Freight Stories

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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.

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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We do not publish work that exists solely for readers of romance, mystery, crime, erotica, or other genres you can name; we do, however, happily consider works of literary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, as well as on your manuscript. 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. 5

Contents

Alicia Gifford

Wreckers

From behind the wheel of the Volvo wrecker Janek looked at the Iraqi girl splayed in the dirt. Vaclav, riding shotgun, crossed himself, kissing the nub where his thumb used to be. He got the silver flask from the glove box and took a long hard pull, and then wiped his mouth. It could be Dari, he said, referring to his daughter, home in Plezn.

Flies buzzed around her body, ghostly, with its pale shroud of dust. In her hand she clutched a bottle of water.

The convoys had halted and U.S. and British troops milled about with dogs, goats, and more children. An officer wiped sweat from his face with a camouflage rag as he negotiated a price for the girl's life with her father. A woman soldier covered the little girl's body with a military blanket and a journalist snapped photographs. The Pakistani truck driver who'd thrown the water bottle to the little girl, causing the accident when she ran out to the road to fetch it, sat drawing circles in the dirt with a stick. Above the din, the keening ululations of the mourners rose like waves of heat.

There wasn't much for the wrecker crew to do—a six-year-old doesn't damage an eighteen-wheeler much.

Tears welled in Vaclav's pale eyes to run down his cheeks and drip from the rusty wires of his beard. Janek longed to pull him close, to cradle his big lion's head and comfort him. Instead, he gripped the wheel with both hands and looked straight ahead, past the girl, one moment alive and full of possibilities, the next, rotting in the sun.

I love you, Janek whispered.

What? Vaclav wiped his eyes and thumped him on the shoulder. We're like brothers, yah? He took another slug from the flask.

Janek exhaled. Yah. Brothers. He shifted gears and pulled over to let an American Humvee pass. Brothers in *hell*. The two men knocked knuckles in a gesture of solidarity and then phoned their supervisor to request permission to leave the scene.

That night Janek lay on his cot in the Kuwait border-town compound where KBR housed them, hands folded atop

his heart, feeling its beat. He and Vaclav had drunkenly vowed to live the rest of their lives fully and without regrets as homage to the girl in the dust, to give her death meaning. They'd raised their glasses and seared their throats with absinthe.

The walls of the compound were cracked, and the moonlight slipped through like quicksilver. Vaclav snored lightly in an adjacent cot, his beautiful face slack in the blue light pouring in through the wavy glass of the window, his thumbless hand pillowing his tawny head. Janek had become too emotional with Vaclav at the death scene, sometimes his impulses—

The desert air was soft and bore the scent of war. Janek closed his eyes to press in every moment to his memory. He fell asleep to the lullaby of Vaclav's breathing, and dreamt of a boy he knew in school.

The dark-skinned boy, a Cikán, took to squatting near the schoolyard field at St. Nicola's to watch soccer practice. From his goalie's post, Janek watched him furtively when the ball was in play at the opposite goal. When he was defending, he could feel the gypsy's eyes on him.

Janek went out for the soccer team the year he was twelve. Before he was born, his three sisters and mother weighted one end of the gender pole, leaving his father floundering and unbalanced at the other. From a very young age Janek felt his father's large investment. He alone could prevent the family name from extinction, the family's crown prince. We men have to stick together, his father said daily during the years of growing up.

Janek wasn't crazy about sports but he knew how proud and happy it made his father if he participated. He was a competent goalie and he enjoyed the masculine camaraderie of the locker room, but he would have preferred poring through the latest issue of *Vogue*. When he was ten he sketched a dress for his oldest sister's graduation ball. She'd squealed when he'd shown her the drawing, and then he had sat by at the dressmaker's shop, lording over the details.

The night of the ball Ana floated into the kitchen billowing layers of silk organza the colors of seashells, Janek in bashful attendance. Their mother had slapped a hand to her throat, her face wide with surprise. His other sisters had yelped, Me! Me!—and clamored for a Janek original. His father's eyes, usually soft and full of good humor, were hard and black, and quickly looked away when Janek shot him a tentative, flushed glance.

Janek and Vaclav had three months left before their contract was up. Vaclav was going to use the money to buy an auto repair shop in Plezn. His wife was expecting another child, a boy. Janek hadn't taken the bleak job for the money—his family had plenty and they'd been devastated by his decision to go to a war zone. He'd just finished law school and had become engaged to a beautiful woman, but Janek had been determined to get away to someplace harsh, self-flagellating, where he could both think and escape his thoughts. He signed onto the KBR wrecking crew on impulse, telling his family and fiancée that his life had been too cushy; he needed to grow a spine. Despite his father's protests, Janek knew he was secretly proud. You are a fine son, his father had told him, his voice breaking. Go with God.

Vaclav showed Janek photos of his wife and his daughter, a poodle named Noodle, their small, neat home in Bohemia. Janek showed pictures of Petra, tall, long-necked and sleepy-eyed, nipples poking a thin tank top. Behind her, the Pyramid of the Sun at the ruins of Teotihuacan stood in the haze. She grinned lopsidedly, shielding her face, the glitter of a diamond solitaire on her left hand.

A beauty! How does one ugly guy get a girl like that? Vaclav said happily.

Janek emailed his parents and told them not to worry about him. He hinted at the ribald activity at the compound, courtesy of KBR, their employer. He knew that Vaclav was tempted by the sultry whores, the metallic sheen of their oiled legs, their waxy red lipstick on long, slim cigarettes. They sipped iced vodka perched on stools like exotic birds in the compound's cantina.

Which will I regret more, Vaclav asked hoarsely, fucking them—or not fucking them? He looked at the photos of his family, prayed to the Virgin, and jerked himself off. Janek sketched the whores in notebooks, drew them in gypsy rags, and jerked himself off.

He emailed Petra about the war and the Arabs, and about his bunkmate, Vaclav. He described Kuwaiti villages and Iraqi children, and the Aegean Sea of Vaclav's eyes. Our sail in the Cyclades? Just like that, he wrote. Hair like copper scouring pads! Imagine—he lost his thumb to a wolf! And he plays the violin, thumbless!

I look forward to meeting him. And his wife, Petra replied.

He worked in his sketchbook on Petra's wedding dress, the big society wedding at St. Nicola's Cathedral next Christmas. He wanted halogen pin spots focused on Petra's crystal-dusted veil to make it sparkle like a fresh snowfall as it

drifted behind her. He envisioned the incandescent cream silk satin of the strapless bodice against her pale olive skin, the gown draping on the bias from her perfect proportions—how she inspired him!

He was designing clothes for the whole wedding party. Even his father would wear a tuxedo designed by Janek to his only son's wedding.

After a tough practice Janek's team had been ebullient, shoulder slapping and goosing each other in the revelry and spirit of good gamesmanship. Janek had glanced to where the Cikán boy crouched. Their eyes had met and held.

Janek went in to shower with the others and dawdled in the locker room until most everyone had left. He then walked out toward Otakar II Square, and the gypsy boy stepped out of the gloaming to join him. They did not speak to each other as the boy, maybe fifteen, spoke only Romani.

Janek's father always spat the word "Cikán" like a bad oyster.

They walked in silence through the Square until they reached the fountain, where they sat on a stone bench, the wind fresh with autumn, ruffling the boys' hair. Streetlights flickered on and the aroma of baked sugar wafted in the air. Brittle leaves skittered across the cobblestones.

The gypsy boy had warm, whiskey colored eyes, and curls like bronze springs. Silky hair darkened his highly curved upper lip. The gypsy boy leaned forward and kissed Janek fully on the mouth, filling it with his tongue, richly spiced with cloves. Janek felt the world swirl vertiginously around him; he closed his eyes. The boy placed Janek's hand on the hard throb at his crotch while simultaneously fondling Janek, who ejaculated, his first time—a whirling shock of disgust and elation, self-hatred and burning love. Janek broke the kiss and drew back, slamming the heel of his hand hard into the boy's nose and upper lip, and then he ran, the virgin semen trickling sticky down his inner thigh.

That night watching the television news with his father, a story ran about vandals who had thrown buckets of feces and urine onto the dance floor of a gay bar in Prague. They showed a young gay man crying, mascara and feces dripping down his face. Janek's father snorted.

Buzerant! Janek spat with disgust. And he and his father laughed.

We men have to stick together, his father said.

Yah, Papa, Janek said, his mouth hot with cloves.

He and Petra watched a silly American husband-and-wife spy movie. He'd been home for six months now, leaner and harder than the boy who left for Iraq a year and a half ago. Petra stroked his steely, muscled belly and dipped her fingers inside his jeans toward his genitals. She turned to kiss his cheek. One more month, she whispered in his ear. Janek watched Brad Pitt sweating, cocking a firearm.

This is too stupid, he said, turning the DVD off with the remote. He reached for her breast and she gave a little moan. He turned his face to kiss her, the image of Brad Pitt blazing in his brain.

Vaclav and his family came by train from Plezn to Ceské Budejovice for the wedding, and Janek went to the station to meet them. The men hugged heartily and unabashedly wiped tears away on their sleeves. Vaclav introduced his wife Daniela, a willowy brunette with pale, translucent skin and dark, tired circles beneath soft brown eyes. She carried the baby, and Dari, their little girl, held her father's hand and stared up at Janek.

The wedding Mass was to be on Sunday. Saturday was the rehearsal followed by dinner at the Grand Hotel Zvon, where many of the wedding guests from out of town were staying, including Vaclav and his family. Vaclav was to be the best man and Dari would strew rose petals down the aisle, along with Petra's twin nieces.

The rehearsal went smoothly and they all welcomed the idea of champagne and a good meal. The wedding party took their places at the elegantly set tables and everyone toasted the bride and groom on the eve of their wedding. The white-gloved waiters were beginning to bring in silver tureens of fragrant South Bohemian potato soup when the slicked-back bronze waves of one of them made Janek inhale sharply. Janek had not seen him since that evening fifteen years ago, though the boy had shadowed him like a wraith. Panic seized him to see the revenant fully fleshed, and his impulse was to bolt. Would the Cikán remember him? Janek had grown nearly half a meter since their last encounter, and now wore a mustache and beard. He wasn't sure if the boy had ever known his name.

The gypsy had the same petulant pout and whiskey eyes. He wore small gold hoop earrings, a silver stud above his right eyebrow, and black eyeliner. His jaw had thickened and the planes of his face had sharpened. As Janek watched him, another waiter breezed by and subtly brushed the back of his hand against the gypsy's crotch, and Janek felt a surge of jealous rage. Clove-scented saliva flooded his mouth.

Your soup's getting cold, Petra said, lightly touching his thigh. Janek jumped like she'd zapped him with an electric prod.

You're pale, she said. What's wrong? What are you looking at? She looked to where he'd been staring.

Janek turned to face her. I can't wait to fuck you, he said. That's all. Petra smiled, ducked her head, touching her fingertips to her flushed chest.

All through dinner Janek furtively watched the waiter, who was glassy-eyed and indifferent to everyone as he served and cleared plates. Vaclav got very drunk and his wife, obviously irritated, finally bid everyone goodnight and hauled her roaring husband upstairs. Petra too, made her exit, claiming her need for beauty sleep. She kissed Janek goodnight, a lingering, wet kiss, full of suggestion and champagne. She was spending the night at the hotel; Janek was going home to his apartment on the other side of the square, where they would live. They planned to honeymoon in Paris after spending their wedding night in Prague. Then he would begin a new position in international law as junior partner in his father's firm. Their life would be elegant and social, and he would design dresses as an avocation, inspired by his beautiful muse—his wife—the future mother of his children. They would live happily, entangled in the joy and occasional sorrow of family life.

Janek's parents bid goodnight to their son. God answered all my prayers with you, Janek's father said, his voice tender and catching. He embraced his son, and Janek felt a new fragility in his father, an anticipation of loss. Papa, he said, holding him tightly.

But Janek didn't go home. He drank a cognac at the hotel bar and watched the kitchen. Around eleven the Cikán came out in faded jeans and a thick, cable knit sweater. He swigged beer from a bottle and carried a plate of eggs that he set down at the far end of the bar to eat. Janek watched, barely breathing, a dark heat spreading in his belly. The gypsy ate his eggs, and lit a cigarette. He raised his eyes and focused on Janek, now delirious with longing. Their eyes locked.

The groom, the Cikán said, smoke streaming from his nostrils. He stubbed out his cigarette in his plate and leaned back in the chair, clasping his hands behind his head and looking at Janek through heavy lids. Every groom deserves a boy's night out, he said.

Let's go, Janek said thickly. He threw back the rest of his cognac. And they left.

Two hours before the ceremony, Vaclav, his head aching from the night before, gulps aspirin. His wife has taken the children downstairs to look at the Christmas tree in the lobby. A light snow has begun to fall. Janek paces nervously.

I'd be worried if you *weren't* nervous, Vaclav says. He pulls out the old silver flask from under his pillow and offers it first to Janek, who defers. Vaclav takes a long pull from it.

Do you think you should have that before the wedding? Janek asks. He wonders how much Vaclav drinks. He drank heavily in Iraq. They all did.

Now you sound like Daniela, Vaclav says. He takes another swallow and then remembers the magazine article, and pulls it out of his suitcase.

Look, the little girl. There she is in the dust, and there's our wrecker. See? That's you. A famous guy.

It's a special war issue of *Time*. In the photo, the dead girl's body is covered with a blanket and Janek is visible in the cab of the wrecker, his hands gripping the wheel and staring straight ahead. Vaclav is a shadow next to him, but the glint of his tears is visible, caught by a sharp reflection of sun from something on the instrument panel. Janek's elbows begin to ache, and he rubs them.

He's been with women. His first was one his father arranged for him on his eighteenth birthday, and he had enjoyed it well enough. In Iraq, he and Vaclav had smoked hashish and Janek became so aroused that he'd agreed to a night with the whores.

He knows that tonight when they release their vows of celibacy, it will be fine with Petra. It will be loving and tender. She might conceive a child. He will meet her passion and she will not be disappointed, but oh, how he will think of the waiter! He closes his eyes for a moment and feels a whirling rush.

Vaclav picks up the magazine. Poor thing, he says. Janek remembers their solemn revelry that night, clinking glasses, celebrating the possibilities that come with being alive and vowing to live truly and fiercely, without regrets.

No regrets, my brother, Vaclav whispers now, his Aegean eyes red-rimmed and rheumy.

An image of Janek's parents' home, their grand piano cluttered with photos in silver and gilt frames. Grand uncles and aunts and cousins, nieces, nephews, children and grandchildren, brides, grooms, anniversary parties and christenings, the memorabilia of family staring back from the frames with cheery resilience.

Ah, Vaclav, he says.

Later the priest will ask him if he will take this woman to be his wife, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, until death does them part.

His father, silver-haired and pink with pleasure, sartorially elegant in his dove gray morning coat and sterling cravat, will blink the moisture from his eyes and squeeze his mother's kid-gloved hand. His sisters will weep into white linen hankies trimmed with Renaissance Belgium lace, leaning on their husbands. Petra, as luminous as the Madonna, already will have pledged her life to him. Above them, a pewter Christ, limp and bleeding on a rosewood crucifix, will lord over all.

I do, he will say.

Ron Burch

Coyote

Our neighbor was feeding the coyotes. Standing in our front yard in the dark, their bodies fat but yearning, their eyes pinpoints in the dark. They didn't run.

I knew this because my wife told me when she came home about midnight on Tuesday. She said she was at her sister's house. Her sister had just had a baby with red hair that was falling out. I called them but no one picked up.

My wife saw the coyotes in the yard. One of my neighbors wanted to shoot them.

She is fucking someone else.

Not that I blame her. I have aged. My hair is thinning and starting to gray. I have gained weight around the middle and my face has filled out, a double chin haunting me; I am no longer thin and boyish and young.

We no longer talk as we once did. I wish I knew why but I really don't. Not anymore.

I was watching the coyotes skulk through the neighbor's dusky yard when a car pulled into my driveway. I thought it was just someone turning around, lost on these serpentine streets in the hills, trying to find the park to our north. The coyotes scattered away into the dark, joining with the shadows.

But the car was idling in the driveway, lights on, what looked to be one person in it. And then the lights turned off. The engine followed. Our 1920s streetlight only faintly illuminated the area. The driver sat in the car in my driveway, waiting.

I wasn't sure whether I should go out or not. I stood in the house, staring at the car. The hall light was on but I didn't know if the person in the car could see me or not in the dining room window. Were we watching each other?

The door opened and a guy got out. Mid 30s, goatee, crew cut, and little wire rim glasses. He came up to the front door and rang the buzzer.

I walked to the door but didn't unlock it. I stood on the other side, trying to catch my breath. My heart was beating fast. The hallway was dark and I stood there, unsure what to do.

The buzzer rang again.

Yeah? I said.

Are you Jerry? his voice asked through the door. His voice was deep like he'd been practicing.

Yeah.

You need to come with me, he said.

I knew he was standing out there in the dark on our porch. I didn't turn on the porch light for him.

Who the fuck are you?

It's about your wife, he said. You have to come get her.

He gave me the address. I kind of knew where it was, down off Wilshire near the El Rey. We'd seen a couple bands play there years ago. I got in my car.

He was leaning out his car window, looking back at me. I was parked on the street. You want to follow me?

I leaned over and rolled down the passenger window. What?

You want to follow me?

I think I got it.

I'll drive slow, he said and rolled up his window. He backed his Lexus out of my driveway, careful not to clip me as he turned onto the street.

I followed him and turned the radio to the jazz station from Long Beach. Bird was playing and I cracked the window.

The house was a duplex in the S. 900 block of Dunsmuir, a white shingle house with blue trim that had been broken up into two units. He pulled into an old wooden garage. The boards at the bottom were broken. The garage had one door that he had to stop, get out of his car and pull up himself before driving in. He propped the garage door open with a bowed piece of wood.

I parked on 9th Street, which intersected Dunsmuir at the corner where the house sat. I considered leaving but turned off the radio. I stood outside the car, watching him.

He came out of the garage, sliding the wooden door down behind him. It jammed on the track and it took him about a minute before he could get it properly closed. He probably just needed to oil the track but I wasn't going to tell him. The temperature seemed cooler here in the flats than up in the hills where we came from.

He walked by me on the sidewalk as I was leaning up against the car but didn't say anything. I followed him onto a covered front porch that had large curved stones, a path that I could barely make out by the dim porch light.

He had his back to me, unlocking the door. I didn't want to go in. I wanted to get back in my car and drive to my house,

go inside, turn off the lights, and lie down. But he was standing there, turned, the door open, waiting for me.

What's your name? I asked him.

Richard.

Richard, I repeated, shaking my head.

I went inside. He closed the door behind us and flipped on the light in the entry way. Marble floor, white paneled walls. A large picture of an abstract flower done in brownish yellows on the wall across from the door. The paint on the frame was coming off.

Are you sure my wife is here?

He nodded. She passed out on the couch.

He led me to the living room. There wasn't much furniture. A tv on a small wood table and a nearly empty bookcase. A brown recliner in the corner. In the center of the room was the couch. It was red with several large pillows, a country look, I guess. But she was not there. I looked at him.

She was here when I left.

He went over to the couch and moved a couple pillows around as if she might have slipped beneath them, down into the recesses of the couch like loose change. He threw the pillows back on it and shrugged.

I don't know, he said.

It doesn't look like she's there now.

He shook his head. His eyes were a sad blue, I don't know how else to describe them. He didn't want to be doing this with me, I could tell. I didn't want to be doing it with him either.

So where is she?

I don't know.

Why don't you know?

He licked his lips. I could see the glimmer of white.

I'm going to look around.

He nodded and followed after me.

We started searching the house. I looked in rooms and he didn't say anything. He didn't stop me. He encouraged me to search, to take back what he must've considered mine and what he was sorely misunderstanding.

I glanced in the bathroom, thinking perhaps she was passed out on the floor, as in the past, but she wasn't there. The bathroom had purple tile from the 30s, a metallic sheen to it, and white built-ins including a dressing table with nothing on it. There was one soiled white towel on the floor and an open toothpaste tube leaking out onto the green sink.

I closed the door behind me. I could hear him rummaging around in another room. I checked out an office. His office. A computer and a chipped laminate desk, cheaply

glued together, from an office supply place two blocks away on Wilshire.

He and I together searched through the house, ending up in a small kitchen. Dirty dishes clustered in the sink. Crumbs scattered on the counter and a putrid smell came from the small white trash can, I guessed.

You find her? he asked.

I shook my head.

Where could she have gone?

Why the hell are you asking me? I said.

He pulled on his fingers and leaned back against the counter, putting one of his hands on an old white stove.

I shrugged. Did she drive?

No.

You check the back yard?

He nodded. I didn't see her back there.

You check the entire house?

He nodded.

And you didn't find her?

He shrugged as if he didn't know what else to do. His stomach fell over his belt and his shirt gaped open, showing hairy white skin. I wanted to laugh but didn't. We stood there for a while not really saying anything. I wondered if I should go.

You want a beer? he asked.

I hesitated and then nodded. I'm going to go round again.

Okay.

I went room by room. In his bedroom, which I hadn't checked the first time, the sheets were unmade and tangled, pillows askew. There was a smell. I left the room and looked into a couple more before giving up. Maybe I wasn't really looking for her but looking for something.

Back in the kitchen, he handed me a cold can of beer. I took it from him.

Where could she have gone? he asked, not really asking me. I could tell he was worried. He took a drink, wiping the wet residue off his upper lip.

I drank half the can. What was she doing here?

Somebody from work was having a party, he said, and she wanted to go. Said her husband. He stopped himself and shook his head.

I took another drink as if it didn't matter.

Said you didn't want to go and didn't care. So we went and had a couple drinks, danced in the living room, and came back here and talked but then she passed out and I couldn't get her into the car and I felt funny about leaving her out here and going to bed so I went through her purse—

I gave him a look.

—Just to find the address, that's it. That's how I found you.

I nodded and finished my beer.

You expect me to believe that?

What?

Do you?

He raised his hands. Hey, he said, I don't want any trouble. She wanted to come here, she insisted.

How long's it been going on?

He shrugged and glanced down at his shoes. And shrugged again.

I watched him and didn't say anything. He wouldn't look up.

I lifted myself up on the white tiled counter. The cabinets were old and stuck out so I had to lean forward. You married? I asked.

He shook his head and went into the living room. He sat in the brown recliner that looked poorly bolted together from a kit. I followed him in. He was sitting in that chair, hunched over himself.

Was, he responded, not anymore.

What happened?

She met someone else. Moved out.

I nodded.

You going to repaint?

What? he asked.

It always helps if you repaint. I pointed to the wall behind me.

Oh, he said, getting it. I never really thought about it.

The living room too was a dingy red color. Maybe it was an off-red or maybe it had changed from age or smoke. It was hard to tell. There were only two small windows. It felt dark and cramped.

I'd definitely repaint, I said. Clean the place up. You own it?

He nodded. Yeah, a couple years.

Might want to think of selling. It helps.

What color would you paint it?

I walked around the room. I put my hand out and dragged it along the wall next to the opening. I don't know, I replied. I walked around the room again. I stood in the doorway between the living room and the small dining area that had a wicker round glass-topped table and four wicker chairs. He was still in the recliner, sagging into it, letting himself go.

White, I finally said. I'd probably paint it white.

He nodded and put his head in his hands.

I don't know how it happened, he said. We used to be happy, me and her. We met in college and got married but

through the years things just got harder and harder. It's like we were always looking for a fight. And then I came home one day and she was just gone and I was lonely. I waited almost a year but I was just lonely, so lonely that it made my teeth hurt.

I put the empty beer can in the middle of the floor. Thanks for the beer.

Sure. He didn't stand. He just stayed in the chair like it was a nest, a place for him to burrow.

I headed for the front door.

Where do you think she went? he asked again.

It was a question I had asked many times before. I shrugged. I don't know, I said. Maybe she woke up and not knowing where she was, she went for a walk. She's done that before. She's done lots of things before so it's hard telling. You should probably look for her.

He nodded and I left.

Outside it was quiet. The crickets sounded louder here. It was getting cold so I zipped up my jacket and got in the car. I sat there waiting, trying to figure out what to do. Finally, I started it and headed home. I felt myself glancing at the sidewalks, and wondered if the coyotes were waiting for me and what I would do if they were.

Jason Skipper

Yellow

Right now, Sherri's kitchen light seems too bright, and she feels like she's waking up from being passed out or asleep at her small red dining room table, though she hasn't been sleeping or drinking. Instead, she's been awake and wrapped inside a cocoon of nausea and headache, tight enough to shut her down. The small rectangle window above the kitchen sink is open but covered with a wire mesh screen, keeping mosquitoes out. She can almost feel the sound of their buzzing and realizes her head is on her hand and she's staring at the window instead of writing, so she sits up straight, thinking she needs to get to it, finish this letter and take her meds and get to bed before another wave of pain comes on. Looking at the yellow paper, she inhales the deep and even breaths that once cleared the pain but now hurt like hell. She focuses on the first line, in blue ink.

Dear Maria,

It's 1 a.m. This is the last thing I will write you. I have so much I want to say but don't know really how to start.

Sherri rolls her eyes, thinking how these lines are straight out of some stupid movie or TV show. She looks at the small, framed photograph on the table, a close-up of her daughter Maria's face. In the picture, the girl has brown hair that curls up underneath her earlobes, a wide jaw and a wide smile. Brown eyes. She likes bright colors and always has, which Sherri knows is a weird thing to consider, given Maria's age. Seventeen now, and living with her father and stepmother, twenty minutes up the road, though you'd think it was three hours, given the frequency of her pop-ins. When Maria stops by, she sits fidgeting on the edge of the couch and stares around for half an hour. Looking at the framed picture on the table, Sherri remembers the night six years ago when Ray locked her out. A warm May evening like this, only different. Back then, bugs didn't matter. Time was nothing. All that factored was whiskey and dancing and cowboys in tight jeans and black boots who weren't her husband. On that night as Sherri stood outside the house, pounding the door to be let in, she saw herself in her peripherals, reflected in Maria's window. Ragged

face and smeared make-up. Straggly hair and untucked shirt, buttons done all wrong where if you looked you could see her right breast. Maria's face suddenly appeared alongside Sherri's reflection, wide-eyed and awake. Maybe the kid had been there all along, only Sherri hadn't noticed. Sherri thought, This is wrong, no girl should see her mother like this. But she didn't think to stop all the running. Instead she turned away from the window and hazy picture of herself and her daughter. She moved on. Got this trailer and some furniture, a telephone number, her own line in the phonebook. Things were good. Then this cancer. After that, the operations at the run-down city hospital. The radiation and chemotherapy. The envelopes of hospital bills that went straight to the trash.

Sherri doesn't like the notion of regrets. Thinks they're stupid. People do things for reasons. Change and grow and become new all the time, so to judge who you were is just the same as judging somebody else, and you can never know anybody's situation. Sitting here at the table, she taps her Bic, thinks for a moment, stares at the paper and wonders if she should write about the mosquitoes and their hum. Tell Maria to listen and pay attention to what is being said. Tell Maria, *I gave you that name for a reason. I knew that people would sing it whenever you told them who you were. There are so many songs with Maria in the title or in the verses. I gave you this name so you could gauge people you met by what they sang.* But that's a lie. She gave Maria the name on a whim and only later found out how many songs used the name. Even now, Sherri can't recall the titles of the songs themselves, only the places wherein her daughter's name appears, and how the notes tend to rise when people sing it.

Against the yellow sheet of paper, the lamp hanging over the table feels too bright. Sherri considers turning it off. The porch light outside the window would suffice once her eyes adjusted to the change. But she wants to get through this. All day, she skipped the morphine for this part of the evening, this moment. She reminds herself: a clearer head means steadier writing. Smarter thinking. But then tonight, once the drugs started drifting, she came to know the waves and layers of pain that have stayed beneath the morphine. She wants to write, *They are not shitting to say it eats you inside out.*

These days she is awake as much as a sick person sleeps. She pukes up the Ensure, even when it's at room temperature. It's when the little things stop mattering—long gone are the big things—when the vanilla shakes and breathing hurt, when sleep steals too much time and awake means hurting, that the morphine is important.

Sherri wants to write all of this down. How she will miss the choice in lights. How the bulb would burn her hand if she

held it and it would hurt if she licked her finger and touched it, and the room would feel cold with the light off. She could unscrew the bulb and put it against her face, roll it along the bones in her cheeks to feel the warmth. To know the bones that make her body. She holds her hand up in front of her face and stares at it as if the room is dark. Skinny isn't the right word for what she sees—gray skin, deep wrinkles—and she refuses to find a way to describe it. She wants to tell Maria to think more about time, to make it stop when she wants. *Stop and stare at things a while. Don't be impatient to move on. But don't be scared to move on either.* Up above the sink and on the window, Sherri sees something flicker. A gray moth's landed on the screen, its tiny chest expanding and contracting. Thin wings flapping. Sherri wonders how it's holding on and why it's staying here. And, for some reason, she suddenly thinks of the word *Lepidoptera*.

She remembers a sunny spring day in fourth grade, sitting beside the warm window in the classroom with her cheek in her hand, elbow propped on the desk, staring out at a large oak tree across the distance. The twisted trunk and thick branches that stretched out, covered in green leaves. She heard Mrs. Ludwig say the word and it caught her attention. Mrs. Ludwig, who'd said so many times before that she'd about given up on Sherri. Used to say how she never paid attention and was a sweet girl when she wanted to be and could maybe amount to something if she stopped fidgeting. Sherri thinks how she was restless, even then. Never good at a fucking thing, not school or boys or kids or writing. Now Mrs. Ludwig's eyes fall on Sherri, and Sherri feels like she's been caught. Behind the woman on the green chalkboard in white lines of chalk are two wings and antennae, but Mrs. Ludwig is standing in front of it, teaching the class. Sherri moves her head around and Mrs. Ludwig steps aside to let Sherri see.

Sherri shakes her hand as if she's written a lot. The plan tonight was to say good-bye. To say she's sorry to miss the things she won't see, like graduation, wedding, career, and grandkids. To name what she'll miss most when she's gone, that way her daughter will always see these things and live better. But everything that comes to mind feels stupid. Another reason Maria can say someday to somebody, My mom was such a dumbass. Here, take a look at this.

She wants to write, *I too love colors. When I was a little girl in school I used to wear overalls and a rainbow striped shirt every day. Not just because we couldn't afford different, but because I loved them.* But what she really wants more than anything in this needling moment is the hurting to stop. She can feel the next wave coming, as if she's kicked something hard and knows pain is on its way, like she has felt all day and

night, only this time much longer and more intense. She could write this. She could tell Maria how she's afraid to die, how the morphine eases things. That this is life right now. She could take the whole bottle. She could tonight. But how does one say this to the daughter who doesn't visit? What is most on her mind and in her thoughts. How there aren't words to describe this. And isn't there more to say than that? She wonders how on earth, on this yellow sheet of paper, to describe the fear of death, to teach an appreciation for life—in this light, on this evening, to a stranger.

She sets the pen down. She turns out the lamp and collapses back in her chair. All dark. Just sound and the memories and what's coming. She folds her arms and rests her cheek on the table, keeping her eyes on the screen. The moth breathes and flaps its wings but goes nowhere, staying with her. Sherri matches its breathing. She mouths the word. *Lepidoptera*. Like something beautiful being beaten to death, but it means butterfly. Even this gray ashen creature wants to be here. She remembers the words to one of the songs for her daughter and sings to the moth, feeling the hum inside her throat.

Rachel Furey

Cleaning Up

They're at it again. Veronica and Tony are having sex under Veronica's rose-petal pink sheets. From her bed, only yards from Veronica's, Riley can hear the sounds of their kisses, moans, and groans. The curtains are closed and the lights are off, so Riley shouldn't be seeing anything, but Veronica has red fiery hair that seems to cast a glow of its own. Riley sometimes catches a curl of it flipping up above the sheets and dancing a moment before being tugged back under. When the hair disappears, a new chorus of groans and giggles follows. Riley understands that in the future intercourse may become as spectacular for her as it is for Veronica. But the way Veronica fervently engages in the act, cheering Tony on with things like *Keep your head up!* and *Go, Fight, Win!,* has only made Riley more anxious.

After Veronica and Tony's first night of sex, Veronica bounced out of bed for her eight o'clock class, pulling on rabbit slippers on her way down the hall to the dorm bathroom, where she would spend half an hour applying makeup. Riley sat up in her bed, exhausted. The back of her T-shirt was still damp because she had spent the whole night sweating, as if listening to the sex was almost like being involved it.

"I've got a good energy today," Veronica said while she picked up her basket of makeup. Riley rubbed sleep from her eyes. "Don't tell me you were surprised. Don't tell me you weren't expecting it."

"This is a scholarship dorm," Riley said. The words made sense at the time.

Veronica laughed so hard she nearly dropped her basket. "Come on," she said. "This is college and it *is* the scholarship dorm. We're advanced." She skipped off down the hall to the bathroom.

Tonight, Riley is worried Veronica is going to exhaust herself with all that laughing and movement under the sheets. Veronica promised Riley that at seven tomorrow morning she would go to Lake Ontario and help with the clean-up efforts for International Coastal Cleanup Day. They both agreed it would be a good tradeoff. Riley had to listen to Veronica and Tony have sex every Friday, so Veronica could spend a Saturday

morning picking up cigarette butts and fast food wrappers. But if things keep going the way they've been, Veronica might not be much help tomorrow, might not be able to pick up anymore than a few Styrofoam coffee cups, and the idea of the clean-up is to pick up a whole lot and finally beat the next town over by collecting the heaviest load of garbage.

Tony's glow-in-the-dark condomed penis slips above the sheets and Riley starts coughing. While Veronica isn't the sort of person to stop mid-sex, she has been concerned about Riley's asthmatic state since the morning Veronica doused herself in perfume only for Riley to begin wheezing and go scrambling through her top desk drawer for her inhaler. It's too bad it isn't quite cold season yet and Riley doesn't have any phlegm in her lungs to get a good wheeze going. She coughs again, louder this time, and sits up her in bed, putting her hands on her head.

"Hey, are you having an attack?" Veronica says from under the sheets.

Riley coughs again. It's best not to say anything, best for her to have so little air she can say nothing.

"Tony," Veronica says. "I think she's having an attack. I almost killed her once with my peach raspberry body spray." The sheets billow and wave.

Riley coughs again.

"Can you reach your inhaler?" Veronica insisted they keep it in a spot they both knew about so that it in the case of an extreme attack, Veronica would be able to grab it and save Riley, presumably doing a cheer afterward. They keep it on top of the television. Veronica let Tony pick the spot. "Seriously, can you get it?"

Riley fills her throat with spit and gets out a really good cough.

"Stay there," Veronica says. Riley wonders if she's talking to Tony or just his dick. Veronica climbs out of bed, completely naked, her body so pale it glows in the dark. She reaches a long arm to the top of the television and grips the inhaler in her hand.

In her head, Riley had guessed an asthma attack would bring the sex to a ceasefire and Tony would have to leave, but Veronica seems to be considering an asthma attack only grounds for a brief intermission, one that doesn't even require dressing.

Riley likes to think of Veronica as a series of redheaded Barbie dolls that are not only capable of changing clothes, but also of changing dimensions. Sex Veronica has a body so slippery clothes can't fit on her. She comes not with clothes, but with sheets, sheets the color of rose petals and a pack of glow-in-the-dark condoms. Judo Veronica is stronger and larger and

wears baggy clothes with a white belt, can throw down a two hundred pound man, and does not confess to things like sex. I'm-looking-for-a-guy-better-than-Tony Veronica wears tight-ass jeans that are hung to dry to prevent shrinking and only allow limited mobility in the legs, always shows cleavage, and carries a purse heavy with makeup.

"Here," Veronica says, standing in front of Riley's bed, sweat gleaming between her size-C breasts. Her thighs are round and strangely strong, at last not held back by those tight jeans she squeezes herself into every morning. Her nakedness makes her seem taller, larger, and with Veronica standing there, reaching out the inhaler, smelling like sweat and sex, Riley's lungs cramp for real, her stomach beginning to heave in and out.

"Come on, take it," Veronica says. "Don't make me call 911. You sound like a sick whale. Pretty soon you'll wake up the whole dorm."

From below the sheets, Tony groans. He rarely speaks, just emits a series of groans that range from the low and guttural to this higher-pitched near squeal. Riley's heard it before. It means something's not staying where it's supposed to.

She takes the inhaler in her hands and pulls it to her lips, feeling the rush of chemicals pour into her lungs. Veronica still glows beside her.

"Maybe we shouldn't go to that clean-up tomorrow after all," Veronica says, standing too close to Riley's comforter, brushing her hips along its edge, making Riley wonder about sperm and how well it travels and if there's any lingering on her bedding right now.

"We have to," Riley says. Or all of the world will soon look like Veronica—unclothed, pale, bare, rolling back into bed with a man like Tony.

In the morning, Veronica dresses as I-don't-give-a-shit Veronica, wearing sweatpants, a hoodie, and old tennis shoes. She has applied only a small amount of makeup and does not carry a purse. She clings to a Styrofoam cup of coffee that she's reluctant to relinquish to the cup holder in order to start the car. When she turns on the radio, she tunes it to rap and turns up the volume. Riley feels the vibrations from the speakers run up through the floorboards and into her calves and thighs. She swears her eardrums are about ready to pop and somehow finds the bravery to ask for NPR, but Veronica just glares.

"I can turn this car right around, if you'd prefer," Veronica says.

"We haven't even pulled out of the parking lot yet."

"Then we could just head back inside." Veronica takes another long draw from her coffee cup. "Fuck cleaning up a lake. Isn't that what bottom feeders are for? Catfish and the like?"

"It's about a guy," Riley says.

Veronica coughs, spraying coffee onto the steering wheel. "Shit. Why didn't you tell me? You—a guy? Damn. I thought you'd at least be a senior before that happened. Well, let's go then." She puts the car in reverse and backs it out of the parking space and then onto the road that heads out of campus. "You going to me tell who? Wait. Let me guess. Some kid from your environmental science class. Some kid who's in love with his Birkenstocks and wears all natural organic cotton. Probably thinks deodorant is optional. Hey, does he smoke pot? Could you hook me up with some?"

Riley bites her tongue. She wants to tell Veronica *yes*. Yes, to all these things. It would keep Veronica driving. "Yes. From environmental science." This is no lie. Her professor is, indeed, part of the class in the sense that he directs and leads it, or at least as much as a man with a stutter and spitting problem can. Veronica would never understand that his faults are part of what make him so attractive, not only because they make Riley feel less awkward about her own inadequacies, but because he is so brave in the face of them, appearing completely unfazed when spit escapes his lips and spots the empty seats in the first few rows. He buys his clothes at the Salvation Army, and can never quite wash the smell out of them. This gives him a magnificent seven-houses smell, making him seem to Riley a world traveler. In the right hand corner of the chalkboard, he gives extinct species a voice by tallying the ones that have disappeared since 1500 AD. In the left hand corner, he records the number of species currently endangered, and each day Riley wishes to add a digit for Dr. Felders. Men like him are rare.

"Details," Veronica says. "Don't leave me hanging."

"He's cute." Cute in an I'm-unkempt-because-I-care-so-much-about-other-things sort of way.

"Cute, huh? Well, if that's all you've got, it's not true love."

There *is* more and it just might be true love. "Is Tony a true love?"

"Hell, no. That's just sex. Not even really good sex. Just something to get by. I mean—"

"I get it," Riley says.

The sun rises in the sky, streaking orange and red over the horizon. Veronica starts tapping the steering wheel to the beat and Riley makes a game out of counting the yellow dash marks in the middle of the road. Veronica pushes the gas pedal

and then lets it go, like she can't decide which is worse: driving slowly or arriving at a community clean-up on time.

Riley has counted two hundred and forty-four yellow dashes on the road when Veronica pushes the brakes and Riley turns her gaze from the middle of the road to the side of it, where their front bumper collides with a golden retriever. The air in her chest stops and she finds herself fingering the inhaler in her jacket pocket. Veronica pulls the car to the side of the road, the tires crunching over the berm's gravel. She turns off the engine and flicks on the four-ways, then steals a glance at the rearview mirror and sees the dog lying in their lane. Riley can't manage to look.

"Well, fuck. This is your fault, you know," Veronica says.

Riley struggles for air, pulls her inhaler from her jacket pocket.

Veronica grabs it right out of her hand and chucks it out the window. It bounces across the road and into the ditch. "Not now. You don't get to have an attack now. Godammit. I'm the one who gets to have an attack now."

Riley starts in on deep breaths, just the way her father always taught her. He used to make her practice every time she got an attack, making her go on a minute or two before he let her use the inhaler. He feared she'd build up a resistance to the Albuterol.

Veronica unbuckles her seatbelt and then Riley's too. She gets out of the car and goes around to the passenger's side. She grabs at Riley's wrists, tugging her out. "You can't just leave something like that in the middle of the road," she says.

"I know," Riley says.

"Well, we better get to it. When another car comes, it's going to be a messier job."

Hot tears burn at the back of Riley's throat.

"No crying. Not now. Maybe later, but not now."

Veronica goes to the dog and when she kneels to it and runs a hand over its head, Riley has to go too. There's not any blood in sight, and Riley's breath evens out. She puts her hand on the dog's neck, as if she could find a pulse there.

"Don't tell me you're doing what I think."

"I'm in this CPR class." If there were two things Riley could do for the rest of her life, it would be to save and be saved.

"No." Veronica tears Riley's hand away from the dog. "Godammit. You're such a dreamer. It's gone. It's dead. It isn't getting up again. If you want to imagine it in heaven, that's fine, but we have to get it off the road."

The dog's snout has some whitish hairs and Riley mumbles something out about it being old and maybe this being the right time for it to go.

"Don't put that on me," Veronica says. "Don't make me driving the right time for this dog to go. Nothing deserves that." She curls her arms under its middle and picks it up, pulling the dog against her chest. She bends backward with its weight while the dog's limp head tilts over her arm.

"I could help."

"No, I got this. You'd just end up dropping it. God knows it doesn't need that." She walks toward the car and when she gets to it, she asks Riley to open the back door.

"Seriously?"

"What? You thought I was going to leave it on the side of the road?"

"That's what people do. Someone will find it and bury it."

"And you have that sort of trust in the world? What about this: say someone does find it. Say Little Suzie and Bobby wake up, watch their Saturday cartoons, and then walk outside to find Rex here dead. What kind of Saturday morning is that?"

"I don't think the name Rex is really used anymore. I bet its name is more like Samson or something."

"Open the fuckin' door."

Riley does and Veronica lays the dog inside. "Look at those feet," she says. "Those are strong, gorgeous feet. Bet that thing has run all over this county." She rubs a hand over one of the paws, wiping some dirt from it, then heads to the trunk and pulls out a blanket. She runs her hand the length of the dog's spine, tucking the blanket around it.

Inside, Riley breathes deeply. She can smell the dog: its wet fur, the mud on its paws.

"Don't worry," Veronica says. "We'll still go to the clean-up. I wouldn't want you to miss that. Especially if a guy is involved." She wipes dog hair from her hooded sweatshirt and then starts the engine.

Riley glances over to the opposite ditch, where her inhaler somewhere lies, worms and beetles probably crawling all over it by now. "I should go look for my inhaler."

"Fuck it." Veronica pulls away from the berm. "This'll be the best thing you've done all year. Besides, guys do *not* think inhalers are cute."

Riley nods and lets the rap music pulse through her veins, breathing deeply enough that she smells the dog in every breath.

A few miles down the road, when a deer dashes out of a field of ragweed and across the road in front of them, Veronica quickly pumps the brakes while the deer runs off into the woods on the other side of the road. Her fingers shake over

the steering wheel. Riley puts a hand on Veronica's shoulder and can feel the vibrations run into her own body.

"Pull over," Riley says.

Veronica does. She lowers her head, her shoulders shaking.

"I could ride in the back with it," Riley says. "I could hold its head."

"It's already dead." Veronica stares off down the road.

"But still, maybe it'd help. Maybe the dog—"

"Just shut up!" Veronica wipes tears from her face and takes a deep breath. "We have to go back."

"To put the dog back?"

"No, for your inhaler. You're not dying on my account."

Riley nods and offers a weak smile, though inside she's sad in a way she wasn't even when she knew the dog was gone. For a moment, Veronica was the first person to dare to believe she might survive without the inhaler. Riley counts the yellow marks it takes for them to get back to the spot where the dog was hit, and after she scoops her inhaler from the ditch, she spends the rest of the ride to the lake wiping away the dirt that covers its surface with the sleeve of her jacket and then squirting hand sanitizer onto the inhaler and carefully scrubbing it away. When she gathers the courage to ask what they are going to do with the dog, Veronica just shakes her head.

After they pull into the park beside Lake Ontario, Veronica says they can't talk about the dog anymore. "You've got enough problems, kid. You don't need to be the girl who has a dead dog in the back of the car."

"Sure," Riley says, though she still worries what they're ever going to do with it.

"So where's the hunk?"

"Not here yet," Riley says, though he is. Dr. Felders is standing over by a large oak, wearing navy blue corduroy overalls and a gray thermal shirt. A red stocking cap sits atop his head. Riley knows this is for Jacques Cousteau, about whom he once spent an entire class talking off the cuff when one of the degenerates in the back asked who the hell he was. If Jacques Cousteau were still alive, he'd be getting fan mail from Dr. Felders.

They climb out of the car and join the meager group that has gathered, hoods up to combat the wind, at the lake's edge.

Veronica downs the last of her coffee. "A bunch of geeks is what this is," she says.

Dr. Felders begins to hand out plastic gloves and bags. "Glad to see you're here," he says to Riley, handing her a pair of gloves. He has that seven-houses smell and Riley can't think of anything to say to him before he shuffles on to hand gloves to the next person.

"That was weird," Veronica says. "I hate teacher talk. It's like they can't ever be honest, can't ever say: fuck this shit, it's cold as all hell and the lake's going to be dirty by this time next year anyway, thanks to the goddamn idiots who haven't figured out how to use trash cans."

"Shhh," Riley says. She can't let Mr. Felder catch her communicating with someone who doesn't appreciate a lake clean-up. "We're doing good."

Veronica laughs at her. "God must have laughed his ass off when he put us together as roommates. He probably sits up there watching you squirm every night. It's probably like his version of *Lost*."

Dr. Felders comes around with clipboards and Veronica gives him a glare.

"It's for keeping track of what you collect," he says. "There are categories already listed and you can add your own as well."

Veronica smiles and Riley tries to think of something to say before she starts in, but isn't quick enough. "Isn't it all one category," Veronica says. "Isn't it all just junk?"

"We're breaking it up," Dr. Felders says, pointing to the categories on her clipboard: food wrappers, beverage containers, clothing, cigarettes, shotgun shells, car parts, tires, toys. "This gives us an idea of what trash dominates. After we're done, we're going to weigh it all." He says this part with a smile and points to a scale under a pavilion. "We'll weigh one bag at a time and then add them all up. Hopefully we'll beat Lockport this year."

"I'm undecided on my major right now," Veronica says. "But if I decide to go ahead with psychology, can you be my first person to analyze?"

Dr. Felders is too pleased by this. He pushes his plastic-gloved hands into his pockets. "Of course," he says. "But bring a mug for your coffee next time. And add your cup to the trash when you're done."

Riley is scribbling onto the clipboard, trying to jot down the last sixteen cigarette butts, three McDonald's wrappers, and the bike tire Veronica failed to write down, when Veronica

tosses a condom onto the clipboard. Something green, something Riley chooses to think of as algae, clings to its inside.

Veronica smiles. “You know what that is, right?”

Riley knows. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when she dares to open her eyes, she catches Tony’s dick above the sheets, his penis a bright wand because of the glow-in-dark condoms Veronica buys.

“It sort of makes me wish Tony was here. What group are you going to put it in? Don’t short the condom. I spent ten minutes getting that out from between those rocks.” She points to the granite fill, working as an aid against bank erosion, that lines the lake’s shore.

“You didn’t get the coffee cup or that deflated soccer ball,” Riley says, pointing to the garbage sitting atop the rocks. She looks at the soccer ball because the condom is looking at her.

Veronica picks up the condom in her gloved hand and then slaps it down onto the clipboard, making some of the green liquid inside ooze out onto the sheet. “I was getting this,” she says, her nostrils beginning to flare, a sure sign she’s headed toward Don’t-fuck-with-me Veronica.

“Okay,” Riley says. Don’t-fuck-with-me Veronica knows Judo, carries a large bottle of pepper spray, and sometimes smokes.

Veronica grabs the clipboard and starts her own category: sexual paraphernalia. “It is a matter of opinion though, isn’t it?” She kicks at the large plastic bag that is three quarters full. “Some people would include cigarettes in that.” She is slow to drop the condom into the plastic bag and when she does, she watches it fall in between a waterlogged Burger King crown and pieces of a blue tarp. “I think I’ll handle the clipboard now,” Veronica says. “You can play fetch. I’ll be the scientist that marks down how well you play fetch.”

Riley agrees only because a condom, and the green liquid inside it, has touched the sheet atop the clipboard. She scrambles down onto the rocks, the wind tugging at the hood she has tied shut. The waves lap at the granite. She’s reaching for the leg of a doll—maybe even a Barbie—when she hears Veronica calling to her, telling Riley she’s going for a bathroom break. Riley turns around to look at her and catches Veronica tugging her cell phone out of her back pocket and pulling it to her ear.

Thirty-four cigarette butts, two shotgun shells, four cans, and one bra later, Veronica still hasn’t returned and Mr. Felder is calling to Riley: “Come help me out.”

He's about twenty meters down the shore and Riley wonders how she didn't notice him before. He's standing in waders, the water up to his waist and lapping at his waterproof overalls, threatening to work itself inside. His arms are in the water up to his elbows. He grins at her. "I've got something big," he says.

Riley doesn't remind him of the rule he established himself: *Don't go in the water. There are no lifeguards on duty. The water is cold. You could get hypothermia. There are riptides. You could die.* This is a good rule, with proper reasoning behind it, but Riley thinks she loves Dr. Felders and sometimes she allows herself fantasies with him: the two of them in Alaska, building an ice park for polar bears where the bears can slip down ice slides and run and play, despite the melting glaciers; the two of them discovering the secret to keeping the coral reef alive, not telling anyone, just diving again and again, swimming among fish of every color; the two of them blasting off in a spaceship, packets of seeds in their hands, ready to find out if life can be sustained on Mars—the place where they can kiss and curl up in a crater together because there is no one to tell them they can't, that students and professors aren't supposed to make love.

"I have an extra pair of waders in my car," he says, pointing toward the parking lot. "It's the one that smells like McDonald's. I run it on fast food grease."

Riley drops her bag of garbage. She heads for the car, easily detecting the one that smells like McDonald's. She finds the waders in the back and can't wait to climb inside their cool plastic. She slips off her shoes, leaving them in the trunk, and eases her way into the cool rubber boots. They're a bit big and have plenty of room for her feet to wander. She tightens the straps and then begins chugging her way back toward the shore, wondering if Dr. Felders has been inside this pair before or if this is just his extra. She would like to think that his body was once where hers is now.

Dr. Felders looks a bit paler when she finally returns to him. His lips are beginning to turn purple. His arms are still under water and the wind is still blowing.

"Maybe you should come out for a break," Riley says. She'd rather they sit on the beach together.

He grimaces. "Come on out. Slow now. The bottom isn't exactly even. I'm afraid if I let go of this, I won't be able to grab it again."

"What is it?" Riley steps into the water and while the plastic keeps the water out, its coldness still penetrates. Goose bumps run their way up her legs. The bottom of the lake is

rocky and though Riley feels extra geeky doing it, she holds her hands out at her sides to keep her balance.

"Can you do me a favor?" Dr. Felders asks when Riley is only feet from him. "Could you slide my glasses back up my nose a bit? They're slipping."

Riley reaches out a gloved hand and then thinks better of it. She slips off the plastic glove, the glove that has touched cigarette butts and chewed plastic and soggy cardboard. Then she reaches out her hand, gets a pointer on that bridge of his glasses, the lenses so thick she's surprised they haven't slipped off his face altogether, so thick she is sure they allow him to see things in a way no one else does, and slides them back up his nose, his eyes suddenly magnified—their dark green catching the sun in a way that makes them shine. She wishes to run a hand along his face, to see if she can feel the prickle of stubble or if Dr. Felders' skin is smooth, bare the way he fears Earth might one day be. He has lost his seven-houses smell for the scent of algae, brackish water, and sweat. She waits for his glasses to slip again so that her finger might be granted the privilege of once again hovering so close to his skin.

"Go ahead and reach your arms under," Dr. Felders says, nodding to the water where his own arms have disappeared.

A drop of Dr. Felders' spit lands on Riley's cheek and instead of wiping it away, she lets it evaporate. The water is cold and makes goose bumps run the length of Riley's arms and explode on her neck with such a fierceness it reminds her of the chicken pox she caught her senior year of high school, the red lumps rising on her neck—a reminder of how far behind she always was. There is not another person Riley would stick her arms into this water for, and she pushes them deeper, the water lapping at her armpits while her hands curl around cool splintering wood.

"What do you think it is?" she asks.

"Can't tell." The water is dark and undulates enough that it's hard to get a clear picture. "Have you got a good grip?"

"Yes." For now. The water is quickly numbing Riley's hands.

"We'll pull on three." Dr. Felders tightens his lips and squints. "One. Two. Three."

Riley doesn't exactly lift on three. She waits for Dr. Felders to lift a bit first, to do most of the work for her, though she tightens her lips too and squints, as if the narrowing of vision really does add to physical strength. Dr. Felders leans back while his elbows emerge from the surface of the water. His lips begin to shake and Riley wonders if it's from the exertion or just the cold. She really pulls now, trying to help him out. Pain prickles into her shoulders while the object begins to surface. It's a battered sheet of wood, snails clinging to its surface, and

there's more below. Its grandness frightens Riley, makes her think there's no way the two of them will ever get that thing out, and her grip slips a bit, allowing the wood to sink back under.

Dr. Felders grimaces. "Have you ever seen an elephant give birth?" he asks.

Riley shakes her head. She supposes he might tell her that what they are doing right now is sort of like elephant birth, that the process isn't inherently beautiful because of how large elephants are and how much work it takes, but that the beauty comes in looking back and seeing what emerged and remarking on the process taken to get there.

"Me neither," Dr. Felders says. "But I bet it hurts. And the way this world is headed, I probably never will see it."

Riley wonders if it's hypothermia talking. Dr. Felders isn't making sense. Someone is frantically waving from shore and Riley turns her head just enough to see that it's Veronica, finally back from her bathroom break.

"Hey," she calls. "Do you know what a metal toilet seat feels like on your ass in this weather? I think I left part of my skin behind. And these freaks are so fucking adamant about saving trees that there isn't a scrap of toilet paper."

Dr. Felders stares at Riley and she knows it's not for her, not about her hazel eyes perched behind thick lenses of her own, not about her soft rounded nose, or her cheeks that have turned red in the cold wind. It's about Veronica and her yelling, her inability to take this clean-up seriously.

"I don't really know her," Riley says.

Dr. Felders bites his lower lip and takes a step toward shore, dragging the object with him. Riley follows in an unsteady step of her own.

"Hey," Veronica calls. "Just 'cuz I'm not stupid enough to go in the water with you doesn't mean you can ignore me. If you're not coming back, if you're not going to fetch things for me to write on this lame-ass sheet, then I'm ditching you."

Riley doesn't have the energy to shout a response back to her. Her voice doesn't carry like Veronica's and she's putting everything she has into her curling her fingers around that damp wood and pulling with Dr. Felders. He begins to grunt a little bit, a low moaning that frightens Riley with its similarities to the groans Tony sometimes forms under the sheets. Riley hears a clanking from ashore and sees the clipboard bouncing off the granite and heading for the water. Dr. Felders is so lost in concentration Riley guesses he doesn't see it. She is thankful for this. Veronica is her ride back to school, but Riley supposes Dr. Felders just might give her a ride in his grease mobile, explaining to her how its engine runs. They might even drive by McDonald's so that he can show her how he fills it up.

While they pull the object toward shore, the water grows shallower and more of the object's body is revealed to them. It's an old wooden desk, drawers battered in by the waves, holes and cracks pounded into them, and they take a break to examine it. Riley tugs a drawer open and finds clams and mussels clinging to its inside. A small school of minnows swims out. "Maybe we ought to leave it," Riley says. She should be saying this for the clams, for the creatures that have made a home inside the desk, but she's really saying it for her. She's tired. And cold. She's shaking and wishes she had some hot chocolate, even if it did come in a Styrofoam cup.

"Think about how much this must weigh," Dr. Felders says. "Especially waterlogged. I think we're going to beat Lockport this year." He gets his hands around the desk again and waits for Riley to do the same. Together, they haul it toward shore, where a small crowd has formed and is encouraging them with claps muffled by gloves and soft cheers that slip out from behind scarves. Veronica's clipboard floats right past Riley and she pretends not to see it. The crowd adds energy to Dr. Felders' step and he begins pulling the desk in a way that allows Riley to become only an actor playing the part—tightening her lips, narrowing her eyes, holding on, but barely tugging at all. This acting is easy enough that Riley loses her concentration, tripping on the rocky lake bottom, tipping toward the cold green water enough that it streams into her waders before she is able to right herself. She hasn't gone under, but the water in her waders is cold and adds further weight to her already heavy boots. Her heart pounds.

Dr. Felders nearly has the desk ashore and Riley's absence hasn't slowed him any. He's dragging it along the rocky shore, members of the group stepping forward to help him out. She waits for him to turn around and notice her there, to notice what no one seems to have caught: that she dipped just enough for water to seep into her waders, that her lips are beginning to turn purple and that she can no longer feel her feet. If Dr. Felders takes time to note the Pyrenean Ibex extinction, surely he can notice her now, shaking with the initial signs of the hypothermia he warned her of just an hour ago. But he's talking with the other volunteers, who size the desk up and make guesses as to how much it weighs. A man with a gray beard says it might put the town up in the top ten clean-ups in the state. "We found a couple car tires too," he says. "That'll put us up there."

"I want to weigh it while it's still wet," Dr. Felders says. The crowd around him plunges their hands under the desk and together they carry it toward the pavilion where the scale sits. Bags filled with garbage have been piled beside it. In her waders, Riley trots along behind them, enjoying the rhythm of

rubber against ground, its dependability, even if it is holding cold water against her legs. The sloshing water makes her move slower than the rest and when she arrives at the pavilion, she stands just outside while they hoist the desk onto the scale and wait for a number to appear. The desk weighs ninety-six pounds and the crowd claps with a rejuvenated force, offering high fives and slaps on the back to Dr. Felders. Riley waits for him to turn and look for her, to stretch out a hand for a high five, because she was his partner in pulling it out, but he doesn't notice her at all—not her presence, not her waterlogged boots.

Riley doesn't plan on giving back the waders any time soon. She appreciates the durability of this rubber coating and begins plodding down the trail that lines the lake, looking for another spot to enter to the water and let the gentle waves lap at her legs. The boots scuff the pavement, sending vibrations up her legs that do nothing to warm her cold body. She decides to enter the water at one of the few sand beaches where she won't have to worry about balancing on granite fill. The wet sand sucks in the bottom of her rubber boots and makes walking more difficult, forcing her legs, already numb, to work even harder. When she's in up to her thighs, the boots go so deep in the sand, or maybe it's mud now, that she can't pull them out again. Instead, she pulls her legs out of the waders, one and then the other, stepping into the cold water. She begins to jog toward shore, her socks catching in the sand. Her feet can no longer feel the sand beneath them, only movement and pushing forward.

Riley collapses on the sand. She lies on her back. She can't feel her legs and this excites her more than it scares her because she has the feeling her entire body might soon become airborne, heading for the sky, where she might look down upon Dr. Felders and his motley crew, all of them making the final tally of the garbage brought in. It's too bad she couldn't have found something else to bring back to him, something so waterlogged it'd break the scale with its weight. It's too bad Veronica isn't still here and Riley couldn't go to the back of the car and bundle up the dog, tying the four corners of the blanket together around its body, and then offer it to Dr. Felders. The dog must weigh at least seventy pounds and somehow it doesn't seem so strange to say they might have found something like that in the water. Perhaps the dog could be what puts them over the top. Perhaps the dog could share in their victory. Dr. Felders would have to start a new category and Riley wonders what he would call it. Carcasses? Death? Maybe he'd just file the dog under miscellaneous.

In the water, the waders still stand, the gentle waves filling them, pushing them forward and then pulling them back. Riley sits up and squeezes her cold feet in her hands. Her shoes

are back in the trunk of Dr. Felders' grease mobile and she doesn't feel like walking past a crowd of people to get them, though she'll have to ask for a ride from someone if she ever wants to get back to her dorm. She rises from the sand while she still can, jams her hands into her coat pockets, and heads for the pavilion.

A woman in a red and white snowflake sweater stops her before she can get there. "Where are your shoes, honey? Why are you wet?" she asks, not waiting for an answer before she pushes a gloved hand against Riley's back. Her heat radiates even through the fleeced glove and Riley falls back into it, not able to say a word when the woman says, "We have to get you home. Have to get some dry clothes on your body. Weren't you here for the talk in the beginning? Didn't you hear about hypothermia? It works in mysterious ways," she says, guiding Riley toward the parking lot. "Usually by the time you're cold, it's too late. You have to be one step ahead of it. Have you got shoes somewhere, dear?"

"In the back of Dr. Felders' car," Riley says.

The woman bites her lower lip and shakes her head. "He's a different one, you know. You can't go running your car on McDonald's grease and not have the people in town think you're something else. Imagine what the world would smell like if everyone ran their car on grease. We do what we can, but there's only so much that can be considered reasonable. I think you just ought to get a new pair of shoes. They can't smell right by now."

Riley agrees only because it's easier than arguing and Dr. Felders' car is on the other side of the parking lot.

"Where do you live, honey?"

"On campus. In Thompson Hall."

"In the scholarship dorm?"

"Yes."

The woman smiles and claps her hands. "How good for you. We sure are proud of the bright ones this university brings in. Get in, dear, get in." She unlocks the car and climbs into the driver's seat.

Riley looks around the parking lot, trying to find Dr. Felders in the group of people heading for their cars. He might see her yet, might think to look for her now that the garbage is totaled. Maybe they beat Lockport. Maybe he will take her out to celebrate. He might at least ask for his waders back and they would have to go to the sand together and pull them out. Maybe she could tell him about the dog and he would know what to do with it, know of a special place to bury it, and they could bend to the dirt and dig together.

The pavilion is filled with full garbage bags, but she doesn't see him there either. She does spot Veronica's car in the

very back of the lot, far from the other cars, not where she parked this morning. She must have come back for Riley, remembered she didn't have a ride. Riley feels warmer already and thinks maybe she will tell Veronica about Dr. Felders, about the way she thinks she loves him against her better judgment, about the adventures she has planned for them in the future. Veronica will know what to say because she is experienced and understands things like this.

"Actually, I just spotted a friend," Riley says.

"You sure?" The woman looks disappointed, perhaps saddened she will no longer be able to tell her friends that she saved a college scholar from the cold waters and drove her home before hypothermia set in.

"Yeah," Riley says, heading toward Veronica's car, the blacktop rough through her socks. She thinks about how she might start off the conversation: *When did you know you could get in bed with Tony? Do you ever wish you hadn't? Isn't it funny the people we fall for?*

When she gets to the car, the windows are fogged, and familiar groans and cheers are coming from inside. Tony and Veronica are lying together on the backseat. The dog is nowhere in sight. The blacktop suddenly feels colder under Riley's socks and she turns to the place where the woman's car was parked, only to find it now gone. She takes in a deep breath of the cold air and catches the scent of French fries. Across the parking lot, Dr. Felders' car escapes down the park's exit ramp and she wishes she was in the passenger's seat beside him, sharing a large fry from McDonald's. Above her, seagulls fly in erratic arcs while the wind picks up, sending a new wave of goose bumps over her body.

Riley taps on the glass and waits.

Michael Martone

Contributor's Note

Michael Martone was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and went to the public school there, attending North Side High School during the years they took to renovate the old building. The construction went on all four years of Martone's time in high school and the students worked around the workers who closed first one wing of rooms then the next, sending classes looking for a new space or reclaiming a room now rewired or freshly painted or floored with new terrazzo. The electricity for the master clock in the principal's office had been cut early, and all the clocks in the hallways and classrooms found their own separate times. Most stopped. Some sped up, swept ceaselessly, or stuttered in place as if it was now impossible to move to the next second or the next, sticking with each tick, mesmerizing Martone with a cruel montage of what was now becoming his lost and wasted youth. The period bells, the commencement and dismissal bells, had quit ringing months ago, the space of time when the students changed classes marked in gritty silence. A rudimentary PA system had been jerry-rigged, tinny speakers and exposed wires, and each morning the Guidance Counselor squeaked that the official North Side time was whatever it was. Everyone set his or her watch, regulated for the rest of the day, shuffling through the debris and drop cloths in the work-light lit hallways. It was here Martone first studied chemistry in the 50-year-old laboratories on the 3rd floor east wing that would be the last to see repair. He still has his slide rule, Army surplus, in its leather case. The hairline cursor embedded in the sliding glass indicator, he realized, was a real hair. He learned to manipulate the contraption in the oversubscribed extra credit slide rule seminar after the regulation lab session. There, too, in the chemistry labs, he saw, for the first time, his teacher perform the Old Nassau clock reaction. He mixed the solutions in the big Pyrex beaker to first produce a pumpkin orange precipitate as a mercury compound settled out and then, after several seconds, the bright orange suddenly turned to a liquid lamp-black as the excess iodine left-over transmuted to starch and turned on its color, a black black curtain dropping instantly. The demonstration was meant to astound with its alchemy, and Martone was astounded, asking

to see again the chemical logic of it, how benign soluble concoctions created a product that became a new reactant that then was ready to react. He liked both the anticipation and the rapidity of the transformations, the visual demonstration of whole moles being stewed in their own molecular juices, the quick switch and then its double-cross. It was called a "clock" because of the predictable ticking of the bonding and unbonding that timed-out perfectly, a collection of ionic seconds spinning on their own internal clocks. This led to this and that to this. The equal sign is replaced by arrows in a chemical reaction, one thing after the other. Years later, when he was a senior in organic chemistry, Martone asked the teacher if he could, in his spare time, work on constructing a new clock reaction that would, this time, express itself in North Side High School's colors, red and white, not out of any school spirit but mainly out of an urge to tinker with the watch-works of cooked-up nuclei and electron shells. After all, the class he was taking spent its time knitting together long compounded chains of carbons and hydrogens and oxygens, matrices of esters and ethers, another kind of ticking, the proteins twisted into the worsted zipper of a gene undergoing mitosis, another two-step through time. In that lab, too, he set a girl's hair on fire with the Bunsen burner, the flame eating up the long straight strands of her long brown hair like a fuse, another illustration of time. The burned hair, turning to ash, flaked, crumbs of a rubber eraser, spilling to the floor as the stink of it, the hair burning, rose in almost visible solid cartoon waves of wavy stench, the glow of the actual burning peeling now in the nape of her neck, the instant chemical reaction of it, giving off its own unique rainbow of bright colors. They had been performing primitive, spectral analysis, igniting unknown compounds held in little wire loops over the lip of flame, reading the combustion's signature through the slit of a cheap prism tube. The tip of her hair sparked as Martone tipped the burner toward, what turned out to be, a sulfuric something or other. Martone damped down the crawling flicker with his hand, his fingers flouncing the hairs that wove themselves into a now ratted cap, a nest, and for a moment it seemed that the whole canopy would ignite, enriched by the addition of fresh air. Martone was left holding this halo of fire, a hat from hell, a melodrama of oxidation, when, just then, the teacher pulled them both into the emergency shower where they were doused and, just as suddenly, engulfed in wet smoke and sodden hairy ash. Martone never did find the combination of compounds to create the clock reaction in his school colors. He remembers pouring through old manuals his teacher gave him with pages of tables listing reactants and products and their shades of colors, valences and radicals, ions and elements, metals and

base. He wandered through the old laboratory's closets looking for odd specimens in ancient glass bottles stopped up with moldy cork or decaying rubber stoppers, the forgotten chemicals undergoing their own unsupervised and unrecorded experiments, reactions oxidizing into clumps of rusty rust, bleached stains, inert crystalline sweating salts, the paper labels foxing, the beakers mired in viscous goo, and the wood racks gnawed at by some now long gone acidic lick. Helping to clean out the closets in anticipation of the renovation, Martone garnered extra credit to offset the disappointment and possible average grade for his disappointing independent study. In the mess he found the apparatus used through the years to create the famous Old Nassau clock reactions for succeeding classes—the tinctures of iodine, the compounds of starch, the granules of potassium, and the etched graduated cylinders set to deliver the proper quantities of chemical ingredients for the demonstration of time all that time ago. Years later, Martone is on the phone to his classmate from those years whose hair he set on fire during an experiment meant to identify certain chemicals by the spectrum of light they emit when set on fire. Martone has taken to looking through his past lives, has found many of his former classmates by employing the emerging electronic technologies online. He lives now far away from Fort Wayne, in Alabama, and finds it difficult to return home for the sporadic reunions, and when he does, others from back then now live even farther away or seem to have disappeared altogether. He thinks of it as a reconstitution, as hydration, this telephoning, and admits that his efforts redoubled after the collapse of the towers in 2001. That collapse seemed to be a kind of boundary, a membrane, a demarcation as narrow and fine as the hair fused in glass on his slide rule, of before and after. He found her, the woman whose hair he set on fire in his high school chemistry lab, living in New York, teaching organic chemistry, of all things, at Columbia University there. The irony was not lost on them. She explained to him that she now was attempting to isolate low-molecular-weight chromium-binding substances in human urine. It had something to do with diabetes and insulin and iron in the blood. It was late at night and they had been talking on the phone for a while about the past and chemistry and what they had both been doing separately at the same time during all those years when suddenly Martone heard band music. It was past midnight. The music, even diminished by the telephone, was distinctively brassy and rhythmic, shrill and thumping. Martone identified it as "The Horse," a favorite of their own high school's pep band years before. "Oh that," she said. "It's Columbia's marching band. A tradition. They spontaneously appear on the night before the orgo final and march around the Upper West Side." No one will believe this,

Martone thinks. After all these years, no one will believe such coincidences of time and space. He learned long ago in the science classes of his high school that there were these things called constants. Gravity was one. The speed of light, he remembered. And time—time was constant, too.

Margaret McMullan

Mont Royal

The dinner was in the old part of Montreal where Molly could hear horses and carriages on the brick streets. The hostess lived alone in a home a furrier built in the early 1800s, the stone walls and the beams stripped now and exposed. When she and Ivan walked into the living room, everything was bathed in burgundy light, with a fire going in the big hearth, and she could smell meat and potatoes roasting in the oven.

Ivan was in town for a physics conference, and while there he wanted Molly to meet his son, Darko, which they had done earlier that day. Ivan was better dressed than most academics, because he was European. He was a tall man with graying hair, dark eyes and a beautiful Slavic accent that transformed her name into something sweet and edible. Molly wore a slim, black dress with kitten-heeled pumps, and she had put her hair up in a snood. Ivan smiled every time he looked at her from across the room.

Over the rich dinner, Molly sat beside the hostess, a clothing designer named Cassandra with curly red hair who wore a green strapless dress, highlighting her muscular neck and shoulders. Cassandra told Molly she was from Alberta. She had just come back from Mongolia, and she had swiped her designing ideas that season from Mongolian armor. “I was in the museums there, and it suddenly occurred to me. Put two spaghetti straps on all that hammered gold, and boom, you’ve got a summer shift,” she said.

When the torte came drizzled with white chocolate, Molly was drunk enough to tell Cassandra all her woes about the Mississippi Gulf Coast which had been destroyed by the hurricane. “When you see the chaos up-close, when you see homes and gardens blown apart like that,” Molly said, dizzy with the thought, “it just leaves you breathless. Who knows when something can just blow us all away.”

Even though she spent her growing-up years in Lubbock, Molly rarely told people she was from Texas. She had spent the best summers of her life vacationing or living on the coast of Mississippi with her parents, friends, and later her ex-husband, and the watery shell and shrimp memories were so

strong, she felt she was more from there, born of the Sound, straight into the sand.

Just before hurricane season, she had put a down payment on the gulf coast property next to her parents' home. She hadn't told anybody this, not even her ex-husband. It was to be a surprise, a gift to her parents, her son, herself. Selling the Chicago condo with all the memories of her first bad marriage and moving down there to Pass Christian, Mississippi was going to be her second chance to become a better mother, a better daughter, a happier person. But then, in Chicago, when her son Jake showed her a satellite picture of the hurricane in the paper, she could only stare speechless at the giant destructive gyre of storm clouds swirling around the Gulf of Mexico.

"Is Molly telling you that her beloved town of Pass Christian is gone?" Ivan asked, standing behind Cassandra. He felt comfortable enough in this woman's home to pour wine for the guests. "My own country disappeared to become Serbia and Montenegro. We are both now orphans, made for each other. " He kissed Molly on the cheek and moved to pour for the next guest.

"I can't help but envy your pain," Cassandra said. "Ivan lost his childhood home too. This is what first drew me to him."

Molly smeared the white chocolate drizzle around and took a bite of cake. She was drinking and crying too much lately, comforting herself with too many sweets.

Whenever Molly spoke of the hurricane, she realized how wrong it all came out. It hadn't been The Katrina War. This was a natural disaster with a woman's name and slow government response. Get over it, she told herself over and over. For a while she even felt important, caught up in such a newsworthy event. When "her hurricane" made the covers of magazines, she felt as though she had made the covers. For a while, she couldn't stop talking about the destruction and the debris she had seen. After the storm, the coast really *did* look like those old images of Hiroshima after the bomb, and she really had been in danger when she went down there. But back in Chicago, while her friends moved on to talk about charity auctions, ski vacations, and the Middle East, Molly's mind was fixed on the unmoving pile of rubble that was once her paradise.

"Very compelling," Cassandra said, looking at Molly's scrawny shoulders and arms. "My work needs more suffering. All those things in the hurricane washed and made different now, they'll have a Katrina patina, like you."

Molly sniffed and stared at Cassandra.

"It's clever, isn't it." She brushed aside some of the red hair that had uncoiled down her forehead. "I'll have to use that somehow."

Molly's cell phone rang inside her purse. She recognized her mother's number and turned off the ringer. The rest of the table was complaining about the Bushes and the prime minister. Someone tried to recall something Khrushchev once said.

"Now *there* was a memorable tyrant," Ivan said, making them all laugh.

They were a mix of academics and artists—a gathering that shrank as the evening went on, evolving into a drunken, morose circle in the end. When he left Yugoslavia after the conflict, Ivan had attained Canadian citizenship, then later landed his faculty position at the University of Chicago. He traveled to Montreal at least four times a year to visit his friends and his son, who was in his last year at McGill. Molly wondered why Ivan made such a big deal out of Montreal. Sure, there were the great restaurants and the tiny museums with OK paintings of ice cutters, people gathering seaweed, and early settlers being attacked by wolves, but really, why keep coming back?

After too much wine, Cassandra kept saying *fucked up* so frequently Molly began to feel dizzy and unable to hear anything correctly. She thought one man said *insulting* instead of *consulting* financial services. She was ready to go, but Ivan was not. She reminded him they had to get up early, that she was to meet up with Darko for tennis.

"My name has nothing to do with being dark," Darko had said to Molly over lunch that afternoon. "It's a derivative from the Slavic *dar*, meaning *gift*." He had smiled when he said the word *gift*. He was lovely and tall with brown eyes and long ears, like his father's.

At lunch, Ivan was consumed by an argument he'd had with his departmental chair before he and Molly left Chicago. His chair wanted Ivan to slow down with his scholarly work and focus more on his teaching. "Can you imagine?" Ivan had said, unable to touch his sandwich. "He could have another Nobel on his faculty."

"Maybe your students miss you, Dad."

Ivan said something in Slavic to Darko, and then he said something in French. The three grew quiet as they sipped coffee. Molly and Ivan had agreed that they both needed a certain amount of freedom. She had also learned not to say just anything that occurred to her. Ivan sometimes said she sounded like one of his students, which really meant one of the students he did not prefer. He was careful never to say that he hated his students and teaching. Molly knew that Ivan was

grateful for teaching because it allowed him to live and conduct his research in the United States.

"*Ce n'est pas la meme chose*," Ivan said to his son, Darko. It was the only thing Molly understood. *It's not the same thing*.

After he had his final drink, Ivan finally took Molly back to the apartment. She listened to her messages. Her mother and Jake had called. They were learning the violin together and had taken to calling and leaving songs on her voicemail, short ditties that made her feel sad and guilty.

After the hurricane destroyed her parents' home, Molly asked them to come to Chicago to live with her and Jake. When they came, Molly left, first to go to Mississippi for two weeks to see what was left of her property, and then to perhaps salvage what she could from her parents' home. When she saw her son's first bed, the wrought iron twisted and mangled in the branches of a Live Oak, she couldn't stop crying. The water had hollowed out both houses, and the walls were barely standing. The furniture that had so many intimate associations and confidential histories, all of it was either gone or destroyed, and with these things, it felt as though both her past and future were wiped out as well.

When Molly returned to Chicago, she spent most all her time with Ivan, at his place on 59th, where his bedroom window looked out onto the roof of the Museum of Science and Industry, its dome a breast, the building itself a relic.

Then Molly left again, this time with Ivan to another country. Her parents could look after Jake. He was in the fifth grade now, a big boy. She begged her mother to understand. Her mother had asked only, "Why?" and "Are you sure about him?" then finally she nodded and suggested that Molly bring some nice perfume and a scarf.

At last Molly and Ivan were together again in bed. While they were in Montreal, they stayed in Ivan's spare, black and white, brushed stainless steel one-bedroom apartment that he sublet during the peak seasons. It was September, off-season in Montreal, still hurricane season on the coast.

"Tell me formulas," she said, stifling a hiccup. He laughed, but he began to recite as though the numbers, quotients, fractions, sines and cosines were lines of poetry. Tipsy but sure of himself, he whispered to Molly about her delta, the alluvial Delta of the south, and his mathematical delta, a variable, a function, a finite increment.

"Nothing," Ivan murmured, kissing her neck and her breasts. "No levees can hold me back."

When he was on top of her, his whole mouth covered hers, and she felt as though he were filling her back up with air. She was a punctured beach ball and now he was springing her

back to life again to become mobile, airborne even, and elevated. Buoyed by Ivan, she floated.

While Ivan delivered his paper on the Non-Abelian tensor product of two Engel groups of rank "n," Molly and Darko played tennis at Jarry Park. It was an unusually warm fall and they played outside in sweatshirts and shorts on clay courts and the green sand stuck to the backs of their legs. Molly had not played in years, but she was still in shape from all the swimming, and whatever ball she couldn't hit, she at least chased down, sliding across the clay, making Darko laugh.

She was the first to ask to stop, thinking she might have an inner ear imbalance because again she felt light-headed and woozy. For a moment she thought of a FEMA tent she had seen on the coast. Outside the tent, a hand-lettered cardboard sign stayed propped on a rusty metal folding chair, reading *Free Medical, 9-5*. Darko fetched cold water and steered Molly to a nearby picnic bench inside a gazebo, and as she got her balance back, Darko talked about his studies with insects. The smell of spun sugar hung in the air.

"It's interesting that after all you and your father went through, neither one of you went into politics or even economics," she said.

"After all that we went through, there was no way in hell we were going into politics or economics. We saw politics lead to genocide and we saw that everybody, our leaders and their men, got away with murder." Molly watched five old men playing bocce and a young woman running her dogs.

"I started with water mites before I moved on to periodical cicadas," Darko said, leaning back on the picnic bench, crossing his legs at the ankles. "The broods that interest me most are in your American southern states."

They took the metro to the Botanical Gardens where there was an Insectarium. They saw Mexican Darkling beetles made into living jewelry, brooches called Ma'Kech that crawled around on gold leashes pinned to women's dresses, living sometimes up to eighteen months. They saw a necklace made out of green beetles, all of them dead, and stag and rhinoceros beetles turned into pets. Later, as they walked around the grounds outside, the beautiful gardens made Molly long for the coast house she'd hoped to live in all over again. She wrote down the names of her favorite blooming perennials using Darko's pen and paper: Perovskia Russian Sage, Delphinium Belladonna, Aquilegia Vulgaris in Clementine Blue, and Baptisia Starlite Prairieblues.

They had lunch in the Garden Restaurant and they each drank wine. She was on vacation, after all. She heard Christmas

music somewhere, though it wasn't even Thanksgiving. Young people were climbing a fake wall nearby. The girls were rigged in rope climbing harnesses that reminded Molly of a scene from an old porn movie she had seen with her ex-husband.

Sitting across the table from her, Darko smelled of warm air and suntan lotion, nothing like Ivan. She missed being near the water. She was happiest around water.

When her cell phone rang, Darko ordered more wine. Molly listened to the violin jig on the other end of the line, and she broke in to interrupt the song.

"Jake? Jake? Is that you?" Molly smiled at Darko as she spoke to her son, listening to what he said about school, violin lessons, and math. She watched a little girl at another table stand up and press her face into her mother's hip. Jake had never done anything like that. From the time he could walk, her son had always been able to stand alone. People told her this kind of independence was good. Molly impressed herself with her son's ability to cope so that she would feel less guilty about leaving him in Chicago with his homeless grandparents.

"Can I talk with your grandmother?"

Molly thought about her mother standing there reaching for the phone, her lavender blue, holier-than-thou eyes, telling her, but not *saying*, she was a terrible mother and daughter too, just as she had been a terrible wife. Molly had never been close to her mother because she felt she was nothing like her mother and that she had been nothing but a disappointment turning into this daughter with no career and now no husband.

"Hi, Mom?" Molly winked at Darko. He poured her wine.

"Molly." Her mother's voice sounded so far away. "What are you doing? You can't keep running away like this. Your father. He's not well, and you being away only makes him more upset."

"What's wrong with Dad?"

"He's just not himself. He sits in front of the television and watches all the awful news," her mother said. "And now he's worried about you."

"Mom, I'm fine. This is just what I needed. Really. Would you tell Dad that? I'm going to be staying here a while longer." She felt like she was sixteen again, asking to stay longer at the party. Molly could hear herself as she spoke, too, the slow drawl coming on.

Maybe here in Montreal, after being away, she was finally becoming a woman of the south again. The women she knew in Mississippi still sprayed their hair, still wore a lot of make up and dressed, really dressed, for everything, especially lunch. And yet, they never really did anything northerners considered valuable—they endured, plugged on, so why wasn't that enough? The night of the hurricane, one mother saved her

baby boy by floating him in a Tupperware bowl. Another woman Molly knew survived three days on a bag of peeled shrimp she cooked on a hubcap. So what if there were no Marie Curies coming out of her home state, maybe there would be something else.

After the phone call, Molly had more wine and two slices of pie. She asked Darko about his girlfriends. He told amusing date stories, and then, he said, his last girlfriend asked him to piss on her, which he did, and which, he said, the girl had liked.

"No thank you," Molly said. "For future reference."

It was a term her ex-husband had used ages ago, when they had just finished making love on the beach in front of what she hoped would be her future home, not yet destroyed then, on the coast. He told her she should remember how much she liked doing it outdoors. She asked why. "For future reference," he had said, spoiling the moment, and now, all these years later, sitting with Darko in Montreal, Molly saw that her husband had been preparing her for their eventual divorce. They had married in a predictable way, after he'd earned his MBA, and they had both been so eager to register for the silver and china and *stuff* that would surely enable them to get on with the obvious, foreseeable success of their lives. But by saying *future reference,* wasn't he suggesting that he was not to be her future partner in some future sex on some future beach in his future life? Wasn't he thinking beyond her?

Darko sat now across the table from Molly, studying her, smiling, tracing the rim of his glass with his middle finger, trying to appear older than his years. Molly could tell he too was considering the *future* of her *reference*.

He was a beautiful young man, strong and healthy. She was forty-nine years old, flat chested, and lean. She managed her gray hair with frequent and regular hair colorings, and she still had all her parts, inside and out. She still wanted, and she wanted to see. She wanted to see if she could still get whatever she wanted.

Future reference? Why had she said this? It was wrong on so many levels.

She was setting herself up. She knew this, right then. Making her own bed. The awaiting catastrophe in her relationship with Ivan would be all her own doing. She had seen her own marriage crumble, her parents' home gone, and her future plans for a new life blown away. There she sat in another country without a plan, out of balance, off-center, and free to do as she pleased. Was this her way of seeing just how damaged she could get?

"Edward Wilson is speaking at the university," Darko said as they started back to the Metro. Her legs and back felt

stiff from sitting so long. “He’s the most amazing entomologist and chief bug man of all time. He’s southern, too.”

Darko put his arm around Molly’s waist, resting his hand on her hipbone. The move made her feel young and slim. “Or we could just skip it,” he said.

Ivan’s paper was very well received. That night, over dinner, he told Molly that his colleagues from all over the globe toasted him at the reception, and later a renowned scholar asked if his university journal could publish the paper.

Molly held up her water glass. “To Ivan Banovic.”

“Perhaps I should hold out for another offer, a better offer,” he said, thinking into his glass.

“Best to take this one while you can,” she said. Her words came out flat, but Ivan didn’t seem to notice. He was going on now about the Engel group, explaining to her that a set can be numbers or letters with certain properties and that two Engel groups can have special properties. She stopped trying to understand.

She was tired and her head hurt from all the wine she and Darko had drunk that afternoon. At first it had been sweet and different. She called him *baby* and *sugar* and all the rest. *Close your eyes, baby. Open your mouth, sugar.* But then he rolled her around this way and that, using her as a prop for some movie going in his mind. She supposed she should have expected this. Why was it so easy to become a prop in other people’s lives? He pressed hard into her and she disappeared, swallowed whole and still alive like Jonah inside the whale, except that afterwards she felt as though she had been spat out, pissed upon, and altogether deflated.

It was the sweet love she missed most. And now she was getting along in years. That was what she felt most now, her age. Does all sweetness have to go away with age? Afterwards, lying in Darko’s ridiculously narrow bed, she thought of the gem-colored leashed beetles she had seen that day, manacled, poked, threaded through, and made into accessories.

“Tomorrow I want to take you up Mont Royal,” Ivan said. He was feeling strong and confidant, his English elegant and sure. “We’ll have breakfast with Darko, then hike up.”

“I think I’ll skip breakfast,” she said. Ivan tilted his head.

“I thought you liked Darko.”

“I don’t need to be eating so much.” She smiled, patting her tummy.

“Then he and I will meet up alone.”

“Good.”

“Father and son.”

"Yes." She took a deep breath, and decided to begin drinking again, after all. "I'll meet you at the foot and we can hike up together," she said.

Molly, Ivan, and Darko circled the Mont's summit, without talking, pretending to take in the view of Beaver Lake and downtown Montreal. They watched couples and families taking pictures of the views and each other, then slowly walking past the winged statue and into the chalet to get their bags of chips, sodas, or hot chocolate. None of them had said a word on the hike up the Mont. It had turned cold overnight.

"An American designed this," Darko said, reading Molly's guidebook. "Olmstead. The same guy who did Central Park."

Ivan was pacing. Molly stood near the ledge, staring out at the tops of trees and buildings.

"*The lush forest was badly damaged by the Ice Storm of 1998,*" Darko read. "*It has since largely recovered.*"

"You think you are only one to lie and cheat?" Ivan said at last to Molly. "You think you are only free one here?" Since that morning, his English began to break up. Darko stood beside Molly. He held her arm.

"Please," she said. "Stop."

"Did you know?" Ivan said, pacing in front of them. "Did you know that Cassandra is my other mistress? My Canadian woman?"

"That clothes designer? The redhead?" She tried to recall Cassandra, the woman who said *Katrina Patina*. She remembered the shoulders and the green dress. She couldn't tell if Ivan was telling the truth.

Darko said quietly, "My father. He's not a nice man."

Molly wondered if Darko had just come out and told his father that morning, or if Ivan simply knew when he saw Darko. Or maybe Ivan knew when he saw her.

She faced Ivan. "I don't know what else to say, Ivan. I thought we had agreed not to grow attached."

"You sicken me. You and your hurricane and your petty problems. A little trouble and you cry, *Wa wa wa, where is Mommy?* You have not seen war or bloodshed. You have not watched family members butchered."

"I can't stand when he does this," Darko said. Standing next to Darko, Molly felt as though she were coming home late from a date, getting yelled at by a parent.

"I survived ten years of the Yugoslav Wars and no one even remembers them," Ivan said. "You Americans, so wrapped up in your 9/11 and your Katrina."

"Ivan, please."

"If it doesn't happen to American, it doesn't count to American." Ivan stopped, stepping aside to allow a hiker to snap a picture and pass.

Molly and Darko were standing so close to the edge. Ivan came close first to Darko. He jabbed his finger into Darko's chest and whispered something in Czech. Darko lowered his head, then stepped away, milling around the winged statue.

Ivan's lips touched Molly's cheek and ear, and his breath was hot.

"My son?" He spit at her feet. "You two deserve each other."

He talked fast and in Czech. She stood leaning back, trying hard to keep her footing. If she fell to her death then and there, she realized how ridiculous her life would have been, how embarrassing, how there would be nothing to say or show for it.

"What is your awful American expression?" he said, his face red and sweaty. "Grow up, Molly Zimmer."

He looked at her, and then stepped back. He took his jacket off and draped it over his shoulders like a cape. "You find your own way back down. You don't have to do anything. You can do as you like. I have important work."

Nauseous with guilt, she watched him leave, his broad shoulders moving as his legs moved. He was so sure of his direction, and only moments ago seemed to have lost control. He was leaving her, more handsome than ever.

Darko came to her like some shy schoolboy. He held out her guidebook, which she took. He kissed her once, then twice on the cheek, and he walked away, going the opposite direction of his father's path.

What had she done? How could she right this? For an instant she recalled pulling off embroidered pillows, hand-stitched linens, and books caught, twisted, or impaled on a neighbor's wrought iron picket fence after the hurricane, as if unstabbing and untangling them would make a bit of difference in all that damage. Some messes can't be undone. How would she clean up her own life after this, at her age?

She looked around at other hikers and the view. How would she ever get off this mountain? The hike up had been no trouble. Getting down and finding her way back would be the hard part. She thought it better not to follow either Ivan or Darko. Maybe that was her first mistake. She went another way altogether, thinking all the paths led down anyway. One path led to another and then to another until at last she grew clammy and exasperated.

This was not it. This was not it at all. She had gotten it all wrong. This path let out towards the schools. And this path led up again towards the hill with no view. Where was the path

with the view? Where was the one that led her back to where she started? Where was the one with the giant cross, the one placed there to fulfill a vow when the founder of Montreal prayed to the Virgin Mary to stop a disastrous flood?

Fewer and fewer hikers passed, and she regretted that she had not asked for directions. It was getting cold and late and she was hungry. She slid on mud and wet leaves, then slipped and fell, rolling down a hill towards a small cliff, stopping herself just in time to look around and reconsider her boundaries. Below her was a kind of canyon on what felt like the edge of everything.

She saw her life as in a movie reel: she saw herself consuming newspapers, face creams, pasta, sweets, TV, pantyhose, and men, and she saw herself seated in the background in cafes, far away and removed from the main scenes, the main events. She had missed more than the hurricane—she had missed her marriage, her son, and time with her mother. She felt both betrayed and guilty of betrayal, but she wasn't sure at all how to right anything. Her cell phone rang inside her backpack and she answered it, laughing, feeling at once both lost and found. She heard the violin music on the line, the quirky, jerky jig. "Jake? Mom? Oh, Mom."

"Are you crying?"

"No," she said, crying. It sickened Molly to think of her mother and son practicing their notes on the violin, hardening their tender fingertips for a ditty to play for her while she had been doing what she had been doing.

"I think I know what you're going through," her mother said.

Molly wanted to yell out *No, you don't. You have no idea what I'm going through or what kind of wreck I am,* but she stopped herself and said, "Oh, Mom. It's so great that you and Jake are learning together."

"He's a wonderful boy," her mother said. "He reminds me of you, Molly. We're having such a nice time. But come home. We miss you." She heard static, and then, "I love you."

"Mom? Jake? Can you hear me?" She heard her mother say something like *swallowtail*, and then the connection went bad and they were cut off entirely.

The air smelled of wet leaves and damp cement. She listened to a bird say over and over what sounded like *virtue virtue virtue*.

Years later, Molly would say everything had changed for her. She had not been in Chicago that night, the night her mother died of heart failure, but at the same time she had been very much with her. There on the edge, no bell went off, no

light bulb, but Molly's memory of those moments on the Mont remained with her, though some of the details would change, and through the years, she would recall some images more than others. She would point to this moment later, after the funeral, and during the drive back down south, and she would say that everything had changed for her on the Mont, right after she spoke to her mother.

Her shins were scraped and bleeding. She dabbed at the cuts with a gold, almost transparent leaf. Her son had learned to roller skate by falling and scraping his knees, only to get back up and start all over. She herself had taught him to swim, what she thought now might be her only gift to him. She taught him early because she knew he would be around water all his life. She wanted water to make her son as happy as it had made her. In the water, she had only to hold his head, telling him to lean back, his body would know what to do, and when it did, his legs and torso magically floating to the surface, she heard him laugh, saying *Ha!*

She stood up then and brushed away the dirt and debris from her jeans. She put her cell phone back into her bag, and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Smoothing her hair into a ponytail, she stood and surveyed what was before her, looking for the way. Then she set forth and began her descent on yet another hidden footpath, thinking of her mother and her son, winding her way down the Mont, through the forest.

Bryan Furuness

Portrait of Lucifer as a Young Man

Lucifer's father was a portrait painter for hire. If you mailed him a photograph and a check for four hundred dollars, he would paint your likeness in dark, smoky oils. Not a bad deal for a vintage ego trip and the surest way to make new money look old. It was the nineteen-eighties. His business boomed.

He wasn't the world's greatest portrait painter, truth be told, but his clients didn't complain, and he loved the work. Loved it so much, in fact, that when he was finished with paying jobs for the day, he liked to paint Hoosiers of guttering fame—men like Hoagy Carmichael or Booth Tarkington, men whose names rang a faint bell, but you weren't sure why, though you thought they might have pitched for the Cubs or served in your grandfather's platoon.

The idea behind these unpaid portraits was to revive some of the subjects' former fame, but since no museum or gallery had commissioned them (or would accept them, even as donations), they ended up lining the living room wall in rows, a jury box of befuddled uncles.

Growing up, Lucifer thought portraits were ridiculous, and that his father's clients were shallow and stupid. But around the time of his twelfth birthday, curiosity began to gnaw at him. If his father could make a grain dealer look like a university president, how dignified would Lucifer look in oil?

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough," his father said. "But it won't be from me. You'll be so famous you won't need a shlub like me to boost your image."

This wasn't your standard case of a doting father with high hopes for his boy. Lucifer was lousy with talent, and lousy at hiding it. A lot of people thought he was going to make it big. Some even hoped for it. What was he good at? Everything. By the time he was ten, he could whip his father in the Jeopardy Play-at-Home game. At his fifth-grade graduation ceremony, Lucifer gave such a stirring delivery of Tennyson's "Ulysses" that the entire crowd stood up in the bleachers; no one could say why. In gymnastics, he could whirl his body around the pommel horse so fast that his legs blurred into a propeller, but the real marvel was that none of the other boys in school made

fun of him for it. Lucifer was electromagnetic, and fame seemed to be flying toward him.

What he didn't know—what his father didn't know either—was how famous he would become, and for what. But they were about to get a hint.

His father tried to tell him no, but Lucifer wheedled. He cajoled. He reasoned, issued mild and veiled threats, promised rewards, posed leading questions to draw his father into a minefield of rhetorical traps and trip wires of guilt. The boy did not (ever) beg, but he employed every other form of verbal persuasion known to man, and a few new ones besides. His approach wasn't smooth yet, but he was persistent. Finally, on the third afternoon, when he sensed that his father would agree to anything to stop the noise, he closed the deal.

"Look," said Lucifer, stroking his bare lip. "No moustache."

Moustaches were the bane of his father's work. His portraits were usually decent until he could no longer put off the moustache (there was always a moustache—the kind of man who commissions a portrait is never clean-shaven), and then his subject would look like he'd somehow trapped a caterpillar between lip and nose, and was now waiting, slightly cross-eyed with fear, for animal control to arrive.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, sit down," his father said. "Let's get this over with."

Lucifer arranged himself on a chair while his father set up the easel in the living room. Usually his father whistled *Peter and the Wolf* as he painted, but today his whistle came out thin and shrill, and after a few minutes he fell silent. Now and then he'd make a brushstroke, but mostly he frowned at the canvas and tapped the end of the brush against his chin. "Hold still," he said several times, though he was the only one fidgeting.

After a few agonizing hours, he plucked the canvas off the easel. "Forget it," he said. "If you want a portrait so bad, we'll call Peter Muntz. He does kids."

"Show me what you got," said Lucifer.

His father looked at it again. "Nah, I'm just going to get rid of it."

Lucifer stepped toward him. "Show me."

"I'm not used to working with live models. Too many . . . dimensions."

But when Lucifer took hold of the portrait, his father let go of it with a sigh. The boy was going to get his way eventually, so why fight him?

At first glance, Lucifer didn't see the problem. It looked like him, all right. Maybe he looked a little older than eleven,

but that might have been because of the brown suit he'd put on for the painting.

But his face—it *was* a little long. And the way his head tilted down while his eyes looked up expectantly . . . the boy in the painting looked as though he had been amused a moment earlier, but was not any longer. He looked like he was about to say: *Where's the money?* Or: *I'm waiting*.

Lucifer began to understand why his father had kept squirming. The portrait put the viewer on the spot. Looking at it, you felt like a laugh had sprouted and died in your throat.

Lucifer put it back on the easel, tried a joke. "Put a moustache on it."

His father dabbed his brush in the blackest paint and drew a thin cartoonish moustache, complete with big swirling curls. Lucifer laughed, so his father added a sharp little goatee in four rough lines. "Horns," said Lucifer, and watched a pair of goat horns appear on his forehead.

They took turns then, adding wicked black eyebrows and a weird serpent tail and a forked tongue, each of them forcing out a puttering laugh at every embellishment, so the other would know that this was hilarious, a mere mistake, some fun, not something that scared the hell out of them both.

Victoria Patterson

The First and Second Time

Rosie and her father sat at a picnic table facing a man-made pond in Tee Winkle Park. Earlier, he'd watched her tennis match at the high school and she still wore her uniform. The ducks waddled to the pond, dunked their feet, and then floated across the water's surface, creating ripples. This safe, generic park was his preferred site for Big Talks.

"Your body is a temple," he said, leaning forward with his hands pressed together, fingers creating a steeple; she thought he looked sincere. They were polite and reserved in each other's company. "And your job is to stay a virgin for that one special man you will marry." His face came up, punctuating his declaration with a steady gaze. She read the look of disappointment in his eyes, and he must've seen it in hers—they both looked away. Two Sundays ago, after a church service, he'd given her a painfully comprehensive version of this same monologue, complete with Bible passages endorsing his position, and he appeared to be making one last abbreviated attempt.

Rosie was fifteen, and her sexual experience consisted of kissing and fondling (buffered by clothing), but she was on fire with curiosity. She'd learned about sex through word of mouth and the occasional *Playboy*. As a child, she'd invented "Baby," whereby she'd powdered and diapered—with a dishtowel—a fellow male playmate's "private area" and then the procedure was reciprocated. When she got her period at twelve, her mother had a sketchy "sex talk" with her, because she was "officially a woman." And although she was aware of the shame and disgrace that her mother's affair had wrought, she was also aware of the payoffs: "Sex can be wonderful," her mother had told her, "if it's with the right person." But in her observation, men had power, and it appeared that the most power women had was through their ability to obtain men.

And how could she be made for just one man? She wanted options. Grandma Dot had been married forever to Grandpa, and all that did was ensure her a life of cooking, cleaning, and serving. Grandma Dot, while ironing one of Grandpa's shirts, had even said, "Don't ever be like me."

Her father extracted a cracker package from the side pocket of his jacket. He fiddled with the wrapper, breaking a saltine and throwing the pieces on the grass near his feet. “Why does everything have to change,” he said in an uncharacteristic flare of self-pity, shaking his head, “when all I want is for things to stay the same?”

A wave of tenderness swept over her: he would often tell her nostalgic stories about the fifties, and she knew that what he craved was simplicity, clear answers, what she imagined as men coming home from work wearing pressed slacks and ties, briefcases at their sides, their wives in flowered dresses with aprons, cocktails in their hands, waiting by the front doors. Qualities that he had successfully spent his life burying were already beginning to bloom in her, namely defiance.

“It’s okay,” she said.

The ducks approached cautiously, waddling in a roundabout way to the cracker pieces, eyeing them, making grunting noises—not quack quack—more like unngh unngh. In the distance, people walked dogs and rode bicycles. There was the pong sound of tennis balls from nearby courts.

She saw an old wisp of a man stooped in a wheelchair, blanket across his lap. A brown-skinned woman stood behind him with her hands at the wheelchair. They were on the other side of the pond, but she could see the man was smoking a fat cigar—puffs of hazy smoke.

“What a shame,” her father said, squinting in the same direction. “He shouldn’t be smoking.” He looked at Rosie for confirmation, but she imagined the caretaker allowing the man this final indulgence, and her father stared down at his topsiders.

She had a sinking feeling. If only she could be like Kristen Johnson. It was a recurring yearning, but a fundamental impossibility. And besides, she didn’t really want to be Kristen Johnson; she just longed to please her father. The Johnsons were her father’s friends. Kristen Johnson was demure with blonde hair and blue eyes, near Rosie’s age, and her father always compared Kristen to her—i.e. Kristen Johnson is a cheerleader. Kristen Johnson is in the church choir. Kristen Johnson is saving herself for marriage. Kristen Johnson is the leader of her Bible study group. Her father would point Kristen out in the choir. “There’s Kristen. Do you see her?” “I see her,” she would say, watching Kristen’s pink mouth open in song, hands crossed modestly at her front, and she would hate Kristen for being the daughter her father would never have.

Rosie had once been Daddy's little princess. Before the divorce, her father had slept in the guest room on the foldout sofa bed. Above the sofa was a crudely drawn picture of ice skaters. Her room was next to this room, and often her father would climb into her bed, on top of her beige silk comforter.

He would fall asleep easily. She never got accustomed to having her father's adult-size body in her bed, and she would not sleep. It made her feel weird, as if she was the wife and not the daughter, but she would let him stay because she knew he was desperately lonely.

She would become hyper-aware of his breathing, the way it would develop into a snore, counting the seconds between her breaths and his long breaths. She would try to time her breaths to his, but she could not.

He had hair on his arms; his lips parted when he fell asleep; a scar divided his left eyebrow; his mustache brushed against his top lip; his face relaxed. Eventually, he would stir and turn, curling into a fetal position. She would move her body if his arm or leg touched.

Always, he would wake, startled by one of his more resonant snores, or for no predictable reason. She would pretend to be asleep. She didn't want him to feel guilty about keeping her awake.

Sometimes, smelling of moist sleep, his lips would touch her cheek, his mustache brushing against her skin. He always returned to the sofa bed. She would feel relief when he left, although she would curl into the warm spot his body had created on her bed, and finally drift to sleep.

The Clash's "Should I Stay or Should I Go" played at low volume on the car stereo, and Rosie knew that her father wasn't changing the station because she liked the song. The first time he'd heard it, he'd said to the radio, "You should go!," and she half-expected him to repeat this, because he'd made her laugh; but he was silent, their goodbye tinged with resignation and sorrow. When they arrived at her house, he got out of his Buick to come around and hug her. She knew he was anxious, hoping not to see her mother and Will, since Will was the man her mother had The Affair with and he hated them both.

"I still have to pack," she said, to distract him.

"How do you pack for a yacht?" he said, with his fake British accent. Rosie had been invited for a weekend trip to Catalina Island with her friend Isabella and Isabella's parents on their yacht, *The Golden Eagle*.

When they hugged, they were conscious of her breasts. It was difficult to hug without letting her breasts touch him. She rounded her upper back so that her breasts caved inward. She noticed that he hunched his back as well.

While her father pretended her breasts did not exist, when she and her friend Chris hung out at the Peninsula or at the beach, other men offered vocal confirmation of their existence—whistles and hoots and pleas to just let them see. Recently, a Marine had bought them a twelve-pack of Michelob—all they had to do was lift their tops; she'd followed Chris's lead, but hadn't ventured further the way Chris had, by pulling up her bra as well. Breasts, she believed, were powerful tools.

She stopped hugging her father first, hands dropping to her sides. His cheerfulness was usually tinged with hostility, but this time his smile was covered in grief, and she smiled back, exactly the same.

"Come on," Isabella said, when Rosie arrived. "I made chocolate chip cookies." Rosie followed her to the kitchen, where Isabella held a cookie to her nostril and inhaled noisily. Isabella was pretty—long brown hair, round face, mooneyes, and gentle features—but in a way not recognized by Newport Beach standards. Her body was naturally inclined towards softness and curves, and she was at war with it. Rosie was used to Isabella denying herself the satisfaction of consumption, instead cooking and smelling forbidden food products: brownies, cakes, cookies, fudge.

Whenever Rosie came over, she rode the elevator because Isabella had an elevator in her house. There were antique vases, chandeliers, and Isabella's mom, Mrs. Leer, lurked about, noticing lint on the carpet, a lamp not in place, a painting improperly slanted. Rosie pressed a button, and they rode to the third floor. The doors opened—she pressed another button, the doors closed, and they descended.

Mrs. Leer waited at the bottom floor so that when the mirrored doors opened, she said, "That's enough," in her French accent, her foot against the door. When any type of heightened emotion engaged Mrs. Leer, she spoke French. "Allons-y," she said.

Isabella apologized. She was keen on pleasing her mother, and Rosie was sorry for her: pleasing Mrs. Leer was on par with walking on the moon. Mr. Leer—a squat man who didn't talk much—walked past them toward the sliding glass doors, Rosie's suitcase tucked under his arm.

Isabella had a younger half-brother and half-sister, but Mr. Leer gave money to keep the children away, and Isabella

had only seen them once, accidentally. She had told Rosie about it in a hushed voice, even though they were the only ones in Isabella's bedroom: "They were waiting in a car, I saw them from my window…a little girl and a little boy…so cute. Daddy wrote a check to a woman…"

Isabella's willingness to toe the line came from her understanding that her legitimacy was a matter of luck; she didn't want to fuck up her good fortune and be Daddy-less; although Rosie's secret belief was that it wasn't purely luck: Mr. Leer was afraid of Mrs. Leer—he watched his wife closely, taking his cues from her.

The motor of *The Golden Eagle* rumbled and the air smelled of gasoline. Mr. Leer untied the ropes from the dock outside their house and then jumped on to the boat. Mrs. Leer had set out wood bowls of pretzels and mixed nuts on the yacht's dining table. Mr. Leer wore a captain's hat, his hands on the spokes of a large steering wheel, guiding the boat out of the dock. Isabella sniffed a pretzel, then inserted it in her mouth and chewed. When Mrs. Leer was looking out the window, Rosie saw Isabella spit the gooey mass into a star-spangled bar napkin and throw it away.

Rosie and Isabella changed into their bathing suits in the master bedroom. They climbed steps that went to the top of the boat, Isabella wearing a blue one-piece. She had a pear-shaped body and wore a towel around her hips when ambulatory, to keep her lower half hidden. Rosie wore her new red bikini; she enjoyed the way she looked when she wore it, the bottom half tied at her hips. She liked her stomach when she sucked it in.

They lay on their towels and watched *The Golden Eagle's* wake slicing through the ocean. Seagulls and pelicans swooped and glided with the wind; the ocean looked like brushed dark velvet. They played checkers, read magazines—pages flapping in the wind—and talked about boys.

After two hours, Catalina came into focus: they could see individual bushes and trees. The water was aqua-colored and the island was hilly and rock laden. Mr. Leer drove past Avalon Bay and anchored *The Golden Eagle* among the other yachts, near an unpopulated portion of the island. The people on the yachts knew each other; there were welcoming hand waves and hollering hellos. Most came from Newport Beach or Santa Barbara, the cities etched underneath the boats' names. One yacht was larger than the others and it was anchored near *The Golden Eagle*: *Big Orange*. Men wearing T-shirts with the yacht's name across the back polished wood and hosed the deck.

Rosie and Isabella dove into the water from the deck of *The Golden Eagle*. They jumped; they cannonballed; they made crazy gestures—this is a crazy person running—midair. After some time had passed, Rosie noticed a man reclined on a lounge chair on the deck of *Big Orange*, one knee up, wearing blue swim trunks, and watching her with binoculars, an empty drink on the table next to him with what appeared to be a celery stalk in the glass.

He saw that she was looking at him, and he set the binoculars down so that they rested on his chest from a band around his neck. His legs swung to the side, in a sitting position. He waved, although she could see that he was not smiling.

"Who is that?" she asked.

Isabella put both her hands to her forehead, shielding her face from the sun. "Rod likes you," she said.

They were quiet, staring at Rod while he stared back.

"He's old," Isabella said, but she said it like it was a good thing. "His mom and dad let him take the yacht."

Rod continued to watch them, although Rosie knew that he was really looking at her.

"Do something," Isabella said.

Rosie stood in her bikini. She did a mock hula dance: hands gesturing, hips swinging. Isabella's hand was at her mouth, laughing.

"Watch," Rosie said. She walked to the edge of the deck, toes tipping over. She sucked in her stomach, and her hands went above her head, fingers together—an upside down V.

She dove—a rush of air—body alert and toes pointed. She caught glimpses: blue sky, the hull of the boat. The salt water stung her eyes, but she opened them anyway, hull bobbing in the water, dream-like. She went deeper, the water progressively cooler and darker. Her lungs hurt from holding her breath. She somersaulted, kicking her legs so that she was pointed the other direction. She swam toward the surface and the sun made wavy white lines through the water.

She liked the sensation of her head breaking through ocean and coming into air. The water looked bright and sparkly, and she took a deep, appreciative breath, her hair slicked back. She dog-paddled to stay afloat and turned in the direction of *Big Orange*: Rod was standing near the edge of the deck, as she had hoped, his binoculars right on her.

The Leers were invited to a party/barbeque on the shore, close to the beach, a location with two outdoor barbeque

pits and six picnic tables. All the yachts were invited. It was to last all day into the late evening. People drove their small motorboats to the pier and unloaded. Other dinghies docked along the sand.

Rosie and Isabella snuck Coronas from a cooler, hiding them in their shorts' pockets, T-shirts untucked and covering them, and found a shaded place to drink, underneath a pier that no one used—white paint peeling off the wood, cracked and falling apart; not too far from the picnic tables, but far enough so that they wouldn't get caught. But they couldn't figure out how to get the bottles open. "I thought these twisted off," Rosie said.

"Oh my God," Isabella whispered.

Rod approached, two fingers hooked under the plastic of a six-pack of Budweiser. He stooped under the pier. "Thought I might find you," he said. He wore his blue swim trunks, the ends reached past his knees. A circle of dark hair ringed each nipple, a diamond of hair was at the center of his chest, and he had a slight paunch. He folded his legs to sit with them on the ocean-hardened sand. Attached to his swim trunks was a key ring with a bottle opener. "La cerveza mas fina," he said, opening the Corona bottles and passing them over. Rosie thought he was handsome: a man, not a teenager. His forehead, cheeks, and nose were sunburned, and because he'd been wearing sunglasses, the paler skin around his eyes gave him a startled look. He ignored Isabella, but she didn't mind. "What's your name?" he asked.

She told him.

"Rosie, Rosie, Rosie," he said. She lit up with the sound of her name in his voice. He asked questions—Where do you live? What classes do you like? How old are you? And she answered as cleverly as possible: I don't like school and I'd quit if I could. How old do you think I am? She showed him her sunburn and he peeled skin from her shoulder.

Twenty minutes later, Rod walked with them to the picnic tables from the pier because Isabella didn't want her parents to worry about her. Everything was arranged buffet-style on two picnic tables underneath an awning: plastic bowls of potato chips and tortilla chips; a stainless-steel bowl filled with strawberries and another with pineapple slices; plastic trays with cupcakes and cookies. The barbeques were large and made of stone, and the men took their grilling duties seriously. Fold out chairs stuck out from the sand at the beach. Somebody's golden retriever fetched a tennis ball from the water: back and forth, back and forth, tail wagging. The tide was low, small waves lapping the sand.

When Rosie had to go to the bathroom, Rod said he would take her. "That's what happens when you drink beer,

young lady," he said in a mock-stern tone. She ran ahead, kicking water at him, and he laughed. "You're so cute," he said. Her face warmed even though she wasn't facing him. The bathrooms were a concrete affair, steel toilet rims, flies circling, no mirrors. He waited outside. As they walked back, he held her hand briefly and she was awed.

Mr. Leer sat with the others, eating a hot dog. He wore a ridiculous straw hat with a wide brim and it made Rosie fond of him. Isabella was next to her father, glowing with belonging. Rosie would have felt left out, but she didn't mind because of Rod. He sat next to her, his arm touching hers, and she felt like her throat was being tickled.

The sun was sinking, shadows and coolness, and the sand on the beach looked silvery-gray. People pulled on windbreakers and sweatshirts. It smelled like campfire, ocean, and burnt hamburger. Rod poured Heineken into a plastic cup for her, and no one asked what she was drinking. Conversations revolved around real estate, golf, and yacht-maintenance, and Isabella played cards with her father. Mrs. Leer drank red wine from a plastic cup, making hand gestures when she spoke. "We plan on visiting Europe this summer for a month or two, with a week in Venice," she said. "No one should stay long in Venice."

Rod hid his face with his arm, rolling his eyes so that only Rosie could see. He pulled on a blue hooded sweatshirt that ruffled his hair, as if someone had slapped it to one side. He asked if she wanted to see his boat. She nodded, heart thumping, glancing at Isabella, who was completely occupied with her card game; she knew Isabella wouldn't mind.

And then she glanced at Mrs. Leer sitting at the other side of the picnic table. Rod leaned in and whispered, "Trust me: I've gone to these parties for years. They're just going to get more fucked up, no one cares. They'll forget where you went." The sun was gone, sky dark with purples, oranges, and reds.

Mrs. Leer had a slight flush from her wine, setting her hand on Rosie's forearm. "How exciting," she said, eyes sparkling, when Rosie told her she was going to see Rod's yacht.

"Careful," Rod said, taking Rosie's hand to help her aboard his dinghy. He pulled on the starter, his back to her, arm yanking three times, until the engine sputtered to life. The motor hummed as they made their way from the barbeque, winding around the anchored boats. He asked her to hold the flashlight, even though there was a full moon and the dinghy had a light at the front. She lay on the bow with the flashlight tucked in her arm, a small beam of light bouncing on the water. It was dark and beautiful, the stars blinking. She felt like her insides were on the outside, like the world was wide open.

He killed the motor and they floated, away from the yachts, where the current was a little rougher. He opened a wood panel. Underneath a life preserver was a small bottle. “Un tequila reserva especial,” he said, with a bad accent, twisting the cap off. “Muy especial.” He took a long drag from the bottle, and when he pulled it away, his mouth was twisted, and he shook his head as he swallowed.

He handed her the bottle and she took a sip. It tasted like fire and her insides melted. He leaned over and kissed her, his fingers sliding down her forearm to take the bottle. She was lost in the kiss, eyes closed, body swirling, his tongue moving around her mouth, blurring with her mouth. He tasted like salt and tequila, and she felt wetness on her bathing suit bottoms. He pulled away and watched her.

“You’re alone,” he said, staring at her broodingly. She wasn’t sure what he meant but was eager to understand; and kissing him she’d felt a connection—a thousand times more than she did with Isabella, Isabella’s parents, and even her own father and mother.

“Like me,” he said, looking away and taking another pull from the tequila.

They took turns sipping from the bottle, passing it back and forth. The boat rocked—the current sucked and slapped against the wood—and faint voices from the party carried across the water. There was a soft breeze and the tequila hummed inside her.

“I don’t know who I am,” he said. There was a pause and she watched his face, wondering if he was done, but it turned out he was only mulling things over. He told her that he was a trained paramedic and that he had loved his job, but that his parents were making him go back to law school, now that he was older. He told her stories about dead bodies: how they can still move after death because their synapses continue to fire away. She thought he was authentic because he spoke of death. He said that he once had to lift a lady who had jumped off a building; he held her underneath her armpits, since they were hauling her dead body. Her head fell back and a long audible gasp of air came out of her mouth.

“I was so scared, I dropped her on the ground,” he said.

When he talked about being a paramedic, his voice was animated, but when he talked about himself, his tone was derisive and condescending, especially when he spoke of law school and his family’s business. She thought perhaps this was characteristic of worldly adults.

“Once, before I got kicked out of law school,” he said, shifting on the wood plank seat, “I hated it so much that I got drunk and laid down in the middle of an intersection near the parking lot, just to see if the cars would stop.”

"That's crazy," she said, and she laughed even though she wasn't sure why.

"When people get run over by cars," he said, ignoring her, "it almost always knocks their bodies clean out of their shoes, no matter how tightly their laces are tied. You can find their shoes at the accident site while their bodies have been dragged or thrown. Sometimes, the shoes are tipped to the side, but there they are."

Rosie was conscious that she smiled for him, laughed when appropriate, and frowned often. But she didn't mind, because she was drunk, a wonderful sensation, as if she would never be troubled by anything again.

"And rip currents," he said. "I've seen drowned bodies." Her father had warned her about rip currents, ocean a lighter color, calmer; she knew not to swim against one, but rather to swim parallel to the shoreline or float until the current moved away.

When they finished the tequila, he tipped his hand over the side of the boat and filled the bottle with seawater, put the cap back on, and then dropped the bottle. It sank into the dark water, softly. He started the motor and drove back, to where they wove between the yachts.

He tied the motorboat to the side of *Big Orange* and they climbed a ladder to get onboard. She leaned against him because she was losing her balance, and he held her hand while he showed her the kitchen, the dining area, the bedrooms, the living room, ending at the master bedroom. His finger went to his lips, warning her to be quiet, but his eyes laughed. The men she'd seen wearing *Big Orange* T-shirts slept on a different section of the boat, reserved for staff. The boat rocked, and she wondered if she would be sick. He took his sandals off and she noticed patches of hair on his toes. She took her tennis shoes off without unlacing them, spilling a little sand; she wasn't wearing socks—her feet were cool against the wood floor. She told herself that no matter what, she must try to remain upright.

"Rosie," he said huskily and he slid his hand under her shirt and bathing suit top. He leaned into her, her back against the wall. His body was dark and strong, his breathing heavy. The wall seemed to be moving, and then she was pulled to the floor, the back of her head hitting the ground, the ceiling vibrating in a jolt of light. He tugged down her shorts and her bathing suit bottoms. When he spread her legs, instantly she knew that he was going to have sex with her, and she was terrified; but she couldn't control it, like a child slammed down by a wave. A heat moved inside her, a ripping sensation, and she wanted to explain that this wasn't what she wanted, even if she had wanted to see what came next. Please, she said, no, oh

God, oh please. In time with his knee knocking against the wood, her head thumped against the wall.

When it was over, she went to the bathroom where she put herself through the motions of urinating—a horrible stinging, a small amount of blood coiling in the toilet bowl; she gently wiped toilet paper against the moist numbness (not looking at the toilet paper)—afterwards washing her face and hands. She thought briefly of her father and mother, but she felt as separate and distant from her parents as she'd ever imagined. She listened momentarily to the beating of blood in her eardrums, but avoided her face in the mirror. When she walked back to the bedroom, she bumped into the wall. She had the sensation that her body was made of vapor, that Rod could put his hand right through her.

They climbed back on the motorboat to make their way to shore. The lights from the party were tinkling in the distance. She tilted her head back and the sky spun: stars whirled and the full moon swayed. Her throat was slippery, and she knew that if the sky did not stop sliding, she would be sick.

She leaned against the side of the boat, vomiting beer, tequila, potato salad, half of a cheeseburger. Afterwards, nothing left in her stomach, she used a life preserver for a pillow, and an oar pressed against her back. Her entire body was damp with sweat, and she wiped the back of her hand against her mouth. When she saw that he was watching her, she looked away, dunking her hand in the ocean to wash it. She watched the water break around her wrist and a light from the boat flickered across the current. Weariness sank into her, filled her with a deadening weight, and she heard herself making a whimpering noise.

When the boat bumped softly against the dock, he killed the motor, held on to a rope, and jumped ashore, the boat dipping with the loss of his weight. The front end swung around before he tied that side. There was a space between the dock and the water looked black. The motorboat wobbled; the dock swayed; there was an instant—as she jumped—when she thought she could make it, but then she was in the water. She was scared and she gasped, but she didn't scream, even though she thought of eels and sharks.

He held his hand out, and she grabbed hold of his forearm. He pulled her to the dock and she felt the pinch of a splinter in her knee. They looked at each other and she said something about being cold, but her words were garbled and sounded like they were coming from far away. The water was dripping off her and she was shivering.

The coldness sobered her like hard slaps, along with the vomiting, so that she felt it when he pulled her in the bushes near the old pier and took off her clothes. Between the leaves,

in and out of focus, she saw the red fire pits from the party, so she closed her eyes. When she listened closely, she heard laughter. He moved on top of her, his breath on her neck. Because she was wet, the dirt stuck to her legs and back. She bit the tip of her tongue, tasted blood; a rock scraped against her back.

His body clenched and he fell on top of her with all his weight as if he'd been shot dead. At first, she thought he might have fallen asleep, but then she realized he was only catching his breath. She squirmed underneath him, feeling disgrace and disappointment, the cold reality of humiliation. This was sex?

"Sorry," he said, and moved to give her room. She wiped the dirt from her legs with her shirt, and he handed her his sweatshirt. It was long, reaching her knees. She couldn't comprehend what was happening. For a second, she couldn't even remember where she was and had to wait for the word "Catalina" to come to her. And then the word wouldn't leave: Catalina, Catalina, Catalina.

He drove her in the dinghy back to *The Golden Eagle* and she could sense him climbing onboard after her. She took a shower in the tricking hot water from the showerhead, hoping that he would leave. There was a cut on her back from the rock, and she tried to reach it with the small oval of soap. And while she showered, she let herself evaporate into a non-reality, a tolerable disbelief. She changed into sweat pants and a T-shirt in the bathroom, flooded with steam. She brushed her teeth three times, the back of her head tender from where she'd hit it on the floor, tiny scratches on her arms from the thorny bush leaves. When she opened the door, she saw that he was still there, and that he'd put her wet clothes in a plastic baggie. She had the sensation of not being able to keep her eyes open while reading. He gave her a questioning look when she handed him his sweatshirt.

"Let's get you to sleep," he said.

She was lying in bed with her eyes closed and could feel him staring down at her. Finally, she heard his footsteps moving across the floor. His motorboat started and she listened as the motor faded. She wanted sleep to temporarily black out her existence.

She stayed in bed the next morning. Isabella couldn't get her to do anything. She was a wet blanket, a party pooper—no fun. Mrs. Leer came into the bedroom.

"You need to get up," she said. "You can't sleep all day. We're going water skiing."

When she did get up, she refused to wear her red bikini. Instead, she wore her jeans. The insides of her thighs were bruised.

That night, Rosie and Isabella ate dinner at the dining table on the boat with Isabella's parents. Mrs. Leer had made tater tots and scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese, Isabella's favorite meal. There wasn't much talk, and the silverware clanked against the plates. The cut on Rosie's tongue was swollen, making it difficult to chew. Isabella drenched her food in ketchup and Mrs. Leer gave her a disdainful look.

Rosie didn't want to watch Isabella try to please her mother anymore. She was angry with Isabella and didn't know why. Isabella sensed it and left her alone. The four of them were going to play Spades—the girls against Mr. and Mrs. Leer—but the sound of Mr. Leer shuffling the cards made Rosie sleepy. Mrs. Leer complained that they would be left with an odd number, but Rosie excused herself and went to bed anyway.

Isabella was asleep next to Rosie, snoring softly, her body warm. The boat made creaking noises; the ocean lapped. Rosie's hands were outside the blanket and she stared around her. She'd gone to bed early, only to wake up—alert—with everyone asleep. She moved her tongue to the side of her mouth, touched the cut against her teeth. The ocean made wavy shadows on the walls. It was a full moon; the night had a lit-up darkness.

She heard the hum of a motorboat, and that was when she knew: Rod didn't get enough the first and second time and he wanted more. She sat up in bed, her motion waking Isabella.

"What is it?" Isabella asked, rising to a sitting position. She rubbed at her eyes and yawned.

There was a thump against the boat and steps above them coming closer.

"Dad," Isabella called. "Dad. There's someone on the boat."

They heard Mr. Leer getting out of bed, cursing.

Then they heard voices.

"What are you doing Rod?" Mr. Leer: angry, exasperated, inconvenienced.

"I'm here for Rosie." He was drunk, slurring his words.

"Rod. She's fourteen." She was fifteen, the same age as his daughter.

"I don't care."

"You're going to have to leave, Rod. This looks bad."

Mrs. Leer's voice joined—"What's going on?"

"Nothing, sweetheart. Go back to bed."

"I'm here for Rosie."

"Oh, Rod. You're drunk." Mrs. Leer's voice was sympathetic.

Rod began crying—they could hear him. Isabella's eyes widened.

"Jesus," Mr. Leer said.

There was a shuffling sound. She knew that Rod was trying to get past Mr. Leer, but Mr. Leer was blocking him. They heard more shuffling. Someone fell.

More weeping, childlike.

"Rosie," Rod said. "Rosie."

Isabella's eyes searched her face. She could hear Rod moving.

There was a hand pressed on the window between the curtains, like a pink sea urchin. Then she saw Rod's face, but it was quick, a flash of one eye, frantic. She didn't think he saw her.

She could see him rising, his leg between the part of the curtains. He kicked the side of the boat softly. Thump.

She heard stumbling footsteps. He was getting back into his motorboat—she could feel it. The engine sputtered, the sound of the motorboat faded.

Rosie went to Maritime Church with her father two Sundays later. She sat in the pew and watched the Perry Como-like pastor. The church offered a brand of Christianity where monetary success was considered a good thing, brought on by Jesus' favor. During the service, she had the urge to shout, Okay, Jesus died for my sins! Can we move on to something else? And she knew this was very wrong. She saw Kristen Johnson standing in the front row of the choir, her hair pulled back in a ponytail.

When Rosie was a child, her father would hold her hand and squeeze a certain number of times, and she would squeeze back the same number. She would concentrate because sometimes he would squeeze up to twenty times and she wanted to get the number right. No one else knew, and it would make her think he was paying attention to her, that they had a connection, and that she was special.

She remembered this as she let him hold her hand. His hand was moist and they rose. He began singing with the others, the words on a screen for everyone to follow, his eyes brimming with tears of faith or joy or whatever it was that he felt, whatever it was that she was unable to grasp. To her, he looked naïve.

All I need is You

All I Need is You Lord Jesus
Is You Lord Jesus

She sang out of an inherent desire to please her father, to make their estrangement bearable, but her body was hot with shame, holding on to secrets, aware that more would follow. Her father looked at her—he was proud, misty-eyed—as if mistaking her emotion as inspired by the church service. But she was mourning their relationship, aware that she was lost to him, that even as he stood there holding her hand and watching her, she was strangely invisible.

Many times after, she imagined accidental meetings with Rod—in restaurants, at the beach—their shared looks of shame, because she would confront him about what had happened; he was the only one who knew. But she had a feeling that she would never see him again. He had left her with a surreptitious desire, a longing for danger, a readiness and need.

She would comprehend that she had been defrauded of dignity, and her anger would rise, but she would direct it at herself. She would feel the futility of any attempt to articulate her sadness or to salvage her innocence—most of all the impossibility of finding her place in the world; and these times scared her the most, leading, as they did, to periods of inconsolable loneliness and grief.

Liza Wieland

First, Marriage

There was, briefly, a husband, but I was not in love with him. I was in love with belief. So simple, I imagined: you do believe or you don't. Say it: I do.

I am a translator by occupation, though I am now an old woman. I have spoken a great deal about my work over the years, but what I never say to anyone is this: I have always felt a desire to have no voice at all, to say nothing, to keep the words to myself. And isn't it true that translation is about privacy and secrecy? And which of these is the origin of the career? Is a young woman secretive by nature, and so she takes up the work of translation, or does the profession dispose a woman to be secretive? I wanted to be everywhere and nowhere, to elude capture. I wanted silence. And order. What the translator has power over is order. Words in the sentence. Events in sequence.

So: in the beginning was Raymond Alexander, his brother, and God.

Raymond Alexander was a painter and a student in art history. His paintings were representational, out of fashion then, delicate oils, *windowscapes*, he called them, the view from a small room. When I saw four or five of his canvases, I thought, the light is strange, too much of it, coming out of nowhere. You felt as if you would not want to be in such a room, or else you would never want to leave it. He lived in a studio apartment, almost directly behind the Columbia University library, in a building between two fraternities.

"But it's deceptive," Raymond said when he'd let me in. "I have this extra space." He led me through the main room, where there was a mantle and a fireplace, two metal bookshelves—the kind people who live in the suburbs have in their garages for tools and cans of vegetables—a red butterfly chair, and a frameless futon closed up like a couch. The kitchen was big enough for a table and two chairs. A cookbook was open on the table, the *Moosewood Cookbook*, I knew from the small, careful handwriting of the author, which has made it untranslatable. Green peppers, tomatoes, onions and parsley were piled on a cutting board. "But this is the best part." He stepped into the bathroom and unbolted a door on the other

side, then propped it open with a kitchen chair. “Look at my back yard,” he said.

Five wooden steps led down into a wide alley stretching a quarter of a block in length, one of those usually empty echoing spaces made by the backs of tall apartment buildings in New York City. But this one had been transformed into a garden, bordered by middle-sized shade trees, a vegetable bed, shrubs, rose bushes, and two circular, groomed grassy lawns, the whole space wound with paths filled with small luminous stones. On each end, there was a wooden bench set against a high trellis. I did not recognize the vines on the trellises, but each one was just coming into leaf, so it would be possible to sit facing east or west, and with a certain sort of strict vision, see nothing but green. Each of the round lawns was about six feet in diameter, the size of a bed. I wanted to lie down on one of them. I wondered if Raymond ever had.

“This is gorgeous,” I said. “Did you do it?”

“No, no,” Raymond said. “I haven’t been here that long. A woman who lives on the ground floor in the next building—she’s been there for years. The widow of a professor. She did it. I’m just lucky.”

“Does she let you sit out here?”

“She used to let me paint out here. As long as I’m quiet. And I do a little pruning for her. I cut the grass. She has a push mower by the back door. It’s a funny thing to see in the city.” He pointed to the mower, and it was surreal, like Magritte’s pipe. “Do you want something to drink, Nora? I was just about to start cooking.”

We climbed the stairs and passed back into the kitchen. Raymond opened two beers and handed me one. He pointed to a small knife and the peppers. The cookbook was open to a recipe for Scheherazade casserole. Two medium green peppers, chopped.

“I’m not a vegetarian,” Raymond said, “But I play one on TV. I hope this is okay.”

“It’s great,” I said, not quite getting the joke, not then. “Anything is great.”

There was a silence in our working together that was a kind of presence, but comfortable. Two people standing next to each other, with jobs to do. When we met at school, there had been noise and so much talk. We never had enough time to finish the conversation. Now there seemed to be so much time, hours in which to wash the tomatoes and peppers, rinse the bundle of parsley, really look at Raymond as he moved around the kitchen. I thought for the first time that he resembled certain pictures of Jesus, though he was tall and muscled: the light brown hair that hung to his shoulders, the neat beard, a softness in his eyes. It was a troubling notion, and as if in

response, the floor began to tremble, utensils hung on pegboard rattled against each other. In the other room, books fell off a shelf. Water from the parsley flew into Raymond's face, and he laughed. He opened two more beers, patted my back.

"It's all right, Nora. Don't worry."

"What *is* that?"

"It's the subway. I hardly notice it anymore. Except when the books fall down."

"Does it happen every time a train goes under?"

"Only the express trains. The trains that stop at 110th Street haven't gotten up enough speed yet."

I walked into the other room intending to pick up the books. I could see the bare bones of how he lived. There are only a few years in most people's lives when that's possible, before meaning is obscured, before they move to bigger apartments, then houses, then into marriages, children, back into their old hobbies. But for a little while, it's right there, out in the open, the truth of what somebody is and wants. Raymond's typewriter sat on a black board he'd balanced over the top of the radiator. There were several large books piled to one side, and I went to look at them. The one on top was in French, *Ecole de Barbizon*. The cover was Jean Francois Millet's *Angelus*. I picked up the book and took it into the kitchen.

"Are you studying this?"

"Well," he said, "I'm *teaching* it, but also studying, yes, the period really. The place."

We stood for a moment just outside something. "It's pretty. It's so familiar."

"The light," he said. "He got it just right. It's genius."

And it was. But it was almost too much for me, the way the light shone so hard on the frailties of the people, how fallen it made them, and I took it back to the desk.

We ate at the little table in the kitchen, talking about our work and holding hands awkwardly around the plates and bottles. I felt elated and afraid. A garden in the middle of an alleyway in New York City, the end of my schooling. I'd been very good at learning languages. I told Raymond the family history: my father's early death, my mother's grief, and mine, which had always felt like making a speech into one end of a long tube, but less so this time. I told him I loved the soothing silence of translating poetry. The process is slow, internal. I find I must take the whole poem into my body. Sometimes I imagined joining a convent, that there was some stillness and quiet I needed to find out what to do with my life. He nodded and ate—what reply was there to such statements? The casserole tasted very good, *substantial* was the word I used—I remember this because Raymond laughed and repeated it as if

he wasn't quite sure he was being complemented. But I meant it was the first food I had really tasted in a long time.

We finished the meal, took our beers and sat outside, on the east-facing bench of the garden so we could see the quarter moon. It was wonderfully dark. There was a long rectangle of light shining out the back door of Raymond's apartment, illuminating what I thought must be a rose bush, maybe a camellia, but a red flower, in bloom and round like an apple. It was like being outside one of his paintings and looking in, and I said so. Beyond us, the sounds of cars, car horns, voices, the trickling of music from open windows, all of this seemed to quiet and then fade. Raymond's arm was around my shoulders, but I couldn't see him. We weren't talking.

"I thought this feeling might go away," he said suddenly. "But it hasn't." I must have stiffened a little because he held me more tightly. "No, no. Not about you. I mean about painting. There's something about what Millet's seeing. What I'm seeing—"

"Your work is so different from his."

"I know. If I could only really see like that. But I think all I can do is copy. I can't do anything useful. I haven't even wanted to paint in months."

"You'll get back to it." I patted his knee, motherly.

"No. I don't feel that way. I feel relieved. It's fine that I'm not going to be another second or third rate American painter. I'll finish school in two years. I love the teaching."

"Art in the dark," I said. "That's what they called it when I was in college. We called it that. The students did."

I didn't want to leave that garden, but we did. We went inside and unrolled the futon and got down to solving other kinds of mysteries. I loved Raymond Alexander then, but I knew I did not love him enough. We lay in the dark in the middle of the night, with the windows open, listening to the fraternity boys next door, the anguished, endless barking of a dog, and shouting between men and women, all the ways New York City talks in its sleep. Once or twice, I thought there was a rumbling underneath us as the express train ran north or south, and then the echo of it traveled across the room and into the kitchen.

"Do the trains run all night, Raymond?"

For a while he didn't answer. For a long time.

"I don't think you're convent material," he said much later. His lips moved against my neck as if he were trying to tell me something.

Raymond and I spent the summer this way. And in the fall I took part time teaching jobs at the Fashion Institute and Hunter College and The New School, and my life became a blur of train rides and vocabulary tests. Raymond had nearly finished his course work, began to think about a dissertation. He never touched his paints.

Most nights that summer we slept out in the garden, in a sleeping bag when the weather turned colder. Raymond explained to the old widow that we were doing this, and she smiled approvingly, he said, and nodded her head, and she told him it was like having an all-night security guard. Sometimes in the morning, we would wake up to find her a few feet away, pruning, fertilizing, gathering blossoms or late tomatoes. It was hard to say, at those moments, who was guarding whom. She seemed to me an angel, a vision, a message I could not quite read, but didn't have to yet. When I opened my eyes, she was looking at me. Not at us. It appeared that she smiled and shook her head, just once. The sun rose behind her, and her smile brightened when she saw I was awake. Then she turned back to her work.

In December, Raymond's brother David was on the plane that blew up over Lockerbie, Scotland. His parents went over to Lockerbie, but Raymond didn't think he could stand it. In New York, we went to church together for days, staying long after Mass had ended. Raymond was trying to understand, to make a thousand deals with God. He told me in the coffee shops along Broadway those first weeks of January, the litany: If I could be sure he felt no pain, if I could be sure he wasn't scared, if I could be sure he had no knowledge whatsoever. If someone could promise me these things. If I could be sure he died immediately. If I could be sure what we buried was really him and no other, that he's not alive somewhere. If I could be sure he's gone to heaven. If I could be sure there is a heaven.

"What's the *then*," I said.

"The *then*?"

"If, then. If you could know these things, what would you give? You have to give something back."

"Then I could be happy. Why should I have to give anything back?"

We drank another cup of coffee. We tried to talk about our lives at school, the city, books, but his desolation was too great, and it became mine, too. We couldn't stop talking about it, or reading the newspaper accounts. We held hands constantly. We sat close to each other in the booth and held on.

Finally, Raymond came to believe he had to see the place where the sky let go of his brother. Many of the families felt this

way. Raymond wrote to some of them, talked on the phone. His own parents had gone in December, and now, they said they were too old to make the trip again, too broken. And so I agreed to go with him, we made plans all summer, and then left in August. We flew to London, then to Edinburgh, rented a car and drove the rest of the way, through beautiful weather, really more like the end of spring that far north. We were in farm country, where the land had unfolded itself, opened fully for a brief time to admit us. Everywhere we were told we couldn't have come at a better moment, it was the season of life, the season, a priest said, when every tear shall be wiped away. The families stared dumbly at this. We were traveling with two others, two sets of parents and a sister. One of the mothers whispered *I can't bear it*, over and over. Her husband shook his head. Sure, tears could be wiped away, he said, but there was no end to them, would never be.

And then we got to the place in the road, behind a man's house, a place where suddenly eight months before there had been chaos, metal raining from the sky, and flesh, and a child's doll, the sleeve of a sweater, sugar packets, miniature bottles of liquor. We lived through it all again, the crater, the woman on the roof, the other still half-buckled into her seat, the flight attendant whose pulse could be detected for ten minutes, the others who lay in fields, on roads, who looked like they were sleeping.

We went to a house to ask about it: a woman who said Raymond's brother had fallen into her kitchen. Smashed through the ceiling. She opened the door after the explosion and the fireball, and there he was, curled into himself as if he'd dropped there for a bit of rest. The police told them not to touch the bodies, not to move them until there could be an investigation. He lay there, the sleeping laddie, she called him, through the night and all the next day. It was bitterly cold. When evening came on, I couldna stand it, she said, and she covered him with a blanket, even though she knew he felt nothing.

"I talked to him," she said, tears filling her eyes, "I told him he was a good lad, and I knew he was with God, and I promised I would take care of the flesh until—" She stopped.

"His mother came for him," I said.

"Did she?" the woman said. "I didn't know that. We weren't told anything."

But she petted him, she said, and closed his eyes, even though she wasn't supposed to touch. She wanted us to know that, that he wasn't alone.

It was not survivable, they told us again and again, until the word lost its meaning. The sets of parents nodded, their

eyes empty. I could see they were thinking something: *And neither is this*. We looked up into the open spaces of the church, the meeting hall. There were three separate memorial services while we were there, the drone of a voice trying to explain. I remembered the sound from the weeks after my father's death, the noise a heart would make were it a machine and not living tissue. God is building a house, one of them said, and he was exactly right. It was the sound of an adze or a saw, a carpenter's tool that has to repeat its sorry work over and over.

There is a famous golf course at Lockerbie, and some of the wreckage fell there. We came to it quite by accident, driving aimlessly, having seen what we thought was the worst. It was closed, but the guard seemed to recognize the seven of us before anyone spoke or explained. There was something about the open space, the groomed quality of it, that made us separate from one another, fan out, the relatives each seeking some quiet place apart. Husband drifted from wife, father from mother. Raymond let go of my hand and wandered down the first fairway. The sister fell to her knees at the edge of a green and then lay down.

There is the notion, I think, that you can hear God's voice in an open space like that. But what Raymond said was that the silence on the golf course, over all of Lockerbie, was terrible, unbearable, not survivable. There was no comfort, no voice of God to explain, to soothe him.

"The rest of the world is so loud," I said, and just then an airplane roared overhead. We stood perfectly still and did not look up. As the sound grew louder, one of the mothers bent her head, folded her hands, became the woman in Millet's *Angelus*. She and her husband had been digging for something, the basket at their feet mostly empty.

We were married in a town just outside Edinburgh, on the way home. We didn't plan it. We had two days' layover—though that isn't the right way to explain it—we came away from Lockerbie two days earlier than planned, gave up the rented car and rode the train, because we couldn't stand it. Not the sorrow, not our sorrow, or the local people and the strangeness of theirs, inside of which there was a thin line of accusation, like strata in rock. Not even the ghostly immanence of the place, the sense that all these American students would suddenly reappear, walk out from the meadows and lanes, clouds of them drifting into the pubs and the chemists' shops, fanning out across the golf course, sweet smiles on their faces, the joy of homecoming. It was that, in the end, at the end, we didn't know why we'd come. Raymond didn't know. I knew. I had come to try to resolve my old quarrel, to face one of the

most inexplicable of God's oversights and see if it shook my faith. It didn't. But David wasn't my brother.

We stepped off the train in Edinburgh station, and there was the famous music festival. We had forgotten about it, not noticed at all maybe. So there were no rooms. No rooms at the inn. We got back on the train and went to the next town out, really a suburb, South Edinburgh. The weather was warm, the sky a brilliant blue. Everywhere we saw posters advertising the International Music Festival, and even here people on the street had the same joyous, drunken look we'd seen in the city proper. It seemed as though many of them were in costume—we told each other this, but now I don't know how that could have been true. I was reminded of Mardi Gras, all that frenzied pleasure before the solemnity and self-denial of Lent. We walked along the road that ran from the train station until we came to a small place, the Glenora Hotel, and went in. An old woman led us upstairs, where we saw the room was spare, but very white and clean. The bed was soft, which ordinarily would have been a nuisance. But the events of the previous days, all the attention they required, made us both feel that we wanted to fall backward into something deep, bottomless, a pool of feathers.

"A cave made out of bodies," Raymond said as he was falling asleep. I didn't know what he meant.

When we woke up, light poured through the window, and music rang in the street, hum and laughter even at this far edge of the Festival. We held each other close for a long time.

"I'm afraid the world might end right now," he said. "But I'm not afraid, too. It would be all right." He touched the side of my face. "David missed out on this."

"How do you know?"

"He told me. He wrote it in a letter. He said he'd gone to bed with a woman, for the first time, but they both knew it was nothing, that they didn't want it to happen again. He said he was waiting for somebody he could just hold in his arms."

Raymond had closed his eyes, but now he opened them, looked at my face. "Let's get married, Nora," he said. "Right now. Here. For David."

I didn't know what to say. I gazed at the details of our little room. The roses on the wall paper, the white washbasin and pitcher—I tried to get some meaning from them.

I reminded Raymond that we weren't citizens.

"Are you saying yes or no?"

I thought about that. I loved this man, but there was this other loneliness, this voice I wanted more of. Still, he'd suffered so much. I knew what I was saying was right, that back in the United States, the marriage would be—what? The words

seemed strange to apply to marriage: null and void. No good. The marriage would be no good.

"Yes. I'm saying yes."

We got out of bed then, dressed—a kind of fury had seized both of us, though not a kind, different furies, bound by the same knowledge that right then, in or near Edinburgh, there would be someone crazy enough, happy enough, song-filled enough to marry us. We laughed and kissed and brushed our teeth, looked at ourselves in the mirror, mugged it up like a couple in a photo booth. This seemed significant later, this lack of evidence: how we didn't have any pictures of ourselves that day, only the memory of the tiny hotel bathroom, the cloudy mirror over the sink.

Downstairs, a young man stood behind the reception desk, wearing earphones. His eyes were closed. There's music everywhere near Edinburgh, I thought, even places you can't hear it. Somebody is hearing it, though, and that's what's important. This man was so completely still and pale that he looked not alive. The woman who found Raymond's brother at her back steps had said he was wearing earphones, and I must have recalled her words a millisecond before Raymond did, because he stopped as if I had noted this resemblance outloud. He clutched my hand, then released it, like pulsing. I could almost feel it myself, his taking note, the way his body seemed to move from this world to a kind of shadowy universe that ran beside it, and then back. He sighed out a tiny rasp and took hold of my hand again. The man had already heard us or seen us and pulled the soft discs from his ears, one at a time.

"I have a crazy question for you," Raymond began.

"This is just the place," the man said, smiling.

"We want to get married."

"That's nice."

"Where can we find a magistrate?"

"You're Americans, right? I think you need to go to your embassy."

"Do you know of anyone who might just do it anyway, just for the money?"

"I think there's some waiting period before you can get a license."

"Who could we talk to, do you think?"

"Go over to the Catholic church, St. Anne. And ask for Father Percy. He's visiting from America, and my sister says he's quite mad."

We did as we were told, and the woman who answered the door at the rectory said Father Percy would be right with us. He appeared, as if from nowhere, and stood behind her.

"Come in," he said. "It's me you're looking for. What can I do for you?"

We told him, and told him what the young man's sister had said, and he laughed, then invited us to sit down.

"I probably am quite mad. But not mad enough apparently because I feel compelled to tell you the marriage wouldn't be legal once you got home. Also, I don't know you, to put it bluntly. I would need to ask a few questions."

"All right," Raymond said.

Father Percy turned to me. "You're awfully quiet and solemn, for one thing. For a woman about to be married. Are you here of your own free will?"

I told him I was.

"What are you doing in Edinburgh then?"

"We've just been up to Lockerbie," Raymond said, and from his tone the priest understood at once.

"A family member?" he said.

"My brother," Raymond told him.

"And it's made you want to marry each other?" Father Percy looked from Raymond to me. His voice was gentle and full of sorrow, but there was another note in it too. Approval, I thought. Understanding, an appreciation of how it could happen that senseless, violent death might cause two people to want to cleave together. That it might be a way to mourn. That the one might translate the other.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "You'll have to do it all again when you go home because no one will issue you any paper, any license. There's a waiting period here, several months, I think. But I'll say the words. It will be like a rehearsal. I'll say the words and I'll mean them. God will understand." He looked heavenward. "A rehearsal. Let's go into the chapel."

He led us out a side door, through a small courtyard and into the lady chapel, left us alone for a moment, and came back wearing a stole, holding a prayer book.

"Let me read a gospel first," he said. "I like this one for marriages." He grinned at us. "It's short."

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel.

"Salt," he said, "for you right now comes from your tears. But someday, it will come to have once again the old meaning, flavor—all that makes your lives good and interesting. You will be salt for each other in that way. About the rest of it, the light for the world, I don't know. Show each other the way. Don't let each other down. Light is a tricky thing."

And then the familiar part: do you take this woman, do you take this man. We did. We took. We promised. We kissed

each other, there in the Scottish Catholic chapel, in front of the American priest. Afterwards, we walked back to the rectory and had a glass of whiskey and a piece of apple pie. Father Percy told us he was from California, but he had become tired of the west, it was so corporeal, so unreflective.

"The chapel was on a college campus," he said, "across the street from the football stadium. Sometimes games were played at the same time as Mass on Saturday evenings, and I don't know the electronics of it, but the sound systems would get crossed over, and the game announcer's voice would come booming through the speakers in the church. Or else there would be this terrible feedback. One day, it just wouldn't stop, and I had to end the Mass. I walked across the street to the announcer's booth, and I went nuts. Yelling. Trying to break things. Breaking things, too. I don't know exactly what. I was away from myself. Just out of my head. Afterwards, I told the Bishop I needed to be alone somewhere, and he said I most certainly did."

"Remember," Father Percy said as we were leaving, "this will be something else when you get home. But try not to let it be."

When we came back, Raymond and I were estranged. The whole world seemed pushed to the sides of my vision, and out of focus. *Peripheral* is exactly the word.

There were questions first, in September, asked very seriously across a desk at the Mercy House in Brooklyn. There was a priest present, a vocations minister, and a sister. The questions had a certain weightlessness about them, an absence of gravity, in both senses. I was reminded of the process for obtaining a permit to carry a concealed weapon, which I had read about in a story.

"We are in the world," the sister said. "Not like the Benedictine. You won't renounce your family, or anyone. That is right for some women. You should think whether it is what you want."

Later, I was alone with the priest and the crucified Christ, which hung over his head and seemed very attentive. The sounds of the city seemed to come back then, car horns, shouting, the hum that is thousands of people talking, the forward-going of their lives.

"You are older than most of the candidates," the priest said. "Most of the time they come to us from high school, during high school. You'll automatically become a mother figure, probably a confidante if you have that skill."

"I don't know if I do," I said. He looked at me for a long moment, as if he were wondering whether I knew anything useful.

"Most of our older candidates don't make it. But there have been exceptions."

It was there, then, like a weak stitch in the fabric, a loophole.

"Make your confession now," he said.

And I did. But it was not a good confession. I left out the most important things: Raymond, Lockerbie, our strange and desolate marriage.

"Is that all?" the priest said. His eyes were closed, or maybe he was staring down at his hands. His fingernails were ringed with something black and unwashable, grease or dirt. I thought he must have been working on his car.

"That's all," I said.

He looked up, at my face, then took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The dirt seemed to sting, he blinked hard, pulled his hands away quickly and stared at them.

"There's something—" he began, then sighed heavily. "But what do I know?" He smiled. "There's a power in you. A kind of sadness. Power and sadness can be the same thing sometimes. Think of Christ."

I nodded. Unaccountably, I said, "It's lonely at the top."

He laughed, shook his head. "You probably don't belong here. But sometimes that's good for the others." He folded his hands, signaled that I could go.

"Did you fix your car, Father?" I said.

He glanced at his hands. "I'm not a mechanic," he said. "I can't fix anything."

I went to Raymond's apartment. He was drinking tea and studying his art history text. The Greeks. I thought of all the statuary I'd seen, all those broken bodies. He had made cookies. His apartment smelled like sweet, tentative life.

"I went to see the Sisters of Mercy," I said.

He didn't respond for a long time. It was all right. I knew he had to take in such information slowly. I looked around his apartment, which I believed I'd never enter again, saw the monkishness of it, the futon, the hemp rug, the board over the radiator, the red butterfly chair someone had given him, the metal bookshelves which he had assembled badly, without tools.

"Do you want some tea, Nora?" he said finally.

I followed him into the kitchen. The blue kettle, the package of tea bags in the cabinet above. The pegboard also inexpertly attached to the wall, the shaking utensils, the sound of falling books. I had not thought of it this way: several times an hour, his whole place rattled, threatened to collapse.

"I'm going to move in with another candidate. Named Wendy. She lives on 112th Street, so I'll actually be closer to you. Nothing will really change."

"Nothing will really change?" He spun away from the stove toward me. "What do you mean nothing will change? You take vows. Everything will change."

"Yes, but—"

"You know what I mean." He flung his arm toward the futon.

"I know what you mean."

He handed me a mug of tea and arranged some of the cookies on a plate. We sat down on the futon which he folded every morning into the nearly S-shape of a couch. He was using a fruit crate for a coffee table.

"I guess I never thought you were serious," he said.

"I didn't really act serious, did I?"

"No."

Subway cars rocked under us. The art history book, heavy and glossy and awkward, fell off the table and convulsed briefly on the floor.

"The priest said I was too old. He thinks I'm probably not going to last."

"But he let you in anyway?"

"It takes a long time. You have plenty of chances to blow it, fall away."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I think I'm telling myself."

He nodded and we drank our tea. The cookies were still warm, peanut butter with chocolate chips, the ideal marriage of sweet and salt. I thought that at the time, I really did. The ideal marriage.

"My brother—" Raymond stopped, picked a shard of cookie off the floor. "David is everywhere." He turned to face me. "I talk about him too much. Is that it, Nora? That I can't get over it?"

"There should be fewer people in the world with something to get over."

"He's everywhere," Raymond said. "But what good does it do? I can't get to him, can't talk to him. Can't touch him."

"He can't eat these fabulous cookies," I said.

Tears ran down his face. "That's exactly right. That's it. That's right."

"And he's missing them."

"He is. He *is*."

He bent double, weeping, his face pressed into his knees. I patted his back, then lay sideways across the strong table of

his spine, the curve of his ribs, feeling the faint good rumble of his heart.

"This is killing me," Raymond said. "This feels like murder."

I moved in with Wendy and two other candidates, but downtown, near the Mercy House. They were all in nursing school, and nineteen years old. What the priest said was true, that I was their mother, their confidante. They were very sweet girls, very pious. What they wanted most was to do good in the world.

I worked on my candidacy, substitute taught in the public schools, tutored children, taught religious education classes. The students did not understand much of what they were learning—I can see that now—a cultural moment was overtaking us. Good children went bad overnight, brought knives to school, smoked marijuana before CCD classes, so that there was something of the beyond, of the divine, of the immortal about them when they came into the room. It gave them a kind of awe, an appreciation for the miraculous. They said "whoa" when we read that the stone was rolled away, the burial garments folded neatly, the body disappeared. They meant it.

Every other day, I took the subway uptown for a class at Mother Cabrini. I knew when the car I rode in passed under Raymond's apartment, knew how his place fell apart and then becalmed, fell down and then got up. After I moved, we didn't see each other, but I knew that his brother was still everywhere.

And I understood the Millet painting, the *Angelus*, the strange fade of that light, the storm coming in from the right side of the canvas, close to the village in the distance, the way it burned on the arms of the man and the woman standing together in the foreground. It was she who was facing into the light, and the bridge of her nose and her fingertips glowed red, as if she would feel hot to touch, to kiss. And the light turned the field red, too. The ground was burning; it would be impossible to walk across. How would they get home, this man and this woman? I had once asked Raymond, but he didn't answer. How would they lift their loaded cart and turn and move toward the village without bursting into flame? And what was there waiting for them? The place they lived was only a dark steeple, almost black, and a low rectangular structure that seemed to admit the light, a corncrib, a broken down stable. No wonder she stood frozen, burning, her neck bent as if expecting a blow. Allow me to translate. The King James version of the Bible, for instance: in French, one reads "Laissez la lumiere." Let there be the light. In English: "Let there be light."

Unspecified, casual. Some light, somewhere, wherever, whenever. This is the difference between the painting and our seeing of it.

There is a story I heard later, about this painting, that the man and the woman had just buried their child, who had died in an accident on the road outside the town. Millet knew them, loved the child also. In English: “The child has been run over.” No one’s fault. Accidents happen. In German: “Das Kind ist unter die Rader gedommen.” The child is under the car’s wheels. Such drama, and a terrible vision in the mind’s eye. In French: “L’enfant s’est fait ecraser.” The child has caused himself to be crushed. This is what Millet would have said when his wife asked him what had happened to the child. This is how I have to make him say the words. This is my violent occupation.

The translator brings her own language into the machinery of another language. She enters into that language and smashes her way to the center, the heart, and she tries to break that heart open, to see what’s inside, see how it all works. And in so doing, she becomes invisible. She leaves the scene. What the translator has power over is order. Words in the sentence. Events in sequence. What the reader knows when. Otherwise, she’s nothing.

Contributors

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