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Rooming House and Other Stories

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## Rooming House

Tertia, bleach-white bath towel and washcloth stacked folded in her hands, looking every bit the part. All smiles and accommodation. It's just up here, this one, the blue room. The bath is down the hall, see the dried flowers? That door. There's no one else here, so you don't need to knock, just use it. Next Friday, if you're staying that long, there'll be a couple of others. When would you like breakfast? 7:00? 7:30?—she pauses for a shrug, then a nod—Okay. Just let us know if you need anything. Another nod, his eyes taking in the hallway, the room; everything but her. The click of the door.

And not even a Thank you.

*Prick.*

Down the steps, 9, 8, 7—the familiar creak. Granny Rho by the stove. A tray of warm apple spice muffins, Tertia pinches off a corner. Chewing, she says, "He's a weird one. How long did you say he'd be here?"

"A week, or nearly. He's here for the American Something or Other, a convention I guess. Didn't he speak to you?"

"Not a word."

"Me neither. Barely. It's just as well, we get enough of them coming down here trying to talk themselves blind. What time did he say—"

"7:30" and Tertia slips out of the kitchen and into the back of the house, to her room. One floor down from Mr. Bhandari's blue room. Around her, the house settles: an old Victorian with a big porch, grey paint peeling like scabs across every board. Someone

once used purple for the trim, and so Granny Rho has kept that up, having it redone when necessary. This street has remained houses like theirs: solid and determined, but outpaced. Around them, just out of view from any window, newer houses and small office buildings have sprung up.

Tertia opens *Voyages in American Literature*, the words remaining ink lines and symbols; her ears, like her attention, trained upstairs. Not a single noise from the blue room. What is it with this one?

She's used to a wide smile and a parental voice: You're how old? 17, wonderful. College soon, then. What'll you study? She can tell when they're nervous, or shy—but most are not, most want to talk, march into her life and invite her to ask about theirs.

But these are personal questions to Tertia, things that should be asked by family and not left to strangers who'll be gone in the morning, leaving plates of picked-over fruit sitting in fermenting juices, muffin wrappers and sticky forks scattered beside empty mugs and juice glasses.

So she lies.

It's not part of the deal, anyway. She's got to talk to them, be polite; but she doesn't have to tell the truth. She doesn't have to say, I can't imagine that will ever come. I'll be 17 forever. There's nothing but this.

For Mrs. Mercer's first-period English class, she's reading, "A Woman on A Roof," another story in *Voyages* about people who are nothing like her. This one she likes, though, likes that the sunbather has drawn the full attention of the workers. And that she turns, coldly, away—because what right do they have? *The boy stood grinning, foolish, claiming the tenderness he expected from her.* From above, the sound of a few careful movements: shoes

coming off? The chair moved away from the desk? She loses her place in the story, finds it. Right, there he stands, waiting for her to turn back to him.

*She said nothing. She had simply shut him out.* She goes over the line again and again, but can't fix on it, distracted by her eagerness for a new noise to give her a picture of the life going on upstairs.

In the morning, she comes in to find Amit Bhandari already seated at the table, tucked behind square-rimmed eyeglasses and a New Haven Register. Tertia says hello; he nods. His hands are smooth and brown, the skin like a child's, unlined. His eyes are as dark as his hair, a near-perfect black.

"Here, you'll need this," she says, unfolding a placemat in front of him, moving his mug off the lacquered wood. "House rules," she gestures toward the kitchen. Another nod.

From behind the swinging door to the kitchen, Granny Rho calls: Tertia, come grab the coffee?

He speaks, then, softly: "Tertia. That's an unusual name."

"Yes"—Granny says, appearing in the doorway in an apron, holding the carafe—"her father was British."

"Is British."

"Is British, he lives in South Africa at the moment."

"He doesn't live there, he lives here, actually. But he's on business in Pretoria. He comes back—"

"I'm bringing muffins now, Mr. Bhandari. Would you like yogurt with your fruit?"

"Amit, please, Ms. Perry. And no, thank you."

“Then Rhodenia, please, Mr. -- Amit.”

“Ah yes, another lovely and interesting name,” he says with a small, strange smile.

Granny Rho, whose given name is Rhodenia Alice, is from the South, way off down in Virginia. Tertia is from nowhere. That's what here is, really: nowhere. A dead zone between a heartbeat and a cleft-open sky. No one can stand to stay in New Haven very long; there's nothing here. The Gimbels, the Macy's, the factories on the edge of town: closed. It has been explained: unless you work at Yale or its hospital, the city has no time for you; you have to go somewhere else to make ends meet. The only problem is, that sort of life's not suitable for children. New Haven is most definitely suitable for children. Children, the elderly, anyone lost or left behind. When she finishes school, maybe she'll go to Africa to see her father. Or out west to live with her mother, out where the K-12 options are no good and everything's touch-and-go.

"Well that was down right *chatty*," Granny Rho whispers in the kitchen. They sit across from each other on the little table, eating cereal. Tertia has covered hers with raspberries that spring their bitter juices in her mouth.

They don't have a paper. They look out the window beside them, listening to the sounds of their eating.

Because the house is large and Granny Rho is getting on, Tertia comes directly home after school and helps ready things for dinner and the days to come. That's the deal. She doesn't have to stay in. After the work, she can leave. Sometimes, she meets Steph and Martin at Louie's Lunch for a burger or Dr. J's Cafeteria, a gloomy coffeeshouse on a derelict block.

The mall on Church Street is nowhere she ever goes. It makes her think of blood and rage. Two years ago, right outside the door for Spencer's Gifts, a man cleaved his ex-wife's skull with an axe, as their kids watched from the window of her car.

If it's light, she sits in Hatcher Park off Edgewood Avenue, sketching trees and whatever else. Trees are her thing, with their knots and turns, and ways of absorbing every change, circling and circling, reaching ever upward.

They call it Flasher Park, for obvious reasons. So far, Tertia has seen two. One she surprised in a clearing of trees; he was dirty, oldish, wrapped in the requisite overcoat, two lone inverted peaks flashed in a gummy grin. The other was a surprise for her: a young man, maybe a Yale guy. In a blue and white jogging suit.

Pencil whispering into paper, she saw him approach, a blue bobbing in her peripheral vision. And then he was in front of her, hands on the band of his pants, pulling them out and down, smiling at her with genuine kindness. She frowned, felt herself flush, but never turned her face. She looked from his half-erect penis right up into his eyes. He blanched, laughed—a sound like an engine sputtering—and turned swiftly, his gait quickly back to a jog.

In the trunk of the oak she'd been sketching, she drew what she could remember of his face. But it looked like someone else, someone she knew. She couldn't get it right. She worked at the paper so hard her pencil broke through. Giving up, she walked through the park looking for something else to draw.

Other than that, what else is there to do?

On the third Sunday in September, one day after Amit Bhandari arrived, just before a new moon, Tertia dyed her hair blue-black.

When presented with the change, Granny Rho said: "Oh dear." Brushed at a tendril near her face with the back of her fingers. "I thought I was the one supposed to have blue hair. No house is big enough for two blue-haired ladies."

At school, no one said a word except Abby McGuirk, who said, thoughtfully, "Huh. Matches the uniform." By this she meant Tertia's dark-colored clothes, her black cardigans. As usual, she wasn't being mean, Abby—she was just saying.

It was an enormous disappointment that Mr. Mackey, who mixed social wisdom in with his 7<sup>th</sup> period science lessons, did not comment. She thought he'd understand, make a pronouncement about changing seasons, changing colors. Give her gesture a shiny surface of defiant meaning. But he didn't say a word. He smiled at her when she took her seat, but as quickly as he cast his eyes upward, he threw them to her left, and circled them around the room.

So nothing had changed but her hair color. She caught glimpses of herself in the windows and picture-glass in the hallways and thought, it looks pretty cool. She wore dark lipstick and penciled her eyebrows in black. She felt sophisticated and renewed.

A letter came from her mother in Indiana. *My little T, How's life with Ma?* Her mother always did this, referred to people by their relation to her, never to anyone else. "My brother" instead of your husband, or Jack; James Wallis or my ex-father-in-law instead of Grandpa Jim. *Harold has opened another restaurant, this one in Muncie, right next to a Diner. So we travel back and forth, with mainly me driving (it takes about 2 hours) and Harold riding with his clipboard, making plans. Can't you just picture it? I think we're going to get all the diner's customers, because, as you*



*know, his fries are legendary, and we're much more upscale with steaks and genuine homemade desserts and etc. I'm still taking classes at night and doing accounting for some of the smaller places in town. How's school? Do they still do mass every morning? Are you becoming a little Episcopal now? I can't wait to see you, next time we're in town, which should be soon. You know I always think of you. Miss you tons, baby.*

And the same signature every time: *XOXO, your Mommy.*

Tertia, in her room, listening to the occasional movements of Amit Bhandari above her. She tries to imagine his life somewhere else, outside the blue room. This morning he requested breakfast at 6:45, and was gone right after, before she even left for school. At the table, he laid a black briefcase beside him, a long black coat over the chair, sat in shined shoes with pointed toes. He spoke to neither of them except to say "Please" and "thank you." Tertia propped the kitchen door open and watched him over the rim of her spoon. He ate slowly, chewing an impossibly long time. He picked his toast up with two fingers, shook the crumbs off onto the plate. Held the paper in the other hand. Slender fingers with trimmed nails, delicate half-moons. Granny Rho turned from where she was rolling dough for biscuits, and eyed Tertia over the tops of her glasses, but said nothing.

Tertia, done with chores, stands before the door to the blue room and knocks. He opens it, unsmiling and silent. Nods. "Hi," she says. "I wondered about dinner. Did you have some?"

He looks at her, unspeaking, for a moment before shaking his head. "Not yet."

"Would you like something here?" Granny Rho would have killed her. But Granny Rho is in Hamden with her Euchre club.

"I didn't know that was included?"

"It's not, really, but I thought since you're here, and busy. It's no trouble. You could call it a working dinner?" She tries to sound like Granny Rho, put barb and a wink into her voice, though the words do not deserve it. She wants to sound like an old friend, to crack open the distance between them, the stranger-ness.

"How is it that your hair's so... black?" He asks her, eyes slightly squinting above her forehead.

"I dyed it," Tertia says, suddenly lit with anger. Forget it. No dinner. Offer retracted.

"Yes, so I thought. It's unusual." A hand moving up from his side, then stopped, corrected, replaced.

After a pause, softly: "You can touch it." Reaching her own finger first, offering a strand at the back of her head, intended to disarm. "It's not gross from the dye or anything, it's real soft."

"No thank you. To dinner. It's very kind, but I have to work." He fixes her with that same small smile, and she understands something she has never known before: There is no point in playing with some things, they're bigger than you and too much to carry. She folds her arms across her chest and says, "Okay," swallowing into silence the "If you need anything..." that wanted to scuttle out from habit.

She pictures this man's wife, large and warm and present, wearing a marital dot on her forehead; isn't that what it's for? She wonders if he has kids, assumes he must – why else work so hard? Things often take you away from what you love, the people you most want to be near. It's just a fact of life. She thinks about what dinner must be like for the Bhandaris: wrists reaching from silk sleeves, the steam of spicy-hot food, the talk. Noisy, voluminous

talk. And a night-time settled in together, Amit beside his wife, kids in twin beds whispering after lights out.

She eats cereal at the table and then, when the day's dishes are dried and put away and the laundry gathered up from the dryer in the basement, she decides to go Dr. J's. Or over to Naples Pizza, where college kids drink beer and carve into the wooden table tops with steak knives; scratching their initials, leaving behind an incisive word or two. On this quiet street you can hear nothing—rarely, someone kicks a trash can in the alley between the houses, or curses at something unseen. All the noises, the car-horns, the sirens, the sounds of people moving, come from the bigger, more traveled streets and sound miles away from here.

## You Never Lived in the Country

They left the baby on the porch in the shade, and draped a netting over the car seat that converted into a bassinette. It wasn't too hot, maybe just sixty degrees, Earl had guessed. No more than sixty-two. We'll come right back, they told each other. We just need a walk.

Inside, Sylvie's mother slept in their bed; they'd spent the night on the pullout couch downstairs. They'd never done that before. It wasn't as bad as they expected, although it did dip slightly in the middle. Not enough to pitch them towards each other in sleep, but enough that each felt a little off as they lay there. The balance of things, the firmness of the earth beneath them newly uncertain. The right side of Sylvie's body was stiff from compensating.

Their house was surrounded by 72 acres of land that had once been a farm, of which they owned one and three-quarter acres. The original owners had sold the rest two years earlier to Argyle-Thomas Homes, which immediately drew up plans to cut all but a few maples, oaks and ashes and replace the thorny undergrowth and clover with the perfect lawns and faux-brick houses of Wild Hollyview Estates.

A little path from their driveway led into the remaining patch of woods, left untouched by agreement between Argyle-Thomas and the planning commission. A trail was cleared; it joined a paved bike path that wound through the development, from the central housing office building to the small pool and fitness house, through row after row of square, two-story Colonial houses. Sylvie and Earl took this path, hoping to cut across an old field and into what remained of the woods. They looked at the houses with their alternating trim and shutters: yellow, green, slate blue. On every third or fourth house, the front door was painted a proud and optimistic red.

"Weird, i'ntit?" Earl asked.

"A little. Yeah." She didn't know if he meant the way their land had changed, or their lives. She decided he meant everything, and that her response was honest and fitting.

He reached for her hand, catching only the first two fingers in his. These they clasped tightly, not shifting into a firmer grip.

She looked around. Late spring, but the contours were all wrong. No hills, no vines. Flatter than it should have been; the mulch carrying an unnaturally sweet smell. Everything was planned and deliberate but the inevitable weeds—a blight now, a flaw—that arose in places, beginning to thrive.

"Watch it, that's poison ivy right there."

He pulled her just as she was about to step, with bare legs and open-toed shoes, against a waist-high bush of soft-looking green leaves. "That? It's huge."

"You'd think they'd at least rip that up, with everything else they've been doing out here."

"I wouldn't know that was poison ivy. Are you sure it is?"

"I am. Look at the middle of it, there. Three leaves." An oily, red-tinged triad of leaves jutted out from the plant's stem. The leaves surrounding it were bigger, with none of the tell-tale shine, but they, too, were arranged in threes.

She stepped around it. "There must be other plants with three leaves? Good ones." She felt momentarily guilty, as if in double-speak she had asked for reassurance about the three of them: she, Earl and the baby. But that's ridiculous, she thought.

Earl shrugged.

The path they were walking ended abruptly at a cluster of trees. They dropped each other's hands and made separate ways through the heavier undergrowth, into the woods. When they first bought the house, they walked often, with socks rolled up and long pants, despite the heat.

Once, walking alone, she found a half-deflated soccer ball—the old-fashioned leather-and-stitch kind—in the bed of the creek in back. She pulled it out, used a bike pump to inflate it, and when Earl came home they'd kicked it around the yard, setting up goals and trying, after a while, to send it flying at each other as hard as they could. She grew nervous that he'd win, and felt a need to prove her ability to herself, or perhaps to him. It enraged her in that moment, the way things came so easily to him—athleticism, sex, happiness—and that he did so little with his luck. Her instincts were sharp, and she managed to stop nearly every ball he flung against the side of the house, between the two bricks she'd set end-up in the grass as goal posts; her hand, foot, sometimes her chest, darting into place. He scratched his head and laughed each time she blocked a shot, and she knew he was proud of her, felt close to her; she brimmed with competitiveness, nothing else.

It seemed so important, in those days, that he *know* her, her every thought and curiosity. When they were apart, she grieved for all he missed: the colors in the produce bins at the grocery or the way the mountains rose up in the distance when she turned left onto Route 84, bathed in a perfect mid-day light and capped with clouds. For a while, she quoted passages of books she was reading, clipped magazine articles and saved folded newspaper pages for him.

Somewhere in the course of things, though, she grew up. Recognized the futility of this urge. The beauty of the mountains vanished in retelling, and describing the look of

overhead lights on the varied skins of oranges or plums was well beyond absurd. If Earl wanted to talk about an article she left for him, she'd find that she'd already forgotten its point.

They used to check each other's bodies for ticks after their walks, or weekend afternoons in the grass. Now, they each checked their own when they remembered to.

"What ever happened to the soccer ball we found?" she asked.

"I guess it's still in the shed. Why?"

What had made her think of that? Luke played soccer; of course that was it. Luke, their neighbor, the boy in the new development.

Lately, she'd developed a habit of mentioning things that related in some way to him, without ever using his name: showing Earl Orion, the Ursas and Leo (science was Luke's favorite subject, and lying beside her he often talked about constellations, cell mutation, photosynthesis); cars (after reading countless *Consumer Reports*, he bought his first car, a brand-new Honda, ten years younger than her own); soccer and baseball. Talking to Earl about these things brought her guilt to the surface, which might have been the purpose. But she was also leaving clues, confessing in small but sincere ways. If he really loved her, this man she'd married, he would notice. He would slow down, listen to the things she said, put two and two together. He would ask her.

"You know. It'll never be quiet here again," Earl said now. "First the construction, which is still just about nonstop, and then pretty soon more cars and garage doors and kids. We'll smell the grills and hear them splashing in kiddie pools and the lawnmowers and ... They'll be no getting around it, it's going to keep changing."

In fact, she liked the idea of a world expanding, growing noisier to drown out the silences around them, but she said nothing.

Earl was three years older than Sylvie. In school, he'd been tall and thin, with cords of muscles that moved in his arms. While she tanned in the summers, and her hair picked up white-blond streaks, no amount of sunscreen could prevent Earl's skin taking on the sunburned outline of his sleeveless undershirts, or the freckles on his cheeks, nose and shoulders.

He was still tall, no longer all that thin, and his skin had a permanent sprinkling of dots her mother called "beauty marks" when they appeared on women. His hair was thinner, but still light brown. The strangest thing, really, was that his penis had grown darker, more purple. His testicles hung lower than they had when they were younger. These changes she noticed more than any others. She felt oddly embarrassed for him, and tried to mask it by paying more attention, cooing and stroking and loving this part of him more than she ever had.

They'd waited a long time to have a child. Not by choice, but it seemed the way nature intended. She was on the pill for years and maybe that had something to do with it. When she passed her thirty-second birthday, she started to worry. Unnecessarily, it turned out: three months later, the little plastic wand they called the "pee-stick" showed not one, as she was used to, but two pink lines.

The sensations were immediate in breasts. Her stomach felt unpleasantly full, even early on in her pregnancy. By midway through, her organs and lungs felt as though they were being pushed into tiny channels and openings, whatever they could find. She knew women



who experienced pregnancy as liberating—able to eat and eat and blame every shift and swelling curve on the baby. Sylvie disagreed. Being full all the time made a person feel guilty, like taking a giant second helping of dinner in public. Finishing something off someone else's plate. A nagging, constant need to apologize for going ahead and doing it anyway, that wrong thing.

And now here she was: little Elena. Twenty-three hours of labor. She wasn't supposed to think of that, wasn't supposed to think *Elena Margaret twenty-three hours McGarrety*. Her own mother had told Sylvie, "It's the worst, worst pain you can imagine," and before she could register the recoil on her daughter's face, quickly added, "but. You forget it right away. It's like it never happened. The minute you see your child's face, *that's* all you can remember. That face, that absolute darling little miracle."

Still, her mother said she was in labor for 19-and-a-half hours and the very fact of that quantification seemed proof that it never entirely goes away. Like seeing someone else's pet mangled by a car: the visceral wrenching ebbs, the visual memory fades (and one can, in fact, go on without willfully replaying the imagined violence of those last few moments, or the morbid externality of inner liquids, at mealtime). But the dim sensation of the reaction remains, able, at the wrong moments, to trigger a muted retch.

In this distant sense she recalled the pain and some of her thoughts during childbirth, the way a night returns fragmented and refracted, as if through several feet of water, to a person who spent it very, very drunk. She regretted some of the things she'd wished for, the few sharp moments spent bargaining to be someone or somewhere else, to have made different choices; the anything-but-this tone of her pleas.

Her daughter in her arms—slightly blue and moving spastically for the first time in this world—did erase everything else for several glorious seconds. In the aftermath of energy exerted in the pursuit of something unassailably good and wholesome, Sylvie allowed herself to feel full of love for all things. She felt grateful for her life, and everything that assembled to compose it.

Luke played soccer—and this was the really awful part, the part that should have prevented everything she'd done—for his *high school* team. The thought of his age brought a wince, then a smile as if it were all a joke, someone else's life she was recounting for entertainment. He was a senior, a forward and not the captain, but that's how she thought of him: as captain. Born not just to achieve, but to excel.

"Not too bad, out here," Earl said as they walked. "It's quiet, anyways."

"You seem surprised," she said. "What did you think?"

"It was so beautiful before, Syl. It kills me that they had to go and do this. Our house in the sticks is now in the suburbs."

"It was always the suburbs, technically. But I'm glad they left all this green here. It's great to have that path back there, too. I can take Elena in her stroller in the morning when you're at work. It'd be a bitch to have to drive to somewhere just to walk where I can roll the stroller."

"But don't you miss it?" He put an arm around her. "Our life in the country? It was like a return to simpler times, back to our childhoods, before they did all this."

"Earl, we're from *New Haven*. You didn't grow up in the country. What are you talking about?" For the past few years, he'd talked about getting back to the land, finding his

roots. It drove her crazy; there were no roots to find. She thought he should look forward, look *around* at the here and now. That was entirely the problem.

Of course, that was more than she could do. Always, her mind struck out elsewhere, staking claim to a million grim potentials. Right now, it oscillated between Luke, Earl and Elena. Whom would she fail more?

"We had it, though, for a while," he said gently.

If they had, she realized she didn't miss it. Maybe *that* was the problem. They had both loved the house, and the land they thought of as theirs. But from the minute the first hole was opened in the red earth, she felt nothing but an impatient eagerness to see it all completed.

Shirtless, Luke was like a magazine picture. His color so vibrant, the lines of his skin, bones and muscles too perfect, and too hairless, to be real. It bothered her, actually, this unreality. It numbed her. Not the first time, that had felt explosive; the sharpest, most genuine moment she had lived in ages. But each time since then, her nerves dulled slightly more, her mind wandered a little farther away. He was like standing on the edge of a scenic overlook in the mountains: a beauty so arranged and lovely that it made her impatient to get back in the car. Only in memory or imagination could she hold any part of it.

"Do you know the song, 'Sylvia's Mother?'" he asked once, singing a few of the lines.

"God, that's so *old*. My father used to sing it when I was a kid. Where did you hear that?"

"The oldies station. They play it a lot. I was just scanning channels and I heard your name."

"Yeah, but I'm not *Sylvia*. That's not my name. It's just Sylvie."

"It's close enough," he put a hand on her neck and pulled her to him, kissing her cheek, running his other hand over her breasts, which were swollen just enough to fill out in a way she liked, but were so tender these days. Maybe it was his touch, or maybe it was something else.

Later, when she had the answer—in the form of those two perfect lines on the little stick—a flicker of a thought occurred to her, gone before she could debate or dismiss it: What sort of a teenage boy falls in love with a pregnant woman twice his age? He was flawed, he needed something; for a second, she realized she might be able to really love him, in a way, and it terrified her.

Luke's voice was confident and playful as he sang. It disoriented her. Perhaps sensing her distance, he stopped. "I want to meet your mother."

"My mother?"

"Yeah. Weird, I know, but I do. I had a dream about it."

"My *mother*. Why?"

"I want to see where you came from, I want her to see me. She's your mother."

Indeed. Months later, when her mother was on her way from Indiana, something clicked in Sylvie's mind. He could not meet her mother; she couldn't let that happen. If it did, it would bring everything to the surface. In her mother's presence, everything—not just Luke, but all she refused to acknowledge—would be revealed.

In the woods, she felt a growing unease; it was time to go back.

"Sylvie, the baby's fine. I think you should relax," Earl said now. "You just like to have something to spin around in there, to make you feel—I don't know. What does it do, Sylvie, to worry all the time? I wish we could make a decision and stick with it."

"But it's getting hot, Earl. This is not ridiculous." She fumed at the way she felt: defenseless, irrational.

"I really think it's fine. Your mom will be up by now. I say we keep going and enjoy it."

They walked on in silence. "When do you think you'll be ready to turn around?"

Instead of answering, Earl bent down on his knees, clapping his hands at a cluster of branches to the left of where they stood. From behind the leaves, a dog emerged. It was old, with gray fur around its face and paws, and clumps missing in reddened patches on its back.

"Hey. Come here, pup," Earl said. "Look at this. Look at what's hiding in here." And to the dog: "It's okay. You're all right, girl."

Stroking the dog, he looked up at Sylvie, asking her with his eyes to join him. She didn't move. She knew she should feel sympathy. Instead, the dog brought forth a well of disgust so deep that she could hardly stand to watch this scene. For this she wanted to atone—to Earl, to the dog, to the parts of herself that had hardened somehow. She recognized this feeling; long before Luke there had been other acts, real and imaginary, that showed her she was not the sort of person one expects to be. That she had gone wrong very early on.

All her time with Earl, she had tried to know him and herself, and to forgive them both. Simply living required reserves of forgiveness that were, more often than not, greater than she could summon.

Still, her reaction to the dog—gently licking Earl's hand, its tail tucked under in submission—shocked her. Neither she nor Earl could have given name to what was happening in this moment, but both knew that something was being uncovered, the ground between them leveling out.

"Maybe we should bring her back with us. If you want," Sylvie offered. "Does she have a collar?"

"No collar. I think we need to get her fed, get her some water."

"Okay."

They turned back, the old animal following on stiff legs behind them. Sylvie knew with certainty that when they returned, Elena would be in her mother's arms, safe and content. Her mother would withhold her criticism about leaving a child unattended, assuming they had needed some time together.

She knew, too, that Luke would be there, sitting with her mother. And that this meeting would signal a shift in absolutely nothing—nothing would be different. She and Luke would continue once or twice more, then part kindly and without incident. Nothing would be revealed; on summers and vacations from college, he'd wave hello to her or Earl as he passed. She and Earl would stay on their land and raise their daughter, noticing things about themselves and each other. Learning to live with them. Her transgression might be a terrible thing, a mark against her on some cosmic tally of Good and Awful. Or it might be nothing, pass unnoticed into time, into the earth, into the foundation of new developments. And the same old, same old life in this scarred country.

But then, the dog.

Sylvie could not see how she fit in this. Would she stay, or wander off? Would she survive? This fixed her interest; she lingered on these questions as shame rose and tightened in her chest. Of all the thoughts to nurture, of all the places to vest hope and curiosity, how could it be this animal—and not Earl, not Elena, not herself, nor their future—she chose?

Feeling she could not go one step more, either forward or back, she took Earl's hand. What she said meant nothing, the way so much of what gets said to others or oneself cannot bear examination, but it soothed her. "Let's say it's still the same," she offered. "And this is morning in the country."

## White City

Brice sets his duffle down inside the doorway to clasp his father's outstretched hand, receive his mother's embrace. Their skin is warm; so too is his mother's breath behind his ear. But he feels these as though through a filter, a folded stack of bleached-white towels. No sensation. He could be anywhere. Sleepwalking.

His sister Anne is confused but delighted. "Yay," she says, a self-conscious touch of chin to collarbone, a giggle. "You're here." She is no longer the child she is in his memory, but still he bends slightly to hug her.

"Okay," his mother says, breathing herself taller, hands reflexively touching her abdomen. "Why not go get cleaned up and let's have a drink in the living room."

Evening light speckles the blue living room carpet. Brice, in a fresh tee-shirt and jeans, says, "I'm not drinking." He has washed his hands and face, scrubbed the dirt of the day's bus ride from Portsmouth to Bridgeport.

"No?" his father asks.

"Not these days."

"Well good for you. Cheers," his father says, holding up his glass of red wine.

The room closes in, veers away, comes close again and Brice sits down hard on the sofa, looking away toward the darkening window.

The old Anne smelled like childhood. Hair, clothes, breath, and all. Now, she smells 16—of rose soap, hairspray, berry lip gloss blending with McDonald's, Starbucks, and something



else: a trace of industrial cleaning fluid. The stuff they shine the floors with at Montgomery High. He recognizes it instantly.

This is the new Anne, he can tell by looking. The tilt of her head recalls the self-conscious poise of the popular girls he knew in high school—watched but rarely spoke to.

That's good, at least. Good for her.

“How're you doing?” he asks. “How's school?”

So he's the new Brice, too, it seems. An imposter in grownup-land, a cocktail party 'questioneer.' It's the best he can do. He hears his sigh before he can catch it; feels the grind of slight irritation at having to talk—he's just so *exhausted*.

Last week, Dr. Govil in Student Health said, “I think it's time we turned this over to a real shrink, what do you think?” His voice was conspiratorial, falsely light. Head cocked as though waiting for Brice to make an informed response, a counter offer.

Instead—for now—Brice has decided to come home.

- & -

Morning and the street is quiet; windows shut against the chill of early spring. Brice is running—something that until now, he's done only in gym class. His sneakers are high-tops, made more for looks than action. To compensate, he laced them too tightly and had to stop, untie, and try again.

The neighborhood hasn't changed. In the rest of the town, enormous houses are crowding out the old bungalows, but here it's the same small square houses, planted on the

same small square lawns. Only it's all gone anemic, the color drained carefully, as though with a syringe. A reverse transfusion. A few St. Patrick's Day decals and decorations, now weeks old, lay forgotten on stoops and in windows. The asphalt driveways sprouting gradual cracks, unseen beneath Irocs and minivans and Civic hatchbacks.

On summer weekends, walking to the corner of Bluff Avenue and Mercer Street feels like roaming the dial on a long stretch of highway—scarred legs sticking out from beneath jacked cars, extension cords leading off into shadowy garages. Radios blaring here top-40, next the Doors, on to Steely Dan, Jefferson Starship, Queen.

He's no runner, never has been. But he couldn't sleep. Neither could he sit still in his old room, or in the fluorescent hum of the kitchen.

A few people are warming their cars for work. At first, he nods, says Good Morning. But he tires quickly and turns his gaze downward, tracking the pounding of his feet on the sidewalk. When he looks up, it is straight off into the distance. Brice feels their occasional looks like hands reaching for him. Ridiculous, but he feels compelled to respond, and visualizes slapping them away, fighting off the tethers that tie him to other people.

Yellow police tape trails the perimeter of the beach parking lot. A hand-painted wooden sign proclaims, BEACH CLOSED. There's only one reason for this: in heavy or steady rains, the sewage treatment plant spills its runoff into the Sound. It's happened for years. Although today is brighter, the previous days' rain gathers in puddles and divots along the sidewalk and road.

He runs past the library, the Mr. Donut, Parillo's Deli and on into the neighborhoods of duplexes, where stores pull grates and aluminum awnings over their doors and windows at night. West Haven's other edge.

He had planned to run to the flea market on Avon Street, but decides to turn around at Savin Rock. Circling the graffiti-covered rock, Brice looks up at the scrub-brush that dots its top. In all, it's maybe forty feet high, and not even as long as a football field. But here it is, an outcropping at the edge of the ocean, smack in the middle of a parking lot. Like something dropped from outer space.

He stops on the pavement below the rock, bends over and stretches half-heartedly, trying to keep his mind from wandering.

- & -

After a week, Brice settles into a routine: cardio in the morning, then weights and stretching. He moves his body hard whenever he can, to get the energy out. To get things under control. In the afternoons he's supposed to be looking for a job. Most of the time, he walks around downtown, watching people doing ordinary things.

There's a beat-up stationary bike in the garage, behind a row of boxes. It takes most of a morning, but Brice digs it out and drags it into the basement, which is unfinished because it floods. There's an old workbench and a sink that no one ever uses. The light pools from two sources: a spare bulb with a pull-cord, and a Black & Decker utility light hanging from a hook on a rafter.

"Oh gross," Anne says from halfway down the stairs. "It smells like an old person down here. And this light. It's like an interrogation room, a Russian gulag or something."

"It is what it is," Brice says.

"Right. So now you're working out, is that the idea?"

“I don’t know.”

Her eyes circle the small room, taking in the bike and the free weights stacked on the workbench. “I would say that yes, you’re working out. Are you trying to get all buff down here? Or is it just, like, a thing to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s like what, your mantra? ‘I don’t know, I don’t *know*.’”

Anger blooms in his chest, hot and aching. “Anne, can you just get—” but he stops himself and forces patience. “I really don’t know. Okay? I don’t know anything right now. I’m just...”

She waits for him to go on. When he doesn’t she asks, “Did you ever hear about White City?” Her tone is rushed, deflecting.

Brice shakes his head, spraying WD-40 on the screws that hold the seat in place. He needs to raise it.

“Okay, so, at the base of Savin Rock there was this thing called White City. A huge, electrified area with theaters and dancing and rides and things. Like a classy Coney Island I guess. I saw pictures and it’s pretty wild. There were piers too, where they’d dock ferries from Long Island and have dances and swimming races in those weird old-fashioned bathing suits.”

Brice nods, turning the cap and pulling the bicycle seat up.

“So at one of the swimming races, which this millionaire set up, the pier collapsed and all the spectators fell in the water. It was this huge, huge deal. The races were stopped and Savin Rock had to issue apologies and it was in all the papers. No one was even hurt, it

was just a total embarrassment.” When he doesn’t reply Anne says, “I thought that was sort of interesting. A little funny.”

“Why was it called White City again?” he asks.

“Because it got electrified early. It was all lit up.”

She crooks a hand to her hip and stretches the other to the workbench, holding herself up. She looks like their mother, with a luminescent strand of brown hair falling across the left side of her face, rising slightly with each exhalation.

In a slower voice she says, “You didn’t like school? I’m not supposed to ask, but.”

“It’s not that. It’s complicated.”

“Don’t you miss it? Have you talked to anyone up there?”

“Not really. Not much.”

“Are you going back?”

“Sure. Not this semester probably.” He says, “Quit looking at me that way.”

“You’re really funny,” Anne says. “You always used to be. I hope you’re still really funny at school.”

“I am,” he says, and gets on the bike to test it. “I’m a fucking riot.”

“Tell me about the horse,” Brice says to Anne after dinner. They’re sitting on the couch, Anne doing her math homework with the TV on in the background. Brice keeps count of his sips of water. Two. Three. Four. He can’t seem to help it.

“What horse?”

“The Savin Rock horse.”

“I don’t know anything else. Just that,” she says. “You don’t have to be super-sweet to me, Brice. I’m the normal one here.”

“Oh yeah?” He thinks she’s kidding, but her face takes a serious cast.

“Definitely. I mean you’re here doing ... whatever it is. And Dad’s moving out and—”

“What do you mean Dad’s moving out?”

“Maybe not *moving out*-moving out, but they’re not getting along. He stays in your room, you know. When you’re at school.”

This is news. “He does?”

“Just recently.”

“Shit.”

“Maybe it’s just temporary.”

“Did they say it was?”

“They didn’t say anything, Brice. I just know it. Right now, it’s ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’ And I don’t want to hear it, frankly.”

He looks at her, amazed.

He and his father, who used to talk easily, now speak politely to each other as though they were acquaintances at a party, aiming above all else to be inoffensive.

Staring up at the water stains on the ceiling of his old bedroom, Brice hears his mother in the next room saying, “Nothing, Anne. It’s just a temporary thing. Listen to me, I want you to be very nice to your brother, okay? Let things slide, even if they start to bug you.

Do we have a deal?” Brice knows they’re talking about him; apparently “don’t ask, don’t tell” doesn’t extend to lunatic brothers.

Turning his head to the window, he feels his biceps with his palms. The house, the room makes him feel as though he’s never left, hasn’t spent the past two and a half years away at college. His heart beats fast and his chest burns. Everywhere feels unfamiliar.

-&-

Parillo’s Deli is a run-down box of a place with a few tables and a picture window that looks out across Campbell Avenue into the Grocery King parking lot. Behind that, the smokestack of the sewage treatment plant prods the sky.

Dwayne hired him without even making him fill out an official application. Brice just walked in and said, “I saw the help wanted sign.”

Mostly, it’s sandwiches and coffee they sell. There are also two gas pumps and the usual convenience store supplies. But what the place is really good at moving isn’t on display. About every tenth customer is *not* looking for chips, soda, pastrami on rye, or gas. It’s a well-known fact in town, and Brice isn’t surprised to see Dwayne, the manager, the owner’s son, taking people into the office in back. Who knows what it is exactly; weed, harder stuff. Brice keeps his mouth shut.

For a week, he has managed to stay under the radar, listening to the guys make plans, moving around them and their jokes, piling meat on sandwiches, filling orders.

But now, he's spotted. Dwayne—perched on a stool beside the back door, propped open with a folder paper plate—exhales a stream of smoke through his nostrils. “Brice,” he calls, “you doing anything tonight?”

“I don't know. Why?”

“You're going out. I don't know what you do in your free time, but tonight, you're coming with us.”

“Where?”

“Who knows. We'll find a party or something. You got a clean shirt?”

Brice is wearing the Parillo's shirt, splattered with mustard, tomato sauce from the sausage and peppers, other dull stains. He shakes his head.

“I've got something in the Bronco. We'll fix you up.” Dwayne stands and exhales an inhumanly long breath. “Okay. All right. Back to work.” He moves over to the cash register, opens it, closes it again and leans forward on the counter, staring out the window. Brice finishes the last call-in order and takes the bathroom key.

“I'll be back in five,” he tells Dwayne.

Julio and Martin, who are supposed to be here, haven't yet showed. He won't be able to handle the lunch rush without them.

-&-

His muscles are getting bigger, no question. In the shower, there's a new tautness, freshly wakened tendons: his quads bulge when he bends his legs up to soap them. He can see the beginnings of roundness in his arms, a hint of definition. This is something, at least.



-&-

Dwayne's Bronco gleams blue, freshly washed and waxed. Party favors, he says, pulling a few red and white capsules from a small Ziploc. Brice turns it down and is surprised when Dwayne doesn't push. Instead, Brice bums a cigarette and puts it behind his ear; he doesn't smoke but he needs something. His chest is tight and he has no idea what to say to these guys. The white undershirt from Dwayne hangs loosely on him; he flexes his pecs imperceptibly beneath it, trying to breathe.

"What are we doing tonight, captain?" Martin asks.

"There's a party over at that dude's place in East Haven," Julio says.

"No way," Dwayne says. "Bunch of skanks and junkies. We can't show Brice that kind of time."

From the passenger seat, Martin turns back to eye Brice. "Right," he says.

"I don't care what we do," Brice says.

"Well I care," Julio says. "It better not suck. And it better not be expensive."

"Fuck that, J, we're not spending any money," Dwayne says.

"Unless it's on ho's," Martin says, laughing.

"Shut up," Julio says, turning to the window.

"Seriously, you think that's an option? I heard about one house down on Howard Street where we haven't—"

"Guys," Dwayne says in a voice that shuts everyone up, "be serious."

-&-

On what turned out to be the last day, he left art history right in the middle. Martini's *Annunciation* was on the screen. The look on Mary's down turned face was misery not piety, a burden, unbelieving. From the angel's closed lips, words rushed at her. It jogged loose something in his chest, threatened to suffocate him. His blood suddenly electrified, he had to move. "Excuse me, excuse me," down the row, students swiveling their knees out of his way. Sliding along the wall toward the red Exit sign, closing the door behind him so carefully, noiseless but for a small click.

The bright fluorescence of the hallway gave way to dimmer sunlight, an incongruously blue sky. Back in his room, the feeling subsiding, he sat at the desk and looked out over the courtyard, across a parking lot to the hotel, the gas station, Governor's restaurant. There was no moment of decision, just a phone call and a question. "Can I come home?" Ridiculous, but there was nothing else. It was possible that nothing mattered. He was genuinely afraid.

Julio buys a 12-pack and they decide to take it up to Savin Rock, where it'll be dark and they can drink it without getting busted.

Brice has been feeling wired since he got in the car. His palms are wet and he can feel his blood flowing in his arms. His mind won't crank; he can think of nothing to say. He wonders what he's doing here.

It helps when they're out of the car, climbing up the rock like Brice used to do as a child.

“We’ve got to *do* something tonight,” Martin says then lets out a high-pitched giggle like a digital bird call. He scares Brice most of all. His anger simmers beneath the surface. He is microwaved water, Brice thinks. No visible bubbles but heated to a frenzy; one jostle and it’ll rush out like a geyser.

“Just chill for a minute,” Dwayne says, sitting down on patch of dirt on the rock. Everywhere, there are cigarette butts, sun-bleached beer cans and other castaways. “Just fucking stop.”

Brice downs a beer fast, starts on another. Halfway through it, he lets it fall and turns away from the others. He starts running, and in an instant is far enough away that he can barely hear them laughing, calling him back, asking what the fuck he’s doing. He pounds his way along the edge of the beach and keeps going when the road curves sharply left, up and away from the water. He can smell the beer, the salt air, his own body. He keeps moving, one leg and then the other, past the houses, lit and dark, and thinks maybe he’ll never stop. Run all the way to China before ever turning back again.

## A Good Turn

Oh my Jesus, Miriam said when she saw it. Stock-still in its mother's arms; too many teeth in its tiny mouth, head jugged with bones at the temple. "How old is he?"

"Twenty-one months."

"That's not right," Miriam said, letting go all decorum.

The McCarty woman, Gladys, took a small step back. "It's the undergrowth, ma'am, is what he's got. We've nurse and nurse him and hit don't take. I give him the sugar cloth too. Don't seem to help."

The child's sounds pierced the room, overwhelming any pity Miriam might have felt. She didn't want to touch him, this perversity. Her mind raced forward: an ambulance couldn't make it up here, the Model T Doc Miller drove might clear as far as the general store. They'd have to take it—take him—down to Johnson's and meet the car. One of the men, maybe Gladys's husband. Or Elsie, herself a man as much .

"Twenty-one months. And how much does he weigh?"

"I think 14, 15 pounds," Gladys said.

Beside Miriam, Elsie Frasier stood and said nothing, her breath coming in and out with the usual noise. Elsie was a small, trim woman, who breathed like a man three times her size. Everything about her seemed to belong to someone bigger. Miriam was often awed by her, and found the delicate bones of her wrists and cheeks disorienting, promising a softness the woman didn't possess. Even her voice was deeper than it ought to have been—not quite

a man's, but the voice of a hard, hard woman. Someone raised, as she indeed was, in the dark shadow of this hollow.

“What's the child's name?” Miriam asked.

“John,” Gladys said, “like his father.”

After a pause, Miriam reached out her arms because that was what should be done. She thought for a moment of shaking its screams silent, as a lesser woman might have, but instead she pushed its head—dry and cool to the touch, like ashen paper—against her shoulder and rocked it gently as she questioned its mother.

The crying subsided and the child loosen its palms, its muscles all over. Miriam felt him relax against her skin. She look at him then, a child and not a demon.

“We'll have to take him,” she said, staring into the child's blue-gray eyes as it stared back, its left eye looking just beyond her in some middle distance.

Gladys stiffened, and Miriam said, “Not for good, but he's got to get to the hospital down in Luray, there's nowhere else for him.”

Gladys grabbed back for her son, who was startled by the grasp and began to shake again. “No you ain't,” she said quietly, and looked at Elsie, who said nothing, her face blank and fixed.

The issue of the papers. If they were to find out about the baby. Miriam knows this is a potential. “You think about it,” Miriam said, “just think about it and I'll come back Thursday next.”

“Please,” Gladys said, the baby quieting in her arms, “ask the doctor to come up here, ask what can we do.”

“I will,” Miriam said and looked one last time at the misshapen form, quiet now, a thumb in its mouth, a line of spit where its lips met in a corner.

As she did all the families, she gave Gladys a packet of vitamins, iodine tablets for the water, and a mention of vegetables. “We’ve got plenty,” Gladys interrupted, “packed in the cellar. And no, they ain’t all pickled or whatever you think we do up here.”

Miriam said goodbye to both women. Neither responded.

To get to the place, Miriam had had to leave the car and walk the last few hundred yards because the road was too rough and rocky to pass by automobile. *Make some changes*, she thought, as she heaved slowly uphill. She’d put on weight in the past year and often found herself short of breath. It was understandable, though, the weight—with their oldest off in Tennessee with the CCC and Charles sick for so long with bronchitis. She overindulged when she was worried. It was one thing that got away from her every time.

Now, closing the car door against the darkening mountain, Miriam thought of the woman Frasier. *A sight for sure*. Small and light as a bird, with such a pretty face—but a voice as deep as a man’s, and a way of sitting that was decidedly unfeminine. It wasn’t Christian, but she thought: no wonder the husband ran off. “Except weren’t my husband,” Elsie had said. “I didn’t want to marry him then and I was right, you can see.”

\* \* \*

Miriam Sizer had kept an open mind. From the first, when her little car rolled up into Blighty Hollow—officially Boone’s Hollow on the maps, but no one called it that since the Chestnut

blight rolled across and devoured the mighty trees and with them, leaving just the stumps sometimes sprouting doomed, fresh growth. Hard to imagine what it was like before, without the Johnny-catch, the brambles and undergrowth, everything kept in the shade of the giant trees. Miriam has never smelled a chestnut roasting, but she imagines it a sour smell like fertilizer burning in the fall. What a strange thing to think, that.

The roads were rough and she had to walk most of the way to Elsie Frasier's place. It wasn't at all what she'd expected. Two stories, a stone chimney that stopped her in her tracks—each stone fitted perfectly, the mortar between them white and solid. It was beautiful, this old craftsmanship, not like anything you could pay for today. Too much mass-production these days, every little thing made to look the same as everything else. For a moment, Miriam stood quiet before the place. But, miles from home and with much to do, she stepped up on the porch and knocked firmly on the door.

That was the first time she'd noted Elsie's size, her delicate light hair, her skin that looked like it was rouged. She could have been a woman in a magazine, answering a door with a smile for the company come to her party.

When she spoke, her elegance fell away like a cloak; Miriam saw there was nothing delicate about her. "You that woman from the school?" Elsie asked in a stony voice.

"I'm Miriam Sizer, yes."

"You walk all this way?" Elsie's eyes lit on Miriam's spring suit, her Sunday shoes.

"Yes, I walked from—well, no, I drove up as far as that turn down there, and walked the rest." At this, the Frasier woman raised her eyebrows and looked out at the dirt road that wound down the mountainside.

“You made it all the way up there in a motorcar? The roads ain’t usually too good. They get washed out with the slightest rain.”

“I’m sure they must, but they’re fine now, such a run of clear days we’ve had.”

“They’re talking bout putting a paved road all up in through here,” Elsie says, watching Miriam closely for reaction. “But you must already know that.”

“A 100-mile road along the ridge. They’ve got some of it in already, the CCC boys been working hard. Have you seen any of it?”

“No, I ain’t,” and then more formally, stiffly: “Come in, now.”

In the kitchen, Miriam sat where Elsie gestured, in a hand-caned chair at a smooth wooden table. In the corner, a pump stood over a basin; running water. An autochrome—maybe even one of those new Kodachromes—of a family on a picnic was tacked on one wall. None of the still figures smiling in the sunlight, caught in carefully posed mid-action, looked familiar, no shades of Elsie or her kin. It might have been store-bought.

Miriam sat across from Elsie, accepted a cold sweetened tea, and began to talk as she’d planned. “I’ve been two months at the school over in Weakley Hollow,” she said. She’d taken over after the teacher before her, Mr. Sexton, had run off no one knew where, with no one would say who. She knew the children, knew their lives.

Sitting in Elsie’s kitchen, looking at three cut spring Trillium in a glass on the windowsill, Miriam told her that she was a teacher, bona fide, with a master of arts degree from University of Virginia, received four years ago: August the 31, 1928. She did not tell her that before, with a bachelor of arts from William and Mary, she had spent three years making sketching merchandise at Yellar’s department store in Elicott, for newspaper advertisements. That was before she married, and put her education to use. Nor did she tell Elsie about the



Department of the Interior, which was the reason she was here, officially—to help facilitate the resettlement. Fifteen families in this hollow alone, over 430 counting the two neighboring gaps. She knew the families, and they asked her to find out how would they take the relocation, these type of folk.

From what she'd seen so far, they were passive to a fault. Bill Gentry in Weakley said he might as well go as stay, and Miriam assumed he spoke for most of his neighbors. Struggling with droughts, with bad soil, what was there to keep them here but the force of habit and their own ignorance of all that was beyond these hills? Most would go smoothly, she was increasingly sure. Perhaps they didn't understand that it was for good, perhaps they didn't care. These were simple folk, good old-fashioned people who wouldn't spin a complicated picture in their heads; they'd do what they had to, they'd do what was right. That at least was a blessing.

But I'm here as a teacher, really, she thought, looking past the three white flowers to the woods beyond the house. First and foremost. Here for the children.

\* \* \*

The sun had moved three-quarters farther down in the sky when Miriam stopped in at Gladys McCarty's. The kitchen was filthy, and Miriam hated to put her arm down on the table. Dust clung in strange storm-cloud gathers in the corners of the room; table scraps and splatterings from the stove lined the cracks in the wood floor. The windows had a film so the daylight coming through looked sickly and dangerous. She didn't make notes in her book, but logged the status of this woman's housekeeping in her mind. It should have been

no surprise, but she had gotten comfortable at Elsie Frasier's place and forgotten where she was. Here was a woman, Gladys McCarty, who could neither read nor write. She said she'd never had but five months' schooling in her life.

Her dark hair, from the looks of it, was long unwashed, pulled back with looked to be a rag. Miriam could smell the oily scent of her scalp, could see the flecks of skin loose along the line of her part.

"And the children?" Miriam asked, her pen poised above her book, ready to note.

"Three. Candace's 10, Joe's 7 and then the baby."

"Are the older ones in school?"

"Yes, most days 'cept when they have to help around here because John—that's my husband, you know—come down with the croup. But they go most days. They like it."

"If you lived in the valley," Miriam said, "they'd go to school every day. You wouldn't need to have them running things around here." She thought of the rough cabin, with its three small rooms for all the family. The ramshackle siding, the spring house with its busted door, hanging on a hinge; the outhouse, no plumbing. "In the valley, you'd have indoor plumbing, and it's electrified all over the place now. Think of all the things you could do. You could get an electrified sewing machine. Get a radio."

She nodded but her face registered no expression.

Miriam did not know it, then, the baby lay breathing weakly in his crib in the room off the kitchen.

\* \* \*

It wasn't until the next visit—three weeks after the first—that she saw the baby. Elsie wasn't home, so Miriam continued on up to the McCarty's, stopping off at a few other homesteads along the way. When Gladys opened the door, Miriam saw Elsie was there with her, and saw her eyes harden as soon as they found Miriam.

“Mrs. Sizer, I didn't think you were—”

“Miriam, please. Call me Miriam.”

“I didn't think you were coming. The baby's sick. We've been trying and Elsie's been helping and we can't get him to stop crying and he won't take any food, and we've tried everything, this isn't his usual.”

That was the first time Miriam saw the boy. She knew immediately what had to be done. The right thing was to get the baby out. The right thing was to make it well. It would die. There was no question about what the right thing was.

The next morning, back in her own sitting room, she called Dr. Rosser in Luray, described the child. His response was quick. “Malnourished, I'd say. Or born early. I never heard of the undergrowth, but it's maybe a vitamin or foliate deficiency. The mother didn't take care when she was pregnant.”

“She didn't know any better,” Miriam said. “They work hard just to survive up there.”

“Of course. Blighty Hollow, you said? Where is that?”

“South of Old Rag.”

“That up there in where they're talking about making a park?”

“That area. Used to be called Boone's Hollow, but no one calls it that anymore.”

“You're staying up there?”

“No, just teaching, and doing some work with the families there, to help them.”

“Is she a smoker, the mother?”

“She might be, I don’t—“

“Mrs. Sizer, if you can get him here, we’ll get him well. He’s survived this long, that’s good. We can get him nourished. But we can’t wait forever. Sometimes—and I can’t say this has happened—sometimes there are cerebral bleeds. We can often drain fluid if we need to.”

“She’ll want to know how long it will take, until he’s well?”

“You know we can’t say for sure. Could be a month, could be six.”

“You say you can take him right away?”

“Right away, bring him in as soon as you can. Every day counts, I mean it.”

“I’ll tell her.”

\* \* \*

To her husband, Miriam said that night, “There’s fifteen families in that hollow, and most don’t have running water unless you count the spring. Only two got electricity. The ones lowest, by the creek, got farmable land, but you should see some of the makeshift terraces they built up the hillside just to try to scratch out something from that land. And then there’s Elsie Frasier, who went and got pregnant twice and says she has no interest in a husband, and never did. She’s a difficult woman, and she’s got it in for me.”

He looked at her and she could see he was proud. “You’ll survive,” he said, touching his palm to her knee.

“It’s the most amazing thing, Gib. It is. It’s a beautiful place, though, you can see why they’d stay. I’d hate to leave it. It’s like time forgot it. You go there and you’re looking at history living right there. Our ancestors, walking around among us. Elsie Frasier said if strangers come up unannounced and don’t answer the right way they consider it fair to fire a shot. Imagine? It’s like the frontier days up there.”

She didn’t tell him Elsie Frasier lived in a two-story frame house with brick and stone. Or that there was a Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogue in the front room, a phonograph and four 78s in the sitting room. Not from deliberate omission; she just hadn’t really seen them, familiar as they were.

\* \* \*

Gladys never learned to read or write—no one in her family did. But Abigail Foster, who’s 15 and goes to vacation school, can. And so once a week, Gladys walks up the mountain to the McCarty place, sits on the porch, and speaks out her letters for Abigail to write on pieces of cut paper. She talks too fast, always, and Abigail has to ask her to slow down. Some of the things Gladys says, Abigail’s never seen written before, so she has to guess at the spelling.

Gladys takes the heavy paper down to Johnson’s to be carried with the other post to Luray. That’s where the baby is, down to the hospital, getting well.

*Dear Mrs. Sizer, I am writing to tell you that I am missing my John awful, and hoping he has not forgot me and who I am, which is his mother who loves him. I know it was the right thing to send him down there to be cured, but I am hoping he is doing well enough now to come back home where we are very much wanting him to be back with his family. I have received the money you sent and I thank you. I am using some*

*of it to buy a bottle of Circle "A" Ginger Ale for him because it was always what he could keep down and help him to take some food for a meal. This I send, along with the love and prayers of all of us. Please send word that he'll be coming back soon and I will come and meet you at Johnson's to receive him. Yours very truly, Mrs. G. E. McCarty*

\* \* \*

"She never smoked and she don't drink, neither," Elsie said. They were on the porch this time, the boys off in the woods together. Elsie had given her a limeade in a glass with a small chip in the rim. Miriam turned the glass so her lips wouldn't have to touch the jagged ridge.

"I never said she did."

"You oughtn't have asked her that. She's got guilt enough as it is, thinking she's the reason the child is sick. You all but told her she is."

"The doctor asked me, that's all I was saying."

"Of course the doctor asked. We're up here with nothing but moonshine and t'bacca, right? And none of us can read or write or do much more than stammer out our names."

Miriam stayed quiet, letting Elsie quell her anger. After a few moments, she said, "They're moving out in Weakley, did you hear?"

"I heard. I heard George Pollack over there in Skyland is taking up some of that land they're vacating. I heard they're burning houses."

"They *buying* houses, buying land to build the park."

“They’re *burning* houses too, if you didn’t hear it. They set the old Boss Morris place on fire after he left it. They been giving parts of houses away, too, to other folks who said they’d leave with it. The CCC boys been carrying off doors and shutters and things. Disgraceful.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“Have you told them we’re just going to leave, just like that?”

“I’m not telling anyone anything. I’m here to help you.”

“Help me what? Help me clear off the land and make way for a damn road? Like you helped Gladys McCarty?”

“Maybe you’ll decide to leave, that’s up to you. I’m not here to make you leave.”

“And the money they’re giving, you think it’s fair prices?”

“I don’t know the details, but it’s the US government. Yes, I’m sure it’s fair prices, and now, with this Depression, I suspect it’s more than fair what they’re offering, more than anyone else could give.”

“But you don’t know that.”

“No, I don’t know that.”

In the silence, they watched the boys return to view. Three of them—Elsie’s two and Miriam’s Will. Miriam’s boy covered in the dust from the clay soil, the hems of dungarees a brick red. Elsie’s youngest, Appie clapping at the dog, Lyle watching over them all like a father, taller every day like he was sprouting at the knee.

“What’s the word on little Johnny McCarty?” Elsie asked.

“He’s doing fine. I took a letter up to her earlier, from Dr. Rosser. He’s put on 20 pounds, more than double his weight when they brought him in. He’s talking, saying words.”

“He’ll be coming back then?” Elsie asked. Miriam could have heard the answer in Elsie’s voice, if she’d listened for it.

“I think they need to keep him a little longer. I’ll be taking the letters to them from Gladys though, as long as she writes them.”

“Of course.”

\* \* \*

*Dear Mrs. Sizer, it has been five months now and I have not seen baby John. I am pleased to hear he is well and I hope that means he will be home any day now. Please write with the time and I will be at Johnson’s to meet you.*

*Truly yours in hope, Gladys M.*

\* \* \*

Gladys and John stood on Elsie’s stoop, a letter in John’s chapped hands, apologies—always, too sorry, that girl—flying out and out of Gladys’ mouth.

The letter was short, written in a rounded, jaunty script that suited Miriam Sizer perfectly. It was optimistic and simple and so carefully done. “It’s good news,” Elsie said. “Says that already John’s put on five pounds and is crying.” She read slowly, “That may not sound like progress to a worried mother such as yourself but it means he’s healthy enough to produce tears. The doctors didn’t have to do much but give him a small drip, some nutrients and heaps of rest. He is getting much attention and love, and is no longer suffering at all.”



Gladys interrupted to ask, “When’s she say he’s coming home?”

Elsie scanned the last few lines. “Doesn’t,” she said. “Soon, I guess, from the sound of it.”

John arched an eyebrow. “Nothing about that?” He laid a hand on his wife’s leg, as though to hold back whatever was rising.

“Nothing,” Elsie said. She turned the paper over and back, looking for the missing piece she knew she wouldn’t find. First it was the men from New York, coming up and offering 5 dollars an acre for mining rights. You keep the land, they told them, we just buy what’s under it. For those who’d been foolish enough to bite—and several had, though none in Blighty—there were a fine few years. But then in come the machines and the surveyors and there was nothing could be done about it. And now the rumors about clearing out the hollows to build a highway for the city people, or a park or some damn thing.

It was one thing and then another, all the way back to the beginning. But the Frasier had lived here for four generations. Had lived and married and birthed and farmed and bled here and nothing could tear her off it. There were Lyle and Appie to consider, too. Neither had any interest in life in the valley—even after their father came back talking of electric stoves and wall-to-wall carpeting, paved streets and bicycles. Nothing swayed them; the mountain was in their blood.

“Its’ going to be fine,” Elsie said. Gladys gives her a wide-eyed look like a child and Elsie had to hold her hands down to keep from slapping her face.

John stayed on after Gladys left, to talk. “They’re moving out in Weakley, did you hear?” he said.

“The Skyland resort’s taking up some of the land,” Elsie said. “I heard they’re burning houses. They set the old Boss Morris place on fire ’fore he was even a hunnerd yards away.”

“The CCC boys been giving away parts, too. Letting folks carry off doors and shutters and things. Shameful.”

They sat in silence for a minute, the sun low in the hills behind them. Elsie lit her daddy’s pipe and passed it to John.

“Things changing,” she said.

“I guess,” John said. “Not everything, though.”

\* \* \*

Charles is irked about her taking the car again, but Miriam insists. She wants to go to Dr. Lewis’ private practice, just up the road from the hospital. Wants to know when the McCarty baby will be well enough to travel. Tell him she can take him back up the mountain herself when he’s ready.

Dr. Lewis leans forward across his desk. “Yes,” he said. “Well there’s good news there. He’s back to adequate weight, is talking and moving around like a normal boy his age. We’ve arranged for a family in Sperryville to take him in, make sure he stays healthy.”

“How long?” Miriam asked.

“What do you mean, how long?”

“How long with the family?”

“Forever, I hope. That’s what they signed on for.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Adoption, they signed the papers.”

“And his parents did, too?”

Dr. Lewis is quiet for a moment. “They agreed, yes. We got their approval.”

“But I just had a letter from the Frasier woman—”

“I’m sorry, Miriam, I have other patients to see.”

Miriam nodded but remained sitting. “Okay,” she said finally. “Right.”

As she backed Charles’ car out of its spot, she thought, *It’s the right thing, after all. It is.*

It nagged at her, but there was nothing more she could do. She thought of the errands she had yet to run. There wasn’t much time before she’d have to pick up Charles, and it really wouldn’t do to be late.

## Theft

Thursday, and Joy is home from work, her white blouse stained in spots just beneath her breasts. *Grease*, she tells her mother, although her mother has not asked. Turning away modestly, Joy slips it over her head and lets it fall on the washing machine that stands in a corner of the kitchen. Wraps herself in her arms as she heads to her room.

There, she begins the ritual of shedding the rest of the uniform, separating clean clothes from soiled, and putting the old white sneakers in their place in the closet. This time, when she finishes, Joy empties her purse on the floor in front of her dresser. Kneeling, she throws the few lipsticks, eyeliner pencils and chewing-gum wrappers to one side, carelessly and without interest. There are, inexplicably, several paper clips and a thumbtack, which she pushes over to the same pile. Next come the pens and tiny notebook her mother makes her carry, in case of emergency. She has never asked exactly how these would come in handy (she pictures herself madly scribbling Help-Me notes and throwing them on the ground, like a trail of breadcrumbs), but she carries them anyway; her mother has a tendency to be right about things and Joy fears that to flout the warnings would leave her defenseless, foolishly responsible for her own ruin. There are other things in her purse: subway tokens, loose change from tips, and the fork.

The fork is silver, though not really she knows, and there are traces of old fingerprints on the handle. She holds it against her palm, squeezing it tightly enough to hurt. She's not sure why she does this, or why she took it in the first place. Thinking of it makes her feel ashamed. Panicked, ashamed. Someone will know, someone will figure it out. She

has committed a crime, and worse, a violation of 'The Rules, and for what? She's condemned herself to some terrible consequence for a silly, useless object.

There is something else beneath the shame, the fear. Something lurking that feels good. She did it, and no one will know. *She did it.* She puts the fork in her second drawer, underneath stockings and socks, and tells herself to think of something else.

In the shower, Joy watches her hands, her palms and fingers dotted with perfect droplets of water from the grease on the food she helps cook and serve. At the end of August, when her friends were loading up their cars and driving off to college, she found an ad in the paper and was hired by Lou, the manager at Rae's. He is at least fifty, a large man with gray hair around his ears. During the day, he sits in his small room at the back of the diner, at a desk cluttered with papers and over-filled ashtrays. She doesn't really know what he does there in his little room, but she knows it is not a job she would ever want, the same way she knew college was not for her. Not yet, anyway. Not on her parents' salaries.

She scrubs herself carefully with soap that smells strongly of lavender. When she is clean and stripped of the odor of cheeseburgers and tuna melts, she steps out onto the bath mat and dries herself off. The bathroom mirror is foggy from the heat of the shower and she rubs a spot clear with the corner of her towel. As usual, she does not like what she sees: a pasty-white face and too-dark eyes. She likes her hair better wet hair, though. Usually it is a dull blond that makes her appear even paler, a chalk outline of a real person.

She makes faces into the mirror and smiles, embarrassed; it is dangerous to look in mirrors for too long. For one thing, you could be considered vain, and she knows she has nothing to be vain about.

She allows herself only a quick peek at her naked body—the mirror captures only pale breasts and the top of her stomach, she doesn't look down—and then covers herself tightly with a dark blue towel. She feels strange but can't pin it down. Her guilt has returned.

Once she is dressed, she thinks again of the fork. It now seems very silly. It's no great secret; she has stolen *a fork*. Even the word "stolen" is too dramatic. She took a fork from a place that has thousands of them, from a place where forks disappear all the time. They fall and wedge themselves under counters or stoves and are left there, or they get bent and are thrown away. She breathes out heavily, thinking that she should just get rid of the thing, wondering whatever possessed her to take it in the first place. But she doesn't move to get it, leaves it hidden in her drawer, remembering how terrifying it had been to hold it in her hand and slip it into her purse. She was afraid of being caught, of being called a thief, or worse: she could have been fired.

\* \* \*

The day she applied at the restaurant, Lou, the owner, took her in with a sweeping look and nodded his head. "You've waited tables before?"

"I have," she lied, and named a restaurant on the other side of the city that had shut down last year. "I was there for almost two years," which would make her 17 when she started and introduced the complication of school—but there were nights and weekends, and of course people must do it.

"And you're reliable?"

"I am," she nodded.

"Fine," he said, breathing laboriously through his nose. "Can you start this Thursday?"

She could and she did, wearing thick-soled white sneakers and a pressed white shirt with a butterfly collar, a khaki-colored skirt and an apron tied around her waste, with two marsupial pouches for her tips, pens, and order book.

It wasn't bad, the first day or after. She found she could look customers in the eye and hold her pen and voice steady. She forgot, sometimes, to ask how they were, and making small talk was awkward—but she was a smiler, deferential by nature and that seemed enough. There were three others on shift with her: Theresa, Susan and Pam. Only Theresa spoke much to her; the others were at least twice as old as Joy and Theresa and seemed by disposition uninterested in anything. Lou kept himself more or less locked inside a little office in back, at a desk cluttered with papers and overfilled ashtrays.

Joy didn't know what he did back there, but she knew it wasn't a job she would ever want, the same way she knew college was not for her. Not yet, anyway. Not on her parents' salaries. When her few friends loaded up their cars and headed off to college, she hugged and smiled and vowed, like they, to write, wondering if they had reached the end of their friendships.

\* \* \*

The fork is the first thing she has ever stolen. She can't remember ever event wanting to steal, although most of the girls she knew in high school did it. Marcie Steinman, who was for a short while Joy's very best friend, prided herself in having lifted something from nearly

every store she entered. If Marilee wanted something she couldn't afford—usually something hideous and matronly, but expensive—she nearly always found a way to get it. She considered it her social duty, a Robin Hood set-up with no middle man; Marcie cast as both thief and deserving poor. Most people Joy knew had at least stolen a pack of gum as children, before they knew better. It's a wonder, really, that she herself never took anything without paying for it.

And this, after all, is only a lousy fork.

From somewhere in the house, Joy senses more than hears the electric buzz of a far-off television. Pretty soon, her father will come home and join her mother in front of the television and they'll eat, and watch their programs.

Her parents are both too tired after work, her mother has explained, to deal with Joy's attitude, which she considers "difficult." At dinner—when it's not in front of the television—conversation has been replaced by silences and newspaper pages turning. Her parents never stop to say, "Listen to this," for which Joy is grateful. She reads books; the news doesn't interest her. It is too much to read about the tragedies that can never be changed. Even the gory details of rapes or hackings-up are no longer enough to hold her attention.

The books she likes are paperbacks that she finds in drugstores—and pays for. There's a reliable amount of passion, betrayal and comeuppance that keeps Joy reading. That the meek and innocent can accomplish great acts of courage to regain their honor, or something resembling it, reassures Joy in a way she doesn't quite understand. Her parents, never big readers, no longer ask her what the books are about. It's clear they find them unrealistic, useless.



Some nights, Joy puts her book down and watches her parents. She thinks of prodding their fears, casually saying something like, "Today, at Rae's, a gunman broke in, tied us all up and demanded money. He threatened to kill Angie." Or, "Hey, there was an explosion at the fry station today, right next to where I was standing. They said Mac was burned on 30 percent of his body."

She doesn't say these things, partly out of a sense that it's wrong to lie, and because her parents, having no idea who any of the other waitresses or cooks are, and would ask frantic, predictable questions about them—where they live, whether their parents are divorced. Mostly, though, it's not their reactions she's afraid of. If they didn't respond, if they only murmured, half-listening, Joy is certain she would disappear, cease to matter, and to exist, just like that.

When her brother was living here and she was still in high school, her parents had seemed like the only people worth knowing. They seemed alive, full of knowledge and ideas. They lived in the world. There was never this type of silence in the house. She was relieved, in a way, when Stephen moved in with his girlfriend; now she'd have her parents all to herself. She imagined that the circle that was their family would close tighter around her. Instead, it seems to have shrunk to a tiny pinpoint, big enough only for her parents. She didn't expect this, to see her parents' lives grow softer and softer, a ritual played out daily, a habit.

\* \* \*

On a cold Sunday morning, Joy is the one who answers the phone, so she is the first to hear the news.

"Staying out of trouble, kiddo?" Stephen asks. For a second Joy feels nervous, but before she can answer he is telling her about the trip. She hears only a little of it. His voice is high, his words coming so fast she has to sit down on the little chair by the phone. She tries to concentrate. Language lessons, the metro, berets—laughter as he rolls over this word—a little apartment on an actual "rude" or something, maybe he'll take a job and stay longer.

"Wait, what?" she asks, trying to slow him down.

"I know, I know. It's going to be great. Listen, you can come visit. We'll be there for a whole month. Sheila's got this thing, it's kind of hard to explain, it's kind of a job, working with this chemist who wants to learn English and we're going over there to—"

"To France," Joy says.

"—to translate and live and you know, *experience*."

Joy is stunned. No one in their family has ever been out of the country. They took a trip, when she was little and Stephen was barely in middle school, to Nebraska, to see the wide-open Plains. She hardly remembers anything but the smell of gas and hot vinyl in the station wagon. This is something else entirely. "Wow," she says. "That's cool."

"You can come visit," he says again. But she has never been on an airplane.

\* \* \*

Thursday and Theresa wants to have lunch. Touches her shoulder, says, let's go, we'll take it together today. Joy nods, gratitude and nervousness spreading like a chemical spill inside her.

She runs through the customers, their orders, everything that has filled her day until now, searching for a story, a joke to offer Theresa. Nothing. What will she say?

The tips of Theresa's cigarettes are tinged with her lipstick. A not-quite red. It's a great color, Joy should have it, she should wear lipstick more. Should know how to pick it, and make it look good.

At lunch, Theresa asks, "How about Lou?" A mouthful of smoke snakes around the words.

Joy doesn't know what she means, so she laughs and, fingering her own DuMaurier settled in the ashtray, says, "Yeah. Lou."

"No. I mean, what do you think he does when he's not there? Think he's the Rosedale Rapist? Maybe he's a porno actor, or something. Think he's married?"

"Maybe," Joy says, she's never even thought of this before. All he ever does is sit in his little office, at a desk cluttered with papers and over-filled ashtrays. She doesn't really know what he does, just that it's not a job she would ever want, the same way she knew college was not for her. Not yet, anyway. Not on her parents' salaries.

"Hey," Joy says, suddenly inspired, "what do you think his wife's named? If he has one?"

"I don't know. Gertrude. I bet he's married to a total square, some fat woman with blue hair and big boxy purse, lipstick around her lips."

"Hildegard."

"Cunt-essa," Theresa says. Joy has never said that word out loud, and hearing it brings out a laugh from deep inside her that is almost surprising.

"I can't stand it there sometimes," Theresa says. "I mean, sometimes I can't even *handle* the smell of another goddamn thing. The grease. The bullshit. Who needs it?" She looks at Joy, "You know?"

Joy nods, finds herself saying, "I know. I've got to do it, though. I'm taking classes at York. Just two right now: Philosophy of Religion and 'Externalities and Interior Space.'"

"What *is* that?" Theresa asks.

Joy shrugs, "You know," she says. "It's just requirements."

"I'm taking psych. I swear, my professor is completely insane. Sometimes she stops what she's doing and just mutters to herself. But she's nice enough."

"What do you want to be?"

"I want to work with children, like in social work. Or, I don't know."

She doesn't ask Joy, which is good, because what would she say? She's not in college, of course she's not in college. *Externalities and Interior Space*. Where did that come from? A giggle comes out like a snort, and Theresa looks at her, then shrugs.

She used to say she wanted to be a nurse. But that was ages ago, and besides, she was never strong in science.

"You know," Theresa leans in, "I think maybe Lou's wife died of cancer a couple years ago. Vondra said something about it last shift. Said that's why he sits in his office and never gives anyone hell, even when they deserve it."

Joy feels ashamed and betrayed. They were laughing, joking. And the whole time, this. She stares at her sandwich. She knows nothing of death, but she feels loss. Loss she understands. Small losses: Goober Ooder, her goldfish in grade 3. Mr. McCulskey, dropping her off from after-school, and nothing else.

"My father has cancer," she says to Theresa. "It's been really hard. They don't know how much longer he's got."

It's not true! She almost says: not true, not true, I don't know why I. It's not. She's dooming her family. Just get back to work and its small, un hurtful talk. She takes an enormous bite of her sandwich, nearly choking herself, covering her mouth with her hand. Goober Ooder, though, that's really true. She did lose him.

"Shit. I'm sorry," Theresa says. "Really, Joy. Sorry."

\* \* \*

On the way back, they stop at a corner store. Joy goes in. Joy goes in while Theresa stays outside to smoke. There is a display of pantyhose and a tall swiveling rack of sunglasses right next to the door; she nearly bumps them as she enters. Catching sight of herself in the small mirror, Joy looks down reflexively. At the counter, she asks for a pack of DuMaurier King-Size filters. "A little young, aren't you?" the man asks. "Nineteen," she says. He looks at her, finally saying, "That it, then?" She nods and he turns to pull the boxes from the stacked that color the shelves behind his head like a pop-art painting.

At that moment, Joy's arm darts to the right, pulls a piece of plastic from a display case, drops it into her purse. He turns around and she looks up with her hand still deep in her purse.

"Four-eighty," he says.

She lets go—a small, sharp something that she knows from her peripheral vision to be a pair of cheap plastic earrings on allergenic, non-surgical posts—and grabs her wallet. He

studies her over the tops of his glasses. Shit. The room sways; does he see how her hands shake? Then, he's back into his paper and she's out, out onto the street, the familiar noise of traffic and heel-strikes on the sidewalk, Teresa stubbing out her cigarette. Fabulous. She feels electrified, part of the motion around her.

\* \* \*

When her brother calls to say he and Sheila have decided to get married, a scarf, a cheap lipstick called "Moonlight Rose," and a pair of too-big sunglasses with purple plastic rims have been hidden next to the fork and earrings. Joy is the one who answers the phone when it rings, so she is the first to hear the news.

"Staying out of trouble, kiddo?" Stephen asks. For a second Joy is made nervous by this, but before she can answer he is telling her about the wedding. He is excited, she can tell. He rushes her through their conversation, shaping it with his own thoughts and questions, leaving her able only to answer with short replies. She is exhausted by the time she hands the phone to her mother.

"He's getting married," she says breathlessly.

"What!" Her mother grabs the phone. From the sound of her voice, you'd think she was the one getting married. Joy supposes her parents have been waiting for this news for quite a while.

Sometime during the phone call, it is arranged that Joy will be a bridesmaid. Probably this is more Stephen's idea than Sheila's. Joy hardly knows her, and in fact has never even

met any of the other women who are going to be bridesmaids. Sheila is a part of her brother's life that she has never been included in.

The following weeks are busy with plans for the wedding. Joy has very little to do with it all. On a dark Saturday afternoon, her mother comes in and sits on Joy's bed, a scrap of fabric in her hand.

"I thought you'd like to see the color of the dresses." She holds the fabric out to Joy. It is a rustling sort of material, a bright green that has blue somewhere in it. The blue moves in lines when she holds it up to the light. She likes it, but can't imagine this brightness against the pure white of the bride's dress. It is more the color of a prom dress. She tells this to her mother, who smiles and says, "Well, you know Sheila."

Her mother is buzzing, patting Joy's leg. "I think it'll look nice." Joy rolls her eyes and sees her mother stiffen.

"I think it'll be nice, too," she says, and her mother smiles. They sit for a moment and then her mother looks around her room, taking in the pictures and posters, and, she imagines, the dust. There is a Rolling Stones poster behind her door and her mother's eyes seem to hang on it for a moment. "That was Stephen's, right?" she says. It is more a statement than a question. "I remember when he got that."

Joy can't remember where it came from, she hardly notices it anymore. She has seven records, but has not listened to any of them in a long time. When she was younger, she would sit in the dark, singing Ruby Tuesday along with the Stones. It moved her, made feel dramatic and important.

"Listen," her mother says. "This wedding is going to be *fun*." She pats Joy's leg again before she gets up.

At night, Joy hears her parents speaking loudly on the telephone, telling neighbors and relatives that they will soon have a new daughter. They say it with a laugh, of course, but something about all of this disturbs her. She feels, in some ways, as if she is being replaced.

"Her parents are divorced," she hears her mother explain on the phone one night. "Mom's in Milwaukee, so I'm sort of doing the duty." Her mother spends a great deal of time with Sheila, having lunch, going shopping, always coming home with some story or another to share with Joy and her father. Dinner is now punctuated with wedding talk.

It all makes her slightly uneasy, as if her family has opened suddenly, in a burst, to let Sheila in, and Joy is still hanging on the edge of it. Sometimes she wonders whether all of this is because Sheila has gotten pregnant, like some long-awaited manifestation of all her parents' worries and warnings when Stephen first moved in with her. This possibility relieves Joy, and she thinks it without any guilt at all.

Guilt has not been a problem for her. She has begun taking things more often. It has become a habit, like wearing lipstick or smoking DuMauriers. Usually, she does it without thinking. She is no longer worried about getting caught. She picks things up the way she would as if they were her own, only more carefully, and buries them in her second drawer. It is a power, really, to have this secret, this power to possess without anyone knowing. Thinking about it makes her smile. Like a trade, she thinks. I am replacing the spaces left by the things I take with bits of myself, or else an emptiness that is all because of me.

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In the weeks before the wedding, Joy has acquired a gaudy ring with a stone that is supposed to look like a diamond, a pen that says, "Toronto is for you" in bright blue script, two postcards with boring pictures of smiling people on the front, and a bra. The bra was the hardest thing to manage. It is red, with lace and a tiny flower in the middle. She slipped it on over her own bra in the dressing room at Eaton's and walked right out. She thinks of these things as being saved-up, in case she ever needs them. For what, she isn't exactly sure. She doesn't even really think she'd use any of them.

On the morning of Stephen's wedding, she wakes to a house full of noise. The kettle in the kitchen is whistling, and she can hear it as if it is in her own room. Her mother is humming and walking quickly around the house. She hears a zipper being done up and the sound of heels on the linoleum. Her father is in the shower; a radio is playing in her parents' room. She sits on her bed trying to wake up, remembering what day it is. The dress is hanging in the closet, with the clothes on either side of it pushed away. She takes it out and lays it on her bed. She takes a new pair of stockings, still in their plastic bag, from her second drawer and sees the red bra. She picks it up with the stockings and closes the drawer.

For a moment, she considers wearing everything: the earrings and anklet, the scarf, the ring, all piled up on her body. She could wear sunglasses and delicate heels that click when she walks. It feels almost like a dare and makes her heart race as she thinks of it. For a moment, she doesn't move. Then, slowly, she closes the drawer and begins to roll her stockings up over her legs.

The three of them drive to the church, where everything happens so quickly Joy can barely keep track of it. All around her is movement, color and airy kisses between adults. Only when she is standing with the other bridesmaids, who have introduced themselves

politely and coolly, is she finally able to see everything the way it is. Stephen stands beside Sheila, who is smiling at the priest. She does not look pregnant, Joy thinks disappointedly. She looks nervous. Stephen looks even worse, as if he is about to crumble. He holds body in a way that suggests he might. There are people everywhere, rows and rows of them. Nothing else is in sharp focus; the noise like background static.

As she stands waiting beside the altar, Joy thinks of the small white garter she watched Sheila slip into. She feels the familiar crescendo of excitement, like nerves. She would like to take this whole awful scene and fold it, as if it were a photograph. She would hide it underneath layers of socks and stockings.

## Friday

I knew it was them, it was always them on Fridays. They were quieter than usual, but I could hear them talking as they walked to our door. It got me up out of bed.

Sitting on the stairs, leaning my forehead against the banister dowel, I could only see a square of the action. They were in the kitchen now. Definitely drunk, doing what looked like the shuffle, Aunt Peg weaving and stepping, trying to stay in front of Uncle Al. “Stop it, Albert. Come one. Calm yourself,” she was saying.

“Let me by, for chrissake,” Uncle Al said. He was plastered, slurring, fresh from the VFW—but that was nothing new.

“Let it *go*, Albert. I seriously don’t understand why you’re so—” and then she gasped and stepped back fast. “Jesus Christ. Albert Stanley,” she said quietly, her hands flying out in front of her.

“Yeah. That’s right. I said back off.” I saw Uncle Al’s back as he moved past her out of the kitchen.

Friday nights, Uncle Al’s stories made everyone laugh, my father most of all.

Weeks when my father wasn’t around—when he was off in Cuba or Panama or Honduras—Uncle Al came by quieter and stood drinking water and swaying, asking how things were. He let Peg and my mother talk, although they never seemed to have much to say to one another. They were roughly the same age, from neighboring towns in Iowa, and had married brothers who brought them east within a few years of each other—but that was all you could say about the two of them together.

My mother was everything Peg was not. She was tall and blond; Peg was short, stocky, and was plump, kindly and looked like an aunt even in her high school pictures. She wore cable-knit sweaters and beige skirts that hit mid-calf. My mother wore Levis and tank tops and cut the neckline of her tee-shirts so they showed off the freckles on her chest. She smoked, she laughed, she said whatever occurred to her.

In her own house, Peg took care of things and had them under control. That much anyone could see. On Fridays, they went a little nuts, but that was just for fun.

“Frank,” Aunt Peg called now. “Frank!” My father was in the living room, with Mark and my mother. It was strange, the way they could be in the same room together. But we were all getting used to it.

“Come on in, guys. We’re in the living room. There’s a program on but we’re almost finished.”

“No. No, you don’t understand—”

“Hey. Albert,” my father said kindly.

And then my mother screamed.

\* \* \*

Most of the kids at school could care less about what my father did for a living. A few of them, though, had questions. “Where does he go?” “When do you get to see him?”

Thomas DiRobbio said, “Maybe he’s a spy.”

“Shut up,” I said. He wasn’t a spy. He was in the military and had to travel for work. We almost never got to go with him, which was fine with my mother. “I will not uproot Joseph, and our lives,” I once heard her say. “Even if you’re leaving me an army widow.”

When it came to stories, my father was the worst. He hated to tell about anything. Uncle Albert had stormed the beachhead at Normandy and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. After a few drinks, he’d tell you everything and in more detail than you ever wanted. Despite it all, had what he called “a shit deal of the deck.” He busted his knee in a training exercise, hurt it so badly he got shipped home to Rhode Island. That’s how he got into real estate.

When my father was away, my mother’s rule was a family dinner at least twice a week. I preferred to eat at friends’ houses, where there was a lot of noise and passing plates and something to talk about. The Bradfords across the street had three kids. Pete and Will went to Sexton County middle school with me. Mark was 18. Their real mother was out west somewhere. Their dad’s second wife, Mrs. Bradford, was trying for step-mom, but it wasn’t going over well.

I ate a lot of dinners there. Sometimes they asked me to call my house and invite my mother. Usually, she’d come.

When Mr. Bradford’s car skidded off the highway on his way back from a visit to his father, who was dying in South Carolina, my mother and I went across the street. My mother held Mrs. Bradford’s hand. I went upstairs to Will and Peter’s room, where we were more or less silent the whole time. All I could say was, “I’m sorry” but they didn’t want to talk about it.

A week after that, I listened to my mother say into the telephone, “Frank, it’s just for a while, so he doesn’t have to change schools. California would be so disruptive and from

what I understand, that woman's got her priorities all wrong. That's why they're here in the first place. Carol can't handle them, and the Essexes have already agreed to take Will and Pete for the rest of the school year. It makes sense. Yes. And besides, it'll be good for Joey."

I helped my mother pull the bottom half of my old bunk bed from the garage and set it up in the basement. When Mark moved in, I carried his boxes of LPs across the street to our house. I told him I liked Pink Floyd. "Check this out," he said, and put on an album I'd never heard.

\* \* \*

"Oh no. No you don't," Albert said. "We're well beyond talking."

I couldn't see anything, but Albert's voice made the back of my neck pulse. Without standing, I slid down to the bottom step. I felt like I was trying to squeeze myself flat against the railing.

No one spoke until my father said, "Albert. Be reasonable. What are you planning here?"

"What I'm planning," Albert said, "What I'm planning is what you should have done five months ago. I'm halfway thinking to kill you too, because what kind of a man—"

"Oh stop it, please. Stop this!" Peg's voice was shrill and fluttery.

"Regina, honey, get out of the way," Albert said. "Don't you try protecting that piece of shit." If my mother responded, I didn't hear it.

"Back on the beach," Albert said slowly. "You try it that time and it would never work," his voice was rising to a shout. "We were in the thick of it then, boy, and it was

everywhere and—get your ass *over* here, Bradford. If you think you can just destroy this family, just take advantage. I tell you, you're no better than the fuck-all of Germans I killed."

I couldn't sit there anymore. I had to go see. From the doorway, it was just what I expected. They were standing; my mother in front of Mark, Peg and my father on either side of Uncle Albert. He had a big fishing knife and was waving it around. "Get out of the way," he said again to my mother.

"Gene," my dad said softly. "Please." My mother's eyes darted from Albert's face to my father's, but she didn't move.

I jumped when Albert shoved her to the side and she landed on the couch, seated and stunned. He moved fast toward Mark. From over Albert's shoulder, I could see Mark's face. He never even flinched, just stood there looking Uncle Albert in the eye. He was maybe an inch taller, but Albert was broader, and the smart money would have been on him.

He pushed the tip of the knife against Mark's chest, marking a pock in his shirt. He was whispering something, hissing like a faucet. I heard him say my mother's name. My father charged, pulling and pushing and throwing Albert straight to back of the room and against the sliding door. They tumbled through the screen—ripping it and popping the aluminum door out of its frame—and fell onto the flagstone deck. The knife skittered out and away.

"Albert!" my father yelled, and Albert stopped fighting and lay there, stretched out on the ground.

"God," Albert said, flinging an arm over his eyes. "I can't—"

In the living room, the moment over, my mother reached up toward Mark but he didn't look at her, he just took off running, pushing past me and out the front door.

“Mom?” I said. She looked at me, and lowered her head into her hands. “Oh,” she said through her palms, “Oh, Joe.”

Aunt Peg didn't move outside or over to my mother. She stood in the living room biting her lip and looking up, then at the carpet, then over at the wall, shaking her head like she couldn't believe the décor. “Well,” she said, mostly to herself, “there's a fine end to the day.”



## On the Plane

It's fine, it's fine—she's finally gotten the hang of it. They've given her a pack of gum and blue plastic pin in the shape of wings that her mother stuck through her striped turtleneck. Her lucky shirt, her favorite.

“You okay, Bethie?” her mother asks.

Bethie nods. As long as she keeps her left elbow tense and her eyes out the window, she'll be fine. They'll all be fine. If she stops, if she loses track, forget it. They can't stay up in the air without her. She breaths quietly to herself and curls her fingers around her armrest.

“You sure?” her mother asks. “You're not going to be sick?”

Bethie shakes her head.

“Cause you look weird.”

“Nope.”

“Okay then.”

When the stewardess comes by to ask, Bethie leans up and, behind a cupped hand, mouths into her mother's ear *orange juice*—it is almost soundless, but her mother, who is used to this, tips her head toward her daughter and understands.

Bethie keeps her elbow tensed. Good good.

“Did you have fun at Mama and Pop-pop's?” her mother asks. “And aren't you excited to see Daddy?”

It's hard to breathe. Her eyes sting, her lips taste salty and her face is hot and thumping.

"It's back there," she says. "It's right back *there*."

"Yeah, I know honey," her father says, a hand on her head. "I know, but we can't get it. It's too late. You've got to relax." He was fun and jokey all week, but has been angry since they left the hotel.

On the runway, the plane bounces gently into a turn, the engine revs, slows and revs again.

"But, Wompy. Wompy," she says between gasps.

"Is there a problem?" a stewardess asks. "Is there something you need?" She puts a hand on Bethie's father's shoulder, leans in close. She is gold-blonde and rosy. They smile at each other. Bethie is too upset to mind. Her father smells, like always, of cologne and soap.

"It's a doll," her father says, with a dismissive tone that sets Bethie crying even harder. "A stuffed horse actually. We left it back at the gate."

The stewardess wrinkles her face at Bethie. "Oh no. Poor you. That's so too, too bad." Turning back, she says to Bethie's father, "Would you like a drink?"

Later, her father says, "We had fun though, didn't we, kid? At Disney World?"

Because she is a good girl, she breathes back her tears and nods.

\* \* \*

"Do you have to do that?" Reuben asks. "Chew like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like a horse, all open-mouthed. You chew gum like a cow with its cud."

“My ears hurt,” she says. “If I don’t equalize I’ll be screwed when we land. It’ll take hours and I won’t hear any of the stuff.”

“So then yawn. It works better.”

“Oh yeah? Why don’t you just tell me one of your stories? That’ll help.”

“Very funny.”

“Are you still scared? Or is it just takeoff?”

“I wasn’t scared,” he says. “What makes you think I was scared.”

“Whatever.”

“You know,” he tells her, “Amber Wilson’s doing it with Justin Zandri. I bet they do it in the hotel.”

“No way. They’ll have to stay in the rooms. Mrs. Duffy says she’s taking count every night.”

“Duh, Bethany. Everyone’s planning to sneak out anyway. When my brother’s class went to Washington it was a like a free for all. Until Cathie Morgan tried to kill herself by drinking hairspray.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. She threw up everywhere, called Mrs. Duffy and got everyone in big trouble because no one was in the room with her.”

“So genius, that means they’ll keep an extra eye on us.”

“Not likely. I bet they’re doing their own stuff. They’re on vacation too, you know, from their normal little lives back home.”

“You’re a jackass,” she says, pulling the headphones on, swinging the radio dial from channel to channel. Smiles at him to show she’s not serious.

“This week, I’m going to smoke a cigarette,” she hears him say, before his voice is drowned out by a Pink Floyd song.

\* \* \*

Across the aisle, two teenagers coo at each other. The girl is curled up against the boy, her head on his shoulder. She shoots a look at Beth, pulls a blanket down over herself. Little movements under the blanket and her eyelids flutter, her cheeks flush. The boy watches her face intently.

Beth turns away, over the lap of the woman beside her and out the window. It’s black, no lights below. Grey clouds drift past like galaxies in space.

It’s going to be held at St. Paul’s. That hadn’t occurred to her before. A Catholic church, but her father was Protestant. It’s bullshit. It’s typical.

Her mother and the new husband are coming to meet her plane. For almost a year now, that’s what Beth has called him. Not Adam, but “The New Husband”—as in, “how’s the new husband?” and “What’s the new husband have to say about that?” Her mother lets it slide, although she has said on several occasions that Beth has been “difficult about this whole thing.”

“You could be more of a help,” her mother said to her the last time—the second to last time—they talked on the phone. “I’m not inhuman. I have feelings, you know. This mess has been hard on me, too.”

Yesterday, one of the freshmen came and got her, said there was a call for her on the hall phone. Her mother spoke softly. Stunned. They ended the call with I love you.

For no reason at all, Beth remembers a stupid tantrum she had on a flight back from Orlando, where her father was on business. About a book she'd left in the hotel, or a doll. He had tried to go back for it, but the flight crew wouldn't let him. Or something like that. Most of the trip she'd spent in the hotel and the office park, except for a few hours at Disneyland. World. They rode the Space Coaster and she thought she was going to die from giddiness.

\* \* \*

They've been going in circles all day. It's ludicrous. There's nothing more to say. She unbuckles and stands, grabs her pillow and her magazine. "Excuse me," she says, and he swings his knees into the aisle. She steps over him and walks back to an empty row. She's never seen a plane so empty, and thank god.

She can see his shoulder and the side of his head. He doesn't even turn around to see where she's gone.

Asshole, she thinks. Why are we even bothering?

On the magazine, a tear makes the page transparent, a circle where the type blends with the text beneath.

\* \* \*

"Oh dear," the woman in the Christmas sweater says. "This is a problem."

They're both holding tickets for seat number 17D. They've checked and double checked the flight number, the date. Identical except for the name.

She has to make this flight. And this woman—this idiot in a hideous reindeer sweater, with her lunch-lady hairdo and her trashy neon paperback—refuses to move. Forcing Beth to block the aisle and countless passengers to rub against her, knocking her purse as they pass.

When the flight attendant finally arrives she takes a look at the boarding passes and asks Beth to follow her.

“I'm sorry about that,” she says, “But how's this?” It's business class. Beth has never been bumped up before. “Fabulous,” Beth says, picking up the complimentary travel kit.

A moment later, a man's voice above her: “I'm sorry.” She removes the complimentary eye patch and earplugs. “I'm sorry; I think you're in our seat.” He shows her his ticket, then his wife's. Beth leans over the aisle seat and cranes up to see the row number.

“But I was told to sit here,” she says, like a petulant child. “They said.”

“Yes,” the man scans the cabin, waves a woman over.

The usual Beth would have hopped up apologetically by now, but Pissed-off Airplane Beth, Bumped-to-Business Class Beth doesn't move. She stays put, thumbing through the magazine on her lap, willing a ruling in her favor.

“Our mistake. Obviously, someone's got to move,” the attendant says. “You two come with me.”

The attendant leads them forward, pulls back the first class curtain and ushers them through. They move slowly, burdened as they are with carry-ons, shopping bags and duty free.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Beth says.

\* \* \*

The seatbelt sign keeps binging. Never off, just on and on again. *Yeah. We get it*, she thinks. It’s bad, very bumpy. Two hours from Los Angeles, the loudspeaker crackles on. “This is Captain Harris, to let you know that we’re, um, going down—”

Around her, gasps and tittering, near the front, a person retches.

“—okay, sorry, down to 25 thousand feet to see if we can shake some of this turbulence.”

After a second the man beside her says, “Jesus H. *Christ*.” On his open tray table he has a calculator and papers spread about, showing rows and columns of numbers, with DRAFT stamped red on every page. He pounds the tray, tips his chin up and calls out over the seat in front of him, “You can’t pause there, guy. Jesus.” He turns to her and laughs loudly. Gives her a “what do you expect?” sort of shrug. “You know? I mean, really,” he says.

She doesn’t smile, but nods and leans back against the headrest. Her heart races.

Please. Don’t get chatty, she wills the man.

\* \* \*

She’s reading a passage one of her friends has Xeroxed from a book, *The Seven Precepts of Tibetan Mind Training*. It’s about countering dejection by shining light onto others. Across the

aisle, a man yells, “Wake up! Wake up. Vince, wake up.” Shakes the man next to him, whose head lolls forward a little. A line of spittle webs from his lips to the plaid front of his shirt. His companion punches the flight attendant call button.

Beth returns to her story. Should she offer to help? She should know something—CPR, the Heimlich maneuver, something. The attendant arrives, and the companion tells him, “He’s diabetic. Maybe, try juice.”

They get him awake enough to drink it, but just barely.

“Is there a doctor on board?” another attendant asks over the intercom.

“I’m a paramedic,” a woman says. She kneels beside the row. After a minute she says, “Too much insulin.” The man is talking a little, muttering. The paramedic brushes a strand of auburn hair back from her eyes. “Keep him awake, get more orange juice,” she says.

People are turning around, craning over their seats to see. “Hello? Okay, people. It’s fine. We’re fine, please,” the attendant says. “I’m calling the flight doctor,” he tells the companion, and leaves to dial someone 30 thousand feet below.

Beth goes back to her book, looking over from time to time as the man slowly revives.

A few rows back is the galley. “We don’t have to turn around,” Beth hears one flight attendant say to another, “which is good because I’ve got plans in Dayton and I know it sounds bad, but I’d really hate to cancel.”

“God, that was a close call,” the other one says. “That was scary.”



## Strikers

All the young men, they haven't gone anywhere. Just swallowed whole into the maw of factories, warehouses and service jobs. The lucky move off to business parks and brick-face office buildings. The rest are plucked from the littered streets and packed into shuttering buses, emptied into parking lots and curbs where they linger and smoke and one-up until it's time to go in.

And when the college kids and union people hung signs and handed out pamphlets, they didn't come. They didn't appear at rallies or meetings or petition drives because who has the time? They care; of course they do. They want the jobs to stay, but what can they do about it? Nothing. Not when you have to clock em, punch em, log those hours for the paychecks, the direct deposit, the insurance with its maddening co-pays. Because it's better than nothing, and there are people depending on you.

Aaron pushes through the crowd. It's early, the sun barely up over the asphalt. The strikers are bleary, their signs akimbo, their chants off sync. He wants to say, *Hey, I'm sorry*, but he doesn't allow himself. There's no use thinking that way. It's ridiculous. You can't strike when they're closing things down. You can't quit if you've been fired. There are thirty-three more days here before it's done and some other sorry shitbag in some other country takes over. Until then, he has to keep it up; he's already sent feelers out to other places.

His shirt is dirty, which is only a problem because he can smell it, can feel the cloth growing courser in his armpits. He's thinking about last night, which is what he usually does to get through.

Last night her arms were like little coils, burning hot around his neck, and he feels them again now and he grins around the butt-end of his cigarette. He pulls, holds, exhales and drops the tiny remainder on the ground, sees the shimmer-shush of embers exploding on the concrete and doesn't bother to stamp it out beneath his boot. It'll die. It all dies, but he's full of light and fuel and fumes and love and he can smell the essence of her on his body and he wonders, Does she think of me now?

He nods at Tay, who isn't someone he'd have pictured breaking lines, scabbing. Not Tay.

“You in?”

“I'm in,” Aaron says.

There are about 30 of them inside. It's a man's world for an hour until Joanne shows up for her shift—another he wouldn't have figured—and takes the forklift.

Bindings they make, and good ones. For skis. Olympic-grade. His shirt bunches up and he pulls at it. There are certain safety precautions but they, like everything, are semi-optional.

Marie was his last night. He is only dimly aware of thinking this.

A grind, a shearing sound, a hiss. “Jesus! You gotta watch it,” Richard says, an eye on the way Aaron's moving against the machine. “Watch it man, that thing isn't a toy. What, you think this is FAO Schwartz? It'll take your whole arm off.”

And Aaron snaps to, realizes he wasn't paying attention.

They don't talk about their families, they don't talk about the lives they wish they had or the things they've dreamed of or deluded themselves into thinking they'll do. They just mind the machines, move with them, feel the tug and pull and energy of it in their shoulders,

their arms. It swings you around and lets you know that this is your life and you have only to move with it, move with it, feel it. Go.

Rancin is a Mexican guy, from somewhere dense and thick with smog. His parents—he has only mentioned his mother—muled it over here through the weight of a desert solstice and hid until dark at the trafficked crossings. He stands next to Aaron now, his breath hot beside Aaron's face, and they remain speechless as they watch Charles unstick the gears.

“It just got crimped,” Charles says, and nods. He's wearing the employer shirt, regulation, and they nod back at him like he's the boss, which he thinks he is in some way because he can fix things.

The clarity of life, some people never see. There is suffering and great beauty here. Forget the bullshit ideas. Since the union, it's been a good job, a keeper. For thirteen years, Rancin says, the big guys fought it—all attempts to unionize. “Now we've got it and there're the scabs, and it's what we are and I want to spit on my own feet,” he says. “We never woulda had it so good if it wasn't for the unions.”

Cigarettes must be taken in the break room or outside. Smoking keeps you going and lets you know you're alive. Feel it in your veins, see your breath in the hot summer heat, like a runner's in the morning cold.

Rancin's wife Beth smokes Pall-Malls and swears at him over the phone in the break room. If you're anywhere near the phone, you can hear her. Rancin, he just nods, holds the receiver away from his ear, and weathers the storm with patience until she's done. “Baby,” he says. “Baby, chill.”

He tells the guys she likes it in the ass and they always laugh and nod. Aaron stares, wondering at this life of his.

He hasn't had Marie like that, in the ass or anywhere else besides the normal, though that's more his fault than hers. She's up for anything. Their time together is all sweat and muscle and straining and it leaves him feeling full and satisfied, but a little strung out. Shaky. She has a wind chime hanging from a rafter above her front door, made of petrified rocks strung on fishing twine. Each time he leaves her, the sound breaks his heart. Those rocks have been around forever, he thinks. Thoughts like this make him wonder how he ever got sidetracked and wound up in this body, in this place.

The bell signals the shift change. Outside, he can hear the dim chants of the strikers, more in unison now than before. A horn honks over and over, beating a rhythm to support their call. A siren sounds in the distance.

"You think we should quit?" he asks Dwayne.

"You a fucking pussy?" Dwayne says, by way of response. In his eyes: I'm sure of nothing.

"Turn the news on," someone calls from the front.

The strikers march on the flickering screen. Aaron's stomach seizes. A few guys from loading make a show of ripping off their gloves, one after another, and walking outside. A guy from the floor takes the uniform shirt and throws it down. "Fuck this. This ain't right."

"I got a family," Rancin mutters to himself.

"You do?" Aaron says before he's even aware he spoke.

“Damn right I do. Two daughters, and another before Beth, too. I never saw her but one time, but I send the check every month. I can’t be walking out now.”

“We won’t get fired,” someone—the college kid—says. “We can’t. Union rules. It’s a law.”

“You got a problem to share with everyone?” the foreman asks.

Joanne has a heart condition. She sits on a stack of boxes and waits for things to calm down. Aaron goes over and in a moment of unthinking, lays a hand on her leg. His skin grows hot. She is 300 pounds, easy. Near her right now, in this moment, he feels he’s on a plane going down. Fast. He wants; and he will take anything.

“You want a cigarette?” he asks her.

She nods.

They go out back and the hot Texas midday hits them hard. It’s not as bright as he’d expected, and the sounds of the protestors are muted, on the other side of the building. She turns to him, a slow, heavy turn; he can hear each movement in her chest, the exertion of her breath. Smell the sweat on her skin. She says, “I don’t have any,” and looks him in the eye. “Can you give me—?” He leans towards her and grabs her hair, smooth and baby fine and colorless, until his mouth is open on hers. Surprised, she pulls away gently, but moves quickly into the moment, switching her breath to her nose, meeting him in her mouth. He runs his hands down her back, feels the rump above her bra strap, steps closer and grabs her with force. It is like nothing else he has ever felt. *Marie*, he thinks. *Marie. I love you. I really might.*

## Hypnotist's Daughter

“Isn’t this nice? Some people,” her mother said with a mouth full of poblano pesto burrito supreme, “some people eat like this all the time. Whenever they want, they just stop off and *bing!* nine, ten dollars each. Just like that. And that’s for lunch, remember. I’m not even talking about dinner.”

“It is good,” Miranda said. “They got unsweetened tea. And pink lemonade in the soft-drink thing.”

Already, she’d refilled her drink twice—careful not to overdo it on the ice. Free refills, hopefully. If not, and someone said anything, she’d play dumb and what could they do? She had a look for this sort of thing: fresh-faced and pony-tailed, big innocent eyes. At school, no one ever suspected her of ditching, or sneaking out to smoke up with Scott Kraus and Mike Lee before first period. No one knew anything about her anyway; she was straight-up average, an all-American girl. The kind you didn’t have to know, you just saw and thought you had nailed.

Though only 16, she was a good helper at home and knew some tricks if things got iffy. She knew by gut instinct when there might be trouble, and how bad.

Mostly, it was the same thing—only a few were allowed to actually stay, and these were regulars, so she was used to their nodding off in the living room, their eyes rimmed red and shadowed, the little throb of a vein in a temple, the twitch of a finger, a chin bobbing and then settling on a chest with a sigh like vapor.

Her mother would move about the place arranging things, fixing herself drinks, gathering newspapers and magazines, busy.

“You make me nervous,” one of them, not a regular, once said. He was buying, not using. “Can’t Miranda do that and you just sit?” he patted the couch with his palm. At her name, Miranda turned from the television and started to protest, but his look turned her right back around, lips tucked into her teeth. Her attitude could be bullshit, her mother often reminded her, especially with customers.

“You won’t mind in a minute,” her mother said.

She might have said, “I’ll sit in a sec,” or, “I’ll sit when I feel like sitting,” or simply: “No,” because there was nothing anyone could tell her and if you didn’t like it, you could leave and good luck, too, finding another deal like this. One thing her mother never would have said was: “Leave Miranda out of it.”

She stayed out of it anyway, unless she was needed.

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“You want anything else?” her mother asked.

“I’m good,” Miranda said. There was a big TV on in one corner of the restaurant, and Miranda watched the game, men rushing back and forth across the basketball court, from one net to the other again and again. It was 3:00, well past the lunch rush, and they were the only customers.

“You can change that, I bet,” her mother said. Which meant, in actuality: Honey, get up and change the channel. “You can find something good.”

When they'd had the little TV in their apartment, her mother often watched the soaps. Miranda despised the close-ups on the actors' expressions, and the dramatic way people spoke to each other. It was like her mother, in a way, who often moved and spoke like the whole world was watching and it had to count. Ridiculous the way she had to have everyone's attention. Like a child. Infantile.

But whatever, that was just the way she was.

Miranda went over to the TV, with its rows of buttons. Which of the ">" and "<" were for channels, which for volume? There was a remote on top of the set, covered with 3-D drops of dried food—salsa maybe, dried a uniform brown like clotted blood. It was gross, but she picked it up and changed the channel.

"What'd you find, kid?" Without turning, Miranda held the remote up over her shoulder, knowing her mother would ask her to bring it to her.

"Thanks," her mother said, and started flipping channels. Really, the TV was enormous: five feet big at least, sitting right on the floor. Her mother found some sort of daytime movie and left it at that, a woman with a tear-streaked face pleading with an older man in a suit who kept fiddling with his watch and sighing in between angry looks.

"*Bor-ing*," Miranda whispered and her mother shot her a look. "Here, Miran', get me another soda," her mother said, holding out her cup. Miranda tilted her head and raised her eyebrow. "Please," her mother said. It was one of their jokes, Miranda playing the grown up, requiring the magic word.

The ice made so much noise that Miranda looked at the counter to see if anyone was watching. There was just one guy, not much older than she, leaning forward on his elbows,



head turned down. He didn't look over at her, so she stared for a moment, enough to decide he was kind of cute, which made her feel optimistic in general.

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It had been a while since Miranda had spent any time with just her mother. Especially out of the house. When Gary was in the picture—and he was the main one, around the most often and for the longest time and also, by chance, the nicest—he was always there. If he'd been around when this whole thing happened, he would have been right on the case. He was a hospital orderly, and knew how to cope in a crisis. But he was gone more than three months now and the last time Miranda had seen him there'd been a showdown big enough to merit a small paragraph in the local police blotter: mutual assault, dragged apart by the cops. Got to arrest someone in a domestic abuse situation, so they took both in, leaving Miranda to scrape together enough for one bail.

“Cheryl, I think you seen enough of him,” Miranda said to her mother as they waited for the final paperwork to be processed.

Her mother nodded. “Good riddance. That was a one-time thing, that temper flare of mine. But his? I suspect what we saw was just the tip of the iceberg.”

A woman behind a Plexiglas screen handed them her mother's shoes, belt and wallet.

“Whatever,” Miranda said. She disagreed, but what was the point?

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Miranda was the first to notice that Arnold N's lips were blue and his in-out rasp had quieted.

“Oh Christ,” her mother said. She stood, rubbing her hands on the thighs of her jeans, clenching and unclenching her fists. “Oh shit. Shit, shit.”

Miranda pounded on Arnold's chest like they do on TV. Gentle at first because she was afraid to hurt him, but then harder when it didn't seem to be working. The needle bobbed up and down gracefully as she heaved at him. He had on a nice shirt, a tucked-in flannel, rose-colored plaid.

“Mom. Do we do mouth-to-mouth?”

“I think. You do it, I don't know how.”

They spoke low and with some urgency, but there was no frenzy in their voices. It was as if it were already over and they were recalling it with the buffered remove of memory.

“I don't either, we didn't get to that yet in health.”

“Do you even go to health class? How would you know?” It was just a rhetorical question; her eyes were on Arnold, not Miranda.

“Will it even help?”

“Okay, look,” Miranda said after a moment, looking up over her shoulder at her mother. “You have to feel the pulse with your fingers, you can't use your thumb.” She worked her fingers on his neck, finding the spot. “See? You do it here, and you don't use your thumb because it's got its own pulse.”

Her mother frowned and squinted. “Fine. Whatever. Fascinating.” She was angry, she was always angry when she wasn't kidding around.

One thing you could say: Arnold didn't look afraid.

There wasn't any pain in his expression—but it wasn't peaceful, either. You couldn't mistake this for sleep; there was a different light to him, a grey shadow in the air. Like a force-field. It hung over the three of them.

With Arnold lying there in the apartment—and her grandmother's doilies still on the tables even though she'd been dead two years and her grandfather in the home for nearly as long—Miranda thought about death, thought things she'd never tell her mother. He wasn't the first dead body she'd seen. There was a homeless guy who froze on the sidewalk two houses over, sitting up against a stack of garbage cans. A kid who got hit by a car, and though she hadn't actually *seen* the body, she'd seen the EMTs and everyone gathered around him, which was almost the same. He was there, the dead kid, and could have been seen. This was the first one she'd seen up close, though. She had none of the feelings she'd expected. She thought she'd cry, or feel crushed by the weight of it. Like when they saw the movie in school where that blimp exploded and the anchorman said, "Oh the Humanity" and his voice was all choked up. She didn't feel anything yet, but thought maybe it would come. Her mother, more sober than usual, seemed numb too.

After there was nothing else to do, Miranda backed up and her mother knelt down beside Arnold, her white pumps up under her jeans, scuffed and blackened at the toes. She pulled his wallet from his pants pocket with two fingers like she was a rich lady holding a lace handkerchief. She thumbed through it, turning the pictures this side and that, squinting—not after his cash but a glimpse into the life he was leaving, the people in it. Everything up till this moment, when it stopped mattering.

Miranda crossed the room to pick up the phone. "Don't," her mother said softly. "Not yet."

“Aren’t we going to—”

“I don’t know. But don’t do anything yet, I got to think about this.”

“Me too,” Miranda said. She flipped the TV off. Next to the armchair was her half-open book bag, the spine of her history book showing, reminding her that she had an assignment due. “I’m hungry,” she’d said. There was a soda on the tray table beside the armchair. She finished it, flat and saccharine, sticky on the roof of her mouth. It tasted like canned bad breath, thick as syrup.

“Hungry,” her mother said. Miranda watched as she took a twenty from the wallet.

And now Arnold was buying them lunch.

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Five years earlier, the judge had listened to Miranda’s plea and said, “Okay, here’s the deal” without a whole lot of thinking or recessing time or whatever. Her mother had a certificate from rehab, two negative urinalyses and had completed a three-hour parenting class, where she said she’d sat next to a bunch of mothers of infants and got lectured about formula and shaken baby syndrome. She didn’t really need an anger management class, and so she wasn’t referred to one. With Gary still four years off, her mother was rarely ever wound up.

Miranda was not a shaken baby. She was a loved and cuddled baby who slept in a “family bed” and got plenty of milk to drink. Sometimes her mother hadn’t eaten herself so Miranda could have soup and bread or Mac-n-Cheese with hotdogs cut up in it, her favorite.

This she told the judge, who’d nodded his head and thanked her. Foster care was awful, she’d added. Three months with a family of four, all fosters, screaming and fighting

and kicking each other for no reason. Nice enough people—there was no grossness or touching—but it wasn't home and they couldn't handle her, really. There wasn't room.

The judge said, "I can see she's a good kid. So you've clearly done something right. But this is a critical time, with adolescence approaching. You've got to monitor homework and attendance and keep a stable environment. You can do that?"

Her mother, tears dragging blue-black eye makeup in zigzagged lines, nearly screamed, "Yes I can, Yes." When the order came down, she held Miranda almost tighter than Miranda could bear, and repeated, "I love you, Bean, I love you."

"I'm going straight this time for real," her mother had said when they left the courthouse. With her secretarial job at Mullen Furniture and Miranda working at the bagel place, they'd get by without the extra money. Even if it meant a night job, too, her mother'd do it. "From now on, we fly right, kiddo" she'd said.

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The late afternoon sun was slanting across Adobo Burrito's stainless steel tabletops and wooden benches. The inside lights were bright and cleansing. If we lived here, Miranda thought, it would be easy. When the soda bubbles reached the top of the cup, Miranda let go of the button. Perfect. Not even a drop. When she turned, the kid behind the counter was gone. She brought the soda back to her mother, taking a sip along the way. Her mother didn't notice when Miranda set the cup down in front of her.

On the television screen, a woman sat sobbing on a bright floral couch in a terrifically fake-looking living room. “You know,” her mother said, talking maybe to the TV, maybe to Miranda, “this is not the end of the world.”

Miranda took a sip of her own drink, watered down now with melted ice. “It’s going to be fine, Ma” she said. Across the table top, they nodded at each other. And the nodding went on so long it was like they were dancing.