had her for my junior and senior years. At first, I didn’t realize what was going on; I knew I was always excited to go to her class. I would sit in the front, trying to get as close to the action as possible. She had a love for history, especially the French Revolution.

“She would smile at me in the middle of her lecture and my seventeen-year-old self went tingly all over. I had kissed girls, but I didn’t realize what it meant to be gay. I didn’t know that there was a word for it. I just thought that all women were beautiful. I thought all women secretly wished to touch each other. And I hoped that Mrs. Westin secretly wanted to touch me. I would ask her questions that didn’t matter after class. She would sit on her desk, her endless legs crossed and dangling in front of me like candy. I obviously couldn’t bring myself to do anything other than be her teacher’s pet. I knew she was married to a man, so I didn’t think my fantasies of her undressing for me after class would ever come true.

"After an exam in the beginning of my senior year, she asked me to stay and talk after class about my essay. This was one of the few times where she had requested my presence and I was immediately on edge. I had hoped that she didn't think my essay was stupid.

"The way you wrote about Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora was beautiful. I was very intrigued by your take on their influence and their relationship.' I was relieved by her praise but I smiled nervously before I spoke.

"I guess I just wanted to try and capture how different Theodora was from other women in that time. She was a prostitute turned ruler of a kingdom—I think that's pretty amazing.'

"She was looking at me intensely. She got up from her leaning position on her desk and put her hands on my shoulders.

"You are one of my favorite students, you know that? Have you ever thought about studying history further?'

"I was so aware of her hands on me that my mouth fell open, and words I wasn't sure if I should've said came out.

"Not really, I guess I just really enjoy your class and the way you teach things . . . it, uh, makes it easier for me to understand.'

"It was the last period of the day and I could hear lockers slamming and the shuffling of feet beyond the wooden door. There was a small window in the door—the curtain drawn shut. I could not match any sights to the sounds of students leaving.

"Do you have anywhere you need to be?' she asked as I looked to the door. I wondered if she sensed that I was uncomfortable. But it was more of an unsettled feeling, the kind you get when something big is about to happen and you are excited and scared by it.

"No, I—I can stay and talk for a bit.'

"Actually, would you walk with me out to the parking lot? I always get a little creeped out leaving here when everyone else is gone.'

"I was relieved at her request; I needed to leave the classroom. The air had thickened and became heavy, something in it unbreathable.

"As we walked, our steps hardly echoing through the empty halls, I was so aware of our hands—which were so close. When we left the now quiet school, the early August air made me sweat with the heat of the evening. The occasional brush of her hand against mine caused my palms to dampen. I was slick with the possibility of touching her."

As she recounted the tension she once felt with this history teacher, I was reminded of the day that she first asked me in her office after class. It seemed so familiar. The sweaty palms. The closeness of the two of them walking together. I remembered the kindness in her plump lips as she smiled at me, telling me her admiration for my most recent case file that I put together from our class notes. It was in her office, after classes were over for the week, that she kissed me for the first time. That first kiss was unsure of itself. Not certain if it was meant to exist or not. I, myself, had been unsure of my existence in that moment. I kissed her back though, that being the only action I knew how to perform. I remembered the undeniable pleasure in that first kiss. That same unsettled feeling of something big happening. I loosened my grip on her hands as she continued her tale. Suddenly they felt sweaty. I tried my best to focus on what she was telling me, but whenever I blinked I saw flashes of our first night together. When we were in some deserted parking lot, making love like we

weren't supposed to.

"We approached her ninety-something Honda Civic. My dad always said those were good cars because they blended in so well, that you would hardly ever get pulled over in a car like that."

With the mention of her father again, I couldn't help but ask the question that had been burning a hole in my pocket: "What was it that your father did?"

It seemed simple to me; I thought maybe he worked odd hours for a car company, perhaps a distributor of some kind. Then her eyes locked with mine. I saw a coldness in them I didn't know existed in her. The greenness that they held only a moment before now seemed steely gray, her mouth a hardened line. My hands finally left hers, unsure of how I could continue to hold them.

"I—I will get there." She looked down for a moment and brought her delicate fingers to her eye to wipe away something I could not see. "He . . . he wasn't who I thought he was." She didn't look at me as she said this, even though I wanted her to. All I could do was swallow the excessive saliva that had been forming in my mouth. After a moment of silence, in which it felt like we were mourning someone, she continued.

"I don't think we had sex that first time. I walked her to her car and she asked if I needed a ride. My car had in fact been in the adjacent lot but I told her I would appreciate a ride anyway. I could walk to school in the morning or ask a friend for a ride. When would Mrs. Westin offer me a ride like this ever again? As we sat in the car, I felt very stiff—yet she seemed so relaxed, like she was really in her element. I directed her to my house and she pulled to the side of the road about a block away from where my family resided. It was dark now but I didn't mind walking. As I opened the car door and said thank you, she quickly moved her hand over mine that rested on the center console.

"Wait," she said. Then I felt the smooth tip of her thumb rubbing the top of my dry, pale hand. Everything inside me turned upside down, and by the time I looked up at her, her lips were against mine. I kissed her back like I never kissed anyone back before. Harder than the girls I had played spin the bottle with and longer than the boys who had cornered me at parties."

I heard the endless smile in her voice as she spoke of their first kiss. I tried to think of the first boy I had ever kissed, but his face was vague in my mind. When I thought of her, Lily, I too found myself smiling at the thought.

"Later that week, after everyone else had left the school—even the janitor—we walked to her car and made love. I told my parents I had a group project to work on or some other bullshit excuse. After that first time, I would have to tell them that there were a lot of group projects. At one point I told them I had joined the chess club."

I laughed at this. "Do you even play chess?"

"Now I do. Back then? Hell no. I didn't even know there were pieces other than a king and a queen." She smiled down at our hands and we both giggled.

"This went on the rest of my senior year. It was the happiest time in my high school life—the first time you fall in love is always unlike anything else. I remember the time when her husband was out of town on business and I finally got to see her outside of the plethora of parking lots which we had begun to nest in. Her house was just like her, aged beautifully, abstract art all around, knowledge pouring from the paint on the walls.

"I slept there for two nights in a row and we made breakfast together in the morning. I told my parents that my friends and I were going on a camping trip. I

remember eating omelets with her while coffee brewed in the French press. I imagined our life together. She would leave her husband and I would graduate and we could do this every morning. Of course, imagination never quite matches up with reality.

"We had been sleeping together for several months when my younger sister had her last basketball home game of the year. My parents and I went and held signs, cheering her on. Mrs. Westin was one of the many faculty members in attendance. I caught her sideways glances and blushed with every meeting of our eyes.

"I got up from the creaking bleachers, the gym echoing with applause and yelling voices. I stepped out into the quiet hallway and found her there. She was stepping out of the bathroom as I walked in. Our shoulders almost touched as I passed her; it was so close that as I remember it, I think I can feel her. I lingered in front of the mirror in the small, empty bathroom. It was only a moment before she was behind me. I turned to her and then checked each stall. We knew we had to make our kiss brief, but our mouths made the sweetest music. We didn't say anything as we parted ways. She went out quietly back to the gym, then I followed a moment later. But I was met by my father who stood outside the bathrooms, talking on the earliest version of a cell phone. I froze, his eyebrows tried to kiss in the middle of his forehead. I couldn't tell if he was confused at me or who was on the phone, but then he smiled at me and mouthed to me that he would be back inside in a minute. As I walked away, I heard his frustration as he asked when the next shipment of supplies would be coming into his office. It was only a few minutes that I was away from the game and my family, but it felt like a small eternity."

When she was describing her secret kiss with Mrs. Westin, there was a faraway look in her eyes and then I knew she wasn't with me. She had time traveled back to when she was seventeen, and at the mention of her father, I felt the sadness through her hands as I held them.

"For the next week, whenever I tried to make up an excuse as to why I would not be home directly after school, my father would say he needed me home for something. There were dishes to be washed, or something to be cleaned. He would say anything to get me home. He seemed so stressed, and I wanted to help him but I was on edge, missing her. At school I told her that my family was busy and she was understanding. She told me we would have the summer together, that school was almost over. I thought this was her saying we would finally be together for real. I had been waiting patiently to see what would happen after I graduated and turned eighteen in the middle of summer.

"The Saturday night following the basketball game—the last night I had kissed her—I was hoping to sneak out and see her somehow, but my mother asked me to go to the warehouse where my father sometimes worked late. She made his favorite dinner, lasagna, and he had missed it. She was only trying to be a good wife. I drove across town for miles, across the shittiest tracks, near the river which made up the western border of our town. When I made it to the shipping yard along the water, I pulled into the lot which was in front of a series of warehouses. They were home to whatever came through the river port, each one having space for an office or two. It was a maze composed of warehouses and shipping containers, but I had been there a time or two, I knew the relative location where my father worked.

"As I walked in the block where my father worked, trying to decide which eerie looking building was his, I heard a scream. It was feminine and shrill. My feet became glued to the wet concrete. There was another scream but it ended abruptly, like a hand

had covered the mouth behind the noise.”

I thought of her hands over my mouth. I closed my eyes and withdrew into the cushions of the still sticky couch. She hesitated without my gaze on her. I slowly peeled my eyelids open, she looked so small, like a child waiting for my permission. All I could do was swallow and nod my head.

“It wasn’t too hard to find where the scream came from. Next to a warehouse that felt all too familiar, there was a rusty orange-colored shipping container with a door cracked open. I tried my best not to breathe as I peeked carefully in like an eager child coming down the stairs the night before Christmas morning.

“To this day, it is the worst thing I have ever seen. There were four men in the hollow container, my father included. My father was standing in the middle, a long knife used to slice thick cuts of meat in his hand. In front of him was a chair. It was hard to see everything and I had to fidget with where I kept my line of sight. My eyes strained to see the details of the faces in front of me. I turned to my side, allowing only one eye access through the cracked metal door, letting the pale moonlight, like the fluorescent stove light in a midnight kitchen, to shine inside. Finally, I saw who was in the chair.

“I covered my mouth with a damp hand: it was my girl. Although her face was so wet and bloody that I could hardly recognize her, I knew. He had tied her up, twine ropes around her thin wrists and ankles. Her face was swollen and her head hung low; she was shaking. My father and these men I did not know were laughing. I suddenly understood the mysteries that my father left in my childhood.

“She could hardly move her neck but she looked up at my father. I could not make out her expression through her swollen eyes, but my father smiled with something behind his jagged teeth I had never seen before. His eyes burned into her. I wanted it all to stop but I could not look away and I didn’t make a sound.”

“Why didn’t you scream or something? Why didn’t you do something?” I interrupted her without thinking.

Her eyes felt cold on me for the first time as she spoke. “What would you have done?”

I tried to answer, my mouth open and ready, but then I realized I did not know. What does one do when they are caught between the law, a father, and a lover? I let her continue. “I’m sorry, I just . . . I . . .”

“I know.” She squeezed my hand like she always had, but this time I did not squeeze back.

“He walked up to her slowly, his heavy boots scraping across the floor. He brought his knife to her cheek and slowly opened her flesh. Her already muddy face was dampened by blood coming from the cut. I felt my own cheek become wet with tears, as if I had just been cut.

“I could not hear anything that was being said in that space, which seemed so far from me. My father bent down, whispering in her ear. Pulling away, he looked at her as he dragged his knife across her collar bone. Seeing my father draw blood from her felt like a thick, calloused hand squeezing trunk-like fingers around the muscles of my heart. The men around my father smiled, but his face was now as expressionless as a white wall. His eyes rested on her bleeding figure as she squirmed, her torso moving tightly in the chair. I watched as more blood seeped from her. It was all blood. Brown with its dryness, red with its freshness, thick like syrup. I wished to put it all back inside her. I wished I was God and could do anything I wanted. I stepped back from the door and cried to myself as softly as I could muster. I knew I had to leave. I took one

last peek inside to see her spit blood onto my father's face. He wiped himself with a heavy hand before bringing that same hand across her cheek. As I walked away, I put the delicately wrapped, perfectly layered lasagna my mother had made on the ground in front of the container and I wondered if my mother knew. Then I ran.

"The very last week of school, Mrs. Westin had a sub. The sub told us Mrs. Westin had gotten into a car accident. She probably wouldn't be in until the end of the week. I was happy she was coming back—that at least meant she wasn't dead.

"On Friday she was finally back. Her face seemed slightly swollen, just enough that people could believe she was recovering from something really bad. She wore a maroon scarf around her neck, I remember thinking that it looked nice against her auburn hair. I sat in my usual seat at the front of the room, but everything she did during class seemed to be in an effort to avoid me. I couldn't deny that it pained me to look at her too. I could tell that she was not looking at anyone in particular, but found a spot on the back wall to pay attention to. She turned stiffly and quickly toward the board whenever she got the chance. She had always been light and carefree in the classroom, always in her element. That day felt so much different. I knew I had to say something. I hadn't decided if I would tell her that I knew. That I was sorry. That I didn't know who my father really was. That he was still my father and I didn't know what to do. When class was over I walked to the front of her desk as other students were leaving.

"Instead I said, 'I miss you.'

"I, uh, I have to go.' She wouldn't look at me, she busied herself with the organizing of papers. I looked around as the last of my classmates trickled out of the room.

"Is everything okay?' I knew I shouldn't have asked such a question but I had to. She stopped her fussing with the things on her desk and was silent for what felt like forever. The time only stretched longer by the fact that she would not look at me.

"She finally spoke: 'I can't see you anymore.'

"For a minute all the sound was drained from the world. The constant drone of things suddenly gone. I saw that she was moving her mouth subtly but I couldn't hear a thing.

"What?'

"I said,' she took a deep breath, "someone knows about us." She looked up at me with watery eyes.

"Who?' My stomach flipped with guilt.

"I can't really say . . . it, it's just better if we don't see each other anymore.' She looked to the door of the classroom to the side of her, with her chin in her hand and her fingers cupped around her mouth.

"But I, I think we could still keep a secret if we wanted. Just. . . .' My voice cracked as my head tilted forward, my body felt so heavy. 'Maybe somehow.'

"No. We can't.' Her voice sounded like it fell hard on the floor as she spoke.

"I want to know what I can do.' I don't know why I was trying to beg for her, I knew now that we couldn't do this. It just wasn't safe for us."

I wondered if her telling me this story was safe at all. If I should be here right now with her. I thought of my own father. I wondered what he would think of me if he knew I was with her. Someone not too far off from his own age.

"What happened after that?" I was too eager for her answer, clutching my hands over my chest.

"I cried a lot that night. My mother came in my room, but I told her I didn't

wanna talk about it. Then my mother did what she always did when she was unsure, she sent my father in.”

My hands tightened as I thought of her and her father in the same room.

“I stopped my crying as he sat on the edge of my bed. He put his strong hand on the calf of my leg.

“‘What’s shakin’ bacon? Talk to me.’ He gave me what I once thought was a sad tender smile, and now I see it was a cover up.

“I didn’t say anything right away, trying to put together my perfect response. ‘It’s nothing Dad, just a boy I was seeing. He ended it today at school.’

“The look on my father’s face told me everything I needed to know.”

I saw now that she was crying. I wondered if I was just now noticing this or if she had been this whole time. I reached out to touch her face, to do something, but then we jumped at the sound of my phone buzzing. Usually I wouldn’t have noticed the soft vibration coming from her desk a few feet away from us, but the room had only been filled with her voice, her story this whole time.

I smiled nervously and walked over. I felt a pang of fear tickle my insides as my finger gingerly turned the phone over, which buzzed with the name, Dad, calling.

I answered his call, sniffing my almost tears through my nose. He asked when I would be home. For a second I felt embarrassed that I still lived at home. Then I felt happy for who my father was. I told him soon; I would be home soon.

Samson

Aaron Benshish

THE QUARRY WAS SO CLOSE TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD THAT THE HOUSES COULD BE felt shaking whenever the dynamite went off. Samson had learned after a few months that the blast-mining followed a loose schedule, and, for no reason at all, decided to send his friend, Kyle, into the quarry just before the four o'clock explosion on a dare.

To get to the quarry, Samson had Kyle bike out of the neighborhood, ride along the shoulder of a busy local road, and climb the steep hills overlooking it. Samson followed on his own bike, the entire time shouting to Kyle that he was a little bitch. He had heard the phrase the night before on some TV show that his parents had forbidden him to watch. Though he did not know what it meant, he knew that it was mean, because the man who had been called it on the show got angry and punched the man who said it in the face. Kyle did not know what it meant either, but from the way Samson was saying it, he suspected it was bad.

Samson would not go past the base of the hills. Kyle was at one of their peaks, looking down at the bulldozers and metal tracks, at the colorful striations on the walls.

"I don't think I want to do this!" he shouted.

"It's just going up and down," said Samson. "Or are you a little bitch? That's fine, but I'll tell everyone, and you'll go trick-or-treating alone."

Kyle thought about it. He was leaning on the orange rope separating the quarry from the rest of the land, watching a group of people in bright green vests crowd around a spot on the ground. Samson was getting impatient.

"Alright," cried Samson. "I guess this makes you the little bitch. I'll go tell everyone." He got on his bike and slowly began pedaling toward home.

"Wait!"

Samson stopped and faced him.

"Don't go, please! I'll do it, I'll do it." Kyle was jumping nervously, arms out in supplication. He would not be the kid trick-or-treating alone on Halloween.

"OK," said Samson. "So do it."

Kyle took a deep breath and stepped over the orange rope. One of the attached signs read: STOP—PRIVATE PROPERTY—DANGEROUS. It flapped as he crossed it.

Samson watched him disappear behind the hill and was immediately very scared. He did not think it would go this way—or any way, really. He had not given it much thought. He began to shout for him to come back.

"Stop! Kyle, stop! Something bad will happen! You need to come back! Kyle, please! Stop!" He was struggling up the hill, his breath short, his fat, stumpy legs already weak from the biking. When he reached the peak, there was only enough time for another shout. There was a flash, a deafening, chest-rattling thud, and, where Kyle had been standing, a cloud of fire and smoke—a new impression in the ground from which to draw stone.

That night, Kyle's mother called Samson's home. She wanted to know if Samson or his parents knew anything about the whereabouts of her son.

"I've been calling everybody," she said. "I'm getting scared. Kyle has never done anything like this. He's always so good about getting back home before dark; he knows I don't like it when he's out late."

"Have you contacted the police?" Samson's mother had been the one to pick up the phone.

Silence. "I hope that won't be necessary."

"Hold on, I'll ask Samson if he knows anything." She put Kyle's mother on hold and called for Samson to come down to the living room.

Samson had been in his room with the door shut and locked since returning from the quarry. He had never biked faster than before that evening, after seeing what he did. A lot was on his mind: *Had anyone seen? What will happen when they find his bike? Am I going to Hell? Will I be grounded?* Hearing his mother's call, Samson crawled into bed and pretended to be asleep. She called again, and Samson turned on his side. He heard her footsteps squeaking up the stairs and onto the wooden floor of the hall to his room, closer and closer, until they stopped at his door.

"Samson?" she called.

He lay completely still, holding his pillow close against his chest.

She knocked on the door. "Samson? Are you awake?"

He heard the doorknob rattle.

"Samson, please open the door."

He swallowed hard. "Sorry, Mom, I was sleeping." He got out of bed and unlocked the door. He could not bring himself to open it.

His mother was quiet. "Sorry, Linda, give me a second." The phone beeped. "Can I come in?"

He backed up to his bed and sat. "Sure." He could hardly get the word out.

The door swung open. His mother stood in its frame, silhouetted against the lights in the hallway. "You've been sleeping?"

He nodded.

"Are you feeling okay?"

He shrugged. He was shaking. The pits of his shirt were dark with sweat.

She walked closer and lifted the back of her hand to his forehead.

He took a deep breath.

"Well, I don't think you have a fever. Actually, you feel a little cold." She put her fingers on his cheeks and gently turned his head, left to right. "You do look a little sick, though."

Samson was staring at her knees.

"Samson?"

His eyes darted.

"I'll let you get some sleep. First, though, I need to know if you know where Kyle is."

A tunnel was spiraling before him. "Kyle?"

She nodded.

He felt like his chest was about to burst. The truth was crawling up his throat from some deep place, growing larger, choking him.

"Samson?"

His bottom lip quivered. He tried to speak but a sob cut him off.

She was kneeling and had her hands on his shoulders. "Samson, what's the matter with you? Did something happen?"

"Kyle didn't want to play with me."

"Oh," she intoned. "Is that why you're so upset?"

He nodded and wiped a tear from his eye.

"When did he tell you that?"

He began to cry. "This morning. I asked him if he wanted to race on our bikes and he called me a little bitch and told me to leave."

She stood up. "A little *what*?"

He shook his head, snot cascading down his lips. "I don't want to say it again."

"That's good. Yes, very good, Samson. That's a bad word, a very, very bad word. Don't repeat it."

He nodded.

She lifted the phone to her face. "You're sure you don't know where Kyle is?"

He wiped his sleeve across his nose. "No."

She thumbed a button and the phone beeped. "I'm sorry, Linda, but Samson hasn't seen him. Apparently he asked him if he wanted to play this morning, and Kyle called him something . . . *rude*."

Linda did not immediately respond. "So none of you have seen Kyle?"

"Well, no," Samson's mother began.

Samson, under his tears and mucus and red, puffy face, tried to repress a smile.

"But your son said something very inappropriate to Samson."

Linda said, "Thanks anyway," and hung up.

Samson's mother scoffed. "Wow."

He watched her.

"So you're not feeling sick? It was just because of Kyle?"

He coughed a sob and nodded.

"Well, I'm sorry that happened to you. Kyle was wrong to call you that." She became pensive, then smiled. "You wouldn't come down for dinner earlier. You must be hungry. How about we go and get some ice cream?"

He was rubbing his face, sniffing. "OK."

Linda did call the police that night, and Kyle's bike was found on its side the next day at the base of the hills around the quarry. The workers at the quarry were questioned by the police, but they did not know anything. No remains had been found among the dust and broken stone, and the media was quick to declare that he had been killed in an explosion.

A wooden cross was put at the spot where the bike had been found. Samson had seen a picture of it in the local newspaper. It was on the front page, a small square of text, the headline read: *A Cross for Kyle, Boy Destroyed in Quarry*. Included under Kyle's photo: *school portrait, courtesy of Liongrove Elementary*, and under the photo of his parents: *How could this have happened?*

Samson saw himself in those hills, around the stone and dying grass, the cross, thin and white, bent under the weight of beads and scarves and notes. He had torn up that front page and thrown it away, hiding the scraps in the garbage beneath a pile of unused paper plates.

For an entire week, there were no explosions. The knickknacks on the shelves in Samson's room did not rattle, the birds did not rush in alarm from the trees, the streets were not dusty with silica. This was to show respect for the family of the victim, and to comply with the ongoing investigation. Eventually, however, the mining had to continue, and it did. Kyle's little cross collapsed after the first explosion, splintering on impact with the rocky hill. It was pushed across the street by a strong wind to the woods, the beads and scarves and notes littering the asphalt, the place at which it had stood unmarked, except for the hole where it was staked.

Certain that the boy had died after wandering into the quarry in an explosion, the police closed the case, and gently urged Kyle's parents to accept that their son was gone. There was no attempt at setting another cross. Locals had shifted their attention to the grave. In the few days since the burial—when a small, empty casket was lowered into his plot—it had become the most flowered site in the cemetery. The funeral train had been as long as the town itself, not because so many people knew Kyle, or because his family was especially important, but because tragedy was something to be heard about on the news, or told in a story, or read about online, not something to experience, at least not personally. Having this untimely death so physically close, in so mysterious an accident, had the town inflamed with morbid interest and sanctimonious grief.

Samson did not attend the funeral. His parents tried to convince him to go, even tried forcing him, but he would not comply. He was shouting, red-faced and trembling, "I'm not going to stupid Kyle's funeral! He was mean to me!" and felt in those words a coldness that scared him. So they called for relatives to watch him while they attended the funeral, waited until his uncle arrived, and left. He lay in bed for the remainder of the day, crying.

He cried every day for about a month and then was quiet and humorless. He no longer played outside with his friends, and at school his grades were suffering. Neither homework nor chores were ever done; he would instead lay in bed, or watch TV, or draw. His drawings, which had always been of monsters and cartoons, were now shaded-in squares or circles or scribbles without semblance or pattern, only dark, jagged lines of ink and graphite mingling into each other, confused. His floor was littered with them. His parents were concerned about him, but did not know what to do. They talked to each other about therapy and decided that if he was not acting like himself in a week, they would find someone, or ask the school, or take him to church—something to bring their child back.

By the end of that week he was outside, watching Kyle's house. Samson's parents thought he was playing with his friends, and were happy that they would not have to find someone to counsel their son and risk the stigma. They let him leave the house whenever he wanted, so long as it was not too late in the day. He would bike for hours around Kyle's house, circling its block even after his legs had become stiff and weak, the entire time unsure of what he was doing. He could sense only the impossible mass around which he was orbiting, and the distance between them shortening by the minute.

It started as ding-dong ditching. He would stand behind the bush at the front

of the driveway, partially concealed, staring at the shuttered windows, and then break into a sprint. He would stop at the door, ring the bell frantically with one hand and slam on the door with the other—bottom lip nearly bleeding, he bit it so hard—and sprint back to the bush at the front of the driveway and hide. This was always in the evening. A parent would answer the door, usually the father, and, after half-heartedly surveying the front yard from the porch, would go back inside. Samson hated it. He hated what he was doing. He hated Kyle's house more than anything else, but he could not stop returning to it. He had nightmares in which it was only the house standing there, isolated, and he could only wait and watch, disembodied, utterly transfixed, everything else, even himself, merely darkness.

When they stopped answering the door, he started breaking windows. He broke one of the windows above the garage with a stone on which he had written "Kyle is Gone" in marker. When he broke one of the tall windows facing the backyard, he heard over the shattering glass someone wailing, and he thought about climbing through the window and hugging whoever was in there and crying with them, but he only screamed and ran home. He ran from cops and suspicious neighbors, backyard dogs staked to their turf, the shouts from open-windowed cars of aimless teenagers, from teachers, friends, cousins, the well-meaning questions of his parents—*How was your day, Samson?*—everything but the misery of Kyle's family.

Months later, when there were no more windows to break, and nothing more was done to keep sealed the broken glass from outside, Samson began breaking into the home and hiding under their beds and in their closets. He would pound on the walls and eat the food in the pantry, and sometimes he would turn on all the faucets and leave. He made sure before climbing through a broken window that they were gone, and once, while entering, a shard of glass still on the pane cut into his calf and spilt his blood onto the wall and the wooden floor below. He wandered around the house, letting the blood trail behind him. In Kyle's room he swept his arm across his desk and knocked the photo frames and plastic toys to the white and red-spattered carpet. He fell to his perfectly made bed, thrashing and screaming, the blood from his leg smeared on the sheets and blankets, the room spinning. He ran again around the house, and when he shut himself in a closet that could not be opened from inside, a thin trail of his blood now in every room and passage, he sat, and waited, and hoped that he would soon fall asleep.

Crescendo

Brie Garrett

IT'S A SPRING DAY AND AS BEAUTIFUL AS CHICAGO LOOKS OUTSIDE, AT LEAST WITHIN the horizon, it sounds nothing but ugly in here. I can see the birds flying and sitting on the powerlines in the alley of our apartment. The neighborhood kids running back and forth on the pavement. The girls playing double-dutch with some old clothesline they found, their twists flopping in the air with every jump. And they're all so blissful, so content with what they have, with what life has given them.

I see Amaya skipping as hard as she can in those ropes. She's about the same age as my Jasmine, fourteen, and all she does is double dutch. And I know her head is only in those ropes so she can't hear her parents fighting about how they're going to pay the rent next month. She can't hear them from all the way down there.

Still, I can. I hear their argument every time and I can hear it now even while Jasmine plays her piano scales, or tries to anyway. She messes up and then she starts again and she messes up and she grunts, slamming her hands on the piano.

"I hate this stupid thing!" she screams, but she screams it in a mumble that she doesn't think I hear.

"I don't hear you playin' in there," I shout back while scrubbing a plate with an old rag. I haven't looked at my fingers, but I know they look like old prunes swimming in the warm, soapy water.

"I'm playing, I'm playing. . . ." she groans, and the sound of misplayed piano keys bounces off the walls.

I close my eyes and pretend like I'm enjoying the sound. I can't describe the tune she's trying to play. It's like the sound of opening and slamming old cabinets, perhaps. But still, I listen and I bop my head, searching for some kind, any kind of rhythm.

The screen door screeches open and I think it's just Jasmine's playing until I hear the sound of short, quick pants popping out of small lungs. I turn to see Langston, covered in dirt, his glasses askew, leaning against the door with a big smile on his face showing the gap between his two front teeth.

"Hey, Mama," he breathes out. He puts his hand over his heart and I can practically see it pumping just by the vibration of his fingers. "I'm hungry, do we have any Lunchables?"

He peels himself off the door and I can see, on the back of his dirty and sweat-

soaked shirt, that the print from the screen door tattooed its mark. Langston pushes his glasses up on his face with the palm of his hand so his eyelashes touch the lenses and walks to the refrigerator. I look down and see the dirt on the floor from his shoes.

"Boy, I know you're not tracking dirt on my floor." He stops mid-step and looks down at his shoes.

"Sorry, Mama," he says and kicks his shoes off. "I'll clean it up!" He grabs the mop from the corner and I fill up one of the clean cups with a little bit of soapy water for him to pour on the floor. The mop is taller than he is, and his slender body only has a few pounds on the stick. He swipes the strings of the mop across the floor, sloshing the muddiness around, and I know he thinks he's cleaning it, but he's just making the dirt blend in with creamy tiles. He stares at his work and looks up at me for the final verdict.

"It's fine, I have to mop anyway." He gives me a grin, some of his tongue poking through his gap, and he turns back to the refrigerator, pulling the door open. I clear my throat at him, and he looks at me.

"Yeah?"

"You know you're supposed to wash your hands before you go in the refrigerator, boy. I raised you with some home training, I need you to act like it."

"Oop, sorry Mama." He closes the refrigerator and walks over to the sink, squirting a few dollops of hand soap into his palms and flipping the faucet to the other sink. I get a whiff of him in that moment.

"Mmph, boy you smell like outside! You need to do more than just wash your hands, go hop in the shower."

"But my Lunchable," he says in this pitiful voice like I've put him on punishment for something he didn't do.

"It'll still be here when you get out. Now go hop yourself in the shower, stinkin' up my kitchen."

He laughs a little then and flicks the water off. He looks down at his once white t-shirt, shrugs, and dries his hands on it then walks out the kitchen. I hear the bathroom door close from the sound of the rack on the back of the door hitting it.

And that's when I notice that I can't hear a piano. I dry my hands on the rag hanging on the handle of the stove and walk my way up front to the living room.

Jasmine sits on the piano bench, her chin buried in her left palm as she scrolls on her phone with her headphones in her ears. She's mouthing words but I can't make them out. Ringlets of her dark brown curls hang in her face and frame her portrait. As thick and springy as her hair is, there's a wispy nature to it and I know she's fluffed her hair out to try and make it look messy and carefree. Like she doesn't care what others have to say about it, but I also know she's placed each coil with precision to give it that look.

I inch closer to her and she looks up at me, yanking her headphones out of her ears. "I . . . I was just taking a quick break," she says and turns her phone face down, looking back at the piano keys. She stares at the ebony and ivory keys and hovers her cherry wine colored nails over them. They shake a little, but you can only make it out if you focus hard enough on them.

"That's enough for today," I tell her and she drops her arms in relief but tries to play it off like she was just casually stretching.

"Well, I'm getting better I suppose," she says like she's trying to convince herself of it more than anything.

"Yeah," I tell her, "you'll be a little Nina Simone or Alicia Keys in no time." I push one of her curls out of her face and she reaches up at first and then puts her hand down. Instead, she responds by giving me a smile.

"Where's Langston?"

"In the shower, he smelled just like outside, stinking up the whole kitchen." I go to the window and, with my candle lighter, I light a cranberry scented candle.

Jasmine winces, "Ooof . . . outside smell, gross." She grabs her phone in her hands. "He asked me if I could show him how to play something on the piano but it can probably wait until tomorrow." She stands up, putting her phone in the front pocket of her overalls. "Can I go hang out with Amaya?"

"You can go clean your room," I respond.

"My room *is* clean."

"Then go read a book," I suggest.

"Why can't I go hang out with Amaya?"

"You don't need to be out there."

She looks around like there's an invisible audience that needs to hear what she just heard. "I don't need to be in our own backyard? Jumping rope?"

I point a finger. "You better watch that tone."

"Sorry," she mumbles, "I was just making a point."

"I know."

"So, can I go?"

"I didn't say all that." I walk past her and out of the living room. She follows behind, trailing as we walk through the hallway to the kitchen. Langston skips out the bathroom, water drops glistening on his hair and an old *Toy Story* towel wrapped around his waist. Jasmine waits until he goes in his room before she responds.

"What makes Langston so special?"

"Girl, what are you talking about?"

"What makes Langston so special that he gets to have fun and I can't? He always gets to go outside. Is it because I'm a girl? Is that why there's a double standard?"

I furrow my brows. "Naw, it's not because you're a girl."

"Then why?"

"Do you need something to do? I can give you something to clean. Or you can go back to that piano." I look at her, giving her the chance to choose. She looks at me, her eyes tightening and jaw clenching. Jasmine has never been good at standoffs. She always breaks. So instead of torturing her even longer, I say, "Well?"

She pauses for a moment before talking. It's like she's thinking of every mean thing she wants to say but can't.

"I'll go play the piano." She brushes past me, her voice so low I hardly catch it.

Langston comes rushing out his room mid-throwing his shirt on. His hair is still wet and I know he hasn't put any moisturizer on it or his skin. "Can I have my Lunchable now?" He grins at me as he slides into the kitchen.

I go in the fridge and pull out his last pizza Lunchables. "Can I make it?! Please?! Please?! Please?!" he begs and I hand it to him. Langston is so excited to make Lunchables by himself that he rushes it, practically throwing all of the ingredients together. One of the pizzas has a lot of sauce, cheese, and pepperoni on it while another is basically just a bare cracker with whatever was leftover from making the other one. Regardless, he's proud of what he's made. Langston hands me the plate and I put it in the microwave, taking it out after a few seconds and handing it to him.

"In the living room you go," I tell him and he dashes out with his food.

The sound of Jasmine at the piano travels through our walls. She's not really playing anything, just pressing keys. To passive-aggressively spite me I assume. I told her she had to be at the piano, but I didn't say she had to actually practice anything.

The problem with Jasmine is that she doesn't actually realize just how special she is. She wonders what's so special about Langston that I let him play outside with the neighborhood kids. It doesn't even occur to her that maybe I have her practice playing the piano instead of playing jump rope because I want her to know what she's capable of. Outside of this apartment. Outside of this neighborhood. Outside of this city. She could go on to do so many big things.

But a parent saying that doesn't mean much. A good parent is supposed to say that their child can do anything amazing that they could put their minds to. So I want her to believe it herself. And I know that if I don't push her, she'll be content with what she has, with the short end of the stick that life has given us. Just like I did.

I walk back up front to see what they're doing. Jasmine sits at the piano and Langston hovers over her, eating his pizza. "Jazzy, can you show me how to play that song you've been learning?" he asks in between chewing.

"Well, I haven't learned all of it yet, Langston." She shifts in her seat to look at him. By force of habit she tries to fix his shirt while smiling at him.

"I'll give you half of my last pizza," he offers, giving his big, innocent smile. It's usually hard to deny that smile when what he's asking is so harmless.

I can make out a little bit of a smile on Jasmine's face until she notices me in the living room. Her expression almost drops until she darts her attention back to Langston.

"I mean . . ." she sings, "if you're bribing with pizza, I guess I have to say yes." Langston's body jumps with excitement, making Jasmine laugh.

The comfort she shows with Langston changes when she turns back to the piano. Instead, she's stiff and rigid. Langston cozies up to her on the seat, although it's so small they can't really fit together, and Jasmine starts playing. She misses more notes than she gets right and she knows this. But Langston insists she keep going.

Jasmine stops playing and I walk up to her. "You didn't sound that bad that time. Start from the beginning, but this time a little slower. Your problem is you keep rushing it," I advise.

"I think you sounded beautiful, Jazzy! I liked how weird it sounded," Langston encourages her. We both know that his comment is genuine. He genuinely believes that the way she played it was the right way and he liked it that way. She nods her head, takes a deep breath, and tries again. I glance up at the clock. She's been practicing for about two hours, but she's so close to getting it that I don't want to tell her.

She messes up once more, and again, and again, until she can't even get herself to start anymore. Instead, Jasmine stands up from the bench and pushes her glasses up on her face carefully with one of her fingers, her bouncy coils of hair moving in unison as she does.

"I don't understand why you love this thing so much," she huffs. "Actually, I don't understand why you're trying to force me to love it so much. You don't force Langston to play piano and you let him go outside and play with the other kids. Why can't I?"

I don't want to fight with Jasmine when Langston is in the room. But I also don't want to back down. I tell her, "Didn't we already have this conversation?" And I can see just in her face all she wants to do is scream at me. That she feels stuck and

in this moment she hates me because she knows she can't respond with what she really wants to say.

So instead, Jasmine pouts, "That's not fair," and she folds her arms. She has enough sense in her body to not roll her eyes at me, or at least not where I can see. She stomps to her room hard enough the fire in the cranberry candle feels it, and I wonder how a room that smells so sweet could feel the opposite.

"Jazzy, don't feel sad!" Langston calls after her. He looks at me for permission first and I nod. He grabs his plate and walks out the living room to her room, knocking on the door. "Come on, you forgot your pizza," he says, walking in and closing the door behind him.

I run my hands across the piano scales, lightly to make sure I don't play a single note. The brownness of my fingers stands out against the ivory keys, but a shade or two too light to blend in with the ebony keys. And as badly as I want to play it, as badly as I want to listen to the sounds that my fingers are capable of creating, I instead just walk over to the candle and take an extra whiff of the bittersweet smell, and I blow it out. I don't want to smell it anymore.

For the rest of the day, Jasmine gives me the cold shoulder. She toes the line so she never crosses disrespectful, but even though Langston doesn't notice, I can tell how fed up she is with me. I let her sleep it off, expecting her to feel better in the morning. It's the usual routine when she gets frustrated.

In the morning she continues giving me the cold shoulder while getting ready for school and even when I drop her and Amaya off, only making the effort to talk to me when she asks me if Amaya could ride home with us after school because both of her parents are working late again and never gave her the money to get a new Ventra card.

I agree, partially as a peace offering to Jasmine, but also because I know I would want Amaya's parents to do the same if Jasmine was in her position. Amaya thanks me with a hug as she gets out the car which surprises the both of us. But for the rest of the day, I think about ways to make it up to Jasmine so she can feel a little more peaceful around me in the evening.

I have it all planned out: a way to say sorry without actually saying sorry because I'm not sorry for wanting to help her see better for herself. But I do feel bad that she feels like I'm denying her adolescence to do it. So to make it up to her, on my lunch break I pick up some pudding mix, crust, and whipped cream to make an Oreo pudding pie with her, like we used to do when she was younger, whenever we had something to celebrate. There'd be nothing to celebrate, but there was always a moment as we were making it where I told her that we were making the pie because I was proud of her.

When we get home, I'm so focused on how I'm going to reach out to Jasmine that it's Langston who first notices that something is off as we reach our apartment door. Maybe we should have noticed when the door to the building wasn't closed all the way, but that's not a new thing for our building. The lock hasn't worked for months and no one has fixed it.

"Something's different," Langston says, staring at the front door. Amaya and Jasmine look at something on Jasmine's phone. I jiggle the knob a little bit, pretending like I'm not suspicious as well, but something in the air does feel different. When the knob doesn't turn, I let out a sigh of relief that mine is locked. I unlock the door, letting the three kids walk in first, and I close the door, putting the lock on the knob first and then trying to remember if I put the top lock on when we left this morning because if I did, the top lock wasn't on when I just unlocked the door.

"Wait, oh my God." The words don't escape my lips, they come from Amaya. "You guys were robbed." I quickly turn around to see what she's talking about. Jasmine rushes to her room and Amaya follows behind despite me calling for them to come back instead of wandering off when we don't know if some stranger is in the apartment with us.

"Mama?" Langston turns to me and I can see the tears sitting on top of his lower eyelids. I take his hand and pull him close to me.

"Stay with me, okay? Jasmine! Amaya! Get back here right now!" I grab my phone out of my purse and call 911, my fingers trembling with each number. "Hi, yes, my apartment's been broken into."

The man on the phone talks with a tone like he doesn't fully believe me, "Okay, m'am what's your name?"

"Diana Greene."

"Okay, Mrs.—"

"Miss."

"Mrs. Greene, hang on. What's the address of the place?"

I give him the address and the line goes silent. For a moment, I think he's hung up because all I can hear is Langston's whimpering at my side and the faint back and forth between Jasmine and Amaya.

"Hello?" I respond.

"Yeah, Mrs. Greene, someone will be there shortly," he says and he hangs up before I can say anything else—the typical response when you're looking for help on the south side of Chicago. Jasmine and Amaya rush out of her room. Jasmine's skin is as rosy as I've ever seen it and I know she's doing everything in her power not to cry, so she lets herself be a controlled angry instead.

"They stole my bank, all the money I had saved is just . . . gone. And that one really nice purse you bought me for Christmas last year, I can't find it, and . . . and . . . and. . . ." Amaya throws her arms around Jasmine and squeezes her tight. I go over to Jasmine too, and in this moment, I've never been happier to have Amaya in our lives.

"Miss Greene, is there anything I can do?" Amaya asks, looking at me with her big brown eyes.

"I've already called the police, so they should be on their way now," I tell her and I know by the way Jasmine, Amaya, and I move that we all know what that means.

"Besides, you should probably go home, Amaya," I continue and then I think for a second. What if whoever broke in here is in there now? And should she be in an apartment by herself if her parents aren't home?

But I know she's thinking this too when she says, "Imma go see if anybody saw anything, alright? Maybe somebody heard or saw something." I advise her not to, but Amaya has had to grow up in order to survive more than she should have to at just fourteen. She's so street smart that she's sure she can handle it, so she declines my offer to stay with us until we know for sure her parents are back. Amaya looks over at Jasmine and gives her another hug. She tells her, "I'll be right back okay, Jazz?" Jasmine nods, her head resting on my shoulder, and Amaya slips out of the group embrace and walks out the apartment.

I lay my head on Jasmine's curls, her soft curls that smell like honey and shea butter and coconut milk. And the three of us try to catch our breaths. Try to make sense of it, of any of it. I go back to when Jasmine was a little girl and I would wash her hair for her. Go back to the times when she would lay on the ironing board so I could wash

her hair in the sink and how much she hated the smell of the sunflower and coconut shampoo I'd put in it because she wanted the fruity shampoo in the commercials.

Jasmine lifts her head up and runs into the living room and I can't believe I didn't even think to check what all they had took, instead just noticing it was empty. The living room is basically bare, filled with nothing but a few pieces of stripped furniture and the five boxes stacked against the wall that we never fully unpacked from when we first moved here seven years ago. I see my cranberry candle sitting on the windowsill. *How nice of them to leave it*, I think—although I don't mean it.

Langston clings onto me, refusing to let go, but Jasmine roams in the spot where the piano used to be. There are imprints on the carpet from where the piano legs once stood. Jasmine turns her seat up right from where it was knocked over.

"They . . . just took it," Jasmine says pacing back and forth. "They took the piano." She looks up at me and takes a staggered breath. "I'm so sorry, Mama." She's crying now and once her tears fall, she can no longer face me. And that motion stings.

I guide Langston and myself over to her, and there's a million different things I want to actually say, there's a million different things that race through my mind and as badly as the tears want to come out and I want to damn whoever broke into this place, I just put my arm around Jasmine and fake a small chuckle, picking my next few words carefully. "Well, I know you hated that piano, but I know you didn't hate it bad enough to have someone steal it."

I can only hope that it keeps her from blaming herself for any of this, but I don't know how it'd keep her from it. I realize that though I believe I've taught her many things, I've yet to teach her that not every bad thing that happens is her fault. She wipes her eyes and nods her head, but it feels instinctual—she still blames herself.

The three of us sink to the floor, holding each other in a huddle, saying nothing. Jasmine and I hold in our cries and our screams and our anger, living through the whimpers that come out of Langston. And we just wait. For Amaya to come back, for the police to show up, for everything to appear back in its place.

When the officers finally arrive after what feels like an hour, I clutch Jasmine and Langston to my body as tight as I can. The officers sway across the room and, although I pay the rent for this place, they have all the dominance. There are three of them: one pudgy and young, one thin and old, and one beefy and in between. All of them white. I see them eye Langston up and down and I wonder what they're thinking of this little nine year old boy who has to wear string on the arms of his glasses because he loses them so quickly.

And what are they thinking of Jasmine when they check her body out? I see her arms folded across her chest and I know she feels it too. That she's just as aware while Langston is idly shaking at my side.

"So, ma'am, what we have here is a classic case of breaking and entering," the pudgy and young officer explains to me like I'm stupid, like I wasn't the one who called the station in the first place an hour or so ago and told them.

The old and thin officer walks up to say, "This is fairly common around here." And they both look at Langston again. I hold him tight. Jasmine sheepishly reaches her hand over to protect Langston too. The beefy, in-between one darts his eyes away, inspecting the spot where the piano used to be.

Now, I wonder what they're thinking when they see me. I wonder if they're judging me and I wonder this even though I already know. They're probably thinking, "Lady, you got yourself into this by having your family live here. What did you expect?"

You can't have your family live in a neighborhood like this and expect safety." I'd even go further to say they're angry at us for being robbed because they had to come out and be around all these black folks this evening.

"Can you tell us what all you've noticed is gone so we can make a list?" the beefy officer asks, fiddling with the weapons on his belt.

I hesitate telling them the piano is gone. Black folks aren't allowed to buy luxuries when they live like us. That's called irresponsible and negligent even if we paved that road with good intent, with the intent to live like regular people.

"Our piano's gone," Jasmine says. "And our television. My bank and my fancy purse are gone."

With each thing Jasmine lists, the officer eyes us. I feel guilty with each glare. It's a power move, an attempt at asking me, "How dare you?"

How dare I give these two the luxury of a television or a piano or a nice purse or a bank to store money? How dare I have anything worth stealing when I live where I live, in the apartment I live in? And not only that, but how dare I report the robbery like we deserved any of those items in the first place?

"Do you have anyone who you think would have stolen your items?" the old and thin officer asks. "Some people who might want to get even with you? There is gang activity in this neighborhood."

"None of us are affiliated with gang activity," I say, taking deep breaths I hope they can't see. I imagine this is similar to how Jasmine feels around me. But significantly worse, because I'd like to think that at least when I give her a hard time, she feels like she is still a person.

"Aye, let me through!" We hear Amaya scream and we all turn around. The officers tense up around her.

"Get back! You're not allowed in here!" the beefy and in-between officer says.

"No! She's okay!" Jasmine assures them.

"She's okay," I repeat.

They still look at her and I do too. The twists in her hair are frizzy. She's wearing a red hoodie with an old N.W.A. t-shirt that was probably a hand me down from one of her parents, ripped jeans, and a pair of worn-out Jordans. It's a harmless look for anyone that understands black kids expressing themselves. But I can see why they'd look at her like a threat.

"Are you sure she couldn't be a suspect?" the pudgy and young one asks.

"Considering I drove her home, I know for sure that she isn't," I respond, staring until they finally give in. They let Amaya in, questioning her about everyone she's talked to. And while the officers explain to us the next steps for building a case, I find it hard to focus. I agree to going in to the precinct the next day and thank them for the help they did offer. But it hurts more that when I get my Jasmine back to talking to me, it's not over pie—it's over losing her safety.

My Resignation

James Oxyer

DEAR MR. KRUMMENFELD,

As the standing general manager of the Krummenfeld Department Store's Santa Monica location, I regret to inform you of my resignation, effective immediately. I hope you will not blame me for this decision after reading this horrible, gut-wrenching tale (fair warning: it is not for the squeamish or the faint of heart).

It all began the morning the opening crew discovered several couches torn to shreds. This was not long after our grand opening, so our security cameras were not yet functional (we placed cheap plastic dummy cameras around the store to discourage would-be shoplifters) and we had no way of determining what had torn into the fabric of the furniture and ripped out the cotton stuffing. Our night watchman admitted to dozing off in the night, but after a firm reprimand from myself, he agreed to keep a better eye on things the following night.

Two days went by without incident. Our location, situated right on the ocean next to a bustling boardwalk, was doing quite well in sales. We were scheduled to install security cameras the following week. Our night watchman, a muscular young man named Ezra who had an affinity for wearing heavy gold rings once the store closed and public appearance was no longer an issue, remained employed after hours.

That is, until the morning crew came in to find him missing.

None of us knew the man very well and it seemed more than likely he had skipped town after trouble with the law. Several of our customers have issued complaints concerning beach bums visible from store windows "shooting up" with PCP by the glow of barrel fires at dusk. Every time we call the police, and every time they show up, the bums scatter and throw their needles on the beach, the tide sweeping them up and sucking them into the ocean foam (to be perfectly honest, Mr. Krummenfeld, I worry not so much about the people injecting the PCP as I do the drug's effect on sea life once it is in the water). We all assumed Ezra had gotten tangled up with that crowd and had either ditched work to shoot up or had been arrested.

The only evidence to suggest otherwise were the seven gold rings we found scattered throughout the store's three floors. We found them over the course of a day or two in strange, miscellaneous locations: a golden glimmer coming from a stack of blue jeans, a customer feeling a firm poke when they sat on a desk chair, an obnoxious

clanking coming from one jammed in the escalator. We called the police about this and filed a missing person's report. Our concerns were heightened the night after the disappearance when we discovered several dresses from our signature spring line in tatters! It looked as though they'd had a bad date with a paper shredder!

Enough was enough. I contacted one of our other security guards and offered him a hefty bonus to accompany me in spending the night in the store, where we would hopefully deduce what in blazes was going on.

We arrived at the store around 10:30 p.m. Closing time was 11:00 p.m. We had both taken the day off to get some rest before our big "all-nighter." The security guard was even more intimidating than Ezra had been: a 200-pound bald man named Terrence.

We entered the store, said goodnight to the closing crew, and went about situating ourselves in a good vantage point. We decided to place some pastel cushions behind a cream-colored couch on the second floor and lay low, poking our heads out every so often to check on the store. Terrence and I had plenty of room, despite being sandwiched between the couch and a large plate glass window.

The store took on a whole different persona during the midnight hours. The furniture section on the second floor, usually crowded with people milling about and brilliant fluorescent lights illuminating every nook and cranny, looked like a graveyard, the moon serving as the sole light source. Every dresser a tombstone; every couch a mausoleum. I couldn't help but notice how the neon sign from the store across the street shone off Terrence's head, vibrant reds and blues blinking on and off in intervals of three seconds like an electric wig short-circuiting.

The silence in the store was painful. Not a single AC unit was running; the gentle hum of electricity sorely missed. Eventually, I couldn't take just listening to the blood pounding in my ears and struck up a whispered conversation with Terrence. I set aside our roles as employer and employee and we had a pleasant man-to-man conversation. He discussed trying to have a baby with his wife. In response, I discussed my own troubles with "picking up" women and ran through a few of my previous awkward encounters with the opposite sex. That topic seemed to make him uncomfortable, so I dropped it. We sat in silence yet again.

As embarrassed as I am to admit it, I must confess I did fall asleep shortly thereafter. The absolute silence of the store and the flickering lights on Terrence's bald head lulled me right into a sound slumber, awakening only to Terrence tapping me on the shoulder.

Because I yawned rather extravagantly—forgetting where I was and what I was there to do—I didn't hear it at first. It wasn't until Terrence shushed me that I noticed the sound. Sir, I cannot fully describe the noise I heard, but out of my fragments of memory, I can piece together some adjectives that might do it justice. Wet. Sloppy. It was soft, but it was a wall of sound; not like footsteps that are one at a time, but like six percussionists playing different rhythms on drums made of damp seaweed.

Terrence and I looked at each other, confirming we were both hearing the same unearthly noise. Terrence poked his head out, then returned. He gave me a confused shrug—he hadn't seen anyone. Terrence drew his revolver (I do understand it is against company policy to provide our security guards with firearms, but since neither of us knew what we were going to encounter that night, I thought it best to prepare properly) and inched out from behind the couch. I was prepared to stay behind, hidden from sight, until Terrence looked back at me and, remembering that I was the one who

brought him here, I felt obligated to tag along.

The sound seemed to be coming from the first floor. Terrence leading the way, we crept down the immobile escalator. We reached the first floor—still seeing nothing—and followed the source of the noise toward the rear end of the store—the area closest to the ocean. There was nothing back there but our lighting fixtures display (there are no windows in this section so our lights can make more of an impact, but in the dead of night with the lights turned off, I silently cursed this decision) and the restrooms. I pulled out my cell phone and allowed the screen's glow to guide our path while Terrence led the way, his pistol still at the ready.

The sound was growing louder; what once could have passed for a subtle hum on the second floor now resembled moist television static with the volume halfway up. It seemed to emanate from the restrooms. Terrence and I weaved our way through different varieties of lamps toward the wooden swinging doors of the men's restroom, the women's restroom only ten feet to our right. The sound crescendoed to a roar.

Terrence kicked the bathroom door open. I shined my light inside. Terrence waved the pistol around, itching to fire. The only thing that caught my eye was the dark water pouring out of the toilets and spilling across the bathroom floor. I heaved a sigh of relief (it was nothing serious at all) followed by a sigh of annoyance (this was yet another problem I would have to deal with).

Terrence kept his gun pointed at the toilet, his mouth agape, his hand beginning to tremble. I asked him what the matter was. It was just an overflowing toilet. He attempted to stammer out a response, but he didn't need to. I looked closer and knew exactly what caused his behavior shift.

Something dark and shiny poured out of the toilets, but it wasn't water at all. Multiple moving parts all seemed to move as one, flooding the bathroom and inching toward us.

I heard Terrence cry out next to me. I shone my light lower, toward his feet. Clamped onto his right toe through his dress shoe was a small turtle, probably a baby. I was initially confused. What was a turtle doing here? Did it have something to do with whatever was pouring out of the toilets?

It hit me almost instantly. The flood pouring out of the toilets was not just filthy water. It was a swarm of frenzied turtles.

I saw them moving toward us, their rocky shells glistening under the glow of my phone, their veiny necks straining forward, snapping their small mouths with a fury I had never seen in any living creature.

I was so startled by the nightmarish sight that I dropped my phone. The turtles were so close to us by this point that my phone fell on the swarm and was sucked in, the turtles snapping and chomping in a fervor, shattering it into small pieces within half a second like an organic woodchipper. There was a clear choice to be made here.

I chose to run. Terrence chose to fight.

Terrence lowered the revolver and fired wildly at the horde as I spun around and ran toward the exit, weaving through our lighting displays, finally reaching the sliding glass doors and pulling out my key to unlock them when I hesitated and looked behind me.

Terrence stepped back, the swarms of turtles flapping their flippers and moving toward him at an alarming rate. He continued to open fire, but I could see that it was pointless, and I'm willing to bet he did too. I could see the door to the other restroom propped open by the turtles that were pouring out of those toilets as well, but Terrence,

unfortunately, did not. Those turtles wound up behind him, and just like that, poor Terrence found himself completely surrounded just as he turned to run.

I hope you can empathize when I say I looked away just after he fell face-first into the flood, the poor man not even getting the opportunity to scream. As I covered my ears to block out the sound of a thousand tiny, hook-shaped mouths chomping away at my security guard, I felt something hard flick my leg. I slowly looked down, afraid of what horrors I might bear witness to next.

Terrence's wedding ring. Those goddamned turtles had spit the blasted thing out! Not tasty enough! At the sight of the ring, I screamed and screamed, barely able to unlock the door and run out into the night. I looked back once and saw the turtles retreating into the restrooms, dragging pieces of Terrence with them to snack on back home (whatever Hell those foul demons called home).

I spoke with the opening crew the next morning. They found nothing out of the ordinary. Except Terrence's ring, of course, which they gave to me (thanks!) and small puddles of water on the restroom floors (probably just the plumbing).

That was this morning, and now I am sitting here in my home, the ring sitting beside this very sheet of paper, confessing what I have seen. I know you will not believe me, and frankly, I've reached the point where I do not really care. Just know that I believe myself, and if you had seen what I claim to have seen, wouldn't you resign?

I pray the authorities do something about those junkies throwing their PCP into the surf. It's been having a rather negative effect on the wildlife.

Sincerely,
Miles Horowitz

P.S. If those turtles are to be commended for anything, it would be their decision to rip apart that ghastly spring line of dresses we had in stock. For God's sake, man, where is your taste?

Hooked

David M. Sula

THE CRACKED CEMENT WALLS WITH ROUGH CHIPS BLEMISHING THE POLISHED stone supported low-hanging ceilings from which white tubes of fluorescent lights hung in a matrix of pipes and wires. Their buzzing polluted the silences between the roars of trains. My ears were ringing. My bare feet stumbled on the concrete slab of the platform. Every cubic inch of my flesh felt awkward and clumsy. As I teetered on the edge of the platform, the wind of a departing train whipped across my exposed back. The clattering of its wheels on the tracks were deafening, and they shook the floor. As the train sped down the tunnel embedded in the wall, a horizontal rush of air distorted my weak balance. I feared I might tumble back, get sucked into the speeding steel like the paper littering the ground. Then a warm hand seized my wrist.

The fingers wrapped around my flesh, firm and controlled. There was a surreal sureness in the touch, one without hesitation or doubt. With a tug, I leaned forward and collapsed against a stranger's naked chest. I used this other body for support as warm arms wrapped around me. Some of the other people milling around on the platform looked our way with raised eyebrows, but didn't say or do anything. The stranger led me away from the edge of the platform, and the train vanished with a clap and a suck of air. As the clacks faded into the distance, the buzzing lights resumed their chorus. My savior sat me down on a varnished wooden bench. My skin pinched between the slats of wood.

"There we go. Nice and steady now. You're a new one, aren't you?" The question wasn't so much of a question as an assumption. The voice possessed a mild timbre, neither high nor low. There was a smooth warmth to it like an underwater murmur hummed right against the eardrums. And as the ringing in my own ears died away, I was able to enjoy those comforting words. I shook my head, dispelling my dizziness, and glanced at who had saved me.

They had short black hair that, while thin, covered the scalp in full. Soft eyes the color of dark chocolate watched me with fascination while a smirk creased their smooth cheeks. From forehead to toes, tan skin covered an average build, not muscular, not chunky, as if they were deciding which they would yet be. Their palms were a baby pink, the same as all of my skin. I flexed my knee and extended my foot. With a wiggle of my toes, I got used to the sensation of driving my own limbs. It occurred to me that this was my first motion since . . . I guess I could call it my arrival, the moment I appeared

on this platform.

Lowering both of my feet to the cold stone floor, I tilted my head and memorized the way my fingers curled and uncurled. "I don't know who I am," I stated.

"That's normal," my companion explained. "Not many new people do."

"I don't know how I got here."

"That's a secret no one learns here."

I was confused. My head was full of cotton and noise. "What are we doing here?"

The stranger nodded at the empty rails. "Waiting for our train."

"Will it be here soon?"

"That depends."

"On?"

"The trains."

"Are *you* new?" I asked. I wondered how much their lack of knowledge was rooted in their amount of time here and how much was hindered by this situation.

"I've been around long enough to see plenty come and plenty go. You can call me Jo. It's short for Joseph. Or Josephine."

"What should I call myself?" I asked.

Jo shrugged. It was an interesting gesture, not one of apathy or uncertainty, but one of openness, as if it were up to me to decide. My lips pursed in indecision. To be honest, I didn't know any names except for Jo, Joseph, and Josephine, but something innately buried deep inside me told me not to take Jo's name.

In the meantime, I leaned forward and looked down the tunnel, hoping to see the bright lights of an approaching train I could board. "How long have you been waiting?"

Jo's face scrunched up. "Hard to say. It's been a while, but I think I have a while yet to go."

"You didn't wanna get on the last train?"

Jo shook their head. "Someone before me told me it's really bad to board a train early. They heard it from the person before them, and they from the person before them. Word is it makes it a lot harder to get off when it reaches your next stop. Probably an urban legend; no one comes back the other way, but people say they've heard the screams of early boarders echo from up the tunnel."

"But what if you miss your train?" I asked with concern cracking my voice.

"Your conductor might get annoyed, but you can usually just catch the next one. That happens a lot too. It's hard to keep track of time here."

I nodded. That was a relief. I didn't know much about myself, but I knew that the thought of only getting one shot to board my train would worry me, especially with how loud and angry they sounded and how fast they zoomed in and zoomed away. "Who's the conductor?"

Jo smirked. It made me feel comfortable in this unfamiliar space. "Well there's not one conductor. Everyone has their own. My conductor named me Jo."

"So my conductor will name me?" There was a hopeful swell in my chest. My back felt straighter, and my stomach lurched in anticipation. With the possibilities of the future in mind, a smile stretched across my face. "So what should I call myself until then?"

Jo rubbed their chin. "Hmmm. My friend Abby just boarded her train before you got here. Can I call you Abby?"

I nodded. It seemed like a good name, especially for the time being until my

conductor gave me a better one.

Jo stood up and clapped their hands. "Abby it is."

The train station was rather boring. All day long, trains came and went, and one or two people got on every train. I expected the amount of people in the station to dwindle, but every time someone left, a new person took their place. There were no doors that led in or out of the station. The new people just appeared. At least the constant cycle of coming and going kept the station from becoming crowded. It was filthy though. Plastic bags, crumpled papers, spent cigarettes, and wads of blackened hardened gum littered the floor. I left the gum where it was, but with little else to do but wait for my train, I decided to clean up a bit. With pincer-like fingers, I picked up the papers and bags and stuffed them down into the overflowing garbage cans. Despite my efforts, it was always dirty. Empty pop cans, crunched water bottles, and grimy coins seemed to just accumulate. One time I found a lonely glove and slipped it on my fingers, but the wool felt weird on my bare skin, so I threw it away. Without a match, it was just out of place.

Every once in a while I would people-watch. A lot of the soon-to-be passengers stood in isolation, most of them dazed as if in their own little worlds. A few of them would exchange small talk with each other now and then, especially the new people, but for the most part, the only sounds were those constantly buzzing lights. I glared up at them, frowning, wishing that I could will them away like the nuisances they were.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a familiar voice said.

I turned to my right. Jo was next to me, but they looked different. Their features were more pronounced, a sharper edge to the chin, a broadness to the shoulders. They were taller, and the added height seemed to have sprouted in their legs. I gave them a quizzical look, my eyebrow arching. "That's not what I would say." I crossed my arms over my chest.

"I dunno. I like vaulted ceilings like this. The way the teal mosaic tiles run along the seams of the arches and how it contrasts with the orange tiles."

My eyebrow raised higher. I glanced back up at the sharp angled pipes hanging under the concrete ceiling. They were sweaty and rusty.

"I take it your station doesn't have that?" they asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well everyone's station is different," they explained.

The casual flippancy in the response irked me, and I couldn't help but feel I was supposed to know that. Then I became frustrated because why *should* I have known that? It didn't even make sense. "We're all here in the same station," I argued. I spread my arms and spun a full circle, indicating both ourselves and everyone else.

Jo chuckled. "Well yeah, we're all here, but we're not in the exact same place."

"How can we not be?" I demanded.

"How *could* we be? We're all getting on different trains, aren't we? We're all going to different places. So why should we all come from the same place. It sounds silly, no?"

"If we're all in different places, then how can I see you right here in front of me."

Jo stroked their chin. "It's something my conductor told me once. 'Sometimes someone can be right there in front of you and still be the farthest person in the world.'"

Their words just made me more confused. Then I became angry. Their conductor spoke to them, and *that* prolifically? Mine still hadn't talked to me at all, hadn't even

given me a name yet. Or even an option of names like with Jo/Joseph/Josephine. I just had silence.

As if they could read the thoughts behind my pouting face, Jo added, "It takes a while before you'll hear from your conductor. And some talk more than others."

I made a harrumphing sound. "Am I supposed to talk first?"

"You could try. They don't seem to hear us though. They just make announcements. Do you see any speakers around your station?"

I looked around, and then I spied a gray metal circle in the ceiling dotted with little holes for sound to come out of. I pointed, though when Jo squinted in that direction, it was clear their own station had something else in that spot. Probably more pretty tile patterns.

Jo nodded. "Mine are over there." They pointed towards the corner of the room where my station featured a white funnel of spiderwebs. "When your conductor talks to you, you'll hear it through the speaker. And you'll know when it happens, 'cause it will be the best sound you've ever heard."

Again that hopeful swell rose in my chest, but this time it felt weighed down. I wanted to be as excited as when I first arrived and was promised a name, but now I was afraid to be excited. Maybe I just needed to be patient. I stepped away from Jo and moved to the center of the platform and looked up at my speaker, and I waited, and I listened, and I only heard the buzzing.

It was difficult to measure the passage of time in the station. But the growing tedium of futilely trying to keep the floor litter-free, a seemingly endless task, made it feel like it had been a while since I arrived. I had started to grow hair on the top of my head, so sparse and blond it was barely noticeable. That wasn't the only physical change I'd noticed around here. Joe had a penis now. What had once been a tan triangle of naked skin, now had a set of genitalia. I hadn't really been paying attention to the midsections of the other people, and now that I was aware of it, I noticed that about half of the people milling about the platform either had a dangling penis with testicles or the folds of a vagina. Everyone else, myself included, only had the bare triangle, and I felt a bit of resentment brewing.

"Don't worry. All this stuff comes in time. You'll get one of them . . . maybe even both; though that's rare."

I huffed a sigh. Joe also told me that his conductor announced that he would definitely be a Joseph, and he politely requested that I now refer to him as a "he" instead of a "they." He immediately followed that up with, "While I may decide to change that some day, there's no rush at the moment. So for now, I'm a 'he' and a 'Joseph.'" He noticed my confusion and added that I could still call him Joe if I wanted to. The familiarity of not changing his name provided some comfort, but as time went on and more familiar faces boarded trains to never be seen again, and Joe continued to develop—with his arms growing lumpy with muscle while his body broke out with black hair between his legs, under his arms, and on his chest and chin—while I remained a pink, sexless, name-borrowing blank slate listening to the constant cicada chorus that was these abominable lightbulbs. I started to wish that I didn't have to wait on my silent conductor's train, and that this station had a door.

I spent most of my time waiting: waiting to grow genitals, waiting for a name, waiting to hear a voice, waiting for a train. I had stopped picking up the litter, and now there was

garbage everywhere. Sometimes I would kick it around, and Joe would stare at my feet with confusion. Apparently he had cleaner floors in his station. As much as I envied him, I still appreciated his presence. His assurances that good things were coming were a respite against my own pessimistic doubts. Watching his body change more and more was interesting. It made me excited to see what changes would happen to me. Would I grow muscles like his? Would my belly get big and round? Would I be tall or stay this height? I wondered how long my hair would grow. It was still just a small patch of short strands, while Joe's now hung past his ears in smooth slopes. Living on this platform was awful, but Joe made it better.

Then he had grown silent, distant. He spoke to me less and less, and spent more time looking down the dark tunnel from where the trains came. So I decided to approach *him*. "It's almost time for me," Joe announced when I reached his side. He stood on the edge of the platform, eyeing an approaching train. "Not this next one, but soon," he said as it pulled into the station. His fingers were twitching. His toes tapped on the dirty concrete, and I wondered how his floors compared. I wondered if his conductor was talking to him right now. I still hadn't heard from mine. Joe turned to me, his soft eyes wider than usual. He laughed, and it was a shaky breath. It lacked the certainty I sensed during that first touch.

"You okay?"

He nodded then shook his head. "I don't know. Just nervous I suppose. You know? What if my next stop . . . what if it doesn't have the tiled ceilings and the warm lights?"

A frown curled onto my lips. I wondered what it must be like to prematurely miss the station. I couldn't wait to board my train and leave this dump behind. Nothing could possibly be worse than this noisy, smelly, filthy, endless boredom. I tried not to feel bitter and pushed into Joe's point of view. It must have been harder to accept change when there was something to lose. And just like that, the bitterness came anyways.

"Does your conductor say anything?" I asked as genuinely as possible.

He nodded, "I've been promised it'll be wonderful, but . . . promises are different from guarantees."

"At least you have promises though."

Joe rubbed his arm at the elbow and looked away. "Mm. I suppose." He parted his lips to say something, holding a finger in the air, then hesitated, but after I quirked my brow at him, he yielded and grabbed my hand. "Come here. I want to show you something." His voice was stiff, and his grip tugged with a troubling urgency.

Even his touch had lost that sense of assurance. His pink palms were rougher, awkward around my own fingers. All the same, as he weaved in and out of people towards the corner on the opposing wall, I kept pace with him. As we walked, he spoke. "There's something you should know before I board my train."

I said nothing and waited for him to explain. He didn't say anything more until we had crossed the room and stood before a rather depressing sight. A person was curled up in a ball on the ground. He was certainly a "he," but I hadn't seen him before; perhaps his grim appearance just blended in with my surroundings. His skin was ashen and wrinkled. Gray, wispy hair stuck out at odd places on his head, with a large amount of his scalp visible and riddled with little brown spots. When the wrinkly man breathed, his teeth were yellow and rotted with holes. He had a long beard of wiry hair that stretched down to his chest. As this other person sat on the floor, legs pulled tightly to his chest and arms around his shins, he shivered and stared at the dirty floor.

"Are you OK?" I asked. Crouching down, I tried to make eye contact, but his gaze

was so low that I couldn't have possibly wormed into his line of sight. Sitting back on my haunches, I waved my hand in front of his face to no response. "What's wrong with him?" I looked up at Joe. A somber line flattened his lips.

"It's something that doesn't happen often, but . . . sometimes . . . someone never hears from their conductor. And then they just . . . wither away, claimed by the station. We call it 'getting hooked.' *Usually* people who get hooked are only here for a really short amount of time."

As Joe said this, the man grew more and more wrinkled. His back hunched forwards before our eyes. His beard spiraled down his chest simultaneously growing longer and more spindly. His breathing came in wheezes. His hands trembled. Then he slumped back against the wall. The chipped concrete suddenly seemed viscous. It oozed around him as if he were sinking in mud. I grabbed his hand and it was cold and hard as the stone floor beneath my bare feet. "Wait. Wait! What's happening?" I shouted.

Joe bent forward. His hands were around my wrists. His fingers crawled along the backs of my hands, trying to pry away my fingers from the sinking man.

"Help me pull. Help me pull him up, Joe."

"Abby." I froze. It was the first time I'd heard someone address me by name since just after I arrived. It sent a stab right through my core. It wasn't even my real name. It was borrowed. Everything was borrowed. I had nothing: no sex, no conductor, no distinctive features to set me apart from everyone else developing as they waited for their trains. And now the stone wall had slurped up and enveloped nearly all of this abandoned soul. Only his hands and his face, a face of exhaustion and pain, remained. I tried to hold onto him. I refused to let go. I thought I was the only one living in this station in silence. I needed this man to stay with me. I needed him. "No! No!"

Then his face melted into the stone. My fingers were pressed into the hard surface of the wall, and his own wrinkly hands were gone. I collapsed forward, palms against the cold unfeeling rock. It was the most horrific thing I'd ever seen. "What happened to him? What happened, Joe?"

"He's gone." His voice was dead.

"He can't just *go*! He didn't get on a train! Where else can he go but on a train?" My palms slapped the concrete. What had been soft as syrup for the man was solid for me. I listened for a hollow sound, but the fruitless *plap lap plaps* of my palms against the wall revealed that only rock lay on the other side. He really *was* gone.

Joe's hand settled on my shoulder, but I brushed away his touch. My chest was pounding, and I felt dizzy. I crumpled against the wall. My eyes were wet with tears. "How long do hooked people *usually* last?" I asked Joe with an accusatory edge.

He whispered, "Not long."

"How long is 'not long'?"

"It doesn't matter."

I looked up at him. "As long as I've been here?"

He rubbed his arm again and looked away. The apologetic frown said it all.

"Should I have heard from my conductor by now?"

"Listen, it's really uncommon to get a name while you're here. A lot of people board their trains before receiving one."

I stood up and tightened my hands into fists. "Should. I. Have. Heard. From. My. Conductor. By. Now." My jaw was clenched.

Joe sighed. "More than likely."

Everything went cold. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to preserve some warmth, but they just felt alien, like they weren't my own. Like they, too, were borrowed. They weren't comforting at all. I felt like the ground disappeared out from under me. I tried to breathe, but my lips sucked in a vacuum. My body shook.

As this happened, the approaching clacks and roar of a train crescendoed. There was a rush of air, and the train zipped into view. The faded torn up poster embedded into the brick wall on the other side of the tracks flashed briefly between the gaps of the cars, and then the train slowed to a screeching stop. Joe stepped away from me. "This is my train. I wish you the best of luck, Abby," he whispered.

I ran after him and grabbed his hand. "Wait! Take me with you!"

He tried to pull away. "It doesn't work like that."

"You have to. You can't leave me here. My station sucks! I don't have pretty tiles. I have concrete. It smells. It's noisy. It's cold. I can't stay here."

Joe's face contorted with frustration. He yanked his arm as hard as he could, and he came free of my grip. He stumbled, then caught himself on sure feet. He glared at me for a moment. His eyes narrowed into dark brown slits. Then they softened pitifully. "I'm sorry, Abby. You have to wait. It's not too late for you though. Regardless of what's happened or hasn't happened, there are no guarantees." Then he stepped onto the train, and the doors hissed shut. He flashed me one sad look before the train whined on its rusty tracks and sped away into the darkness, leaving me all alone in the stale air and the bitter white lights. I wondered what the hooked man's station had looked like.

It came when I least expected it. I had stopped talking to the other people on the platform altogether. I sat down in a nest of loose papers and other garbage, and eventually people stopped looking at me. I had grown used to being ignored. And when I felt the attention finally directed towards me, I was so shocked I almost fell over. A loud voice blared through on my speaker. It was fuzzy and muffled, but I knew it had to be my conductor. I smiled. "Yes! Yes, I'm here! I'm here. I've been waiting for you." Joe was right. The voice was the most beautiful sound in the world. It was so big. It surrounded me and flowed inside of me. It rumbled my eardrums, and my heart pounded in accompaniment with the inflections of its rich tonality. I didn't even care what it was saying. I clutched my chest and sighed in relief. I remembered what Joe had told me, about how the conductor wouldn't be able to hear me, so instead I leaned back against the wall while absolute joy flooded me from head to toe. And I listened and loved.

"Yes I'm absolutely sure," the conductor boomed. The speakers cracked and popped with unpleasant electronic sounds, but I didn't care. "Yes," the voice continued, and then it took on a cold tone. "I just want to get rid of it."

I wrinkled my brows, wondering what the conductor meant by that. I hoped they would say more, but that was the last thing said. I waited and waited. Trains came and left and came and left and came and left. I didn't move from that spot. I was too scared to. I worried if I moved, I'd somehow jinx everything, like there was something special about this spot that had made the conductor speak up, and if I moved, I would never hear that voice again. But my superstitions did no good. And the conductor said no more. I craned my head upwards towards the speaker in the ceiling, and yearned to hear it. I wrung my hands and waited and waited and waited. And then I started to sink. I felt it immediately. The ground softened beneath me, and gravity started to

pull me under. I tried to scramble to my feet, but I couldn't get up. There was nothing solid to push off of. I shouted a cry for help, but no one looked. No one paid me any mind. They just milled about, waited for their trains, and spoke casually to each other. I screamed and waved my arms. Already the stone floor was around my waist. I couldn't feel my legs. I started to cry. I slammed my fist against the floor, and it stuck. I couldn't pull it free.

"No! No no no!" I pulled on it with my other hand, and as it disappeared beneath the cold mushy floor, my other hand got captured too. I squirmed and wriggled back and forth. "No! It's not fair! It's not fair! I want my train! I want my conductor! This isn't fair!" I screamed until my mouth was swallowed by the floor, until I was just a pair of tear-filled eyes darting about, hating everyone else in their happy stations and who knows what. My muffled mouth raged through the concrete, and no one heard. Joe's words echoed in my mind. "Nothing is guaranteed."

Ugly

Carolyn Boykin

MY EXACT AGE HAS ESCAPED ME. I DON'T KNOW IF THIS IS A PRODUCT OF SELECTIVE amnesia or the blissful dulling of time that allows us to seek the grace and mercy of youth. I am beyond the age of reason, but have not reached the age of enlightenment. I am the paper-bag-brown, lanky middle child of Dot, being raised by her sister Ruth. I don't know the how or why of this parenting arrangement; however, it is the only one I have ever known.

I am sandwiched in age between 'Vonne, the youngest with her round, dark cheeks, big eyes, and coal black curls, and Patricia. Patricia is ten, I think, two years older than I, so I am guessing that I must be around eight. She has the cherished hazel eyes, pale-tan skin, and silky, red, curly hair that have bypassed me. I don't begrudge my sisters these qualities. I just don't know how to exist between them.

It is summer; I am wild and untamed. My laughter is loud, unrestrained by adult prohibitions to be quiet and remain invisible. My arms and legs are long and thin, making my clothes always hang loose on my frame. My three short braids stick out at angles like three horns jutting out from my head. I'm sweating my hair back to its natural state. Moisture seeps into its freshly pressed edges, returning it to its thick tightly packed coils. Perspiration drips from my forehead and down my nose. Mama is going to whip me about my hair for sure and right now, I don't care.

I smell like outside, that smell particular to young children: sweat, dirt, grass, sunshine, and last night's Ivory soap. I stop running and try to catch my breath, bent over, hands on knees, and air bellowing in and out of my overworked lungs. The vestibule looms high around me, enclosing me between its glass doors that lead outside and the two smaller doors that lead to Mama's third floor apartment and the second floor where Glen and Gregory live.

I feel safe for the moment in this perfect place of shelter. The scarred oak panels of the door conceal the lower portion of my body, while the towering beveled glass panes give me a complete view of the landing beyond. The glass is so thick that it muffles the sound of my sister's laughter, which floats up from the bottom of the stairs beyond. I think no one can see me.

I jump, startled out of my reverie at the sound of Linda's open palms slamming against the glass. She presses her face against the glass, squashing her nose and causing her freckles to spread out, distorting her features to make her look piggish.

Her gray eyes cross as her tongue jets out at me.

Everyone praises her Shirley Temple cuteness, but I don't see it. The rhythm of my heart has increased triple time as I try to discern how I missed her coming up the steps. She motions to the doorknob that both of my hands have wrapped around reflexively. Her mouth forms the words, 'Open the door.' It's not a request, it's a demand. Weak-willed, I do it, falling back against the wall.

"You scared me," I admit in a voice that shakes. My fear is real, not the kind that you know you'll get over in a moment, but the kind that grips you from within in mortal terror. My heart beats erratically in my chest, threatening to burst free.

Linda should not instill this in me, but she does. She is older by a few years, big everywhere that I am small, and there is a wrongness about her. The pieces don't pull together to form a picture that matches the external. Her hair is bright, copper red always in thick spiral curls that frame her freckled face. Her nose is petite and rests above a pink rosebud mouth. She should be pretty.

It might be her mouth. It should be sweet, but it's hard and cruel with lips pressed in a thin line that grudge to open and let words escape. It could be her pale eyes that always look at me, disgusted and repulsed, the way that I look at dead things found squashed and mangled on the street. Her eyes fix on me and my skin crawls like a million biting insects. I want to run, but Linda is blocking the door. I want my sister, Patricia, to come protect me; I mentally shout her name, knowing she does not hear me.

Linda's eyes slide over my whole body. "C'mon, Cal, let's play house. I'll be the mother and you be the father," she says, flipping a flaming lock over her shoulder. She doesn't wait for an answer and my insides quiver. An alarm rings deep within, warning me to run, to flee as fast and far as my Red Ball Keds can carry me. I don't move as she stretches her hand out towards me and begins to pull my reluctant feet to the shadows of the wall. The sun doesn't reach there. My eyes search wildly, looking for escape or salvation. Neither comes.

Linda slips down to the floor, her back sliding against the wall as she pulls me with her. My body is crushed between her and the adjacent wall, leaving no room between us. Her weight holds me securely in place as if she can read my desire to run. She continues her directives, pouring them into my unwilling ears; she is oblivious to the fact that I am not playing, and this is not a fun game. She is half sitting, half reclining and her hands are pushing at her shorts. Her breathing is funny, short sharp gasps for air.

"You're the daddy and now you have to kiss me in my special place," she pants, pulling at my shoulders until I am on my knees in front of her. Her hands grasp the top of my head and the back of my neck and yank me forward. Her shorts are down around her knees and her legs are spread apart. Her vagina flowers before me, revealing a small, pink bud of flesh so close that I feel my eyes cross as I look at it. A smell like dead fish rises from between her legs and I gag.

"Lick it," she commands, her eyes glazed, not seeing me. The tip of my tongue eases forward of its own volition, though I am repulsed and horrified at the thought.

My hands find the floor on either side of her and I push backwards with all my strength, forcing my head out of her hands. I fall on my tailbone; ignoring the excruciating pain, I scramble crablike away from her. Her face contorts in anger, blood pulsing beneath her skin, making her freckles stand out. For a moment she seems unable to move and I seize the opportunity to run, exploding out of the door, across

the landing and down the stairs. I don't look back. I don't think. I just run.

My world has shrunk back to the ten-by-ten concrete square at the bottom of the stairs of our building and the nine-by-twelve flagstone garden directly in front of the windows of our basement apartment. This is the only place that we can play, other than the backyard. Each day, Mama dictates how our area will be defined with an admonishment to, "stay in the backyard or stay in front of the house." The words are branded in each of our minds along with the fear of what will happen if we don't.

Yesterday's whipping for disobedience still plays vividly as I look down at my skinny legs where the scabs are just reforming, and I recall the ironing cord, my mother's disciplinary choice, rising and falling, ripping the scabs off. Afterwards, I did not dare to move as I sat next to my sisters whimpering quietly, too frightened to wipe the blood running down onto the plastic covers of the couch.

But a child's mind is a powerful thing. It can shut out anything that it doesn't want to recall. That whipping is over, and Linda has gone back to her building, taking today's horror with her. I have shut both things away in the secret compartment where I hide all my shame.

With the supernatural resilience of youth, I have returned to my childish play. Now this space has become too small to contain our game of hide and go seek. I try to stay within the boundaries Mama has set but keep getting caught. The space called outside isn't big enough anymore.

I stand in that big-small space, my toe digging at the tufts of grass that grow between the irregularly shaped flagstones. I have never lost well and don't intend to start today.

First, I run as far as Miss Rose's building next door, feet flying up and down the stairs, ears vigilant for the sounds of scolding residents that might tell Mama. Victorious, I burst from my hiding place and make it back to the thick elm tree that stands guardian to our revelry before I get tagged. I am giddy with my win and strategize where I will hide next.

I elude my sisters as I pass the alley. They sense my plan and follow, with me shushing their excited laughter as we separate and run in different directions back to the tree. I am successful; my sister Patricia is not. She is 'it.'

Last night, night before
Twenty-four robbers at my door
I got up, let 'em in
Hit 'em on the head with a rollin' pin
All hid?

My sister sings out the familiar rhyme as we all take flight. I am fast, my feet barely skimming the surface of the ground, and I take little notice of the fact that I have run past Agnes's store and reached the gangway of the three-story apartment building that is the middle of our block. 'Vonne and Glen have joined me, and we press our backs against the closed door that blocks the passage to the back of the building, giggling. My heart flutters with childish glee, anticipating the run back to the tree and safety.

I hear a window opening above us and freeze. Looking up, I see Linda and her brother, Rusty, their hands grasp the window sill, their necks craning to look down at

us. I twist my neck awkwardly to peer up at them. The familiar palpitations that signal Linda's presence multiply with the presence of Rusty.

He is bigger, older, and to my way of seeing, uglier. They could be twins, their faces twisted with the same malevolence. "What are you niggers doing down there?" Rusty sneers.

'Vonne tugs at my shorts. "C'mon, Cal, I'm scared. Let's go," she pleads. Glen has already moved away from us and is running back towards home, back to the 'front of the house'.

I can't move. I hear my mother's voice scolding me, my dad Alec's voice singing the song he says was made for me because I never listen. I am hardheaded, they both say.

Caldonia, Caldonia, what make your big head so hard? I hear the song inside my head, and I am rooted to the spot, my eyes locked with theirs. I watch Rusty pull his head back and then lean forward again.

I feel it before I see it. A large glob of spittle lands on my leg, bubbling white and sparkling in the sun's reflection, running slowly down my brown leg into the edge of my cuffed white socks. Disgust oozes through me and I continue to watch it, not able to bring my hand to touch the filth. I know that if I touch this contamination, it will spread all over my body and I will never be clean again. 'Vonne is crying, pulling at my hand as the laughter rains over us from above.

"You niggers better get your black asses outa' here before I tell my daddy you're down there and he gets his gun!" Rusty screams, his face disfigured with rage. Linda is still laughing, pointing down at me. Her eyes have never left mine. Her hatred simmers there, and our shared secret burns in my chest. Her look and Rusty's words hang in the air as the sound of the window closing spurs me into motion.

We're running again, fear close at our heels, chasing us back to the safety of our stoop. The tree looms up before me, and I feel Patricia's slap against my back just before I reach it. She is breathless and laughing.

"You're it," she gasps.

The wind has dried the spit on my leg, leaving a dry ashy line that disappears into the fold of my sock. I look back and think that I can still see Linda, lurking along the edges of the window. I can feel her hatred radiating towards me even from this distance. I glare in her direction, hoping she can feel my malice flowing back.

I open my eyes quickly the next morning, eyelids snapping up like window shades, my hands clutching the white chenille bedspread. I always sleep with covers to keep me safe from green skinned, fanged monsters that hide in the shadows of my closet, glistening, gossamer ghosts, and anything else that inhabits the inky corners of the night. Summer does not alter this necessity of my life.

Reaching down, I scratch at the dry skin of my matchstick legs, itchy with the sweat from the combined heat of the sweltering August weather and the heavy covers. I do not rise immediately, listening instead to the insects buzzing insistently against the screen of the window that Ruth has raised before leaving for work.

My waiting game begins. I wait for the phone to ring, my first signal to tumble from the bed and begin my day. Outside, the day, brimming with promise and excitement, is waiting for me and my friends. I just need to get through the morning. The phone rings, jarring my anxious nerves.

"Were you up?" Ruth asks, in that quick rushed voice that lets me know that

she has snatched a few precious moments from her cooking to call me. She makes me call her by her name because she is not the mother who conceived me and says that honor can't be taken from Mama. She tells me, "Honor thy father and thy mother," like it says in the Bible.

I imagine the rice puddings in their small round aluminum trays revolving on the huge oven racks of the commissary where she works. When I inhale, I can almost smell their cinnamon vanilla sweetness.

"I was awake, I was just waiting for you to call, can I go out now?" My words rush forward in one unending sentence. There is a pause on the other end and I can imagine her face, dark eyes flashing beneath the jet-black wings of her eyebrows, with that look of impatience she gives me when I ask questions that I already know the answer to.

"If you need to get anything, I left you some money on the table. Don't leave that house before ten o'clock, and don't think I won't know if you do." Her words are sharp, irrefutable. They are my answer.

"OK," I sigh into the receiver and hang up. She would know. The neighbors and Mama watch every move I make and dutifully report it back to Ruth when she gets home from work each day.

After hanging up, I cross the room, crammed to capacity with furniture, to turn on the television. My bed is tucked into the corner of the living room, sharing space with the television, a couch, two end tables, and a coffee table. I pull back the covers and neatly tuck the sheets into place before covering them with the bedspread. I stand back and check the length of the covers hanging to the floor but not touching it and the covering of the pillow, tucked neatly with no pillow showing in the back. When all is the way that it should be, I turn to the kitchen.

Ray Rayner blares cheerfully in the background, encouraging me to brush my teeth and to eat a good breakfast. I'm not sure that the Trix rabbit cereal is part of a good breakfast, but I pour a bowl full and drown it in milk. I rush to eat it before the balls turn soggy, then drink the dregs of colored milk from the bottom of the bowl.

I pull plaid shorts, a yellow t-shirt, my Thursday panties, and white socks from my drawer, heading for the bathroom. I stare at the thick water pipes that run overhead for a minute, considering doing a trapeze swing while I have the chance, then discard the idea for a later time. *Romper Room* filters in from the television as I wash my face, brush my teeth, and pull on my clothes.

I sit down in front of the television and watch Miss Peggy teaching, clicking my toes together in their canvas sneakers, and wait.

Romper bomper, stomper boo
Tell me tell me tell me do
Did all my friends have fun today?

I watch Miss Peggy stare into her magic mirror and silently wish, as I always do, that she will spot me as she calls out the names of the children that she sees. She doesn't see me today either. She never does.

Shoving disappointment aside, I leap to my feet, grab my key chain, sling it around my neck, and gather the coins left on the table to stuff into my pockets. If *Romper Room* is off the air, it's time to go outside!

The sun stands high in the sky, so brilliant that I must shade my eyes to look

at it. I glance down at the Timex watch affixed to my wrist to see that it is only one o'clock. The day has not yet lived up to its promise. We played baseball in the alley until a neighbor started yelling that she would call the police on us. We spent a quarter of my money at Agnes's store, taking fifteen minutes to select all the two for a penny and three for a penny candy that we could. Agnes had slammed her hand down on the counter, exasperated with us. Afterward, we spent another hour dividing it and gorging ourselves.

Now Billy and I sit on the stoop, back to back. He's my best friend. My mind wanders, under the malaise of heat, and I remember Billy and I meeting. We were in the narrow alley between the backs of the two sets of buildings that formed the unofficial boundary between the black families that lived in the four buildings on my street and the white families that lived in all the rest.

We are gathered together under the telephone wires that run the length of the alley, throwing rocks over the lines that flow from pole to pole.

Glen and Gregory are no competition, and Patricia, as usual, shows no interest. A strange new boy stands off to the side, his dark eyes watching us for long minutes from beneath a mop of thick black hair. He pushes off from his gate and walks slowly to stand beside me. I glance in his direction, curious about this white boy who I have never seen in the alley before.

I throw a rock and watch as it arches over the wire, landing on the other side with a thud. Wordlessly, he picks up a rock and pitches it higher. Sparking to the challenge, I heave a rock that flies past the point where his arched, then observe as the next projectile fired from his hand reaches but does not surpass mine. We both pull back and propel our rocks, watching them climb parallel to one another and then fall to the earth to strike simultaneously. We turn to face each other, grinning like idiots.

I glance down at our nearly exhausted candy stash. The afternoon stretches endlessly before us and I fidget restlessly, bringing my sluggish mind back to the present. Boredom causes our breath to come in long desolate sighs and I feel Billy push against me.

"You know what?" he asks.

"What?"

"I found a way to get in that gate where they're digging over by the university apartment building."

My eyes widen. The fence is at least seven feet tall and is crossed with chains and signs that warn you to stay off the property. Every day on the way home from school, we pull at the locks and try to peer inside. We can see the mountains of rich dirt, dark as pitch and the bottomless excavations looking like tunnels to another realm. Steam shovels and trucks litter the site, silent behemoths begging us to explore.

"For real?" I ask, not knowing why. Billy and I never lie to each other about anything. He snorts and swings his body around to look me in the eye, not bothering to dignify my question with an answer. Excitement wiggles through me as I stand, dusting off the seat of my shorts, and offering Billy a hand up.

"Where are you guys going?"

I recognize the voice instantly, feeling my body tense involuntarily. Turning my head, I face Linda standing a few feet away. My face closes; the bile of my hatred churns and clutches my stomach as she stares at me, daring me to make her go away.

"We're going over to the construction site," Billy answers. He and Linda are in the same class at the Catholic school down the street from my public school. My temper simmers as she makes her eyes go all soft and round as she looks at Billy.

"Can I come?" The question comes out on a gentle whispered breath, charming and innocent. Billy's shrug is noncommittal and she takes it as a yes, wedging herself between the two of us as we walk.

Her voice is sugary enough to make my teeth ache as she talks about things from school: "Did you do the assigned reading for the summer yet? Do you think we'll be in the same room again next year?" She continues, edging me out of the conversation and excluding me.

My desire to leap on her back, yanking her hair from her head, grows exponentially as I realize that Billy seems mesmerized by her. I need to tell him about her, about the putrid ugliness that lies beneath the sweet veneer she shows him, but residual fear and shame scorch the words from my throat and seal my lips shut. I can never tell him how scared she makes me, or let him see me as a disgusting freak.

Linda paces herself so that she is slightly behind Billy, able to cast her poisonous gaze at me, animus sliding across her vision then disappearing as her head turns, dazzling Billy with her smile.

"Here's the spot," Billy says, bending down and indicating a break in the fence near the base that runs along the sidewalk nearest the University gangway. The wire has been bent back until it is wide enough to admit a body crawling on all fours. Billy pushes at the opening, allowing Linda to enter first, followed by me, then him scooting through last.

Linda stops suddenly, and my face smashes into her rear end, forcing that repugnant smell to waft up and causing my stomach to twist in on itself. She looks over her shoulder, grinning as Billy laughs behind me. She takes the opportunity to glare at me, raising her fist and shaking it in a mockery of menace.

"Hey girl, watch where you're going." She laughs for Billy's benefit, like it's a joke. I can feel the flush of heat in my cheeks. I wish she was dead.

Emerging behind a small earthen mountain that hides the gap in the fence, we survey the work site. It looks like another planet. Small hills rise and fall, surrounding deep craters in the ground that will form basements and foundations of the townhouses that will be built here.

I am so absorbed that I don't hear voices drifting back to us from a distant mound. Billy shades his eyes and looks toward the sound: four boys, staring at us. They stand, feet braced apart, hands fisted at their sides, making it clear that we are infringing on their territory.

"Hey sissy boy, what you doin' over there with those girls, playing dolls?" The sun reflecting off their blond and brown heads makes it difficult to see who is speaking. I assume the insults are being hurled in our direction by a dirty, mud-splattered boy whose stomach hangs over his jeans; he stands a little bit in front of the others, their apparent leader.

"Nah, I do that with your mama, fatty," Billy tosses back, inching to stand between them and us. I step forward until he and I are side by side. Linda might need protection, but I certainly don't.

The first rock seems to materialize in the air, flying out of nowhere, as one of Fat Boy's companions begins an assault. I scan the ground beneath my feet, searching for ammunition as Billy launches his own missile, gathering rocks to him. We are

dangerous together, rock warriors, having the best aim and longest throw of anyone we know. Bravado wells up through me. These fools don't know who they have come up against.

I bend over, searching the overturned soil for the perfect projectile, large and jagged. The sound of a rock whistling through the air over my head is followed by a solid *thwack* as it strikes flesh.

A howl splits the air, freezing the blood in my veins, as I look up to see Linda clutching both hands to cover her left eye. Thick, dark red blood is seeping through her fingers streaming down her cheeks.

Our assailants turn as a unit and flee, looking back over their shoulders to check for pursuit. The sound of Linda's continued bawling pushes them forward. Eight pounding feet disappear, and I tuck their faces into my memory.

Billy has his hands on her shoulders, his face twisted into a grimace of guilt, horror, and fear as he tries to peel her fingers away to see the damage. She twists violently away from him and he relinquishes, grabbing her by the elbow of one arm and leading her as she lurches toward the opening. He drags her through with me pushing from behind to get her to the other side. His soothing words do nothing to calm her continuously mounting hysteria as he helps her to her feet, once again dragging her by the elbow.

I wait for a minute, forgotten in the chaos, then follow a few steps behind. Jealousy ricochets around inside my head, bouncing between rage and betrayal as he walks and consoles her. The sound of her sobs grates up and down my spine as I follow the gore of Linda's crimson trail.

Glen, Gregory, Patricia, and 'Vonne sit in a row on the edge of our stoop, their mouths hanging open as they watch Linda and Billy walk past. I drop down into the space left at the end and pull the small, twisted brown candy bag from my pocket. Looking inside, I pull out a cherry chew and pop it into my mouth, staring into their expectant faces. I say nothing, turning away from them to allow my eyes to rest on Billy's retreating form.

I watch silently, wondering if she will lose her eye. That is a lot of blood. The wails drifting back on the air have changed to a piteous mewling that escalates in volume as the proximity to her building decreases.

I continue to watch as Billy stops in front of the door, reaching up to ring the doorbell. I watch as the second-floor window flies up, allowing Rusty's head to poke out. His head swivels to look down and then back towards the interior of the apartment, screaming words I can't understand. A moment later, the downstairs door springs open.

Linda's father is a short, squat man with heavy jowls and a cigar clamped between his teeth. His round belly hangs between his suspenders and the top of his pants, straining the material of his sleeveless white t-shirt. I watch as he glares at Billy, reaching out to grasp Linda to his chest and then pushing her back. He holds her at arm's length, brushing her hair from her face and failing in his attempt to pry her hands free. I watch Billy fumbling to explain what happened, his arms waving, erratic birds in the flight of his tale. I watch as her father draws Linda inside and slams the door in Billy's face.

The place in my heart where compassion for Linda should be remains a lightless void. Hatred and bitterness move aside to allow satisfaction to take up residence with them. I'm okay with Billy taking her home whether she deserves it or not. He is

a good guy, better than me and my ugly ways. Looking at his slumped shoulders as he walks back to me, I think, *He's not the one I'm mad at.*

I stand up from the stoop, my hand extended forward. I hold the open candy bag in my palm, an offer of absolution. He looks inside, chooses a candy and begins to peel off the wrapper as we walk shoulder to shoulder.

I listen to the sound of a siren in the distance and remember what Ruth says to me whenever my behavior or decisions are questionable, nodding my head in silent agreement: "God don't like ugly and he ain't real crazy about pretty." I bump my shoulder against his. I will tell him about Linda. I will tell him about me.

Do We Have to Talk about Kevin?

Matthew Hawkins

I LOVE GOING TO GROCERY STORES. I LOVE EVERYTHING ABOUT THEM: THE fluorescent lights that incubate all of the food and patrons like little baby chickens, the tired people behind the registers who probably fantasize about bagging up the bodies of the customers in their line and the other customers who are lost and confused amongst the aisles, like they are Lewis and Clark or something. Grocery stores are the watering holes of the city; you see everyone there. Once, someone looked at my basket for too long and I growled. I don't know why I did this. It was completely instinctual, but I certainly do not regret it. I really enjoy looking at all of the brands, there are so many brands. I take my time when I go grocery shopping, but not as much time as I used to.

I used to count calories, all of them, even the handfuls of granola that I snuck from the pantry that no one even knew about. I had an app on my phone that kept track of it all for me. I fastened a band around my wrist that counted my steps. I only took it off at night when I remembered to, like a dog with its collar. I had it on when I met Kevin.

Kevin ate a lot on our first date. He looked thicker in person than on the Internet. His hair was short and thin. His face was plump. His skin was the same hue as unrisen dough. I pretended that he looked like he did on the Internet. He told me that I looked the same as I did online, as if he were congratulating me for my honesty. He told me I was more Italian in person, and shorter, which was weird because I was still a good three inches taller than him. We went to a shitty Mexican place by my house, Buena Vista. This translates to "Good View" for all of you right-wingers. It was BYOB and it was summer, so we ate outside. Throughout the entire meal, compact cars attempted to parallel park on the street just a few inches from us. None of them successfully got in. They would ding a bumper of one of the parked cars and then speed off down the street.

Kevin was, of course, sweating profusely. He had enchiladas with beef in them. The meat was cheap. He had to chew it twenty to thirty times before swallowing. It was covered in this viscous, red sauce that looked like sour roadkill. Kevin's food came out quick, and so I ran across the street to a liquor store. An old Russian man named Vadim runs the store. We are on a first name basis, Vadim and I. I told him I was on a date and he high-fived me and wished me luck. I jaywalked back across the street, dodging cars like Frogger, if Frogger had been armed with a bottle of red wine he did

not plan to share. Kevin told me that my lips and mouth turned purple as I drank it. This made me laugh. Kevin laughed because I laughed. And it was a date; he did what he was supposed to do. You're supposed to laugh. His stomach shook while he did it. He acted like he couldn't finish his meal. I finished the wine with no problem.

We had sex that night. He was nervous to take his shirt off in front of me. He told me that he hadn't worked out in a while. And he hadn't. He insisted that we close the blinds, even though we were both consenting adults in the city. I lived on the sixth floor of a high-rise, a few miles north of the Loop. I looked out past the other buildings and the windows and the lights and the people to the lake. The blinds crashed down to the windowsill, and the room was completely black. He got on top of me. He sweat so much that it pooled in my mouth. It was salty as he rocked my body back and forth. I felt like someone who had just fallen overboard from a Carnival cruise ship, somewhere in the Caribbean. We fell asleep in a puddle of his juice afterward.

The next morning we went to a diner by my house. He got a lox omelet and I got a bagel. The diner had mirrors on all of the walls. I watched him eat the whole thing from the reflection in the mirror next to our booth. It was greasy, and he chewed it with his mouth completely open. I could smell the salmon from across the table. It was like I was in Alaska or something. I pictured a school of them swimming around in his stomach. He burped a piece of lox up into his napkin. I imagined that this was because one of the fish attempted to jump out of the acid in his stomach. I stared at his plate and started to space out. We were silent as I spread the cream cheese cautiously around my bagel and he folded the omelet with a tiny fork, into his mouth, over and over again.

Travis used to pronounce salmon all wrong. He said it like, "sal-moun." He was my ex-boyfriend, who had left me two years prior to moving to the desert. It was some suburb in the Tucson metro area. We used to go to this small school on the edge of Lake Michigan, in a forest an hour north of Chicago. We would walk out to the lake at night and lay on the dock while it swayed on top of the water. He'd always point out to the landmass in the distance. Travis had long, thick hair, and it would flow in the Chicagoland wind, like a god, or a warrior, or a leader of some ancient civilization. He claimed that the land across the water was Canada. I told him that it was Wisconsin or maybe Michigan, but he assured me that it was Canada. We both laughed into each other's mouths while we kissed. His lips felt permanent on mine. His cheekbones felt solid and high like a statue's, against my face. The steam would roll out of our throats as we fooled around on the dock like two dragons jousting. Later that year, I told him that I loved him at the lake. The dock underneath us was swaying with the wind. Our limbs were turning purple. We were both looking into the water and he grabbed my hand and he told me that he loved me too. We both kept looking out, squinting hard enough, so we could see all the way to Canada.

I worshiped Travis. We had sex so often that we regularly missed dinner at the one cafeteria on campus. I began to get slimmer and so did he. Our bones were visible on our diaphragms. They were prisoners attempting to escape from our bodies. Our ribs would tangle together, like a man and a woman holding hands, when we laid on top of each other. When Kevin was on top of me, I felt nothing. Holding his hand was like holding the hand of a deceased person at their funeral. It was pointless, but I did it because I felt like it was what I was supposed to do. I held Kevin's hand on the short walk from the diner back to my bed. He squeezed my palm and I squeezed back.

"It's Ke-vin. You called me Travis. You called me Travis, again," Kevin said to me when we were back in my bed.

This, of course, made me think more about Travis. Everything makes me think about Travis. And I mean everything: the word salmon even when it's pronounced correctly, hair, wind, any two-syllable word, food, calories, drugs, kissing, mouths, Canada, water—every neuron in my brain sparks and flows back to him.

"You're out of condoms," Kevin said after foreplay, topless and rifling through my underwear drawer.

Kevin insisted we use condoms. Travis and I never used condoms.

Kevin and I threw our clothes back on and went to the grocery store right by my house. His shirt was on backwards, but I didn't notice until we were inside. It was really bright in there, like the light I imagine you see right before you die. We walked past the produce, which was getting spritzed by its hourly shower coming from overhead. I looked at the bell peppers longingly: the red, the yellow, and the green. They were a renaissance painting just waiting to happen. We walked past the lobsters too. They were all crawling all over each other like people in an orgy. This little girl with thick pigtails started tapping on the glass of the tank. They all perked up and began swishing around the bottom. Kevin laughed as the mother scolded her and sat her in the little seat in the shopping cart. She fastened the belt extra tight, and the metallic bars separated her legs. The girl shook the cart back and forth with her body and screamed louder than the sounds of the intercom calling a manager to register nine. The mother ordered thinly sliced salmon from the guy behind the fish counter. He slid the knife through the fish delicately, like it was flesh, like he really knew what he was doing. He got salmon juice all over his hands and rinsed it off in the sink. He moaned when the warm water hit his hands.

Travis and I used to hold hands at frat parties. We went to all of the parties. No one really invited us, but we would go. Some people thought it was weird that two guys were holding hands at frat parties. A few straight white girls overcompensated their acceptance by approaching us to tell us how cute we were together. We would fill up empty Gatorade bottles with straight SVEDKA and take shots of it on our way to Moore Hall (the party dorm, it was plagued with holes from drunken punches in the hallways and vomit stains on the carpet in the elevators). It was only four floors, so Travis and I would take the stairs, gulping a swig from the Gatorade bottle at the landing on each floor. I was better at drinking than Travis. I had a higher tolerance than him. He had a tendency of throwing up in other people's bathrooms. I had a tendency of holding his hair back while he did it.

At one of these parties, Travis surprised me by pulling his pet turtle out of his pocket. He loved that turtle. He had a heat lamp on his desk beside his twin XL bed and he regularly stole crisp arugula from the cafeteria to feed it. I'm not sure if turtles are supposed to consume arugula, but Travis's turtle always did.

Travis was especially drunk at the party. Too drunk. He was hanging onto me like I had just been drafted in a war, or like I was transferring or something. He kept putting his hands down my skinny jeans and the people close to us pretended like he wasn't. The room was small and everyone was sweaty. There were over 100 people in the dorm. The walls were covered by a montage of vintage band posters and parking

tickets distributed by public safety to the occupants of the room. Halfway through the party, Travis realized that he had lost his turtle and grew frantic. He let go of my hand, or he was never holding it—I was too drunk to remember correctly. He flipped the overhead light of the room on. Everyone yelled at him. He started crying. The frat boys kicked him out of the party. I muscled my way to the door and left after him. Travis never found his turtle. He mourned it for a few weeks and then he forgot about it. Whenever I'd stay over in his room, I'd fall asleep looking at the empty turtle cage.

Kevin wanted Trojan, but I wasn't so sure. I wanted to take my time with deciding. I looked at the wall of condoms—all in their different colored boxes—picking up each box and holding it to the light, like a housewife picking out a new color for her living room. Kevin was embarrassed, and he started sweating again. He told me that it wasn't classy to put your sex life on display like that. I blushed. We ended up getting the Trojans. He paid for them. I paid for the Astroglide.

They had condoms in the Resident's Office. I thought about grabbing some so Travis and I could try something different. I had been written up for having alcohol and paraphernalia in my apartment (a.k.a. ping-pong balls and a surplus of PBR). I told the Dean of Residence I was sorry, and I said it convincingly so he let me off easy. He sentenced me to alcohol.edu. For those who do not know what alcohol.edu is, it is the young adult, online version of D.A.R.E. for troubled adolescents and incoming freshmen. It doesn't work and it's really boring. I wanted to make a game out of it, so Travis came over and helped me take it the night before it was due. We dug the frozen bottle of alcohol out of the back of my freezer.

It asked me how many drinks I had a week. I was drinking while I was answering the question. I looked over at Travis across the bed. His hair was up in a bun, and he had so many hickies on his neck that he looked diseased. I asked him how many drinks we had a week. He said not enough. He laughed and the marks on his neck shook like they were breathing, spreading. We each took a shot of whatever we took a shot of before we moved onto the next question. He threw up that night and I held his hair. I kissed him anyway. We fell asleep with arms tangled. I'm pretty sure I failed the test at the end of alcohol.edu. Statistics show alcohol.edu has little success in preventing students from heavy drinking or drug use. I guess Travis and I were just two of the statistics.

After Kevin and I had sex, I felt drunk. I hadn't been drinking, but everything felt hazy and weird. I put up the blinds; it was already dark, and Kevin fell asleep hard like a bear mid-hibernation. His arms were wrapped around me tight. I flopped around so I could look out the window. I looked as far and as long as I could. I looked past the grocery store—past the other buildings and the blurring lights of the city—into the dark. I watched the waves roll straight in from Canada.

Travis and I stopped eating for different reasons. He forgot to eat, and I couldn't stop thinking about food. Once we stopped, we never really started again. We would go to the small town's Jewel-Osco so he could buy drugs from his dealer that sat on the bench outside. We never went inside. I'd always watch the customers checking out through the big window while the transaction was going on. People bought the weirdest stuff. Sometimes I think people don't understand what they're putting into

their bodies. Or maybe they just don't care. Once I saw this jock wearing his high school letter jacket rip open a box of brown cinnamon sugar Pop-Tarts as soon as he swiped his credit card. I watched him swallow one of the pastries. Crumbs studded his face like piercings and fell like glass onto the floor when he brushed them off. I looked at him disapprovingly when the automatic doors slid open for him to leave. Travis yelled at me for staring at the boy. He slapped me hard enough that I fell to the concrete. He yelled at me. His eyes were glossed like a Polaroid photo. He told me I was fat and that I didn't deserve him. He made me repeat his words back to him, that I didn't deserve him. And I believed him. This is when I knew that I'd never eat another Pop-Tart again.

Travis did a lot of acid that year. His brain started to mush. He would crawl around, all over me in bed while he was tripping, like one of those lobsters at the store. I started doing all of his biology assignments to the best of my ability so he wouldn't flunk out. One time when he was tripping, I was crying. We were in a study hall alone at 5:00 a.m. The sun was rising and Travis told me he wanted to dance. So we danced. In the middle of our rendition, he apologized for the way he treated me sometimes. He told me that he didn't mean it. I told him that I knew he didn't mean it. He cried into my shoulder. There was no music, but we danced. Later that day he was still tripping in class and he thought his organic chemistry professor was Hillary Clinton. He asked for her autograph and she asked him to leave. I told him it was okay, that we all fuck up sometimes.

Travis wanted to be a pharmacist. He was going to be a pharmacist. I was an English major; I had no idea what I was going to do with my life until I met him. That's when I knew—it was him. I would be doing Travis for the remainder of my life. I was sure of it, until he broke up with me in the spring of that year. He told me he had hurt me too much. That hurt me even more. He said the world didn't want us to be together. And he was right: the world did not want us to be together, and neither did he. But I did. And I still do. Often, I think about how we will grow up and marry other people. How we will have children that are not a product of our relationship. How we will be buried next to different bodies. He will shop at Whole Foods and I will shop at Trader Joe's. I pretend like I am okay with this. I eat three meals a day now. But the truth—I don't want to.

Travis and I both transferred schools after that year: me to the city with skyscrapers and him to the desert with cacti. He went to rehab outside of Flagstaff for a while, but I heard he still smokes weed occasionally. This is how I know that he still loves me. He knows that I still love him because of all of the calories that I count.

I went to the store the next morning to buy pancake mix to make Kevin breakfast. I hate pancakes. They make me feel lumpy and slow, but I like to watch other people eat them. It makes me feel better about myself. There were 230 calories per pancake. It said it on the back of the box. I checked it, twice. I bought low-fat maple syrup.

I told Kevin I had already eaten mine when he strolled out of the bedroom, still shirtless. He ate five of the six. He put peanut butter—that he stole from my roommate's side of the pantry—and low-fat syrup on the pancakes like an animal. I watched the particles of food travel down his throat, through his esophagus. I saw his waist expand as they plopped into his stomach, one by one, like pollution being dumped into the water supply. Kevin was disgusting. He was just a mass of germs and acne walking around. He looked like a loaf of bread gone stale.

I told Kevin I loved him that morning, even though I didn't. He told me he loved me too. I pretended the last pancake was Travis and I drowned it in syrup, until I

couldn't see it anymore. I cut it up into little, tiny pieces with my knife, so forcefully that you could see scars in the ceramic of the plate. I swallowed the miniature pieces quickly, like I was taking a hit from a bowl or a shot from a glass.

Kevin and I went to the lake that day and he started crying. He opened up to me about his friend in high school who did so much acid that he committed suicide. It was overcast and rain was misting us lightly, every once in a while, like the produce in grocery stores. He told me that he didn't like to talk about it and hadn't in years. I kissed him because I didn't know what to say. His lips were limp on the other end. I pushed my tongue in his mouth forcefully, as if my tongue was giving his CPR. We walked back to my apartment without speaking. When we crawled back into my bed that night, I checked my watch and I had accumulated 20,000 steps throughout the day. I thought about pacing around my apartment for a little bit, really swinging my arms so I could get at least 30,000, but Kevin looked so peaceful. His eyes were still wet. I wondered how much acid I would have to take to have the confidence to go through with committing suicide.

Once, after we had broken up, Travis was high and asked me to come over. He lived in the basement of a large dorm with two other roommates. The room was always dark, so you couldn't tell what time it was. The other two roommates were passed out in their beds when I got there. We each took an acid tab, then sat on his bed and waited silently. When it hit, he hit me physically and told me that I was stupid to keep coming over. My reactions were too slow to do anything about it. He told me I shouldn't believe in him anymore. He told me he didn't love me. He told me he wanted to have sex. He said that you didn't have to be in love to have sex. And I still loved him, so we had sex. Afterward, he looked at me differently, like he didn't know me. He hit me and told me to get out of his room. I just looked at him, eyes open and still. I'll never forget his face when he hit me again. He started to cry. He was angry, so he hit me hard. But I couldn't feel it. I couldn't feel anything. I just looked into his eyes and knew that I would never truly know him. He dragged me outside by my hair and the building's door locked automatically when he went back inside. I slept by the dumpster and some football player poured beer on me to impress his teammates. They all laughed. Travis watched me from his window until a public safety officer found me while doing his rounds the next morning.

I still think about that night now, but I remember it all wrong. Travis's face is blurry and his words are jumbled. The feeling has faded, like a photo that developed badly. Often, I find that when I don't eat, I can see that night clearly again. Hunger makes it easy to hallucinate. It makes me high. Sometimes, I skip dinner, go to bed early, and relive that night instead. Sometimes, I eat a lot and throw up after. Sometimes, I sleep with random boys—like Kevin. I wonder if Travis is in bed with his own Kevin right now. I wonder if he loves him, like he loved me. I wonder if he fakes it, too. I wonder if he ever learned how to correctly pronounce words. I wonder if he's sober now. I wonder if he wonders.

Later that day, Travis left a box of my stuff outside of my apartment. I watched from my window on the second floor, while he did it. He paused for a minute and just stood there and stared at it. Eventually he turned around and walked away.

After that, I started avoiding the cafeteria altogether. One time, my friends made me go for dinner. They got me a plate and they put mac & cheese on it. The room had a complex layout of long rectangular tables and small circular tables. It was

loud and people were laughing and kissing and yelling and telling jokes and telling lies and gossiping. I was just consuming it all. I played with the mac & cheese. I stirred it around with a fork until it puréed. It looked like bile someone puked up the morning after a good night. My friends talked to me. They tried to ask me questions that would get my mind off of things, to get my mind off of Travis.

This kind of worked until Travis stumbled in, head down, staring at the checkered design of the carpet. He sat at a table in my line of vision. His hair was all gone. It was completely shaved. He looked like he was a prisoner of war. He was alone at the table. He didn't even get any food. His back was arched, and he was lying with his head in his arms on the table. I watched him like a parent waiting for their child to wake up from a coma.

Eventually Travis looked up and saw me staring at him. We locked eyes. His were bloodshot and huge. He didn't look like the same person. His cheeks were hollow, and his face was on the verge of concaving. He looked like the remains of a Midwestern town after a tornado. I looked deep into his irises. I started to cry. Big, thick tears started drooping down my face and onto my plate. Eventually he got up and left without saying anything to me—like it was nothing, like I was nothing, like he didn't even remember. And he had taken so many trips without me. Maybe he didn't even remember.

I wonder what Travis had for dinner tonight. I wonder if he even had dinner tonight. I wonder if he has a job. A girlfriend? A boyfriend? I bet he's still allergic to peanut butter. There are some things that you just can't get rid of; I think allergies are one of them. Once, I ate a rice bowl with peanut sauce when our small school was compensating for its lack of diversity by sponsoring an aggressively racist "Oriental Cuisine Week." Afterward, Travis and I had sex and his face blew up like a bomb getting ready to detonate. He yelled at me and shoved his fingers down his throat. He threw up. He hit me in the bathroom after. I watched him do it from the dirty mirror in front of the medicine cabinet. My face collided with the tile. Blood from my nose and mouth splattered on the ground like an abstract painting. I told him that I was sorry. And I was. He hit me again and I hit him back. We hit each other until we were purple. We hit each other until we forgot about why we were hitting each other.

Sometimes I meet new people and I forget about Travis for a while, but then I'll dream about him, or someone somewhere will order salmon, or I'll pass the Great Clips on my block and see people getting a haircut, or I'll go down the wrong aisle at the grocery store and see all the different brands of peanut butter. And I'll remember. Travis has been allergic to it since birth. He knows it's not good for him. He doesn't even see it as an option. He sees it as an enemy, as a threat. I text Travis sometimes. He never texts back. I wonder if he got a new number, or if he's built up some kind of tolerance to it all and blocked mine. I still feel bad about everything that happened. I still feel guilty about poisoning him with peanut butter and hitting him back. I wonder if he ever goes on social media and resists going to my profile or responding to my text. I wonder if he even remembers. I wonder if he ever goes down the peanut butter aisle in grocery stores just to think about what he can't have. I do it all the time.

After Travis threw up a few more times, he forgave me. He wadded up the thin toilet paper the school provided us and shoved it up my nostrils. He told me he didn't know why he gets like that sometimes. He told me that he didn't mean it. I told him that I knew he didn't mean it. When we got in bed, he thanked me for never giving up

on him. Travis and I kept the mattress underneath the tall bedframe to conceal us from my roommate. We layered the top of the frame with blankets for extra privacy. We called it the sex den. I was lying on top of Travis and our bodies were moist. Things got hot in the sex den. I could feel the reverberations of his heart beating through his chest. It was consistent, like a ticking clock. He said I was the only one who had ever believed in him unconditionally like that. We kissed and were quiet for a while.

Eventually he started crying. I could feel his tears wetting my hair. He opened up to me about his parents. He said that they never loved each other. He said they stopped sleeping in the same bed after his little brother was born. He said they hit each other. I didn't know what to say, so I just kissed him instead of replying. He cried until he fell asleep. I matched my breathing to his, so the rising and falling of our chests were synchronized, like divers in the Olympics. My face bled throughout the night. The bed sheets were stained red. We laughed about it in the morning. I tried to ask Travis more about his parents then, but he told me to stop asking about it. He told me to forget that he ever said anything about it. We never talked about his parents again. I tried washing my sheets, but the blood stains wouldn't come out. My mom made me throw them out when we packed up the car at the end of the year. I cried the entire eight-hour car ride back to my hometown in Ohio. My mom said she knew how I felt. She said it was awful to feel like that. She said she felt sorry for me.

I feel bad for Kevin, I really do. I had an aquarium as a child with big fish in it. We would buy smaller fish called "feeder fish" to feed to the bigger ones. I always found it humbling that an entire species exists solely to be consumed by something else. I feel like Kevin is a feeder fish. I don't love him and he knows it. I know it, he knows it, and Travis knows it. To be honest, I hate talking about Kevin. I hate thinking that I am his Travis—that perhaps he actually does love me. Maybe I was Travis' Kevin and he never loved me. Did I buy low-fat syrup for Kevin's pancakes for a reason? Do I love him?

Kevin stupidly interrupted my existentialism by snoring. I put my arms around him and I kissed his neck. It was sunburned, irritated, and pink, like a salmon in season. Every time my lips touched the sunburn, it left an imprint for a few minutes before settling into his body. I kept my mouth pressed to his neck for so long that I felt discombobulated. It was like I was living in a different dimension. We're all kind of living in our own dimensions, if you think about it. Our minds are weird, and complex, and dull. They think the same things repetitively until we die. Kevin's skin tasted like Travis, so I licked him and swallowed all the bacterium living on him, like a vacuum sucking up the crumbs under the couch. I made a mental note to add fifteen calories to my daily total, just to be safe. I continued kissing Kevin's neck, until I fell asleep, or until I died, or until the world ended. I'm not sure which comes first.

Note: This work was previously published online in *Notyourmothersbreastmilk*.

Contributors

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Donna Baiocchi is a photographer of people and nature. As an antidote to politics, she photographs for Chicago Botanic Garden publications. Her work has been exhibited at Oak Park Art League, Gallery 1837, PhotoPlace Gallery and Highland Park City Hall. Donna lives in Highland Park, Illinois. Her images can be found on Instagram @donnab_photos.

Carolyn Boykin is a second-year graduate student embarking on the realization of a dream. Her sixth grade teacher told her mother that she was special with an unbelievable gift and talent for writing awarding her the 1st place prize for her essay, “What is a Neighbor?” It has taken many life seasons to arrive, but the time is now with the publication of “Ugly.”

Brie Garrett is a writer and youth facilitator with a BA in Creative Writing and in Television Writing from Columbia College Chicago. She co-created and runs the young adult online magazine, *Teenplicity*, where she interviews artists of multiple mediums at different points of their career. Brie has also previously had op-eds ranging from activism, pop culture, and social issues published for the non-profit organization, Scenarios USA.

Matt Hawkins graduated from Columbia College Chicago in 2017 and abandoned his former roommate, Kala Wahl, in 2018. He’s currently a nonfiction MFA candidate at Florida Atlantic University. He’s been published before, but wants you to focus on this one. Kevin, however, does not want you to focus on this one. Sorry Kevin.

Matthew Hernandez is a graduate fiction student at Columbia College Chicago. He has never written a biographical note. “Feeling Fine” is his first publication.

Jeff Hoffmann’s writing has appeared, or is forthcoming in *The Sun*, *New Madrid*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *Sanskrit* among others. His story, “The Binder,” won *The Madison Review*’s 2018 Chris O’Malley Prize for Fiction. He lives near Chicago and is pursuing his MFA at Columbia College Chicago.

Jack Nothwang is a class of 2020 student at Columbia College Chicago, studying Post-Production and Screenwriting with a minor in Fiction. He is originally from Ventura, California. “Before The Eyes” is his first published work.

James Oxyer is a senior screenwriting student at Columbia College Chicago. He is spending his final semester in Los Angeles, after which he will continue to write absolute nonsense. “My Resignation” is his first published work.

Jessica Powers is a creative writing student at Columbia College Chicago. She is from the south side of Chicago. She has been writing for as long as she can remember and was most recently published in a brand new online magazine, *Ransack Press*. You can find her poem, “Questions about my Birth,” in the magazine’s first issue.

Zoe Raines is an essayist and fiction writer from Detroit, currently living in Chicago. She has been previously published in *Punctuate.*, *Habitat Magazine*, and *Hypertext Magazine*.

Drew Renner is a writer of prose and poetry based in Chicago. He graduated from Columbia College Chicago in 2018 with a BA in Fiction Writing. He plans to continue crafting and publishing work.

Haydee “HR” Souffrant is a Chicago-based Haitian-American writer and artist-healer, whose work weaves critical race theory and cultural memory through storytelling and performance. Her literary work has been featured in numerous online publications, including *Sixty Inches from Center*. Her performance work has been featured at the Whitney Biennale under the Dance Diaspora Collective, as well as Links Hall @ Constellation, Jimmy Beans Gallery, Threewalls at Navy Pier, and other venues in and around Chicagoland.

David M. Sula grew up in Herscher, Illinois, and currently lives in Chicago with his pet rabbit, Casey. He is an instructor of first-year undergraduate writing at Columbia College Chicago. His most recent publications include the short stories, “The Dolls of Bogle Street” in *The Lab Review* and “Resistance” in *ROAR*.

Kala Frances Wahl graduated from Columbia College Chicago in 2019 with a BA in Fiction and was abandoned by her former roommate, Matt Hawkins, in the same year. What’s next? She couldn’t tell you. But she knows she doesn’t want to do fiction anymore.

Colophon

Hair Trigger 41 was produced on an Apple iMac using InDesign. The cover was produced on an Apple iMac using Adobe Photoshop CC 2018.

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