Freight Stories

No. 4 February 2009

Freight Stories

is a free, online, fiction-only literary quarterly featuring the best new fiction on the web (or anywhere else, for that matter). Editors Andrew Scott and Victoria Barrett constitute the full partnership and entire staff.

We are mission-driven to promote the work of contemporary authors, both established and emerging, and to offer writers the confidence of print editing practices with the exposure of web publishing.

Our offices are located in Indianapolis, Indiana. Reach us at:

Freight Stories
P.O. Box 44167
Indianapolis, IN 46219

www.freightstories.com

editors@freightstories.com

Cover photo by Victoria Barrett. All design and typesetting for online and pdf formats by Victoria Barrett.

Freight Stories
Submission Guidelines

Freight Stories seeks to publish the finest contemporary fiction. Send us your stories, shorts, stand-alone novel excerpts, and novellas. During our first year, we received a surprising number of very long stories and novellas in our inbox; though we welcome longer works, please do consider sending shorter material as well.

We do not publish work that exists solely for readers of romance, mystery, crime, erotica, or other genres you can name; we do, however, happily consider works of literary fiction that employ the tools of successful genre fiction in their exploration of rich characters.

Fiction of all lengths and styles is welcome. We wish only that your work be driven by the exploration of the lives of believable, compelling characters, and that it help to illuminate, broaden, or in some way enrich its readers' perspectives.

We do not consider work that has been previously published in any form. Submit only one story at a time. Simultaneous submissions are fine, but please let us know immediately if the work is accepted elsewhere.

Submit your best work via e-mail to submissions at freightstories.com. To help us streamline our record-keeping, please include your name, contact information, and title of the work in the body of the e-mail. PDF and Word attachments (.doc, .docx, .rtf) are preferable to cut-and-paste submissions. As is the case with many literary magazines, we cannot offer payment to our authors, though we hope to in the future.

We welcome submissions year-round and hope to respond within three months. Submissions of more than 40 manuscript pages will require extra time, up to six months or more.

Freight Stories No. 4

Contents

Lee Martin

Bedtime Stories

We walked back from the restaurant, just across the street from the hotel, and because we were far away from our homes and the people who waited for us, and because it was one of those nights we remembered from when we were younger—those nights when we'd walked just for the pleasure of being alone in the dark, my hand at the small of your back, yours in one hip pocket of my jeans—we sat a while on the park bench near the hotel's front door, and we watched people come and go on a late summer night when the air had cooled just enough to make it pleasant to be outside, and we were happy to have each other's company and to know that in time, we'd rise from the bench, go to our room, and there I'd kiss you, and you'd kiss me back, and slowly we'd undress each other, but first a car stopped in the hotel driveway, and we watched the young woman behind the wheel and the young man with her say the last things people say to each other before good-bye, or in this case good-night; then they kissed, and the young man got out of the car, a small overnight bag under his arm—he wore a denim jacket and plaid sleep pants—and the young girl watched him until he was inside the hotel, and then she drove away, leaving us to make up stories: I said maybe he'd just gotten out of a hospital and for whatever reason he was staying at the hotel, but you said, no, they'd been somewhere private, maybe the girl's apartment, and now she was bringing him back, and she was watching him like she didn't want to let him go, the same way you didn't want to ever leave me, though we both knew eventually we'd go back to our homes, but we didn't have to think about that yet because we still had time, even after our lovemaking when I thought about how lucky we were on this night when we didn't have to say good-bye and how thankful I was—please say you were, too—that we found each other again after all those years—and I wished for countless nights when we'd give ourselves to each other, as we did again toward dawn when you turned to me and our mouths found each other's and our hands and we knew where to touch, and we were glad to love each other in that room before morning light broke, to lie close in the dark, while all around us behind closed doors people like the man we'd watched slept or lay awake, none of

them giving us a thought, hidden as we were—so we chose to believe—lovers now and ever after in a story, this sweet, sweet story that began once upon a time.

Jasmine Beach-Ferrara

Custody Bus

When Carlos and I get together—which is sometimes every few weeks and sometimes every few months—we do it here, at the downtown Hilton where I've been taking reservations for the last five years. It's easy for me to score a good room at the last minute. I book it with the employee discount and we hole up with a bag of weed and a few bottles of wine. This weekend, we're in the Ambassador Suite on the 22nd floor.

When you work in hotels, they lose most of their glamour. You hear the stories in the break room and you swear you'll bring your own sheets next time and you'll spray everything down with Lysol before you touch it. Carlos and I joke about everyone who's been in the room before us. It's like when we used to rent porn movies and feel this strange mix of disgust and camaraderie toward all the people who'd already watched them.

It's only midnight and Carlos has already been asleep for an hour, his legs sprawled like open scissors across the bed, the snake tattooed on his shoulder rising with each breath. But I can't sleep. Every time I shut my eyes, it feels like my heart is going to gnaw its way through my chest. This happens sometimes. More lately. If we were still married, I'd wake him up and without my needing to ask, he'd hold me and we'd ride whatever this is out together. But we're not married anymore, which is, after all, part of the point. We play by different rules now.

After I clocked out tonight, I walked across the hotel lobby and stepped through the closing doors of an empty glass elevator. I stared down at the atrium as the elevator rocketed up. Carlos had called me when he'd gotten to the room a few hours earlier and I knew that when I pushed open the door, he'd be stretched out on the bed, channel surfing, sipping a beer from the minibar. Just like I knew that when he saw me, he would look, but not leap, up. This is how it is with us. We stick to the rules. No fighting. No talking about the past or the future. Keep it simple. Keep it easy.

The truth, though, is that we are both lonelier than we know, and this makes us dangerous. To each other, I mean. It's

not a hot, reckless danger. It's something else, like what happens with sedatives or promises, things that calm you down and are way too easy to depend on, to want more of.

We've been divorced for nine months. It's not, he says, that he stopped loving me. It's just that we can't be married anymore. When someone asks me what happened, I say that we spent the time we had together like a wad of cash. Some people get sixty, seventy years. Some people get one night when their lives collide and they both want each other enough to do something about it. We got five years, time when we belonged to each other, when the word *possession* was a good thing. It wasn't about owning each other. It was about finding someone who feels like home.

"You know this isn't normal," Carlos will say once in a while, gesturing towards the hotel room and then the bed and then us. By his tone, it's clear he's telling, not asking, me this. Early on, Carlos convinced himself that I never really learned the difference between what's normal and what's just getting by, and that it was his responsibility to set me straight. He says he doesn't blame me; he blames the way I grew up.

He grew up in El Paso with two parents and five sisters and his abuela and a hundred cousins and huge family dinners every Sunday and annual trips to Mexico City to visit his dad's family. In the past few years, he's read just enough self-help books and listened to just enough talk radio on his fifteen minute commute to decide that if I'd had a childhood more like his, we'd still be together.

Carlos used to like it when I told stories about my childhood. At parties he'd call me over to the knot of people he was talking to and insist that I tell a particular one. The Custody Bus was his favorite, the most reliable crowd pleaser. We had a routine. He'd feed me opening lines, play my straight man, laugh in all the right places.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss going home at the end of the night with someone who already knows my stories.

For two weeks in the spring of 1981, my father was a hero in Danville, Virginia. In those fourteen days, he got a citation from the Mayor, ended up on the front page of the local paper, and, after staying over for three consecutive nights, got back together with my mother for a trial reconciliation.

He was an unlikely hero. A Virginia boy with a reed thin ponytail and a joint hanging off his chapped, bottom lip, he was always squinting at the world from behind the wheel of his souped-up Chevy Nova. He wore faded Levis with a twenty-eight inch waist and carried a maroon Velcro wallet, thin enough to be empty, in his front pocket. In addition to me and

the Nova, he had two friends, no pets, a rusted out motorbike, and a power saw.

There was an epidemic of divorces in Danville that year and most of them were nasty. In my fourth grade class, half of the kids' parents had split up and the other half was convinced their parents were about to. We regularly missed school to testify in court. The Guidance Counselor visited our classroom once a week to lead a divorce support group. She walked around the room tapping kids on the head and asking, *What animal do you feel like at your mother's house? What about when you go to Daddy's?* I sat at my desk, praying she wouldn't stop at me and chewing on erasers until they turned to powder in my mouth. Next to me, my best friend Wolfy picked at a wart on his knee until it bled.

My parents were functional divorcees. If they crossed paths in town, they'd peck each other on the check and say hey. Sometimes my dad would just come over for a beer, tapping his can against the kitchen table until my mom reached out and grabbed his wrist. But even though they got along, I still ended up on the Custody Bus.

The bus was the brainchild of Judge Argus, who was presiding over all the divorce and custody cases in the county. Just looking at him, you could tell how much he hated his job, the pettiness of domestic life, the snarl of love undone, reconfigured, sob stories about working overtime, bounced checks, no-show babysitters, seduction, betrayal, the snotty kids sitting in his courtroom, choking on their Sears-bought dresses and clip-on-ties, watching wide-eyed as Mommy and Daddy flayed each other on the stand.

The idea behind the bus was simple enough. The court would enforce visitation agreements by providing transportation. Judge Argus made sure that every kid rode the bus for a probationary period, until his parents could demonstrate that they didn't need court supervision to handle visitations. It wasn't hard for him to get it off the ground. An out-of-commission transport bus was salvaged from the State Prison in Richmond. It was driven by an ex-warden who was retired on disability and who owed Argus money on football bets. The Judge recruited a cadet from the Police Academy to be the Bus Monitor and put him on the county payroll. Each Friday afternoon, the bus would pick us up from school and deliver us to our non-custodial parent's home or workplace. Sunday evenings, the bus would come back around and take us all home.

Carlos never believed the part about the gambling debt. He did concede, however, that it made for a better story. It is possible that I've made up some of these details along the way. I do know for sure that there were about forty kids on the bus

and that I sat next to Wolfy, in the third row from the back, and that the seats were hard and patched with duct tape and everything smelled funny, like vomit and metal that's been gripped hard by sweaty palms.

When you grow up crazy, you either shut up about the past or learn to talk about it carefully. For a long time, I stayed quiet. And then I began to notice that people like stories about crazy, as long as you tell them well. You figure out which details to omit because they're too shocking and which to include because they're funny. You lie to maximize entertainment and minimize discomfort. Most importantly, you learn how to let your audience off the hook, how to make them forget that what they're hearing actually happened to you.

The first time I told Carlos about the bus, we'd only been dating for a few weeks. We were both drunk, and I thought he'd laugh, the way other guys had. But instead, his eyes got sad. That was the first time he said, *You know that's not normal, don't you*? In response, I just shrugged. It wasn't something I'd ever thought much about. When you're a kid, you watch adults and all the arrangements they make, the laws they uphold, the ones they break, and you think, this is how the world works. But the way he reacted stuck with me.

At some point, Carlos announced that he liked the story after all. What this really meant, we both knew, was that he had decided he could love me. *You're such a brave boy*, I would say to him, and in response he would grab my hips and pull me into his lap, nuzzling my neck, his hands working their way up my thighs. Even then I knew that as much as he loved me, I was also his project, someone with whom he could share the bounty of the healthy, civilized love he'd grown up with.

What all of this has to do with us now, I'm not sure. Holed up in a hotel room because we both happened to be free this weekend. Carlos dead asleep, me in the bathtub, adding butts to the ashtray balanced on top of the soap dish, soaking in water too hot for most people to touch, so much of the room still, as if we are somehow stopping time, as if we can fool ourselves into thinking that *this* is our life, that we're from somewhere else, just in town for the weekend. That the reason we don't talk about anything that matters is because we don't need to. This quiet is nothing new; this is how it is every night at my apartment. But it's different with him here, because silence isn't our only option. It's the choice we're making.

Carlos was the one who urged me to track down Wolfy a few years ago. He couldn't understand why I didn't keep in touch with anyone from Danville. This from the man who still plays soccer once a week with his best friend from fourth grade and who's been the best man in three of his friends' weddings. When I finally got in touch with Wolfy, he was living in Chicago

with his girlfriend. They'd just had a baby. He sent me a picture of the kid, his face squished up, pink mouth open in protest. It was good to talk to him—Carlos was right about that. But when I asked Wolfy about everything that happened with the Custody Bus, he just laughed and changed the subject.

Wolfy's parents met on the Dead circuit. He spent the first three years of his life at shows. They split up because his Mom had an affair with the guitarist in a local Stones cover band, the one who thought he was Keith Richards. Wolfy's dad, AJ, was my dad's best friend and, for awhile, he was known as the only black Deadhead in the South. But when Wolfy's mom left him, he denounced the whole scene as a cult and forbade Wolfy from saying Jerry Garcia's name. He stopped wearing patchouli, bought a leather jacket, and started listening to R&B. When he put us to bed on weekend nights, he would read Wolfy and me articles about the Black Panthers and excerpts from *Soul on Ice*.

After their respective divorces, my dad and AJ moved into a one-story cinderblock house behind the Safeway. On weekends, my dad slept until noon and when he'd finally get up, he'd have rotten, sour breath and head right for the shower, where he'd get lost in the steam and sing Dead songs to piss off AJ. He'd walk out of the bathroom with a beach towel wrapped around his waist, his skin pink from the heat, and he'd crack open a can of Coke and eat a few dry handfuls of Captain Crunch. Then, the day could begin.

During the week, my mom dragged my ass out of bed every morning at 6:00 and deposited me at the kitchen table. I'd wake up to find myself nose to nose with a bowl of soggy cornflakes, hearing my mom quiz me on spelling words as she packed bologna sandwiches and a couple of Oreos into wrinkled brown bags for our lunches. She called us "The Girls," saying it like we were a team of superheroes instead of a skinny nine year old with glasses and an overworked CNA about to spend her day taking care of a woman with Alzheimer's who thought that it was 1953 and my mom was her husband.

There are other stories I could tell about those years—like the day my mom got busted for giving pot to one of her patients or about the time in high school when Wolfy and I got caught having sex in the freezer of the Shoney's where I was an assistant salad chef. But The Custody Bus was always the one Carlos liked best. I've never asked him why. People hear what they need to in stories. As far as my mom is concerned, everything that happened that year was just further evidence of what was wrong with my father. But Carlos hears something else, something, probably, that appeals to his vision of the world as a place in which it is still possible to protect those you love.

"Which little pisser's running his mouth?" the bus driver used to say as he glared into his oversized rear view mirror and scanned our faces. When he talked, it sounded like he was choking on his tongue. The bus rumbled down the street on its diesel engine and we swerved dangerously close to an idling cement mixer. Wolfy looked at me and crossed his eyes. I giggled. The Bus Monitor glared at me and shifted his weight in a way that made his gun look bigger. We shut up.

The Monitor treated us like security threats. When we got on and off the bus, he'd search our bags and always kept a hand on his gun. The whole thing was a nightmare. But Wolfy was the only one who seemed to grasp the injustice of it. One time, right after AJ had read us a story about Rosa Parks, Wolfy staged a sit in on the bus steps. He refused to move and started singing "We Shall Overcome" until the Monitor grabbed him by the collar and escorted him to a seat. After that he had to sit alone in the front row for two weeks.

Wolfy deserved a better sidekick than me. While he was up front, I just sat in the back and stared out the window, my forehead bumping against the glass, watching the houses we passed by, imagining what it would be like to have my own bedroom. The forces at work in the world seemed vast, beyond comprehension. It was easier to think about the race car bed that my dad had promised me.

Wolfy and I were dropped off together at the garage where our fathers worked. They talked constantly about opening up a specialty shop where they'd only work on Corvettes, Mustangs, and TransAms. Their dream was to break into NASCAR. My dad wanted to be a driver, AJ his pit crew chief. The local track, which we visited every Friday of the racing season, was one of the few places where my Dad seemed fully alive, like the smoke had finally cleared from his brain and, in the wattage of those lights, he could actually see the world.

After the races, they'd take us to Catahoulas, the bar of choice for anyone under forty. While our fathers played pool, Wolfy and I would sit at the bar and practice our party tricks. Wolfy could blow a long rope of snot in and out of his nose, and I could wiggle all my loose teeth with my tongue so that they bled.

My parents met at Catahoulas when they were eighteen. Under different conditions, my mom wouldn't have looked twice at my father. But the bar was his habitat. He shone there, a wizard at the pool table, quick to lay down cash for a round of drinks and quarters for the jukebox. I can see her at the bar, sipping a piña colada, watching him from behind the veil of her

bangs, taking note as he chugged another Bud and tapped his pool stick on the cracked cement floor, to the beat of yet another song by Zeppelin or The Who.

When my mom got pregnant six months later, he wanted her to get an abortion. This was 1971, and he went so far as to find the name of a doctor in Richmond. They broke up for the second trimester. Then one night, he showed up at her parents' house with a ring. Two weeks later, they were married at the Baptist church my mom grew up in, their parents and extended families looking on with strained cheer.

My dad avoided the draft because he was underweight. At that point, his career path was directed by a simple strategy: getting hired at businesses that were likely to shut down soon, getting laid off, and collecting unemployment. He found one address on the east side of town that was incapable of supporting a business for more than six months. In two year's time, it housed a pizza place, a Chinese restaurant, and a Mexican place. One restaurant would sell all of its inventory to the next tenants, so the place had colored maps of Italy in the bathrooms, Chinese lanterns over each table, and nothing but salsa and meringue in the jukebox. During the first year they were married, my dad delivered pizza for two months, picked up two months of unemployment, got hired as busboy for the Chinese place for three months, and then went on unemployment again.

They waited eight years to split up. More and more often, my dad stayed home when my mom and I went out. Then he stopped being home at dinner, and then he stopped sleeping there. He came by one night with AJ's truck and loaded up a few boxes of his clothes and records. I watched him from under the kitchen table and even when he crawled under there with me, I wouldn't talk to him.

It must have been harder than that, messier, rougher. But I don't remember any fights or screaming, and my mom still won't go into any of the details. It was as if, at roughly the same time, they both understood their love had run its course. Words like *eternal* and *permanent* weren't part of their vocabulary.

It's not like I didn't think about all this as I walked into the courtroom nine months ago, done up in fake pearls and that ugly, navy dress my lawyer had advised me to wear. I saw Carlos sitting shoulder to shoulder with his lawyer, his mother and two of his sisters right behind him in the front row, and something inside of me turned to ash. But I felt other things too, and the truth is that part of me was relieved.

Divorce is like this legacy you carry around with you, something you know, deep down, that it's not even worth trying

to escape. When Carlos and I were together, I used to look at our life—everything from his putting away money each month for when we had kids to the consistently good sex to the dinners with other couples where *we'd* go home feeling like the lucky ones—and I would think, *so, this is how you do it, then. This is how love works*. And I'd say to myself, *I can pull this off*.

But no matter how good things seemed, I could never entirely shake the feeling that we might explode at any minute. Nothing could convince me otherwise. When we actually split up, it was like I could stop being terrified and finally just accept what I'd always known: once love begins, it's just waiting to end.

I was wiggling my three loose teeth for Wolfy when his mother knocked on the door of the Custody Bus. We were stopped at a red light, just a few blocks from the garage. The bus was already half-empty. The driver recognized Wolfy's mom and pushed the door open with a whoosh. She climbed up the steps, making room for a woman I recognized as Wolfy's aunt. They were both wearing gray sweatsuits, the kind you can buy at discount stores, and big plastic sunglasses. The smell of incense immediately filled the bus.

"We've been trying to track ya'll down. I forgot to pack Wolfy's inhaler. Lemme me just give it to him real quick," his mother called up to the driver.

Next to me, Wolfy turned the color of redwood. He didn't have asthma.

The driver hesitated. This was against protocol. But the women were already in the bus, lugging huge shopping bags with them.

"I'll get it to him," the Bus Monitor said, extending his hand towards her. He was standing in the middle of the aisle, blocking her view, but she kept ducking down and then jumping up, trying to find Wolfy among all of our faces.

"Wolfy! Come here, honey." Her voice sounded strange, like she was high on something she wasn't used to taking.

Wolfy stepped into the aisle and inched his way forward like he was walking the plank. When he got to the front of the bus, his mother bent down and whispered something in his ear and then nudged him, more forcefully than she needed to, into a front row seat. I couldn't see what happened next, but suddenly the Bus Monitor doubled over and grabbed his crotch and Wolfy's aunt was holding an unsheathed, ten inch hunting knife in the air. His mom reached into her shopping bag and whipped out a power drill. She turned it on and pointed it in the direction of the driver. The light turned green, but we didn't

move. The power drill inched closer and closer to the driver's face and Wolfy's mother ordered him out of his seat. Her sister was waving the tip of the knife in a big circle, like a satellite orbiting the monitor's head.

"You're shit outta luck, buddy," Wolfy's aunt said, flashing a weird grin. Watching her, you would've never guessed that she worked as a bank teller in Richmond and lived alone with two cats and a gerbil. During the trial six months later, she sat on the stand and wept as her lawyer piloted an early, crude version of the PMS defense.

The light turned red again and they used the time to handcuff the two men together and shove them into the front seat across from Wolfy. They didn't resist. They sat there like the rest of us. Wolfy's mom got behind the wheel and floored it. His aunt stood guard over the driver and monitor and every so often she'd look up and smile cheerfully at us. I think she expected we'd cry and wet our pants. But the bus was dead quiet.

AJ and my dad were in front of the garage, gliding chamois cloths over the hood of a brand new red Camaro. They looked up as the bus approached, waiting for it to slow down, ready to catch our eyes in the window. But the bus didn't stop As it careened by, they must have caught a glimpse of AJ's ex behind the wheel. I can't imagine that it took them long to figure out what they needed to do. They were men who had spent long, hot afternoons dreaming about an opportunity like this.

I can hear AJ urging my dad on, cranking up the radio, bouncing in his seat like a kid. And I can see my dad nodding confidently and leaning closer to the wheel, sweat beading on his forehead as he becomes the man he's always imagined.

I waited for sirens, but none came. Dust circled the bus like a protective shield, pine trees racing by in a dizzying blur. The engine sounded like it was about to explode and Wolfy's mother was bent, nearly doubled over the steering wheel. She had it up to ninety and was humming, making this buzzing noise, like a cicada. The bus jerked violently as we rounded a corner. Some kid finally screamed. I hit my mouth on the seat in front of me and watched as three bloody teeth landed in my lap.

Later, we'd be told that this was when the bus skidded off the two lane road, snapped a rusty barbed wire fence, got its fuel tank punctured by a fence post, and crashed into an abandoned barn. We'd learn that Wolfy's mother lost consciousness before the impact and that, upon impact, his aunt stabbed herself in the thigh, missing her femoral artery by two centimeters. But in those moments, it was just a slow, blind terror, bodies sliding around the bus, the crimson of fresh

blood and the dazzling shower of shattering glass, the sounds of tearing metal, someone crying, someone else cursing.

A few hundred yards back, the Camaro skidded to a stop on the side of the road and our fathers sprinted towards us. I grabbed my teeth and turned towards the rear door. None of the kids had been badly hurt and we all began lining up single file, facing the back of the bus like little automatons. My dad caught each of us as we jumped off the ledge of the door, easing us onto the hard-packed red dirt and telling us to find a buddy and run to the Camaro. AJ was working the other end of the bus, wedging open the door and dragging Wolfy and his ex-wife and sister-in-law away from the flames.

My dad and I were on the front page of the paper the next day. In the picture, he had his arm around me and we were staring at the charred, smoky hull of the bus. His face was dripping with sweat and covered in soot. He looked like the kind of man who would do anything to keep you safe.

The hijacking didn't make sense. After all, Wolfy's mom had primary custody and she was going to get him back that Sunday. But she was, I guess, trying to say something else. Not just, *this is my kid*, *leave us alone*, but something bigger about all that was at stake for her. Love that you fight for has a voltage all its own.

My parents' trial reconciliation began the night of the highjacking and lasted for two weeks, enough time for us to settle back into a routine and take a day trip to Virginia Beach. My mom and I spent most of the day sitting on the wet sand, letting the waves rush up over our legs. The surf was rough, and since my mom didn't know how to swim and I could only doggy paddle, we were scared to get in past our knees. My dad lay out on a faded Budweiser towel, his undershirt balled up over his eyes because he had forgotten his sunglasses, his pale legs sticking out of cut off jeans. Wisps of light blond hair ran down the center of his chest like a dividing line. He refused to put on anything but baby oil and over the course of the day we watched him turn brighter shades of pink.

Every hour or so, he'd prop up on his elbow and whistle at us. I'd turn around and wave. My mom would look at him and shake her head and smile like we had all the time in the world. We drove back late that night, stopping at Dairy Queen for dinner. I fell asleep to the sound of them laughing, the red glow of their cigarettes lighting the front of the car.

My dad took off again the next day. He called from the garage and told my mom he was moving back in with AJ. He had decided, in the vast privacy of his silence, that he wasn't cut out for marriage, for a life like the one we were angling toward.

And my mom didn't fight for him. She knew that the ride was over.

This isn't how I used to tell the story at parties. Then, it was just the stuff about Wolfy's sit in and the bus getting hijacked and all the press coverage. These are the parts that people like. This is how it works, isn't it? You give people a version of the world, a version of yourself, that they want to see. Just like how tomorrow morning, when we're sitting there in bed eating room service waffles, I won't mention to Carlos that I spent half the night in the tub like this, wanting to be alone and also wanting him to wake up and find me.

My dad left Danville when I was eleven and moved, in quick succession, to Atlanta, Daytona Beach, and finally Charlotte, where he got his first job on a pit crew. First he stopped visiting. A few years later, the calls and postcards stopped too. For a while, I used to fantasize about his kidnapping me. I wanted him to be an outlaw, to want me as badly as Wolfy's mom wanted him. That was before I knew that he had never asked for full custody and a long, long time before I really understood what this meant.

It's been almost twenty years since I've heard from him. Sometimes, I forget that he's not dead. It's hard to miss someone for that long. It wears you out and, let's be honest, it lets you off the hook. All that time you spend wishing, shuttling back and forth between remembering and imagining—it's just another way to keep your distance from real life.

When Carlos left me, I cried so much that I got dehydrated. No shit. They had to give me an IV at the emergency room and even when I was sitting there, channel surfing and watching the bag of saline slowly empty, I couldn't stop crying. They wanted to keep me overnight because they thought I was a suicide risk.

I cheated. With a guy named Rick. He's on the maintenance staff here at the hotel. I never loved him. It was Carlos I loved. But I wanted Rick, and he wanted me. When it started I swore that it would be just once. But it wasn't. We'd sneak into empty rooms at lunch and the sex was better than it had any right to be. It lasted for two months before Carlos found out. We made it through two appointments with a therapist and, at his mother's insistence, one session with a priest before he left me. This is the plainest way to say it, to cut through the long-winded bullshit.

Maybe it is just getting by, this arrangement we have: just a weekend at a time, every few weeks, only at the hotel. It's

so tempting to convince yourself that everything can be reinvented, even two people. When I'm with Carlos, I force myself not to think about getting back together. Sometimes, all I want to say to is, *come back to me*. But he won't. And I know this. There's no way to explain what it feels like to be on the other side of something I've always been terrified of and to know I'm still breathing. That, even if he can't, I'm capable of forgiving myself.

Mostly, we stay in bed. During sex, Carlos likes me to straddle his thighs and take his dick in my hand like it's a gear shift. *Rev me up*, he'll say, and I'll sit there, pushing my foot against his armpit like it's the clutch, going from first to second to third as he starts to moan and gets this sweet, blissed out look on his face. And I'll say *you know this ain't normal, baby?* and he'll laugh and right then, it feels good to be with him, to know that he's still willing to act like such an ass in front of me.

Tonight, as it started to get dark, we walked over to the window and watched the sun set, the way it crashed through the city's skyline like a cheap backdrop. I'm scared of heights and kept my distance from the window, but Carlos knelt down on the thick carpet and pressed his body and open palms against the warm glass.

Standing there, I didn't look down. Instead, I watched Carlos, his head bent like he was praying, staring out at the city like he was ready to take flight, and I knew that even though his face was close enough to touch, he was far away from me. Looking at him, I wondered what it would feel like to be someone different, someone who, when she hears the word *love*, thinks first of what it can become.

I saw my mother, still waking up at 6:00 every morning to fix breakfast for her husband and get ready for another day of caring for strangers. I saw the man my father has become spending day after day at the race track, hustling to change a tire, to fill the tank, watching as his driver circles the track, feeling, for the first time in his life, devoted enough to something to stay with it.

I saw how we are.

How, even when we hold each other, we still strain toward a different place, driven by the blind spots of desire and need. I saw how easy it is, if we are not careful, to let go.

Daniel Wallace

A Night Like This

I was with a woman the other night, the first time I'd been with one in a while. I'm not going to give her a name here because I'm not sure her name is all that important: she could have been anybody. That sounds mean, but it's true. She could have been any number of women, I think, even though things had worked out with us well enough to the point that we were together, and we were all set to have sex. We'd gone through the preliminaries: the dinners, the movies, sharing highlights from our pasts like movie trailers, and then the gradual physical intimacy that began with a brief kiss on the first date and then a deep one on the second and a very complicated and tangled maneuver on her couch on the third, which left us both breathless, wanting more. But we were pacing ourselves, just being together a little bit before we went the whole nine yards. Both of us knew that the next time we saw each other we'd have sex. It's not something we said, but we both knew it was going to happen.

I thought about it all week. I must have thought about it ten times a day, imagining this woman with her clothes off, or me taking them off, and then me with *my* clothes off, on top of her, you know, or wherever, wondering how it would all play out. When you're married for a while you trade in that mystery for comfort, and while the excitement level can be low there's nothing like being with a friend, making love with someone who doesn't care if you look a certain way, different from Mel Gibson or whoever, and who accepts you as you are, who actually *wants* you as you are. That's the way it is in a good marriage, folks, at least that's the way it was in mine. But it's not like I ever thought about making love to my wife ten times a day. We just did it. Then, usually, we'd go to sleep. I shouldn't keep calling her my wife. But it's hard to rename somebody after calling them one thing for so long. It's a lot to ask, to start calling her my *ex*-wife, just like that. It's only been a few months. I'm trying but I'm not there yet. It's like having a new telephone number, or the first few weeks after the year changes. It takes time to get it right.

Finally the night came. This woman and I had a little dinner at the new Mexican place, which was good. A couple of

margaritas apiece. I was funny—or she was laughing, at any rate. When she laughed she showed all her teeth, and they were nice. Nicer than I had remembered. Things went well.

Back at my place, my apartment, events proceeded rapidly. I mean the door was barely closed before we were all over each other, kissing hard right there in the hallway and holding our bodies together with such a force that I worried I might hurt her. But you could tell the opposite was happening: she was loving it. I was, too. It had been six months since anything like this had happened, and I couldn't believe I had gone so long without it. I don't know how long it had been for her, I never asked, but I could tell we were on the same page: she almost ripped my clothes off. She turned into a kind of beast, honestly. Her eyes were hooded, and she had to push me away from her occasionally, not because of anything I was doing but to put the brakes on herself, as if she were on the verge of ripping the flesh from my body with her teeth. And she did bite. I think I still have the bruises to prove it.

No reason to go into every detail, though. You know what happens. This isn't a how-to manual. By the time we made it into my bed we were naked, except that she was wearing her socks and I had my watch on. A couple of times I nicked her with it, and apologized. And though I'd been worried that I wouldn't be able to perform, it having been so long and this woman my first since being with the same woman for ten years, I did pretty well, I think, all things considered, and I think that she was happy too, though I felt I shouldn't ask. I don't know what to do anymore, how to be. But it was probably a good idea not to ask.

After it was over, we lay beside each other, breathing. As fast-paced as everything had been up until then, it was weird, just lying there, still. I'd left the bathroom light on, with the door cracked, and a thin path of light edged across the room and fell against my dresser. We were both looking at it. On the top of the dresser was a little photograph of my wife, unframed; it leaning against the bare wall, the only picture in the whole room. I missed her, there was no getting around that. I missed her body. I missed watching her take her shirt off, the way she crossed her arms in an *X*, taking the hem of the shirt in her fingers and pulling it upwards over her head, exposing her bra and then her breasts, drooping like teardrops, soft as rain. I missed the sentences she never finished, the words she never found. I missed the *idea* of her as my wife, to have and to hold. I missed her saying, "Well, I'll be…." And when, because some friend of hers was broken-hearted and out of anger and empathy she condemned the men of the world wholesale as terrible, inhumane creatures, she always looked at me and smiled and said, "Present company excluded." I liked that, and

I missed that, and I wished I had a chance to hear her say it again. I had found the picture the other day and something about it, I don't know, it was just a nice shot of her. But looking at it now, with this woman, it made me wish I had put it away.

"Who's that?" she asked me.

"That picture?" I said. "Nobody."

"Well," she said, with a little laugh. "It's *somebody*."

"You know what I mean," I said.

"Is that, like, your girlfriend?"

"No," I said. "I don't have a girlfriend."

But maybe I shouldn't have said it like that, because if I had a girlfriend it was her. I could tell this stung her. The air in the room changed then, and she seemed to move away from me a little on the bed. Our arms had been touching but they weren't anymore, and her face, when I looked at it, had lost something. A friendliness.

"Is it your wife?" she asked me.

"No," I said. "No. I mean, it is, she was, but she's not anymore. I told you that."

"And you have her picture on your dresser?"

"It's just a picture," I said. "One picture."

And I thought how true that was, how it was only a picture, a moment a picture had fixed in time, one moment out of all of them. It was just her standing there, doing nothing special, at a time before when she was my wife. And here I was looking at it with this new woman.

"It's none of my business," she said, "but I should tell you, you know, for the next time this happens to you. It's maybe best not to have a picture of your ex-wife on display. It kills the mood."

She smiled at me then, in a friendly way, and I knew, just the way I knew a week ago we were going to be having sex that night, that we were never going to have it again. It just wasn't going to work out. I knew we wouldn't see each other again, all because of that picture I had on my dresser and the way the light fell on it so that we both could see. The way she said *the next time this happens to you*. The next woman, she meant. The next her. And I thought, How wonderful. How wonderful that I would get to go through this all again, the movies and dinners, the incremental kissing, the flirting, the figuring out of each other, just to get right back to this same place. Christ, I thought, I might have to do it *ten* times, or even more. Who could say? Not me: I'd be the last person to know. I'd be the last person in the whole world. And all of a sudden I was glad I had that picture of my wife up there now, illuminated in the light, so we could all see whose fault this was. I hated her, hated her so much in that moment. But it passed.

"She's pretty," the woman said. "Your ex-wife."

"Well, she takes a good picture," I said.

And that was that. I took the woman home, the two of us sharing that terrible quiet, and watched her walk the long walk that led to her door. Then I drove away, and for some reason started laughing. Because it struck me as funny, I think, how fucked up we can be and still manage to carry on. Not *we* really, but me: *I* was fucked up, and here I was carrying on—like a soldier, or a dark and quiet hero, and that was kind of funny. It was a cool night, a starry sky, and I drove without a thought of where I was going, through the dark parts of town, the lights of the city glowing in the distance. The wind slipped in through my window and was soft against my skin. It felt good. The wind felt good. It was like feeling like you're in a movie, that your life is a movie and this is one of the good parts, where the sweet music starts to play. I could even see a piece of the moon, shy tonight, but full behind a glowing bank of clouds. Perfect. It would be a night like this, I hoped, when I would suddenly realize I wasn't married anymore, like the day you get the year right, or remember your telephone number without thinking about it, or when you can tell somebody where you live, the new place, and call it home, and mean it.

Patrick Nevins

Harboring

Avery is quiet as Treat pushes her old Corolla up 65 like a fugitive. The speed doesn't worry her; the cornfields stretch out a dull white both east and west, but the interstate is clear. She wonders if a fleet of Lafayette Police cars will pull up behind them at any moment, she wonders if what she's doing is what's called "harboring" on the TV shows her mother watches, she even wonders what she's missing in World Civ. There wasn't a test scheduled, so she's safe on that front. A glance in the side mirror shows no police, only two shrinking semis. She swipes off her pink toboggan and unbuttons her pea coat, getting comfortable with helping Treat run from the law, the idea that made her hesitate back at her father's.

Treat had been staying at Avery's father's house since Thursday night. Her mother was working late, so Avery had taken her retriever/shepherd mix, Peyton, to her father's so she could walk him around Columbian Park after dark. Peyton was born with cerebellar hypoplasia; with no motor skills, his paws chop the air as he skates down the street, tumbling forward and backward like he's on ice. People can't help commenting on his jerky gait: "What's wrong with him?" When a young mother pushing a stroller had said, "That's the *strangest* dog I've ever seen," Avery told the woman she had the *ugliest* baby she'd ever seen, and since then she walks Peyton only at night. Thursday night, Peyton had tugged—as best he can—Avery off the sidewalk and through the playground toward a boy slumped in a swing. She recognized the boy from his thick red curls: Treat Miller. In first period study hall that morning, she'd smelled liquor on him.

Treat scratched behind Peyton's ears. His nails were too long and seemed to glow. He'd never seen Avery's dog before, and that he didn't ask about his flopping around in the snow helped Avery overcome her disgust for him. It even made her like him a little.

"I suppose Katelyn told you everything?" he asked.

"Yeah. Don't worry. She made me promise not to tell anyone."

Avery's best friend, Katelyn, had done it with Treat; Avery was still a virgin, but Treat was not Katelyn's first.

Katelyn said Treat was rough, gripping too tight, letting those long nails scratch. She almost asked him to stop. When he came, he hit her in the side. Avery didn't know about it until a dozen cheerleaders and Katelyn's coach had seen the bruise, and the story that she'd gotten it in some guy's bed had seeped through the halls of Tipp County High. Even Avery's father, a drunk who phoned in his English lessons, had heard. When Katelyn finally told Avery the story, she swore her to secrecy; she wanted all the talking to stop, and thought turning in Treat would make things worse. Now this sicko was hiding in Columbian Park, cozying up to Avery's dog.

"I'm not a monster," Treat said.

Avery gave Peyton's leash a gentle tug: *Time to go*.

When the dog's ears were out of his grip, Treat's face flopped into his hands, his fingers digging in his curls.

"He'll kill me," he said. "He'll *kill* me."

"I said don't worry. Katelyn's not telling her parents, so no one's going to kill you."

Treat looked up. Tears shimmered on his cheeks.

"I'm not talking about that," he said. "He's going to kill me because I got caught drunk at school. If he finds out about Katelyn, he'll find a way to kill me *again*."

To Avery, Treat was the worst kind of jock: the kind that doesn't actually play any sports, but acts like a star in pickup games, talks too loud, and thinks so little of women that when he finally gets one (what was Katelyn doing with him, anyway?) he thinks he can rough her up. But she found herself pitying him. What would happen if she turned him away? He couldn't hide out in the park or on the street—it was January. If he went home, what would his father do? Hit him? Grab him by his curls and throw him to the floor? Her father would know what to do.

Treat followed Avery and Peyton the two blocks from the park to Avery's father's house. Avery's father was on the couch watching the Boilermakers lose to the Buckeyes. His sweats stretched across his belly and he was cradling a bourbon and Coke. He said Treat was welcome to stay in Avery's room until Mr. Miller cooled off. When Treat had gone to bed, Avery's father explained to Avery why he'd taken the kid in: When he'd done ninety meetings in ninety days the summer before the divorce, Mr. Miller had shown up once toward the end. "He left a bad taste in my mouth," Avery's father said. "I knew he wouldn't get the help he needed, not that time. And I knew his family would pay for it." Avery thought: *Like us, Daddy, just like us*. To soften the harshness of the barb, she revised: *Not* just *like us*. *You never lay a hand on us*.

Avery spent the weekend at her father's, sprawled on her bed reading World Civ and Advanced Chem, while Treat

watched basketball with her father. In the evenings, rather than go out to Desario's or China Buffet and risk being seen with their refugee, they ordered pizza. Treat went with Avery and Peyton on their nightly walks, telling Avery how hard his home life was: If his father had a lousy day at the Dodge dealership, he laid into his family with cruelty. When Treat's little brother prattled on about *High School Musical*, his father called him "my good lady." His father once stared across the dinner table at his mother and said, "If you insist on being frigid, you could at least learn to cook." Each night, he hoped the climax would arrive sooner: When his father slapped his mother's cheek or pushed him into the wall, he felt a great wave of relief—it was over for now. Treat's a loudmouth, and he hurt and humiliated Katelyn—but how could he know any better? There was more Avery could do besides hide him. Sunday night in the park, when they'd grown silent and the only sound was the flurry of Peyton's nails scratching the sidewalk, Avery turned to Treat and kissed him, their mouths steaming.

Monday is when things go really wrong. Treat had stayed home from school, blaming a bad feeling in his stomach. Avery wonders now if it was a premonition or just luck, because during the break between sixth and seventh periods Avery's father asked her into his classroom and told her that Katelyn (who hasn't been to school since last Monday) broke down this afternoon and told her parents the name of the boy who hurt her. When he put his hand on her shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, but it was Treat," she couldn't fake surprise, but offered her blankest face. He didn't ask, to be sure, if she knew. He said Katelyn's parents had notified the school, and he was obliged to meet the police at home to hand over the boy.

When the tone sounded for the start of seventh period, Avery was at her locker, grabbing her coat and toboggan. She sprinted to the student lot, started her car, and sped to her father's house. They'd escaped: Treat answering her banging on the back door, she shaking him and giving him the situation, he grabbing his coat and jumping into the driver's side. They'd only paused when she stood outside the car, not sure if she was supposed to go with him or just give him the car. But then his "Come on!" muffled by the driver's window settled it. Their cells fluttered in their coat pockets, echoing their racing hearts, calls from their fathers that they shut off. Treat said something about Chicago—he has a cousin in Chicago. Dominic. Then they were on State Road 26, mercifully empty, and then they were pulling onto 65 north.

Treat feels comfortable enough to call his cousin. "I'm on my way up to Chicago. I was hoping you could put me up for the night." Avery hears Dominic's miniaturized laugh coming through. "I got into some trouble with a girl and need a place to

lay low for a while." More laughter. Treat listens to Dominic give him directions to his apartment. Then he says to Avery, "We're good."

The sky is too close. It doesn't give Avery the impression of distance that it does on clear days; the gray seems to hang just on the other side of the windshield. In this sobering light, she knows she's not running away with Treat. She doesn't even think Treat will stay on the run. Maybe he will. But if she doesn't come back, for one thing Peyton will die. Her mother thought they ought to put him down when the specialist at the Purdue vet school diagnosed him when he was puppy. Her father would make an effort, but not enough, as the dog needs constant attention. For another thing, Avery graduates in June. Her heart's set on Cornell; maybe she'll double major in psychology and English. It's just a matter of how long this will last. Dominic will keep them tonight, maybe longer. Avery glances over at Treat, whose eyes are squinted and tired, and sees a husband driving the last stretch of a long trip. If she's given him a measure of comfort, time to breathe before his mistakes, which seem to float harmlessly in the past, are put on paper and fed into computers and he's made accountable, she'll consider all this a success.

The gray sky darkens and gives them room as they get on 90 west. They haven't stopped, though the tank's getting low, and their stomachs rumble.

"We going to make it?" Avery asks.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Avery points to the gauge. Treat thinks they're close to Dominic's village. He pulls off the Kennedy Expressway and drags them down a one-way street of red-brick row houses. They can't pick out the numbers, but when Treat thinks they're close, he parallel parks. He bumps the CRV behind them.

Dominic's second-floor apartment puts Avery at ease, not because it's her element, but because it's Treat's. Dominic's head is shaved, though a blue horseshoe pattern shows. He's wearing a blue shirt, unbuttoned, and black wool pants, but he must have been home for hours. He hugs Treat, thumpimg him on the back. His apartment is cavernous: big rooms for boys to spread out and thump each other, little in the way of furniture, only a matching leatherish couch and chair facing a flat-screen TV, under which DVDs are crammed into a stand. Avery shifts on her feet, crunching dirt into the hardwood floors. Dominic looks mid twenties. A bachelor pad. The only feminine touch is a vase of red carnations on the dining table. A girl's been here recently.

Dominic introduces himself to Avery with a gentle handshake. “Make yourself at home, Avery,” he says, gesturing toward the living room. “Can I get either of you a beer?”

Treat says yes, so Avery says yes too. They are safe for now; they ought to relax before their next move. Avery flinches as the beer’s bitterness washes over her tongue.

When all three are settled, Treat and Avery on the couch, their coats thrown over the back, and Dominic in the chair, Dominic says to Treat, “You didn’t tell me you were bringing the girl.”

“Sorry,” Treat says.

“No, it’s okay. It’s a nice surprise.” Dominic winks at Avery. “What kind of trouble are you two in, anyway?”

“She’s not the one,” Treat says.

Dominic asks Avery, “Are you in some other kind of trouble?”

“No,” she says. “I’m just here for Treat.”

“So you’ve got one girl helping you run from another one?” Dominic laughs. “I had no idea my little cousin was such a player.”

Treat, not drinking his Heineken, just stares at his feet. Even Dominic can tell he ought to stop grilling him. “I can understand if you don’t want to talk about it,” he says. “I’ve got just the thing we all need.”

He goes to his bedroom and returns with a cigar box and squeezes between his guests. He opens the box to reveal a bag of pot and rolling papers. When he licks the paper to seal the first joint, his tongue looks too pink.

“Ladies first,” he says, handing the joint to Avery. She’s smoked pot once, with her ex, Johnny, and some of his friends. It was one of the moments that pushed her to break up with him; he was too busy goofing with the others to take care of her, to see that she was doing it right. She’s not sure she did. When she sucks this time, Dominic coaches her. “Hold on to it. Let it go down.” When she can no longer take the tickling and burning, she lets go with a rumble of coughs. “Good girl.”

After her next hit, but before she’s sure she’s feeling the drug work, she says, “Oh my God, I just remembered I was starving.”

“Damn,” Dominic says, “You get the munchies quick, girl.”

He puts a frozen pizza in the oven for them and grabs them each another beer. It’s working, Avery thinks, Treat is free, breathing easy between hits, feeling invincible. She’s given him this. Dominic turns on his stereo: rap music, which Avery usually can’t stand (it’s all the *niggas* and *bitches* she can’t take), but digs right now. An angry black man stands between them and their pursuers. Even if they got past this smooth

monster, the wall of thumping bass would overwhelm them. Dominic juts his elbows out, dancing. In his wool pants and with his work shirt swinging open, he looks like a total *douche bag*, something Avery has never called anyone. But she's loving him anyway, right now; he's given them a safe place to stay, food, and gotten them high. Beacons of light surround her: Dominic's glossy forehead, their green bottles, the tip of the joint in Treat's lips.

Treat sits up and says to Dominic, "Sorry I wasn't being cool earlier. You're really helping us out."

"No problem, little cousin. One dance with your girl is payment enough." Dominic takes Avery's hand and pulls her up to dance with him. She obliges. She dances so close to him that they keep brushing each other, little strikes of his crotch against her hip, her boobs against his torso. She's sweating, so she pulls off her sweater, and—fuck it—her tee shirt too, so she's down to a white tank top that rides up to reveal a sliver of midriff.

Treat goes on: "But this has been a fucking crazy day. I'm wanted by the cops, the fucking cops, and here I am, stoned as a motherfucker."

Dominic laughs. Maybe he thinks it's a joke. He's struck dumb by Avery, anyway. He tosses his shirt away. Avery can't help but run her fingers over his thick shoulders. He puts his hands on her sides, his pinkies penetrating the slice of skin between her tank top and jeans. She doesn't know how long they've been at it, she can't tell when one track ends and the next begins, but she's burning up, her Secret deodorant sweetening the skunky pot smell. And she's actually *turned on* by this corporate douche bag ex-jock—so not her type. She dates boys from Academic Team; her husband will have a PhD. She guesses there's a Nerf basketball hoop on Dominic's bedroom door. But it still turns her on that an older guy with a career and his own place—and this body—is flirting with her.

She has to pee and asks for the bathroom, and Dominic takes her through the bedroom. The light is too bright, so she flips it off and cracks the door enough to see by the bedroom lamp Dominic had switched on.

On her way back, she surveys the bedroom. It's clean: bed made, dresser top covered only in a couple picture frames (it's too dark to see but she imagines his parents smiling out of them), a creased copy of *The Da Vinci Code* on the night stand. No feminine touches. She wonders if that means he's not serious with the carnation girl. And there's no hoop on the door.

Out in the living room a jangling noise invades them. It's an unfamiliar cell ring—Dominic's phone. The stereo goes mute, and in this quiet, Avery feels their safety threatened. It

seems Treat's father is in the hall, about to knock down the door. She sits on the bed to steady herself and listens.

"Hey, Pop," Dominic says. "Have I heard from Treat? Why would I have heard from Treat?" There are the sounds of him cracking a window for the smoke; he's making the place presentable for some unexpected visit. "The police? Really." More talking from the other end. Avery strains to hear him, cowed by Pop, giving them up. "I didn't have any idea, Pop. Yeah, I'll keep them here."

As soon as he flips his cell shut, Treat is off the couch and in his face.

"What the fuck, man! Why'd you tell your dad I was here?"

"You didn't tell me you were wanted by the police for assault."

"Yes, I did."

"What kind of shit did you pull, anyway? He said you assaulted a *girl*."

There's a pause in which Treat must think he's lost. That space Avery had bought for him to breathe in has closed.

"A police car's coming to pick you two up."

Avery freezes when she hears this; it now seems inevitable that she's going back to Lafayette tonight, and the difficulties of her return frighten her. Will it be in a cop's car? Or is her father on his way to Chicago? Please, God, let it be that. Don't let her mother be with him. Let him bring Peyton.

"No," Treat says. "No fucking way."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I'll run. I'll go to a hotel."

There will be no keeping Treat here short of physical restraint, and while Dominic has the strength he may lack the will. Dominic steps into the bedroom and closes the door behind him. Avery stands, holds herself.

"I don't know what's going on between you two," Dominic says, "but I think it would be for the best if you stayed right here."

"I can't leave him."

Dominic puts his arms around Avery, and she leans into his body for a bit of comfort before she leaves. Because maybe by leaving they can buy Treat a little more time.

Dominic whispers: "He's trouble. That family's trouble. You're safe here. I'll take care of you."

His hands creep up her sides now, his fingertips digging under her tank, alarmingly close to the edge of her bra. She tries breaking away from him, but he buries his face in her neck, that pink tongue flicking in her hair.

Avery tries to cry out, but the cry gets choked off, and instead she throws a tantrum, arms flailing and feet stomping.

This loosens something in her, and the cry gets free of the bottleneck and opens up like a baby's wail. Dominic emerges from her neck and kisses her mouth, trapping the wail. The effort weakens his hold on her and she falls onto the bed. The spot where he licked her neck burns.

"Cocktease," he says.

She gets up and runs to the living room, where Treat stands looking caught, unaware of what's happened in the bedroom.

"Let's go," he says.

She gets into her coat and grabs her tee shirt and sweater, and they are out the door and down the stairs and inside her car before they can speak. Treat wants to get out of the village, back onto the Kennedy and then a cheap hotel. But he doesn't want to stop for gas, either.

"What were you doing back there?" he asks.

"What was I doing? What were *you* doing? That creep was about to rape me and you were just standing there."

"He left his wallet in the kitchen. I got all the cash from it. Count this." He hands her a folded stack of bills. "And I took the rest of his weed."

As soon as they're inside the room, Avery sinks to one of the beds and begins sobbing. She can still feel Dominic's hands on her skin. She'd held herself together in the car, which jerked and wheezed for fuel as they pulled into the hotel lot, and put on a tired smile to match that of the old Hispanic woman in the hotel office. Treat had said to pay for the room with Dominic's money, but Avery shoved it in her pocket and pulled from her wallet the emergency MasterCard her mother had given her. She pressed the card to her lips. If she left a paper trail, they could be found. But wouldn't that be the same as calling the police and turning Treat in? The woman, waiting on the credit card, asked if everything was okay. Avery nodded and slid the card to the woman. It is not *exactly* the same. She was buying him more time this way. But she hoped it wouldn't be too much longer.

Since the spell of Dominic's place had been broken by that phone call, Avery wants only for her father to show up and take her home. And Treat can't run forever.

Treat works all the locks on the door. Then he sits by Avery and holds her, tries to stifle her sobs. To get the awful film of Dominic off her, Avery kisses Treat. It's not like last night's kiss, a hot little star in the cold night, it's sloppy and fills the room with its smacking and sucking. Treat's hands reach

inside her coat and crawl up her back, and she pulls him closer. His mouth works its way down her chin to her neck and to the firm spot just above the rim of her tank top. But it fails to wash Dominic away; instead it seems to seal him to her.

"Wait," she says. "I feel like taking a shower."

Treat smiles. "Together?"

"No."

Treat's smile takes on the stuck look of the hotel clerk's.

"I'm sorry," Avery says. "I just feel like cleaning up."

She shuts the bathroom door and turns on the shower before taking off her clothes. She shouldn't have made out with Treat. He's probably expecting her to have sex with him now. That would make him comfortable, but she must think of herself here, and this isn't how she wants to lose her virginity. She lingers in the shower, prolonging the moment she'll have to face his expectation. Then another fear grips her: *What if he comes in here and tries to rape me like his cousin did?* She turns off the water and nearly slips hurrying to get one of the coarse towels around her body.

She comes out in her jeans and tank top, barefoot and with her towel wrapped around her hair. Treat is rolling another joint. The TV provides the only light in the room.

"*Up in Smoke*," he says, pointing at the screen. "Can you believe our luck?"

He lights the joint and takes a hit, then offers it to Avery.

"No thanks," she says. "I just want to lie down."

She crawls on the bed next to Treat, but doesn't get under the covers. Treat must've turned on the heat while she was in the shower. Her skin begins to itch from the room's dryness.

"Can you turn that down?" she asks.

When he reaches for the TV remote wired to the nightstand, she says that she meant the heat. He obliges, and she turns to face the wall, where the TV's lights grow and shrink and play, finally lulling her to sleep.

She wakes up to hard knocking and a mildewy smell. The smell is her towel, which has fallen away from her head. The knocking is at the door.

Treat bounces off the bed and rushes to the bathroom. Flushing. Avery looks in on him. The pot, of course. Through Dominic and the MasterCard, the police have tracked them down to this hotel and come to take them back to Lafayette. Is her father on the other side of the door? It's time to lose the drugs. She has an impulse to flush Dominic's cash too, but doesn't want Treat to know she didn't use it for the room. Treat

tells her to answer the door. All she can say here at the end is, "It's going to be okay." How lame.

She undoes the locks and opens the door, disappointed to see it's only the clerk. "Someone complained about a smell," the clerk says. That stuck-on smile has been replaced by a hard, dry mouth.

"I haven't smelled anything," Avery says.

The clerk pokes her nose into the room and sniffs.

"This is a no-smoking room. And I don't like what I smell. If I have to come back, you'll have to leave."

Avery promises the clerk she won't have to come back. When the clerk's gone, Treat comes out of the bathroom and clicks off the TV, leaving them in darkness, but not quiet. The hum of another room's TV, the ghost of theirs.

"Maybe we should get some sleep," Avery says.

She lies down on the bed and Treat lies next to her. The pot gone down the toilet, he might make his move on her now. But instead he says, "What's our plan?" Avery says nothing. "We ought to move to another hotel tomorrow. But where're we going to get the cash?" What's he thinking of? Picking pockets? Snatching purses? He could get killed. Or maybe he's thinking of finding the kind of work where no one asks many questions, but that probably doesn't exist anymore, and that loss saddens her, and not just for him. She wishes she could say something in earnest, give him hope, because the police aren't coming tonight, they're not going to trace them to this room, she's been dragged into too many detective shows with her mother. Tomorrow, she'll tell Treat she's got to go back. He'll understand she wants to go back to her father and mother.

"Get out of the city," she says. "Head for big open spaces."

As soon as she's said it, she's afraid Treat will ask if she means they should get out of the city together. He answers only with deep breaths. As her eyes adjust to the dark, his face comes into soft focus. He's drifted off, maybe into dreams of hitchhiking out west, landing a job on a ranch, playing pickup games with the other cowhands under a rusted backboard, not talking so loud anymore.

She's given him peace. She wants to keep up this vigil, but she's exhausted and drifts in and out of sleep. She doesn't know if it's hours or only minutes when she finally surrenders.

Knocking again. Avery straightens and moves to the door, ready to tell the clerk she's made a mistake this time. But when she undoes the locks and swings open the door, two cops wait on the other side. The closer one is fiftyish, his features clumped on his face like clay, with a gut, an uglier version of her father. His wide belt of glossy black compartments comes almost to her nose.

"Avery?" he says.

She had wished for them earlier, but since their absence had granted her and Treat the peace they were now interrupting, she's angry, and all she can say to them is a dry, "What took you so long?"

Treat is not fully out of his western reverie when the other cop enters the room for him.

The first cop says to Avery, "Your parents are really worried about you." This brings her around. She wants to be back home: Her room at her mother's, her room at her father's, the children at Columbian Park who don't know any better and their parents who should know better than to ask about Peyton, World Civ and Advanced Chem. She collapses into this man's arms and cries out for all of it.

Shasta Grant

The Good Ex-Wife

The doorbell rings and even though she doesn't want to, even though she'd rather take the boys and hide upstairs, she opens the door. So strange, him standing on the front steps, ringing the doorbell. The doorbell to their house. He looks very much the same, except he's wearing his hair a little differently, a little longer in the front. He's still so familiar that she has to remind herself he's not. His car is parked on the street and she can see the woman in the passenger seat.

"Did you have to bring her?" she asks. "Really?"

"Good morning to you, too. She has a name: Kathleen. I thought the four of us could go to the movies," he says.

"The movies?"

"Christ. What's wrong with going to the movies?"

"Nothing. I'd just think you'd rather do something with the boys other than stare at a screen for hours. But it's your weekend. You do what you like."

She wants to ask what they'll see, make sure it's appropriate, like she is their mother and he is not their father. Only she is responsible now for all the decisions. The big ones and the little ones. She is their protector. She watches the woman, this Kathleen, behind his frame in the doorway, flipping her black, glossy hair over her shoulder.

"Fine," she says. "The boys have packed overnight bags. Isaiah's had an upset stomach for a couple days. So watch what he eats. Nothing sweet. Or spicy."

"We'll be fine," he says.

Sure. They'll all be fine without her. She leaves him standing in the doorway, without inviting him in. On the stairs she passes their family pictures, the wedding pictures, afraid to take them down. Afraid that the missing photographs, the evidence of visiting the ocean and building stout snowmen in the front yard, would upset the boys, that they would think their father was being erased. But Anna is tired of seeing the pictures of all of them, so young and happy. The boys are in Ezekiel's room, playing Hungry Hungry Hippo on the floor.

"Daddy's here."

"Cool," Ezekiel says. He pushes himself off the floor and goes downstairs.

Isaiah remains seated, fingering one of the pink plastic hippos, which are almost the same color as his cheeks.

"C'mon, buddy," she says, kneeling next to him.

She brushes a stray strand of hair off his forehead. His eyes fill with tears and he clings to her, his pudgy arms around her waist.

"I don't want to go," he says.

He has never spent the night away from his mother and only a few nights away from this house, either on vacations or visiting family. She tries not to show that she is sad, too.

"Aw, pumpkin. It'll be okay. It's just for one night. Daddy misses you. And don't you want to see his new house? He has a special room for you and Ezekiel."

She is the good mother. The good ex-wife. She won't tell Isaiah that his father is a cheating bastard who left his family for some 26-year-old home wrecking slut. She won't tell the boys that their father slept with his secretary for six months before leaving her and the boys. How did they become such a cliché? She won't tell them that on some days their father would fuck the secretary when the rest of the office was at lunch and then he'd come home and put the same fingers that were inside the secretary inside their mother. She won't tell them that when he finally did confess, it wasn't a sorrowful admission of guilt but a declaration of love for another woman. It was a confession that he was leaving them, all of them, because his love for this other woman was so great let no man put asunder what God has joined together, least of all his stupidly devoted, trusting wife or his two sweet, innocent boys. No, she won't tell them any of this.

She picks Isaiah up from the floor, telling him only that everything will be fine. Great, even. Daddy is taking them to a movie. He loves movies, remember?

Downstairs, Ezekiel's bag is slung over one shoulder, his skateboard under one arm. He is telling his dad about a new trick he learned, something called an ollie. Apparently, the key is to bend your knees enough. Just hearing him talk about skateboarding makes her flinch with fear for him breaking a bone or spraining an ankle.

"Leave the skateboard here," she says.

"C'mon, Mom. That's not fair."

"Sorry. It stays here," she says, even though she knows that he is right.

That it's not fair. None of this is fair. In this uncharted territory of agreements and support payments and visitation, the skateboard stays. Isaiah is slipping from her, his feet reaching for the ground and she places him down, feeling the

ache of his empty weight in her arms and hip. He reaches for his father's hand where it slides easily, tightly. She hands over his bag and they are out the door, down the walkway, into the car and away. She waves her hand long after they are out of sight, until a neighbor walks by dragging a puppy behind him and looks at her strangely. She closes the front door and turns to face the empty house; once warm and safe, it now swallows her. She thinks about going shopping, or out for some coffee, or calling her sister, who will say something like "You need to be more independent. You should love yourself more." But what does she know of Anna's love? She does none of these things. Instead, she washes the dishes from breakfast, the hot, soapy water wrinkling her shaking hands, and then she knows where she will go.

She purchases her ticket with sunglasses on. Inside the first theater, she pushes the sunglasses on top of her head. Her eyes adjust slowly to the darkness as she scans the room for them but does not find them, nor in the second theater. They are in the third one, a Disney movie—the woman's shiny hair thrown over her seat. Anna quietly sits in the last row and watches. His arm is around her. Kathleen. The boys sit on the other side of him. Isaiah's head is barely visible over the top of the seat. It looks like Ezekiel and Isaiah are sharing a tub of popcorn. For twenty minutes she sits, running her fingers over the velvet seat, staring, not sure what she's hoping to find or see. Some evidence that he's an unfit father? That he shouldn't be allowed to see the boys, that they should be just hers? Or what is so special about her, this girl who can't possibly know anything about life but has managed to dissolve Anna's? Or maybe she's looking for signs of trouble between him and this woman, an indication that it's only a mid-life crisis brought on by his thinning hair and the little crinkles around his eyes, a mistake—one that can be corrected. He's coming back to his family; he really meant to buy a shiny, red Corvette. He still loves her.

She imagines her fate of forever watching movies alone, on the fringe of other people's happiness. Of his happiness. This is how it will be now—the weekend father and his boys with his girlfriend, maybe soon his wife. And Anna, skulking around, spying on his new life, his new happiness, in movie theatres, restaurants, grocery stores, in his new house. Anna, donning disguises—blonde wigs, gray wigs, hats with feather plumes in the brims, big sunglasses, dressing up like an old woman until one day, the actual transformation has gone unnoticed and she is an old woman. No longer a disguise.

Ezekiel stands up and hands the tub of popcorn to his brother. Anna slouches down in her seat as he passes by on his way up the aisle, suddenly embarrassed for following them here—like a mad woman, a woman without good sense, exactly the sort of woman whose husband leaves her. Then she remembers a news story from a week ago, about a young boy who choked to death while eating popcorn in a movie theater. His parents performed the Heimlich but the kernel would not dislodge. The paramedics arrived and pronounced him dead in the theater. Anna remembers feeling ashamed because what she wanted to know was: did they stop the movie?

How can he let Isaiah eat popcorn? She stands up, thinking she will save her son from a violent, choking death. Then she hears Isaiah laugh in response to whatever is happening on the screen and Kathleen laughs, too. He hands Kathleen the tub of popcorn, reaching it across his father's lap, and Kathleen reaches her hand in and scoops out a handful.

Anna opens the door into the hallway, flooded with light, and sees Ezekiel walking towards her from the bathroom, through the crowd of a just-ended movie. But he isn't walking towards her, he's just walking back to the movie, to his brother and father and Kathleen.

Anna makes an early dinner—baked chicken wrapped in prosciutto—and eats it in silence. She is the envy of many mothers tonight: an entire evening to herself, no husband, no children, no chores, no responsibility. Lots of mothers send their kids to camp just for a night like this. She decides to make some tea and sit on the porch to enjoy the last of fall, the colorful leaves on the verge of drifting to the ground. She picks up Oprah's latest selection from the coffee table and opens the front door. As she closes the door, one hand on the knob, the book tucked under her arm and her tea balanced carefully in the other hand, she's aware that she doesn't have the key. But the routine motion is swift, quicker than the cells in her brain and the door clicks shut. Her heart rate quickens, armpits dampen. Furiously, she pushes against the handle but it does not give. Tapping uselessly against the window, she looks through, into her empty house, with nobody inside to open the door. She removed the key under the doormat months ago, when he moved out.

She walks around the house to check for open windows and they are all, predictably, closed and locked. She thinks of smashing a rock through one of them and then climbing through but the hassle of cleaning it up and arranging for a

replacement window is overwhelming. Sheepishly, she walks to the next-door neighbor's house and knocks on the door.

"Hi, Mark. Is your mom home?" she asks.

"Sure. Is Ezekiel with you?"

Mark is two years older than Ezekiel but they like to skateboard together. In the interest of being neighborly, Anna allows it. Mark's hair is rumpled and his pants are too big, a style Ezekiel has recently taken to.

"No, he's at his father's house. It's his weekend. The first weekend with the boys since the agreement was signed." She feels herself saying too much, like she always does when she's nervous.

Mark's mother, Carla, comes through the kitchen to greet Anna and grasps Anna's hands in hers. Carla says that she's been thinking of Anna and meaning to stop by but she didn't want to intrude if Anna wasn't up for company. *I'm divorced, not widowed*, Anna keeps herself from saying. She explains her carelessness with the door and asks to use the phone to call a locksmith. Carla pulls a thin phone book from a cabinet and hands it to Anna, directing her to the telephone. Carla brews a pot of coffee while Anna flips through the filmy, yellow pages. She dials four numbers before a line is answered. Carla pours some coffee while they wait. Sitting at the kitchen table, Carla looks at Anna sincerely, in a way that nobody has in a long time. Once her friends expressed their initial sympathy, they disappeared as if Anna were diseased. As if her disease might spread to them and infect their own families.

"How are you holding up?" Carla asks.

"Well, you know. Hanging in there. This is his first weekend with the boys."

"You feel a little lost?" she asks, gently.

"A little." Her pity pisses Anna off. What does Carla know about being lost or unloved? She's never been left by her husband. Anna tries not to think about what the neighbors must say—about her husband running off with that whore and how it makes her look.

"I promise you, it will get better. You might need a little bourbon in your coffee for awhile, but it will get better." Carla laughs and lifts her mug up to her lips.

Anna tries to let herself be comforted by the company but finds herself looking out the window, wishing the locksmith would arrive so she can escape Carla's sympathetic stare. In the presence of Carla's compassion, the dismissal hidden behind her eyes, Anna understands that her marriage was nothing special. Their love was not different or stronger than other loves. The women drink two cups before they see a van embellished with "Eddy's Lock Repair" pull up outside. She

excuses herself, thanking Carla for the hospitality. Carla gives her a half-hug, with one arm. Anna awkwardly hugs her back.

In front of Anna's door, the locksmith asks her to hold some of his tools, brushing his hand against hers. He's very plain looking with a long, bony nose and a receding hairline that bares his temples. His tool belt pulls down on his pants and reveals the top of his underwear, which makes Anna wonder what he looks like naked, even though she knows that she's not interested, that he is nobody she would consider being with. Maybe one day she will have to lower her expectations. A woman with two children is probably not very marketable in the dating field. Neither is a woman who thinly disguises herself behind dark sunglasses and follows her ex-husband to the movies. She tries to picture herself kissing the locksmith, or some other man, and is sure that she won't. There will be no new life for her, no reincarnation of herself.

His peek-a-boo underwear makes her uncomfortable so she talks to fill the air. "I feel so silly. I've never done this before. I guess I wasn't thinking. I was just coming out to have a nice, relaxing evening on the porch and then…." She tells herself to shut up. Just stop talking. She knows that if she keeps talking, she will tell him about the movie theater. Maybe she wants to see the judgment that would flicker across his face before he would smile and make a joke of it. Then he would quickly finish the job, eager to get away from the crazy woman obsessed with her ex-husband.

"Lots of people do it. Or I wouldn't be in business," he says, winking.

"Yeah, you must be right." Anna picks up her book and the cup of cold tea, which she left on the front steps earlier.

He fiddles with several long, needle-like instruments and the door opens.

"There you go," he says, waving his arm as if he's giving Anna's own house to her as a present.

She invites him inside while she writes a check. He stands uncomfortably in the foyer, waiting, his hands inside the front pockets of his jeans. She sees him peeking at the toys in the living room.

"Thanks so much," she says, pressing the check into his hand. "You're a real life saver."

"No problem. Here's my card, in case you ever do it again. Just give me a call." He smiles, half of his lip rising higher than the other half.

She imagines inviting him in for tea but just closes the door instead. She walks up the stairs, pausing at the pictures that cover the wall. She takes the wedding photos down,

pictures from thirteen years ago, when it felt like the whole world was in front of her, about to happen. She leaves the ones of the boys and their father, trying to believe that he hasn't dissolved that relationship too. She places them in the bottom drawer of the dresser, lingering only slightly at his arched eyebrows, his fresh face, his full head of hair, noticing how generic the pictures seem. They could be anybody's wedding pictures. They could be the display pictures in frames at stores. Down the hall, she checks Isaiah's room, to make sure he has packed his favorite bear. He has. Only the stuffed frog sits on his pillow, its green fur on the verge of turning brown from being handled by his sometimes-grimy hands. She lies down next to the frog and waits for her boys to call and say goodnight.

Donna D. Vitucci

That's Amore

Lindy picked up the telephone extension and overheard a call not meant for her. Father Benedict would bring the basket of rectory laundry by on Friday, he said. While her mother and the priest conversed, Lindy clasped the heavy black receiver, lifting it up and down like a dumbbell, exercising her imagination along with her muscle.

She latched onto Father Benedict as she did onto every Catholic detail, only because those details seemed to define all of her life. How lucky, these years with her mother employed as the pastoral laundress, the keeper of Father's house, because who then would look askance at Lindy paying a call to the rectory? She believed her every visit held the potential of Father casting off his holy vestments.

Whenever Father stepped aside for her to enter his house, Lindy felt she was teetering on the edge of a huge magic trick. Soon all the wires, all the backstage charms that held up God and his thin, dark haired priest would be revealed. How disappointing that, during their math tutoring sessions, Father restricted their work to the kitchen, never allowing her to peek beyond the hallway, and yet she craned her neck around the corner, tried to glimpse his bedroom and his plain, celibate world. The woven placemat that had been one of her last projects before she quit Girl Scouts protected the rectory table from the scrape of Father's dinner plate. She held onto this hope: that he thought of her every time he ate.

Once, this past spring, Father had given Lindy the envelope with her mother's weekly pay, then ushered her out to the idling car, forgetting to close the rectory door behind them. She'd interrupted him from the ordinary task of dishwashing. His hand, still wet from rinsing his one plate at the sink, firmly guided her shoulder until they stood in the exhaust of the chugging car. The point of the laundry money envelope scraped the inside of her knee when Lindy lifted her uniform skirt and slid, ladylike, into the front seat. As her mother shifted into reverse, Father Benedict closed Lindy's door. While her mother backed out the car, Lindy reached inside her blouse's neckline and underneath the shoulder of the garment to feel soapy water that had soaked through in the shape of Father's hand. The way

he watched her in retreat, Lindy felt her hand might as well have been his inspecting her damp skin.

She again brought the receiver to her ear because she couldn't stop listening. Father Benedict said, "Do you know the Cuiciettas?"

Her mother's voice answered positively and loudly from the basement extension to compete with the noisy water cascading into the washing machine. The Cuiciettas lived across the street—an older couple, along with their son, Tony, and his grandmother, an ancient lady who spoke no English—in a house that had always been clamped shut from the neighbors.

With priestly clairvoyance Father had pressed facts out of the rumors traded among women who waited to receive his extra blessing on the church steps after Mass.

"Their daughter, Veronica, is getting divorced," he said.

Lindy's mother clicked her tongue on her teeth. Sadness, sympathy, and a little condemnation.

"She's due home today with her girl, Cara. They'll be staying until she can get back on her feet."

Lindy twisted and stretched the cord of the telephone so she could hide in the living room drapes, still listening in while spying on the new divorcee and her daughter. She squinted at Veronica traipsing from the carport into the house, imagined that all the items she carried—everyday cutlery, the special occasion underwear, an opened carton of cigarettes—defined her new status as single woman, daughter, mom. Released from marriage, free to date but bound by mother duty, she had built-in babysitters, her relatives, who would shower her with disapproval, advice, and shameful glances. She'd made a major mistake marrying that bum, and she'd have to prove she'd learned her lesson before anyone in the household forgave her.

Lindy's mother wondered about bad influences.

Father Benedict pointed out the need for Christian charity.

Her mother sighed and Lindy could envision her next to the washing machine, nodding her dark head of hair, accepting Father Benedict's words, already reversing her opinion.

As they were exchanging goodbyes, Lindy tiptoed to the telephone and stealthily replaced the receiver in its cradle before rushing back to her spy post.

Across the street the son, Tony, painted the Cuicietta front door. It looked like the task might take him all afternoon. Veronica detoured around him, scraping her suitcases and boxes over the concrete. She lugged grocery bags near to ripping from the weight of her possessions.

And there walked that new girl, Cara, whose blond hair and light-colored eyes conjured for Lindy visions of cold and Scandinavia, of Heidi in the Alps. The girl skipped along the

Cuiciettas' front sidewalk, her hands free, typically twelve, no help to her mother at all.

Lindy's mother came upstairs, leaving for a minute the precious laundry, saw Lindy wrapped up in the drapes, and said, "Maybe you could ask Cara to play."

Lindy frowned. Almost in high school, she no longer "played," but Father Benedict's interest in this whole affair might spur her to cross the street.

"You've had nothing but bad to say about Tony," Lindy said.

Her mother was tying an apron around her thickened waist. "I don't like you talking with him, but if Father thinks Cara needs your help fitting in here, wouldn't that be the neighborly thing to do?"

Lindy raised her eyebrows, partly to challenge her mother, to make her feel shame at beating back her own long-held opinion in favor of Father Benedict's. It was clear to Lindy whose desires her mother held uppermost.

"He's her uncle, so what? You can steer clear of him and still make the girl feel welcome."

Lindy approached her mother's every request with a begrudging shrug. "I might have to talk with him," she said. "With Tony, I mean."

Her mother ran water at the sink full blast and raised her voice to be heard over it. "Where's the harm in words?"

Upon eighth grade graduation the math tutoring sessions between Father and Lindy had ceased—oh, how she missed those intimacies! —but Lindy saw Cara's plight as her own opportunity, for she could recount her neighborly kindness while seated at Father's kitchen table, a new and legitimate claim to stepping across the rectory threshold.

She sighed. "If you think it will help."

"I do." Her mother nodded. "Father thinks so, too."

Ah, Father's blessing. For Lindy, now, there was no turning back.

Tony wore jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt. His face had a lump, a scar from an accident or an operation, off-center on his broad forehead. It didn't help his looks any.

"Cara here?" Lindy said, though she'd been spying from her own living room and had seen Cara exit and enter so many times she'd lost track

Tony nodded. "Inside."

Lindy shrank to pass when he reached to paint the front door lintel.

Tony flaunted his underarm hair in her face. He stepped his foot sideways, nearly tripping her, keeping her in place so she was eye level with his nipple; she could see the rise of it under his thin cotton shirt. His arm with the paintbrush was a bridge above her.

"You going to let me through?" she said. If this had been only her idea he might have scared her away, but the mental urgings of both her mother and Father Benedict bolstered her.

"Thinking," Tony said. Then, "Yeah." And he stepped back so she could move into the house.

She knew the importance of manners and she showed them off to Tony, knocking on the doorframe where he hadn't yet painted. "Hello? Cara?" She stretched first her neck inside and then brought the rest of her body with her, out of Tony's range, though why she supposed he might reach for her she couldn't say.

She put her hand on the cool, painted wall; she leaned against the uneven doorjamb between hallway and kitchen.

Cara emerged from the basement. She nudged a stack of boxes with her hip. "How do you know my name?"

"There's lots I know," Lindy said. And though she refused to glance back the way she'd come, she knew Tony stood paused in his painting, that he was watching her, listening to her, and adding up the parts of her in his ugly head.

A week later Tony was still tackling the paint trim, as if he was under house arrest and they were dreaming up dreary, methodical jobs just to keep him occupied and out of trouble. Lindy didn't recoil from him this time as she stepped on his dropcloths and passed through the open front door.

Two weeks, and she was one of the family. When she crossed the threshold into Grandma Cuicietta's kitchen, Lindy felt the house and everything within it bribing her. The Cuiciettas' Old Country ways tempted, and she flirted with the charade of belonging to them and to their dinner table, with its tumbled-up, musical language. The house cast its spell on her. The Cuiciettas spoke a homemade version of church Latin, their native Italian, so when they talked, scolded, cursed, they were wrapping themselves up in prayer. So easy for Lindy to leave her mother, her one blood relative behind, to indulge in her new-found taste for ox tail soup, artichoke hearts, and spumoni.

She watched Veronica return from the laundromat, unloading an armful of grocery bags and slapping the stack of mail onto the kitchen table. The paper sacks fell into each other, spilling Cara's clean underwear and her mom's lacy bras

onto the floor. Lindy considered offering her mother's wash-woman services, or her own. She wanted to lend aid.

Tony came in, paint splattered clothes and skin. When he bent down to pick up Veronica's spilled underwear Lindy smelled paint fumes, body odor, and his exhaustion.

He twirled a black bra by its strap like a lasso on his finger. "Ride 'em, cowboy." He let loose a rebel yell.

Veronica swiped it from him. "You'll get paint in it."

He was up to his elbows in turquoise enamel.

One of the envelopes caught Veronica's eye and she grabbed a steak knife from the drawer to slit it open while Tony ran the water in the sink for a cold drink.

She announced, "Independence Day, but with no whoop in her voice, no firecracker in her smile.

Tony raised his glass and guzzled.

The old grandma, enthroned in the living room recliner spoke garbled, clipped Italian that proclaimed, Lindy supposed, "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

Veronica poured herself a glass of wine from a bottle with no label, then gave a fingerful in jelly glasses to Cara and Lindy. Oh, yes, Cara was there, though her presence was slight in the scheme of things requiring notice. Lindy drank down her wine before Veronica could think better of what she'd done. Heat bloomed up her throat.

"What are we celebrating?" Cara said.

"Our fucking freedom."

Cara's mom poured herself a second glass. Lindy held hers out for a refill, thinking she'd take whatever they were giving.

Tony shoved his glass in place of Lindy's, just as Veronica was about to pour her more wine. His crooked smile made his robbing her all the harder to put up with.

As the chair-bound great-grandma scolded in Italian, Cara grabbed Lindy's elbow and dragged her to the basement steps.

Cara said, "Hurry. We need to get out of here."

Grandma Cuicietta's orthopedic shoes telegraphed her approach through the house. Cara switched on the light at the top of the stairs. Her stumbling down them sounded like a bag of onions had split and scattered into the basement.

Lindy regretted the lost seconds of drink. She knew she should escape before Grandma arrived in the kitchen to pass verdict on Veronica's curse language and to rave in Italian about no-good husbands. A smack to her daughter's cheek might help drive her point home.

At the basement doorway Lindy turned to find Tony toasting her.

"That should have been mine," she said.

With the glass tilted so it covered half his face, Tony slurped the very last drops while he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Cara called her name, sounding much farther away than the basement.

Lindy wanted to stay and see somebody get hit.

Grandma Cuicietta and her scoldings rounded the corner, heading for Veronica, and Lindy had to stop from running between them, because she suddenly, desperately wanted to feel the slap she felt sure was deserved.

Instead she fled downstairs, where Cara conducted a tour for her, pointing out the collection of Annette Funicello records that belonged to her uncle. "You can't touch what's Tony's," she said, which made Lindy draw her hands to her sides. Because Cara specifically said not to, Lindy wanted to leave her fingerprint everywhere in the basement, though up until now she'd had no interest in Tony's things.

"What grade is he in?" She was glad that she'd applied to Mt. Notre Dame, the all-girls school. A relief that she wouldn't run into Tony later in some hallway between gym and auditorium come fall.

"He's out of high school," Cara said, implying Lindy should have known better.

"Does he have a job?"

"You saw him painting the door, didn't you?"

Lindy wanted to ask if Grandpa Cuicietta forced Tony to earn his keep, but Cara put up her hand to stop the questions.

Cara showed Lindy around the basement, indicating Tony's bed, his chest of drawers, his other records and magazines, sashaying with the importance she gained from her uncle's possessions.

They played with Barbies there in Cara's grandma's basement. Lindy was too old to be playing with dolls; even Cara was probably close to leaving that kind of make-believe behind. Still, they dressed and undressed the dolls, rounding their thumbs up and down the plastic bosoms, something they might want to do with each other, thought Lindy, just to compare.

The Barbies were as good an excuse as any for lingering amid the label-less wine bottles, the geraniums, and the Blessed Mother portrait Grandma Cuicietta surrounded with votive candles. Lindy had seen a similar shrine in Father Benedict's rectory, but in Cara's grandma's house the flickering candles only deepened the mystery of the Cuicietta dinner table—three old people spouting Italian, the language runaway, dripping, while Veronica burst into tears after too much wine and Grandpa scraped his chair back from the table, exiting the house in disgust. In these exchanges Uncle Tony barely counted. He contributed nothing but a smile that showed too

many teeth for his mouth. Lindy imagined Grandpa Cuicietta's anger erupting out in the garden, with no sarcastic backtalk from his daughter and only the plants' leaves to shush him.

Old World things that Lindy had no name for cooked on the stove upstairs: the smells stuck in her throat. She heard the murmurs of a talk show as the Cuiciettas settled in to watch afternoon TV talk shows.

Under the stairwell in Uncle Tony's unmade bed Lindy and Cara listened to Annette sing in Italian. They puffed on imaginary cigarettes, practicing for the day they might swipe a pack of Marlboros from the drugstore. They invented scripts for the prank phone calls they planned to make from the downstairs extension. With the Maybelline pencil Cara had stolen from her mom they drew Cleopatra eyes on each other's lids.

"We're glamour queens, getting our beauty rest," Cara said. She sank back on Uncle Tony's pillows.

Annette vocalized unintelligible Italian love. Too quick, someone tumbled down the steps.

Uncle Tony joined them there, rubbing his sock-covered feet up and down their thighs. The Annette record skipped. Lindy hopped up to flip it over but Uncle Tony pulled her arm so she fell back into the bed.

"Let Cara get it."

Lindy closed her eyes and tried to pretend but Uncle Tony's ragged exhale couldn't touch Father Benedict's sexy telephone breathing. The smell of Tony's sweat and the enamel fumes from his paint job clouded Lindy's head. His mouth had no taste and her own tongue, like a fish, kept lolling slippery in the center of things.

Not until Annette sang the whole second side did Cara come back to the bed.

"Where were you?" Lindy said.

"Playing Barbie."

Lindy punched Cara in the arm.

Uncle Tony said, "None of that now. Let me rub it."

He massaged Cara and she shrugged her shoulders so his patting slid off her arm and over her chest. She squirmed and exaggerated her shoulder roll, which only encouraged Uncle Tony.

The stereo needle skipped over the annoying end of Annette. Italian words and footsteps rumbled above them, then the basement door opened and Veronica yelled, "Fix that record."

Lindy jumped out of the bed. Over her shoulder she spied Uncle Tony rubbing Cara and she turned away to flip through the records, listened to Dean Martin crooning *That's Amore*.

Uncle Tony danced Cara to her feet and they slid around on the linoleum in their socks.

He sang, "When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie," his arms reaching down low, hers stretching up high, the two of them mismatched. Lindy was more his height.

"You're too big," Lindy muttered.

"He is not," Cara pouted.

They waltzed by and Cara punched Lindy's shoulder.

Uncle Tony stopped his swirling. He said to Lindy, "Let me rub it; it'll feel better." The knot in the center of his forehead pulsed.

Cara nodded, gave Lindy a wide-eyed look, a peace offering. "He knows magic," she said.

While such Italian magic bubbled up at the Cuicietta's', Lindy's home contained English and no foreign yelling. Even her special "in" with Father Benedict faded in the dusky allure of this house. She ached for the translation of all she was encountering.

Lindy allowed Uncle Tony to transfer magic from his fingers to her shoulders. There was little muscle there; Grandma Cuicietta often tisked that Lindy was nothing but skin and bones. Near the record player Cara high-kicked Barbie's legs until her pointy-heeled shoes flew off. Lindy leaned forward to watch Cara crawl under the bed but Uncle Tony drew her back to him by her shoulders.

"You're tense," he said.

His fingers rubbed her shoulders, then dribbled Italian magic into her hair and along the back of her neck. It sent her shivering.

Dean Martin's voice slid around in his songs. Lindy wanted to claim ancestry from the land of the boot. She swayed, dreaming she might change her name to Angelina or Louise.

When the record finished Uncle Tony, said, "Cara."

His hands pressed down on Lindy's shoulders as he knelt on the bed, making her a statue between his open legs.

"I got it," Cara whined.

With Dean Martin singing his second side Uncle Tony swirled pretend shampoo in Lindy's hair. He gathered a handful into a ponytail and folded it on top of her head like Cara did to her Barbie, and when he lifted her long curls Lindy's neck welcomed the cool basement air.

He leaned into her so the snap of his Levi's dug into her backbone, so it was useless to try and sit straight on the sinking mattress. When her spine curved Lindy thought of hunchbacks, old women, Cara's great grandma from Italy.

"If you're tired, lay down," Tony said. He pointed his fingertips into her back like a bully picking a fight.

"I'm not." She'd faked sleepiness before.

"I am." Cara hopped into the covers, kicking Lindy until she fell out of the bed.

"Change the record," Tony said, snaking his arm around Cara's shoulders.

Lindy took the Lennon Sisters from their record sleeve. The cover pictured them in chiffon dresses and matching short jackets the color of icing—green, yellow, blue, and of course Janet in pink, all of them with matching bows in their puffed up hair.

Cara had lost her hair bow when she'd crawled under the bed. Now Uncle Tony was distributing magic in her hair. Her long, blond strands had tucked themselves inside her shirt. Tony reached down her back to flip the hair out, and then his hand snuck in again. The two of them moved underneath the covers, scooting down like Lindy would do on a Girl Scout overnight when she tented up the top of her sleeping bag and read by flashlight.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Lindy said.

It was a useless announcement because obviously Cara and Uncle Tony could hardly be bothered. Inside the bathroom the abundance of light surprised Lindy. This basement bathroom at the back of the house had a bubble glass window that faced west. It let light *in*, let it shine on every item in the small room—cream floor and wall tiles, cream sink, cream toilet, cream shower curtain with black lyres and harps floating across, cream soap in its cream dish, cream cup, cream toothbrush holder with what must have been Uncle Tony's red toothbrush. She hoped he used it; his jumbled teeth looked prime to attract cavities. Probably a toothbrush was useless in Tony's mouth. *In Tony's mouth*, in Tony's crowded mouth, around and behind and under his uneven teeth where he and she had both flipped and slipped their tongues in kissing that was tasting, sampling, almost gouging. Lindy took his toothbrush and scrubbed her teeth. She could find no toothpaste so she sucked the bristles for any tiny taste of peppermint, slurping at the hint of clean, of fluoride. She spat and watched her bubbly spit, pink with blood, drool down the cream bowl towards the stainless steel drain.

Surprise. Who was the girl in the mirror, with eyeliner curving, turning her eyes sexy and made up, big and old enough to see? Father Benedict might not even recognize her. Cleopatra eyes made her into a new Lindy who did things she thought she'd have no stomach for, but she did.

Outside the door floated Cara's giggle and Tony's low, instructive voice, amid the Lennon Sisters' high shining melodies. Lindy hugged herself in the dappled light of the bathroom. Broad daylight outside and so why wasn't Tony at

his painting? Had he finally finished with that front door? What kind of job would he be onto next? Her hand gripped the metal door knob and she clicked and unclicked the button that worked the lock, stalling.

The Lennon Sisters sang Side A and Side B and then the needle scratched at the end of the record. The sound drove Lindy crazy until she burst out of the bathroom more loudly than she'd intended.

Cara and Uncle Tony popped up from under the bedspread, their hair electrified.

"That's annoying," Lindy said, meaning the speakers crackling, but she didn't care if they heard her differently.

Veronica whipped open the basement door. "I said cut that crap out."

The three of them looked at and away from each other. Uncle Tony put his finger to his uneven smile in a quiet sign. When they saw Veronica wasn't coming down, Cara lay as still as a spell-bound princess.

"She's dead," he said, lifting Cara's wrist. He let it fall to the mattress. "I'm the undertaker."

Cara's eyelids fluttered open. "No, the prince."

The priest, Lindy thought. Could Uncle Tony bring her back to life?

"I know not what to do," Tony said, playing the part they assigned him.

Cara spoke with closed eyes: "You must revive her any way you can."

She folded her hands on top of the sheet at her waist, as if she were Snow White waiting for her one true love. She had told Lindy she believed in rescue.

Cara had confided to Lindy her true loves were Jason, Jeremy, and Joshua from *Here Come the Brides*. The show's theme sang in rerun inside Lindy's head while she watched Tony's lips move to Cara's hair, to her cheek, to her mouth. He was drawing her out of a deep fairytale sleep. Lindy had not traded secrets, had admitted no one true love, but what if she had?

Lindy compared Father Benedict's neat and shimmering vestments with Uncle Tony's sloppy T-shirt and jeans, tried to force similarities between Tony's magic fingers and a priest's healing hands. Father Benedict had once placed his palm on her head and called down God's blessing but it was in a church full of people and Lindy knew he intended nothing special. She'd wanted to kick him then in the shin, to distract him by leaning into his priest skirt.

She imagined confessing what she'd discovered at the Cuiciettas', as Father Benedict sat closed in his side of the box,

gasping at her words, his silhouette nodding encouragement. She would touch the screen between them, rubbing the metal mesh until her fingertips tickled. The whisper of her skin would invite. Confession's tight boundaries would nag Father Benedict until he couldn't help himself, and he'd touch the screen too. Just to keep from going crazy he'd have to jump in and say something.

Only a few steps away, while watching Tony play acting with his niece, Lindy, in secret, ran her tongue along the smooth, clean surfaces of her teeth. Tony stammered sloppy kisses on Cara's lips, then he lifted his head and smiled his big ugly face at Lindy. His smirk, so plainly meant for her, turned her dizzy and she felt caught inside the jumble of Tony's mixed up mouth. Upstairs the slap bided its time in an old woman's flabby arm, in Grandma Cuicietta's plump garlicky hand, which would hopefully knock some sense into Lindy. Lindy prayed for the slap.

Andrew Roe

Why We Came to Target at 9:58 on a Monday Night

Donnie remembers just in time. So we run practically every stop sign and red light in town, and get there just before they close. They're about to lock the front doors but we burst on in like we own the place, the goddamn heirs to the Target fortune, telling the puny Rent-a-Cop Guy, It's cool, it's cool, we'll be real quick, no worries T.J. Hooker. Then we prowl the aisles, through Home and Living, then Outdoors, then Sporting Goods, and we're laughing, laughing like pirates, and Donnie is still drunk from the Vodka Dews, and I probably am too, though it's starting to wear off, it's that time where you're crashing faster than you'd like and that feeling of *you can't touch me* is slipping away and you're starting to realize *you can be touched*, *you can be touched*, no one can escape that sad, basic fact. The puny Rent-A-Cop Guy has one of those mustaches that looks like it's been drawn on. And he's shorter than me almost, and Donnie is big, beefy, an all-state wrestler his senior year and capable of lifting a keg like it's a six-pack. So what's the guy gonna do? He doesn't even follow us.

Next Donnie starts pulling stuff off the shelves (deodorant, denture cream, orange-flavored Metamucil), saying, Let's buy this, fuck it, let's buy everything. But I'm not laughing as much now, because I'm starting to remember why we're here, why we came to Target at 9:58 on a Monday night. I pretend to be real interested in a dress that I know I'd never buy. Donnie puts on a bright yellow baseball cap that says Bad Ass. The lights in the store dim (hint, hint). I say to Donnie, Let's go, over here, I think. He turns the cap so it's backwards and follows me. Tampons, panty liners, lady things. Then: there. So many to choose from. We should pick a good one, I tell Donnie, who says, How can you tell the difference? It's like fucking cereal there are so many.

They make that announcement where they say the store is closing and you better bring your shit up front and get out.

Donnie's picking up mouthwash, toothpaste, other crap we don't need. I tell him, It's not like we're buying condoms or porn, we don't have to mask it with other stuff you know. So he dumps everything on the floor, including the Bad Ass cap, and we bail. Some minimum wage slob will have to clean it all up. Not us.

There's a long line to check out. Only one cashier open. The girl who rings us up doesn't blink or bother with hi-how-are-you-did-you-find-everything-you-were-looking-for, she's tired, she wants to go home, she has hair curled and gelled, plus this spooky lipstick and makeup like an old lady but she's not an old lady and should know better.

The drive back is quiet. We stop for the lights. We don't talk. The Vodka Dews have officially worn off. My head spinning like a pukey carnival ride. I'm young, Donnie's young. His body like a blanket I want to wrap myself in. When we first met it was right away. I'd always wanted something like that to happen to me. Then it did. It was both like I'd imagined it would be and also completely different, if that even makes sense. And it was something that got carved into me, something that was mine, something long-lasting and true. I don't want to lose that. I don't want to lose Donnie. He's concentrating on driving, he's squinting, leaning forward. Lights flash across his face, fill it with meanings I can't make out, not from this angle anyway.

Say something, I say.

Something, he says.

Come on, Donnie. What are you thinking? The question every boyfriend loves to hear.

What am I thinking? I'm thinking, actually, that my dad's one of those dads. One of those dads who everybody's always afraid of. Like he can explode anytime, anywhere. Push the wrong button and boom. You just never know. I don't want to be like that. I don't want my kid to be afraid of me. That's what I'm thinking.

This sends my heart soaring, it does a little Michael Jackson dance, flutters like a beautiful fucking butterfly.

You won't, I say. You won't be like that.

Suddenly I'm very sleepy, very aware of my body and what could be happening inside of it. Have I gained weight already? Will I start throwing up tomorrow morning? I want to touch my belly but that would be silly.

So what do you think our odds are? Donnie then asks, braking, guiding us into a left turn, the steering wheel sliding slowly back through his hands. Fifty-fifty?

I stare ahead at the road and the lights and the other cars coming toward us, and I gnaw on my lip so hard it almost makes me cry.

Fifty-fifty, I say. That sounds about right to me.

Jim Tomlinson

Angel, His Rabbit, and Kyle McKell

The day Angel brought that damn rabbit home, I told myself it was nothing to get upset about. I told myself it was just this minor, annoying thing. I'd been around long enough to know that's how boyfriends can be—annoying—especially once they've moved in. This time I wanted things to be different. I wanted Angel to stay. I'd try hard to tolerate his ways, because, honestly, Angel's got so many good qualities. Putting up with things, I'd decided, was better than always getting into it. Getting into it is what my mother would do.

Anyway, about Angel's rabbit. He called it Victor. He told me it was a show rabbit, a champion of some kind. He said it had pedigrees, said I could shoot pictures if I wanted. At first he claimed to be keeping the rabbit for some friend. Before long, he was calling it collateral. He was holding on to the rabbit until this friend paid back what he owed. After a week, he brought Victor's cage onto the mud porch. These arrangements, he promised, were temporary. Every time Angel opened his mouth, another version of things came tumbling out. Looking back, I'm guessing he owned that rabbit all along.

"We'll get him some females," he said after the second week. "They'll breed. It'll be our business enterprise."

I told him this girl's life was plenty full without that.

"They'll have Victor's bunnies," he said, not giving up. "They'll be purebreds too. They'll be valuable." He got out paper and pencil. He wrote figures, erased, wrote some more. Then he slapped the pencil down, and he smiled over at me. Angel's dimples just melt my heart.

He held up the numbers. "Every twelve weeks," he said, "we'll double our money." I told him again it wasn't for me.

Understand. This rabbit, Victor, was nothing like what you'd think of as a real rabbit, the kind you see running wild. He wasn't the usual tame kind either, not one you'd give a kid for Easter. He was huge, the size of a boar raccoon, much too big for holding on your lap and way too skittish to pet. More than once I tried. His teeth could take your finger at the second knuckle. There's nothing you can do with a rabbit like that. So Angel kept Victor in that wire cage out on the mud porch. Day after day the rabbit sat out there, staring at my boots.

Maybe it's because Angel's got that name that he thinks he can do no wrong. Down at Gilly's Gas-N-Go, where he works, Juanita and Holly pronounce his name "on-hell," which is what I call him too, all *chica*-like, every time he gets puffed-up and full of his macho self, which he does way too often.

How many times I told Angel to burn the pissy newspapers and empty the turds piling up in the tray under Victor's cage, I can't say. Twenty times. Probably more. Maybe you think, when I noticed them piling up, I should've done it myself, which is what Angel finally said for me to do—empty the tray and burn the newspapers—instead of hassling him. But here's how I see things: this place might not be a mansion, but it's mine. I hold clear title to it and to the acre and three-quarters it sits on. That's no small thing in this world. I've got a paying job at the mall camera store, and I'm learning a profession, which is more than I can say for some. Every day I show up for work, even times I don't always feel like it. More to the point, this rabbit I'm telling you about is Angel's, and that makes the turds his too. That's how I think, and that's what I told him.

"If you feel that way, I'll get rid of him, sell him right now," Angel said. He tried to look pitiful. He stuck his fingers between the cage wires to scratch behind the rabbit's ears. It was the first time I'd seen him try that. Victor crouched to get away from him.

It was late on a Saturday afternoon. I was just home from work. I needed a warm shower and a cold beer. I didn't need this.

"Someone will buy him," Angel said. "You'll see. They'll gut him and skin him, cut him up for rabbit stew." He glanced over like he expected me to care. You could tell he was bluffing.

"Go ahead," I said. With my hands I made a gesture like wringing a neck. Maybe I bulged my eyes out too. That really set him off. When we get into it, I can't hold back. Neither can he. Holly says we're too much alike to last.

Angel slammed out of the house. Even Victor jumped at the noise, and he got all agitated and twitchy for a minute in his cage.

You can call me heartless too, call me a bitch like he did. I don't care. Sometimes a bitch is not a bad thing to be. Anyway, I'm just saying straight out how things were that day with my boyfriend and his damn rabbit, which, by the way, he didn't bother taking when he climbed into his pickup and sped off.

Twenty minutes later I was drying myself outside the shower stall when Kyle McKell called. I'd heard he was due back from the army any day, and here he was, just home and calling me.

"Dempsie," he said, "I'm coming over."

Everyone in town knew about the leg he'd lost fighting in Iraq. The story was in all the newspapers. So even though Holly and I had plans to go dancing that night, I told Kyle, "Come ahead."

"Get out those pictures you took," he said and hung up.

The pictures he meant were from five years ago. You might say they're what got me my job at McKell's Camera Outlet. It's nothing I ever talk about though. And by keeping that whole episode secret, I'd almost forgotten it myself.

Right away I called and canceled plans with Holly. I didn't say why, which probably misled her into thinking Angel was responsible. Then I started rummaging through drawers, looking for where I'd hidden those photographs.

While I searched, I couldn't stop thinking about Kyle's lost leg and the three steps he'd have to climb to my front door. Somehow I imagined him showing up in a neat khaki uniform with medals on his chest. He'd have an empty pant leg pinned up and wood crutches jammed under his armpits. It'd be a scene from a movie.

I had found the pictures and was sorting them on the bed when I heard a motorcycle rumble to a stop out front. The engine revved and shut off. Through the split in the bedroom curtains, I saw Kyle climb off the bike. He turned the bill of his ball cap from back to front. From behind a saddlebag, he unhooked a black walking cane.

Kyle's pant leg was definitely not pinned up. In fact, he walked on two legs, walked with a rolling kind of gait. If you didn't know Kyle McKell from before, if you hadn't seen how he was then, all agile and athletic, you might think he was just bruised up a little. You might think he'd turned an ankle or twisted a knee, judging by how he walked. You'd never suspect that one of his natural legs was gone.

By the time I got to the front door and opened it, he had his fist up and ready to knock. "Kyle," I said, going out. I hugged him carefully, not knowing what still might hurt. His balance wavered for a second, which made him hold me even tighter. His clothes smelled musty, like they'd been in his parents' basement too long.

"Hey, Dempsie," he said in my hair. My name sounded good coming from him.

Dempsie is what almost everyone calls me. It's okay as names go. It's nothing you'd want painted on an overpass though. It's actually my last name. Ashley, my first name, is way too common for anyone to use, anyone except my mother, that is. She never calls me Dempsie. Never. Dempsie is my father's name, after all, a name she swears will never pass her lips again, never in this lifetime. She thrives on bitterness. "Besides," she says, "what kind of name is that for a young woman when she's already got two sweet names like Ashley Lynn?" Most of the time I answer the phone when she calls. I just listen though. I quit arguing years ago.

Kyle seemed taller. Broader too. He isn't hard to look at, but he isn't what you'd call handsome either. He has too much nose and not enough chin, which means he photographs best straight on. His face seemed more sculpted, at his cheeks and around those hazel-brown eyes. It gave his face a more purposeful look. He tucked the ball cap into his waistband coming into the house. With a few finger-flicks, his corn-silk hair fell into place, neatly mussed. Beneath his dark gray jacket, Kyle wore a steel blue shirt. His shiny black sweatpants whispered as he walked. They gleamed too, with snaps and zippers everywhere.

I cleared Angel's three Oaxacan pillows off the couch so Kyle could sit, and I went to the kitchen for beers. When I got back, he had the jacket off, and he was rolling up a shirtsleeve. His left forearm had a strange shape. Angry scars, red raised ones, branched up it like rivers. "I wanted to show you this first," he said, "and skip all the awkward talk."

"Ouch," I said without meaning to. I sucked air between my teeth. You could still see the surgeon's stitch pattern. Stray black hairs sprouted up in odd places. He raised the arm and showed the other side. The skin was a patchwork, some tanned, some pale blue and veiny, like the sides of a newborn's head.

I was holding the bottles—Negra Modelo and Bud Light—that I'd brought from the kitchen. I gave Kyle his choice. He took the Mexican beer, sipped, and seemed pleased. He turned the fat bottle in his hands, reading the gold label or pretending to. The writing was all Spanish.

I piled two pillows on the floor and sat. "Does it hurt?" I asked.

"The arm?" He shook his head. "Not like the leg."

I'd almost forgotten the leg. I wondered how much was gone.

Kyle kept studying the bottle. "The arm's got a permanent ache," he said, "deep in the bones. You know what I mean?"

I couldn't imagine. For some weird reason, I wanted to touch that arm.

"They tell me the pain goes away," he said. He smiled as if there was something funny about that.

"Three times a week I get physical therapy," he said. "Exercises." He moved his arm, cranked it like something mechanical. Then he let the arm rest on the knee of the leg that must have been artificial. That ankle beneath his pant leg was fat as a softball. Kyle made a fist with his hand and he squeezed an imaginary rubber ball. The arm muscles slithered under the patched-up skin.

I had to look away. I made myself look away, and when I did, I wanted to look back again, wanted to look closer. A shudder ran up my back. This wasn't like I'd expected.

"It's okay, Dempsie," Kyle said. "It's nothing I like seeing either."

"I'm sorry," I said. I truly was. I felt his hand on my quivering knee.

I got to my feet, and the hand fell away.

"I'm the same person," he said. "Just look at me. That's all I'm asking. Just look."

I picked up my beer and backed away. "I'll go get the pictures you wanted," I said.

"Just look," Kyle said again. "Don't walk away. You owe me that much."

He was right, of course. I did owe Kyle McKell.

I crossed the room to the couch again, set my beer on the table, and sat beside him.

When you're young, you do stupid stuff. I know I did, lots of it. This one time, Ashleigh Tinker and I hatched a plan to steal a camera to take on our senior class trip. We'd be going to Washington DC, staying at a hotel five days. It would take every bit of my savings. We wanted pictures of monuments and museums, not just postcards but pictures we were in. There'd be partying at the hotel too, which was another reason we needed that camera. We intended to make memories, ones we'd treasure forever. We wanted a real camera, not the drugstore cardboard kind or a cheap plastic one like my mother's, which you couldn't even find film for anymore. I wanted a quality camera. I wanted one bad. And the more I thought about wanting one, the worse the wanting got.

Tinker and I downed whiskey shots out in her father's toolshed to calm our nerves. We rolled a joint from the old man's weed scraps, and together we smoked it down to the pinch. By the time we got to the mall, we were way calm.

Kyle McKell, whose father managed the store, sat on a stool behind a glass counter. He was reading a magazine, which he slapped closed and tucked away when I went in.

"Hey, Dempsie," he said. I remember being amazed that he knew my name.

I started chatting with him. I told him about our class trip. I leaned across the display case, looked in, and pointed at different cameras. I asked him about the Minoltas and Nikons, about lenses and different kinds of film. Every time I'd point at a camera, Kyle would bring it out. He seemed friendlier than I remembered from school, more relaxed. He let me handle the cameras, let me get the feel of them, let me see each one up close. Before long, we must have had a dozen spread out.

"Someday," I said, "I'd love to work in a camera store." I framed his face in a viewfinder and clicked the shutter. Even without film, it felt real. "I might study photography too," I told him, "and own cameras like these." Just saying something out loud can make it seem possible.

Kyle looked toward the front of the store and then back at me. "Really?" His voice sounded husky now.

"No lie," I said. It felt risky, revealing dreams in the middle of so much deceit. But he had kind eyes, and that's what I did.

While he was busy with me, Tinker was supposed to wander in. She'd find the best display camera, something compact, and slip it into her shoulder bag. She'd signal with a cough and then leave. That was the plan. It was a good plan too, one that had worked in other stores for cosmetics.

Kyle glanced toward the front again. I looked too. We were still alone. He put the camera down. "Wait here, Dempsie," he said. "Mine's in the office, a Pentax. You think you could handle it?" He started for the back of the store without waiting for my answer.

Opportunity doesn't always bother with knocking. Sometimes it just throws open the door.

As soon as Kyle disappeared behind the office curtain, I grabbed the compact Nikon and slipped it into my bag. I went around the counter and snatched the empty box too, then hurried back to where I'd been. When he came back with his camera, I was fiddling with the bulky Minolta's lens, really studying the settings.

The expression on Kyle's face wasn't so relaxed now. He looked toward the front door once more. Everything inside me pulled tight.

"You picked a good one, Dempsie," he said, "that Nikon." He pointed to where the camera had been.

I straightened, stepped back, groping in my mind for some way to deny it. There was no way, though, and I knew it. My insides sank. I took the box and camera from my bag and

put them with the others on the counter. “It’s back,” I told him. “I put it back.”

“No harm, no foul?” Kyle said. His eyes were hard to read.

“Nothing happened,” I told him. I wasn’t far from tears, which I did not want him to know. “You’ve got your camera back.”

He fitted the Nikon into its box and put the cover on. “It’s not my camera,” he said. He slid it back across the counter. He busied himself putting the others away, then took up the Pentax again. “This is my camera, Dempsie. Everything else here,” he said, “it’s just merchandise.”

I looked at the box, looked at Kyle, looked at the box again, waiting for him to say clearly what was going on. You could tell he was turning something over in his mind.

Just then I heard Tinker’s fake cough. With everything going on, she’d come in without my noticing. Kyle didn’t seem to have noticed her either. Even after the fake cough, he didn’t so much as glance her way.

He said, “You want the Nikon?” His face told me nothing.

I reached for the box, but Kyle grabbed it first. “What?” I asked.

He let go, took his hand away. It trembled a bit, retreating. “It’s yours,” he said, “if you do me a favor.”

I looked around the store for Tinker. She was nowhere to be seen.

“Shoot some pictures,” he said. “Shoot pictures of me. That’s all I’m asking.” His voice trembled now too. “Have them developed while you’re in DC.”

I picked up the box, the Nikon inside. Confusion swirled in my head.

“Please?” he said.

When I still didn’t answer, Kyle reached for the magazine he’d tucked away. He opened it on the counter and turned it to face me. He flipped pages, showing me what he had in mind.

The photos Kyle wanted me to take that night weren’t the kind he’d want his parents to see. They weren’t what he’d want anyone in Burkitt County to see. Maybe not in the whole state. The photos were for his friend, Dwight Poole. Poole had moved that month to Chicago, joining a dance company there. Kyle explained all this later that night, explained it as I hesitated outside the room he’d rented at Motel 6. I told myself I could still change my mind.

"I'm gay," he said, as if I hadn't figured it out from the magazine he'd showed me that afternoon. "You're in no danger here."

"I know," I said. Still, I didn't budge. It felt dangerous, being anyplace with him.

There was a frustrated look on Kyle's face. "Please, Dempsie?" he said. He took the key card from his pocket. "Please don't make this so hard."

He slipped the card into the lock slot and pulled it out. The lights flashed green on the first try, which I took as a positive sign.

Tinker and I each had our own cameras for the DC trip. I brought enough film for both of us, even though her camera turned out to be digital. The first day there, I took Kyle's four secret rolls for developing at a pharmacy on Rhode Island Avenue. On the film envelope I checked the boxes for double jumbo prints and glossy. I made up a name and address for the yellow envelopes. Two days later, when the clerk handed me the photo packets, her undisturbed face told me she hadn't peeked inside. I paid and left the store. When I felt certain that no one was following, I opened the envelopes and looked.

I liked what I saw, these posed photos of Kyle, the way the light looked on his skin, the deep shadows and subtle colors. Everything looked more real in the photos, looked more vivid than it had that night. The photos seemed somehow precious—artistic, in a way—like paintings. Artistic. It's a way I hadn't seen myself before.

You might wonder why I ordered double prints. I could say I just checked the box because it was there. That wouldn't be a lie. I could say that I wanted an extra set to be safe, that I didn't totally trust Kyle about letting me take something valuable like that camera, no strings. That's what I told him about the double prints, and there's more than a little truth in it. I could tell you that I wanted copies because I realized, even then, that Kyle's motel photo session could be a start for me in photography, that I wanted to remember that as much as the DC trip. That would be true too. Sometimes life offers a person way more reasons than they need.

I sat beside Kyle on the couch and let him show me his injured arm. He talked about the attachments, the muscles and nerves involved, the finger numbness, all the ligament damage. I tried not to be squeamish. He traced things with his finger as if he could see inside. He kept talking about that injured arm in

expert ways. He knew how it all worked together. He knew it the way Angel knew cars.

"My father wants to hear nothing about wounds," Kyle said. "He wants to hear about good deeds, what he thinks I was doing there. My mother leaves the room if I even mention the arm."

"Or the leg?" I was more than a little curious about that.

He finished his beer. "She can't handle any of it," he said, handing me the empty.

I was in the kitchen getting him another beer from the refrigerator when Angel came in the back door. "Whose Harley's out front?" he asked, easing the door closed.

"You're back," I said. I wished he wasn't.

"Maybe," Angel said and shrugged. He wasn't over it yet either. "Who's here?"

"My boss's son," I told him. "Kyle."

"The wounded one?" Angel asked. I nodded. He took the beer from my hand and popped the cap with his belt buckle. "He going to stay late?"

"Maybe." I shrugged. I could be that way too. Behind the milk, I found a carton of onion chip dip. It looked okay. Smelled okay too.

"You think he's something." Angel said. He wrapped me in his arms from behind, grabbed on to me like everything I've got belonged to him. He did it in a playful way, having decided by himself that it was time we made up. "You think this army man is the real deal," he said like a growl in my ear.

I jabbed with my elbows, jabbed hard and twisted free. "He lost his leg over there, Angel!" I tried to keep my voice down. "For Christ's sake!"

"*Dios mío!*" he gasped, staggered back in mock horror. "Then we must help him to find this lost leg, to find it before he falls over."

With my empty hand I swung at him. He was quick though, stepping back. Like a boxer, he feinted, slap-jabbed at me, danced away. "I float like the butterfly," Angel said. He shuffled his feet, circled across the linoleum. He could be such a *muchacho* at the worst times.

I put frozen pizza treats in the microwave, pressed buttons, and dumped potato chips into a bowl. "You joining us?" I asked.

"Three's a crowd," he said.

"Suit yourself," I said. I tried to mask my relief with another shrug.

Angel took the chip bowl from my arms, and he grinned. "I like crowds."

"You got nothing to worry about in there," I said. It was truer than he knew. I spread warm pizza treats on a plate and started collecting up everything—bowls, plates, and new beers.

From the cupboard, Angel grabbed his green hot sauce, the stuff he sprinkled on everything. "Bring napkins," he said, tucking the tiny bottle into a shirt pocket. "And relax, *chica*. You won't hardly know I'm there."

I grabbed napkins, and we went to the front room.

"Wow," Kyle said, seeing what Angel and I were bringing. We must have looked like old married hosts. It really wasn't much, just refrigerator and microwave food, and I told Kyle so.

"She's so modest," Kyle said, "this girlfriend of yours." He got up and stood long enough to shake Angel's hand.

"Dempsie? Modest?" Angel said. He sputtered a laugh.

"You know. Humble," Kyle said, sitting again. He put his cane on the floor. "About the food."

"I know the word," Angel said. "I spoke English since I was two." I hoped he'd quit right there. Not likely, I knew. He took his beer and some chips and went to sit in his favorite chair. It's off to one side, a plush chair with a side holster for the television remote.

Kyle tried the chip dip. "I'm just saying not everyone can put on a spread with no warning."

"My brothers and sisters, all of us, we're bilingual," Angel said. "That's what you'd call us if we were *anglo* anyway, bilingual, not ESL, which is what everyone wants to say because it's us."

I offered Kyle the pizza snacks. He took some on a napkin.

"I always dream in English," Angel said, "even back in Mexico."

"Strange," Kyle said. His interest seemed real.

Angel pulled the hot sauce bottle from his pocket and sprinkled his chips. "It wouldn't be my choice for dreaming," he said. "Spanish is better for everything but school. You can mean more, talking Spanish."

"Angel promises he'll teach me a little bit," I said. "*Un poquito*." I'd already learned a few phrases.

"But then she will know all my secrets." Angel winked at Kyle. You'd think they were pals and I was just some girl. Angel leaned over the side of his chair and offered his bottle of hot sauce to Kyle, who took it.

"I learned some Arabic phrases," Kyle said. He put the sauce bottle on the table without using it. "They trained us how to give greetings in Iraq," he said, "using the right gestures so we wouldn't offend anyone. We learned to shout out these Arabic commands too, so the Iraqis would know what to do."

Angel came over and got another beer. “They say it’s hot over there.” He said it to Kyle like a question. He stole a quick look at Kyle’s legs, glanced fast and then away. He couldn’t help it either.

“Hotter than the hinges of Hades,” Kyle said. You could tell by how quickly he said it that he’d said it a hundred times before.

“I can’t stand summer heat,” I said.

“Iraq heat is real heat, oven heat, all day and every day.”

“You get used to it though,” Angel said, standing there. “Right?”

“Not me. Some said they did, but I never believed them.” We all drank from our bottles then, the three of us together, as if that Iraq heat had found its way into my place.

From the table, Angel grabbed up his little green bottle and went back to his chair. When the subject was heat, he’d usually say something about Mexico or August heat in tobacco fields he’d worked. Angel could get competitive about anything. He wasn’t this time though. Instead, he asked, “How’d it happen, the leg? You get shot?”

“An explosion.” Kyle said it like it was nothing.

“An IUD?” Angel asked.

“IED,” I said.

“Probably a grenade,” Kyle said, “something thrown.” He shrugged again. This time I saw the tension in his shoulders, the strain on his face. He only wanted it to be nothing.

“We’re patrolling like we do every day, five of us, and I’m telling Horton some dumb joke,” he said. “In an instant, the world’s upside down. I can’t hear a thing. I see Horton not five feet away, and he’s lying there all opened up like meat. I try to get up, to run with the others, and I’m totally pissed because the leg, which I don’t know is gone, won’t work.”

“*Santa Maria,*” Angel said. He made the sign of the cross.

“Next thing I know, I’m in a hospital bed. Bags of fluid are draining into me, and some of it must be sedatives because the minute they tell me the leg’s gone, my world goes white. I wake up in Germany.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I put my hand on his good leg and then took it away. It was hard to know what to say or do. We ate and drank in silence, the three of us, for the longest time. All the while, you could hear the battery wall clock across the room tick off seconds.

“Dempsie,” Kyle said at last, “how’s your photography?”

I let out the breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

I brought out my portfolio and showed him my best nature photographs, my plant and horse and scenery photos,

most of them taken within a mile or two of my place. The horses weren't thoroughbreds. They were regular horses, ones my neighbors kept and rode or just kept now that they were old.

On the television, Angel watched his Spanish cable channel, a variety program with an audience that was part of the show. Angel kept the volume low. On the show, a Mexican chef in a high white hat was giving lessons, cutting a whole watermelon to make a fancy basket of fruit and melon balls. A bikini model was his student. She wasn't acting very bright, making lots of mistakes. She tried to cut the melon with the dull side of her knife. Nobody could be that stupid. Skinned peaches slipped out of her hands. She kept licking juice from her fingers, laughing as she did. Before long her watermelon basket was a wet mess. She was too. She tried hard though, and the audience applauded and laughed. Angel, on his fourth beer, laughed too.

Kyle leafed back through my photography folio. He really looked at each print, the big ones and the small ones too. He asked questions. Sometimes he'd flip back to an earlier one, comparing it. When he finished, he closed the folio. "Now," he said quietly, "you've got some pictures for me?"

In my bedroom I gathered up the photos he wanted and the negatives too. I don't think they all got back into their original yellow packets or all the negatives and photos matched up. But it all was somewhere in the bundle I banded together.

When I got back to the front room, Angel had turned off the television. He was over by Kyle, in front of him, pointing the neck of his empty bottle at Kyle's legs, asking some question. Kyle didn't seem to mind. He reached down and unfastened snaps on his pant leg. He opened it halfway up to the knee, spread the pant leg wide.

Angel knelt, trying to get a better look. He didn't look very steady doing it.

Kyle's lower leg was a black pipe not too different from his cane. It looked like something a plumber might use. The pipe screwed into a ball-shaped ankle twice the size of a real one. An axel ran through the ankle, the fat ends coming out more or less where anklebones should be. The bottom third of the ball disappeared into Kyle's shoe, which I realized now wasn't any more Kyle's than the fake foot was. The shoe belonged to the machinery.

"There is a motor in there?" Angel asked.

"The ankle?" Kyle shook his head. "The only motor is in the knee." With his two hands, he flexed the foot and ankle, moving it like walking. "The ankle has hydraulics and springs inside," he said. "They adjust when my weight shifts." He pulled up on the toe of his shoe, and the ankle flexed. He let go, and the foot moved smoothly back straight.

Angel was sitting on the floor now. I could tell he wanted to see more. Kyle must have realized it too. He unfastened several more pant-leg snaps, exposing the knee hinge and some upper leg, a wide metal strut.

With a knuckle, Kyle tapped the shell covering the knee. It made the sound of an empty terrapin shell. “I’m still learning to use the new motor,” he said. “It’s experimental.” With both hands he grasped the strut and lifted. The knee bent with a hushed, whirring noise. A small smile came across his face.

“That’s the motor?” Angel said. He moved around to where the light was better.

“Quiet, ain’t it?” Kyle said. “I feel it though, feel it like you wouldn’t believe, this quiet hum and tiny ratchet clicks up in my hip.” He moved the leg again and flexed the knee almost silently. The smile came back. I couldn’t look away. I tried to imagine the sensations—the hum, the intimate clicks—tried to imagine feeling them deep in my own hip. For a moment, I thought I did.

“It’s like you see in movies,” Angel said, “people with robot parts.” He opened another beer. “Fucking Schwarzenegger.”

“Robocop,” I said. “He’s just movie CGI shit, all computer-faked stuff. This is real.”

Angel looked over at me like he’d forgotten I was there. “What I’m saying is the idea’s the same. The concept.”

“They can fake anything in movies,” I said. “This is fucking real.”

“You want to see real?” Kyle said. Using his good leg, bracing his weight with an arm, he scooted awkwardly from the couch to the floor. He rolled onto his side and worked his pants waist down past his knees. Then he held his shirttail aside.

His shorts were this white elastic material, legless briefs, tight like cycling shorts. Several inches of leg stump showed, the skin red, the flesh lumpy. The stump disappeared into the fake leg’s fitted leather boot. A crisscross harness strapped the thing in place like a jockey’s saddle—one long diagonal strap to the opposite hip, a short strap to his groin, crossing an ugly scar there.

My insides clenched up. I had to look away.

He rolled onto his side. A braid of fine wires snaked up from the backside of the boot. Just above Kyle’s waist, low on his back, the wires were taped to a wide blue tattoo. “My landscape, a nerve resection,” he said, “a neural rerouting that works with my trusty computer chip.”

He rolled back, cinched both straps tight, and then patted the side of the boot. “Computer chip’s right here.”

“Damn!” Angel said. He knelt close to look.

Kyle's hand moved to the front of the boot and lifted a leather flap. "Batteries included," he said, showing them. They looked like they belonged to a cell phone. With a finger he pried loose a fabric packet wedged beside the batteries. "Also convenient," he said, unrolling the fabric on the table, "for a private stash." He removed a fat joint and stuffed the packet back.

"Fuck, man," Angel said. He rocked back and laughed. "You're loving this too much." He slapped Kyle's good leg, slapped it like an old friend.

Kyle swung backhanded at him, swung hard, his fist thudding on Angel's chest. Angel lost his balance and fell back against a chair. "It's all fucking toys," Kyle said, biting on the words. "Nothing but bright, shiny toys."

"I didn't mean nothing." Angel stumbled to his feet. He looked at me like I should do something about it. "*Cabrón,*" he muttered at Kyle, and he went to the kitchen.

The change in Kyle, his flash of rage from nowhere, had taken my breath. Now he worked his pants back up, bent, and snapped the pant leg. When he finally sat straight again, he looked over at me. There was a vacant look in his red-rimmed eyes, not at all like the eyes I remembered.

In my hands I saw the photo packets, the ones he'd come for. I held them out to him. He stared for several seconds, uncomprehending.

"From DC," I said.

He took them then and tucked them away in his pocketed pants. I wanted to tell him that I hadn't shown them to anyone, not even Angel, that I'd kept his secret and he had nothing to worry about. I wanted him to know that. I couldn't say any of it though.

Kyle worked himself up onto the couch again. He lit the joint, inhaled, and offered it to me. I took it, toked, and let the smoke settle deep in me before passing it back. It was the weekend, Saturday night, Sunday tomorrow. What the hell.

From the rear of the house, I heard loud banging and dull thuds, and I rushed to see. Angel had picked up the rabbit cage. He carried it now, staggered with it. He was trying to take the thing outside in the dark, trying to fit it crosswise through the porch doorway. I switched on the light. Inside the cage, Victor cowered, his eyes darting and panicky.

I pushed past Angel and propped the door open with a broom handle. "Turn sideways," I told him. The chill evening air was a splash on my face.

Angel made it through the doorway, bumped through, and managed to hit all three steps going down without falling. He lugged the cage out across the dark yard.

"What're you doing?" I yelled.

"Setting Victor free. You think I did something wrong," Angel yelled back. His breath puffed out, small alcohol fog-balls in the air. "I think this rabbit offends you by being here."

"Keep him, Angel," I yelled. "I don't care. Just clean up after him."

He set the cage down, unlatched and opened the door. Victor hunkered in a corner. Angel kicked the back of the cage. He kicked it again. He banged the top mesh and sides with his hands. Victor squeezed through the door opening and wriggled out. Once out, he hopped heavily across the yard, zigzagged into the darkness, and headed for the woods out back.

Angel came toward me, pushed past me onto the porch. He picked up the tray full of rabbit turds and took it out to the burn barrel. He dumped it there, a disgusting topping for yesterday's trash. Back on the porch, he gathered up the pissy newspapers, the other old newspapers stacked there, took them out, wadded them, and stuffed them into the burn barrel too. Then he touched a match to it all.

"It's best all around," I said. He might not have heard. I walked out to Angel. I put my arms around him and tried to kiss him. No way was he letting that happen. Not yet.

"He won't make it," Kyle said, coming out from the house, pinching the joint. How much he'd heard, I didn't know. "Tame rabbits won't survive in the wild."

"Big expert," Angel said. "He knows rabbits too."

Kyle came over by the fire. There wasn't much smoke, and what there was went straight up. The heat felt good on my face. "I raised rabbits years ago, dozens of rabbits," Kyle said. "They were a 4-H project." He extended the joint. Angel looked at it, thought for a second, and took it. "We sold them all for meat afterwards."

"You had them butchered?" I said. "That's so cruel."

"Set them free," Kyle said, "and they won't survive. They've got no immunities. They pick up parasites, all sorts of diseases. They're easy prey too, prey for coyotes, for foxes, even dogs."

Angel offered the joint back. Just that fast, you could see him mellow out.

Kyle waved it away. "Any more and I forget which legs are real."

Angel gave a laugh. “That one,” he said, pointing like it was a guessing game, as if the guy could suddenly switch his fake leg. “Am I right?”

Kyle got a kick out of that. “They’re both real,” he said. “It’s the third leg, the one that’s gone but still feels real, that’s the one that can screw you up.”

“You still feel it?” I asked. My brain was slowing down.

“It’s weird. Sometimes you forget. You think it’s still there.” He looked serious now. “It hurts like it’s still there, and it itches sometimes—the knee, the ankle, the foot. It feels wet in the bathtub. Believe it’s there at the wrong time though, and you’ll fall flat.”

“The leg is gone,” Angel said, and he nodded. “Its soul remains.” I thought about it for a minute, the idea of a leg’s soul. It was a thought I liked thinking, something I could almost believe.

“It’s all illusion though,” Kyle said, as if he’d been thinking it too. “The doctors, they tell me it’s a phantom in my head. It’s all muscle memory and unconnected nerves firing like they’ve still got work to do.”

Two or three streets away, a dog barked. Another answered from farther away.

“Dogs are everywhere in Fallujah,” Kyle said, “dogs nobody owns anymore. They follow us on night patrols.” He looked away. “We shoot the ones that bark.”

Angel peered off into the darkness, stared out toward the woods. The trees looked ghostly in the dim moonlight. “Is that true?” he asked Kyle, “What you said before about rabbits set free, about coyotes and everything?”

“I’m afraid so,” Kyle said.

Angel started walking away, heading out the woods path. “Victor,” he called, as if that rabbit was some house pet. For the minute or two after he’d disappeared, you could hear Angel whistling too.

With a stick I turned the smoldering fire to make sure everything would burn. The smoke smelled like road tar.

Kyle unzipped a deep pocket, took out the yellow bundle, and moved closer to the fire. He opened the photo packets and started going through the photographs, looking at them. He fed one and then another into the flames. Dark ashes and bright embers rose up, drifted up like resurrection, vanishing in the night sky.

“You don’t have to do that,” I told him, reaching for the stack. “I didn’t show anyone. I wouldn’t.”

He pulled away and kept at it, looking at each photo, dropping it in the barrel. One time he stopped and held up a

photo for me to see. “You’re good at this, Dempsie,” he said. The one he held was my favorite too.

“Save it for me?” I wanted to beg. He could burn the others if he wanted. They were all his, after all. But why not let me have that one?

For a moment I thought he might. “I can’t,” Kyle said, and he let it fall.

After they all were in the fire, he dropped the negatives in too, the empty envelopes, the rubber bands that had held them together. He stepped back and turned away from the fire. “It’s not that I didn’t trust you,” he said. “Besides, my parents already know how things are with me. I told them in the hospital.”

“Then why?” I asked. “Why burn everything?”

Kyle tapped the shaft of his cane on the fake knee. “This is me now, someone with a wired-up tech-toy for a leg,” he said. He hit the leg again, hit it harder. “This. It’s who I’ve got to be from now on. The old Kyle McKell, the one in the pictures, the one with two good legs?” His hand fluttered up like one of the embers. “I’m better off forgetting.”

We walked back to the house. As we did, I thought about Kyle, how he’d make a good boyfriend for me—an excellent one maybe—except for the part about being gay. If it weren’t for that, I could imagine us as a couple, which is to say I really liked the guy. I could get used to his nose and chin. And Kyle, he definitely needed someone like me, especially now. Okay, it wouldn’t work. I know that. But the thought definitely crossed my mind. Like a freight train, it crossed.

A million bugs swarmed the porch light. Kyle used his cane climbing the steps. I tried to help too. He went up without needing it though. You could hear his hum and clicks this time, such inhuman sounds coming from inside a man.

The idea arrived then that Angel must have thought all along that there was a secret connection between Kyle and me. I wanted to believe that he had, wanted to believe in the worst way. Imagine, mattering that much to someone.

In the corner of the porch, I saw a twitch, looked closer, and saw Victor. The rabbit was nestled against my boots. His eyes were on us. His ears lay flat against his head. He didn’t look frightened now or excited in any way. Lying there with my boots, Angel’s rabbit looked downright comfortable.

The Editors

Notes from Year One

We're developing something of a reputation around these parts. The word's out that *Freight Stories* authors have published over 50 books, including finalists for the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize and bestsellers; their stories have been featured in *Best American Short Stories*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, the annual *Pushcart Prize* series, *Best New American Voices*, and other best-of anthologies; and they've earned fellowships and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and other extraordinarily selective arts funding organizations. And alongside new fiction by these much-loved authors, we've brought you the work of first-time and emerging writers, just like we planned. Without these authors, each of whom has given us the gift of their work, there is no *Freight Stories*.

As you may have noticed, we're a little tardy on No. 4. This wonderful issue was nearly the straw that broke these camels' backs; turns out, it's a chore putting out an issue in December, and we'll be better prepared next year. This is just one of the things we learned in year one. A few others:

- We can grow! We're happy to introduce our first contributing editor, Barbara Shoup, author of *Everything You Want* and five other novels, and co-editor of *Story Matters* and *Novel Ideas*. As we keep working, we'll have more editorial news; check in with the *Freight Stories* blog now and then to stay informed.
- *Cargo* is better served bi-monthly. With the help of our contributing editors, in year two and beyond we'll keep bringing this PDF extravaganza to subscribers, with author interviews, engaging essays, and other exclusive content of interest to readers and writers. Subscribing to *Cargo* is the best way to show your support. And you can download a free sample on our Subscribe page.
- Subscribing will get easier next week, when we finalize some boring paperwork and add a PayPal button to our Subscribe page. Subscribers help cover the expenses of *Freight Stories* production and get us one step closer to paying our authors for their work. Like you, we believe

fiction has real value; we hope you'll help us honor that value by becoming a member, even though you can always read our issues for free.

A number of *Freight Stories* authors have new books out—or coming soon:

- John McNally, *The Ghosts of Chicago* (stories)
- Robert Boswell, *The Half-Known World* (essays on fiction); *What Some Men Call Treasure: The Search for Gold at Victorio Peak* (narrative nonfiction, co-written with David Schweidel); and *The Heyday of the Insensitive Bastards* (stories)
- Kyle Minor, *In the Devil's Territory* (stories)
- Sherrie Flick, *Reconsidering Happiness* (novel)
- Jim Tomlinson, *Nothing Like an Ocean* (stories)

If you love *Freight Stories*, buy and read these books, along with all the titles you see in our contributors' bios.

Year one has been good. Four issues. Thirty-five stories. Two novel excerpts. Flash fiction. Long stories. Everything in between. "The best new fiction on the web. Or anywhere else, for that matter." Tell your friends.

Contributors

Jasmine Beach-Ferrara is from North Carolina and currently lives with her partner in Boston, MA. She is a student at Harvard Divinity School and teaches writing at Emerson College and Grub Street. Her writing has appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *Harvard Review*, *Democratic Strategist*, *The Advocate* and other publications.

Shasta Grant received an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College in 2005 and was a 2007 writer-in-residence at Hedgebrook. Her work has appeared in *Stirring*, *Flying Island* and is forthcoming in the anthology *One for the Road*. She has taught writing at several women's prisons, Ball State University and The Writers' Center of Indiana. She lives in Indianapolis with her husband and son.

Lee Martin is the author of the novels, *The Bright Forever*, a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction; *River of Heaven*; and *Quakertown*. He has also published two memoirs, *From Our House* and *Turning Bones*; and a short story collection, *The Least You Need To Know*. He is the winner of the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council. He teaches in the MFA Program at The Ohio State University.

Patrick Nevins lives in Lafayette, Indiana, with his wife and dogs. He has an MFA from Purdue University. His fiction is forthcoming in *Gander Press Review*.

Andrew Roe's fiction has appeared in *Tin House*, *One Story*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Cincinnati Review* and other publications, as well as the anthology *Where Love Is Found: 24 Tales of Connection* (Simon & Schuster). In addition, his nonfiction, reviews and articles have appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *New York Times* and Salon.com. A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, he lives with his wife and children in Oceanside, California.

Jim Tomlinson lives and writes in rural Kentucky. His debut short story collection, *Things Kept, Things Left Behind,* won the 2006 Iowa Short Fiction Award. His work has appeared in *New Stories From The South 2008*, *Five Points*, *Shenandoah, Bellevue Literary Review* and elsewhere. Jim's second book of stories, *Nothing Like An Ocean*, will be published in March by University Press of Kentucky.

Donna D. Vitucci helps raise funds for local nonprofits, while her head and heart are engaged in the lives of the characters mounting a coup in her head. Some of her recent work appears or is forthcoming in *MO: Writings from the River*, *Night Train*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, and *Juked*. "That's Amore," is part of her unpublished novel *Abide Herein*, which features the characters of Vivian, Lindy, and Father Benedict.

Daniel Wallace is author of four novels, including *Big Fish* (1998), *Ray in Reverse* (2000), *The Watermelon King* (2003), and *Mr. Sebastian and the Negro Magician* (2007). He has written one book for children, *Elynora*, and in 2008 it was

published in Italy, with illustrations by Daniela Tordi. *O Great Rosenfeld!*, the only book both written and illustrated by the author, has been released in France and Korea and is forthcoming in Italy, but there are not, at this writing, plans for an American edition. His work has been published in over two dozen languages, and his stories, novels and non-fiction essays are taught in high schools and colleges throughout this country. His illustrations have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, the Italian *Vanity Fair*, and many other magazines and books, including *Pep Talks*, *Warnings*, *and Screeds: Indispensible Wisdom and Cautionary Advice for Writers*, by George Singleton, and *Adventures in Pen Land: One Writer's Journey from Inklings to Ink*, by Marianne Gingher. *Big Fish* was made into a motion picture of the same name by Tim Burton in 2003, a film in which the author plays the part of a professor at Auburn University. He is in fact the J. Ross MacDonald Distinguished Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which is also his alma mater (Class of '08). Though born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, he has lived in Chapel Hill longer than he has lived anywhere else, and he has no plans to leave. His wife, Laura, is a social worker, and his son, Henry, a student at East Chapel Hill High. His daughter, Lillian Bayley Hoover, is a working artist and teacher in Baltimore, Maryland. More information about him, his writing, and his illustrations can be found at www.danielwallace.org and www.ogreatrosenfeld.com.