

Potomac Review

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MID-ATLANTIC LIGHT

THE source of *lyric knowledge*, the source, that is, of the intoxication we label *literary inspiration*, has yet to be explained, much less agreed upon, but it is almost always described as not bound by traditional laws of transmission. For writers of the Mid-Atlantic, the medium for this two-way transfer, whatever it may be, is its light. Whether in stormy suddenness or quiet twilight beckoning, for these writers, the light that sculpts the landscape mantles the region's meanings as well, inscribing not only its objects, but also its observers, with the miracle of self-forgetfulness, and, like inspiration, as if not to overstay its welcome, rests for a moment and is gone. Because the Mid-Atlantic is home to four full seasons, our gaze, in our working and waking hours, follows this changing light. To the north and south of us, the light seems to stay longer in one place, and like the literary reputations of Amherst, Massachusetts, and Oxford, Mississippi, it stays in holding patterns around their respective luminaries for longer periods of time. Here, however, literary reputations tend to shine for a moment and disappear. Maryland's J.R. Salamanca, for example, whose book *Lilith*, published in 1961, and, made into a movie with Warren Beatty in 1964, contains, along with his other books like *The Lost Country* and *Embarkation*, some very fine writing—and yet his work is all but forgotten.

All the historic capitols of the country are here, too, as well as its current capitol and White House—physical proof, on the one hand, that enormous status can disappear and, on the other, that election results along with the term limits built into the Constitution often bestow and withdraw tremendous prestige in an instant and make for a region where alighting and leaving, even for its long-term residents, is *de rigueur*. Here, too, is an America in miniature, a place of extremes, where, if you do not

find a middle ground—cultural or geographical—you must at least cross that middle ground again and again while navigating between its poles. This phenomenon can produce a certain kind of sensibility, a middle sensibility—not to be confused with middling or compromising—but one that can navigate these extremes and, therefore, lose itself in its surroundings, become quiet in the presence of its people, its places, its light, and, when inspired, be illuminated from the inside by the same light by which objects around it are suffused.

So if the literary Mid-Atlantic has no libretto, it does have a leitmotif. There is the myth of light as inspiration—Apollo, the god of poetry, is also the god of light—for it is only the poet, after all, who, as Randall Jarrell said, ventures out in the thunderstorm hoping for lightning to strike. In the Mid-Atlantic, the Chesapeake Bay, the largest estuary in the United States, with more than 150 tributaries and nearly 12,000 miles of shoreline covering six states and the District of Columbia, is where this light is born, and the rivers and tributaries and towns and cities and low-lying wetlands that drain the Appalachians, as well as the stories and poems that come out of it, are its local habitations and its names. This light that links up and that alights and leaves just as quickly is not best defined by state or demographic boundaries, but, in this middle place along the East Coast, by the way it inscribes itself on the commons of the Chesapeake Bay. Ecologically it is one place—it was for the indigenous societies and cultures of the 17th century, as well as for Captain John Smith—and so too it is for its writers; its inhabitants, observers and chroniclers alike can sometimes be seen pausing for a moment, whether standing under a vast wash of tender rose on the Potomac River or among L'Enfant's or Olmsted's visions around the U.S. Capitol, gazing at the clouds blown raggedly apart, held spellbound by versions of the same splendor, all of them part of the Chesapeake Bay's circulatory system of light.

In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner called the Mid-Atlantic the “typically American region” for its “varied society.” He wrote that it was “a region mediating between New England and the South...Even the New Englander...tarrying in New York or Pennsylvania on his westward march, lost the acuteness of his sectionalism on the way.” This mediating

quality is still everywhere present—if talking about the sky, for example, now as then, nowhere else in America are the annual migrations of birds encountered as they are in the Mid-Atlantic. In many respects, it is a heterogeneous intersection, and so for Mid-Atlantic writers, *refrain* can mean *stop* as much as it can mean repeated stanza. They are conscious that the writing of literature requires that they meet the things they are most scared of coming the other way, and if their power is the power of the meaning withheld, so is the region's. Their work embodies a region whose light, if it represents the impulse that calls poetry into life, also represents the moment before artistic creation, and whether it is described as a mood, a coloring, a magic transformation, a spell, an intoxication, or a knack to put oneself in the place where the throat catches, it is also the source of lyric inspiration, which involves the mutability and change that begins in the unknown and, like poetry itself, communicates, as T.S. Eliot said, before it is understood.

As people who are always noticing, whether or not they are noticed in return, these writers have the *negative capability* of the region and, because of that, are sensitive, absorbent of its invisible currents, bathed, that is, in its light, whether by its bay or by its tributaries in all their lights and beautiful changes—clear, placid under the sun, nicked with white when the wind picks up—the changing light of the region forces attention, and out of attention sometimes literature is made.

Americans have always had a sense of place—in a globalizing world perhaps now more than ever before. For writers of the Mid-Atlantic, it is not that they are trying to render the region in writing, but what has been said of great books may be said here, too: *the region reads them*, its light a kind of marginal annotator on their lives and their work. The light and the readers of the light are appearing and disappearing acts both, and in a place where perishability is accepted, they are part of the same public space. *Potomac Review* speaks from this place, and because housed in a community college, *the community college is also its region*. Words have roots *and* routes, so just as there is no rootless writing—writing requires precision and care, particularizing exactness—the literary journals that house a place where the careful construction of those words is honored

is also a rooted place. *Potomac Review* lives in its community college, registered *the* most diverse community college in the continental United States in recent years, so its region is the Mid-Atlantic, but also a region of welcome *to everyone*. It is a region, then, not in the sense of bringing back an idyllic time that never existed because it excluded so many, but rather a region of restoration—where, for example, free COVID testing is provided for county residents and food and personal hygiene assistance for students—in a dialectic of welcome, where the third part of the dialectical triad, therefore, is *also* welcome, and with eight notable *Best American Essays* citations in the last four years, an example of the fact that excellence is not inconsistent with such welcome but might even be constitutive of it.

Community colleges are open admissions colleges and therefore an example of welcome that extends to the entire country, a moral example for both sides of our current cultural divide, a much-needed vision that iterates itself in *every* county in the country—a topos, a region, therefore, not limited to one region, however “region” may be defined or understood. The region of *Potomac Review*, beginning with the aerial or wide-frame camera shot, is the Mid-Atlantic, and narrowing in, the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River, but it is also the community college where the *homeless, tempest-tost*, still find welcome.

America is said to be built up and separated by tribes, special interests, and that to bind them together it needs common places, myths, and heroes. If so, such a place, such a region, might be the community college, because it is a place that does not impose barriers, but whose boundaries begin and end in welcome. The community college, a region conceived in welcome and constructed in welcome in an ecology of welcome with a common love of welcome, does not partake of regionalism, but is a commons, and, as such, a respecter of all difference, for the commons itself takes no position; the price of admission is only the willingness to look for common ground in the structure that has been made for the American experience, but that can disappear if not modeled for the next generation. For just as poetry sounds for the depths prose can’t fathom and uses language to gesture *beyond* language, the

commons must admit, too, that its most important transactions are ineffable ones. The greatest poems, after all, have secret corridors and are full, therefore, of dark trails that even their authors, sometimes by choice, have not completely traversed.

The literary journal that comes out of the region of the community college must welcome submissions from anywhere, by anyone, at any time, hoping to model, too, the empathy required for citizenship, itself a necessary region in the spirit of each citizen in a democracy. The experience of being pierced once by beauty, by an artist's rendition of another's life, creates the capacity in a young person to be pierced again, and that ability to be pierced, learned, for example, in the sudden revelation of a world seen through another's eyes in a short story, creates the capacity for empathy, the capacity, that is, to see others, at least from time to time, without a hidden agenda, without bargaining, the capacity to say something kind to a stranger and mean every word of it.

The world rendered by poetry is both its disclosure and the means, or terms, of its disclosure. Technique is the test of sincerity, the subject matter "wholly other," shrouded in a "cloud of unknowing" that it does not purport to pierce but through the midwifery of its music. In the throes of creation, it is the cadence the writer is catching, trying to catch. The writer's walk forces attention, so it is generous, and genuine, a world made out of attention to the world. For cadence does not purport to explain the world, only to trace it. So, too, at the community college, we listen, and participate in, the cadence of welcome, not for its disclosures, but for its commons, a region that does not exist until everyone is invited. The *Potomac Review* classroom is an open one, title passing from speaker to speaker, the lectern coeval with whatever the voice in the round. As it has been said, knowledge is not gained except in the company of others. The unseen comes to light when insights come spontaneously, unbidden, unforeseen. A light is called into being that comprehends and unifies us all.



*Nick's mother slept directly beneath him on the third-floor,
so I was careful to be gentle*

FLUKE

NICK'S mother wore a blue crewneck sweater with *Yale* scrawled across in gray. While I was cutting onions, she tapped me lightly on the shoulder. "Kay, honey, please don't use that board... Here, look, use one of these." She opened a low drawer full of cutting boards.

"That one's just for cheese," Nick leaned down to whisper in my ear while his mother glided away. "A cheese board," he clarified, pointing to some more cheese boards in the cupboard. I looked at the board under my pile of onions and then back at the cheese-only boards. They looked the same.

"The cleaning ladies come over on Wednesdays," Nick's mother told me after I had finished fussing in the kitchen. Tomorrow was Wednesday. I stared blankly. "One to three in the afternoon. I like to stay out of their way." She looked at me pointedly, her eyes suggesting that I would like to also stay out of their way. "You should hang out in Nick's art studio. He tells me you make some exquisite paintings yourself."

Nick's "art studio" was a transformed attic with toppled easels, half-finished loose canvases, and flecks of paint scattered across the walls. He believed himself a tortured artist—in some head-in-the-oven Sylvia Plath or cut-off-your-ear Van Gogh way—which was hilarious because he spent money on Blue Bottle Coffee and Pornhub Premium. His work was mostly charcoal and pencil drawings of very old crinkly faces and very old crinkly hands.

"Would you like some dessert wine?" his mother asked after dinner. The dish I had prepared today was curry over jasmine rice.

"Yes, thank you," I replied quickly, pretending that yes, I knew what dessert wine was, and indeed, I had it quite often. I handed her my existing empty wine glass. "No, no, this one for dessert wine." She whipped out a

tall, sexy, slender excuse for a flute and handed it to me. Or maybe it was a fluke. Later, I googled “types of fancy champagne glasses.” There was *Aria, Mara, Edge, Trumpet, Tryst, Verve*. No flutes or flukes.

“THIS laundry machine is just for you,” she explained. She arranged for me to sleep just next to the laundry machines, in the guest bedroom in the basement. The floor was unbearably cold and I found myself putting on two pairs of socks. “This is a Pre-Spotter,” she said, pointing at the many jugs and jars above the machines. “This is a Booster. This is a Neutralizer. This is Bleach. This one is a Softener...I think. There’s honey in it. This one is paraben-free. Actually, these are all paraben-free. This one isn’t actually a detergent. This one is organic. This is the one I use. This one smells like a French lilac. This is an Eco Nut.” I looked at the box. It read, “Do Your Laundry With Soap Berries! (Nut Allergy Safe).”

She had the *New York Times* delivered to the door in the mornings. The actual paper *New York Times*. This was the most exciting thing. I couldn’t tell if it was presumptuous or rude to retrieve the package, undress the thin plastic skin, and start reading with a flourish. It was not my *New York Times*, after all. But I was currently staying over—was this not part of the deal? She was bound to read it anyway. Maybe she would even thank me for retrieving it for her. I looked at the bound roll, squished and impotent against the screen door.

I decided to ask her.

She was sitting in the Marble Kitchen Island in a high chair, facing away from me. I didn’t know how to get her attention.

I nailed the family member naming pseudo-test at every once-every-three-years family gathering in China. My mother would say to me, very loudly so that the room could hear “Have you named all of your dear relatives yet?” Standard Protocol. We both knew full well that I had not. But I was prepared. I had reviewed this on the plane.

I would somersault across the room, nailing every single “mother’s older brother’s oldest son” and every “father’s older sister’s husband.” *Da Yi Ma. Er Yi Ma. Xiao Gu Ma. Gu Fu. Nai Nai. Po Po. Shu Shu. Bo Bo. A Yi. Jie Jie. Er Jie. Biao Jie*. They were all understandably impressed. They complimented my mother for raising her daughter “the right way.” *Other*

American Born Chinese girls and boys don't even know *ge ge* from *di di*. I was a big deal in that room.

Here, however, I felt powerless. Saying, "Hi Nick's mother?" felt like we were at a second-grade birthday party and I needed a parent's permission to tackle the orange slices. Saying, "Mrs. Fitzsimmons?" felt like I was addressing a schoolteacher. "Dr. Fitzsimmons?" felt like I was at the orthodontist. "Emily?" was ridiculous, obviously. Going all the way to stand in front of her and try to get her attention was going to make me feel like I was mute or some circus animal. My mother would have instructed me to say "Aunty" because it was the closest translation of "A yi." This was, of course, the worst one.

I resolved to tap her lightly on the shoulder.

She spasmed at my touch—her hand twitched and knocked over her coffee. It spilled all over the Marble Kitchen Island, drifting into the bowl of oranges and apples and bananas, like the slow spread of pee down your leg—relief and horror—except now there was only horror.

"I'm so sorry," I ran wildly to retrieve paper towels, dragging and tearing too many. They were these thick, luxurious Bounty paper towels. Or maybe they were Charmin. In any case, they felt meaty in my hands. It was too few paper towels. I ran back again.

"It's okay. It's okay. It's not your fault," she kept saying as I mopped and heaped more paper towels into a little wet brown mound. "I'm anxious all the time," she said. "It's just my nerves. Don't worry about it," as I continued to run and sweat. She stood there, laptop in hand, and pulled her chair away from the impending drip over the counter. "I meditate an hour a day now. It's been great for me. You should meditate. Do you meditate? Kay?"

Eventually, there were no more spreading or dripping liquids, but the whole room smelled like coffee-breath.

"Could I read the *Times*?" I asked, pointing at the screen door.

PAST midnight, I stared at my phone's lock screen until the time flipped from 1:59 to 2:00 and then I climbed like a gorilla, with flat hands and slippery socks, up many flights of stairs from my guest bedroom in the basement to Nick's bedroom on the fourth-floor. Nick's mother slept

directly beneath him on the third-floor, so I was careful to be gentle when walking past her room, but the floorboards creaked and groaned anyway.

For the first time since the first time, the sex is not lukewarm but burns, and head is not perfunctory but enthusiastic. And for the first time, I feel like I can put my fingers in his mouth, and so I do, until he gags and looks at me with questions in his eyes. I see his gentle disapproval, which makes me angry, so I tie my black t-shirt over his eyes, which doesn't do much, but at least I can pretend that he cannot see. His stomach is rumble and soft. He is comically performative. He trembles and whimpers. His breathing is purposefully airy and short. He says my name, dramatized and soft. I tell him *shhh*. Silence is necessary—your mother-Mrs. Fitzsimmons-Dr.Fitzsimmons-Emily-Aunty is right below us.

It is mostly that I am not smelling the wafting, lingering piss of the 7 train, that I am on bedsheets that someone else strips and washes, that I am here in this impossibly narrow and endlessly tall Manhattan townhouse that makes me come for the first time not by myself.

My tip toe back down to the basement is dark and winding, slow and expected. In the morning, I wake up to seven missed calls from my mother and one from my father.

“Do you not read the news?” my mother asks. In comes an article in my messages. I put my mother on speaker to read it. It is entirely in Chinese. I cannot read Chinese and my mother knows this, but the video is of my grandmother being pushed to the ground.

“That looks like grandma,” I say to my mother.

“They’re only allowing one visitor in the hospital now, so you can’t see her, but please come home.”

She’s cutting out a little bit—the signal is terrible in the basement.

“She’ll be out soon and she’ll want to see you.”

I play the video again. I think about my grandmother’s soft body. She has screws in her hips from a fall decades ago. She had once lifted up her shirt, turned around, and showed me. Two black dots, symmetrical above her waistline. She can’t walk very fast. I think about her Parkinson’s—how she took medication that she pretended was Ambien because she didn’t want us to worry. But she couldn’t prevent her hands from shaking. I

think about her crinkled hands. I think about how Nick would have drawn them—more sad than they actually were, probably. “He’s your boyfriend?” she once said over breakfast. I ate Froot Loops. She ate some hot oatmeal-milk-honey concoction that I had been refusing to eat for a decade.

“Yes, we’ve been dating for six months,” I finally said.

“That’s too long.”

I laughed. “Okay, what is the appropriate length of time to date him, then?”

“Three months is fine,” she said, dead serious. She leaned in to whisper in my ear, “I think your mom will want you to marry a Chinese boy.” I looked around—my mother was not around.

“I’m not going to marry him, grandma.”

“Then why are you dating him? Stop wasting your time.”

I play the video again. My grandmother cowers and puts her hands in front of her face again. The man not so much pushes her as grabs her by the shoulders, lifts her, and throws her. In the crowded street, he is the only one not wearing a mask. I play the video again. I recognize the street and then I see the bakery. It is where my grandma gets her favorite red bean buns, pineapple buns and egg custard. She used to get them dozens at a time. I haven’t had an egg custard in years. My grandma’s head hits the steel of a newsstand box and then her body vanishes out of frame. He turns and walks away immediately. Everyone stops. Nobody apprehends the man. Nobody moves to help my grandmother up. Everyone looks around like they are expecting someone else to do something.

Twitchy fingers and the *New York Times*. In April, a man doused a 39-year-old Asian woman with acid as she took out the trash. In July, two men lit an 89-year-old Asian woman on fire near her Brooklyn home. Two employees of Xi’an Famous Foods were punched in the face on the subway. Someone spit on Yuanyuan Zhu as she was walking to the gym in San Francisco. A sixteen-year-old boy attacked at school. An 84-year-old man shoved to the ground. A high school teacher in Seattle. A college freshman in Albuquerque. A woman and her ten-year-old daughter.

My article-dive is interrupted when my mother puts me on FaceTime with my grandmother. She has stitches in her forehead. Her face, which is normally plump and bright, is now sharp and jutted. Her wrinkles are slacked around her cheekbones. Now, more than ever, I want to hear her sing. She sings these folk songs so beautifully. I realize that I have never seen my grandma sleep.

Nor have I seen her swim. She has turned into a capsule of a woman, a sleeve of her former solidness.

My grandmother refuses to take the phone, pushing it away. "I told you not to call her," she says to my mother, exasperated.

"Don't be silly," my mother said.

"It's really not a big deal," still not looking at me.

"You have stitches on your forehead! Look at you."

"Accidents happen."

"Ma, he pushed you."

"It was an accident. I fell. It's the bad hip."

"It's on tape, Ma, why are you lying? What did you even say to him?"

"Can you hang up?" she asks my mother. "She's on break. She's supposed to be having a good time. She has a boyfriend. Did you know that? How dare you waste her time like this. I've told you, I'm fine."

She looks at me, for the first time, through the phone.

"Really, nothing happened."

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" I ask.

"What is that lady feeding you? I hope it's not just celery and crackers. Or, what do you say, cheese? I've never understood cheese."

"Why did he push you?"

She sighed. "I just want to go home. I think I left the rice cooker on." She looked at my mother and asked, "When are we going home?"

"The nurse said you should probably stay overnight."

"Overnight? Overnight?"

She made a big show of trying to get out of the bed. Mother had to pretend-hold her down.

Nick comes into my room. I hang up quickly, and instantly I am filled with disgust at myself—I didn't even say goodbye to my grandma.

“Who was that?” he asks. What is he doing here? He never comes down to the basement.

In retrospect, it would have been so simple just to tell him the truth. Nick, my grandmother was just attacked in the street. He would have cared. He would have tried to ask his mother to pay for the hospital bill, maybe. He would have, at least, held my head as I cried into his chest. But somehow, the moment escaped me—I said nothing.

“What? Are you not gonna tell me?” And there was such disbelief in his eyes. To him, there was nothing more incomprehensible, was there?

“What? I have to report to you every time I call someone now?”

“That’s not what I meant. You know that’s not what I meant.”

“What do you mean, then?”

“Was that another guy?” he asked.

“I have to leave.”

“You can’t leave,” he says, not missing a beat. “Remember?”

“I’m going back home. Something’s come up, okay? Just leave me alone for a little bit. I need to pack.”

“Kay, we’ve been planning this for months. You can’t come back if you leave, you know? My mother won’t allow it.”

Half an hour later, I’m upstairs, packed and waiting for the Uber.

“It’s not like we own her,” Nick’s mother says to Nick. “She can go if she wants, you know?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot another *New York Times* on the Marble Kitchen Island. The headline reads: “6 Asians Among 8 Killed in Georgia; Suspect Cites ‘Sexual Addiction.’”

I stayed that night. I didn’t go back home. I canceled the Uber. And later, I still climbed up. And still, I was cautious with the floorboards.

I lie there, inert and nearly comatose—my limbs splayed like I am floating in water. He grunts and pushes on top of me with practiced eagerness. It’s this again. His body is slick and feverish. He grabs my boob with an ungentle claw. It hurts. There is a lull when I can hear his breath and feel his locomotive cyclical movements—a machine at work. I am here, in this impossibly narrow and endlessly tall Manhattan townhouse, and I cannot bear to have him on top of me for one second longer, but I bear it nonetheless.

When he orgasms, it is a catharsis only for him—he has his eyes closed and mouth ajar.

He has his hand on my throat and there is just enough slack for me to breathe a little. And just as I wonder if I will ever escape the crushing weight of his body, he rolls off me. In the dark, I can still see his eyes. “I still don’t understand,” he says. “Why won’t you just tell me?”

HAIL MAMIE FULL OF GRACE

(after Joseph Ross)

Somewhere, always, the light switch of the moon is on
as babies feast from mothers' milky pillows.

Somewhere, always, in cradles of the wee hours, swaddling
clothes are lullabies for newborn souls,

cocooning. Once, in a South Side manger, a mother
gave birth to a king. *Hail Mamie full of Grace*

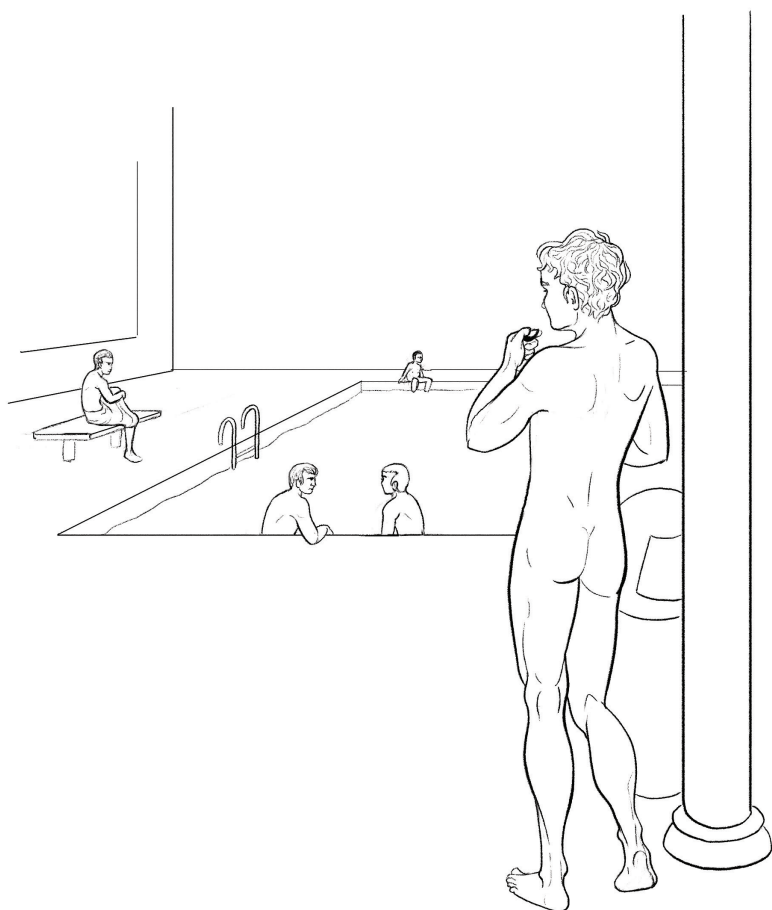
the first time she counted Emmett's toes. *Hail Mamie
full of Grace*, the first time she tallied

his fingers, divined the weight of his smile. *Hail Mamie
full of Grace* in 1941, the very first time

that she dressed him, anointed him with sugar words,
cushioned his dreams when his diapers

were dry. *Hail this Mamie full of Grace*, who never
heard a seed barn scream, or saw

the barbed wire weep. *The Lord is always with
thee*, just like Bobo's ring.



I didn't dare risk making a first move.

ON BECOMING GERMAN

I WAS sixteen when I first arrived in Germany. It was 1955, just ten years after the War had ended and six years after the Berlin blockade and airlift. Much of isolated West Berlin was still in rubble. On the ground, rows of older women could be seen sitting back on their heels, pounding the mortar off bricks; they stacked them neatly so they could be re-used in new buildings. Children played in the rubble. It made for grand castles.

I had been sent there from California as a summer exchange student. When I met my German host family, the first thing I discovered was that they didn't know any English. Well, the mother could say "*Hents oop!*" which I soon realized meant "Hands up!"—but that was the extent of it. They had lied on their application. They wanted an American. And here I was, by myself, 110 miles behind the "Iron Curtain."

It had never entered my head to study German. *French* was the beautiful language. But my German mother was determined to teach me her language, resorting to drawings and mime, pinching my arm and then replacing my *ouch!* with *aue!* Playfully she refused to feed me unless I could identify what I was eating in German. *Eisbein mit Erbsenpüree. Stachelbeer-Torte. Blutwurst. Spinat. Kartoffelsalat.*

To my surprise, gradually I started to intuit what people were saying. I'm still not certain how this worked, but German words began to speak to me directly, bypassing English. The girl in the popular song sang *Gib mir einen Kuss, einen Kuss, einen Kuss*. "Give me a kiss, a kiss, a kiss." Well, that seemed clear enough. One night, when the beer was flowing, my German started to flow. I wasn't thinking; I just talked, full speed ahead. And so I came home to California speaking a fluid but rather freewheeling, rough-around-the-edges German.

I had fallen in love with German. I wanted to learn more.

There were no German classes in my high school—it was still too soon after the War. But there were a few Germans sprinkled about in my hometown. The grandmother of one of my classmates, Dirk, was from Lüneburg and lived nearby with Dirk and his family. Word had reached her of me and she started to invite me over for tea. She would bake *Lebkuchen* or a *Gugelhupf*, and we would sit in the kitchen and speak German. During our conversations, I made lists of the precious words I was learning. I wrote down a few German poems she had me memorize. Dirk would often come home when I was there; a quick “hi” and that was it, he’d disappear into his room. He was on the football team; at school our paths never crossed.

As a Stanford freshman I signed up for German 1. I wanted to have a full command of the language, so I began at the beginning. Conversations with Dirk’s grandmother over *Gugelhupf* could only take me so far. When I started to learn the grammar, I was stunned at the complexity of the language. For openers there are three genders and four cases; accordingly, there are six ways to translate the word “the.” *Der, des, dem, den, die, das*. Slowly I learned that there are twenty-seven ways to form the plural. There are reflexive verbs that take a genitive object. If I had known all this as I happily spoke away back in Berlin at age sixteen, my tongue loosened by round after round of beer, I would have been too daunted to ever start studying the language. But it was too late. I was in too deep. There was no way I could stop.

As my freshman year at Stanford progressed, I came to a realization. Something I had sensed, but tried to ignore. I was attracted to guys. But this was the 1950s, and this had to be kept secret. Surely, I thought to myself, there were other guys who felt the way I did. But as if by gentleman’s agreement, no one dared entertain the idea that such an attraction might exist. The word “gay” meant only “merry.” It was still safe.

While I was grappling with my feelings, I discovered the Stanford “men’s pool.” Actually this referred to three Olympic-sized outdoor swimming pools. They were surrounded by a large deck area, open to the sun and hidden behind high walls. The most notable feature of the

“pool” was that no one was allowed to wear a swimsuit. No one seemed to mind. The pool was a very popular place. Naked guys were everywhere, swimming or sunbathing, some of them scattered around on the deck or up in the bleachers eating lunch.

I remember one day, as I sat on my towel, a sharp-sweet scent drew my attention to a kid standing over by a trash can, peeling an orange. Carefree and naked, lost in his own world, he stood there, tearing away the rind in divots, absently pushing the flesh of the orange, section by section, into his mouth. A young Apollo eating an orange, I thought to myself, as he stood there in perfect *contrappunto*. But then I realized that I was staring and he might notice me. Quickly I forced myself to look away. But who else was looking at him? Were there other guys? And if so, how could I connect with them? I didn’t dare risk making a first move. Approaching the wrong person could ruin the rest of my life on campus. And so there we were, those of us, surely, who were all watching but just sitting there in hiding.

After I graduated from Stanford as a German major, a Fulbright Grant took me back to Berlin in 1960/61. I arrived in Europe early, at the beginning of summer. Classes in Berlin didn’t begin until October, so I had ample time to bum my way around Europe. In 1960, the dollar was king—\$1.00 was officially valued at 4.20 *Deutsche Mark*—and youth hostels cost 25¢ a night. I had a Eurail Pass, allowing me to spend two months traveling on first-class trains throughout Western Europe for a low, set price. I “did” Europe from Trondheim, Norway, down to Naples, then back up to Hamburg and a flight over locked-down, Soviet-controlled East Germany to West Berlin.

While I was traveling, I made an early discovery. If I looked intensely at an attractive young man passing by on the street, when I would look back for one more glimpse, not infrequently the attractive young man would have turned around for one more glimpse of *me*. I quickly learned how things worked. There were quite a number of such meetings, albeit fleeting. We had no place to go; we found places to go. I connected with several young Finns with whom I had no common language, but as it turned out, that didn’t matter.

FOR my graduate work I went back to Stanford, where still nobody gay would dare show his face—although there was a Danish Theater Arts Major named Søren who was rumored to be “that way.” I had a lonely three years; friends, but no real connection, no special friend. After a while it occurred to me that I had never had sex with an American guy. Oddly, the idea seemed to be almost incestuous.

Then, having passed my Ph.D. orals, I was given a dissertation fellowship for a year in Hamburg. I was writing about Thomas Mann as “The Comic German,” a topic that many German scholars considered to be heresy. But back then it would have been even greater heresy to suggest that Thomas Mann was gay. I could intuit this, but that information hadn’t yet been revealed, so I had a leg up. I found I could better understand his comic hero Felix Krull if I followed the gay subtexts in the novel, as well as in the Joseph tetralogy and the rest of Mann’s writings. It wasn’t just von Aschenbach pining for Tazio on the beach in Venice, although to this day scholars jump through no end of hoops to deny any whiff of homosexuality in that stately philosophical novella in which no one is gay.

By now my German was native-fluent; I even had a Hamburg overlay to my speech. It never occurred to Germans in shops or even at parties that I might not be German. It was a perfect disguise; I could choose when—or if—to take off the mask. I had separate selves I could go in and out of. It was a wonderful freedom.

I was getting to know German from the inside out. I loved the tongue-twister “*Brautkleid bleibt Brautkleid.*” Virtually impossible to repeat quickly, if at all. I loved German words like *Augentropfen*, *Zapf*, *schnarschst*, *Herbstlied*. And, of course, *Gugelhupf*. It’s the opposite of seal-slick French. When I speak German, automatically it becomes something physical; I give it an extra oomph. It’s as if I’m speaking with my whole body. It’s a wonderful ride. I feel more alive.

But when I speak English, it’s as if I’m lying inert on the floor. I feel as if my mouth isn’t moving. German has its own rough-and-tumble charm. More *Knochen*, which is their word for “bones.” More *Ecken*, which is their word for “edges.” I like who I am in German.

And then before I knew it, that was the end of the road, the end of my student days. UCLA had hired me to teach German; I was now to become an Assistant Professor in the fall. Although I looked young enough to still get “carded,” I was 27. I was now a grown-up. I wasn’t sure I was ready to be.

And so it came down to my final day in Hamburg before returning home. I had a great friend at the University, Joachim. (My close friends were all straight; I still kept my worlds divided.) We would rent a boat, and he would take me sailing on Lake Alster every Wednesday afternoon. Joachim agreed to accompany me to the Hamburg airport to see me off. I had booked a Lufthansa flight to London before a connecting PanAm flight to take me back home to L.A. It was a very early morning flight; we hoped it would be a short wait. As Joachim and I sat restlessly in molded plastic chairs, there came an announcement over the loudspeakers: my Lufthansa flight to London would be delayed due to heavy fog. Not what I wanted to hear. But then there came another announcement: The Finnair flight to London would now be departing at Gate 7. This discrepancy didn’t seem to make sense; perhaps I had heard it wrong.

Joachim and I hadn’t had any breakfast and were starting to grow hungry. He was friends with a girl who worked for the British airline BEA. A few times she had shown him their lounge just behind their counters. Surely we could slip in and join the staff for breakfast. They were a chummy, casual group; no one would mind.

Joachim quickly found Antje and left me to fend for myself. The lounge looked to be self-serve. I poured myself some Twining’s breakfast tea and sat down at an empty table. Absently I started to spread a slice of toast with butter when a voice behind me inquired: *Möchten Sie etwas Marmelade?* “Would you like some marmalade?” I looked up to see a very handsome young man roughly my age wearing a crisp black Navy-looking uniform, complete with visored officer’s hat. He had dark hair, but his eyes were an intense Nordic blue. They focused on me. No one had ever looked at me like that before. I took a closer look at him as he stood there, right above me. In this handsome young man I saw more than marmalade. I saw magic.

"Hallo, ich bin Horst," he said, introducing himself and joining me at the table. We hit it off immediately. If I studied German literature, surely I loved Kleist. Such an explosive writer! And to think how he met that strange end in a cemetery! Had I spent much time at the *Thalia-Theater*? Had I seen Maria Wimmer as Medea? What was my favorite aria? We laughed when we both said *Nessun' dorma*. I was breathless; I could hardly keep up with him. Had I been to the *Fischmarkt* at dawn? Did I like fish?

While Horst and I were lost in conversation, more announcements were made. The Air France flight to London was now departing at Gate 5. My Lufthansa flight to London would be further delayed. There was still very heavy fog at the airport. Clearly something didn't add up. Horst volunteered to go over to Lufthansa to find out just exactly what was *los*. Minutes later he returned, barely able to contain his laughter. *Das ist die Mühle mit der Bombe drin!* "That's the plane with the bomb in it!"

So that was the situation. Two more hours, and more and more flights flew off to London as scheduled, and yet Lufthansa was still hobbled by thick London fog. Joachim apologized that he had to leave. He had a dentist's appointment; he hadn't counted on such a long delay.

At loose ends, I stayed in the BEA lounge drinking Twining's. Horst in his uniform came and went, tending to business, collecting boarding passes, trouble-shooting troublesome passengers, then coming back to join me. Airline code for *Passagier* was *PAP*; the plural was *PAX*, Horst told me. But he had created his own slang word for the plural, calling them *Päpse*. I had never met anyone like Horst. He said we should exchange addresses. We should stay in touch.

Finally they announced that my Lufthansa flight to London was ready for boarding. We passengers—*Päpse*—were asked to present ourselves in Waiting Room B. Once we were inside, the doors were summarily locked and we were surrounded by police. Now it was official. A bomb had been reported and must be found. They had searched the plane, but there was no bomb inside. That left our luggage. And so we were herded down into the basement, surrounded by police. All our checked bags were opened and searched with a meticulousness that could only be German. No bomb was found.

As I went through check-in for my Lufthansa flight, Horst was there at the gate. *Na*, he told me, grinning, *wenn's wirklich 'ne Bombe gibt, dann merkst du's erst in der Luft!* "If there really is a bomb, you won't notice until you're the air!"

The long letter I had planned to write Horst from L.A. didn't and didn't get written. There were my UCLA classes to prepare for, exams to grade, a speech on Thomas Mann that I was asked to give—in German—at Los Angeles City College. And there was Nicholas, whom I had met during intermission in a small theater. The first guy with whom I had a relationship of sorts. It was easy to be with him. He had warm brown eyes and wrote advertising copy for the May Co. department store. He had even written a short story. Well, the beginning of a short story. But I couldn't get Horst out of my mind. I even dreamt about him once, standing *very* close to me, looking right at me with his blue eyes. Finally at Christmas I sent him a card. I wasn't sure what to say, so I opted for brevity and student flippancy. *Bombensicher mit der Lufthansa*, I wrote. "Bombproof" with Lufthansa. Absolutely safe.

Two weeks later a letter arrived. Deep down I knew the letter would come. The striped, thin airmail envelope was plump and bulged in my small apartment mailbox. Even before opening the envelope, I had a sense of where this might lead. The letter inside had been typed with a green ribbon. Four pages single-spaced with almost no margins. Horst had rented a typewriter to write me. He plunged right in, revealing himself. He started with World War II; as a child he was terrified as the bombs fell on Bielefeld. So many air-raids and scrambles for his mother to dress him and get him to the air-raid shelter in the middle of the night. Sometimes she forgot his mittens.

Horst was an only child. His parents didn't understand him; he was only half-joking when he said that surely he must have been adopted. His father worked in a factory that made bicycle parts. During the war his father had continued to work in the same factory, now manufacturing parts for the war effort. But by then almost everything people in Germany did, willingly or not, was for the war effort.

His mother suffered from clinical anxiety. She was too nervous to ever get inside an airplane, even though as his mother she could have

flown anywhere in the world for virtually nothing. What a waste! She could have gone to Patagonia or the Lofoten Islands. She could have seen the Sydney Opera House!

Horst lived in a world apart from his schoolmates. He had managed to make it through his mandatory military service; he sensed a distance, but tried to be one of the guys. One night he drank so much he fell out of a window and broke his arm. They sent him home early. Had I ever broken anything? Did I have any scars? He was a Sagittarius, what was my sign? Had I ever thought of suicide? His one attempt had failed, but his three-day-induced sleep had led to permanent kidney damage.

I had never known anyone like Horst. Even though I had seen him only once in the flesh, he had a power that was already sweeping me into something unknown. Nicholas in L.A. was sensual, safe and comfortable. But he didn't know any German.

With Horst I could *be* German—the language in which we knew each other. Traveling alone with my Eurail Pass back in 1960, in a youth hostel in Dublin I saw a kid with a German passport ahead of me waiting to check in. Without thinking I blurted out to him, *Bist du auch Deutscher?* “Are you German, *too?*” That was becoming my identity. The guys I joined up with and toured Tivoli or the Tuborg brewery with on my travels were always German. “*Na, wollen wir los?*”

Over the next few months Horst's letters grew longer and more expansive. So many green words crowded onto thin airmail pages in German. Slowly we were creating our own world, our own idiolect. Horst made up so many words that were his own, I had to be careful not to let them spill out into my German Conversation class at UCLA.

But it was far more than just his words, more than bombs over Bielefeld and *Nessun' dorma*. I had to consider what would it be like to know him in person again.

Time moved on, more and more letters, a rapid, increasing baring of souls. As spring approached, Horst wrote he could come to Los Angeles for a three-week visit at Easter; since he worked for an airline his flight would be free. When he was with me, we could discuss where we would live together. Maybe Barcelona, he'd lived near there for two years working at a

resort beach hotel in Sitges. Did I know Spanish? He could always emigrate to L.A. But for right now, during my three-month summer vacation, of course I would live with him in Hamburg. Who knows, maybe I would just like to stay there and not return home. Well, a quick trip home to get my things...

Horst wrote me about his life in Hamburg. In the evening he might attend the 8:00 p.m. screening of the classic 1931 film *M*, with Peter Lorre, and then he'd make a dash over to a small obscure avant-garde theater for the midnight performance where they were all naked but body-painted and in the second act they mingled in with the audience. If the show lasted too long, instead of going home he would sometimes take the *U-Bahn* down to the early-morning *Fischmarkt*. He'd forgotten if I said I liked fish.

That very first day, back when I saw that plump envelope crowding my small mailbox, I had sensed something overwhelming. I wasn't sure I was ready for this.

I wrote back to Horst. I said Easter would be fine.

OUT WITH THE OLD

When we wrestled my mother's old mattress out
the bedroom door and into neverland
we found four dusty rosaries sprawled
into clumps under the frame

dazed by their lack of miracles.

My father and I bent to gather them,
at least one blessed by a saint or pope or a child
who talked to God. We met each other's eyes

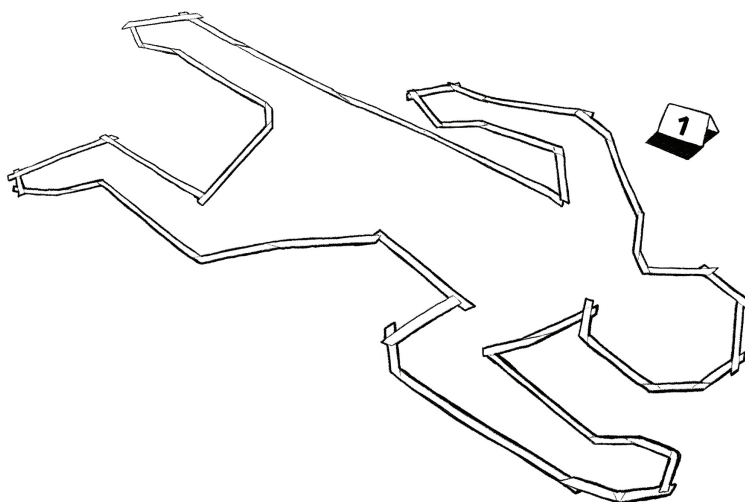
in the hard, beaded silence of what we were
not going to say. They'd deliver
the hospital bed later. We'd bent my mother
into sharp angles on the couch.

I slipped one rosary into her cupped bones
where it liquified or turned to stone
or ash. All I know is I could not will her
back into those prayers gathered

in the dust under that bed vacuumed
from her memory. My father
saved one for each of the children.
The van to neverland turned

onto the block and stopped to erase
the old mattress from the curb.
My father who art not in heaven
sprawled into a clump

in his easy chair across from her
dazed by the lack of miracles.



According to Truman, she was always bringing home some gentleman she'd meet at a singles bar or church.

THAT'S NOT WRITING, IT'S TYPING

When Detective Brewster called Truman to come inspect the scene of the crime, it was discovered that the thieves had only stolen family pictures. Truman's mother's timing had been unfortunate, walking in on the intruders and subsequently strangled in her foyer. There was no trace of her except for the standard body outline taped to the floor. In fact, there was little evidence (other than her things—clothes and furniture which could have belonged to anybody) that she had ever lived in this space, let alone that she had died there. Truman looked everywhere—from the attic to the basement—but all that was missing were photo albums out of the living room, framed pictures taken from the walls (outlines left behind on the faded eggshell), and boxes of snapshots from storage.

Perhaps it was presumptuous to assume that there was more than one thief; one visitor could have easily broken into Truman's mother's house, killed her, and stolen the photographs. Or maybe she invited him in. According to Truman, she was always bringing home some gentleman she'd meet at a singles bar or church. Truman had been telling her—jokingly, of course—for years that one of them would eventually kill her, but she laughed and brushed away his concerns as if they were no more than the paranoid worries of a doddering old man.

Truman had been working on a novel for ten years, ever since he had graduated from college, what he thought, when he finished, would be his magnum opus, his first and last book. He had imagined his novel as a type of game, constructed according to an elaborate system of rules and regulations. Truman's two great aunts, Abigail and Martha, had set up a trust fund for him so that he could concentrate on his writing and avoid the day-to-day drudgery of a career. This monetary aid also took away any sense of urgency; he could take as much time as he liked to finish,

working without an outline or any clear sense of where he was going. “I can’t rush,” he would tell the few who were willing to listen, “the novel has a life of its own.” And truthfully, there was a part of him that didn’t want the novel to end; he was scared of resolution.

Detective Brewster asked Truman to make a list of everything that was missing. Of course, Truman couldn’t possibly remember all of the photos—there must have been hundreds, perhaps thousands—so he made a list of genres:

- 1) *family members*
 - a) *posed*
 - b) *action*
- 2) *newly decorated rooms*
- 3) *corpses in state*
- 4) *landscapes from various vacations*
- 5) *misc. inanimate objects*

Detective Jack Brewster was a barrel-chested man with a scrub-brush moustache reminiscent of Teddy Roosevelt. His achievements included bringing to trial the Brother Sam serial murderer and solving the Morgan and Shaw case. He was known to drink too much, even engaging in the occasional bar brawl.

After he finished the list and answered the detective’s questions, Truman returned home to his bachelor apartment and untitled mess-of-a-novel. Little did he know, Detective Brewster was following. One of Brewster’s self-imposed roles as lead investigator was to personally keep his eyes on the chief suspect in any high-profile murder case and Truman was suspect number one. Brewster knew that if he watched Truman for every moment that, after some nearly mystical predetermined time, he would start to see Truman’s guilt almost as if it were a physical deformity or better, subtler, an aura he carried with him, a haze he walked through.

This type of surveillance is exhausting—no time for respite for the observer even though the observed may sleep—and, at some point, Brewster realized that he was no longer surveilling the alleged matricide,

Truman, through his apartment window, but was actually watching some obscure Dustin Hoffman film at home in his own apartment.

In the movie, Dustin Hoffman sits at an old, scarred desk, typing into an ancient manual typewriter, some pages of the novel he is writing next to him on the desk in a pile. "I can't watch this again," Brewster said, raising the remote and clicking the television off.

ELLIPTICAL ORBIT

There are only so many days. Some people
count them. Prison walls take their marks,

not that I would know. A hundred days disappear,
the planet revolving and spinning

off into the universe, taking me and everything I own with it.
You, too, I suppose.

We are always in revolution,
taking up a cause, marching in the streets, marching in the rain,

but today is all sunshine and apple blossoms.
Given another hundred days, perhaps

I can reach up into the trees, leaves quivering around my hands.
Perhaps I can pluck tart fruit from a high branch and bring it

to my mouth. Perhaps I can bite the unwashed flesh and taste
every second it took to get here, this moment, this interlude

suspended above with seeds that arrive grateful but shaken.
Grateful but shaken,

the world a rare and ripening yield,
I am unsure of my place on the calendar, my place

on the timeline from Big Bang to Big Crunch.
There are only so many days.

This day breathes
under birds and blooms, under breeze and trees,

under wisp and whisper. Wake up. The world is in light,
in darkness in light in light.

ROUND TRIP

Waves against the pilings,
I boarded the ferry to Staten Island.
I wasn't going anywhere,

only passing by. My friend told me
it was the best way to see her,

Lady Liberty on an overcast afternoon.
I thought I could fall in love
under those clouds, the scribbled

silhouettes of seagulls overhead.
The vessel rocked a little

while wind clung to the railing,
while I watched my friend struggle
to light a cigarette. It's been so long ago,

all the details create their own fog.
I think there was light climbing

the statue, highlighting
shadows in folds of sculpture.
What we talked about, I don't remember,

but I'd never felt more like a tourist
or an immigrant, in awe of a symbol

of hope. We debarked, walked around
the empty port, reboarded for the trip back
where we disappeared

among the architecture, surrounded,
as we were, by water.



After the attack, he had lingered several days in the hospital, in an oxygen tent, but had not suffered.

THE OPPOSITE OF DANCING

“WHY don’t you and Ralph get married?” I asked. I was twelve, and thought a man and a woman who loved each other that passionately would want to live happily ever after.

Virginia held back a laugh. “Because every time I want to get married, he doesn’t. And every time he wants to get married, I don’t.”

I had recently learned the word “debonair.” It seemed so perfect here. I told her that, and she patted my head, which was unfair and *not* debonair. But I was just a kid.

Virginia was wearing a big straw hat with a red ribbon, and shoes with red laces. She must have thought that was Colorado mountain gear. She and I sat in the yellow-enameled chairs on the patio of our house. It was June, 1957, and Mother and I were alone on our ranch for the summer. I still hoped Mother would marry again. Like Virginia. Virginia was from Oak Park, a ritzy (that was Mother’s word) suburb of Chicago; but she spent the summers here, because Ralph did.

Mother came out of our yellow house with iced tea and two glasses, one for herself and one for me. She wore a red bandana over her hair. She handed me my glass and teased Virginia, “Are you sure you don’t want some?” But Virginia had her army-surplus canteen. She would sip something from it that smelled sweet and repulsive at the same time. I told her that once, and she said, “Well, it’s an acquired taste.” That sounded ritzy.

ABOUT a week later, after lunch, Virginia drove Mother and me over to Ralph’s. He was our friend too. Ralph and another gentleman, Earl, spent their summers in a cabin up the canyon. It had been creosoted over so many times that it was deep brown and black. Years ago, Virginia came out here to visit them. She must have liked it here in the mountains,

because soon after that she began renting the cabin across the meadow from our house. I think I was nine at the time.

Today both men wore straw hats, like Virginia. Ralph came down to the car with his arms open to “Vir-GIN!” That word embarrassed me, but they pecked each other quickly on the lips, which was so sophisticated; once again I wondered why they didn’t get married. Ralph, who had waves of white hair and a red complexion, squeezed Mother’s hand, shot me a smile as I climbed out, and said, “Come on inside, and we’ll pretend for a moment we’re all together in Oak Park.”

Earl had stayed up on the porch. He was hard to see against the background of the dark woods. “Earl, aren’t you happy to see us?” I shouted up to him. Mother drew her breath in sharply and glared at me. She went up onto the porch, touched her fingers across Earl’s shoulder, said something quietly, and walked inside. Virginia didn’t seem to notice him. Colored pictures of Indian chiefs in headdresses hung on the walls inside their cabin. The big window in the living room offered “an inspirational view,” to use Mother’s words, of distant cliffs and mountain peaks. Just on the other side of the glass, ruby-throated green hummingbirds furiously beat their wings around two red sugar-water feeders.

Ralph brought Mother a glass of white wine and then said, “Vir-GIN, how about a gin and tonic?”

“Thank you!” she laughed. “You’ve had so much experience making them that you’ve got it down just right.”

“Well, you’d know what ‘just right’ is!”

How wonderful to talk like that.

In a few moments, Ralph brought their two glasses from the kitchen. Then he gave me a Coke. Earl had nothing.

Earl sat on the other end of the sofa from me. I’d always figured he was shy, so I supposed sitting with a kid seemed relatively comfortable. He was about Virginia and Mother’s age, and had thin, light-brown hair. His face was often lowered, his voice soft. I kind of liked that, but it also made me uneasy—maybe he liked me but maybe he didn’t. He and Ralph owned a dance school in Oak Park. A dance school “by invitation only,” Mother once pointed out to me in a hushed voice. I imagined the boys

and girls learning to waltz, to bow, to curtsy to each other. Twelve-year-olds, like me. But they were going to be debutantes and escorts, Mother had explained. They were not ranch people, like us. Yes, I was a little envious. But I could tell from Mother's voice that she was even more envious. Resentful, too.

Then Ralph raised his chin toward Earl. "Why don't you go pick Anne some irises? I want her to smell them. They're absolutely *marvelous* this year." He slithered his way through that word.

Earl stood up without a word, got a knife from the kitchen, and went out to the flowerbed in front of the cabin. When he returned, he brought maybe a dozen irises over to Mother. She touched his hand to thank him. Then she turned to Ralph. "Yes, this year the irises are absolutely *marvelous*. They're my favorite flower." She smiled to herself, her mouth in a little "o." I was confused. Why had she mimicked his exaggerated way of talking? And why did Ralph talk like that anyway? It embarrassed me, for some reason. Mother embarrassed me more. But maybe Ralph didn't know she was laughing at him. I hoped not.

The three of us left the two gentlemen's cabin about when I was beginning to get bored. After we got back in the Oldsmobile, Mother handed the flowers off to me, in the back seat. On the way home, I silently pretended that they were a magnificent bouquet, a rainbow of colors that a dashing debutante escort had given me.

After that, Virginia seemed to be spending all her time at Ralph and Earl's. About a month passed like that. Then one day, she stopped at our house to inform us that she was headed back, right away in fact, to Oak Park. Without explanation. For some reason that she didn't tell me, Mother seemed to take this as a personal insult, because she looked angry. But her eyes were a little bit sad.

Abandoned by Virginia, Mother got on the phone and invited Ralph and Earl over for dinner that coming Saturday. It was as though she were saying, "They can be my friends even without her."

I picked wildflowers for the table—red fairy trumpets, blue columbines, and white Queen Anne's lace. I was proud of my selections. They made me think of Ralph and Earl's blue-and-yellow irises: everything

bright, everything cheery. Then my thoughts slid and ended up on Earl again. Ralph didn't seem to treat Earl very well, but I couldn't figure that out, because Earl was basically nice, even though he was so, well, grey. I worried for Earl sometimes. It was only a matter of a few years until I would be on my own, out in the world, fearless. Mother, Ralph, and Virginia were pretty fearless too. But Earl? What had he done before he met Ralph? How had he managed, all alone? Or maybe he'd always known Ralph.

Mother took my flowers, trimmed their leaves and stems to her liking, and assembled them carefully in a vase. She looked proud of herself—she'd gone to get her hair done at the shop by the highway and returned with auburn tresses, like a lady in a poem, teased high and swept back, little curls like apostrophes over each temple.

She'd just put on her blue dress and red lipstick when Ralph and Earl drove up. We went out to their car, and Mother hugged Ralph.

"Isn't mountain weather in August *just right*!" Ralph said.

"Yes, *just...right*!" Mother sort of laughed.

She turned and touched Earl's arm and then brushed his cheek with her fingers, and he silently followed her and Ralph up to the patio.

We sat outdoors to watch the sunset. The smell of Mother's ham drifted out from the house, smothering even the resin smell of the pine trees around us. Ralph turned to Earl and said, "Oh, I forgot. Go to the car and get the wine I brought, will you?"

The quiet, distant expression on Earl's face didn't change. He just went and got it like he was told.

When Ralph uncorked the bottle and poured Mother and himself a glass of wine, I remembered why Earl didn't have any. Once I'd overheard Mother and Virginia say in low voices, *alcoholic*. The word had shocked me, like something really bad, but I didn't know what. Right now, Earl stood off to the side from us. In the low light, his fleshy nose appeared covered with little red veins. Somehow, that was connected to alcoholic. I didn't know how I knew that. He sort of had a sign over his head, with that word on it, which made me feel sorry for him. But a little afraid of him, too, because I didn't know what an alcoholic might do.

Inside, at our big oak table, Mother put me next to Ralph. Ralph stood and sliced the ham. Then he sat, and Mother said, "Bless us O Lord..." Peas and corn from little boxes in the freezer, slices of white bread, margarine, red Jell-O with a spoonful of mayonnaise on top were passed around. Ralph handed me the plate of bread, and my fingers accidentally reached all the way over his.

Hot embarrassment: I had touched a *man*. I was certain everyone was staring at me. Ralph must have thought I was trying to seduce him! I felt zingy and flushed between my legs. It had something creepy to do with "adult." Adult! Well, not that I liked things the way they were now, either: frizzy dark hair, pimples, and an overbite.

"Anne, you're a splendid cook. Simple, good food. Cloves on your ham and that's it. Good mountain food."

I couldn't tell if Mother felt pleased or hurt by the "simple" and "mountain food."

Then Ralph turned and looked at me. Clearly, he'd noticed nothing, not my fingers on his fingers, not my red face, nothing. I was oh-so-thankful.

"And you have such a lovely daughter in Rachel. Smart and fun. She's going to be beautiful soon. She'll marry well."

"That's all a mother can hope," she said, this time clearly proud.

I beamed at the whole table.

"It's a shame there's no dance school up here in these mountains," he sighed.

Mother straightened.

"We've never thought it was that important," she said, her chin high, her eyes meeting his.

Part of me was oh-so-proud of her courage. The rest of me wanted to shout, "Dance lessons would be all my dreams come true, *Mo-ther!*"

Right away Ralph changed the subject to the glorious weather of Colorado; and the two of them slid back into easy talking, about nothing, really.

Earl was looking out the window at the very last of the sunset and the darkness around it. Maybe he was feeling sorry for Mother, because Ralph had, in a way, looked down on us, maybe almost laughed at us,

the way Mother almost laughed at him sometimes. Anyway, Earl was sad because he was an “alcoholic,” I was sure; but maybe also because people ignored him. But even that was not enough to make a man that sad. Something else was doing that. A secret from his past?

Mother smiled at Ralph and handed Earl a knife and the ice-cream spoon and asked him to cut the cherry pie and put a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top of each slice. She took the plates and served everyone; but before she sat down, she bent over and kissed Earl’s forehead.

Alone in bed that night, I thought about that kiss and realized that Mother loved Earl. Maybe she wanted to marry Earl. She could marry Earl, and Virginia could marry Ralph. And every bit of that had something wrong with it. Like jamming parts and pieces of things together into a box that was too small. But I didn’t know what that was about any more than that wetness I had felt at the table. There in the dark, my face was hot again with shame.

THEN Ralph and Earl were gone, back in Oak Park. The Colorado autumn was too short; the snowy, silent winter felt like Elitch’s amusement park closed for the season. Ralph and Earl called us at Christmas, and so did Virginia; and then they all seemed completely gone.

Mother got us a puppy, for no reason at all. Just to have something new and alive. Maybe she felt lonely without her friends.

I became an official teenager and was doing percentages in math class and diagramming in English.

Easter came and left quickly. In May, one evening just as we were beginning to think what fun summer would be, especially with the puppy, and maybe even a horse, Mother received a person-to-person, long-distance phone call from someone she didn’t know in Oak Park. Ralph had died! A sudden heart attack, the woman said. After the attack, he had lingered several days in the hospital, in an oxygen tent, but had not suffered.

I saw in my mind’s eye his white hair, and remembered his exaggerated talking and his enthusiasm about irises. What an odd person Ralph had been. It wasn’t as though I’d miss him, and it wasn’t

as though I wouldn't. But Mother looked away and said, "Well, he shouldn't have smoked."

Well, if the truth were told, she hadn't really liked him.

"What's going to happen to Earl?" I said.

"He'll have to be brave now," she said, biting her lower lip. "Poor man."

What *would* Earl do now? Virginia wouldn't call him, laugh with him like she had with Ralph. Mothers would stop sending their sons and daughters for private dance lessons—certainly not with a tall, thin man who often looked down at his feet. And he wouldn't have much of anything to do at the cabin here. Alone. And I suddenly feared that would be too much for him to bear. But Mother would reach her hands out to him, because I knew she loved him. I didn't want him too close though, not too close, because I didn't know what to say to him about much of anything.

It turned out that Earl called on us at the end of summer. Mother, he, and I sat out on the patio of our house. I'd never seen anyone mourn before. Earl held his chin up as sorrow seemed to drip off his face. His face loose and quivering at his jowls, he and Mother discussed his trip out to Colorado, the selling of the cabin, the late-August weather.

Then suddenly, he said, "It's so terrible to take his clothes out of the closet. I can't look at them." He closed his eyes and took a breath. "I can't imagine them without him."

Mother changed the subject abruptly. It had something to do with me, a kid, sitting there; but that was all I knew. I didn't know where her love for Earl had gone. And Earl's sorrow made me want to cry, because I could see he wanted to cry too, even though Ralph had been mean to him.

I didn't know where Earl went after that. In my mind, he lived in end-of-the-day shadows, long and dreary. The end of summer: withered flowers. Then the end of fall: dry stalks sticking out of the snow. He didn't send us a Christmas card. I asked about him one last time at New Year's, and Mother said, "Well, I suppose he's gone on his way now. People do, you know."

BUT Virginia had been calling Mother ever since Ralph's death. Mother explained that the woman had been left with no one else, really. Virginia would call, talk and talk to Mother, and call again, the same day, just to talk. Mother would look weary, glance at her watch, and every once in a while say, "Oh, yes, Virginia."

After one call that lasted nearly an hour, Mother turned to me and said, "There certainly must be a lot of alcoholics in Oak Park." She put her hands on her lap and remembered. A private smile slowly grew over her lips. A happy memory for sure. Or amusement at Virginia's plight?

Then one Sunday when the winter snow was melting and the sun was becoming warm again, Mother was out walking our puppy, which was actually a big dog now. Virginia called.

"Mother's not here," I said politely.

"Then I'll get to talk with you!"

Her voice was mushy.

She asked me all the questions people who don't really know how to talk to kids ask, like what grade I was in, did I have a best friend, was I learning to dance?

I had a thought out of nowhere. "Virginia, wouldn't it be neat if Earl could teach me to dance?"

Virginia guffawed.

"Why did you laugh at that?" I asked.

"Earl is nothing without Ralph."

"What do you mean? Yes he is!"

"What I mean is, Earl's not a real man. My dear girl, don't you understand?"

So I understood.

Mother and the dog came in.

"Here she is—here she is," I almost shouted at Virginia.

I went out to the patio, to be alone. I was so angry at Virginia that I wanted to trip her. I hoped she'd never come back. And I was tired of everybody always laughing at everybody else. And sick and tired of being a dear little girl who had believed Mother loved Earl and Virginia had loved Ralph. How everyone must have laughed at me through the

years. Then I saw Earl in my imagination. He raised his head, and his eyes turned from sad to gentle. He nodded to me. He held out his hand—he was inviting me to dance, and so I held out mine. He positioned my hand on his shoulder and his hand around my waist, like I'd seen in magazines. We moved one-two-three, one-two-three around the patio, smiling into each other's face.

My dance teacher, and finally my friend.

Two summers later, when I was fifteen, Mother got a phone call early one morning. I was in my bedroom, so I couldn't hear clearly, just Mother's voice being surprised and gracious. Then she came in to me, her mouth in a great big "O."

"Guess who that was—Earl! He is passing through, and he's on his way over!"

We both got dressed fast, and gulped down some coffee. I was hopeful and excited, almost tingling; and Mother's face had its funny, inward smile.

Forty minutes later, a knock on the door. I was nearby, so I opened it. There he was—thin, receding pale hair combed straight back, the same nose, the same shape to his head.

But he wasn't *Earl*. There was darkness in his eyes, and arrogance in the way he held his head cocked while he walked over the threshold and into our room.

He didn't even notice me, with my big smile, raised hand.

I felt walked over. A crushed meadow flower.

The woman he was with had hollow cheeks and wore a black dress with long black sleeves and a belt, even though it was July. She was older than Earl. He turned slightly, but not enough to look at her, and said to Mother, "This is my wife, Elfrieda."

She did not look at her husband.

She nodded slightly in my direction.

Mother stepped up and shook hands with Elfrieda. The dog came over too, and the woman cringed. I spotted a little smile in Mother's eyes, on her open lip.

"You're looking well, Earl! Where are you living now?"

"In Abilene, Texas."

"How did the two of you meet, may I ask, Earl?"

"We met at the Abilene Free Bible Church."

"How interesting! Can you and Elfrieda come sit with us on the patio this beautiful morning?"

"No. I can't," he said, looking past Mother.

Then I got it. Earl had wanted only one thing: for us to see him with his WIFE. It was the lasting way he wanted us to know him. To forget about Ralph's thick, white hair. To forget the green hummingbirds, the straw hats, the blue-and-yellow irises.

But from the side I saw a squint: fear was at war with arrogance in those eyes.

I bet this Elfrieda didn't know about Ralph. Nothing about the long years the two of them had spent together. So, right now, everything was possibly on the line for Earl. What if Mother, or even I, mentioned Ralph and those long years? If this was a secret, Earl had indeed come here through incredible bravery.

Or what if he'd already told her everything—what then was it like for *her* to be at our door?

"I've brought these for you," he said, handing pamphlets to Mother.

Elfrieda nodded at Mother as she, then Earl, turned toward the door.

I was glad I hadn't had to look him in the eye.

Afterwards, Mother and I sat at our oak table and opened the Free Bible pamphlets threatening Satan's touch, urging repentance for all sins, promising redemption, salvation.

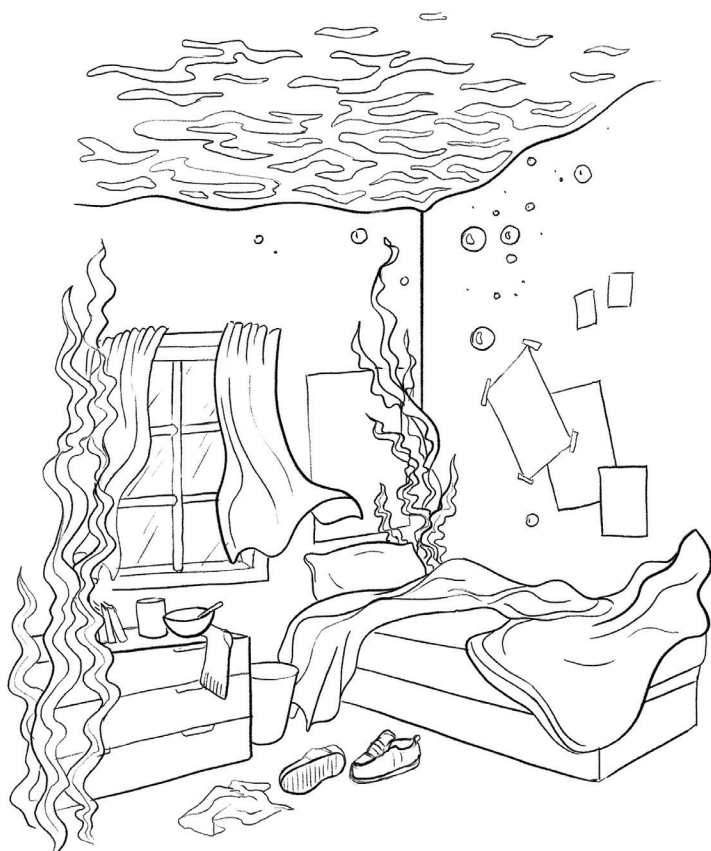
Then Mother's jowls became slack, and she closed her eyes. Her chin went toward her chest.

"Maybe he thinks he's saved," I said, to soothe her.

"Maybe he doesn't."

WONDER

Three things are
too wonderful for me
and a fourth
I cannot grasp:
twilight flight of fireflies
pipers printing the sand
the grace of swaying grasses
the wind in my hand.



I gave up on clearing my head, and quit showering, too.

NOTHING'S SERIOUS WHEN YOU'RE SEVENTEEN

My phone was ringing. I picked it up and walked to my window so I could look out through the blinds while I talked, like I was in a crime movie.

"Hey dad," I said.

"My boy." He was in the car. "You ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you ever like it? The feeling."

"I don't know."

"I think your mom has spies," he said. "I think the world is your mother sometimes. Like, I'm not even driving. I'm sitting in a dummy car, and she's got some countryside scenery playing on the screens around me, rolling past me on loop. A fan to make the wind blow through my hair. They use the screens to divide up the space and make it seem like I'm in new places. I go to dinner, or I'm in bed, or I'm in the car, but I'm in the same house, the same spot. I haven't even gotten up off my chair."

"Are you with Maggie right now?" I asked. Maggie was his girlfriend. He had left us for her eight days ago.

"Not now," he said. "Why? Have you seen her?"

"Why would I have seen her?" It was a crazy question. "I've been at home."

"How is your mother?"

"She hasn't left the bedroom yet." I was going to say her bedroom, but didn't.

"Yoga friends, library volunteers," he said. "She's got a network of all the little women. Your mother's part-time-working women friends,

moving the screens, peeking through the fabric where the silk doesn't quite meet the wooden frame, and all the other gaps in the scaffolding. You know she's got the time to put this together. She's not working. She's too smart not to work. That's the problem. Or being too smart is always the problem, unemployed or not."

"Dad."

"It's not just me. Maggie feels it, too. She's started wearing headscarves and sunglasses. Cloak and dagger shit."

"Did something happen?"

"I mean, I smoked a joint."

"Oh!" I laughed. He shouldn't have been driving, but being high mostly explained the phone call.

"So, you're good," I said.

"Yes and no. Yesterday afternoon, the two of us went for a nature drive. It was muggy. There's this big, wooded subdivision. They built it around a big lake in the 60s and 70s, so all the trees have grown in, and it's like another beautiful planet back there. Dudes working on their boats. Little kids running around in bathing suits, these fifty-foot-tall trees swaying above them. I look over at Maggie with my mouth open, and she's like, dude, be cool, Nelly, be cool. And then I am supremely cool. And then the dinner table floats up to us. Then night falls..."

"Cool."

"Can I send you something," he said. "Your email's the same? It's a screenplay I'm working on. I'll send it to you. I'm trying to get everything down, you know?"

"I do," I said. "I really do."

We hung up, and I tiptoed out of my room and logged in on the family computer. His email had arrived before he had even called me, as I had expected. I looked over to make sure my mom's bedroom door was still closed. It was. She hadn't left her room in days. I had heard the water running in her bathroom just that morning. So she was still alive. But she wasn't coming out.

I began reading my dad's screenplay.

Paris. March, 1941.

SCENE ONE

Abusing myself
in the garret where I slept last night,
and the night before.
It is early morning and a woman down on the street
whistles to a soldier I cannot see.
Today is the Annunciation.

SCENE TWO

Sales stop, a large house on the Seine's far bank
I am sitting with a Nazi officer in his beautiful front parlor.
"If you buy four kilos, I will give you two more free,"
I say, "What day is it?"
"Tuesday," he says.
"Then you will need to buy them today."
He is surprised my German is good.
He unwraps the newspaper and tastes the chocolate.
"I think I will report you," he says, finally.
He is mad, purple in the face, about to shoot me dead.
"Just take it," I say, "A gift."
And I run outside
dodging a puddle as I cross the street.

SCENE THREE

At a bar before noon, a skinny Vietnamese boy
trades me a pair of shoes for chocolate,
he wants a new passport and is trying
to barter his way up.
"I need to see my family," he says, in French.

"I know a man who sells them,"
I say, "But you don't have money."
The boy blushes.
"Is that a rose in your lapel," I ask him.
"You may not need money," I say,
and pour us both a glass of gin.

SCENE FOUR

A large restaurant with greasy tablecloths
that is empty except for me and my friend Claude,
whose German is even better than mine.
Claude works at an office.
"Are you finished with that," I say
in French, and he pushes me his plate.
"Too much gravy," he says.

SCENE FIVE

Warehouses on the edge of Paris:
A secret chocolate factory.
I am counting the bandages and gin
people have traded us,
while Claude puzzles through the Yiddish
engraved on the back of a gold watch.
"See," Claude says. "Life is not so bad."

SCENE SIX

Me singing "Night and Day,"
out way past curfew, on a bridge over the river.
The same river that taught me how
to sing so fabulously, the credits roll
in a classy gold Bauhaus font

and on the quay is the Vietnamese boy
looking up at me.

SCENE SEVEN

Jazz in the background, unusually hot
late winter day. The girls wear a little color
their coats open and I almost die of alcohol withdrawal
in the bathroom of a man who makes bullets,
millions of them, his bathroom is like the Taj Mahal
(A good place to be dead, then). A knock on the door—
it's Claude. His face is blank.

"I'm coming," I say, wiping my face with a red towel.

SCENE EIGHT

A sunny hot afternoon, maybe it's spring already
but I feel well, I have a flask in my pocket.
There is a foot race outside Notre Dame,
and Claude wants me to jump in.

"I'm too fat," I say, and they all laugh

"Sing," the girl says to me, her arm around Claude.

"Why don't you sing?"

SCENE NINE

Things are confused already
I am eating chocolate, piece
after piece,
and the face of the officer
swirls around my head, a very arty
double exposure, and we see battle
from the front lines,
I am a deserter, in the secret chocolate factory.

SCENE TEN

National Headquarters of the Vichy Government.
I have travelled far.
My cart is weighed down with parcels, empty and full.
I will give the cart free to the man who buys me out,
I'm shouting, getting louder and louder,
at the gates of government. So loud,
your ears bleed.

I REREAD it twice. I was trying to convince myself that it was real, that he had actually written this screenplay and then had decided to share it with me.

READING and writing can make you do crazy things. Or was it the thinking and sitting really still that made one restless? It was summer break. I had been alone in my room for eight days. I had been staring at books to pass the time, which was like reading, when I stared at the insides of them. I would open a book, watch the words dance around, close it, and pick up another. Using this method I read about 200 books in an hour. And when that hour was up, I read those same 200 books once again.

I shelved the book I was currently reading and opened the window to let in some heat. Tall reeds and cattails grew between the houses across the street. Our subdivision had been built on a drained marsh, and the marsh was trying to ooze its way back in. Sometimes an underground waterway would open, drowning the roots of a tree and killing it. You wouldn't be able to tell right away that the tree was dead. Trees died so strangely. All the leaves would fall away, like in autumn, and then the little branches would crack off, and the bark would dry out and peel apart, leaving behind a white pole stuck upright in the muck, five or six branches frozen overhead like arms. One of those drowned trees was beyond the cattails. I couldn't see it right then, but I knew it was there,

dead and white, the brush cleared out around it, sticking upright in a ring of water.

I sat back down on my bed. I watched my room fill up with water. I closed my eyes and lay down in it.

THE doorbell rang a couple times. Then whoever it was started knocking. When I was sure my mom wasn't going to get it, I answered it myself. Cousin Scott was on the stoop. He was about thirty years old and had a big belly and a goatee, wearing a baseball cap and a camo shirt. We only saw him on Christmas, so I was surprised to see him uninvited on the stoop.

"How is she?" he asked. He was holding a big black trash bag.

"She's doing OK, you know, with everything."

He held the trash bag out to me.

"Take it," he said.

"What is it?"

"Venison jerky. Almost twenty pounds."

I didn't want it, so I politely asked him where he got it.

"My backyard. This deer liked to limp around our yard. But there's too much meat for my wife and kid to eat. I figured you and your mom might be interested in some."

"You shot it? With a gun?"

"Bow and arrow."

"And you make the jerky yourself?"

"Well, after I made sure it was dead—"

"How'd you do that?"

"I stabbed it in the neck," he said. "So, yeah, after I made sure it was dead, I opened it there in my backyard and gave it a field dressing. That's when you take out all the guts, like the diaphragm and the heart and all the gross stuff."

"Woah," I said. "What'd that smell like?"

"Bad."

"You mean like death?"

"No, not like death. But that also smells bad. This smell was worse."

Like whatever had been making it limp was rotting it up a little on the inside.” He looked sheepishly at the trash bag. He regretted sharing that detail with me.

“Just parts of it,” he said. “The rest was good.”

“Weird,” I said.

“I know a guy who guts deer in his van. For a hundred bucks this guy turned the deer into a bunch of steaks and jerky. He knew what to keep and what to throw out. I got like sixty pounds of meat. For a hundred bucks and an hour or two of work. That’s not so bad.” He had reached the end of his story.

“So, do you want it? You guys can for have it for free. It’s a gift.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“My wife won’t touch it,” Scott said. “She won’t let my kid eat any of it. She says it’s rotten, but it’s not.” He was crying. There hadn’t been any warning. He just covered his face with his hands and sobbed like a cartoon character. He had been out of work for a while now, on disability.

“I’ll try some,” I said. “Scott. Give me a piece.” He reached into the bag and handed me one. I took a bite. It was tough and needed more salt, but it was pretty good, no rancid taste or smell. I chewed it for a few more seconds, swallowed, and thanked him.

“You’ll take it?” he asked. I took the trash bag.

“Thank you so much, man,” he said. He wiped his eyes and nose.

“You tell your mom I said hi, OK,” he said. “You tell her to hang in there, OK? Your dad is a real asshole.”

“OK, Scott.” I waved him off until his truck was out of sight. Then I stepped back inside and put the jerky in the pantry, thinking I’d leave it there until garbage day. Then I went to my mom’s room and knocked.

“Cousin Scott came by,” I said. “He hopes you’re doing okay. He says that dad is an asshole. I’ll be in my room.”

A while later, I thought I heard her door inch open, as if she were peeking out to see if I was still there. I listened to her move through the house, going up the stairs and over to the kitchen. She opened the pantry, then opened the black garbage bag. It rustled loudly as she reached in

and took out a few pieces of jerky. I listened to her chew and swallow and then go get a glass of water from the tap to drink it down. I had wanted to warn her that it was rotten. But my room had filled up with water again, and I couldn't get up to go check.

In the shower I kept thinking about the man in Paris. I tried to push him out of my head, but he wouldn't go, and soon Cousin Scott joined him. The two men embraced, and then they started feeding each other chocolate.

*At the gates of government,
Shouting so loud your ears bleed.*

I gave up on clearing my head and quit showering, too. But I made sure to dry off thoroughly. Every bead of water on me was discovered and wiped away. I dried off so well that I felt accomplished afterward. Then I went to my room and lay face down on the bed.

I WOKE up in the middle of the night, alert and lucid. The cat was meowing. I had forgotten to let him back in. Without bothering to dress, I went upstairs to the family room and opened the sliding door for him. The reeds from earlier were swaying loudly between the two houses across the street. The dead tree loomed behind them, its arms raised high overhead, trembling as the branches dissolved and reappeared in the dark. I stepped outside to look at it better. The pale trunk was luminous in the night, vivid where it stood. I looked up at the glowing tree and let the air wash over my back.

The reeds shook violently, and I glanced back down. Someone had been standing there, a man, watching me from the marsh. I was pretty sure of it. I froze and stared, straining to pick him out again from the darkness. But all I could see were the reeds. He must have pulled back deeper into the cover, crouching now among the cattails. A minute passed and I wasn't sure anymore. I closed my eyes and pictured what he saw, if he were really there—a dark house, his house, framed by reeds; a boy standing outside, alone in the middle of the night, undressed for bed.

The cat meowed again, hungry. I stepped back inside and closed the door and locked it. I drew the curtains. Only then did I say, “Stay away.”

“Never come back here,” whispering it so quietly it hurt my throat. “We don’t need you.”

Then I fed the cat and went to bed.

OIL

All the rivers ran and never returned.
Boys turned into marlins, hawks,
coyotes, and their mothers drove
deep and long until they forgot
every sound and terror. The pine
fields, white as flesh. When the winter
gnawed and scratched itself dry as a nail.
Hares scattering the iron banks of the lake.
It was the only real thing
just across the water. The snow of
knowing and unknowing, that is.
Love as strong as heroin. What makes money
money and the cold of a new machine.
Near the wastes, slick with wells
of oil, the boys used to
pull the bodies of other boys through the
quarry of time. Their mouths, hard as
rope. They learned to run,
steal cigarettes and the master's gold
teeth. They learned the laws chasing them
under the bridge, in the streets,
veining into the blue forest
without stopping. You would die
'xactly like that, in the black
youngberry thickets, one red
zinnia for each river, and what it took.



*Oh, this goddamn hotel/spa/conference center. It has only
ever brought me misery.*

THERE'S A GERMAN COMPOUND WORD FOR EVERYTHING

1. Frühjahrs müdigkeit—literally, spring fatigue. A sense of listlessness brought on by the coming of spring.

I WAS in my ninth year of a dull Cincinnati-based office job I had somehow landed despite the fact that its purview was completely outside the areas of both my interest (languages) and my expertise (also languages). It seemed to be a job for someone other than myself, and so I'd gradually become someone other than myself: bored, peevish, ambivalent. I'd always imagined that things like *expense accounts* and *assistants who answer your phone for you* were bestowed only upon those workers who had a significant commitment to their professions, who saw their jobs not just as jobs, but as *careers*; this had proved to not be the case. I felt no investment in my work and could not find it within myself to put in more than a 50% effort on any given day. Oftentimes I tried even less, or not at all. Yet somehow, this was enough for the bureaucratic machine, at least the one in Cincinnati, and I could not wean myself from the addiction to my growing 401(k) balance to find a more satisfying life direction.

It was late April and that meant the long weekend earmarked for our yearly corporate retreat at a hotel/spa/conference center in Phoenix was upon us. The big bosses touted this getaway as one of the perks of working for my company, and I certainly got the impression that it was an event many of my coworkers regarded with great anticipation. They craved the catered meals, swag bags, and daily massages provided compliments of our employer. For me, it was difficult to muster a similar enthusiasm, as I did not relish things like team-building exercises, or thinking-outside-

the-box-exercises, or, frankly, any exercises at all. I am a person who is more comfortable in a sedentary mode.

But if you have ever worked in a large office, then you understand that it takes great reserves of energy and a proficiency in the fine art of scheming to extract yourself from work-related events, and as I do not have either of those qualities I again found myself on a business-class flight to Sky Harbor International Airport, and then packed into an executive car service (actually it was a van) with six of my colleagues, and then, at last, pulling my sad suitcase on its roly-wheels into Building G, towards Room 302. My boss, entering room 303 across the hall, turned to me and suggested, “Fajitas with the team in twenty minutes?” But I put my hand on my stomach and said something half-hearted about air travel not agreeing with me, and escaped into my room. It was indistinguishable from every other room I had seen in this place. Here I was once more, and who knew how many times I was yet to return?

This hotel/spa/conference center was a massive affair, comprised of one central edifice containing a number of banquet rooms and other gathering places, and a collection of residential satellite buildings which housed the bedrooms. Amenities for the entire complex included a number of pools, an exercise room, and—the one highlight of the place—a very large, bland-looking bar. It was the only place with anything pleasant to offer me, so as soon as I had determined that my room’s TV worked and its toilet flushed, I did a cursory glance of the hallways to confirm none of my coworkers were lurking in my path, and then dispatched myself to said bar.

It wasn’t extremely busy at this time of day, just past 5:00 PM, but I knew it would get more crowded as the night progressed and more guests found themselves unable to think of other amusements. I seated myself on a stool at the far end of the counter. The drink menu the bartender handed me boasted a number of cocktails designed by a credentialed mixologist, but I had made the mistake of thinking these drinks might be superior to vodka crans the previous year, and was determined to learn from my mistakes, for once.

"If you like vodka, you might be interested in our pomegranate martini," the bartender said after I placed my order, but I looked him straight in the eyes and said: "No."

"Vodka cran it is," he replied, disappointed.

From my seat I had a clear vantage point of the check-in counter, next to which a large sign balanced on a tripod brazenly welcomed all the organizations that were currently gathering at this hotel/spa/conference center. A number of groups were in attendance with my company, from the Association for Environmental Science to the Association of Tax Law Professionals to the absurdly meta Association of Association Executives, which is, I believe, an association comprised of people who lead other associations. What has our world come to, I wonder, when such things exist?

By the time I ordered my third vodka cran, the bar had gotten fuller, as expected. Examining my surroundings, I saw that a stool away from me, two men discussed some sort of fundraising endeavor, and a group seated at the corner wore matching shirts denoting that they all belonged to a professional squash-playing organization. Everybody looked as if they hoped they would soon be happy.

And then, as my gaze rounded the far side of the bar, I spied someone who looked genuinely happy *right now*, a man who positively beamed, blazed, radiated with good nature. His hair was thinning and he had a small paunch and I would not have recognized him but for the radiation, for it was a radiation I had first become acquainted with nearly twenty years ago.

I picked up my vodka cran and made my way to the opposite end of the counter. I sat down next to the man.

"David," I said, unable to hide the thrill in my voice. "This is quite a surprise."

2. Kopfkino—literally, the head cinema. The scenes played out in your imagination.

DAVID looked at me and did not immediately recognize me, but then, all of a sudden, he did. His lower jaw dropped as he made the connection between the past and the present.

"Carrie!" he exclaimed. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"Conferencing," I answered. "And you?"

"The same."

"Well then." I said this sentence in a definitive way, as if something had been cleared up, but the truth is that things had suddenly become very cloudy and complicated indeed. I had wondered, so many times, if we would ever meet face-to-face again, and here we were at the bar of this large Phoenix hotel/spa/conference center on the very same night. You have to wonder about fate in times of unbelievable happenstance, and this was no exception.

"How is this possible?" I asked him. I wanted to put my hand on his arm, but didn't.

"How is what possible?"

"This. Us. Here. Me here. You here."

"Oh! Tax law seminar," he said, matter-of-fact, missing the point.

"But at the very same time, in the very same place, as my yearly company retreat?"

I could not believe the coincidence.

David could. "Seems so!" He smiled his big geometric smile straight at me, the one that I had spent so much time with in my younger days, and seemed not to be aware of the fact that my mind was replaying the last time we had seen each other, in my first apartment post-college, back in the early years of the millennium.

I was living in New York at the time. I'd been under the impression that I could hack it in the big city after my graduation, and had found myself an internship in lower Manhattan and a small apartment with a number of roommates in fashionable Greenpoint. It was a newly hip neighborhood, and we did not have the perspective at the time to understand that we were simply playing our parts in the grand, subversive show of gentrification.

David had been a friend in college, one of my very favorites, and so, although he had moved to Boston for law school (fine, I will just say it: he went to Harvard, he went to fucking Harvard), I had convinced him to take the train down to visit for Thanksgiving. It was our first Thanksgiving

as adults, me and my roommates, and we did the whole thing. We roasted a turkey (dry), mashed potatoes (gummy), baked pumpkin pies (liquid in the middle), but considered the whole endeavor a fantastic success. I still consider it a fantastic success.

After dinner we lounged about with open bottles of the cheapest wine we'd been able to find at the corner bodega, which was a significant indulgence at the time but laughable now. Who buys bottles of Chardonnay for \$3.99 and expects them to be good? We did; we were twenty-two; we did not know any better.

We didn't know better, we didn't know better. The night grew later and my roommates had fallen asleep on our secondhand couches. David and I looked at each other, with the simultaneous understanding of what had been building for years, what was inevitable. His charm, my cynicism; his ambition, my levelheadedness; his winning smile, my clever eyes; we were such complements to one another. We retired to my closet-like room, and I thought, *now that we are adults, we understand that we are not just friends. We are more than friends.*

We are much, much, more than friends.

3. *Tagedieb—literally, the day thief. A dawdler, a layabout.*

I WILL not mince words: after that Thanksgiving, the friendship ceased to exist entirely. It was not the way I'd wanted it, it was so far from the way I'd wanted it, but David did not return any of my phone calls, nor did he reply to the emails I sent asking why he hadn't replied to my phone calls, and when our five-year college reunion occurred, he did not go. I didn't understand what had happened, and despite many hours spent analyzing the events that had unfolded, was not able to come up with a reasonable explanation. It remained a mystery.

But I took this setback in stride, more or less, adding it to a growing list of disappointments. I had already suffered many of adulthood's worst trials and tribulations. My internship in New York had failed to materialize into a full-time job, and after I had extinguished my meager savings, I returned home to Ohio in defeat, and faced the dark reality

of my apparent lot in life: I was not destined for the big city. I was a Cincinnati person, nothing more. To believe otherwise would be delusion. I attempted to adjust my expectations accordingly.

When my high school boyfriend called me on my 27th birthday and said he'd heard I was back in town, I told myself: *I am a Cincinnati person*. I arranged to meet him for drinks. My job, despite its poor fit on me, was still shiny and new, and I flaunted certain things to him, certain things that never would have impressed David, for whom basic success had always been a given.

"My assistant is so bad at doing my expense reports," I announced.

"Wow, Carrie. You have an assistant?" Robbie said, which was the correct response.

"Yes," I said, smiling at his stupid, lazy face, unchanged since the night we lost our virginities to each other (fine, I will say this too: it was prom night. Of course it was prom night). He had continued to work at the sporting goods store he'd been a sales associate at during high school, but in the nine years since we'd graduated he'd inched up the ladder and was now the store's assistant manager. Many of his shirts were athletic jerseys, which he could purchase from his workplace with a 30% employee discount. He saw this as a very efficient use of both his time and his money. I suppose that, technically, it was.

It is pleasant to be admired. Robbie liked the way I looked in my business-casual sweater sets and khakis. He told the occasional customers who came into the store to buy Mets gear that his girlfriend was a New Yorker. He said it as if it were something both impressive and frightening. He did not seem to understand that *having lived in New York for a brief time* was something different from *being a New Yorker*, but none of us are perfect, as I well knew.

He loved my cooking, and the way I also meticulously cleaned the house we bought together. He loved how reliably I restocked our cabinets with toothpaste and toilet paper; he loved that I never forgot to pay the electric bill, or the cable bill, or the mortgage. He especially loved the masterful manner in which I single-handedly managed our finances; after all, I was the person who earned the bulk of our income.

Life with him was nothing but compliments for every single thing I did, doled out from the desk where he frequently sat at his computer, contentedly playing *World of Warcraft* with unknown adversaries at faraway gaming stations. We each relished this arrangement in our own ways, because he enjoyed not being challenged and I enjoyed not being abandoned. Is it any wonder that we decided to marry each other?

4. Fernweh—literally, the distant ache. A longing to travel and see distant places.

I AM a Cincinnati person, I continued to tell myself. When I said this to Robbie, he agreed.

“We have a nice life,” he said gratefully. “Our new car is killer.” Our new car was, in actuality, an old car—a *classic*, Robbie called it—that required huge reserves of gas and mechanical maintenance to be even remotely operational. At first, “killer” seemed like an odd word to use as a descriptor—especially for a second vehicle that was really less of a mode of transportation and more of a large toy for my husband—but the longer I thought about it, the more appropriate it seemed. When I looked at its shiny chassis, I did not see the glory of a bygone era. I saw death. A metaphoric death, of course, but death nonetheless. How is it possible to see anything else when considering a mode of transportation that cannot reliably go anywhere?

“Maybe we should take a trip. Get out of Cincinnati,” I said to my husband.

“You want to get out of Cincinnati?” He looked stricken.

“Just for a short time,” I reassured him.

“I don’t understand. You go on vacation to Arizona every year!”

For a moment I didn’t know what Robbie was talking about, and then it occurred to me that he viewed my company’s mandatory team-building retreats to the Phoenix hotel/spa/conference center as something wildly luxurious and foreign.

“Wouldn’t you like to...I don’t know, to see something new?”

Robbie shook his head. "I want to stay right here. We just got the Mustang. I'd like to spend more time with the Mustang."

I could not stand the thought of continuing this same lackluster life indefinitely.

"Maybe I should take a trip by myself," I suggested. Relief washed over Robbie's face.

"Yes. Yes. Sure, if you want to," he agreed, which was not the correct response.

Just a few days later I received a notice promoting my college's upcoming ten-year reunion. My class officers had enthusiastically planned a plethora of events. Panels, lectures, receptions. Fun-runs. A nature walk. Good times were promised. It seemed like a turning point in the making. It seemed meant to be.

I went, but David did not go to our ten-year reunion, either.

5. Verschlimmbessern—literally, to make worse and to improve. To make something worse in the very act of trying to improve it.

BACK home, distraught, I decided to focus on my marriage. What choice did I have? I was a Cincinnati person.

"We should talk more," I said smilingly during a commercial break. We were watching TV as we ate dinner, as we did every night. Again, that stricken look alit upon Robbie's face.

"What do you mean?" His voice was wary, as if I'd suggested he consider looking for another job. (In fact, I'd intended eventually to hint at that very thing, for how many athletic jerseys could one person realistically own, but as it turned out I never got the opportunity.)

"Sometimes I wonder if we really even still know each other. You know what I'm saying?"

"We've known each other for twenty years," Robbie said.

"Yes, but you *know* what I'm saying."

Robbie shrugged, then picked up the remote and flipped the channel.

"I just feel like maybe we don't share that much," I continued.

"Share what?"

“You know. Our ideas, our thoughts. Dreams. Ambitions. The things we want to do in our life.”

Then, there was a long, hovering silence, at least between Robbie and me. The TV continued to buzz with voices and music and sound effects as I waited for him to say something. But within moments the noise had drawn Robbie in completely, and he seemed to have forgotten that I’d attempted to have a conversation at all.

6. Kummerspeck—literally, grief bacon. The excess weight put on by emotional overeating.

ROBBIE did not want to divorce, but it was not because he loved me. Or at least not *entirely* because he loved me. I could never be exactly sure. He was not skilled at parsing his feelings. And it’s very possible that reliance is a kind of love. Regardless, not once did the word arise during all of the negotiations. *Commitment, need, car payment*—all those words came up. *Love*, no.

How had it come to this? I paced through the rooms of our—now my—half-empty house. I stared blankly at my computer screen at work, not even pretending to be scrolling through a spreadsheet or reviewing a draft of a document. *Yes, I’m working on that*, I’d say whenever my assistant would knock on my door and tell me I had a call following up on this particular project or that particular project. He would relay the message accordingly. The quality of my output went down to unacceptable levels, and then to almost non-existent levels. It didn’t matter; I got my annual increase as per usual, the same percentage I’d been awarded for the past six years.

“Great job,” said my boss, as she handed me the letter that memorialized my new salary.

“Thanks,” I said, watching her eyes travel to my middle section, which had turned strangely bulbous, and jiggled at the slightest shift of my body. Nobody noticed that I had become incompetent, but everybody observed my weight gain. Once, a coworker, trying to comfort me, put her hand on my shoulder and remarked that she tried to fill the holes in

her life with food, too. It wasn't that I disagreed with her analysis of my behavior, but she clearly thought my particular holes were the size and shape of Robbie. In fact, the silhouettes of my holes were more difficult to define. What is the outline of a life, or at least a different life? The kind of life which would be worth remembering: what were its contours? How many people were able to twist their lives into that shape?

I thought of all the people who had died without ceremony, quietly, without making waves in the popular consciousness. So many deaths were barely a ripple. Did that make them any less noble? I want to think that it did not, yet so few of us average humans get monuments, or markers, or even remembered, once we have transitioned from being on the earth to being in it.

7. *Fuchsteufelswild*—literally, fox-devil wild. Pure animal rage.

MAYBE nine years at the same fucking job were all leading up to one moment, after all: *this* moment, the one that had reunited David and me in these most unlikely of circumstances. When I looked at him, drinking his white wine in this dumb bar, it wasn't exactly that the years melted away—but they ascended upwards like a chandelier, out of the way, yet still casting a gentle, sparkling glow on the two of us, next to each other, again. We were our middle-aged selves, of course, but inside those selves were the previous versions, the college students blessed with the specific beauty of youth and the promise of the future. We had spent so many nights laughing over stoner flicks played on VHS, ordering late-night calzones from the Italian restaurant that capitalized on its proximity to a university by staying open until 2 AM, talking about everything that lay ahead of us. We'd done all of those great college things. We could do those things again.

"So, how's life?" David asked me. His nonchalance put me at ease, as it always had. His goddamn smile.

"Not bad. I'm back in Cin—" I had already started to answer when, out of nowhere, the absurdity of his question hit me and I stopped mid-word. It was the kind of question you would ask a pleasant sister-in-law

you hadn't seen in a few months, not the kind of question appropriate for a friend you had abandoned almost fifteen years ago.

"Cinnati?" David finished the name of my half-spoken city for me, as if it was up to him to decide which parts of my story should be told.

Fury began to rise like a tsunami.

"You owe me an explanation." Even I could hear how my voice was harder than it had been just seconds ago, maybe even harder than it had been since my final conversation with Robbie, in which I had said *I want more than a Mustang*.

"For what?" David asked.

"Are you kidding? You're kidding. I'm talking about why you disappeared on me."

"I didn't disappear on you!" David objected, and in that moment I am ashamed to admit there was the return of that familiar runaway lost hope, the one of a whole alternate universe, unfurling in my imagination, a world in which some too-crazy-to-be-believed-except-it-had-actually-happened event explained his elimination from my life: he had been in a coma and had only just awoken, he had been held captive by a terrorist... something that would leave him blameless, and therefore allow my fondness for him to persevere, intact.

"That's just the way things go," he continued. "People grow up. They grow apart."

I considered his words. On its surface the statement sounded reasonable.

"It's all just part of being an adult," David concluded, considering me with an expression that appeared to be sincerity. But something rang false. A dagger of mistrust stuck me, then, and I looked deeply into David's magnetic brown eyes, the eyes I had first seen in our Intro to German class almost two decades ago. *Guten Tag*, he had said to me, and I had said it back, and we had laughed, because it had been obvious that neither of us knew a single other German word. David had never taken another language class but I'd continued. I'd studied many different tongues (Italian, Arabic, Greek), though I had ultimately majored in German. It is a beautiful way to speak, I think, capable of expressing

so much—unlike English, which so often falls short of communicating exactly what I want to say.

“That is not the correct response,” I said, frowning at my one-time friend.

A new expression rolled over David’s face, one I’d never seen on him before, yet that still had the echo of familiarity. With a jolt, I realized what it was: it was the face Robbie had made each time I had asked him to consider circumstances from a point of view other than his own. Funny how two men so different could have that same tormented look.

“We slept together and I never heard from you again,” I pointed out, loudly, which made David turn away. The people from the squash-playing organization looked over with interest. I didn’t blame them; something was happening there in the bar of this Phoenix hotel/spa/conference center. Perhaps it had been happening for years. David’s charisma had stopped working. Or maybe something inside me had started working. Either way, something was happening.

“That’s not the way you treat someone you care about,” I said. “Or anyone,” I added.

He didn’t respond.

“Why didn’t you return my calls? Why didn’t you write back to my emails?”

He tossed all of his remaining wine back in one gulp.

I searched the hotel interior for something that would help this situation make sense. My eyes fell upon the sign on the tripod in the lobby. *Welcome, Association of Association Executives*, it said, and in a flash I understood that some things are too ridiculous to be believed, and should not be tolerated.

I looked back at David’s receding hairline and flabby gut. (Flabbier than mine, if I’m being honest.) The anger tsunami spread across my body, drowning all my thoughts and feelings, laying waste to fifteen years of stifled wishful thinking.

“I thought we had something special, you know,” I said. He just signaled to the bartender for his check, so I went on. “We’d been friends for so long. Remember how we used to talk about everything? Our plans, what we could accomplish in the world? Everything we wanted to do in our lives?” My voice rose even more. “We could have done all that together.”

David finally looked at me.

“Stop fooling yourself,” he said. “You never had what it takes.”

“What it takes for what?”

“To be with someone like me. Someone,” he said with a non-negligible amount of pride, “who would go to Harvard Law School, and become a very successful tax lawyer. I gave you a chance, you know.”

I could not figure out what he was talking about. “A chance at what?”

“To make something of yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“After college. You couldn’t.”

“I was twenty-two!”

David shook his head. “You couldn’t hack it. I could tell you’d never make it in New York. And I was right.”

“Right about what?”

“You didn’t get that job. You had to move back to Ohio.”

“So you’re saying...I turned out not to be good enough for you to even talk to?”

David grimaced, as if he were the one who had been hurt. “You should be thanking me for what I did for you all those years ago,” he said. My face certainly registered my confusion, because he immediately elaborated on these thanks I purportedly owed him. “For finally fucking you,” he concluded.

Had he always been this awful person? Had he changed? Had I been stupid, or tricked, or young, or everything all together? It didn’t matter. David did not radiate, and possibly never had.

“Another vodka cran?” the bartender asked me, eyeing my empty glass.

“No,” I said. “No more.”

I had wasted so much time.

8. Weltschmerz—literally, world pain. Pain felt when the world fails to be what we wish it was.

OH, this goddamn hotel/spa/conference center. It has only ever brought me misery.

9. *Torschlusspanik*—literally, closing-gate panic. The feeling of urgency to accomplish goals before some imaginary gate closes and it's all too late.

I STOPPED in Building G, Room 302 long enough to collect my rolly-wheel suitcase. At Sky Harbor International Airport, waiting at the gate to see if the next flight back to Cincinnati would have room for standby fliers, I pulled out my phone.

I quit, I typed in a glorious email window, which I sent immediately to my boss.

Almost instantaneously an answer came back. *Is this supposed to be a joke? If so, it's not very funny. Team solidarity is very important and we have a chaperoned escape room activity planned for tomorrow so that we can develop our problem-solving and collaboration skillsets.*

Oh well, I wrote back. I did not care if this was the correct response.

"Excuse me, you're waiting for a seat back to Cincinnati, aren't you?" the airline attendant asked me. I nodded. "I apologize, but we're completely full," he said sorrowfully.

I imagined my echoing Ohio house, its garage sheltering the stupid car that Robbie treasured but could not afford to keep. That Mustang could go to hell, along with the whole sad false life I'd accepted for myself. I'd been hitching my happiness to Robbie, and then David, and then Robbie, and then David. For one of them I'd been too much, and for the other I hadn't been enough. Only from this Sky Harbor boarding gate did I finally realize how blind I'd been to see myself only through their eyes. *Blind*, incidentally, is a word that is the same in English as in German, like *bitter*, and *stress*, and *hunger*.

But so is *test*, and *chance*. And *moment*. It is small facts like this that truly delight me about languages.

I looked at the airline attendant. I didn't want to be a Cincinnati person.

10. *Luftschloss*—literally, air castle. An unrealistic dream.

"Do you think I could go to Germany instead?" I asked.

The attendant examined his computer screen.

“Yes, we have a seat to Munich, with a layover in London. It’s boarding right now,” he informed me.

“That sounds great,” I said. “I’ll take it, please.”

“I love spring in Munich,” he commented as he pushed the button that printed out my boarding pass. It was a random, passing aside, but it felt important. Weighty.

“Me too,” I said. I was certain it would be true.

Resilience is a difficult thing to achieve, especially in this world. This world has a knack for beating the brightest dreams into smaller, duller, wispy things, misshapen things that aren’t even substantial enough to qualify as minor fantasies. Your youth feels silly in the face of everything that followed your youth. You forget you ever imagined a different life. You forget what it feels like to try.

The flight attendant handed me my ticket, and as my fingers touched the paper, the walls of Sky Harbor International Airport took on a strange cast, a transfiguration of the oddest sort, growing tall and translucent, building themselves to spires that perforated the night, turrets that climbed towards forthcoming day. Magnificence engulfed me. I grasped the handle of my roly-wheeled suitcase and pulled it towards the things to come.

ANTLERS

Mounted there
beside the mantle,
ghost-glowing
in the dark room,
they hint strangely,
pale branches you
brought home
from your wide
wild wandering.

Wood-found relic,
spirit-symbol
of those broad hills,
those spangled flax
and marigold fields
that stretch out there
beyond your lost
unmindful highways,
wayward token of
those shadow brakes
that wait to fold you
into the cover of
their confidence.

In calcic tones
they whisper softly—
like whitened spires
lilting skyward,
or open hands
upheld in prayer,
in promise of rest,
in praise of bounty
or a quiet gesture
saying only:
return, return.

IN PRAISE OF THE GRAZE WOUND

I.

The world is made of jagged edges,
of splinters, cancer, lunatics,
of unlit roads and unseen ledges,
of horrid luck and dirty tricks.

This is a place of spiteful hexes,
of plagues and unattended flames,
of crooks and cons and bitter exes
and wayward bullets without names.

And so, if you are so inclined,
go walk about the streets unarmed.
Whatever suits the fool, but mind:
you will not leave this place unharmed.

II.

So after half a century of
collecting scars and wear and tear,
of dodging hate and misplaced love,
I offer up this simple prayer:

God bless the reeling shot gone wide,
the graze wound and the near miss,
that wreck in which I could have died
but didn't. Bless the faithless kiss.

Bless the high fall to soft deep grass,
the close call, the unpoisoned dart.
Bless even the strike at center mass
that somehow misses the heart.

Bless every ache and pain and sting.
Bless every temporary hell.
Bless every cursed confounded thing
that leaves a scar—but life, as well.



"That's a chinchilla," Ben says. "These people are fucked."

THE COSPLAY SHOW

Episode 1: And So, We Commence

AMY is a 37-year-old white woman with medium-short brown hair, and green eyes. She wears a yellow tank top and high-waisted blue jeans as she enters the coffee shop. The bells attached to the door jangle while she looks around, her eyes wide with hope. She consults the image of a man on her phone. A slight disappointment spreads across her face as she realizes that none of the people enjoying their lattes resemble that man.

She orders a steamed milk with vanilla syrup and takes a seat opposite the door. She checks the time on her phone and downs a big gulp. Her fingernail traces curly-cues over the sticky surface of the table. The bells on the door jangle and she looks up.

BRENDAN, a 45-year-old slim and happy-looking white man, enters. He wears double pleated khakis and a blue cotton polo shirt with a busy pattern of grey, green, and orange intersecting lines. He spots Amy as she waves at him. He runs his hand through his light brown hair and approaches her. His left shoe is untied, so he stumbles when he steps on the lace.

"I'm such a klutz," he says. He extends his hand for her to shake.

"Oh, you've got some goop there," she says after shaking his hand. She wipes her hand on her lap, more charmed than disgusted. "I think it's from your hair."

"Sorry. I've got a bunch of gunk in it to keep it up," he says. "It's harmless, organic."

Brendan sits down across from Amy and tilts his head, sizing her up. She produces a toothy smile and shifts her weight in the chair.

"Aren't you going to get a coffee?" she asks.

"Oh, yeah. I'll go grab something. Did you want anything?"

"Maybe a muffin. Blueberry, please."

"Coming right up."

Amy watches Brendan at the counter and notes how kind he is to the barista. He says please after placing his order and thank you upon receiving it. She smiles again as he returns and sets the muffin down in front of her.

"A muffin for the most beautiful girl in this place," he says.

"Oh, thank you," Amy says and takes a bite.

Brendan watches closely as Amy chews. He sees the bulge move down her throat as she swallows.

"So, you're into *The Cosby Show*?" he asks.

"Yeah, I really like it," she says. "I can't believe he ever got convicted in the first place. Ridiculous. It's such a good show. What a relief they let him out of prison."

"I know, right? I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. I cried when he was released. But people are just so touchy about things now. I mean, I've had a couple nights where I wasn't sure what happened or how I got home—and I'm fine," he says. "But then again, I'm not a woman scorned. What about poor Camille, too? I hope she's okay. Can you imagine the trauma of having your husband taken away like that? She'll probably never be the same."

"I'm sure she's fine. She seems like such a strong, black woman," Amy says. "I bet she's relieved to have him back at home."

"Yeah, totally," he says. "So, how many episodes do you watch a night?"

"Maybe three, sometimes four," she says. "It depends how tired I am really. I usually fall asleep with it on."

"That's pretty decent," he says with a smile. "I can usually fit in five or six, but I've been doing this a while."

"Really? For how long?" Amy asks.

"A few years now. Just by myself, mostly. I was really glad when I came across your profile. It seemed like you might be someone I could explore this with. You'd be surprised how many people get freaked out,"

he says. “Last week, this woman ditched me in the middle of dinner. We went to a steakhouse and she didn’t even finish her food. I started asking her to make me a Gordon Gartrelle shirt, you know, which maybe was a bit forward, and she got spooked. But she didn’t even know that Dr. Huxtable’s sweaters were designed by Koos van den Akker. She thought they were Coogi! She wasn’t very serious. I guess she thought maybe my profile was a joke or something. I’m sorry. I hope I’m not freaking you out.”

“Not at all,” Amy says. “I’m excited to try something new.”

Episode 2: Trust Me

Amy sits behind her well-organized desk. She wears a red jacket, the shoulders stuffed with thick pads, as she types.

SALLY is 45 years old, white, and dressed in a smart gray suit. She enters and sits down across from Amy.

“What’s taking so long with the Henderson brief?” Sally asks.

“I’m not sure, to be honest. I know we’ve got some new paralegals on staff, so they might be a bit slow in accessing the case law. I’ll have Eleanor get on it though. She’ll get it done.”

“I need a draft by tomorrow morning. I mean, that’s not an obscene request, is it?”

“Not at all, I’ll make sure you get it first thing,” Amy says.

“Thank you.”

Sally stands up to leave, then turns back.

“I just want to say that you are looking fantastic. I don’t know what it is, it’s like you’re—”

“Glowing. I know. I am,” Amy says.

“I guess things are going well with that new guy?” Sally asks and sits down again.

“So, so well,” Amy says. “He’s perfect. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so beautiful and whole and just—happy.”

Amy holds her hand to her mouth in a mock whisper and says, “I moved a bunch of my things over to his place this weekend. It just made

sense, you know. I was tired of going back to my place to change and get ready and stuff. He's a doctor, so his place is really nice. A bit masculine and cold. He's got a futon in his living room, like it's a dorm. But I'm working on that."

"Oh, that's serious," Sally says.

"So serious. I was reading this book that said your own happiness is the most serious thing in life. You have to decide to prioritize it."

"That sounds right."

"It is."

"Well, I'm glad you're so happy. And it looks great on you. He sounds like a lovely man."

"He is. Nothing like that jerkoff, Randall," Amy says.

"Oh, I think I remember him. The one with the mole, right?"

"Yes. He always wanted to spit on me. On my face!"

"How awful," Sally says.

"Gross is what it was. Deviant. But now I'm free. When I'm with Brendan, it's like a dream," Amy sighs. "I'd love it if you came by to meet him. Maybe dinner at our place sometime soon? You can bring Ben."

"That sounds wonderful," Sally says. "Shoot me a text and we'll arrange it."

Sally stands and opens the door.

"I'm going to crack some skulls to get that brief going," Amy says.

"Thanks."

"And I'll text you soon, once I talk to Cliff—I mean, Brendan. You're going to love him."

Sally smiles as she exits Amy's office and pulls the door closed behind her.

Episode 3: Food for Thought

Amy enters the house in a navy pencil skirt and silky white blouse. She tosses down her briefcase at the door and steps out of her brown leather pumps. She takes a moment to survey the room. The walls are primed for painting and the floor is covered with drop cloths. A twinkle of

pride shines in her eyes for a moment before she checks the time on her phone and rushes upstairs into the bedroom.

She changes into a bright pink, shoulder-padded jacket over a shimmery purple dress. She clips a pair of large gold earrings on and tucks her hair into a netted wig cap, which she tops with a wig of medium length, thick black hair. As she looks herself over in the mirror, she hears movement from the kitchen and follows the sound of slowly crinkling paper.

"Stop right there," she says, as she bursts into the kitchen. Brendan freezes, his mouth unhinged, inches away from the dripping end of an enormous hoagie.

"You know you're not supposed to be eating that," she says. "Back away from the hoagie this instant!"

"Baby," he says.

"Don't you baby me, Heathcliff. Didn't we just talk about this last night? You know that Dr. Carol just had to have heart surgery. They say it's because of the way he eats. Do I need to rehash the entire conversation for you?"

"Clair, I am a young man," he says.

"Not so young."

"My body can handle a hoagie, from time to time. I'm a doctor. I know what I'm doing," he says and inches the hoagie closer to his mouth.

"That argument is not going to work, you pathetic man. Don't you bite into that hoagie. Now, I mean it. Not a single bite."

"But darling, sweetie-pie, I don't want to waste it," he says. "This is good food. There are people starving in Africa, and if they could see the way you're treating me and this hoagie, they would eat you right up."

"Fine, I'm not your mother. If you really want to, you can have it," she says as she squints. "If you don't want to have me, that is."

He drops the hoagie on the floor and turns towards her. She licks her lips and raises an eyebrow.

"I'm parched," she says and rubs her throat. "Do you think you could fix me something to drink?"

"Of course, happy to. What would you like?" he asks.

"Oh, just something to relax. It was such a rough day at the office. I just want to forget all my worries."

"I've got just the thing," he says.

He opens up a cabinet and pulls out a bottle of gin. He pours the liquid into a short glass filled with ice. He adds some tonic water and stirs it with a swizzle stick.

"And the secret ingredient," he says and takes a pill from his pocket. He crushes it against the counter with the glass, then brushes the powder into the drink. He stirs the drink again as she smiles at him.

"You're too good to me," she says as he hands her the glass. She takes a big gulp and lets out a little burp.

He watches her finish the drink and moves closer as she begins to go wobbly. She slumps over against the counter and struggles to hold herself upright.

"There, there, you're feeling much better now, aren't you?"

"Mnnnnsh nonnnpeeeer sshhypffft," she mumbles.

He puts her over his shoulder and grunts as he lifts from his knees and carries her to the bedroom.

Episode 4: A Room with No View

Brendan removes a pair of purple latex-free gloves and flings them into the garbage bin in the corner of the room. He applies a label to a vial of dark blood and puts a piece of tape over the cotton ball the OLD WOMAN is holding against the puncture in her arm.

"You're all set," he says. "Your doctor should be getting those results back to you early next week. Take care."

The old woman collects her jean jacket and nods her head in thanks. Brendan watches her leave, then makes his way into the break room. He opens the refrigerator and removes a brown paper bag. He unpacks the contents and places them in a neat row before him. From left to right, he arranges a small bottle of water, a pack of dinosaur-shaped fruit snacks, a clementine, a low-sodium turkey sandwich on whole-wheat bread, and a handwritten note.

CARLOS, 27, tall, and thin-lipped, enters. He looks over Brendan's shoulder for a moment before retrieving his own lunch from the refrigerator and sitting down at the table.

"Quite the layout," Carlos says. "Very neat."

"My wife packed this for me. She wrote me a note, see."

"Cool. I didn't know you were married. When did that happen?"

"It's been a few weeks."

"Congrats. That's really great," Carlos says as he bites into a piece of cold, poached chicken. "What's her name?"

"Clair. She's the most beautiful woman in the world," Brendan says. "She's real adventurous, you know? She likes to write me these little notes to get me through the day. Want to read it?"

"That's okay," Carlos says. "I don't need to read it."

"I want you to. I'm not ashamed," Brendan says and unfolds the note. He slides it across the table to his co-worker. "Go ahead, read it."

"Fine," Carlos says with a shrug and picks up the note. Brendan watches his eyes flutter over the page.

"Out loud, read it out loud. I haven't seen that one yet. I don't know what she wrote."

"I don't know Brendan, man, that's a little—"

"Go on, it's just us. Go ahead. I give you my permission."

"Alright," Carlos says, then reads. "My dearest love, I hope your day is going well. I love you so much and can't wait to see you tonight. Always remember that you mean everything to me. We are a perfect match and I've never been happier. All my love, Clair, XOXO."

"See, we're really in it."

"Yeah, man, that's great," Carlos says and slides the note back. He takes another bite of his chicken and stands up. "I'm glad you're happy. I forgot, I have to make a call and I left my phone in my car."

"Oh, alrighty," Brendan says.

"I'll see you around."

As Carlos leaves, Brendan sticks his thumb into the navel of the clementine. A stream of juice squirts out onto the table. He removes the peel and pops one of the segments into his mouth. He picks the note up and smiles as he reads and chews.

Episode 5: The Show Must Go On

Sally wears a conservative black dress. Her blonde hair is tied back into an effortless ponytail and a diamond tennis bracelet encircles her wrist. Sally's husband, BEN, 40, very attractive, wears blue trousers with a gray jacket. The white shirt beneath his jacket has its three top buttons undone, displaying his dark chest hair. They step up onto the stoop and she rings the doorbell.

Amy opens the door, "Come on in," she says, her smile bright and retaining tension. "I'm so glad you made it."

The couple looks around the living room. The walls are slate blue and the hardwood floor is covered with an oriental rug. An old couch sits in the center of the room, its teal and magenta floral pattern standing out against the beige background.

"What a retro couch," Sally says. "I love the 80's too. Amy, where did you get it?"

"Ordered it from a catalog," she says. "Please, take a seat. Would you like something to drink? Water, wine, whiskey?"

"Oh my god, you changed your hair, too," Sally says.

"Yeah, I just thought that this color seemed more me," Amy says.

"It's beautiful. I'll have a glass of red wine, please."

"And just a water for me," Ben says.

"Coming right up," Amy says, and disappears into the kitchen.

"Babe," Ben starts.

"What?"

"She's clearly in a wig. Does she have some kind of condition?"

"I don't think so. She had brown hair this afternoon at the office. I figured she just got it colored. You're sure it's a wig?"

"Yes."

"I don't know."

Amy returns with the drinks.

"Please forgive me," Amy says, "my husband just pointed out that I forgot to put on my makeup. I'll just be a few minutes. Please, make yourselves at home. Heathcliff will be in just as soon as he's finished carving the bird."

Sally and Ben sit on the couch as Amy runs up the stairs to the bedroom.

"They don't have a TV in here," Ben notes.

"Well, they're quite serious people, you know. They might not have time for TV," Sally says. "But I thought it looked like she was wearing makeup, didn't it? Eyeshadow at least."

"Yeah, definitely," Ben says.

"And I thought her husband's name was Brendan."

"Weird," Ben says, and takes a sip of water. "Maybe I should have asked for wine too."

The doorbell rings and the couple on the couch waits for one of the hosts to emerge and answer it. No one comes. It rings again.

"What's the protocol on this?" Ben asks.

"I guess we answer it? I didn't think there was anyone else coming."

Ben and Sally get up and answer the door.

MATT, 15, black, scrawny with large glasses, stands before them on the porch clutching a bouquet of pink flowers in his quivering hand.

"Hello," Matt says. "I'm here for Denise."

"Denise?" Sally asks. "There's no Denise here."

"This is the address she gave me to pick her up. I'm supposed to meet her parents tonight, then take her out to a movie."

"Look, there's no Denise here," Ben says. "Maybe you've got the wrong house."

"Who's at the door?" Amy shouts from the bedroom upstairs.

"Some kid, looking for someone called Denise," Sally shouts back.

"Oh, that'll be Matt. Let him in. Denise will be ready any minute."

Sally shakes her head and shrugs at her husband as Matt steps into the house and looks around.

"Weird place," he says.

"Yes," Ben says as he closes the door, "Very weird."

Brendan emerges from the kitchen in a wool sweater covered in pink triangles. He moves to shake the hands of Sally, Ben, and Matt. They each are left with sticky brown streaks on their hands. Brendan wears a small afro wig and his skin is painted brown. Sally's mouth drops open.

"What the fuck," Ben says. "Man, this is not cool."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable," Brendan says with a grin. "Welcome to my humble abode! Would you like a pudding-pop?"

Amy enters walking slowing down the stairs, painted in the same style as her husband, carrying a chinchilla. She saunters up to Matt and holds the creature out to him.

"Denise has been so looking forward to this date," she says. "It's all she's been talking about this week. How Matt is going to take her out. How Matt is so darn cute. Matt, Matt, Matt. It's like you are the only thing in the world."

"But before you go," Brendan says, "I have some questions about your intentions with our daughter."

"Amy," Sally says. "What's going on here? Is this some kind of a joke?"

"My name is Clair, Sally, and you know that. You silly girl. We see each other every day at the practice. I simply do not believe that you don't know who I am," she says, then turns to Matt. "Now, young man, I believe my husband asked you about your intentions."

Matt is silent.

"Oh, dear. Let me help you out. Do you intend on treating our daughter with respect?" Amy asks as she strokes the chinchilla. "You know, she's very delicate. You have to take care of her. You gently hold on to her tail like so, and support the rest of her weight with your other hand. You've got to do that at least until she feels comfortable. Until she gets used to you. That way she doesn't run away or fall down and get hurt. Do you believe you're capable of keeping her safe?"

"I think we should go," Ben whispers to Sally. She nods, but doesn't move.

"I guess so, yes," Matt says.

"That's a chinchilla," Ben says. "Look man, you're not taking a chinchilla out. These people are fucked."

"We don't use that kind of language here," Brendan says. "This is a wholesome family show!"

"You're in blackface," Sally says. "And that's not okay."

"I'm not in blackface, I am Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable!"

"And I am Clair Huxtable, attorney at law, and we do not accept

racism in our own home. We've worked very hard to get what we have, and we're not about to let a couple of, well, people like you tell us what you think we are."

"Amy, is he making you do this or something?" Sally asks. "If you need help, we can help you. I want to help you."

"Clair Huxtable does not need any help from the likes of you, you small-minded bigot. Coming into our home and telling us right from wrong. I don't think so. Now I want you all to get out of my house by the time I count to three, or else. You are no longer welcome here."

Brendan goes to the record player and puts on some cool jazz as Amy counts out loud and escorts the guests to the door. By the time she reaches two, the guests have filed out, and she slams the door shut. She approaches her husband. Denise the chinchilla perches on the woman's shoulder as she begins to dance with her husband. He spins her around and around, then dips her. He kisses her on the neck and they freeze. The music continues playing as the credits roll.

CONNECTICUT AVENUE

Early spring, trees still leaded frames
for skycolors.

Rush hour, so we wait, looking.

From the car I envy
walkers on the sidewalks.

The green-bronze lions flanking the apartment doors
watch with me—

An older woman—wait! she's my age—
stops, thinks, tries the great door—
no, not this one—she continues her journey.

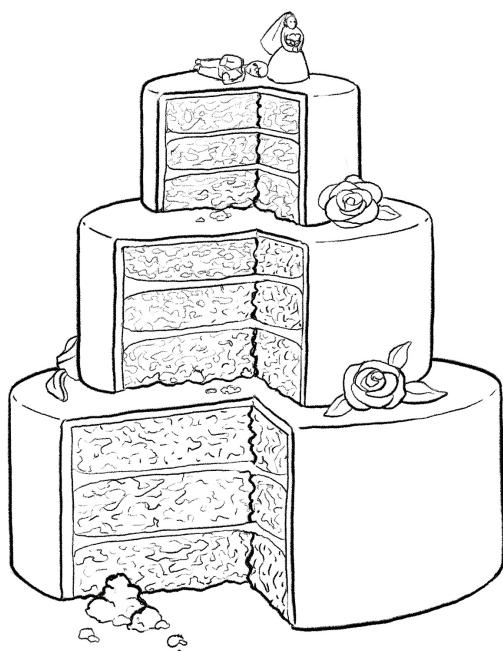
I look past commuters who sit in the bus shelter,
captive to their phones

at a young woman who stands, deep in a book.
Cover uncurled, somber black—Aristophanes? Dickens?

I watch her turn the last page,
intent in her moment

as she is in the book.
Can I be like that again?

The light turns. I leave her
as she leaves her heroine.
This life tugging both of us back,
that relentless current.



Twenty years later, my wedding was a sham.

HOW ARE HER SPIRITS?

It was the day of our school fete and at age eleven I woke excited. It was hot and sunny and most of the events—the three-legged race, the hammer toss, the pony rides, and the apple bobbing—were set up on the school oval. But the student art exhibit and the recorder recital and the big raffle were held in the assembly hall. My parents had bought twenty dollars' worth of raffle tickets in my name and, back then in the early eighties in Australia, that was a lot of tickets. The first prize was a weekend away at a guest house by the beach that one of the wealthier parents had donated, and my mother wanted me to win this. Instead, I won the second prize. Thirty-seven years later I realize it is the only prize, for a raffle or a lottery or a game of bingo, I have ever won. While I have won prizes for poetry and writing and competitions on horseback, either barrel racing or dressage, I have never won anything that involved buying a ticket. When my name was called second at the end of the day I became frantic to get to the lady with the microphone, pushing my way like a mother cow trying to get to her calf, through the herd of children and mothers before me. On the table in front of the lady calling out the winners was my prize, a giant three-tiered cake layered in white fondant, decorated with yellow icing roses. On top of the cake stood a miniature plastic bride and groom, her with a veil and a white dress and him with a dark suit and dark eyes. It was gorgeous. It had been donated by a bride, the older sister of someone at my school. Jilted at the altar were the whispers amongst the mothers. I was enthralled. My mother and I struggled to the car, one on each side holding the silver base, the cake so tall and heavy between us that I could not see my mother's face. I held my side in a viselike grip, excited beyond belief, the cadence of my feet feather-like despite the heft of the load.

We placed the cake in the dining room on the antique sideboard next to the silver teapot and silver tureen and other glorious heirlooms. My mother handed me her largest knife and put the kettle on for tea. My father and sisters gathered round as I plunged the knife into the top layer, using both hands to force it through the inch-thick layer of fondant. I cut wide uneven wedges and laid them on plates. Handing the slices to my family, I heard my sister Sophie sigh with disappointment as she inspected her piece. It was a fruit cake, dark and studded with candied sultanas, pieces of orange and brandy-soaked cherries. My father said he liked a good fruitcake, though after a bite he complained it was dry and took a giant swig of tea to wash it down. I was slightly appalled at the fact it was a fruit cake but did not let on. It was sugar and sweet and it was all mine. My mother remarked that at least it would not need refrigerating as a fruitcake could stand out; she said the alcohol preserved it. Over the next few days, I ate slice after slice of the cake whenever I wanted. And though it was not very tasty and the fondant, thick and rubbery, was inedible and had to be peeled from the edges, I continued to eat the cake long after my siblings and parents gave up on it. The cake stood on the sideboard for days. It was offered to guests or visitors when they came by, but after weeks we had barely demolished the top layer. My mother had removed the bride and groom and placed them beside the cake, and later I took them to my room to put amongst my other treasures on my bedside table—my jewelry box, my piggy bank, my china horses, my special notebook with the lock.

The cake became a joke. I heard my mother on the phone to her sister calling it the magic pudding, saying, “It’s as though it grows overnight. It never seems to get smaller.” I huffed and walked to the dining room to study the cake. We were still working on the top layer. My sisters laughed about the dry texture pretending to gag and choke as they tried another piece. My younger sister got the hiccups so badly from swallowing dry cake while laughing that she threw up on the Persian rug and my mother had to calm her down with a wet washcloth and sips of water. Even my father, who, like me, often yearned for sweetness in our sugar-free home, stopped eating it. My mother talked about throwing it out but I was

determined that it should be there, on the sideboard to show my eldest sister when she came home from boarding school for Easter break in ten days. And when she arrived, I grabbed her hand and dragged her to the dining room and offered her a piece. She smiled and nibbled kindly at her cake and then went to unpack.

That evening she came to my room and said, "I think we should toss that cake."

"Why?"

"Well for a start it's not very good, but honestly I think it might be bad luck eating a wedding cake from a wedding that never happened."

I was dejected. My sister was my guide back then. She was someone I felt had insight into things I had no idea about. She left my room telling me to wait and returned with a bag and a book and sat crossed-legged on the end of my bed and said we should consult the Runestones. Handing me the small cloth bag full of smooth stones she told me to close my eyes and think about the cake and pick a stone from the bag and lay it on the bed. I pulled a rose-colored stone with a symbol that was like the letter T but its horizontal line was at a lopsided angle. My sister nodded and sighed, then looked at her book and said in a solemn voice, "It's what I thought. This is a stone of friction. One of shadows. This cake is not for you. It's riddled with darkness and other people's sadness."

I wanted to banish my sister from my room. I wanted to throw her stones at her face, but instead, I slumped my shoulders and nodded. "Okay."

"I'll do it," she said. She hugged me. "It's a bad omen disguised as sweetness, Georgia." She pulled back and looked me in the eye. "You want to get married one day, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, then it needs to go. It's cursed. You will have your own wedding cake one day. One that you choose and not some disgusting fruit cake."

"Do I have bad luck now because I ate it?" I was sincere and close to tears with worry about what I had done.

"I'll say a spell over you to protect you." She smiled. "I'll take care of it." She picked up the bride and groom from beside my bed and stuffed them in her pocket.

The next day I watched as my sister and my father carried the cake to the outdoor trash can. They were laughing about the weight of it, and from the kitchen window I saw them wincing as they hefted it and it flopped unceremoniously into the dark bin. They said something else to each other I couldn't hear and wiped their hands on a kitchen towel that my mother, who had followed them outside, held out to them. Walking back to the house I heard my mother ask my sister, "How are her spirits?"

My sister said, "Low."

TWENTY years later, aged thirty-one, my wedding was a sham. My boyfriend borrowed money from his parents to buy a simple gold band. We were married on April second, a few days after I had birthed our twin boys. A judge came to our rented home in Arkansas and stood before the fake fireplace in a long robe and big white trainers and joined my boyfriend and me in matrimony. My belly was a soft protrusion, a large squishy sofa cushion that I folded into green pants with a Velcro closure at the waist and then covered with a large white shirt. My mother fixed my wayward curls and shoved a white flower behind my ear. I held my boyfriend's hand and he forced the band on my swollen finger. I was exhausted from lack of sleep and his eyes were brown and confused. He was twenty-four. After we were married, while waiting to return to the ICU to breastfeed my babies, I sat on the sofa, the wound from the C-section aching as I swallowed bites of a Kroger cake and watched my husband drink with his three high school buddies. The cake was a single-layer sponge full of sweet cream and strawberries. I had not chosen it. I thought about my sister's spell of protection and wondered if it had held. A few months after I gave birth and our home wedding, my husband and I traveled to Memphis for my green card interview where we sat before an immigration officer and answered questions about our marriage.

Ten years later, after discovering my husband cheating, I threw that ring, from the back of a horse, into an irrigation ditch in Colorado.

At forty-four, divorced for three years and the single mother of thirteen-year-old boys, I realized I had lived exactly half my life in

Australia and the other half in America. Twenty-two years in each country. I felt this meant something significant. Without revoking my Australian citizenship, I paid my thousand dollars and received my study booklet and my appointment date in Denver. Somewhere between working and cooking and cleaning and sleeping and dating, I studied for my citizenship test. I learned about the Constitution and the Federalist Papers and the Bill of Rights. I learned which rivers were the longest and flowed through which states. I learned rhetoric from Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address, where he pledged his support for Great Britain and staunchly defended democracy, saying that *the United States would not be intimidated by the threats of dictators*. I read about the Mayflower Compact, Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and Ronald Reagan's remarks at Brandenburg Gate in 1987 to the people of West Berlin.

At the scheduled appointment at a nondescript industrial building in a suburb of Denver, heavily guarded by blank-faced men with guns, I was ushered into a white-walled bathroom-stall-sized office and asked ten questions by a solid man at a solid desk. He had a large gun on his hip and a glass of water and a stack of papers and a computer. I had to correctly answer eight out of ten questions. I smiled at the man. I rearranged my hair and my legs and told him I was nervous. He said nothing. With a face as bland as a pound cake, he checked boxes on a piece of paper as I answered. Then he tapped on his computer and said I could go.

"Did I pass?"

"Yes." His voice was flat.

"Really?" I wanted a high five. I wanted a hug. Even a smile would do. But he offered nothing. He stood up and motioned to the door.

"What now?" My voice was high-pitched with excitement.

"You'll be contacted for the ceremony." He touched the gun on his hip. I looked at it. Was this part of the test? I shifted my weight.

I passed! I called my boys. I called my ex-husband. I called my boyfriend. Later I called my parents.

The swearing-in ceremony was on a Saturday at the same nondescript building in Denver. I wore a red dress and red shoes. I was dizzy with

excitement. I sat with people from India, Mexico, Costa Rica, Iran, England, and Ireland. Because my last name came first alphabetically, I was called up first. I stood before an image of President Trump and swore with my hand on my heart that I pledged allegiance to the United States of America. I was handed a booklet called “The Citizen’s Almanac” and a small flag which I waved excitedly. I cried as the whole room stood and sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” and at the realization that I could vote, get my passport, and come and go as I pleased.

That weekend I had a party. I asked all my friends to come dressed up as something from the state of America where they had been born and bring a dish they grew up with. There was Dolly Parton from Tennessee, there was a man as an ear of corn from Iowa, a guy dressed as a surfer from California, an overall-wearing friend who painted his neck red from Arkansas, and a bible-toting big-haired woman from Texas. There were pigs in a blanket and BBQ ribs from the Southern states, corn on the cob from the Midwest, bagels and lox from New York, and a chopped salad from California. I baked a Pavlova. A traditional Australian meringue-based cake covered in whipped cream and strawberries and kiwi fruit. The ear of corn man thought it was the best cake he had ever tasted. We parked my truck in the driveway and sat on the tailgate as we drank Coors and Budweiser while listening to Bruce Springsteen, Merle Haggard, and Frank Sinatra. It was perfect. I was an American.

A few years later, I wanted to marry that boyfriend. After seven years of dating, we had bought a property together. It was a small farm with pastures for horses and before we closed on the deed I envisioned us old, holding hands on the porch, watching the horses graze in the gauzy twilight. After a year living together on the farm—with no marriage proposal, though I had broached the subject several times—I left for Australia to help my aging parents sell and pack up the family home. While I was away, my boyfriend was reminded of the pleasures of being single and moved into the rental unit on the property. Because of the time difference, we never managed to talk on the phone. Alone in the spare bed in my parents’ house, I read his detailed email about why he was leaving me and felt a chill from the past, an alarm somewhere deep

in my bones. All I could think was that I was not the type that men stayed with forever, that I was not worth the trouble. I had strapped myself to men who decided there was venality in my loyalty and felt I had trapped them. They could breathe easier without me. Lying alone in that childhood bed, I wondered why I chose men who balked at commitment. I thought seriously about pleading, because I wanted to beg him to stay. I wanted him to marry me.

In the morning my father asked me what was wrong.

“Good riddance,” he said. “You don’t ever want to be with someone who doesn’t want to be with you.”

I went for a long walk on the beach that day and every few steps I doubled over with pain as though there was a blunt blade twisting into my heart. I absorbed the rejection like a sponge while blaming it on the curse of the fruitcake. And then because I could not leave the world and my children, I gathered my spirits, those internal and those unseen but always protecting me, and lifted my chin towards the blue Australian sky and thought honestly about the relationship and its end. My spirits soared as I remembered how the man who did not want to marry me had appalling table manners and bad slippers. I thought about him slurping his tea and shoveling food into his mouth like it was a coal furnace that might go out, and the excruciating noise of his teeth scraping across the tines of his fork. I felt a calm resolve as I walked back towards my parents remembering all the nights I lay awake beside him while he farted and snored and how before dating me he had never read a book. But mostly I remembered how in our conversations I felt I was always eighteen hours ahead of him. Perhaps my sister’s spell had protected me after all.



*Just for a moment, he imagined running straight
into the sea.*

WAVE

MAC woke around dawn, startled by his own snores. For a few moments, he was two people: the one who sawed away, oblivious, and the one who listened, aggrieved and annoyed. Then the identities collapsed into a single vexed entity and he threw his long legs out of the hotel bed. Settling his weight on the floor, he felt a wrench in his knees. Was it age or only his body's response to yesterday's run along the Strand? When exactly did the aftershock of a good workout shade into the muscular degeneration of geriatric decay? Not yet, he hoped, rubbing at his bare chest, noting the gray hairs among the brown. As a concession to his son, he'd been wearing pajama bottoms for nearly a week, enduring constriction for the sake of propriety. Paul was not so considerate, and slept sacked out across the room in tight white briefs that did nothing to disguise his precocious development.

It would be hours before the boy was upright and conscious.

So Mac had time to kill. He did a few stretches, remembering his young wife's instructions, the wind chime timbre of her delicate voice. How could he leave such a luscious woman unattended while he flew across the world for a classmate's wedding—an event that never even materialized but disappeared into the mist off the Beara Peninsula? Although Lucinda had called off the ceremony, she never offered a plausible reason. Worse, she'd been evading him ever since he arrived two days ago—almost as if he were the rejected groom—meeting his eyes across the hotel lobby, but never extending the courtesy of a simple verbal exchange. Was that any way to treat an old friend who had travelled thousands of miles for the sake of a woman he had never even screwed? Last night, he practically ran into her as she stood arguing with a stranger in the street, and only then did she finally acknowledge him, grabbing

onto his arm like a piece of flotsam in a swift-moving current. And now he couldn't shake the sensation of her touch, the smell of fear mingled with her perfume. What was this perverse compulsion that made him want to complete whatever he started, at any cost to others and himself?

Meanwhile, Sierra, Mac's twenty-nine-year-old bride, had plenty of opportunity to entertain the various surfers and swamis who formed the base layer of her peer group back in Santa Cruz. Imagining potential rivals, Mac added a flight of push-ups to his routine.

Outside the window, Ireland was still there: cows, sheep, meadow. Bay, mountain, sky. All in layers like a gigantic parfait. He might as well throw himself into the mix.

In truth, he was a biker, not a runner. That was why his knees were wrecked, no doubt, because of the unaccustomed impact of the hard roads. But in the absence of equipment, it was the best he could do. He couldn't afford to go soft just because he was stranded in the land of butter and beer. So he slipped out of the room and through the hotel lobby. His gear, much of it from his own line of athletic wear, was cutting-edge, but he felt oddly conspicuous in the orange polypropylene running shorts with their single purple lightning bolt and his tri-color running shoes. An older man eyed him with suspicion, while a middle-aged woman warned him not to scare up the bulls.

As usual, the sky threatened rain. But Mac's six days in the country had already accustomed him to this constant state of hyper-hydration. In the ground, in the sky, and in his poor waterlogged brain, where his thoughts couldn't seem to find any purchase. He kept ruminating about Lucinda: her sterling legal career, her broken engagement, and the difficult beauty that made you look and look without ever discovering the key to its design. Was Ireland leaking into him or was he leaking into Ireland? He brushed his temple, already damp even before he began running. He passed a garden, a field of sheep, and a family of tiny Shetland ponies peering out at him from behind a fence.

He had good traction on the surprisingly well-paved footpath and quickly picked up speed, moving from a feeble jog to a respectable canter in just a few strides. His body resisted, but he had no intention of relenting.

Instead, he pushed through the punishment and into the sweet space of animal exertion. From there, it was only a few paces to outright joy, the type he felt when entering a new woman or closing an advantageous deal. He seemed to grow younger as he ran, shaking the cramps out of his muscles, silencing the creaks in his bones. The mineral brew of the ocean bled into the sweet-sour tang of his sweat to create a powerful affirming aphrodisiac and the gulls called out overhead, urging him along. In front of him, the mist was so thick he couldn't see more than a few yards into the distance, and yet he pushed through nevertheless, so that he seemed to create each new vista simply by inserting himself. Wasn't this always the way? You had to move before you knew what was coming at you, or you'd miss your opportunity. Women with their brief windows of availability, investors with their wandering attention, sudden pockets of demand in the economy, spikes, fads, blips and trends.

Just for a moment, he imagined running straight into the sea. But he followed the circling footpath instead, past stone walls and tidy barns, sheep and cattle and bulls. The mist was still thick over the bay, obscuring the boundary between land and water. Hadn't Lucinda told him that she came out here in the mornings, looking for a quiet place to think?

He ran for maybe forty-five minutes, until he reached the spot she had indicated, where he turned off into the sand without consideration for his shoes. There, on the bluff above him, was a row of cormorants, their wings lifted like crossbows. He still had so much energy that he ran straight up the embankment, sloshing through the tide pools, sinking into the sand, crunching shells underfoot. Then, just for the hell of it, he ran down again, sliding over the earth as if riding a wave. The mist was thick as milk, he couldn't tell where the land ended and the sea began. But he kept going anyway, moving toward the rough uneven shoreline. Out in Colough Bay, a few black rocks broke the cover of the fog and beyond them, a blue transparent mountain rose like a mirage in the distance.

He heard a song, or at least he thought it was a song. Ever since arriving in Ireland, he heard music constantly and couldn't tell anymore whether it emanated from actual musicians, the birds, the sea, the wind, or just the vast bank of irrelevant tunes inside his head. No, not a song,

he decided, but some kind of call. He thought of his wife's cat and the sea lions back in Santa Cruz.

He moved closer and before he knew it, he was practically on top of a couple engaged in full coitus there in the sand. The woman was ascendant, and the man lay prone beneath her, his hands gripping her buttocks. She wasn't entirely naked, but wore a white robe, which fell open, so that her small breasts came into view, swaying with the rhythm of their lovemaking.

What could Mac do? It was too late to retreat.

He had arrived toward the end of things, when the calls were becoming more urgent. Of the two, the man was more vocal. He grabbed the woman's longish fair hair and pulled her toward him, so that he was able to suckle one breast. The she increased the pace, rocking with a violent energy.

Mac felt a shift in his groin, almost as if he were an actor in the proceedings. How long since he'd had sex in a public space? Sierra, in spite of her formidable flexibility, disliked dirt and exhibitionism. So the beach was definitely out for her.

The man shouted and the woman leaned back, as if to give him full rein. Then she dismounted with a strange sideways hop, something bird-like in the execution. The man jumped up too and Mac saw that he was very dark—maybe what they called Black Irish?—with a deep tan and a compact muscular torso. He kissed the woman's cheek before hitching up his shorts and running down the Strand.

Could she really be satisfied? Or was she still waiting for another go?

Out here in the fog, the usual boundaries collapsed and Mac believed, for one instant, that he could simply approach her without preamble.

She turned toward him, as if responding to his desire. Her robe was still open and he saw the pale body underneath, smallish breasts with dark frank nipples, a long sinuous waist, a pale lick of pubic hair. He looked again and saw the woman was much older than he'd thought. Not only that, she was familiar. The wide-set eyes and pronounced eyebrows. The narrow cheeks and sharp chin.

"Lucinda."

“Mac, if I weren’t so distracted, I’d think you were stalking me.”

She closed the robe very slowly and deliberately and knotted it with a masculine force. He couldn’t help but think about her profession and the judicial robes she wore in court. And just like that, her persona snapped into place, closed and resilient as ever.

“I take it that’s not the fiancé.”

“We are having a difficult time putting an end to things. But he’ll definitely be gone by tomorrow.”

She turned to Mac and gave him the stare, the one he recognized from all those late-night debates in college. Her eyebrows lifted and her cheek paled. “How do you do it, Mac? Marry woman after woman? Discard life after life? At some point, do you actually believe that things are going to last forever? Or is it just a convenient social fiction?”

Mac scratched his neck, considering. Why had he married Sierra, after all he knew about the limitations of the institution? Simply because someone else would take her if he didn’t, someone younger, duller, and less deserving. “I suppose I have a conditional view of forever. If our cells regenerate every seven years, are we really the same person? Shouldn’t we be able to shed our obligations along with our skin?”

“But the cleanup, Mac. What about the god-awful debris?”

The sea came in again, providing a natural distraction and giving him time to respond. Mac thought about Paul, the son from his first marriage, a kid he financed but didn’t really know. He thought about the toddler he’d produced with Sierra and wondered if he’d be around to see Kirtan reach adolescence or even second grade. He had to admit, the odds weren’t good. “Just the cost of being alive, I guess.”

“It’s probably just as well,” she said, walking briskly toward the road, “I doubt it would have lasted anyway. He won’t be a diplomat forever. And when he goes back home, what will I do?”

“Did he expect you to follow him, then?”

“I kept telling him otherwise, but he seemed to think I’d change my mind.”

“Didn’t know you that well, I guess.”

“I guess not,” she said. “Not like you.”

Mac suddenly felt the urge to be somewhere dry. It was too early to suggest a drink. Maybe breakfast at the hotel? Or was she waiting for her lover to return?

"You never did apologize," she said.

And now it was too late. He swallowed and tasted a bitter spritz of his own spit.

"You ought to apologize to Kay, at least. I don't think she ever got over it." Behind Lucinda, the fog was dissipating, burnt off by the morning sun. A few minutes earlier, and he would have missed her. A few minutes later, and she would have thought it more discrete to move inside.

"Kay seems to be doing just fine."

"Actually, she's run into some trouble. She had an accident over in Cork. Broke two ribs and punctured a lung. Now they're saying she can't do air travel for a couple of months."

"So she came over too."

"Just the two of you, apparently."

"Your biggest fans."

"Or just the only people with unfinished business."

Breakfast, definitely. Maybe Lucinda wanted to get away from the hotel? He had been perusing guidebooks and knew a place where they could get a full Irish breakfast along with a spectacular view.

"You don't really think you're going to get off that easy."

"Pardon?"

"Interrupting me like that. Once a peeper, always a peeper."

"Maybe you ought to put on some clothes before you say that."

"You don't like my bridal gown?" And she plucked at the sleeve of her robe, puffing out her narrow chest.

Now that Mac was actually offered the opportunity, he didn't like to look, but ran his eyes down her legs instead, staring at her feet, the toes as long and articulated as fingers, the toenails pearly with silver paint. Yes, the feet were the same. In college, she had rarely worn shoes, at least in the dorm, and liked to put her feet up on any available surface.

"Never knew you for an exhibitionist."

“You know, grief does strange things,” she said. “Didn’t you ever have your heart broken?”

Mac nearly stepped on a sea grape lying stretched out across the sand like a giant cable. He knew it wouldn’t hurt him, but he’d like to avoid it anyway. “I’m afraid that may still be in my future.”

“Very bad, when it comes late in life. I can tell you from experience. Better to get that out of the way when you’re nineteen or twenty. Wait till you’re our age and you don’t have much time left to make repairs.”

Mac felt the wrench in his knees again, the pinch in his back. The key was to never stop moving. It was only when you slowed down that you felt the pain.

“So what will you do now?” he asked.

“Change and shower and meet you in twenty,” she said. “I assume you’re going to drive.”

Back at the hotel, Paul had turned onto his stomach and stacked pillows over his head, burrowing into the mattress as if trying to escape the unsavory situation. At fourteen, had he ever had his heart broken? By anyone besides his father, that is? Mac remembered the boy’s sticky infancy and his difficult toddlerhood, the times he threw tantrums over having to wear pajamas or put on socks. The way his face crumpled when you tried to sneak out of his bedroom after six or seven bedtime stories. The tic next to his left eye when he lied. Where did he get that kind of sensitivity? A person like that would always be vulnerable, a danger to himself and others. Still, Mac couldn’t help antagonizing the kid by jostling his ankle as he passed the bed.

Even though Paul was asleep, Mac still refrained from undressing in front of him. He stripped off his running clothes in the tiny bathroom, knocking his elbow on the shower stall and stifling a curse. But once he positioned himself under the hot stream of the shower, he felt fine again, comforted by the health of his own body, the fine old muscles and the visible abs. He had a surge of testosterone, thinking of Lucinda. Then a flush of embarrassment. Well, he’d wanted to run into her, hadn’t he? He’d sent her at least a half-dozen texts since their meeting last night. And if anyone was embarrassed, it ought to be her. Then why was Mac the one who felt threatened? It was that old business with Kay, he supposed.

Kay had been his girlfriend for two years at Cather College—an eternity, at the time, nearly ten percent of his short life, as he calculated one night when contemplating the future. How could he devote that much of his sexual prime to one girl? On the other hand, he did not want to lose someone so perfect, an enticing blend of innocence and abandon. They'd met in a philosophy seminar to which she wore an astonishing variety of outlandish clothing: a vintage sailor suit with a double row of buttons drawing attention to the mound of her crotch, an unbuttoned gingham dress worn over a red bustier, a crocheted halter with fringed boots. While these outfits weren't exactly obscene, they suggested an erotic imagination that was confirmed when he finally got her into bed, a project that took him over two months and nearly exhausted his rhetorical skill set. Didn't she want to see what it was like to sleep with someone who knew his way around an ontological problem? Didn't she want to try out his flannel sheets? She was still fucking around with her hometown boyfriend, but he could feel the ties loosening with every new experience: the Gulf War protest at the courthouse, the first LSD trip, and the group overnight at the lake, when he managed to get close enough to stroke her leg.

She had an extraordinarily sensitive body that flushed from neck to groin every time he laid a hand on her. For that reason, he liked to make love to her with the lights on, watching the play of lust on her skin. She simply could not conceal it. He grew to associate this physical responsiveness with Kay's uncompromising honesty, a virtue that could quickly devolve into naiveté when they discussed politics or metaphysics. The daughter of a social worker and a minister, Kay could not understand duplicity. And while she was open-minded about physical indulgence, she expressed the utmost horror at any kind of financial wrongdoing or interpersonal manipulation. Once, when Mac argued in favor of a drug company that falsified its research results, she refused to speak to him for two days. And when he told a story about cheating on his high school girlfriend with an exchange student from Austria, she announced that they would be on a break until further notice.

Of course, that lasted less than a week. She really did love him, he supposed, at least as much as a nineteen-year-old could. Or was it nineteen-year-olds who actually knew how to love, while the middle-aged lost the ability to care for anything beyond their own deteriorating skins?

So Kay was in trouble, stranded in Cork. What about the husband, that humorless scientist who served up all the stability a woman could stomach? Was he out of the picture? Or was he hovering nearby?

Mac hesitated at the closet, where his clothes had pride of place, since Paul declined to take anything out of his suitcase. Sports gear was making him feel overly American, so he pulled out a pair of tailored shorts and a linen shirt with a banded collar. No, a little too rustic, he decided, and switched out the linen for a striped button-down instead. He didn't want to look like a shepherd, for God's sake. He'd always loved good shirts: stiff collars, fine cotton, vivid colors and clean lines. He supposed that was the inspiration for his clothing line. In Toga Yoga, he tried to reconcile health culture and couture, proving that you didn't have to go around looking like a gym rat just to get comfortable.

He remembered how Kay would always wear one of his shirts home after a night of debauchery, the tails hanging down past the hem of her miniskirt, then return it laundered the next day. Her detergent smelled different than his, a plain baking soda odor that suggested froth and fermentation. He wondered if she was trying to seduce him via her scent. If so, why not something witchy like clove or flirtatious like honeysuckle? Kay's own smell was more fruit than flower—bright notes of citrus, an undertone of blackberry, an astringent whiff of Sauvignon Blanc. She wasn't much for athletics, and so the smell rarely made its appearance outside of bed, though, when it did, he was quick to look around and take note. He touched a dab of cologne to his neck and breathed in what he had become, or rather what he projected—an aloof and dry man who gave off nothing but sandalwood and pine.

Lucinda sat swiping through her phone in the lobby, looking impressive in a vivid green sheath. Honeymoon outfit, he suspected. Of course. She had taken off for the honeymoon and that was why she wasn't rushing home to her job. One of the few excuses for an extended

vacation, once you'd reached a certain age. He thought of the three weeks with Sierra in San Sebastian, the lull of sated lust and the itch of leisure, the fear that he'd never regain his momentum.

When Lucinda saw him, she switched off the phone and stood, so that the dress fell well past her knees, its drape almost as suggestive as her nudity. She gave him a grin. Suddenly, they were pals, after she'd been avoiding him for days. Well, he didn't have it in him to resist. They walked out to the rental car, where he was so disoriented that he forgot about the make of English vehicles and got into the passenger side, then had to get out again to switch. Lucinda only laughed and shoved Paul's AUX cord out of the way.

They drove through the green fields and past some huge vertical rocks that looked like sarcophagi standing on end. Lucinda didn't seem inclined to speak, but once, when he stopped abruptly to let a sheep pass, she set her hand on his knee, pressing it down with a motherly reassurance, and a shock went through him.

After about twenty miles, they pulled into the tiny town of Eyeries, nothing more than a crescent of bright-painted houses along the bay. Inside the pub, people were already drinking, though it wasn't yet ten o'clock. Mac waited to see if someone would greet them. But the bartender was occupied pulling pints and there was no waitress in sight. So he led Lucinda to a table with a view of the bay. Now this, he could appreciate. The foggy morning had given way to complete visibility, so that the whole bay spread out before them, with its layers of green and gold and blue. It gave him a feeling of omnipotence, to see all of it at once, the gardens and pastures, the fields and houses, the mountain and the shore.

"Ah, that's better," Lucinda said, tucking her purse into the chair next to her.

"Were you really blowing me off?" he asked

She chuckled. "As much as I appreciate your multiple offers of assistance."

"I get it, Lucinda. It's unscripted. Nothing in the etiquette books about this. But we've known each other for what, over twenty years. There's no need for formality here."

In the sunlight, her pale skin was crumpled like muslin. But her eyes were the same as they'd been at nineteen. And her stare. When had he ever known a woman to stare like that, not looking at you, not looking at anyone, just the distance over your shoulder? At least here, there was something to look at. He watched a single wave make its progress up the shore, then collapse into the sand, just as another appeared at the same starting point out in the bay, a white ridge rising up out of the ocean. The waitress finally brought a menu and Lucinda surprised him by ordering a full breakfast, complete with sausage and cheese. He'd assumed she would be sticking to egg whites. Maybe it was an effect of sexual exertion. Not to be outdone, he ordered the same.

"It's just, I'm not ready to resume being that person," she said. "I mean, maybe I will never be that person again."

"She was annoying, wasn't she?"

"Always contemplating the future. Always doing the right thing."

Yes, Lucinda had been on a fast-track from eighteen to forty-six. Honors student. Campus activist. *Harvard Law Review*. Partner in a Washington firm. And now a district circuit judge for over ten years. He'd followed her progress, of course, proud at the prominence of his fellow alum, but also puzzled by her apparent lack of erotic attachment.

"You're tired of hustling."

"It's not just that. It's the whole thing, really. That awful election. Having to rule on the President's travel ban. Authority figure after authority figure revealed as a lecher, bully, and fraud."

It had been a bad year for his sex. But Mac was confident that he'd kept his own record clean.

"And now they're trying to break up my engagement."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone called in a bomb threat to my office. They've got operatives trailing Saleem. There's been suspicious trouble over his visa. I'm getting raped on Twitter and assaulted by strangers in the street. It's no time to go through with a big public ceremony."

So there was more to the story after all. He thought of the man outside the pub the night before, his hulking posture and his cryptic

words—something about Lucinda's verdict. Could she be in actual physical danger? And if so, why would she stick around rather than returning home to Virginia?

Their food arrived and he arranged his napkin in his lap. The run had made him ravenous, and he tucked into the meal with unusual appetite.

But Lucinda, after ordering that giant breakfast, seemed reluctant to proceed.

"Anyway, how can I trust anyone, after what I've seen?"

"And you are asking me why?"

She lifted her fork and pointed it at him. "One, you are here. Two, you have extensive experience with serial monogamy."

"Tell the truth, you never wanted to get married anyway. If that's what you were looking for, you would've done it by now. I'm sure you had a butt-load of opportunities, as my son would say."

She rested her chin on her hand and looked to one side, as if totaling up possibilities. "I guess you regard it as a perversion, a woman who waits until she's staring down menopause before even contemplating marriage."

He held his hands up in front of him in protest. "Not for me to judge. Though I was curious, I have to say."

But his mind snagged on the word menopause, something he would never associate with Lucinda. Still she was the right age, forty-six, two years younger than Mac, though thank God he'd evaded this life stage by scrupulously avoiding women of his own generation. It must be sobering for them to experience the end of things in that way, with years and years to survive on nothing but diets and memories.

"I always suspected that maybe you liked women."

"I think you've made that clear."

"Come on, Lucinda. You can't deny that you were into it."

How had she returned him to this again? Retracing the conversation, he realized that he had brought it up himself. His appetite turned and he felt queasy, the animal fat coagulating in his throat. He wasn't used to eating this way anymore. Sierra would never allow it.

"I don't have any sexual taboos, if that's what you mean. But it was obviously to the detriment of certain parties."

Mac had only wanted to switch things up. It was because he loved Kay, really, and didn't want to end the relationship. So he was attempting to make more space for innovation inside their current arrangement. He'd always had his suspicions about Lucinda, who, though very feminine in appearance, had a kind of male arrogance, spouting adamant views on every subject and taking up as much space as possible with her delicate physique. She disagreed with Mac at every opportunity, sometimes taking a position only to be perverse, defending legalized prostitution, for example, or claiming that the country would be better off under communism. But with Kay, she was tender, and when they spoke, Lucinda's Southern accent came to the fore, while the words "honey" and "darling" entered her vocabulary. The two had been roommates since the beginning of college and Kay seemed to regard her friend as a kind of secular saint. She annoyed Mac by referring to Lucinda's opinions at every turn, whether it was the legitimacy of a band, the relevance of a movie, or the viability of a politician. Lucinda considered *Goodfellas* homosocial porn and found the Smashing Pumpkins simultaneously macho and whiny. She insisted that Jerry Brown would make a better president than Bill Clinton. She believed in free access to college education and a universal income. Mac couldn't decide whether to be jealous. But once, when he was in their suite watching the two girls practice for their jazz class, he recognized the smell coming off Kay and he knew.

From there, it was only a question of timing. There were a few missed opportunities, in the girls' suite, in the back room of the comedy club, and of course at the lake. But he was waiting for something more expansive. The opportunity finally came when he scored some ecstasy and invited a select group to the off-campus house he shared with two other seniors—science majors who were usually too absorbed in their common nebbishness to pay attention to his schemes. They were away at a conference, and so he had the run of the place for a couple of days. Fire-pit in the backyard. Wet bar in the basement. Iced brews in the tub.

The guests spent the first part of the evening playing volleyball and horseshoes, touching one another frequently and with an unusual intimacy. A math whiz from Indiana started a limbo. A coed from

Canada wanted to rave. One guy, a transplant from New Jersey, pressed his forehead to Mac's and told him he loved him then nearly head-butted him across the yard. But there were no orgies; this group was too repressed for that. Or maybe this was actually what passed for an orgy in a place like Cather. Still, Mac was much more ambitious. He waited for everyone to leave and when they were down to a few stragglers, he told Lucinda that he wanted to play something for her in his room. Of course, Kay followed along, not wanting to be left alone with the few rowdy guys who were now urging her to join them in a game of beer pong croquet. Upstairs, Mac put on a mix-tape of girl bands—the Bangles, the Breeders, the Go Gos, and Bikini Kill. He had put some thought into the process.

Lucinda sat in his desk chair—naturally—spinning around with an authoritative air, her bare toes splayed out in front of her. She was babbling about collectivism, *The Communist Manifesto* and the legacy of the 60s in the form of free love.

Mac leaned back on the bed and pulled Kay toward him. He caressed her hips and pressed his nose to her ear. They'd been together so many times that he could sense the exact moment when she transitioned from her social self to her erotic one. Her voice got higher and her limbs became more pliable, her body melting into his. Then there was that smell, the one that told him she would do whatever he asked.

He didn't know as much about Lucinda, but he was sure the drug was having its effect on her. She wasn't impervious, after all, but only mysterious, her sexuality suffused into her whole persona, rather than directed at any particular object or goal. But he could tell by the swivel of the chair that she was excited. Sexually? Intellectually? Was there really any difference, at that age?

When the time came, he said, he wondered how much she would be willing to share. He for one could afford to be generous. But Lucinda, in spite of her talk, was always keeping something in reserve.

To tell the truth, he had more faith in Kay. Now Kay was a straight shooter. Kay would never hold back on anyone. As he spoke, he began untying the knot of his girlfriend's halter. No bra, even, how easy could

it be? He felt her shiver, with desire or fear, he wasn't sure which. But she did not object. He would have never proceeded without her implicit consent. He paused, relishing the moment of potential, and released the string to reveal one pink nipple extended long as a hummingbird's beak. Then he pulled the rest of the garment away and threw it off the bed.

From there, the scenario played out more or less as expected. Lucinda obliged by taking off her own shirt, and stepping out of her shorts with defiance, her lavender sports bra and white underpants glowing in the light from the computer screen. Perhaps she was only being chivalrous. But he didn't think she would be able to feign that kind of passion. She touched Kay's knee, then her cheek. She moved in for a kiss and as she did, she gripped his girlfriend's full breast, the swollen nipple trapped between her fingers

Mac thought he would come just from the sight of it. Not just the sheer erotic appeal, but the satisfaction he took in his own skill at arranging the scene.

There was no need for actual physical contact. He didn't have to be involved. Still, he couldn't see missing out on any additional opportunities. So he approached the girls, placing one hand on Kay's pugnacious butt cheek, the other on Lucinda's hard ass. But Lucinda wasn't as far gone as he'd thought and she drew the line at letting him touch her, grasping his wrist and twisting it with a surprising show of strength.

Only after several attempts did he give up and sit back in the desk chair to watch. It was still warm from Lucinda's presence, and this was an added incentive as he reached into his gym shorts and took hold. He finished well before they did, with a violence that shook the desk chair and pushed it halfway across the floor. Then, there he was, in another space. A man who had realized his greatest fantasy but fucked his main chance. His mouth felt so dry that he could hardly swallow and his abdomen itched under a thick spray of semen. Still, he didn't want to get up and go to the bathroom, didn't want to retreat while things were still in play. But the longer he sat there, the more he wondered whether he was the mastermind or the pawn in the exchange.

Now Lucinda tapped her butter knife on the side of her plate.

"You know she didn't date anyone for months after that. And of course we couldn't continue to be roommates."

"We were young," he said. "Hormones, obviously. Experimentation. Object confusion."

"But you had to push it."

He leaned over the table and spoke very quietly, enunciating his words with an exaggerated care. "I didn't hear you making any objections."

She returned the stare, glaring powerfully enough to burn off any polite ambiguity. "Well, now you have a chance to make it up to her."

"Are you crazy? It's been years. I doubt she even wants to see me."

"She needs you. She's stranded over there in Cork. She's injured and she's confused and she's alone. Her husband never came over. He seems to be having some kind of breakdown. So, someone has to go over there and check it out."

"And it has to be me?"

"It has to be you, Mac. That's what I'm telling you. I'll go with you. Now that Saleem's leaving, I want to clear out of here anyway. But you need to make the gesture. That's how you're going to make it right."

Mac looked out to the bay again, where that singular wave kept drawing in toward the shore, a white curl of foam that collapsed onto the beach then reappeared, reconfigured at the same spot far out in the blue. Could you really call it the same wave? It followed the same pattern, that was all he knew.

MOURNING DOVES

This morning I awoke
besieged by some forgotten nightmare—
the grief of widowed friends?
the latest mass shooting?

Survivor guilt hovers above my bed
like dust motes riding the day.
I breakfast on sadness,
sip coffee brewed with tears.

I try to cheer myself by thinking
of sunshine, the daily crossword,
the comforts of a garden full of perennials
that, though not as bright as marigolds,

keep coming back year after year,
unstoppable. Last night's rain after drought
filled the hydrangeas with heavy blooms,
bending them to the ground with a forced joy.

Then I hear the doves' descending cry,
two notes of wordless sorrow,
their little exchange of mutual mourning
a cosmic lament that echoes my own,

the rarified dawn holding their thin grey keening
to the light, their soft sense of inexorable dolor,
their unspeakable, immeasurable loss.



*Afterward it was filed in the hall secretary like a cable
between countries on either side of them, first among
records of a new family diplomacy.*

THEIR GRANDFATHER'S CLOCK

THE children's maternal grandfather, Major Clarke, was eighty-three when he came to visit his daughter Mary's family for the last time. This was in the hot, humid Virginia August of 1982, and the wild berry brambles and vines on the fence-rows around the Wheelers' two acres made a wall up to eye-level. Above that, branches of ailanthus and sumac laden with honeysuckle and poison ivy blocked a view of the Blue Ridge. Beyond these, on all sides, earlier property owners had let locust, cedar, and any other invasive run wild on the land. The old farmhouse sat a hundred yards off the state highway. Its driveway led under the lowering branches of mulberry trees on either side, and once past these, enclosed in green, it seemed there might be no escape from nature's prison.

This was not suburban Virginia but beyond that, where a drive-in theater survived in a land of scattered house lots where discarded tires painted white were used as planters. A few miles further west a roadside store advertised adult film and massage. Not much further was a roadhouse where coal miners from West Virginia were known for weekend brawling. Major Clarke with his second wife, Kokey, Mary's stepmother, kept a tidy yard and bungalow in Rock Island, Illinois, where for years he'd volunteered as a docent at The Arsenal Museum. The Major had not forgiven Vincent for moving Mary and the children into their forsaken region of scarce and suspect neighbors, to a house Kokey thought little more than a dust and cobweb factory.

Vincent had been eager to leave the part of Virginia where home owners associations and county governments harried and taxed a hapless population for a place where they could all relax into loose country clothing. They'd love it. The rustic refuge was half the cost of the tract house they left behind, and only a dozen miles from his work as a

hydrologist in the Winchester laboratory where he analyzed the waters of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers. Mary, forsaking her volunteer work at the public health clinic in Fairfax, was certain she'd find a similar use for herself in her new community. It hadn't happened. Too late she wondered: what could we have been thinking? Moving their three children from their trick-or-treat neighborhood to this rural wasteland where their only social prospect was a deprived public school system. Any therapist could have predicted rebellion, bad humor and family squabble.

WITH the visit only a week off Mary saw that nothing was in order. Not the house, the yard, nor the children were ready for the arrival of her elderly father and his alert younger wife whose inspections, more thorough than the Major's, could detect cracks in a marriage under dust on a windowsill. She still wore the immodest diamond engagement ring of her first marriage. At sixty, young enough to be Mary's older sister; her coming, like a condescension of royalty. Why had her father married a woman who must prove every day that he couldn't afford her? Any family pride in the Major's two-war military service had lost ground to his failing memory and loosened chronological bearings. Mary heard annoying irony in Vincent's references to "the Major." Her children giggled as they whispered "Bomp, and Plokie", the family names for her father and his second wife, but she laid the coming trouble at the feet of her husband, and their ragged yard.

"The disrespect starts with you," she said. "When are you going to mow? The yard's a disgrace. You could make an effort."

She was right about the yard. It had been too wet to mow, then another week had gone by and now the grass was over a foot tall with locust shoots showing here and there. The children were out of patience with his orders, and the lawn mower was in a rebellion of its own, mute to every pull on the starter cord.

Susan, twelve, upset to be forced out of her bedroom by the visit, malingered in her window cleaning assignment. Though confused and touchy in adolescent transition, she could hold her own against her brothers Paul, Bennie, only eleven and nine but fully aware of her

discomfort. She called down from an open window. "How many monkeys does it take to start that thing?" Paul knew better than to reply with a single finger while his father was watching.

"Hey! Sweater girl," he yelled back at her.

"Be quiet! All of you!" Mary called from the kitchen. "Don't be disgusting. You don't deserve to have a family."

Vincent, reassessing, knew that even if the mower started, it would choke out before cutting a first swathe. He phoned their man-with-a-tractor to come with his bush hog, and get the grass down to manageable length. And he called a family meeting. He'd seen this before—Mary's panic before a visit by the Major, and the family thrown into a bickering tailspin. Before their kitchen council was over the boys had pledged to stop exploring their sister's bureau, and to speak no more of her training bra; Susan would stop calling her brothers Chimp and Chump, and Mary had a promise from Vincent that he'd go alone to pick up the Major and Kokey at the bus station in Winchester. To show his particular interest in their visit. Mary, though conceding nothing, vowed to herself she'd show her step-mother an earnest welcome. But beyond her best intentions were the inescapable realities. The inevitable spark and ultimatum; damage and repair, peace at senior nap time. Maybe a whole day between blow-ups, interludes of stifled resentment. She thought of Kokey's diamond-decorated hand on the dinner table beside the Major's placemat, a hand that could as easily be in her lap.

The family returned to their chores, but a few minutes later Susan was sitting at the top of the stairs staring at nothing. Seeing her sullen expression Mary mourned her daughter's lost moments of glad grace once shared so easily. What if this were more than a phase? The year before one of her classmates at the middle school had destroyed herself. Oh, the sweet innocence of a daughter whose Family Life class had jumped so far ahead of a mother's counsel: "Mom, what do you say when you want Dad to put seeds in you?" "That's private, dear," leaving so much to a troubled imagination.

Distrusting her parents' claim for her natural beauty, Susan eclipsed the issue with blue hair and a heavy hand with eyeshadow which Vincent

thought made her look like a raccoon in need of sleep. Now she was standing beside her bicycle in the driveway, a balloon-tired clunker with a single gear. She'd been waiting all summer to call herself thirteen. To put more distance between herself and her brothers. Now a few actual miles. She looked balefully around at them in that shaky moment when wheels are hardly turning.

"Let her go," Vincent advised.

Annoyed with Susan's dereliction Mary put aside her morbid musing, and turned to the realities, in particular her father's wandering mind. Hanging on to a conversation the Major might mumble words, repeating them until his next thought arrived. It made the children uncomfortable to sit in the same room with him only to be scolded if they dared to laugh. When he "took a spell," he could fall into historical confusion, cutting an event from one decade and replacing it in another; his time traveling so smooth you might fear for his safe return to the moment. If corrected too abruptly he went to the piano in the parlor and played "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" at surprising volume and without a misplaced note.

"How about that, people?" Mary could say to herself.

Susan, defeated by the first small hill, was back in fifteen minutes, and working again on the windows while the boys weeded the garden and their father straightened up a messy tool shed. Later, Vince said the day's efforts were worthy of a night out for dinner. Paul and Bennie lobbied for Tyrana-Tacos at Dinosaur Land. Mary and Susan feared Vincent was thinking of the Caverns Diner where a dwarf who did the chores had climbed into the booth beside them to recite the specials. Bennie had started crying, embarrassing everyone.

And God forbid, not popcorn at the ancient drive-in theater where Mary had once sat for two hours, embarrassed for her family as Doris Day smiled chastely over a congregation whose windows fogged all around them. Mary begged to go somewhere they wouldn't feel like cultural anthropologists. Vincent turned the car east, toward nationally advertised hamburgers.

VINCENT met the old folks at Baggage Retrieval inside the depot. There were arms-length hugs and Kokey's "Hello, stranger! Where are the children? Well, they had important things to do." After several revolutions, they were staring at the only bags left on the carousel.

"Those can't be ours."

"Don't be silly... His sight's going."

On the drive back as the roads narrowed, the Major leaned forward in the back seat to remind Vincent, "You moved her a long way out." Kokey allowed he was taking them the scenic way: "it can't be much farther."

After a silence too long to ignore, the Major offered, "Well, he stood up to Khrushchev, didn't he?" Vincent couldn't say. "Anyway, he's got inflation under control. Are you still testing river water? Well, look at that!" distracted for a moment by a cow grazing with her calf in a front yard.

"They're painted on boards," Kokey explained to him. "It's their art."

This could be alright Vincent thought. If he just held back as a friendly chauffeuring presence, roadside attractions would entertain them. His heart softened and he apologized silently for his part in their alienation. He might have softened further, had he known that a year later the Major's heart, on a schedule of its own, defying heroic measures, would stop forever. As country landmarks slid by—the green machinery of the Deere outlet, a duck's wings decorating the side of a mailbox spun in the wind, a volunteer fireman sat smoking beside the Stonefield station house—the surrounding vegetation thickened, branches lowered over the road ahead, and when they finally passed under the mulberry canopy and were in the Wheeler's yard, Kokey asked "But where are the mountains?" And the Major was hardly exaggerating when he replied, "Where's the sky?"

The bush-hogging had got the grass down to a half-foot, but looking down, Kokey drew an audible breath, grabbed the Major's arm and, lifting her dress with her other hand, went high stepping across the lawn as if negotiating a hayfield. The Major, hurrying ahead with her, seemed eager to leave Vincent behind and get on to blood relations. Mary, standing in the doorway, turned to hush one of the boys arguing with his sister.

First thing, Kokey had to give Paul and Bennie their presents, yo-yos, which, without sleeper strings, met unenthusiastic gratitude. Susan would have to wait till the birthday party for her gift.

“Thank you?” Mary suggested.

“For what?” Susan asked.

The Major’s solemn appraisal of his grand-daughter—“quite the little lady”: maybe a wistful recognition she would never again sit in his lap to be tickled, perhaps matured beyond his ability to amuse her at all.

Mary led them up to Susan’s room where they’d stayed before. It had the queen-size bed and firm mattress the Major required. As in all the upstairs rooms of the old farmhouse there was a cast-iron grate in the floor with a sliding baffle allowing heat to rise through the house. Open, it made a sounding board, amplifying conversation in the kitchen below. “These can be so annoying,” Mary apologized, bending down to be sure the vent was shut. “Don’t close that, dear,” Kokey said. “That’s how we know when the coffee’s on,” as if unaware of the antique fixture’s bonus as family spyware.

ON day-two of the visit, before others were up, Vincent drove into Winchester to negotiate with the dealer who’d sold him his mower two summers before. His rehearsed story of tall grass and in-laws held no weight against an expired warranty. But Vincent, sure that awakened combustion was only a few confident steps away, returned with a new condenser, set of points, and a manual with a diagram of the mower’s engine.

Walking into his house he found the Major and Kokey huddled together on the sofa, holding hands in front of the television, seeking comfort from the available signal from Charlestown, half drama, half snowstorm. Drawing him into the kitchen Mary explained how the day had started with Susan coming down to the breakfast table in the t-shirt that said “Boogie Till You Puke” with its photographic demonstration.

“Go to your room and take that off,” the Major ordered.

Instead Susan rode away again on her bicycle, and the old folks retreated to their room.

From there the Major had gone exploring in the attic where he found an honest-to-goodness squirrel's nest under the eaves. Bennie, who couldn't hide his amusement at a third repetition of honest-to-goodness, was given a time-out. Enjoying his release from the difficult attendance on his grandparents, he never asked for an end to his confinement, and the punishment drifted away, beyond anyone's concern.

Vince's commiseration with Mary was brief; he needed the remaining daylight to fix the mower. Easy enough, he thought. With the engine's cover removed; he saw again how clever the engineering of the thing for one with the cunning to appreciate it. Pleased with his swift accomplishment, he was pulling the starter cord with all the pride of a man who knows his way around a small engine. He choked and pulled and pulled, unchoked, and pulled and and choked again and pulled, twenty-five times, maybe thirty without a cough from "this fucking thing" and his frustration—"shit, shit" and "shit!"—reached ears in the house.

At dinner, the Major who had dreamed the two-week visit into completion in his afternoon nap, said it had all been very nice, he was grateful they had shown Kokey such a genuine welcome, but too bad they'd missed Susan's birthday party.

"No, no, Daddy," Mary corrected gently. "You've only been here two days. Susan's birthday is next week."

"Well, it was all very nice anyway," he said, turning for confirmation to Kokey who said, "You're tired, dear. We'll have an early night." She swiveled slowly under the family's gaze and, with no intention of mending the Major's confusion in front of this audience, she rose to lead him up to bed. After tucking him in she came back downstairs to confront the family.

"Go to your rooms," Vincent ordered the children.

"No," Kokey said. "Why shouldn't they hear this? I can imagine what you tell them about me."

She sat opposite Mary to say her piece.

"I see the way you stare at my hand, the way you all stare at it. If you'd like to know, the Major asked me to wear the ring. He demanded I wear it. Ask him. He said he couldn't respect a woman who didn't still love a husband she'd lost. Maybe his heart's bigger than yours."

She turned to Susan, holding out her hand.

"You can touch it, dear," she said. "It won't bite."

Susan looked to her mother for permission.

"If you want to," Mary said, but Kokey had already withdrawn her hand. Astonished, they waited for Mary to defend herself, to defend them all. She wouldn't be stared down by Kokey, but her silence seemed a defeat, a disappointment. Kokey went up to join the Major. No one spoke until Vincent said, "Well, that let the air out."

"Yeah, out of her butt," Paul said; reflexive delivery of a favorite line.

They were all looking to Mary for a reproval. All she said was "he'll grow up." Susan, in disbelief at the uncensored rudeness, said, "We should all grow up. You too, Mom."

"WHAT's to do around here," Kokey asked the next morning, as if she'd just arrived, as if they were starting all over again. "Any attractions?"

"A Family Dollar, eight miles." Mary said, surely a guarantee against excursion.

"We could have a look at that," the Major said.

"Not today," Vincent said.

After taking two days off in honor of the visitors, he was returning to work.

No family trips until the weekend. That night he returned from Winchester excited to explain the impact his laboratory was having on the region's waterways; saving the details for the dinner so the Major and Kokey might better appreciate the significance of his work. With all seated at table he began: "Does anyone know what a PCB is?" The desired silence was broken by the Major's promise of "a little secret" if the boys would take their elbows off the table. Alert to their surreptitious pestering of their sister, he was missing most of Vincent's account of the perfidy of the country's largest rayon manufacturer in nearby Front Royal, the spilling of toxins into the Shenandoah River, the government's enforcement dereliction, a company spy discovered in his own laboratory, his counter-ploy, altering the water-testing schedule, and at last, this week, a consent decree signed by the polluters. Kokey was confused. Mary tried to help:

"It means the company agreed to stop what they hadn't been doing." The Major, meeting Vincent's waiting gaze, said, "very impressive, I'm sure."

THAT Saturday afternoon the whole family climbed into the station wagon for the outing to the Family Dollar, where Vincent and the boys, already wishing they were home again, never got out of the car. Susan had a plan to separate her mother from Kokey, whom she hoped to wheedle into buying her a mood ring. Kokey led the way into the store, where she pulled a large-sized shopping cart from its rank, and pushed off, alarming Mary, who hurried to keep up with her.

"That older boy of yours is fresh as paint," Kokey told her as Mary caught up.

"His name is Paul. Where are you going? What did he say?" For the moment, both of them forgot the Major, who was ambling off on his own for a conversation with the pharmacist about blood thinners.

"Never mind what he said. You need to brighten up that kitchen of yours."

Kokey was pushing down a second aisle, then a third. Coming to House Wares she began to fill the cart. First with some dish towels with a house-blessing message, then a powerful floor soap "for that stained linoleum."

"To perk up the drawers and cabinets" she was counting out five rolls of contact paper before Mary began putting all of it back on the shelves. There was a brief tug-of-war for the last roll. Kokey turned to some startled shoppers behind her, as if they might pull with her.

"You can lead a horse to water..." she whispered.

"Where's your father?" she asked, suddenly turning away. Both abandoning the cart, they went off in opposite directions, each hoping to be first to tell the Major what had happened.

THE visit proceeded with the predicted bruises from sharp elbows. With only a few days left and scant prospect of new connection between her children and her parents, Mary turned her attention to Susan's party. There was a secret after-work shopping trip to Winchester, but again

it was “the lawn, Vincent,” a trimmed lawn required for the grill and picnic table party.

The Major and children were standing over Vincent who was on the ground beside the mower. The Major turned to Bennie: “Does your father know if it’s not ignition, the problem is carburetion?” Vincent, who was already loosening the carburetor’s bolts, asked him to “move out of my light.”

With the disassembled part in hand, he saw the problem at once: “A hole in the diaphragm.”

“You mean we’ll have another little mower?” Susan asked

Paul shoved his sister hard in the chest for her stupidity. Vincent looked up in suspicious wonder at the precocity of his daughter who was yelling, “Did you see what he did to me?” Too much for the Major, who exploded, “What the hell is wrong with you people?” Pulling Paul and Bennie aside, he ordered them to come with him.

“Do as he says,” Vincent told them.

Reluctantly they followed their grandfather into the house and up to his room. The women, seeing it all from chairs on the porch, watched them enter the house. Hearing them troop up the stairs, Mary went into the kitchen where she might listen to any conversation above without intruding. Susan, seeking commiseration, came over to join Plokie on the porch. Above her Mary heard her father yelling, “Sit there, both of you.”

There was a squeaking of springs as they plopped onto the bed.

“Paul, you’re the older one; where’s the example? You should be ashamed, teasing your sister about her breasts.” The boys saw the Major’s eyes begin to wander left and right, as if he were suddenly lost. He looked down at them, found his place, and began again.

“I’ve heard your farting noises. Listen, there are stinks in this world you never dreamed of. A soldier with his leaking guts in his hands. There’s a smell for you.”

Paul saw an opening: “Weren’t you an ambulance driver? Weren’t you too young to be a soldier?”

Her father would recognize the adult tutoring behind this impudence. Mary could imagine his face turning red, hovering over her boys, forced

into the past. "Your father doesn't know a thing about war. How could he in this day and time when they decide which war they'll fight?"

His voice calmed and his mind went drifting behind trenches in France: "I didn't know the other drivers would be your poets and such."

"Do you know what you could catch in the Marne River?"

He stopped for a moment. From the kitchen Mary could hear Susan on the porch thanking Plokie again for getting her the mood ring. She was asking, "Is your ring very expensive?"

"No, dear. It's not the kind they find. It's the kind they make."

If she moved to hear more of this, Mary would be missing the news that was falling again from above, history her father had never shared with anyone. His anger gone as quickly as it arrived, he was telling the boys about the nurse Annemarie who smelled like eucalyptus and had "one of those things with her mouth, a harelip. She thought she was my mother." "Sit still. I'll tell you what you could catch in that river...a German hand... fished it out with a stick...common as carp...all white swollen and white stuff coming out of the thumb. It wasn't a French hand," he said, "there was no dirt under the nails." Mary was ready to run upstairs and put an end to this but her father had calmed, and however horrid, his rambling was priceless history. He went on, "Annemarie wouldn't let me out of her sight. She sat beside me, with the doctor in back. They called him a doctor. Didn't know lice from fleas. She knew all the roads and farm lanes...grabbed the wheel if she didn't like the way I was turning..."

He hesitated, maybe losing his place or wondering why he was talking at all. On the porch Plokie was making Susan promise she wouldn't wear the shirt anymore, "the one that upsets your grandfather...Do you like living so far from any neighbors?" "It's not so bad," Susan lied. She didn't want to say how she and her brothers were bullied by a rougher sort of children on the school bus. "I think I have this friend but he doesn't know my name. I heard you yelling at Bomp last night."

"Did I wake you? Men can be very selfish."

"Plokie, are you and Bomp going to be burned? Or buried like you are?"

"We'll be cremated, dear. After they take what they want. We're both organ donors. They won't use his eyes because of the glaucoma."

"Well, I don't want to be burned."

"Don't worry about that. You've got a birthday coming."

Susan came in to get Plokie a glass of water. Mary went to the fridge.

"No," Susan snapped at her, "You know she doesn't like ice in her water."

Mary sat back in disbelief. Her father still pestering the woman's sleep? Now he was wandering again behind French lines where the hospital's carrier pigeon, Major Feathers, was still alive after a hundred and fifty missions.

"They made her a gold medal but she went missing before they put it on her cage...A tree jumped out of a hole in the ground and scared me out of my proper head. I messed my trousers. They said it was a miracle I was still alive and they gave me a medal too...I was driving another doctor then... the first was dead...the new one told her to take her hand off my knee while I was driving. She paid no attention."

Moments later the Major was back in that hot Virginia August, teaching the boys how to play "I'm the King of the Castle, and You're the Dirty Rascal," climbing onto the bed with them, all laughing as he pushed them onto the floor. By the time Mary got upstairs to put an end to the roughhousing the game was over. Her father was giving each of them a dollar bill, telling them to get something nice for their sister.

Shocked by the unfiltered horror, but pleased with the way he'd put their puny scatology to rout, she stood motionless, and heard Plokie climbing the stairs to join him for their nap, maybe to share their new and privileged knowledge of the children.

Already groggy, lying on the bed, the Major was drifting three decades forward from his duty in France to a bunker on the New Jersey shore, spotting German planes. Before falling all the way into afternoon slumber he confessed as the woman removed his shoes and put a pillow under his head, "We never saw a German plane. We saw tankers exploding on the ocean." Mary supposed the raucous voices she heard outside must be Vincent cursing his mower a half dozen ways. But at a window she saw him lying in his hammock. Beyond the abandoned machine, crows settling on the lawn were squawking at some opportunity or danger. Vincent roused himself and drove off to Winchester again for the mower's

replacement part. Mary sat alone in the kitchen grateful for the bland honor of her steadfast husband whose birth year kept him exempt from all wars. But pitiable too, with nothing comparable of passion, vileness, disgrace, or triumph to be locked away against future inquisition when his life might be on trial, and his children in the jury.

When the old folks woke, the boys were upstairs again, pestering their grandfather to show them his medal. If it existed, Mary had never seen it.

THE next morning, with Vincent hurrying to keep up, the mower rolled forward, roaring its release from human abuse, spraying grass to the side and swathe-by-narrow-swathe preparing the lawn for Susan's celebration. Vincent nodded toward the porch, answering the cheers for his heroic achievement. When the satisfactory machine was stowed in the shed again, Kokey came out to ask, "Is someone going to rake the grass?"

AFTER the practical gifts were opened—a dress, a pair of jeans, a sweater—Susan looked wistfully to her father, supposing she could expect no more birthday gratification than any other adult, his cue to roll out her real present, a three-speed Schwinn, sky-blue with headlamp, horn, and magneto. Attached to the handlebars his card said, "To take you where your ring turns purple," though he feared it might do just that. Her eyes teared and the boys knew she was still one of them.

Susan was still riding up and down the driveway, learning how to shift gears when the sun went down. Paul with Bennie in tow had been following their newly imagined grandfather through the house; the one who messed his pants when a tree jumped out of the ground and drove an ambulance for a nurse who smelled like eucalyptus. Why wouldn't he show them his medal? "Tell us about the nurse who smelled like eucalyptus."

"There is no medal," he told them fiercely. "Who told you about that?"

Which only increased their curiosity. They took the first opportunity to go rummaging through his bureau. Their eagerness to accept and explore the old man's past outpaced any interest they might have in their own parents' history; lives so common by comparison. Mary's love for her father could gather no credible case against Vincent's pretended

admiration for “the subconscious creativity” of a “self-promoted fabulist, who was too young for the first war and too old for the second,” and “confused about which one he was fighting.” With the facts against her, she slept in a separate room that night before they drove the Major and Kokey back to the bus station.

Two thank-you notes, both written by Kokey, were a month in coming, one addressed to Paul and Bennie, one to Susan. The boys’ note apologized for the week-long inconvenience of a shared bathroom, and held two five-dollar bills; the remarkable treasure outweighing any sting of censure for their “rude noises.” Susan’s, more letter than note, held no financial reward, but raised her to a privileged sisterhood. “I hope you’ll come to visit. Your grandfather isn’t the fright he pretends. He actually likes your brothers. He says they’re full of piss and vinegar. It’s a compliment.” Plokey’s list of things to do in Rock Island was not promising: “the Arsenal Museum, you wouldn’t care for it. I shouldn’t tell you but the best thing we have here is the bridge to Davenport.

“You’ll have your own room. You can see the Mississippi from your window.” “You might like the arboretum.” Then, “Don’t worry too much about your father’s mistakes. Men are happy if they can keep a lawn mower going.”

Finally, “You have your mother’s eyes and nice skin. Don’t blame her for being rude to me, remember she had her own mother.”

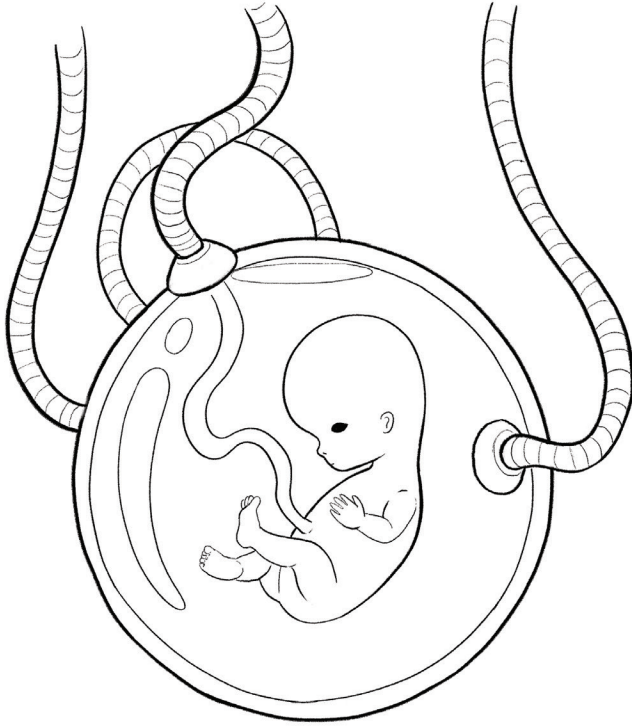
For Susan, she signed herself “Kokey.”

SUSAN did not flaunt her special standing in Rock Island, nor keep it a secret. She left the letter open on the kitchen table, intending that her parents read it. They felt no shame in obliging her. Afterward it was filed in the hall secretary like a cable between countries on either side of them, first among records of a new family diplomacy. It was soon joined by home inspection reports, school transcripts, and contingent sale documents, all these after a kitchen council which began with the confession of their foolish foray into foreign territory and ended with a pledge of a retreat to the homeland.

UNEMPLOYED

the door of it
suddenly you're on the other side suddenly
that place and though you can see
the way back it's no choice
just a view back to where the others
are eating toast speaking normally
your voice is no door but
a pool you cannot get to ripple

though space is widening horribly
though the air is filling with the horrible light
returning the light become disappearance
swallowed shackles of light
gullies slabs broken fingers freckles tunnels
and snarls of light the needles in your throat
commanding breathe breathe



"This is a love story, though it disguised itself at first."

ABILITY STUDIES

TUESDAY

J: I was born like a joey, into a pouch.

J: I came into the world far too early, hairless, eyes closed, and they sealed me up in a plastic pouch full of fortifying liquids, a new treatment that I was lucky to get. My mother, though she had the name *Derek* picked out for me, at the last minute changed it to Joseph. Joey.

J: The dis started early. Everything for me started early. The glasses that tried to teach my eyes how to focus, that people would comment on instead of telling my mother that she had an adorable baby. The electric wheelchair, smallest model available, attracted shouts from car windows, *go baby go!* Didn't mind so much the extra teacher who followed me around, fed me snacks, rendered my homework laughably easy because they thought that I was incapable. Because—then—I could not communicate.

J: And the dis continued. When you don't know any *different*, then it is hard to know any *better*. I accepted that no one would discipline me, or even bat an eye, if I paid no attention in class. When doing homework with my teacher's aide, she would put words in my mouth, write the essay for me. When you are seen as a *dis*, it is easier to absorb the label and coast. It is easier to lower expectations for yourself.

J: I'm sorry. I apologize. This is a love story, though it disguised itself at first. The old teacher's aide retired or maybe broke her hip—they tried to keep from me everything unpleasant, another dis—and the aide who replaced her, we had an immediate spark.

L: Can we pause for a moment here?

J: When you speak to me, Doctor, look at me. Not at Marcus. Marcus facilitates my words, but the replies come from me.

L: I didn't mean...I was actually under the impression that this would be an interview about your relationship to the word "disability." Not a love story. But a chapter in my book. You read the synopsis for my book?

J: Ability. We have been discussing the *dis*, yes, but I want the topic to be *ability*. I should be able to live my own life.

L: Only now it is...a love story?

J: It is *my* story. No one has ever listened to me before, has thought that I could be *listened to*, and so finally I will tell what I need to tell.

L: Of course. I apologize. Please continue.

J: By the time I met Marcus, I'd nearly graduated from high school, held back two years, so twenty years old. Marcus was only ten years older. From the start, there was none of the imbalance of power that I had felt so keenly with my previous aide. You see, Marcus adhered to the first basic principle of facilitated typing: he presumed my competence.

He recognized my intelligence and saw that only a physical difficulty was keeping me from my intellectual potential. Marcus is the only one who ever thought me capable.

M: You *are* capable, have always been...but no one took the time to figure it out. Doctor, he's getting tired. Ten more minutes?

L: I did not realize how long it takes for Joey to type...I mean, ten more minutes is fine.

J: When Marcus touched my lips, that first day at lunch, I felt a spark run all the way down to my toes. Nerves lighted up in certain parts of my body that had not responded to the stimulations of the world for a long while.

I did not understand why. I truly didn't. I was an innocent of my circumstance. Another dis.

L: I'm afraid that we're out of time for today, but we will continue soon. I'm turning off the computer's recorder, now.

THURSDAY

J: No one had ever viewed me as a sexual being. And I am very sorry to admit that Marcus did not view me that way either, at first, even though he was enlightened and educated in the subject of disability studies.

It must have been that dis that got him, that clouded his perception of me. To get him to notice me, I practically had to throw myself at his feet. Don't look so concerned, Doctor. An expression only. My motor control doesn't allow for actual throwing. The more that I got to know him, the

more that I understood we were soul mates, but I didn't see how to bring it up. I was shy and unversed in romance.

L: And today—for the purposes of my book—I would like to slightly alter our topic. Facilitated typing was never my expertise. Since my studies took me more the literary, etymological route, however, I am fascinated by your relationship to your method of communication. An unprecedented communicative advance, made even more poignant because it relies so heavily on the facilitator.

J: I'm not straying from the topic, which at base—you just said it—is relationships. Marcus is my facilitator. This is very much the topic. My relationship with the word *disability* is my relationship with *me*. And I am now a part of Marcus.

Who allowed me to finally speak with the typer, who has the strongest arms, a product of his profession, and who is able-bodied in every way, in ways that made me envious until I possessed him.

L: *Oh...*

J: At first, Marcus did not notice me, not physically. I tried to brush my knees against his whenever possible. He disregarded the hint. Eventually I found the courage to type out the way I felt. Such an ecstasy, to have his fingers around me, his hand supporting my hand that was about to close the gap between us with words. Shocked, he stared at me, at the screen professing my feelings, and then we had a long conversation, a discussion about why this could be seen as wrong, though he did admit to me that we shared the most thoughtful and in-depth conversations he'd ever experienced in his life. But we left it at that: talking.

Until several weeks later, when I brought up the subject again. I had seen the look in Marcus's eyes, that he had noticed me. I opposed his objections: I was old enough; I could consent for myself, though everyone tried to baby me. I was a thinking, feeling being, even if my *disability* made people believe otherwise. I told Marcus that he was like all the rest if he couldn't picture me as a fully formed man with desires. I felt bad about that: Marcus was never like all the rest. But my words got through. He said that I was right, that neither of us should be forced to deny our feelings.

L: Why are you telling me this?

J: Don't sound so shocked, Doctor. As if you are disgusted. You don't hate your own kind, do you? You're writing a book? You need tenure? We need you to introduce us to the world. We need you to be someone who will accept us, who will pave the way for others accepting us. We need your help with all of that.

L: My help?

M: Joey and I have precious few hours together. His mother is grateful that I can assist him after community care, take him places, but we need more time. We're in love, and we want to start a life.

J: Marcus and I have been meeting for months—longer, but as lovers, only months. Before, we would simply talk. That's how we fell into love. But stigmas surround our relationship. Not only will the world see me as differently abled, but also as gay. You'll help us, won't you? Help us convince them that we've made an adult decision? That I can consent?

L: You mean...because I am also gay? You thought I would be... sympathetic?

J: You want your book to be real, don't you? Then write this.
Write how we are perfect for each other.

TUESDAY

J: I have goals, just like any other person. I have dreams and aspirations. I want a house with Marcus, just the two of us. Marcus is going to help me write a memoir. He has an affinity for English. We're going to take classes together, college-level, and every night we'll cook a different recipe for dinner. He needs to become my legal guardian. We need to settle that, and you will help. We need an expert, a doctor, on our side. We need to start living.

L: That must be—I've invited another guest. Come in.

P: Hi, everyone.

J: Mom, what a surprise.

L: Let me explain why I've asked you here, Penelope. You see, I've become interested in the controversial means of communication through facilitated typing.

P: Joey is doing very well. His aide before, Martha, could barely get a word out of him, maybe two at the very most, *maybe*, but Marcus has truly brought my son out of his shell. They work together so well. I can't tell you how happy we are, how grateful, to hear from Joey himself after all this time.

L: I understand how exciting that can be for you. But you have read up on the controversy? How in supported typing, sometimes the facilitator himself is creating the words—not that he means to do so, but simply that he wants his subject to communicate so badly that he manufactures words where there are none. So you see, I wonder: have you ever considered that it might not be your son talking so much as it is Marcus?

J: Absurd.

P: What? No, it's Joey. You might not think it, Doctor, but he has his own personality. It comes through in his words.

L: Communication is such an important, a necessary, form of contact. We all want to believe that it is possible with our loved ones. But even our loved ones who are—who we think of as—who speak, even with them, we are constantly misunderstanding.

P: What are you saying?

L: Before Joey's birth, had you planned to name him Derek?

P: What?

L: I need you to ask your son a question, a question that only he would know the answer to. Something about the family, perhaps, or something that happened when you two were the only ones in the room.

P: Why?

L: Please do it. You'll see. Please.

P: Well. All right. Joey. What was Aunt Ginny's middle name?

J: Don't listen to him. He has something against the two of

L: Oh no—this is what I expected. But I needed to be sure. So that I wouldn't regret what I have to do.

P: The two of you? What is going on? Joey, what kind of pet did I buy you when you were ten? Joey?

J: M can take care of me and I want him t

P: Marcus? Yes, Marcus does take care of you, sometimes.

L: If Joey truly were guiding the typing process, do you not think that he would be able to answer your questions?

P: Joey! What kind of pet? When you were ten? *What kind?*

J: This dr

L: Marcus wishes to take over from you as your son's legal guardian.

P: What? I couldn't see why. That doesn't make sense.

J: did something

M: You're not giving him enough time to finish his thoughts! I'm getting too irritated, too stressed, to facilitate for him. We need to be calm and in tune with each other, we need...

L: I feel compelled to tell you that I have learned through this screen—through this typer screen only—that Joey and Marcus are in love.

P: No. No. What are you saying? Joey is...he would never be ready for that.

L: They want to live together, they want a...to have a life together. I learned from what was typed on the screen: Marcus wishes to be Joey's legal guardian.

P: Joey, I am being very serious. *You must answer the question.* I think I see what the doctor is saying. I am very concerned right now. If you don't answer the question, I am thinking that... Joey, *when is my birthday?*

J: J r pr

L: They want to live together. To...be together.

P: No. *No.* Joey is a...*child*. A two-year-old intelligence, will never speak, never develop strength, they first told me. Which I believed until Marcus started facilitating. Until Marcus...

J: I want to live with Mar

P: How are you typing so fast, now? Marcus, are you doing that? Moving your fingers under Joey's without direction from him? Joey—how did your father die? Hm? Answer me!

J: Please dr

M: You don't understand; Joey needs someone like me, who doesn't treat him like a child, who believes in him—that foundation gave us his breakthrough.

L: I have it all recorded, all of your lies. You consented; we hooked up your typer to the computer; we're recording. Remember?

P: Marcus, did you...*touch* my little boy?

J: He never

L: Enough now. I see that I am right. I'm taking away the typer.

P: It seemed like a miracle. How eloquently my son spoke. How quickly he learned to spell even difficult words. He went to school, of course, but still, a miracle...

L: I'm locking the typer in this drawer, here.

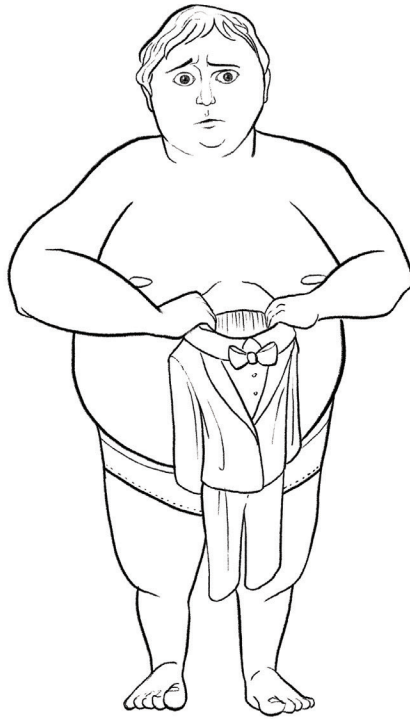
M: That's Joey's only means of communication. Give it back! You can't *take it away*. He's finally *become*, he can talk to us, all of us! His mind is...he's a *man*. Give it back!

P: Marcus, stop crying. Stop it now. I am sick, I feel just sick with... you've been *creating* Joey out of your fingers. Just sick...

M: Look at him! Can't you see? You took away his typer, oh god, oh god, he can't go back to being trapped inside that body, no way to speak, no way to *be*. You don't understand. Give back the typer; he'll tell you that we're in love, he'll tell you himself. He was finally becoming a part of the world, and now you're forcing him into his dis. He can't go back...

DAILY PRACTICE

Some mornings all I do
is write down words—*cistern*,
tribal, *cached*—copying them
from sprawled pages of books
across my desk, words that call out—
glimmerings, *cursive*, *saffron*,
heartwood—holding me in place
as if to say *listen*, you may need me
someday, I might offer you another way
toward beauty, or even beyond.



*It was embarrassing. Mortifying. Insane.
Most of all it was impossible.*

THE FABULOUS FAT-BOY FOLLIES

“FATHER O’Malley needs your help.”

Mr. Grindle was more than my Confraternity of Christian Doctrine teacher; he was the guiding beacon and moral compass of my spiritual life. And he was talking about our pastor.

Every Tuesday evening of my sophomore year in high school, a dozen other pious public-school boys and I crammed our nearly adult bodies into the fourth-grade desks at Most Precious Blood Parish School. For the next hour, we hung on Mr. Grindle’s every dogmatic word. By day, we understood, he sold life insurance, but his once-a-week calling was to shepherd us in the ways of our Catholic faith and ensure our path to eternal reward. He was the inspiration for my weekly trips to the confessional where I examined my soul for the most minute imperfection. And he was the reason I set my alarm each month to attend seven a.m. First Friday Mass and earn an indulgence that guaranteed I would die in a state of grace.

My green CCD textbook contained chapters on Papal Infallibility, the Immaculate Conception, the angels, and the peril of Jehovah’s Witnesses who roamed the suburbs of Southern California in 1961 seeking converts. Mr. Grindle’s weekly instruction, however, always wound its way to the same topic: the mortal danger of lusting after sinful teenage girls who wore short skirts, danced too close at high school dances and hoped to tempt us into what he called “impure thoughts and actions.” “Girls like that,” he promised, “put your soul in danger.”

Father O’Malley was a presence that outshone even Mr. Grindle. On Saturdays, from beyond the shadowy screen of the confessional, his voice murmured the Prayer of Absolution that forgave the sins that Mr. Grindle was so expert at convincing me I had committed. On those days Father O’Malley wore his Roman collar and black cassock, but mostly I

thought of him at the altar in his chasuble as he genuflected and raised the newly consecrated host toward Heaven.

So that Tuesday night, when Mr. Grindle invoked his name after class, I was astonished. What could Father O'Malley want from me, a lowly public-school kid who wasn't even an altar boy? Whatever it was, it was more than an honor, it was a holy imperative.

"Yes, Mr. Grindle," I said. "Whatever Father needs."

"Wonderful," he smiled. "You're perfect for this because you're like me. You've got a big belly."

Mr. Grindle did, indeed, have a big belly. The tie that encircled his collar and chins descended to his belt in a corpulent slope that probably explained his failure ever to discuss our textbook's teachings on gluttony. I stared at his bulk. He's huge, I thought. Did I look like that? I knew I was big enough to intimidate buddies in pick-up games of touch football, but I'd never thought I was fat. Big-boned, my mom said. Stocky, perhaps, but not fat. And what did my girth have to do with helping Father O'Malley? Mr. Grindle remained vague. "It's for the Knights of Columbus. It's a skit we're doing at the dinner for people who gave money for the new rectory. It's hilarious. You'll be part of it, and it'll be nothing but fun."

"Okay, I guess." I knew about the newly completed home for Father O'Malley and the other priests, and I knew that the Knights of Columbus was the organization for prominent men in the parish. They passed the collection baskets at Sunday Mass, and I imagined they all played golf together later in the afternoon. My father wasn't even Catholic.

"Just keep next Saturday night open." Mr. Grindle told me. "And Friday night, too. We'll meet at the parish hall and practice. You'll love it."

I FRETTEd for three days and finally Friday arrived. Our rehearsal was anything but thorough. We met in the parish hall and stood on the shallow stage at one end of the room. Mr. Antonelli, the third member of our act, was a Ford salesman whose girth surpassed even Mr. Grindle's. Standing with these two men, I was pear-shaped, or perhaps a modest apple, between two prize-winning pumpkins. Together their weight must have approached 600 pounds.

Our place in the evening's program, Mr. Grindle explained, was as after-dinner entertainment. We would dance to something called "The Colonel Bogey March," a whistled tune I vaguely remembered British soldiers marching to in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. It was an upbeat, sprightly melody, and except for its march-able rhythm, not military at all. While the music played, we faced forward, formed a line and danced. It was simple enough: kick left, slide right, right, right. Kick right, slide left, left, left. Hop, hop, hop. Repeat. Back and forth we pranced, and after we'd run through it a couple of times, I began to get it down. Mr. Grindle commended me as a quick study, but I wondered how something so simple could be entertaining to anyone. We were an odd trio, certainly, but after-dinner entertainment? Never. Then Mr. Grindle gave me my final direction.

"Just remember to keep your knees together while you're dancing. That's the important part."

"Knees together?" I asked.

"Yeah. Through all the kicking and hopping, keep your knees touching. It's because of the costume."

"Costume?"

"That's what makes it all so funny. You'll see tomorrow night. Here, take the record." He handed me the forty-five from the phonograph. "Use it to practice."

And practice I did. Late into the night and most of the following day, I rehearsed in my bedroom, baffled, anxious, and earnestly trying to be up to the task my faith required of me. Kick left, slide right, right, right. Kick right, slide left, left, left. Hop, hop, hop. Repeat. It's for the church, I told myself. It's for Mr. Grindle. It's for Father O'Malley.

THE parish hall the next night was transformed. The dim space I knew was now blazing with light, its walls festooned with red and blue streamers and balloons. Two dozen circular dining tables—each resplendent in white linen, white china and a bright floral centerpiece—jammed the room. Over the stage hung a wide banner that proclaimed "Our Parish Families Thank You!!!"

Thank you for what? I wondered. Then I remembered the handsome new rectory adjacent to the church. Its broad brick façade and wide oak doorway surrounded with leaded glass proclaimed the priests' importance to the neighborhood, and tonight was a celebration for the donors who had paid for Father O'Malley's new home. Already the parish grandees were arriving in their shiny Cadillacs and Lincolns. These Knights of Columbus were distinguished-looking men in somber three-piece suits who escorted chattering wives with up-combed hair and cocktail dresses from Bullock's. They all knew one another and nodded among themselves in happy self-congratulation.

From across the room a stern Mr. Grindle saw me and strode with purpose in my direction. "You've got to get out of the way till the dinner is over." He scooted me onto the stage and behind the curtain. "Wait here," he told me, "I'm going to go eat." He disappeared into the gathering crowd, and I found a folding chair in a dark corner of the wings. For two hours, while I checked the minutes ticking by on my wristwatch, my stomach lurched and knotted.

My thoughts drifted to where I really wanted to be. A few blocks away, my high school basketball team was playing their crosstown rivals. It was my Liberty High Sentinels against the South High Rebels. Afterwards there would be one of those sock hops Mr. Grindle warned me about, one where girls wanted to dance close and slow. I thought of Bonnie Latham from my geometry class. Actually, I thought about Bonnie a lot—especially about the dimpled smile she gave me whenever she asked for help with hard problems. In my mind I was in the darkened gym asking her to dance. I looked into Bonnie's brown eyes, took her soft hand in mine and placed my other arm around the curve of her waist. She rested her head on my shoulder and we moved with the music. I wondered who Bonnie was dancing with tonight. I was dancing with Mr. Grindle and Mr. Antonelli.

Finally Mr. Grindle returned with Mr. Antonelli at his side. A faint whiff of red wine hung on their breaths. Mr. Grindle was happier, more excited, than I'd ever seen him.

"Okay," he said, "Time to get ready. Your chest needs to be bare." I

watched as he and Mr. Antonelli put down their coats, loosened their ties and stripped off their shirts.

“Now, your pants. Get rid of them.”

In a moment, the three of us stood side by side almost naked. I was in my jockey shorts, and each of them stood in striped boxers that were surmounted by a bulge of pale stomach. Mr. Antonelli, I observed, had long crooked hairs sprouting from his chest and back. I was stranded with these two men behind the stage—all three of us nearly naked—while the parish elite finished their chocolate mousse a few feet away.

Out of a battered cardboard box, Mr. Grindle extracted three heaps of cloth.

“Here,” he said to me, “put this on.”

The costume in my hands baffled me, so I watched as Mr. Grindle and Mr. Antonelli, who were clearly experienced with the procedure, pulled their costumes up over their legs and fastened them at their waists. Below their immense guts, each of them now wore a miniature tuxedo. It was all there: shiny black jacket and pants, white dress shirt, black bow tie, and plastic hands extending from the sleeves. Their bellies, as naked as before, gleamed above their shirt collars where heads belonged. The two men looked at one another and suppressed their laughter so as not to be heard beyond the stage curtain. I pulled on my costume as they had. At least, I told myself, the strange outfit covered the shame of my jockey shorts.

“Now the face,” giggled Mr. Grindle, pulling a jar of black greasepaint from his costume box. He turned to Mr. Antonelli and dipped into the gunk. With a forefinger he drew circles for two eyes around Mr. Antonelli’s nipples. Next he outlined curled eyelashes and thick eyebrows. “And the final touch,” he announced, choosing from a pot of red grease and shaping a pair of luscious heart-shaped lips around Mr. Antonelli’s navel.

Mr. Antonelli proceeded to mark a face with even fatter lips across Mr. Grindle. Then he turned to me. “Less space to work with you,” he said. I felt his finger move the slimy ooze around my nipples and navel, then he stood back. “Yeah,” he said, “That’s it. You look great, kid.”

“Now for the finishing touch,” said Mr. Grindle, and he unfolded my wide two-foot-high top hat. “This is the best part. Keep your

hands inside.” I dutifully crossed my arms and he dropped the hat over my head like a sack. It covered me to my shoulders. The inside was clammy darkness, smelling like burlap and stale perspiration. At least there was a gauzy eyehole. I could see Mr. Grindle and Mr. Antonelli in their hats, and suddenly it all made a kind of grotesque sense. They were two oddly shaped midgets—with the men’s huge bellies for faces—dressed in tuxes and top hats for a bizarre night on the town. I completed the trio.

“Okay,” said Mr. Grindle from inside his hat, “one last thing. ‘The Colonel Bogey March’ is a whistling tune. When the music plays, we whistle.” He saw my confusion. “It’s easy. Blow with your belly button. Just pucker up and blow with your navel.” To demonstrate he whistled the tune softly and pumped his gut in and out along with the melody. His stomach bulged like Dizzy Gillespie’s cheeks reaching for a high note. Inside his hat Mr. Antonelli jiggled with suppressed laughter.

“Now you do it,” said Mr. Grindle.

He whistled softly again and I did my best, swelling my stomach and pumping in and out along with the tune. As I worked, the temperature inside my hat rose and sweaty beads formed on my forehead.

“I guess that’ll have to do,” came Mr. Grindle’s voice. He didn’t sound satisfied. “And one final thing. Keep you knees together. It’s very important. If you don’t, you’ll be in trouble.”

I remembered the same advice from our rehearsal and now I understood it. The pants with a belt at my knees made it almost impossible to walk. Now I was supposed to dance. It was embarrassing. Mortifying. Insane. Most of all it was impossible. Mr. Grindle had been my spiritual shepherd. He had led my class in prayer and sharpened my resistance to predatory young females. Now he was a half-drunk fool who wanted me to become a fool beside him. Dance? With my belly hanging out for everyone to laugh at? I’ll just leave, I thought. If these two old men thought this was fun, they could do their ridiculous dance alone. I’d just tear off the stupid costume, put on my clothes and leave.

Before I could say a word, I heard the voice of the emcee in front of the curtain: “And now, ladies and gentlemen, a special treat.”

"It's time," said Mr. Grindle. "Take your places." He reached from under his giant hat and pushed me to the center of the stage behind the curtain. With my knees bound together by the costume, I stumbled into position between Mr. Grindle and Mr. Antonelli.

I heard the emcee again: "Here they are, everyone! Fresh from their hilarious hit show in glamorous Las Vegas, it's the Fabulous Fat-Boy Follies!"

Through my gauzy eye hole, I saw the curtain rise. The room bubbled with laughter, and beyond the harsh stage lights sat the parish *crème de la crème*. In the first row were my dentist (for whom my mouth was never open wide enough) and his skinny wife. Nearby sat Father O'Malley himself.

I heard the phonograph needle drop into its groove and waited for the music. Then came the funny whistled tune I'd learned to hate, and I started my dance.

Kick left, slide right, right, right. At first things went fine. *Kick right, slide left, left, left.* The problem was that I could only see what was in front of me. *Hop, hop, hop.* What were Mr. Grindle and Mr. Antonelli doing? *Kick left.* I couldn't tell. *Slide right, right, right.* And the whistling. I bulged my stomach in and out, in and out, hardly able to catch my breath. *Kick right, slide left, left, left. Hop, hop, hop.*

Eventually the horrible music ended. It's over, I thought. Sweat was pouring down my face and over my bare chest. But the audience cheered wildly. "Again! Again!" a male voice shouted.

"Great!" Mr. Grindle whispered gleefully at my side. He was in his glory, and this was all the encouragement he needed. "One more time."

The needle hissed in vinyl, and it began again. *Kick left, slide right, right, right.* Through all of it, I had managed to keep my knees together. *Kick right.* Now I couldn't keep the steps clear in my head. *Slide left, left, left.* The music, the stomach-whistling, my knees, my feet. *Hop, hop, hop.* What came next? *Kick left? Hop right? Slide? Which way?*

A heavy force struck me from the right and I stumbled. It was Mr. Antonelli. I'd slid right when I should have slid left. His huge gut toppled me and I smacked my cheek hard as I struck the floor of the stage. I just lay there, my hat gone and sliding into the first row. I crossed my bare arms

over my head, but I was exposed, half-naked and humiliated. Mr. Grindle and Mr. Antonelli danced joyfully on, and when the music stopped, the audience roared. Mr. Grindle and Mr. Antonelli, on opposite sides of my prostrate and gasping self, took their Fat-Boy bows, then dragged me by my feet behind the curtain as it fell.

Both were ecstatic. "That was a great finish, kid," Mr. Antonelli exclaimed. "We'll leave it in the act."

THE next morning I slept late, my head buried beneath my blankets until my mother woke me for ten o'clock Mass. In the reflection of the bathroom mirror I saw a raw purple bruise on my cheek, the stigmata of my fall to the stage. Without enthusiasm, I dressed in my olive-green suit and knotted my blue and gray rep tie.

I was glad we sat in a pew near the back of the church where I felt invisible. My ordeal was over, and no one made any mention of it. No jokes, no congratulations, not a word from anyone about the previous night. Not from Mr. Grindle, not from Mr. Antonelli, and there was no sign at all of Father O'Malley, whom I'd been so eager to please just a few days before. Several rows ahead of me in her usual pew sat Bonnie Latham, a blond vision in a pale blue dress, a white pillbox hat and gloves. I stared at her, a devout young Sandra Dee.

Mass began, and I saw who was at the altar. Father O'Malley, chanted the Introit, his Latin tinged, as usual, with his Irish brogue.

Introibo ad altare Dei

Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.

I read the translation, as usual, in my Sunday missal.

I will to the altar of God,

To God the joy of my youth.

During the Offertory, Mr. Grindle maneuvered the collection basket down the row past me and gave a proud half-grin. I dropped in my customary quarter.

Later at the Consecration, as the Sanctus Bells rang out and as Father O'Malley genuflected and raised the Eucharist to heaven, I didn't bow my head. I shook it ever-so-slightly left and right. I was on my knees, but I

wasn't praying. I was thinking of the handsome new rectory, the smug crowd that had laughed at me, and the smack of the cold stage floor against my face. My eyes fell on the back of Bonnie's head and the blond flip of her hair along her neck. I touched the bruise on my cheek, winced from the pain and wondered for the first time if I was still a Catholic.



*Her reach went far beyond the Thanksgiving table,
choking every aspect of their son's life.*

THEY ALL AGREED

THEY all agreed, it was a good thing that she lived 3,000 miles away. Once a year, on Thanksgiving—not Christmas because that was a non-holiday—she came with Ira and Sara Posner’s son and her two children from a ruined marriage, flying in from California to attempt to commandeer Sara’s kitchen, making oddball demands of an aging Ashkenazi mother-in-law—soy sauce for the string beans, cumin for the lentil soup—while Ira, the patriarch, shook his head. Last year, she started in beforehand on the phone, insisting Sara buy a goose.

“What is this, Dickens?!” Sara said before politely informing her she would be buying a turkey.

Ira had been delighted to see his normally conciliatory wife stand her ground, though had he handled it, he would have used enough force to send their daughter-in-law back to the streets of Mexico. Turkey it was last year and turkey it was this year, he noted, setting down the platter with the ample bird in the center of the table, his eyes glinting with victory before he sat down at the head of the table. When Elena—a large, dark figure at the opposite end—had the chutzpah to complain, telling Sara there was nothing special about turkey, rallying her boys at her end of the table to say goose would have been less pedestrian, Ira leaned forward, facing off against her at the opposite end filled by onlookers from his daughter’s family. “Leave my wife alone!” Ira roared.

Elena took the salt, pretending not to hear.

Her reach went far beyond the Thanksgiving table, choking every aspect of their son’s life. In twelve years of marriage she had persuaded Jason he wasn’t cut out for the publish or perish nerve-wracking research scientist life he had embarked on, and gotten him a job as a preschool teacher, where he joined hands with four-year-olds and sang and danced.

She had also stripped him of almost every friend he had prior to meeting her, replacing them with hers. For their son—their smart son with the postdoc in Astrophysics from CalTech—these new friends were not intellectual equals, but Elena had Jason convinced that “emotional intelligence” mattered more, blinding him to the fact that these friends were handpicked because they too believed in the cult of Elena.

And so it was that through their years of knowing her, Ira and Sara watched with fascination and fear as she bossed and shouted, letting loose what was on her mind like an overactive cannon. Did their son care that she had upended his life? Quite the opposite. Jason trotted after her like a lost pup, their socially awkward son attending one social function or another, entirely out of character for him; helping to orchestrate soirees at their home in Los Angeles, carrying out any and all orders. Ira was disgusted by the man his son had become.

Sara, though, was less critical, understanding her son’s need for protection. She remembered J.P. gasping for air from the start with the umbilical cord wrapped around his head; later holding his bleeding skull after falling victim to a thrown brick in the elementary school playground; and still later lying unconscious in the hospital as a young teenager, his face with eggplant-colored bruises after hitting a car with his new ten-speed. Nevertheless, Sara was peeved. In many ways Elena had turned J.P. against her. The orange juice Sara used to serve at family suppers while raising her children, who, at middle age, still had a taste for it with their turkey, had been reinterpreted as uncouth and replaced with fancy Napa wines, the bottles rising over teetotaler Sara’s dinner table like stakes in claimed territory. The Gershwin tunes Sara used to and still played on the stereo were deemed inferior to the Bach that Elena put on (without asking) the instant she took off her coat.

But that was the least of it; Sara learned, having visited with them in the living room before this year’s meal, gathered around the coffee table with the dried fruit (offerings that Sara had put out and Elena replated and rearranged, bragging about her knack for artistic presentation.) Waiting for her daughter’s family to arrive, they had been talking about J.P.’s childhood, and Sara was reminiscing: a house full of his boyhood

friends running up and down the steps, birthday parties in the backyard, everyone hula hooping after dark. “You had a wonderful childhood,” she said with pride. She’d made sure of it, sacrificing everything. The summer camp where he learned to sail, the trips to Cape Cod with family friends. Oh, the fun of cracking open lobsters and seeing even Ira in a bib!

Somehow, as was so often the case, Elena maneuvered the conversation to get them where she wanted, then delivered the reins to Jason. With surprising bitterness, their son, who normally spoke in a dry analytical tone, offered up a new theory in a creaking voice, patting Elena’s fat knee in acknowledgment that she had helped him develop his ideas. “Don’t you see, by sheltering me, you never gave me a chance—”

Seeing him go for his drink, obviously having difficulty, Elena finished for him, “You never gave him the chance to grow into a full man. Face it, Mom—” Elena said, making Sara recoil at being called *Mom* by her. “—you ran the whole show. And *that’s* what caused all his problems.”

“Leave her alone. She did a damn good job raising Jason,” Ira said.

Silently and tensely, Sara eyed their son, a small man, overshadowed by his wife’s large figure beside him on the couch. He made no apology but Sara wasn’t surprised. She got up to escape the arguing and went to the kitchen, where she found a serving dish for the string beans and a tureen for the soup, listening for signs of continued hostilities. Then, out of the corner of her eye she saw that Elena had followed her. Ira was close behind. Standing a couple of feet from Elena, his face was red with anger. Sara signaled him, mouthing *Calm down*, then ladled Elena’s lentil soup into the tureen, concentrating on keeping her hands from shaking.

“The problem is no one in your family talks about anything. Admit it, you made some mistakes. That’s all we’re asking,” Elena said.

“Don’t talk to my wife that way! You can go to hell,” Ira said, just as the bell rang and their daughter’s family came ambling through the door.

“No *you* go to hell,” Elena said, apparently unfazed by leaning into a seventy-eight year old man.

Ira and Sara’s daughter—trailed by her husband and twins—assessed the situation. She greeted them all very quickly, dropped a bouquet on the counter, then took refuge with her family in the living room.

"Ira, go visit," Sara said, but he was so intent on finishing this round with Elena that Sara had to practically push him out.

Humming, Elena took down a vase and put the flowers in, after hacking off the ends. She weeded out the carnations and baby's breath, tossing them in the trash, leaving the expensive prettier blooms, arranging them so that even Sara had to admit the previously tacky grouping looked better. With a satisfied grin, Elena handed the display to Sara who, moving aside a bottle of Elena's wine, put the centerpiece on the table.

"Is it so hard to admit you made some mistakes?" Elena said when Sara returned.

Sara drew back, then quickly did her best to modulate her breathing, not wanting to give Elena the satisfaction of knowing she'd upset her. She turned from her hideous appraising gaze and busied herself with the remaining work, but Elena was still there, standing behind her. Sara recognized this type, having seen it once or twice in her life: Elena thrived on confrontation. She was, as Ira had once summed up perfectly—knowing she'd been tossed out at a young age and left to fend for herself—a street fighter.

"*Hmm?*" Elena said in a rising, thickly sweet tone that was the most peculiar mixture of accusation and consolation she'd ever heard. The woman topped it off by resting her thick hand on Sara's shoulder. Sara removed it like a foreign object and concentrated on nothing else but setting the table.

As she brought out plates, Elena beside her carrying utensils, Sara fought the terrible feelings she had for this woman, reminding herself that it was her son's life and he claimed to be happy. By many measures, he was doing better than he was before. Throughout his adult life without Elena, he'd had a tendency to have stomach problems; these had disappeared since meeting her. He had aged well; while many of his peers had unsightly paunches, he was trim, even fit. But Elena was, in Sara's experience, not a nice person.

Nor was she physically attractive, with her broad face and chunky figure. Whether dressed up or in casual attire, her clinging clothes showed rolls that jiggled as she marched about. And yet in quieter moments,

she carried herself like a goddess, fingers combing and showing off her long, thick hair, aware of the powers of her own seductiveness. She had a remarkably overblown estimation of herself.

And to think, one and all, they'd been delighted Jason had found somebody. After a series of disastrous relationships mostly to Anglos, the last to a soft-spoken Australian sadist, they greeted his news about Elena with optimism. She was a fellow classical music lover and a nurse, to boot.

Sara thought of this hopeful beginning while they were all seated around the table, Elena at the end, grouching about the commonness of turkey.

Not long after this visit, as luck would have it, Sara, who'd been having heart problems on and off, nothing too worrisome, found herself in the hospital. Her daughter, tied up with work and the twins, could not devote as much time to Sara's care as she and Sara and Ira would have liked.

"I'll be right there," Elena said, and Ira, knocked off balance from his wife's illness, was still fumbling for words when she hung up on him mid-protest.

Ira tried to time his visits to avoid running in to her, but she spent long hours at Sara's side, so this was impossible. They all agreed it was disturbing to see her in her brightly colored outfits sitting beside Sara, talking with her, holding her hand. Anyone could tell she was doing this so she could fly home a hero. And the worst part was that Sara no longer recoiled; on the contrary, she seemed grateful.

The fact was that although everywhere Elena went, she offended—being sharp with the nurses, questioning the doctors, demanding specialists—she got things done. In no time at all, they had a diagnosis and a treatment plan.

"She saved your life," Jason claimed when the episode was behind them by the next Thanksgiving.

To this, Sara poured Elena a glass of wine and let Ira offer a toast because none of them could argue otherwise.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHERINE VONDY

Katherine Vondy, whose story “There’s a German Compound Word for Everything” appears in this issue of the magazine, is a writer, playwright, and filmmaker based in Los Angeles. I recall being struck first by the title of her story—is there not, after all, a German compound word for everything?—and then utterly seduced by its opening paragraph, which amounted to what W.G. Sebald once called “the very careful page of prose.” By the end of the second page, I suspected (barring some unforeseen writerly catastrophe) we’d be publishing the piece, and by the end of the third page I had resolved on an interview. My esteem for the writer only grew as I read whatever else I could find, some of which is referenced in our conversation (“The Birds of New Mexico” appears in The Iowa Review, and “Employee Discount” appears in Briar Cliff Review). Her short fiction has appeared in a wide and excellent range of magazines, and her films have been screened at festivals around the world (for a fuller picture, see her author bio, or visit her website). She is also a member of The Vagrancy, an award-winning, not-for-profit theater company in Los Angeles. In our discussion below, which has been edited for length and clarity, we cover the art of the sentence, the often complicated relationship between the author and the first-person, and, naturally, the unvarnished misery of Dmitri Karamazov.

INTERVIEWER

You have such wonderful sentences. They are precise, musical, and often quite funny. Given their sensibility, not to mention the dominant motif (German compound words), I was instantly reminded of the great

German-language writers, Thomas Bernhard and W.G. Sebald, though you've said neither these writers are major influences on you. Could you talk a little bit about your approach to the sentence? How does one begin, take shape? When it comes to the art of the sentence, who are the writers that move you?

KATHERINE VONDY

I think my approach to sentences is mostly instinctual; I wish I could speak more cohesively about how I form sentences, but I don't think I'm entirely clear on how the process works, myself! I can say that, when I'm in a good creative frame of mind, it feels more like the sentences are coming from someplace that isn't entirely me, and writing isn't a wholly conscious activity. It feels a little bit like a slight fugue state in which I'm somewhat disconnected from the actual work, and am not aware of myself as the writer. When I'm in a less-good creative place, it's sadly a much more laborious process that involves a lot of poking around on thesaurus.com and endless switchings-around of semicolons and em-dashes.

I love Susanna Clarke's sentences. They're so effortlessly witty, and they are a joy to read. For example, I think about this line from her book *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* probably more than is healthy: "There is nothing in the world so easy to explain as failure—it is, after all, what everybody does all the time." It's a sentence that feels both effortless and surprising, and it lets me know that I'm in the hands of an expert wordsmith.

INTERVIEWER

Your story in the issue divides itself into ten discrete sections, each headed by one of the titular German compound words—famously specific constructions, of the sort not to be found in English. Elsewhere you've said that saddling oneself with "a particular set of constraints" can actually ease the creative process; was that the case here? How did the words work themselves into the story, and how did the story work itself around the words?

KATHERINE VONDY

My impulse to write this story came entirely from being interested in those compound words, and I had no idea who or what it would be about when I started writing. I started by making a list of the words that felt rich or resonant in some way, then arranged them in an order that evoked a narrative shape to me. From there, I used the definitions of the words as a guide to what would unfold in each section of the story. I do think that, in this case, defining these constraints from the beginning was a handy way to reverse-engineer a plot. It saved me from agonizing over what kind of moment I would need to come up with at any given juncture; the words' definitions had already decided that for me!

INTERVIEWER

"Compound Word", "Birds of New Mexico", and "Employee Discount" seem, in a sense, to be told by sister narrators: three lonely, highly intelligent people, possessed of incisive internal monologues. Two ("Compound"/"Employee") are wrestling with questions of unmet professional and intellectual potential, while the third ("Birds") struggles with the isolation brought on by the realization of that potential. The narrator of "Compound" is fascinated by German, which she feels is "capable of expressing so much" more than English; Joanne, of "Birds", made a career of French and music theory, and it's through her lifelong relationship to singing that a great deal of the narrative unfolds; the narrator of "Employee Discount", meanwhile, simply wishes to be a "slightly different" version of oneself. Is there a connection between music, foreign language, and this yearning for the altered self? More generally, what is it that attracts you to these narrators? I know many writers, especially younger writers, find themselves caught on the question of 'likeability.' Is that a word you think about?

KATHERINE VONDY

I definitely think there's something transcendent about music. Music was one of my majors in college, though I never became an especially skilled performer. For me, listening to great music has always made me feel what

I can best describe as a sense of possibility—maybe of who I could be or what I could do or what I could understand in the future—that I don't feel at other times. I'm not sure how universal those specific feelings are, but I do think it's clear that music has unique capabilities to make people experience strong emotions, above and beyond the emotions of the status quo. I'm also intrigued by foreign languages and sometimes will attempt to incorporate them into my work; for example, I recently wrote a play that was partially set in Medieval England, and one of the fun challenges of that project was trying to find the balance between using enough Old English words that the dialogue evoked a different time period, but not so many that the play was incomprehensible to a modern audience. However, despite being interested in other languages, I'm only fluent in English.

I'm not always totally cognizant of what's going on with me unconsciously, but perhaps the combination of my interest in but lack of mastery of music and languages is why I felt compelled to create the narrators in the stories you mention. All three of them are written in first person, and maybe that allowed me to aspirationally take on the identities of people who are more accomplished than I am. It's a credible theory!

Honestly, I'm pretty baffled by the idea of 'likability.' To me, a character is likable if they are interesting, and it's difficult to wrap my mind around the idea that readers or viewers might dismiss a story if they, for example, wouldn't want to be best friends with the main character. It means missing out on one of the great benefits of stories, which is that they allow us to get to know various kinds of people without having to actually have them in our lives! I've never asked myself whether a character I'm creating is likable, and I think it does a disservice to all creative art forms when likability is equated with merit.

INTERVIEWER

Building on that previous question: you've said that your creative work is a sort of shortcut a stranger might take towards knowing you. Could you talk a little about what you see as the relationship between the author and the first-person?

KATHERINE VONDY

I get the sense that the arts world is in an interesting place right now where the trend is to look at a work of art as if it's inextricably intertwined with the identity of the artist. This has always been something people thought about, of course, but I think it's especially prevalent right now. It can have both positive and negative repercussions: on the positive side, it can make the experience of the artwork richer for the viewer to understand something about the person who created it. On the negative side, it can start to transform the artist into a product, and I think it's disturbing to think of people in that way.

Sometimes it feels hard to win as a storyteller; on the one hand, if readers think you're writing something too close to your own experiences, your work will be called navel-gazey, but on the other hand, if readers think you're writing something too far from your own experiences, your work will be called inauthentic. The potential scrutiny of who you are in relation to your story can really start to get in your head, and make it hard to feel confident in your work.

As far as my feeling that reading my writing is a way of knowing me, it's less about me writing characters who are stand-ins for myself, and more that I'm not an especially outgoing, easy-to-get-to-know person. I often fear that people who only know me in a superficial way will assume I've got very little going on internally because I tend to be quiet and introverted (especially in large groups). I hope my writing is evidence that I am more thoughtful than I might seem!

INTERVIEWER

In *Brothers Karamazov*, referring to the miserable Dmitri, Dostoevsky writes: *The filthy morass, in which he had sunk of his own free will, was too revolting to him, and, like very many men in such cases, he put faith above all in change of place. If only it were not for these people, if only it were not for these circumstances, if only he could fly away from this accursed place—he would be altogether regenerated, would enter on a new path.* Given the strong connections between character and place you've drawn in the above-mentioned stories, I was curious to know your thoughts on that idea of place and regeneration.

KATHERINE VONDY

I thought about this idea a lot during the early year(s) of the COVID pandemic, when so many of us had worlds that shrank down precipitously in a very short period of time. In my case, I was suddenly spending a previously unthinkable amount of time in my living room, and even when I was able to leave that space to, say, go on a hike, I was still in the same city, Los Angeles, for fifteen months straight. It was a much more limited sense of place than I'd experienced before, and it reinforced this idea that I'd always sort of vaguely held, but hadn't defined extensively for myself: that we need different stimuli in our lives in order to have new ideas or to encourage our brains to work in new ways. I think a lot of creative people found it very challenging (amongst the many other challenges of the pandemic) to feel motivated to make new work in a situation of perpetual sameness.

A lot of my ideas have their roots in specific places I've lived in or traveled to. I think part of that is practicality—it's a lot easier to write about something you already know a little about than something you have to extensively research!—but it's also about a way to continually engage with the wider world, which is something that I think is a positive experience for both the writer and the reader.

INTERVIEWER

"Employee Discount" and "Birds of New Mexico" both end on fairly miserable notes. There is revelation, but no textual suggestion that anything will necessarily *improve*. "German Compound", on the other hand, ends with revelation *and* action—Carrie takes a dramatic step. Yet, the final section of the story, in which this action takes place, is titled "*Luftschloss*—literally, air castle. An unrealistic dream." The final sentences bend towards the magical; in fact, the only other place in the story where the language exhibits this tendency is when she is recalling her 'glory days' with David, shortly before her episode of "Pure animal rage". So, firstly, what are we to make of this word, *Luftschloss*? Does the word "unrealistic" refer to impossibility, or delusion, or is it getting at something else? More broadly: could you discuss your approach to endings? Do the endings of your stories tend to change radically as you

revise, or is the tone and shape of the ending generally established in the first draft?

KATHERINE VONDY

I'm very reassured by the ideas you bring up about the ending of "There's A German Compound Word For Everything" because I have an anxiety about being too saccharine (which is probably why so many of my other stories are such downers). Consequently, I struggled with that ending a lot; I worried that it would feel too easy and too cheesy. Ultimately, I couldn't come up with any other endings that felt right, so I just went with it. But your observation that the dream is specifically defined as unrealistic is justifying my own choice to me!

Thinking more about what "an unrealistic dream" means in the context of this story, I feel that it leaves a lot of room for whatever comes next for Carrie. It might well be disappointment. It makes me think of that observation (unfortunately I can't remember who or where it's from) about how the difference between a comedy and a tragedy might simply be where you decide to end the story. And that makes me feel like the hopefulness at the end of "There's A German Compound Word For Everything" is a more complicated hopefulness, and somewhat assuages my fear that the ending is too sappy. Thank you for helping me see it that way!

In general, I tend to come up with endings about halfway through the first draft of a story, and then I spend the rest of the first draft trying to connect the dots between what I've already written and the conclusion. I don't revise the general idea of my endings very much, but maybe that's because I usually don't start a story knowing how it ends; I just write until the ending is revealed. It's a fun experience of discovery to write that way, but it's also at odds with the way a lot of professional writing—especially in the film and TV industry—works, with fully fleshed-out outlines being required at the beginning of most standard development processes. Regrettably, I haven't yet developed the ability to plan out all the beats of a story before I start writing it so I can deliver a kickass outline before writing a word of the story itself.

INTERVIEWER

In taking a short story from the first word to the final draft, is there a stage you find most challenging? Is there a stage you generally have the most fun?

KATHERINE VONDY

I think the hardest part comes right after I've written however many pages or paragraphs I had the initial inspiration to write...and then I have to ask myself: OK, what else? Those first pages or paragraphs are always the most fun for me, because that's when the story has the potential to live up to my dreams for what it could be. I haven't yet had the opportunity to ruin it by actually writing it!

INTERVIEWER

In another interview, you mentioned your love of Susan Choi's *Trust Exercise*. In the realm of contemporary writers, who else can't you put down? Do you see the emergence of any exciting trends or themes in contemporary writing?

KATHERINE VONDY

In recent years, I've really enjoyed Maggie Shipstead's *Great Circle*, George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and Susanna Clarke's (who I mentioned earlier) *Piranesi*.

One positive trend I've seen in contemporary writing is that I think there is generally a wider acceptance than there used to be of what a "universal story" is. Reading can help us develop empathy for other people, and when we have a more expansive understanding of everything that can be part of the human condition, I think we have the potential to become better people.

INTERVIEWER

Beyond your prose, you're also a playwright and a writer/director. As the germ of something comes to you, how do you know whether it'll be a play, a short story, or a film? Have you ever begun something in one medium, only to realize it belongs in another?

KATHERINE VONDY

I think form and content are inextricably intertwined, and in fact, wrote a number of college essays on this very subject. (This is what happens when you habitually wait until 3 AM to start papers that are due in a few hours; you end up falling back on the same idea over and over.) So far, I've never started something in one medium and then decided it should be in another, because it seems that the seeds of my ideas always contain some element of how they'll be executed. If I had to analyze how those distinctions feel to me, I'd say—speaking in very broad generalizations—that if the idea is very visual, then it feels like a film; if the idea has a heightened sensibility of some kind, then it feels like a play; and if the idea is tied up with a particular perspective or point of view that could be expressed best by language, then it feels like a piece of prose.

A mistake that happens a lot in creative fields is thinking that adapting a story from one medium to another is as easy as cutting and pasting. An amazing book won't necessarily be an amazing film; excellent prose doesn't always translate to excellent images. There's definitely a skill to creating a successful adaptation, and I think it isn't always appreciated or acknowledged!

INTERVIEWER

If you could be best friends with any artist, living or dead, who would you choose?

KATHERINE VONDY

I'm fortunate to already be friends with many amazing artists! Can I answer this question by plugging a few of them? I think everybody should check out Jiehae Park's plays, Julianne Jigour's plays, Kristen Havens's fiction, Eddie Farr's visual installations, and Andrew Barkan & Polly Hall's film scores (and their kids' music, if you happen to have young children in your life!).

INTERVIEWER

What are you working on these days? Do you plan on sticking to shorts, or do you see yourself attempting a novel at some point?

KATHERINE VONDY

I have one completed novel—a YA ghost story—that I'm in the process of querying; please keep your fingers crossed for me that I can stir up some interest in it! Right now, I'm at work on my second novel, and I'm also juggling a few film and theater projects in various stages of development.

M.S. COE has a novel, *New Veronia*, published by Clash Books in 2019, and another novel, *The Formation of Calcium*, forthcoming from Spurl Editions in 2023, as well as stories published or forthcoming in *Antioch Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Nashville Review*, *Waxwing*, and elsewhere. Coe earned an MFA from Cornell University; co-edits the small press Eggtooth Editions; and has held residencies from Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, Petrified Forest National Park, and Ora Lerman Trust.

PAUL C. DALMAS spends entirely too much time polishing a hip and eccentric bio to use if he is ever published. You know: a boyhood selling newspapers on rough city streets, teen years earning minimum wage in the oppressively hot kitchen of a greasy diner, and an adult life working as a boilermaker, helping the poor in Africa, and traveling to Rio, Rajasthan and Rangiroa. In fact, he is a retired high school English teacher who lives in Berkeley, California.

JIM DANIELS' latest poetry book is *Gun/Shy*, Wayne State University Press. Other recent books include his fiction collection, *The Perp Walk* and his anthology, *RESPECT: The Poetry of Detroit Music*, co-edited with M. L. Liebler. A chapbook, *The Human Engine at Dawn*, will be published by Wolfson Press in 2023. A native of Detroit, he lives in Pittsburgh and teaches in the Alma College low-residency MFA program.

GEORGIA ENGLISH was born in Australia to two artistic parents—her father a writer and editor and her mother a painter. From her father, she learned to love literature and from her mother how to look at the world in colors and how to dance. As a child she spent every spare moment on her grandparent's sheep property, riding horses and roaming the hills. Georgia moved to the United States when she was 23 and won a scholarship to Johns Hopkins University, earning a Master's in Writing. The essay, "How Are Her Spirits?" explores the ideas of marriage, intuition, and yearning.

Georgia has had stories and essays published in the *Gettysburg Review*, and the *Chautauqua Review*, and has earned scholarships to Lighthouse Writers in Denver. “How Are Her Spirits?” is part of a collection of essays about her life. She is a mother to twin boys, now 20, and lives in Colorado on a small farm where she trains donkeys, rides horses, and stares at the mountains when she should be writing.

JOHN ROLFE GARDINER is the author of six novels and five story collections. His short fiction has appeared in *The American Scholar*, *The New Yorker*, *The Ontario Review*, *American Short Fiction* and many other periodicals. His stories have been chosen for *Best American Short Stories*, The O’Henry Awards, and Pushcart Prize volumes. His latest novel, *Newport Rising*, is available from Amazon. “Their Grandfather’s Clock” will appear in a collection to be published in 2023.

JORDAN GISSELBRECHT lives in Chicago, Illinois with his cat. His work has also appeared in *Potluck*, *Euphony*, and *West 10th*, among others. You can reach him at jordangisselbrecht@gmail.com.

RENNY GONG is in his third year at Columbia University. He loves nothing more than a good bike ride, but his bike was stolen, not once but twice, and since then he has been in a perpetual state of bikeless anguish. Once upon a time, he played quite a lot of table tennis.

MARGARET B. INGRAHAM is the author of the poetry collection *Exploring this Terrain* (Paraclete Press, 2020); *This Holy Alphabet*, lyric poems based on her original translation of Psalm 119 (Paraclete Press, 2009); and a poetry chapbook, *Proper Words for Birds* (Finishing Line Press), nominated for the 2010 Library of Virginia Award in poetry. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *The Courtship of Winds*, *Evening Street Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *the MacGuffin*, *Mount Hope Magazine*, *Nonconformist Magazine*, *Off the Coast*, *Spiritus*, *THINK Journal*, *Third Wednesday*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, *Visitant Lit*, and *Valparaiso Poetry Review*. Ingraham is the recipient of an Academy of American Poetry Award,

a Sam Ragan Award, and numerous residential Fellowships at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Margaret has twice collaborated with internationally recognized composer Gary Davison, most notably to create “Shadow Tides,” a choral symphony commissioned by Artistic Director Gretchen Kuhrmann for Choralis to commemorate the tenth anniversary of September 11th and performed on that date in 2011 in Washington, DC. She holds a BA from Vanderbilt University, an MA in English from Georgia State University, and pursued doctoral studies in English (with an emphasis on English Romantic Poetry) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ingraham resides in Alexandria, Virginia.

J.M. JORDAN recently began writing again after a twenty-year hiatus. He is a Georgia native and a Virginia resident. His poems have appeared in *Arion*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Image Journal*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Smartish Pace* and elsewhere.

TREVOR LANUZZA earned an MFA in Fiction at Temple University in 2020. He won the 2019 Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers in fiction and lives in Lansing, Michigan.

TRUDY LEWIS is the author of the novels *The Empire Rolls* (Moon City Press) and *Private Correspondences* (William Goyen Prize from Northwestern/TriQuarterly) in addition to a story collection, *The Bones of Garbo*, winner of the Sandstone Prize in Short Fiction from The Ohio State University Press. Trudy’s fiction has appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Best American Short Stories*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *New England Review*, *New Stories from the South*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, and others. Trudy is a professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Missouri.

ROBERTA PAYNE is a graduate of Stanford, UCLA, Harvard, and the University of Denver. She taught Latin for 19 years at the University of Denver. Now retired, she teaches Greek privately. She’s published narrative nonfiction in the *Gettysburg Review* (2007; 2018), *Narrative*, *Calyx*, *Aeon*, *Shenandoah*, *The Rumpus*, and others. She’s also done “A Selection of

Modern Italian Poetry in Translation” with McGill-Queen’s UP. Right now she’s marketing her debut novel, *My Mother’s Autobiography*. The people she has written about in “The Opposite of Dancing” were very dear to her.

ANDREA POTOS is the author of several poetry collections, including most recently *Marrow of Summer*, and *Mothershell*, both from Kelsay Books. A new poetry collection entitled *Her Joy Becomes* has just been released from Fernwood Press. Her poems have recently appeared in *The Sun*, *Poetry East*, *Bearings*, *Lyric*, and *How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope* (Storey Publishing). Her poems can be found widely published online and in print.

DAVID B. PRATHER is the author of *We Were Birds* (Main Street Rag Publishing). His work has appeared in many print and online journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Poet Lore*, and many others. He studied acting at the National Shakespeare Conservatory, and he studied writing at Warren Wilson College.

DONNA PUCCIANI, a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Agenda*, *Journal of Italian Translation*, *ParisLitUp*, and other journals. Her seventh and most recent book of poetry is *Edges*.

ANN QUINN's chapbook *Final Deployment*, was published by Finishing Line Press (2018), and her compilation of teaching ideas and resulting poems, *Poetry is Life*, is newly available from Yellow Arrow Publishing.. Her poetry has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Potomac Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, and *Broadkill Review* and has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Ann holds an MFA from Pacific Lutheran University, is poetry editor for Yellow Arrow Journal and lives in Catonsville, Maryland. Visit www.annquinn.net

KAREN REGEN-TUERO's short stories have been published in about two-dozen journals including *Glimmer Train Stories*, *The North American Review*, *Slice*, and *The Adirondack Review*, whose editors nominated

her for a Pushcart Prize. She works in long-form television in New York and is busy revising a novel.

GRACE Q. SONG is a Chinese-American writer residing in New York City. Her poetry and fiction have been published or are forthcoming in *The Boiler*, *The Offing*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Hobart*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Previous works have been selected for inclusion in Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction. She is the recipient of *Sundog Lit's* 2021 Editor's Prize and studies English at Columbia University.

JOHN TALBIRD is the author of the novel, *The World Out There* (Madville) and the chapbook of stories, *A Modicum of Mankind* (Norte Maar). His fiction and essays have appeared in *Potomac Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Ambit*, *Juked*, *The Literary Review*, and *Riddle Fence* among many others. He is a frequent contributor to *Film International*, on the editorial board of *Green Hills Literary Lantern* and Associate Editor, Fiction, for the online noir journal *Retreats from Oblivion*. A professor at Queensborough Community College-CUNY, he lives with his wife and son in Queens. More of his writing can be found at johntalbird.com.

TRUTH THOMAS is a singer-songwriter and NAACP Image Award-winning poet, born in Knoxville, Tennessee and raised in Washington, DC. He studied creative writing at Howard University under Dr. Tony Medina and earned his MFA in poetry at New England College. His poems have appeared in over 150 publications, including *Poetry Magazine* and *The 100 Best African American Poems* (edited by Nikki Giovanni).

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