We eat the color of cake

April Maranda Wilder

The University of Montana
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WE EAT THE COLOR OF CAKE

by

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The Butcher Shop

Jack circles the block looking for Ann's junker Saab and tonguing his lower left canine, which is loose and clicks in his gum like a light switch. He thinks of calling to see if she's running late, but then he remembers about rethinking their boundaries. Whatever that means in the middle of a divorce. In the alley he parks in a tow-away zone because he doesn't want some smart-ass valet having sex in his car (Jack was a valet in college), and because fuck it. He likes the idea of taking a cab down to the impound yard, again—everyone there looks like they just found out they're being experimented on.

Inside the restaurant, he finds Monahan sitting alone at a table for four. His hair's parted and groomed the way it has been since second grade. It looks like a piece from a Lego set, a cap he snaps on in the morning and off at night. Monahan half-stands, then sits. "You're in for a treat," he says. "This guy cuts a forty ounce porterhouse."

Jack says, "I heard that."

Monahan checks around behind Jack but doesn't ask where Ann is or if she's coming. He says, "Sumpy's in the head."
Sumpy is Monahan’s first girlfriend in twelve years. Jack’s the last of their pack to meet her, though the reports have been coming in from all sides—how Monahan treats her like a child, calling her Bird or Little Sumpy. After they’d been dating less than a month, Monahan’s condom broke, so now there’s a baby on the way. Jack was the first one he told. Of course the condom broke, Jack said, it was probably twenty years old. This was at a Padres game, top of the third. Monahan drank too much and got weepy about fatherhood and started hugging children he didn’t know and security helped him find his car. Jack stayed four more innings because he wasn’t ready to go home.

At home what Jack does is sit in his empty living room in the red club chair whose mate sits in Ann’s new apartment across town. He sits in the dark and watches the house across the street, which has recently been painted the color of a blueberry snow cone. He mixes drinks he doesn’t drink and tries to picture how he’ll react when he finds out Ann has a new lover, or an old lover dating from before she left him, when the house across the street was beige. He wonders how they’re going to sell their house to pay for the divorce with a ten-ton block of marzipan across the street.

Jack’s first impression when Sumpy walks up is, too much time in the sun, but she’s cute. She has a dent in the tip of her nose and hair the color of bleached pine. Her bangs wisp into half-penny eyes that Jack imagines could be seductive in the right light. Everyone agrees she would be out of Monahan’s league, except she grew up in a Christian cult, which skunked her with a strange perfume for life.

The first thing she says is, “Were you able to find kitty a home?”
It takes Jack a minute. Then he realizes she’s referring to a gag email one of their friends sent around earlier in the week. He waits for some sign that she’s kidding, which he sees she’s not. He tells her, “That wasn’t a real cat.”

She says, “Usually with kitties you can’t tell what they’re thinking.”

Jack doesn’t understand this. He looks to Monahan for help, who says, “Sumpy sees what she sees.”

Jack doesn’t understand this either and takes a swig from Monahan’s longneck. He wipes his mouth and explains that their friend took a picture of his—Jack’s—face and a picture of a cat’s face and morphed them together in Photoshop. “Those were my eyes and mouth, but the ears and whiskers were, um, the cat’s.” He can’t believe he’s explaining a joke, this joke. He himself saved the picture on his hard drive and looks at it several times a day, with his office door closed.

Sumpy says, “In my drawing class we learned everyone has an animal they look like and if your drawing doesn’t…”

The waiter brings flatbread. It comes in a steel basket as from some futuristic dishwasher, in keeping with the over-understated decor—the unisex waiters, the light that you can’t tell where it’s coming from. Jack catches the waiter eyeing Monahan’s mini bottle of Worcestershire, an idea he got from Ann, who carries a pepper grinder in her purse. The waiter starts disassembling the fourth place setting, but Jack stops him and tells him they’re waiting on one more. The clock behind the bar says ten after. This means Ann’s stuck on the 405 in the slow lane with her blinker on to switch into an even slower lane.
Sumpy’s art class decided her animal was a warrior horse. Monahan makes a
whinnying sound and Sumpy elbows him.

Jack can see horse, but not warrior horse. That’s just some hippie art teacher
blowing smoke up her ass. He decides Monahan’s animal-double is a rat. Sumpy agrees
and Monahan takes playful offense and Jack sees Sumpy doesn’t even know Monahan
well enough to know he’s taking actual offense as well.

The menu comes on a funky clipboard—one page of food, then twenty pages of
wine. Jack pushes his loose tooth as far as it will go in one, then the other, side of the
socket. He tries to think when he last got a full meal down. “Where’s the rest of it?” he
says. “There’s nothing but steak.”

Monahan leans and says to Sumpy, for Jack’s benefit, “You see what I mean? He
marries into a higher tax bracket, he forgets his roots.” He almost aborts this remark
midway, then he goes with it. “I’m talking about dead animals. I’m talking about loin
cloths and clubs and blood and a lot of groaning, and I’m talking about a little thing
called protein.”

The waiter stops by to see if Monahan’s ready for another beer. There’s a
ventriloquist numbness in the waiter’s face so it doesn’t look like he’s talking when he’s
talking.

Sumpy asks, like the waiter’s a nurse, “Is that his third already?”

Monahan says, “You want I slow down, Sumps?”

There’s a silence, then the waiter says, “To clarify. I will or will not fetch the
Silver Bullet?”
Last night Jack bought a thirty-dollar bottle of scotch with red wax on the cap and sat in his chair picturing himself getting good and lit the way he would if he were starring in a movie about himself, but he could hardly get a glass down. In the morning the bottle was still there on the table by the chair, nearly full. This was more depressing than a hangover, so he went outside and mowed the shit out of the lawn. It was six a.m. and his tooth had kept him up half the night. Every time he took a turn and saw that clown house across the street, he threw himself into the mowing with extra oomph. He mowed over a dead bird then he mowed under his orange tree, with mutilated orange rinds and pulp strafing his bare legs and his yard smelling like an Orange Julius.

Sumpy suggests that they order for Ann and she can eat when she gets there. Something about the way she says Ann’s name, with such ease and ownership, makes Jack feel like she’s plucked it from him. He can feel it in his tooth. His dentist told him the tooth was secure and to leave it alone, which was absurd, because tell him to leave it alone the only thing he’s sure not to do is leave it alone. He asks if the caesar tastes like anchovies then says never mind and orders Ann a Cobb with no bacon and extra egg and dressing on the side, and a filet for himself.

While they’re waiting on dinner Sumpy tells Jack about the day Monahan came into her shop looking for a teddy-bear calendar and right away she knew he was The One. Sumpy wants Monahan to admit it was the same for him. Jack wonders if he should just walk over and ask Walt to repaint his house as common courtesy. He’s pretty sure Walt will resist since Jack has never done anything remotely neighborly, and leaves his trash cans at the curb for days on end, against Walt’s wishes. Monahan thinks that if Sumpy keeps lying in the sun it will boil the baby and he, for one, doesn’t want to raise a baby
with boiled brains. Monahan thinks they’re going to have a boy, he can feel it. Boy or girl, Sumpy’s sure the child will be a blessing, a gift. Sumpy wants to have five children. Monahan wants to have a superbowl party. Every time Jack pictures Monahan on the due date, in scrubs, he sees Sumpy giving birth to a plastic baby, or the doctor rooting around in her with forceps saying, *Sorry folks, there's nothing in here.*

The front door hasn’t opened in so long Jack wants someone to leave just to see it move. He considers the possibility Ann’s not coming. He sorts through last night’s phone conversation, one of those maddening feelies where Ann wants to know how he is, how he really is inside, down deep, and Jack said *you want to know?* and emailed her the picture of the mankitty. Which she found troubling. “It seems to me what you’re saying with this picture is, you feel exploited.”

He was sitting in his chair, Walt’s house in full bloom across the street. “You have got to come and see what he’s done with the place. We’ll get twenty grand less with that thing over there.”

Ann said, “I worry you’re not talking to anyone about this.”

“We’d be better off with police tape and a chalk outline on the lawn.”

Ann said, “I’m serious about this.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t get to do that.”

She was silent a while. He thought maybe she’d fallen asleep, which she does sometimes while she’s driving or waiting for prescriptions. “This is good,” she said then, “what you’re doing here tonight. Some how, some way, I must be stopped.”

“Fuck you, Ann.”

“Yes. Fuck me. Now we’re getting somewhere.”
“I’m hanging up now.”

“Should I not come to dinner?”

“Come or don’t come,” Jack said, knowing nothing pissed Ann off more than answers like sure or whatever. But could she really not come? How could you miss seeing Monahan with a live living woman? For years the community joke was that Monahan was gay. Someone paid to have a newspaper printed with the headline Monahan Comes Out! above the picture of dancing multitudes on V-Day. Monahan thought this was great and tacked the clipping over his bed. On top of this, Ann’s been talking about trying out The Butcher Shop for months. In the last week alone the chef’s been written up in both the Reader and Tribune, one commending his respect for vegetables, the other investigating rumors that he chases his staff around with knives.

Monahan gets up to go to the bathroom, only instead of going down the hall with the restroom arrows, he walks out the front door into the street.

Sumpy says, “Where’s he going?”

“There’s probably a line,” Jack says.

She looks at him. “For the men’s room there’s a line?”

Next door there’s a dive bar where Monahan’s going to slam a beer. He does this. He does this even when he’s out with the guys. Probably a future Mrs. Monahan should know about this, but instead of pressing the point, Sumpy touches her stomach and says, “It’s not true, how he says it happened.”

Jack snaps a piece of flatbread in half, poppy seeds flying.
“When he went to reach for the contraceptive I got on top and moved my hips so he couldn’t get one. That’s because I knew how he felt before he did. The baby was a decision I made for us. I took it as my onus.”

Through a mouth full of flatbread Jack says, “What’s the plural of onus?” He tries to guess her motive in telling him this, then he remembers how a few weeks earlier she stood Monahan up at Clarke’s diner because she hadn’t expected there to be an “e” in Clarke’s.

“Don’t worry,” she says, “we laugh about it now, how I trapped him.”

Now Jack wonders if Sumpy would agree to go and talk to Walt. Walt is at a time in life he should be thinking about salvation, so maybe Sumpy turns up on his doorstep with a bible and starts talking about sin, about the sin of ostentation. On sunny days, the blue of Walt’s house actually reflects onto Jack’s house across the street, gives it a green tinge.

The waiter and another waiter come up carrying their entrees, a napkin protecting their hands from the dishes. “These are hot,” the waiter says. He comes around and rotates each plate like he’s setting a compass. “Don’t touch these.”

In the corner of his eye Jack sees the Cobb salad, Ann’s silverware and napkin, still napkin origami. He sinks his knife into the center of his filet, a silky two-inch cut on the medium side of rare, but rare. He presses the tooth, hard, until it hurts. Ann can be forty minutes late, easy. Jack should’ve put off ordering but the food’s here now and the best he can do is stall. He stares down at his plate. He says, “This isn’t rare.”

The waiter says, “No?”

Jack says, “I ordered rare.”
The waiter sort of bows and takes the plate. As he turns to go, Jack says, “And a glass of Zinfandel to go with the Cobb.”

The waiter looks at him like he’s ordering this in shackles, from inside a jail cell. He says, “We’re pouring Storybook by the glass.”

“Perfect,” Jack says.

Monahan’s back splashing Worcestershire all over his meat almost before he sits down. Jack tells Sumpy go ahead and eat, don’t wait for me, but she just smiles, leaves her silverware lie. At the far end of the room the waiter pivots and backs into the kitchen with Jack’s entree. Through the portal on the kitchen door Jack sees him hand off the plate, then yoink his hand in the air like he’s hanging himself.

Sumpy says, “It’s important to us that you feel comfortable coming to the house.” She has her purse in her lap and all Jack can think is she’s going to present him with a house key, but instead she pulls a leather fold from her purse and slides a card out of a pocket. “This is something that helps me make sense of things.” She hands the card to Jack. It says, The Serenity Prayer. There’s a picture of a canoe floating on a misted-over lake at dawn. The picture’s meant to soothe, but all Jack can think is that the guy riding in the canoe fell out and drowned, and this is the moment after. He turns the card over, then back, and reads the prayer. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change... He imagines the mankitty sitting in his club chair reciting these words into his empty living room. He thinks of a bumper sticker on Ann’s car—God, save me from your believers—and he realizes he’s been holding the card as if Ann were reading it over his shoulder.

Then he sees the salad. Jack is on a date with a Cobb salad.
He feels warm, feverish, and he’s picking up a dirty penny taste in his mouth. Without thinking, he pulls a five dollar bill out of his wallet and hands it to Sumpy.

She stares at it. “What’s this for?”

“It’s for the this—” Jack holds the card between two fingers like the ace from a magic deck. A little light goes out of Sumpy’s eyes and he sees she thinks it’s a joke, a cruel one.

“It’s for you to keep,” she says, recovering, and Jack sees in her face Ann’s not coming. It’s there in Sumpy’s face, and it’s in his face too. He can feel it. He presses his palms on the underside of the table and waits. He should explain about the card—she manages a stationary store, he thought she sold these, was selling this one—but he doesn’t. He’s tired of trying to make things bearable while at the same time suspecting they’re not unbearable at all, but only unsafe. At home he talks to himself in clichés. *No sleep for the weary,* he’ll say. *A man’s got to eat.* When he’s in an especially creepy mood he makes a point of laughing out loud in front of the TV, tossing his head back, really making a scene.

Monahan’s cutting his meat into dice-sized cubes like his mother does when he’s at home. Not looking up he says, “Sumpy knows what she knows.”

The waiter sets a new filet before Jack. The thought of eating makes his stomach twist. Outside the sun has gone down, muddying up the windows so the reflection of the restaurant stretches into the street, into nothingness, and tucked into the vanishing point is the reflection of the kitchen door. Jack turns and looks at the actual kitchen door on the opposite end of the restaurant. He sees a pony tail pass, then the white shoulders of someone giant. The chef, maybe. He wants to think it’s the chef, the one with the temper,
big bully ranging around in his cage like Walt doing god-knows-what in his blueberry palace across the street. Then it hits him. An idea so elegant, so smooth, Jack feels like he’s thought it up with a borrowed brain. His idea is this: Walt comes out of his house once a week, to go for groceries. The rest of the time he’s on lock-down, watching game-shows. Walt doesn’t know what color his house is. That’s what’s so infuriating to begin with—it’s the neighbors who suffer. So late Sunday night Jack sneaks over in camouflage and paints the place with a spray-gun. Just the front, just what you can see from the curb. Jack’s place will sell in a week, two weeks tops. If it doesn’t sell by the weekend, he sneaks over Friday night and paints it blue again for when Walt comes out for his weekly run. Walt will never know the difference. This is revelatory. Jack thinks as long as he can sit here sending meat back to the kitchen, he can figure his entire life out. The waiter hands him a clean knife. This time he barely opens the filet, he just makes a little wound in it. “I want it to look like beef,” he says, “not beef jerky.”

The couple at the next table stops talking. The waiter shifts in his shoes, not sure what to do. Then he does the only thing he can do, prices being what they are, and takes the plate.

Mahan waves his knife up and down in front of Jack. “What’s this.” *This* meaning Jack. It’s a pet-peeve of Jack’s since forever, sending food back, harassing wait-staff.

There are fewer and fewer servers on the floor. Each time one of them flaps into the kitchen, Jack gets a look at the waiter, in the center of the gathering circle. He looks unfazed. He looks like he just let go of a bowling ball and he’s watching to see what it does. Jack’s never been good at thinking things through, but the fact is people like a
scene and the waiter will probably get a filet out of the deal. Then someone’s shouting. There’s the sound of banging pots. The servers come dodging out of the kitchen, syllables and spurts of the shouting. But there’s something wrong with the voice—it’s hollow and round, like a very tired person barking. The chef is deaf. Jack remembers this from the Tribune article.

A guy, possibly on tip-toe, presses his face to the portal and scans the restaurant. The waiter’s face moves in next to him, and he fingers Jack.

The kitchen door bucks open and the guy strides out in one of those straight-jacket-looking chef shirts and jeans. On the end of a serving fork, in mid air, he’s holding a raw steak. He’s short, his hair pulled back and his eyes round, too close together, and riveted on Jack. He looks like he’s from Jersey, as deaf people do. The bartender shifts the blender to a higher speed then turns it off. He pours pink slush into a row of glasses but the bar customers have all turned on their stools to watch. People stop pretending not to stare.

The chef reaches the table, the raw filet drooping on the fork. It looks like a kidney or heart and makes a suction sound as he slabs it onto Ann’s bread plate. He dabs his forehead on the sleeve of his nut suit and Jack sees then, behind his ear, one of those hearing aides they try to make look like human skin. They should make them pink or blue, anything but that terrible rubbed rouge that’s as distorted color-wise as what they must hear, and how they sound. In deaf-talk the chef says, “Rare as I can get it, brother.”

Jack looks down at the steak, the strings of blood on the white plate. When he pictures himself painting Walt’s house in the middle of the night, he sees it from his bedroom window, as Ann would. He thinks of one of their first nights in the house, when
Ann stopped in the middle of kissing goodnight and said how strange it was to say, essentially, goodbye, to someone you’d be lying next to all night, but as empty pods, and Jack said, “Yeah, we’re going to sleep,” and he thinks that’s how he lost her, saying things like that. He picks up his fork and Monahan’s knife. Under the blade, the raw meat bulges like a fat lip, purple-red with gossamer seams. The plate skids on the table cloth, ice tinkles in their water glasses. In his periphery, Jack sees a guy slap a bill down on the bar. “One bite and he yaks,” the guy says.

A woman two tables down in cat’s-eye glasses moans when Jack forks the first bite in. He’s never eaten raw meat. It’s like chewing bloody chewing gum. He chews and chews and the food seems to be chewing back. He hears his jaw pop in his ears. When he swallows, the sweaty blob clogs his throat and for a minute he thinks it won’t go down or up: he’ll die this way, he’ll get a Darwin Award. The next bite he cuts half that size. That one’s like a wet little cat kiss. The still and staring restaurant fades and Jack’s overcome with an underwater consciousness of himself eating in which Jack is not anything but the exertion of survival. He thinks this is what the chef hears all the time. He wonders if when the chef thinks, he thinks in that deaf voice.

On his forth bite Jack feels a suck-pop in his jawbone. He freezes. There’s a warm streaming sensation in his gum, but if it’s bleeding he can’t taste it through the raw meat. He’s pretty sure there went the tooth, but he’s afraid to move his tongue and find out.

The chef says, “What the hell am I looking at?”

What he’s looking at is, Monahan’s bottle of Worcester sauce. He’s looking at Monahan’s Worcester-drenched cubes of porterhouse, lined up in a perfect crazy row.

“You. Out.”
Monahan says, “Why me? What’d I do?”

The chef points at the door.

Monahan looks at basically everyone, then asks, “Can I take my steak with me?”

Jack thinks how exciting it was to lose a tooth as a kid—how his parents seemed for some reason proud, and paid him for it—but as an adult, at this moment, he can’t imagine anything lonelier. In another way it’s perfect, a tiny secret uncorking, which is why instead of doing the smart thing and spitting the tooth out in his hand, he washes it down with a slug of Zinfandel. He remembers hearing about people in the Middle Ages who would get so hungry they would eat parts of their own bodies to stay alive, and he thinks he would do anything not to know that kind of hunger.

When Ann calls, Jack’s standing in the alley waiting for his cab, examining the tracks from the tow truck.

“So? How was Meet the Monahans?”

He can hear through the phone what she’s wearing—catholic-school skirt, clogs, that oversized jersey that says Liberty. He clears his throat, afraid of all the things he could say, and all the things he won’t. He says, “You could’ve come.”

“I thought you told me not to.” She coughs, and the cough sounds so her it makes him momentarily woozy. “Indulge me,” she says, “I’m too sad to read and today I watched the neighbors make their dogs fuck through the fence.”

“Why would they do that?”
She laughs. “I watched through the fence, they didn’t—”

“I get it,” Jack says. He backs against the brick wall, an awning of shade formed by the streetlight and building. “Let’s see. There was a lot of baby talk. Possibly I insulted her.”

“Oh goodie. Let’s hear.”

Jack feels himself smile. “I’m thinking about seeing about keeping the house.”

She makes a little noise of regret.

A door opens further down the wall and someone pushes a milk carton into the alley to keep it propped.

Ann says, “You don’t sound so hot.”

“I don’t feel so hot.” He dips his tongue in and around the naked gum. He’s about to tell her about his tooth and how he’s going in Monday and give his dentist hell, he’s about to tell her about the serenity prayer and about mowing down that pile of oranges, but he knows he has to start not telling her things or he’ll never make it out of this. He’ll start small, is what he’ll do, and work his way up.
THREE MEN

The Actuary

The actuary stands at the foot of the bed holding a suit for her to examine. She feels on the plant stand for her glasses—she was up until dawn reading, of all things, a book on grammar, with the actuary asleep beside her. She has been doing this lately, sucking espresso beans and keeping awake on the sly, through the night, logging what hours are left before he moves out. They have decided to separate, which everyone knows is just practice for divorce. When her hands get cold holding the book outside the covers, she reaches in under his T-shirt and warms them on his stomach; first one, then the other. His body heat is dizzying.

She says, “You can’t wear wool end of June.”

He looks at the suit, then at the clock on the dresser. He’s flying to meet the actuarial brass of the state’s biggest health care provider. He needs to look good. Also, by
her watch, he needs to leave in twenty minutes to make his flight. He says, “Do people
know this?”

“What about that pretty plaid Brooks Brothers number?”

He blinks. With his small embedded eyes, sometimes she wonders how he can see
around corners. He says, “The pantleg caught fire.”

She makes a screwy face and turns up on her side. Her nightgown slips and she
pulls the comforter to cover herself, because of the chill, but she’s afraid it looks like
she’s hiding her body from him. She can’t decide if this is awkward or sad or neither or
both. First of the month he will move into a studio with cardboard walls, but within
walking distance of work. She wonders how long before, when he visits, he’ll look
strange sitting on their furniture.

He tears the dry-cleaner wrap off three dress shirts, a white one, a gray one, the
third French blue, and holds the gray one to his front. Over the breast pocket, there’s a
grease stain the size of a silver dollar. She motions him over, smells the spot and sees
stapled inside the collar a typed note like in a fortune cookie. Special Care was put into
the garment but the SPOTS or STAINS can never be removed! We warn you so you may
realize, that it has never, been overlooked. She rips the tag off and hands it to the actuary
to read.

Since his company went casual a few years back, his formal wardrobe’s out of
shape. Not that it matters. If your actuary doesn’t show up looking like he climbed out of
a dumpster, he’s probably second-tier—this is a line she uses at parties when she goes
into her routine about actuaries and clothes; the time he came home from an interview
with his pants gored in the seat and his boxers showing and how can you not notice the
breeze? While people laugh, he reminds them how she exaggerates, that in fact the tear was barely noticeable.

Outside a car pulls up. The actuary peeks through the blinds, looks back jogged.

"The cab’s here."

She tells him, "He’ll wait."

"I have to call another cab."

"He’ll wait. We can do this."

The actuary frowns and gets into the white shirt. The tiny buttons slip through his fingers like ice-chinks—how you calm him when he gets like this is, you put a pencil in his hand; half-noticing he’ll take and twirl it on his fingers like a toy helicopter blade. He twists his arm around and stands so she can button his cuffs as she has done every work morning for eleven years. She always makes it last longer than it has to, and it feels like the last thing that will ever happen.

Before the sun came up, she called in sick.

He fans his ties out over the bruise-blue cotton sheet. The comforter crackles as she sits up, starts sorting through them. They feel exquisite slipping through her fingers, like the skins of exotic snakes—silver diamonds on black, orange and purple octagons, one with lightning bolt patterns they bought on the way to a wedding.

Outside, the cabbie honks. Every time the actuary leaves now, even to go for milk, she feels everything coming apart and by the time he comes home she’s ready to tell any lie that will make things work. Then they stand in the dining room hugging—one of them holding the mail—saying nothing, taking back nothing. She wonders how tough they are, really. Now she understands why even atrocious couples stay together as long as
they do. She thinks about moving to Chicago. She has family there, but not the kind that will do her any good. On her last visit, her wrecking ball of a brother nearly killed himself driving drunk down a flight of stairs. She stood on his porch watching, nothing to do but watch, matter-of-fact as she is now.

She slides a tie out of the muddle—dark blue silk with green Grinch-who-stole-Christmas heads all over it. He wears it once a year, to his office Christmas party. “This is actually the best one,” she says.

“I can’t wear that,” he says.

“But it is the best one.”

“It’s a good tie,” he says.

At last year’s party, she was talking to the new transfer when his wife butted in and said, Is he boring you yet? She stared at the woman, appalled, and went on about her the whole ride home. “To call him boring, in front of everyone.” She said boring was the worst thing you could call someone. It meant you were furniture. It meant you didn’t count. The actuary drove and listened and said maybe the man was boring. But think about it, she said, to be boring to your wife, when you had kids, and once you got deep down in the routine, wasn’t every marriage the same? He said every marriage was not the same. She said no, she knew it wasn’t, but did he know what she meant? Three weeks later, on their anniversary, they started talking about splitting up.

The ties are in bad shape. Each time he tries one on they notice threads dangling or discolorations like it’s been sitting in the garage for ten years.

She tells him he’ll have to buy a tie in the airport. “I mean it. This is important.”
There are footsteps on the walk, then the doorbell, then someone pounding on the
to
tool. The actuary pulls the blinds—from their bed they have a view of the front
doors; their little house, their second house, built in a dogleg pattern—and she sees the
cabbie back down off the steps without looking behind him. There’s one less step than
you’d think and she flinches thinking he’ll trip, but he doesn’t. He comes up, looms in the
bedroom window, black stubble on his chin that makes him look impatient or cross. The
actuary gestures he’ll be out in a minute but the cabbie looks past him, to her, in her tank
top, with ties spread in her lap and all around her on the bed. The actuary knocks on the
window and says, “Please wait in the car. She’s sick,” but his voice seems to get trapped
in the glass.

She says, “That was odd.”

He turns. “I don’t know why I said that.” Earlier, when he was shaving, she heard
over the running water pills shaking in a pill bottle. Last week some time he emptied all
the tranquilizers out of her bottle until there were only three left. Now, when she takes
one, he replaces it from wherever he stashed the rest so there are always only three. Not
enough to kill her, must be the idea. She wonders what he will do about this when he
moves out. She braces herself, or tries to, for the moment she picks up the bottle and
finds it is again full of pills.

The white shirt’s missing a button and the blue one, the last one, has a weird
streak over the shoulder blade, like silver spray paint. He says he doesn’t care, he’s out of
shirts and out of time. He says, “I’ll keep my jacket on.”

As he ties his Grinch tie, they watch each other in the mirror on the back of the
doors. She remembers on their second or third date admitting she’d noticed him in the
halls but didn’t know about his suits. “I think it was the color,” she’d said, “That old fashioned brown. There’s something eerie about it.” In the candlelight, he stopped chewing and looked at her. He set his fork and knife down. Then he told her he’d gotten all his suits from a widow who lived next door and whose husband had died after fifty years selling insurance. The actuary was just out of school then, rotating the two cheap suits he could afford, so he agreed to come over and have a look, which he did, a week later, carrying an empty suitcase.

“You couldn’t breathe in there, and she only had one light on up high in the closet. So she’d pull one of the suits out to give me and she wouldn’t let go. I’d have to like, tug it away from her.” He said in the months following whenever he wore one of the suits he’d get the feeling the widow was watching from across the street, or the window of a bus.

The dead man’s suits. That was the first thing she’d loved about him: walking over to the widow’s apartment with an empty suitcase. It was so innocent and logical and silly.

She notices he’s covering his hip with his hand. "What’ve you got there?"

He says, “You don’t want to know.”

But she insists and he moves his hand and reveals a three-inch tear where the pocket liner’s showing through. She falls back on the bed and flops her arms out in comic exhaustion, and he laughs. In the nightstand she fishes for a black Sharpie and tells him hold still. His hips shimmy while she stretches the liner and starts coloring it in and she pictures telling their friends about this at a party—this rushed ridiculous morning with all his clothes spotted or ripped, and she looks up then and sees the cab driver at the window,
fogging the glass and tapping his watch, and the actuary’s eyes are closed and his hands are upturned as if to check for rain, and she realizes there will be no party. What is happening now as it is happening is all there is, and they cannot protect each other from this. He cannot keep her safe.
The Stunt Man

Her brother called last night and told her to come by because there was something he wanted to show her. She sits now on his porch swing drinking gas station coffee, waiting. She doesn’t knock or ring so as not to overstate her interest in what is going on inside his house. She’s here because he called, no more no less, and she tries to be clear—if only for her own sake—as far as when she is in and when she is out. Eventually someone will be out: his hangdog son, his rubber daughter, his disappearing wife.

She hears the latch and then the door and then backwards-schlepping feet. A sound like metal fingernails that she can’t quite place. Then a mountain bike bucks through the front door as through a starting gate. Her brother used to race BMX when he was a kid—she used to go and watch, the whole family would go. He is forty years old now, hunched over the handle bars, cocked in flight. She hasn’t seen him on a bike in twenty-five years. Is that true? As he rumbles across the porch the planks send a thrumming through her legs, her feet. He grips the handle bars as he approaches the stairs. These are concrete and so steep you feel like you’re going to fall walking up them.
The woman who owned the house before broke both hips falling down these stairs then died inside a maze of stacked tomato soup cans.

He is pedaling, picking up speed. It is just before noon, so he will be well into his morning-maintenance twelve-pack. His wife told her once he has to drink until one in order to write his name legibly. But write his name on what?

The front door yaws. She wonders where his dog is, Daisy.

He used to win a lot racing BMX, they’d pass his trophies around on the car ride home. After one race, a scout hired him to stunt-ride in a movie. It turned out to be the largest grossing film that year. He was twelve years old, making $125 a day. The movie was about a boy who uncovers a damaging government secret then rides all over his subdivision evading the feds on his bike. She thinks that’s right. She hasn’t thought about the film in a long time.

As his wheel drops off the first stair, a car turns onto the street. It’s a creaking sedan with no hubs and no front license plate. The driver guns it up the brick road, his body jerking and jiggling like a bumped bowl of soup. Beneath the visor, she sees a set mouth in a humorless face. If her brother makes it down the stairs the car will hit him. The vectors are in motion, she sees how they will intersect, and there is nothing she can do. It won’t help to scream or stand, though she does, she gets to her feet, like at the races.

She watched the movie once, at the theater, with friends she can picture in bits and pieces but can no longer name. She doesn’t know why she never watched it again. It never occurred to her until now, when something has happened to time and she seems able to play full conversations in the time it takes her brother to kamikaze down the
stairs. She read somewhere this happens to people who jump off bridges: the ones who survive say you fall forever, you think about any and everything. Did her parents see the film? They must have. (Her brother once paid a babysitter three silver dollars to strip.) Even when someone pulls the snapshots out of her brother on the set, they talk about the fact of his being in the movie, but no one talks about the movie itself.

His head traces a pattern of loops as he punches into each stair.

_Boof._

And then the wait. And then

_Boof._

Last night she stood listening as he talked into the answering machine. Sometimes he dupes her into thinking he’s sober and she picks up and she always regrets it. It’s always a huge irritating wejusttalkedaboutthat yeswedid whyareyouyelling yesyouare Ihavetogonow I’mgoingnow. Chances are he doesn’t remember calling and inviting her here.

However this ends up, she came. He asked her to come and she came.

That’s something she will have.

Forth or fifth stair from the bottom, the front tire crooks at a hard angle and her brother pops off the seat heading over the handlebars except he holds on rodeo-style as the bike torques maybe 160 degrees then drops down the stairs backward. She hears the bounce of rubber, the rattle of the chain, the meaty whip of his body landing on the sidewalk. After a weird delay, his skull knocks the cement.
The sedan speeds by. She watches the driver do a doubletake at her brother. The car lags as he realizes his life almost changed, then accelerates greedy with the news that it didn’t.

For one scene, her brother rode down a spiral staircase only inches wider than the handlebars. Years later he said the stunt was insane and he couldn’t believe they stood by with coffee and doughnuts and watched him do it. In another scene, one that made the cut, his bike got away from him as speeding police cars chased him over a hill—he skidded across the gravel as stunt drivers squirrelled and spun to avoid running him over.

She walks to the top of the stairs and looks down. Her brother’s on the sidewalk with the bike on top of him and his arm shot through the frame. By the angle of his outturned foot she guesses his ankle or knee has snapped. She heard somewhere that drunkenness promotes elasticity in the limbs and she thinks of the once or twice a year she sees him and he smells worse than the year before and when rolls up his sleeves or snags a pantleg, there’s some new grisly scar like he lives in prison.

Where is the dog?

What it is about the movie, she thinks now, has to do with his having been a stunt man so he didn’t have to memorize lines or understand the plot. Everything a stunt man does is real because there’s no such thing as a physical lie. You can’t mean or not mean falling or throwing a punch or even a fake-punch. So the plot was the plot and the script was the script, but her brother rode down real stairs and real speeding cars almost ran him over for real, and that’s why when the photo album comes out no one talks about the film.
As he gets to his feet, he looks like a man trying to wake himself out of a dream, which is how he looks most of the time. He touches his hairline, comes away with blood that he stares at, not seeming to know what it is. His legs buckle and he swings his arms out to catch his balance. *Muh Bubah Sistah.* He’s wearing docksides and a red knit sweater with golfers on it. Nowadays he wears whatever people give him for Christmas. Drugstore watches. Yacht club jackets. The docksides he wore for six months with the stuffing still in the toes.

He is somehow getting back on the bike.

It occurs to her this is the very thing he called her here to see.

He goes ten shaky feet then swerves, his front tire shoaling along the curb. He hugs a lamppost to keep from going over, then steadies himself and pushes off down the street. In a minute he angles around the corner and is gone.

All of this takes maybe a minute.

Daisy crawls out from under the porch and trots over to the bottom of the stairs, her nails clicking on the sidewalk, her sandy head hung as in anticipation of a blow. She starts sniffing around in all different places then hones in on a patch of blood. She lolls her tongue like she’ll lick it, but loses interest before she does and trots up the stairs into the house.

And now she wonders if she got it wrong about the chase, and maybe he was *supposed* to skid in front of the cop cars, maybe that was part of the stunt.
Big Mac

When her father vacations, he takes a Guinness on tap in the afternoon. He says canned Guinness doesn’t taste the same, but she thinks whiling away an hour in a pub reminds him of living in England after the war. His son-in-law, her husband, likes Guinness too, and because she doesn’t like drinking or bars in the middle of the day, they both like dragging her along: taking her hostage is part of the fun. Her father says, “All in favor—“ and her husband raises his hand and they laugh because her vote, in her father’s words, “doesn’t mean diddly squat.”

Today they have driven to Coronado, a peninsula ten miles north of the Mexican border. It’s a tropical-feeling place crawling with money and military and tourists in rental cars. They found the bar in a phone book while she was in trying on shoes. It is a classless and a characterless place—no place they will return to—with a grid of mirrored tiles behind the bar and paneling like inside a trailer. The few customers are jarheads from one of the bases nearby.
On a TV mounted over their table, a reporter stands in front of a grounded fleet of helicopters talking into a microphone. The sound is turned off but her father watches with his watery gray eyes like he can hear the guy, or lip-read. After a minute he says into his beer, “Apaches,” and right then they hear live helicopters in the distance, flying in twos over the bay. Her husband and father decide it’s a Memorial Day exercise.

Then they’re talking about helicopters, about flying and drinking. Her father says that to drink anything at all then fly is a court marshal offense. Her husband sips his Guinness and nods like this is information he needs. His widow’s peak makes him look extra alert.

“Then again,” her father says, twisting a drink stirrer, “it can’t always be helped.”

After twelve years, her husband still can’t tell when her father’s winding up to tell a story or a joke, so he always looks doubly pleased, snuck-up-on, when he catches on late.

Her father begins describing a mission he flew one night after drinking at the officer’s club. His buddy Bill Roderick responded to the call first, flying out to rescue a marine stranded in the jungle. Using his hands, her father explains how when a helicopter can’t land, they lower the medic into the jungle on a cable and winch. Only that night, when Roderick got out there, his medic didn’t check to see that the basket was hooked to the cable, and he dropped out of the chopper like a stone. Her father spirals two fingers through the air, whistling, then he looks up and says, “Yoo-hoo.” This is what he says when someone does something stupid. Yoo-hoo. “Now the medic’s down there too and Roderick’s got no basket, so he flies back to base.” He taps the table, sits back. “And now we go.”

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Only in recent years will her father tell stories about the war. They come off more like dark episodes of *M*A*S*H*—guys pulling each others’ wisdom teeth at four a.m. in a hut, blubbering drunk. During his second tour, her father would send her and her brother adventure stories he recorded on cassettes in the voice of Big Mac, a helicopter rescue pilot. *Hope you kids are buckled in, it’s going to be a rough one.* They lived with their grandmother, who bathed them in the kitchen sink with the dirty pots. They didn’t understand where their father was; she thought Big Mac was an invention until high school, when she wrote a report on Vietnam. In one memoir, a soldier described waiting for a dustoff after he stepped on a landmine. When he heard the chopper in the distance (one of his men had just handed him his arm) he said his soul went up and traced its path across the sky.

Her father won’t tell stories now when her brother’s around because her brother interrupts and one-ups him with some invented story of his own from Desert Storm. *You think that’s bad,* he’ll say. She doesn’t remember when her brother made the leap from bullshit artist to mythomaniac. She knew you could drink yourself useless, but she didn’t know you could drink yourself crazy.

At the bar, a marine in his early twenties pumps back a measure of whiskey. He watches himself drink in the mirror with what seems to her the nerve of a much older man. She has the impression he is listening to her father’s story. Her father’s medic is in the basket now dangling twenty feet above the ground over where the other medic went down. There’s no more cable and the chopper can’t go any lower without descending into the trees and near-certain death. As they hover there deciding what to do, the dangling man jumps.
Her husband coughs into his hand, incredulous. “Now your medic’s down there too?” He almost left the house today with his shirt on inside-out. She caught him at the door, but right-side-out the shirt almost looks worse. The collar’s pulling loose and the orange stripes have faded funky, but what the hell, he flew to the biggest meeting of his life in a Grinch tie. Last night when they were all dressing for dinner, she saw him in the hall in the dark all turned around trying to button his shirt-cuff buttons, something she always does, or did.

Her husband pulls three golf tees out of his pocket and sets them on the table. If not for her, they would golf from sun-up to sun-down, these two. When they come home, she can hear them in the driveway talking and laughing, their golf clubs clacking, their spikes on the walk.

Her brother went golfing with her father once. He pulled all of the clubs out of the bag except the driver and putter then filled it with cans of Coors Light. On the fifth hole he took a swing at a squirrel. On the eighth, he stretched out under a tree, pulled his hat brim down, and told her dad to come back for him when it was time to go.

Her husband asks what it would take for a chopper to go down.

Her father picks up a tee, feels the point with his finger. “Knick the blade, that’s it.”

There’s something wrong with this story. She remembers this story now. Her father won a medal he didn’t want for this mission—her mother showed it to her; he’d never taken it out of the box. In her mother’s version of the story, when they get to the drop site, the Vietcong open fire and her father’s medic refuses to go down. As they hover there arguing, the copilot presses a gun to the medic’s head, gives him an
ultimatum. Her father leaves this out, makes the guy sound brave or like a nitwit for jumping when the cable runs out, but if you know about the gun everything’s different, like maybe the guy’s thinking better down than up.

The bartender refills the marine’s whiskey, free-pouring like she’s in someone’s kitchen. She talks to one customer, to another. Each of them act like they’re the only one she’s talking to.

Her father scoots back from the table and fumbles fitting his earbud in. From his face she can tell it’s her brother calling. As he slips out the front door, he blots out the sun for a second then ducks away, and she sees a guy weaving through the stalled traffic on a Schwinn cruiser, front tire wobbling, his hand held up. In little bursts, her father’s voice carries in from the street. She hears him say, you’re in fantasy land.

Her husband gives her a bittersweet half-smile. Her father doesn’t know they’re splitting up. They’d intended to tell him this weekend, but the night before he flew in, her brother was arrested for roughing up his wife—he claims he was defending himself and the cops have pictures that show little thumbprint-bruises on his upper arm. She knows when her father’s repeating something her brother said, because he takes on her brother’s mannerisms and tics, he says, youknowwhatImean?, which he never says otherwise.

When she picked her father up at the airport, he was the last one off the plane. In the milky light of the terminal he looked so old she looked past him then back when no one else came out of the gangway. He was watching his feet, adjusting his grip on his attaché—an expensive bag now duct-taped in places—his hair scalding white on top and his cheeks deflated and worn like a purse in a thrift shop. Before he spotted her she saw
him take a deep breath then blow it through his cheeks as if reminding himself how to
breathe.

He breathes like that now as he crosses to the table, tucking his cell phone into his
pocket. He takes a drink and says, “You know the kicker, the first guy called us out
there—” he grits his teeth and whispers— “for a fucking sprained ankle.”

Her husband makes exactly the right tragicomic face. Sometimes she thinks to pry
her husband from her father is the cruelest part. She thinks of the night she first brought
him home, cross country, a few weeks after their engagement. Her father opened his best
bottle of wine and made a polite but generic toast that embarrassed her because it
revealed how little he knew about their lives. Neither man was big on small talk. But her
father liked that the young man was an actuary and they started talking about health care,
first in stops and starts, then sitting forward with their wine sloshing in their goblets.
Long after everyone else was asleep, she heard them still going at it on the patio, one
minute arguing hotly, then laughing big laughs. In the morning they went golfing on two
hours’ sleep.

Now her father looks into the bottom of his glass and says he can’t explain how
they made it, the chopper settling into the trees, the rotor blades clipping at leaves and
twigs. “A miracle, every inch.”

Her husband tilts his glass and looks in as if to see what her father sees. When
they talk about splitting up, it seems like he wants to stop it and she wants to stop it but
neither of them does anything to stop it, and it’s hard to make sense of that.

The bartender brings a second round of Guinness. When her father opens his
wallet to pay, a thick of hundred dollar bills expands like gills. The worse things get with
her brother the more cash her father carries, like at any moment her brother might fuck up so bad her father will want to leave the country. For months now all she sees when she thinks about her brother is his drunken dive down the stairs. On the freeway or staring at her computer she watches him tumble and flip on the bike over and over. She’s cut the reel into frames that she places before her mind one at a time, snapshot-wise—the car racing by, Daisy sniffing the blood.

Her father unfolds two bills and hands one to her husband. They shield the backs of the bills and begin a game of Liar’s Poker. Her father says, “Five fives.”

Her husband smiles, then chuckles. “Eight fives.”

She says, “I don’t understand. If you know the chopper’s going to crash, it doesn’t make sense to go down. Then everyone’s dead.”

Her father and husband look up from their bills and she realizes she should’ve kept her mouth shut out of respect. She forgets herself these days. Her father says, “You don’t leave a man on the ground.”

“Yeah,” she says, “But why not go back to base and let them figure it out?”

Her husband says, “There is no one else.”

Her father repeats, “You can’t leave a man on the ground.”

In her periphery, she sees a snatch of movement at the bar. When she looks up she sees the marine’s arms shoot out and start spiraling to keep from falling off his stool, like someone’s shoved him in the chest, which no one did, he just lost his balance. Then he’s on his ass, blown five feet from the bar. He starts to get up, but instead leans back in the grime and the beer footprints, clasps his hands on his stomach, stares at the ceiling. Not hurt, embarrassed only. Or tired. But it’s the way her husband and father react: standing,
then sitting back down like everything’s under control, when nothing’s changed. She
thinks about last Thanksgiving when her brother drank everything in the house—a bottle
of Bailey’s, wine that’d gone bad—then said something about their mother that caused
her father to stab his fork into his pie and launch out of his chair. “One more word—”

Her brother stood, ramped up. “And what?”

Her father had five inches and fifty pounds over her brother, but that was just one
more thing he had to pay for. “And I’ll show you to the other side of the county, that’s
what.”

It was the old fashioned wording that got her. She pushed her husband to

“Do what?” he said. “What can I do?” He took a step forward, two steps. But
edging in on her father and brother he looked like a guy at a dance trying to cut in on a
couple in love.

She asks her father now, “What did he say?”

He looks at her like if she says another word he’ll fall asleep in his soup. “Who
say?”

She drops her eyes. She says her brother’s name. Her father starts to talk then
makes a gesture she doesn’t understand. Her husband glances down from the TV, where
credits are rolling over the footage of the helicopter fleet. If it were a year or even six
months ago, he would be appealing to her, trying to help her keep her cool, now there is
only relief that it’s no longer his problem, compassion for how much lonelier it will be to
deal with. Last Thanksgiving was one of the few times they couldn’t find, in whispers at
bedtime, some cruel but important way to joke the situation into hiding. Last
Thanksgiving was serious, a turning point. Her brother’s feet were like sledgehammers as he stomped across the kitchen, rolled up and bucked into her father’s chest. Her father gazed down, arms at his side. She felt he would let her brother beat him to death before he raised a hand against this diseased little man, his son, but she knew that wasn’t true. As her husband inched closer, she saw it’d have to get nasty before he did anything. She yelled, “Why are you doing this to him?” realizing as she did she didn’t even know who she was talking to, and all three men turned and looked like she might as well have been the mailman, and couldn’t she see they knew what they were doing.
It's A Long Dang Life

Laney leans on the butcher block and listens for the front door. In her other ear, her daughter-in-law Julia lectures her about an eighty-year-old woman who was assaulted on top of her dryer. “You need a real dog, Mom,” Julia says. “No place is safe.” Laney wonders if she’s supposed to be that age already—saying a rosary and pulling on clean underwear every time a repairman comes to the house.

Julia taps a hard-boiled egg against the bowl, deviling eggs no one will eat, because no one in the family likes deviled eggs, and even the children sense that slighting their mother in this way gives her a dark satisfaction.

The front door whumps open. Odd ducks in and sets a Miller Genuine Draft fridge pack against the wall, then strikes into his Wild West stance: his torso squaring off, hands hovering quick-draw over his front pockets.

“I’m here to shoot some kids!”

A delighted squeal from under the wing chair.
Odd’s eyes dart after the sound. He’s got those great thick froggy eyelids that take so long to close, and the bulge of the eyeballs moving underneath. He says, “I’ll give you commie slime buckets two seconds to turn yourselves in.”

Laney’s grandson Oscar dashes out from behind the TV. He drops and worms his way under the couch, where one of his brothers has laid himself out on the springs and arranged the cushions on top of him in funhouse tilts. Laney thinks these guys are out of their minds, or not even in them yet. She loves everything they do.

“Lousy pinko bastards!” Odd pulls a cap gun from each pocket and fires off two rounds, twirls the guns on his trigger fingers. “I’ll tear your eyeballs out, shoot your brains into brain stew!”

The door of the coat closet bumps twice from inside.

“This is your last chance, suckers!”

Odd waits a fiendish beat, then starts shooting, firing the guns in alternation. Pink strips scroll out of the barrels as cottony puffs open all around him. A burnt sulfur smell.

Julia keeps right on talking over the commotion. Odd’s been around long enough now, thirteen years, that people tune him out as you would a jackhammer when there’s work being done in the basement. In the beginning the family wasn’t clear: was Laney dating this man? Was Paul Odd her boyfriend? According to Laney’s youngest, Herbert, what made it hard to tell was the way Laney would enter a place some feet in advance of Odd, as though he were some homeless man who’d followed her in off the street.

“Man, I cannot wait to pop that first head off! You dug your graves, boys.”

The closet door springs open and ejects five-year-old Tucker full throttle. Tucker on those hormone-deficient stick legs high-steps up and over the couch—his brother
ouching and ooching under the cushions—then lashes himself around Laney’s calves.

She feels tears soaking her pantleg.

Odd says, “Gutless, Charles. You think that cracker’s gonna save you?”

Laney scrabbles her fingers through Tucker’s hair and hands down her diet Coke.

“Have a sip of this, honey.” Then she mouths across the room, “Cool it, Odd.”

“You hear that! The FO tells me cool it. I wonder what she’ll think when this place is... SPLATTERED WITH KID GUTS!”

Triplet number two guns it out of the coat closet, abandoning his brother who’s tangled in a vacuum cleaner hose. Odd spots easy prey and starts monster-walking over, pacing it out, giving the kid a chance.

The triplets aren’t natural but had to be injected into Julia’s womb. They’re nearly three now and don’t speak, as if they’re uneasy about being man-made and about their pumpkin-colored hair that grows like grass and even emits a vegetable odor when it’s freshly cut.

When Herbert called to announce the injection’s success, Laney told him straight he was going to wind up with one too many kids. She advised rescinding one triplet before they came due but Herbert wouldn’t hear her. Now there seem to be eight grandbabies rather than five, and that’s what the fifth kid will do.

Laney urges Odd, a bit louder, “I said cool it.”

Oscar wriggles out from under the couch as all three triplets scramble for the sliding glass door, one screaming with panic, one screaming with joy, one just plain screaming.
Odd noses his cap guns into his pockets and flicks his hair out of his eyes. Still all that hair. Laney can picture Odd in college pumping down the basketball court—his sweaty black ringlets and white satin shorts. Daddy Long Legs they called him, or Daddy-O. He is a looker today. Long and sexily slanted to one side, watching you as if from behind the wheel of his 1957 Thunderbird. He’d drive two hundred miles in those days to pick up rims or a door handle for that car. Laney’d go along for the ride, dealing blackjack between them on the seat. Odd would accuse her of palming cards so he could pull over and frisk her, and she’d make sure there was a card to find. *Never trust a woman can find your fly faster than you can,* he’d say.

Now the 65-year-old Odd stoops for his beer and comes and circles around behind Laney. He leans down and whispers, “Marry me.”

Laney turns her head a little, nudges into his voice. “You’ve already got a wife. Her name’s Miller Genuine Draft.”

“Why can’t I marry you both?”

“We are jealous Gods,” Laney says. She doesn’t like to refuse Odd and does so with what spunk or color she can muster.

He drops his head in behind her ear, takes a schoolboy’s toke on her perfume.

“You’ll marry me, Laney Jane. You wait.”

He slips out the screen door without a sound. The next Laney sees of Odd, he’s chasing Tucker across the back yard—Tucker with the black hood to the barbeque pulled over his head and Odd yelling, “I’m gonna rip your arms and legs off!” Oscar follows last in the chain, clubbing Odd in the back with a whiffle bat.
This marriage idea, this is new. Two weeks earlier Laney awoke in the middle of the night, feeling watched, and there was Odd propped on a pillow with Laney’s reading glasses on. “We should get married,” he said. “ Probably tonight.” She looked at the clock and rolled back to sleep, but Odd’s been proposing ten times a day ever since. When Laney pulls back the shower curtain, Odd’s standing in the tub, fully clothed. “OK. I’ll cut back. I need a few for the protein, but no more blacking out.” When Laney goes to adjust her rear-view mirror, there’s Odd in the back seat like a spy. “Swear me in, LBJ. Let the Oddman do for you.”

Just yesterday Odd recounted their whole history to the check-out girl in Safeway, who regarded Odd the way you might a talking ape. “Now you tell me that’s not a true Hollywood romance, and yet here she is turning the Oddman down.” The girl scanned through a twelve-pack and a box of bran. “Do you think it’s the Oddman’s shoes?”

The girl said, “Can the Oddman please take his foot off the ledge.”

But he left it up there, his scuffed tasseled loafer and no socks. “These shoes weren’t cheap, I can guarantee that.”

Those feet were flatter than ground round, but when Odd padded down to the draft board to cash them in the Army took him anyway. Odd’s curls in a pile on the military barber shop floor. That strange erotic terror when something irreversible is happening and you can’t see it yet.

Seven months into his tour of duty, Odd stopped writing. His letters had gotten more impersonal and piecemeal until the last one (which appeared to be missing the first page) spiraled into a tailspin about a Vietnamese boy from a nearby village.
... this guy's goddamn gorgeous with brown eyes that see to the pit & this guy'd come
and trade for C-Rats but last time he took my boots, that doesn't make sense bec. the
boots were on & so how did he get them off my feet? It makes no sense but I have to
laugh too bec. how did he get them off my feet? That's what I can't get is how he...

On it went, round and round. Two months after the letters stopped, Laney's
Mother came in and sat at the foot of her bed—Laney thinks now for no reason, just to
rest her bunions a minute. But Laney braced herself for word of Odd's death. While
dicing onions or clipping her toenails, she had imagined Odd in every posture of gore and
mutilation and asked her mother simply, *Just tell me how.* And her mother, who hated
Odd and wanted Laney to marry a carpet salesman who worked for Laney's father, seized
the moment in a godzillian stroke: *Landmine.*

It never occurred to Laney that anyone, even her mother, would lie about a man
dying in combat. Not even when her father's protégé, Edmond Edmondson, starting
showing up soon and often for dinner. Edmonson was a noisy eater whose sense of
humor should've predicted future meanness, but to Laney there was only Odd and not-
Odd. She did crossword puzzles for fourteen months then married the guy. Two kids into
the deal Edmondson started pushing her around. Pushing her into the fridge when he was
horny. Pushing her down the stairs when he was hungry. One night Laney took a pretty
hairy spill, broke her leg in three places, and with her boys looking on. When the
painkillers ran out, Laney hired the area lawn man slash rental goon to break Edmond's
leg in *four* places.
“What if instead I broke each leg in two pieces, six pieces total?” The guy kind of an albino, kind of not.

“That’s fine too. Whatever’s easiest.”

“Easiest is just to kill him. You get him on the run and splat, without having to get methodist.”

Here Laney did consider backing out, but then she got an itch deep in her cast. “I need to know if you’re able to do what we said and not kill him. He’s a father.”

He picked something out of his teeth, examined it, and put it back in his mouth. “I can try. For the pups’ sake.”

This conversation made more sense when, five days later, instead of harming Edmondson—in fact, swerving around Edmondson—the man ran over their beagle, Dunce-1.

In his tasseled loafers and cut-off jean shorts, Odd huddles in on Herb at the barbeque. Clear across the patio, Laney hears Herb say, “I think Mom just doesn’t want to get married again. Period. To anyone.”

Herb pulls back the barbeque lid and lowers in his baster. As boys Laney’s sons were darling, toothy and alert, but their features aged strangely. They looked like child actors grown up. Herb now with his huge pink face and dragon nostrils. Ron with that holepunch mouth. Also their arms stopped growing at some point. The sight of them
struggling on the monkey bars was a lot to take. Odd said once, “Those boys didn’t have to look like that. If you’d just waited on me.”

Odd opens a fresh beer and studies the playhouse in the corner of the yard. At one time, Herbert had ventured into the custom playhouse business, but he was too much of a perfectionist to make a go. Each house took him a month or more to build, and with the bills piling up and Julia taking on triplets, Herb gave in and joined his dad at Carpet Jungle! This one playhouse remains: a two-story Victorian about the size of a minivan, with fishscale shingles on the façade, a brass knocker and roll-top garage door.

“That right there is something fine,” Odd says now, waving his beer towards the playhouse. “What that says to me is, you got to do that thing right there or die.” Herb shakes his head, doesn’t want to talk about it. “Forget the god-dang money. Whatever you got to do to do it, do it.” Odd crumples his beer. “It’s a long life when it’s the wrong life, man.”

Just then Oscar whizzes across the patio and starts circling Odd. Each lap, he pokes Odd in the gut with an action figure he’s gripping like a hunting knife. Odd plays it cool—see nothing / feel nothing—then swoops down and slings Oscar upside-down over his shoulder. Oscar shrieks and kicks and starts slipping out of his swim trunks, oozing head-first down Odd’s back and Laney has asked Odd not to pick up these kids when he’s drinking which means don’t pick up the kids, but before there’s time to spit Odd contorts himself forward and sets the boy on his feet.

“That’s GI Joe!” Oscar says.

Odd takes the doll in his hand, eyes the hypnotized doll eyes. “I’ll tell you, man, he doesn’t look like any GI I’ve ever seen. They did it right, your little guy here’d come
with a little bag of weed. A coupla boom-boom girls—a couple of prostitutes, you understand?” He pulls the tiny camouflage pants down, points at the doll’s smooth-surface privates. “He’d have a dose of the clap, maybe a little Saigon Rose.”

Laney reaches Odd and cups her hand over his mouth. “Slow it down, Odd. Slow it down.” She glances around for Julia, who tolerates Odd only conditionally and kept the boys away for two months the previous spring after Oscar raised his hand in class and asked if they could play Hide the Salami (it turned out an older kid had put him up to it). When Julia does come out of the kitchen, Oscar’s doing a little dance, hula-hooping his hips and chanting, “Boom-boom girl, boom boom boom.” Julia thinks this is cute and joins in the dance. She sings, “Boom boom boom.” Herb gets one look at this and starts laughing so hard he squeezes the baster out on his shoes. He has always been a good son, but Laney’s not sure about the man as a husband or father. What puts Laney’s mind at ease is, while she can take or leave Julia personally, she knows the girl would’ve had an answer for Edmonson. She would’ve left him when the boys were in diapers.

The turkey isn’t cooking. It’s five o’clock and the turkey’s still pink inside. In the kitchen, Laney and Julia and Herb covertly debate a Domino’s pizza bail-out when Julia says, “Hold on a minute, Mom.” Laney hates the girl calling her Mom. Nothing personal. She’s just squeamish with the word. “Does it sound too quiet to anyone?”

They listen, wake up to this.

“Where are the children?” Julia says.
Next there’s the metallic chirping sound of Dunce-2 trundling down the hall. This once-speedy dog was a length behind the neighbor’s cat when the old coot clipped him with a .22. A double amputee now, he gets around with Oscar’s roller skates fastened onto his hind stumps. He seems to know something they don’t, so they follow him outside and file in along the edge of the patio. Dunce-2 raises one ear and barks a question towards the playhouse.

Laney says, “Well would you look at that.”

The playhouse is all eyes. Tucker and Oscar lie on their bellies looking out the living room windows. The triplets are stationed across the bedroom windows upstairs. Then there’s Odd packed into the west wing, both floors, like a jack-in-the-box—his eyes and nose framed in the master bedroom window and each hairy knee in a dining room window below.

The garage door rolls back and Tucker charges into the sun with a red wagon in tow. He high-steps across the lawn, his sherbet tongue lolling, and curls the wagon to a stop some feet from the patio. “OK,” he pants. “We got that house hostage. For our demands, we want a banana split for each poison—” Tucker pronouncing person poison—“and Grammy has a say she’ll marry Mister Odd. If Mister Odd don’t get her demands then we zap somebody ten minutes from right now.”

Julia asks, “You’ll what?”

“We zap him.”

Laney says, “Oh for crying out loud. Sweetie, you go and tell Odd that he and I will discuss this in private.” Odd glares through the master bedroom window. “And while you’re at it you might remind him about our friend Miller.”
Tucker scratches his crotch. “What his friend name is?”

“Miller.”

Truth be told, Laney could live with the material ugliness of drink—the sour breath and bloat, Odd pissing on the neighbor’s cat. But opening every one of those bottles is Odd’s own unbottleable ferocity for she-doesn’t-know-what. He blows half a paycheck on tasseled loafers when his teeth are dropping out of his head. Every phone call he takes like there’s some big shot on the line. Sometimes Laney thinks he’s still talking after the caller’s hung up.

Tucker parks his wagon next to the ice chest and, with a wild look back at Julia, crashes his hand into the icy slush. He drops a black and gold can in the wagon and reaches in for the next.

Julia starts over. “Tucker, if that man wants a soft drink you tell him—*put those-* Tucker *put those back*—” Tucker arches his back to dodge the swipe of Julia’s hand. “So help me Tuck if you don’t—” Tucker U-turns and takes off, beer cans wheeling and whacking in the wagon bed.

Julia glowers at Herb. “I’ve warned you about this.”

Herb says, “Come sit down.”

“*He’s inappropriate around children.* I’m sorry. He is.”

“Come sit down.”

Julia hangs a hand on her hip. “*Now we have a situation.*”

“*We don’t have a situation.*”

Julia smiles. “No?”

“I see you trying to make a situation by calling it a situation.”
Julia pulls her strawberry blonde hair back, holds it in a pony tail. She has shampoo-commercial features and should be pretty, but she wasn’t born in any mood to energize her looks. “Our five-year-old just made a beer run, Herb. Our children are demanding ice cream for dinner.”

Laney sees Odd’s hand poke through a second-story window and reach a beer across to the window where his mouth is, which he unhitches with a pinky. He angles the can in and drinks.

When Laney was a girl, she had an Uncle like Odd and knows the exhilaration of being drop-caught. It is a sensation she has known only once as an adult, when in a cafe in San Francisco she looked up from her coffee and saw sitting at the bar—not fifteen feet away—the dead love of her life, Paul Odd, not dead. Not anything like dead, but eating shrimp cocktail. Under the table Herbert and Ron, then six and eight years old, were driving matchbox cars up and down Laney’s shins. Odd looked right at her. She poured cream all over the table. It’d been ten years since the landmine, only there had been no landmine because here Odd was, his black curls grown back bushy and lusterless, like a wig on him now. He was stoned. He held up a shrimp and made it wave with its tail, and just then Herbie climbed up on a chair and held his matchbox Le Car up in answer to Odd’s shrimp. And they waved like this. Shrimp and car. Car and shrimp.

Herb is saying now, “I don’t care about my children’s safety?”

“I didn’t say that,” Julia says. “I said you don’t think ahead.”

Laney says, “Those children are safe with Paul.”

“Mom, we don’t know that. He’s had too much to drink.”
Herb says, "Who’s cooking that turkey if I don’t think ahead? It’s not cooking itself!"

Laney looks over at the turkey which, snug on the grill, does in fact appear to be cooking itself. Herb must notice this too, because he kicks his chair out and squirts the bird with lighter fluid. Ribbons of flame curl off the bird’s rear and Herb’s face eases into an expression of awe. He squirts the bird again, then fastens the stream on its igniting body.

Julia says, “Real mature, Herb. We have five mouths to feed.”

Herb says calmly, “There’s something wrong with it. It won’t cook. We’ll order pizza.”

A series of cracks from the playhouse. Laney jumps, touches her hand to her heart. “When I get my hands on those cap guns—”

This time Oscar bursts from the garage door. “We warned you!” he yells, tripping and heaving the red wagon across the lawn. “This is what happens when you don’t listen!” A limp freckled arm springs out sideways from the wagon bed. What looks like blood on the hand. Then Oscar wheels over a sprinkler head and the wagon topples, dumping one of the triplets onto the lawn, his body gelatinous, not moving, more a heap of parts than a whole.

Julia gasps.

Herb’s beating the turkey with a broom, one drumstick madly ablaze. “What?” he says, “What?”

Dunce-2 reaches the body first. He noses the boy’s crotch, takes a drag on his armpit, then nudges the boy’s head up and over. It takes Laney a minute to make sense of
her grandson’s face, which looks like it’s been dragged a few miles on hot asphalt. His forehead and one cheek are smattered in maroon-purple brain-looking matter. Dunce-2 snaps up a chunk of it in his jaws.

“Get him off of him!” Julia screams. “Get that dog off—” She takes hold of Dunce’s collar and yanks him clear off his front legs.

Herb runs out with the broom and kneels beside his son. “Baby,” he says, “Can you hear me?” He bends in closer and sniffs his son’s face. Then he fingers the wound and he... *tastes it.* He pauses, lets Julia suffer a second longer than she has to, says, “It’s hamburger meat. And ketchup.”

Julia catches her breath in her hand. “That’s terrifying.”

The corpse giggles and rolls out from under Herb.

Oscar belts out from the second-floor window, “That’s what happens when you don’t listen! People die!”

The master bedroom curtains are drawn most of the way, but Laney knows Odd’s watching, because Odd never stops watching, and everything he sees is real. Even his hallucinations happen the way dreams really happen in your heart and your head, as anyone who’s ever woken up unaccountably heartbroken knows.

Julia picks a clump of hamburger off the grass, squeezes it in a way that seems lonely. “Am I the only one who thinks there’s something sick going on here?”

After Laney ran into Odd in San Francisco, she bided her time, knowing he would call, say, *Come with me, Laney Jane.* He called twenty-one years later. Laney was sitting at her kitchen table with a cup of tea and a magic marker, blacking in the pages of her *plaid Betty Crocker (2 tablespoons butter or margarine becoming* [redacted]...
She was halfway through Sauces when the phone rang. Instead of a voice, there was someone munching nuts on the other end of the line, and the uncanny thing was, Laney knew it was Odd, recognized the timbre of his munch.

“So I thought I’d call and apologize about the other day,” he said.

Laney heard herself laugh. “The other day as in nineteen-seventy-one?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s it.” The sound of a smile in his voice. “That was a great suit you had on you. What color do you call that?”

“Coral.”

He ate another nut. She could tell he was nodding.

“Hey, does your boy still have that little car?”

“He’s twenty-seven years old, he drives a regular-size car now.” She knew the smart thing was, hang up, but he already had her. And when he asked where in California he was calling, Laney didn’t even blush. “The same place, Odd. I never moved.”

Julia announces she’s getting the boys herself and going home. She’s halfway to the playhouse when a whistle blows and the playhouse roof cracks up and over like a lid on a tank. Laney’s five grandbabies stand a minute in the open air, crew cuts bristling, eyes adjusting to the light.

Oscar points at Julia and yells, “Fire!”

In unison, the boys let fly a raft of bright white soaring—what? Eggs, is Laney’s first guess, but they’re too cushiony for eggs—pelting Julia fwap fwap on the thighs,
*thoop* in the breast, *ptahh* on the forehead. One flies stray. Marshmallows. They’re throwing marshmallows. They duck to reload and, panicking they won’t throw their share, fire off two, three, a handful at once. Julia twists and turns in the blitz, a figure in strobe lights. Julia pelted high and low but soldiering on.

Then someone throws a rock. It glances off Julia’s knee in mid-bend, her leg snaps straight and she jerks, genuflects, goes down. She slings both hands around her knee and starts rocking back and forth in the grass.

Tucker yells, “Mommy’s hurt is—”

Laney can still see Herbie’s face the night Edmondson bumped her down the basement stairs. She can see the pointed tips of Ed’s boots eaving over the top stair, his fork in his hand and a stab of butt steak on the tines. He ordered the boys back to the table and watched five innings of a Giants game before he checked and found Laney had not gotten up. But before that, Herbie snuck back to the landing, stood where his father had stood. Laney told him go back and eat before his father heard. He obeyed, but not immediately. He *hesitated*. And though Laney would always love her son, she would never forgive that second of Otherness, of brute curiosity, Herbie looking down from the top of the stairs while she lay doing rag-doll splits at the bottom, though he was as innocent in this as she had been in shipping Odd out: she was an American, a woman, a girl, her very existence had sent Odd to war.

Julia wants to call the police. Herb’s helped her into a chair and plumped a cushion for her, now he’s positioning an ice-bag on her knee. “This is bad,” he says, “I’m not saying it’s not. But let’s not get carried away. If Tucker says it was an accident, that’s what it was.”
“Throwing rocks? How is throwing rocks an accident?”

“Rock. A rock.”

Laney says, “Maybe a second rock came from over in that grassy area.”

“There was one rock,” Julia says.

The turkey’s burnt Herb’s eyebrows off and large patches of arm hair.

“Herb, please just bring me the phone. At this point, no, I’m calling the police.”

Dunce-2 paddles up Julia’s leg. He positions his forepaws on her thigh and starts
pumping his hips, metal wheels squeaking in and out of a small arc.

“Call them on who, Jules? Our own kids? We’ll look like idiots.”

Julia comes forward in her chair, points at the playhouse with her entire arm. “On
him! He’s doing this.”

Herb considers. “He looks like he’s just sitting out there to me. Mom?”

In the chinked curtain, Odd’s stare is cold. It’s getting to be that time of day,
Odd’s eyes sink in rings of melting like ice cubes sitting out, and you have to let him be,
until tomorrow, when he’ll wake up and try his best for as long as he can.

Laney tells Herb, “I’ve told you I won’t do this with you.”

It’s then Julia looks down and notices Dunce-2 grinding away. “And this dog is
disgusting. How old is he to be doing that?”

Herb snaps his fingers, “Dunce, come on boy. Duncecap, come.”

Laney says, “Those children are safe.”

“You know what I just realized?” Julia looks from Laney to Herb with that
cynical savor you see on the blind when no one will help them across the street. “You
two think exactly the same thing I do. Bottom line, you won’t go out there, because you
don’t want to excite him, because you think he’s dangerous.”

Herb says, “Maybe if you went and talked to him, Mom.”

Laney says, “Those kids aren’t under control.”

Julia says, “It’s Odd who’s not under control. He’s got my kids hostage out there.”

Laney says to Herb, “Maybe first things first, you get your wife under control.”

Not even the pizza when it comes forty minutes later smokes them out of the
playhouse, though Herb makes a show of it, popping the steaming pizza-box lid and
peeling off the cheesiest piece. “Mmm-mmm, does this look good!” He strolls around the
yard eating off his hand, slurping strings of mozzarella off his block chin.

Two minutes of this and Oscar cranks a window open. “We’re not stupid! Pizza’s not
what we want, and we’re still in command!” He draws back and launches a paper
airplane into the dusk.

Julia says to Herb, “Don’t you dare go and pick that up.”

Herb looks out at the airplane. “But I want to.”

“So help me God,” Julia says.

“Just to see what he’s thinking,” Herb says.

“What he’s what?”
Herb kicks the GI Joe—the doll’s pants spin off and land by the dog dish—then he picks the airplane off the lawn. He unfolds it and reads while he walks. “He wants us to call a priest,” he says. Long before she’s in range to take it, he holds the note out to Laney, as if in some larger spirit of offering.

LBJ,

1. the pizzas bullshit, the grands want splitz—

2. marry me laney jane—call Father B—happily ever as long as we got---

PZO

Herb pulls a chair up next to Laney, unloads himself with a sigh. She feels him study her profile then look away. “It’s none of my business, but have you thought of marrying Odd? Independent of all this?”

Laney blinks the playhouse in and out of sight. All the shades of green in the yard have merged into a wilted-sandwich-lettuce green. *Independent of all this*—what could this possibly mean?

“It’s getting late. What about calling Father B? Just to talk.”

“Trick Odd, you mean?”

“Not trick him, Ma.”

Laney folds the note back into an airplane, pricks her finger on its nose. “You did a beautiful job on that house, Herb. You did superbly.”

Herb crosses his arms, holds a finger to his lip. “You think?”

“I’ve always said so.”
Julia talks around her leg like it’s in traction. “For me,” she says, “It’s the priest or it’s the police, and I don’t particularly care which.”

Herb says, “I couldn’t make a living at it.” He smoothes the hair over his ear, like he’s always done when he feels momentarily understood. “I’d be stone broke. That’s what I’m saying.”

The neighbors on the other side of the fence switch a light on. Laney loves the creep of evening, how long you resist pulling a lamp on when you’re sitting reading, and it’s always someone else comes along and insists, and because of their itch to do it you let them, and they’re right and the room lighting up makes you happy, so you thank them, and she bets there’s a word for this in German, a word like *schadenfreude* only darker. “You need a certain amount of disappointment in life. It’s something you can rely on later on.”

Herb stares, his eyelashes minuscule curls of ash. “I’m a disappointment to you?”

“Don’t be dramatic, Sweetie, I’m talking about people.” Laney glances at the uneaten pizzas. “Listen, I won’t trick him. If you think calling a priest is the answer, then call him.”

“Meaning?”

Laney meets his eye. “You think he’s a danger to your boys? Out in that house right now? You think that?”

Julia says across the porch, “It’s more like how can we be sure, Mom?”

Herb says, “It’s getting late. That’s all I know.”

Laney tightens her grip on the airplane. “You divide me, Herbert. You split me in two.”
While they’re waiting on Father B, Tucker sprints from the playhouse, tripping the motion-sensor floodlights and not breaking stride until he’s balled in Julia’s lap. They breathe together a while—Julia molding down around him so they are like a fist within a fist—then Tucker flies up to give his report. “I have a wait to escape until Oscar goes to sleep. And Mister Odd is stuck out there too. Oscar made him get in there, but him is too big to get out.”

Herb says, “Tuck, you’re saying Odd’s trapped?”

“He’s not Lassie, Herb. Let him talk.”

Herb pushes Julia’s shoulder, not hard, but her hair moves.

“Oh,” Tucker’s face broadens, “Mister Odd is stuck bad. He really is. I think the house is have to come apart to get him out. And it’s Oscar put him in there because he doesn’t want chicken and then Mommy gets hit with a grenade and Oscar said it could probably tore her legs off.”

The doorbell rings. Julia picks Tucker up, shifts him onto the saddle of her hip. “See,” she says, kissing foreheads, “Mommy’s legs are fine. Good as new.”

Father B steps out onto the patio, his smiling cheeks the size of a baby’s bottom with one dimple so deep Laney thinks it’s a stab wound. His foot turns funny and almost sends him over. He bends down and picks up the naked GI Joe. “What do we have here?” He inspects the small plastic buttocks.
Herb lashes an orange extension cord across the lawn and jogs out with his drill. He crowbars the strips of molding off and starts working his way clockwise from screw to screw—his arm recoiling and the drill engine fluttering as each screw comes loose.

Father B says joyfully, “Seems a funny time of day to run a drill.”

Tucker says, “How’d you get out of the church?”

Father chuckles and scratches his neck with GI Joe’s feet. “Oh, they let me go now and again.”

Tucker frowns. “We dropped a A-bomb on Japan in, uh, nineteen-forty-five.”

Just then Herb yells, “Here we go!” and scampers out away from the playhouse. For a moment, nothing. Then the playhouse sort of looms forward. The facade peels apart from the building, creaks, then accelerates into its fall, landing in the grass with a thunk.

Father says, “Well isn’t that a picture.”

Herb moves his flashlight beam over the rooms, open now to the night like a sitcom set. “It looks like a suicide cult.”

Oscar’s curled up in a miniature wing chair with the triplets upstairs in a snoring litter-like mound. On the other side of the wall, two-story Odd slumps forward in a lawn chair, his hands and knees and feet nuzzled in pairs.

The felled particle board thunders beneath Laney’s feet and she steps on a beer can in such a way it cleaves to her shoe. She sets her palm to Odd’s forehead. His chest takes in air in quick punches and he’s sweating, feverish. Laney lets go. Something so personal in that heat. The inside-out look he gets when he’s sleeping.

He wakes squinting into the floodlights, glancing left and down to place himself. Then, grumpy, adorable, he finds Laney. “I’m tired, LBJ. I wanna go home.”

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“We will.”

“Lousy pinkos trapped me.”

“I know.”

“Lord love ‘em.” He smiles himself back to sleep and an entire dream plays on his face all in a span of seconds.

“Father’s B’s here,” Laney says, “like you asked.”

He pulls Laney into his lap and belts his arms around her waist, locking his punch-flat knuckles and shifting her against him. Over her shoulder he says, “Father B, good to see you. How’s God?” He says this every time he sees Father B.

Every time Father B responds, “God is good.”

Oscar crawls out and shuffles over, his shoulders in a penitent hang. He climbs into Laney’s lap who’s in Odd’s lap and she belts him in too, holds a kiss to his cheek so long she has to breathe through her nose. His skin smells like when you open an empty glass jar. “You hurt your mother,” she says. “And you hurt her feelings.”

He picks at her sleeve, watches his own fingers. “I don’t know why I do it.”

Julia’s on her way out now with Tucker riding piggy back, his arms cranking like a symphony conductor over the podium of her head.

Odd’s telling Father that Laney’s going marry him, but not tonight, not until she knows herself it’s right.

“Of course not, Paul, but I guess I’m confused as to—“

“I’m saying it is a long dang life, Father, and look at these boys. A guy like me can only take them so far. You understand what I’m saying?”

A few feet off, Herb sits in the grass reorganizing his drill bits.
Father B rests his chin on GI Joe. “You want me to bless them?”

“Give ‘em all you got. Your full horsepower.”

Laney is trying to remember how they go, the vows. It’s hard to believe now she said them once. This close to it, she thinks it’s not marriage she resists so much as the words, the vow-taking itself. What she has now is her life, how things happened, in what order, and it would hurt too much to pretend all that had been taken could be restored, or that Odd was a man without habits or demons or secrets, a man she could trust with her babies and her babies’ babies. But he will drink too much again and he will play too hard, he will pick them up, the grands, hold them screaming in mid air, and some day he’ll play until he’s not playing anymore. And Laney won’t stop him. She never will. If he asked her, if it’s what he needed to make it through the night, she would deliver them to him in her own arms.
We Eat The Color of Cake

My sister Fawn decided to adopt a little girl. She had been involved with troubled youth for many years—professionally and in her love life—and now, at the age of twenty-nine, single and reputedly sober, she felt it was time to take in a lost youth in permanently. When she called to tell me, I was in the middle of playing Sorry! the game of sweet revenge with my man-friend Stuart. “Get a dog,” I told her. “One of those huge lazy mutts that are like an ottoman and a pet rolled into one. Maybe one with a terminal disease.”

“I’m doing this,” she said. “The paperwork’s underway.”

The problem was, Fawn had a past, and the only kids they’ll remand to someone with a past is a kid with a past—the ones with bizarre scars and nightmares, the ones no one else wanted. The girl Fawn wanted to adopt was five years old and both her folks were in the slammer. Her name was Samantha, Sam for short.

“The mom might be out on parole,” Fawn said. “No one’s heard from her.” She exhaled into the receiver. At any given time, Fawn was on some combination of the
patch, the gum, and menthol 100s. Her idea wasn’t to quit as much as keep potential cancers confused. “It’d be just my luck I jump all the hoops and paint her room then the mom shows up and wants her back.”

I asked, “So what did they do to this kid?”

“Geez,” she said, “you name it.”

I named some things.

“Come on, this is a real girl you’re talking about.”

“I’m serious,” I said, and I was. I’d seen the Broadway musicals; I knew what went on in those orphanages, with their slop buckets and oversized hand-me-downs.

“I gave them your name,” she said. “If they call just tell them I’m fabulous.”

After we hung up, Stuart asked how I could possibly vouch for Fawn’s fitness raising a kid. I told him because we were kids together. He said he thought you had to be married, financially stable and not on anti-psychotic medication in order to adopt. I explained about Sam’s age and such, but he just shook his head, that same hopeless look he’d after the last election. “Kids raising kids raising kids.”

Stuart and Fawn didn’t get along. He felt she was blindingly self-absorbed—a trait he disliked above all others—and she accused him of having the hots for her, to which he’d respond, “Case in point,” and she’d say, “So you’re a lawyer now. How nice for you.”

What Fawn didn’t know was that Stuart had kept her out of jail a few years earlier when she mixed herself up with a married restaurateur three inches shorter than her, five with his boots off. The two went on a weeklong coke binge during which Fawn withdrew most of my mother’s savings—eight thousand dollars—from a series of ATMs.
It wasn’t until Stuart reasoned with mother that she decided not to involve the police. My mother respected Stuart. The mere fact that he spoke in Fawn’s defense was enough to turn her around. Only I knew about his brother, who had once signed for a UPS package with a heroin needle sticking out of his arm.

In March we had celebrated Fawn’s third year drug-free. Streamers, sparkling cider, herbal cigarettes, and no one totally convinced Fawn had quit anything altogether. She wasn’t the type to sit out a tough day with gritted teeth. Like all addicts, she favored the loophole. One year after an abortion, she spent six months converting to Catholicism so she could cleanse her soul, then when she finally made it into the confessional booth, the priest told her she’d been through enough and should treat herself to an ice cream. “A freaking ice cream,” she said. “Do you have any idea the freaky shit I went through for this? I had to talk to nuns about my sex life.”

A few weeks later Fawn brought Sam home to live as a foster child and I drove up to meet her. She—or I guess they—lived in one of those smogbacks outside of LA where guys grow television-detective mustaches and mothers push shopping carts across the lot like they don’t care if they ever make it to their cars. Like many lookers living inland of L.A., Fawn had tried her hand at acting and modeling in the city of angels. She got bit parts, enough to string her along. Many agents agreed she would’ve launched to superstardom if not for her elongated torso. This torso of hers: exceedingly long.

Through the screen door, Fawn asked, “Did you bring a toy?”

I hadn’t. I asked the girl, nuzzled at Sam’s side, “Would you accept a check?”
She shrugged one shoulder, nuzzled in closer. “Cash would be better.”

They were both wearing bandana halter tops and skorts. Holy nuts if they couldn’t have passed for mother and daughter, with their slitty blue eyes and elongated torsos, the pencil-shaving curls framing their foreheads. Fawn had warned me of the freaky resemblance, but this was in support of her theory that her aborted child’s soul had transmigrated into Sam for purposes of atonement.

We slid a batch of brownies in the oven and went out back so they could show me their garden. Over a square of churned earth, they giggled and joked as they tried to remember what they’d planted. If I knew Fawn, it would all die before they found out, but I acted interested. Already Sam was calling Fawn Mom, like we were on a movie set. Why didn’t I call her Mom while we were at it? Why didn’t we make daiquiris and take turns hiding in the pantry playing Anne Frank and the Gestapo. We did end up doing that later, so that’s not the best example.

A guy called through the fence, “Hey, Fawn.” He was sitting in a baby pool in the next yard making expressions like he was receiving a massage.

Fawn said, “Hey, Joe.” He looked sixteen, seventeen. Fawn had obviously slept with him.

Little Sam, parodying Fawn, jutted out a hip and said, “Hey, Joe.”

Joe said, “Hey, Sneaks.”

Fawn introduced me and Joe said, “Hey Fawn’s sister.”

I said, “Hey.”

That night after their baths Fawn and Sam came into the living room in lab coats and their hair wound in pink towels. I was just hanging up with Stuart. Fawn undid the
clasps on a portmanteau, converting it into a display case of the skin care products she’d been selling to neighborhood moms on the side. She ripped a length of transparent tape off a roll and handed it to Sam, who pasted the strip across my nose and walked it down with her fingertips. Fawn gave the go-ahead, and Sam tore the strip off my face.

“Christ,” I said, “That really hurt.”

They examined the strip under a powerful cosmetic lamp. Fawn asked, “When’s the last time you exfoliated? Your pores are totally third-world.” I could see Sam thought so too. She gazed at the sullied adhesive as though it were a window into the years Fawn and I had roomed together in L.A. Guys would dart across three lanes of traffic to chat up Fawn, pretending to have seen her in a magazine or movie, glancing at me like I might hand them a hot towel. I’d dealt with this treatment all my life. Men were selective and pushy and that’s the way it was. I could take it. I was no hunchback myself, and when I didn’t think about the lisp it went away altogether. Besides which, Fawn often shrugged off their advances with what I took to be a belligerent protectiveness of me. “What am I going to do,” she’d say, “fuck everybody?”

After getting Sam off the phone and tucking her in (who does a five-year old talk to at midnight?) we made another pitcher of daiquiris and I asked her if she was sure she was ready for all of this, meaning Sam.

She said, “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

I pointed out that Sam was already calling her Mom (though for all I knew she called everyone Mom or Mamma the way truckers and bikers do), and it was time Fawn decide once and for all if she was ready for this. “This” meaning Sam. I said, “Better you
didn’t take her in at all than wait a year or two and give her back. Then she’s totally screwed.”

“I understand that, thanks.”

I saw Fawn was heating up. In our family, I was regarded as the resident know-it-all, the self-righteous blow-hard, so people were resistant to my advice. I measured my phrasing and demeanor. “She hasn’t had some of the advantages we had,” I said. Fawn and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

She told me then that she was tired of being so self-absorbed. “It just gets to be so tedious. Always me me me me me. It’s a disease, it really is.” She pulled her hair forward, checking the condition of her ends. “I’m thinking of going back to my natural color.” She sighed, shook her hair off her face. “I mean, don’t you ever think there’s something else?”

“Something besides, um, you?”

She unraveled the foil from a square of nicotine gum. “You think I’m using her.”

“I think all moms are. I don’t remember anyone asking me if I wanted to be born.”

She chewed her gum like it was a small fire she was putting out. “I’ve never felt this way before. It feels so right. I love that feeling when she’s at school.”

When I looked up, I thought I saw the bedroom door close, but I’d been drinking and it was late and Fawn never lived anywhere where the doors worked right.
My therapists agreed that I was a textbook compartmentalizer: I kept my feelings for Person/Thing X in compartment A, my feelings for Person/Thing Y in compartment B, and so on. As it was described to me, this disorder struck me as clever and frankly rather impressive. But OK. I paid these people (except for the one appointed by the court), and they so seldom agreed on anything that I thought: this one I should take a look at. This one I should deal with. I work in human resources and so have attended numerous problem-solving retreats: me and my colleagues arguing over the most efficient way to gather pine cones.

I decided—and this was my solution, damn those useless shrinks—to start writing letters to myself. Get the compartments talking to one another. I wrote:

Dear Gilda [I was named after my grandmother, a lady and name hated by me],

I hope you don’t find it presumptuous, my writing you. We have been acquainted for many years now, some conscious, some not so. In the time I have known you, you have made some difficult choices, and though you have often chosen poorly, you have done so with gusto, fervor, and a third word I can’t think of right now. You can be decent. Only a week ago a sales girl failed to ring up a hat you wished to purchase. You could’ve walked. The hat was yours for the taking. Instead, you pointed out the error and only when it became obvious the smug wench was neither interested nor listening did you accept the hat. This hat, by the way, does not look good on you. Take it off. Stop wearing it. ASAP. As Grandma Gilda used to say, “All things are not available to all people.” True, she often said this after having cut a pie into too few pieces, but I wish today
to impart this knowledge again to you. Your sister suffers, as we all do (except for Stuart; but more on that later). Remember this. The mailman is now lumbering up the walk with that look he gets just before he’s going to

After two months of “absolute bliss”—Sam a perfect darling—Fawn called me from her pantry, where she was hiding from Sam and chain-smoking. Apparently Sam had an ear infection and when Fawn got her into the bathroom with the medicated ear drops, Sam would have none of it. The two wrestled over the sink with the dropper, until my sister was sent toppling into the tub on her keister. I wasn’t surprised; I don’t know any children myself to compare, but for her age Sam seemed to me an inordinately large and sinewy child. As Fawn went down she jogged on the faucet head and lay with ice water drumming her face while Sam hovered over her. “And stay the fuck off me you slut-fuck.”

“That’s just the part I’ll repeat,” Fawn whispered. “You’ve never heard the language comes out of that kid’s mouth.”

I couldn’t tell if she was furious or crying.

“Now I can’t figure where the little whore went to.”

“You’ve got to find her,” I said. “Otherwise this is a mutiny, pure and simple.” I suggested at the very least she sedate the youth, but she thought this would look bad on her file. “She’s not mine yet, and they’ll take her away, you know, whether this stuff is my fault or not, because no one cares whose fault it is.”

“Whose fault what is?”
“Just stuff happens and if you’re the one holding the bag when the shit comes down you turn around and you’re standing in the rain with a fistful of flowers.”

I said, “Who’s that I hear?”

“That’s the, uh, meter guy. The guy to check the meter.”

“Right. Because now we live in Romania.”

That weekend I drove up. As I got out of my car, a little girl stopped me and asked if Sam could come out and play. She had frizzy red hair and a rash of orange freckles scattered in an ominous pattern. She was holding a tennis ball frothing over in dog slobber. She said, “Sam tried to French kiss me then she put her tongue in my ear and tried to hump me.”

I proceeded inside. Sam came out of the dining room holding a stencil brush dripping in bright green paint. It dashed down her knee and onto the new beige carpet.

“Hi Aunt Gilda. Mom’s nursing a hangover and I’m painting.”

Fawn came up behind her holding a ceramic cupid with bright green lips.

I said, “There’s a girl out there looking for Sam.”

The two exchanged a look. My sister said, “Red hair? Tennis ball?” Then to Sam, “Hon, get me the phone I’ll call her Mom.”

When Sam was out of the room, Fawn explained that the girl was a lesbian and unable to keep her hands to herself. “She’s not supposed to come around here. She got suspended for making out with Dougie in the cafeteria.”

“I thought you said she was a lesbian.”

“Whatever. So she’s bi. She’s bad news.”

“Isn’t everyone bi when they’re five?”
“Let me clean up and let’s talk—” she slit her eyes toward the bedroom. I went, though it was always pain and agony, what went on in there. It was always Fawn, slithering around on the sheets, rapturing over her love life. “Stop me if this gets too graphic,” she’d say, while she told me things I wouldn’t tell a gynecologist. These infatuations, they weren’t real. I knew this. They didn’t last. They always ended with someone running over a mailbox or circling Fawn’s lawn with a crucifix duct-taped to his wrists.

I stood looking at the poster over her bed. It was called *The Creation of Man* and showed God’s hand reaching for Adam’s. Only Fawn would hang such a thing over her bed with no irony or blasphemy intended. I want to say I was beyond all of this, unaffected by Fawn’s parade of men, but I think of that poster, that bed, the way Fawn lived, the way Fawn loved, and I wonder if in a life without Fawn I would see things differently. I think sometimes about one night Stuart flew to Vegas for a bachelor party. We’d been dating several months and this was our first weekend apart. He was due to call at midnight to say goodnight, and I knew he would call on the dot. At ten-till Fawn called. “Pick up,” she said, “you won’t believe what happened.” I could smell the candles burning through the line. I knew she’d met someone, heard it in her voice. I knew as well—guaranteed—if I picked up she would poison my thinking about Stuart, for a hour or a day, it didn’t matter. Which was childish, of course, shameful: we were seven years in, Stuart and I, while Fawn and whoever were still in the fantasy mode, explaining scars and most embarrassing moments. That was my chance, that night. How easy it seems to me now just to have let her go, wait for Stuart’s call as planned. But I picked up the phone. Call waiting beeped and beeped while Fawn played an entire mixed tape recorded
by her new soul mate of the hour, a local musician and shop teacher. In the morning there were three messages from Stuart. *I guess you went to bed early,* he said. The tiny betrayals are worst, the ones that don’t cross any official line, just personal failures that change the landscape forever.

Fawn’s boyfriend of the hour was the long-limbed hottie from the baby pool next door. He was, she explained, mature for his age, and open to the idea of raising Sam together.

I said, “And this would be before or after you get out of jail for statutory rape?”

She reached across the bed and pulled down a glass case that said, *In case of emergency break glass,* which she did, with swift strokes of the miniature axe, and lit the cigarette inside. After a long hit she said, “First off, he’s twenty-one. Secondly, I’m on top of it. I’m a mother now. Which reminds me. Don’t get too close to Sam while you’re here. They sent her home with body lice last week.”

“American children get body lice?”

“We washed her in lice serum so they should all be dead or dying by now. But just in case, you might want to keep your distance.”

The next morning when I opened my eyes, Sam was snuggled up on the futon with her forehead flush against mine. We were so close I could see in her eye the reflection of my eye reflecting her eye. She smelled like the crotch of a Barbie doll. I said, “What are you doing?”

She said, “What are you doing?”

I scooted back and she scooted in unison and I watched for any unseemly flurrying on her skin, lice preparing to jump. I said, “Where’s your mom?”
She said, “Where’s your mom?”

“You shouldn’t do that.”

“You shouldn’t do that.”

“Really, it’s annoying, stop it.”

“Really, it’s annoying, stop it.”

On the drive home, I kept hearing that little girl’s voice echoing my words, my thoughts. The mountain air was warm and smelled like ash, a small town some miles North having burned to the ground a week before. I was the only car for miles. Over camp Pendleton a big-bellied plane was flying in low off the ocean and at such an angle from my approach that it appeared to be stuck, miraculously or diabolically suspended in mid-air. I watched it hang like at the museum of science and technology. There were tears running down my cheeks at every conceivable speed. They dribbled into my mouth, I drank them, not knowing whether they were happy or sad, if indeed they meant anything at all.

There was a letter waiting for me when I got home signed, An Admirer. It had been two weeks since I’d mailed the letter to and from myself (as my Grandma Gilda used to say re: postal mishaps, dress a grown man in knee socks, you get what you get). Only on the second reading did I recognize the letter as mine. Not even the handwriting clued me in. Aside from its articulateness and, shall we say, esprit d’escalier, I found the letter to be abounding in errors, particularly the part about the hat, which looks superb on me. I am wearing it now.

But the eerie thing was, as I read, the voice-over in my head was not my own but Sam’s. Even now to think back, I itch with imaginary lice, smell her synthetic skin. All
things are not available to all people—the words hung in my mind like that airplane, and it was then—blast the fates, blast them—Mavis from the adoption service called. “Gilda, I’m so glad to finally talk. Fawn’s put you down with five stars...” She chuckled, but I was still buzzing from my letter and assumed she was a creditor or crackpot. I made incoherent remarks in a Spanish accent and hung up. It was only then I processed what she’d said, realized she was from the agency. I’d liked her voice. She sounded like someone who’d shoo you away when you told a vulgar joke, but with laughing eyes. She sounded like someone you’d want to tell the truth to. Later Fawn called sobbing, wanting to know why I would sabotage the one good thing in her life.

“It was an accident. I’ll call her back and explain and everything will be aces.”

She was quiet a while. I heard adhesive tape. She said, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I don’t believe you. Since Sam, there’s an ugliness creeping in between us.”

I told her I’d think that over and try to decide if it was true. Then I poured myself a glass of wine and wrote myself back.

Dear Gilda,

Thanks for writing. Your letter came as quite a surprise! I have just gotten off the phone with your sister, who’s (big surprise!!) got a you-know-what up her you-know-who-hole. Meanwhile, Stuart is out is out of town and, as is always the case, you miss him more than you expected to. Sometimes you miss him when you’re with him. What does that mean? The night before he left, unable to sleep, you lay on your side and watched him. He lay on his back, his hands behind his head and one leg propped up, a smile on his sleeping face—a smile!—and his sleeping eyes wide
open, like he could see the stars through the ceiling. Again you knew the
man before you was complete unto himself, sui generis, and ultimately
inaccessible to you. To love a man who’s whole, this is the loneliest thing.
There is a dead ant on your face. No, pardon, he lives yet...

My therapists were split on the letter writing, in part because I wouldn’t show
them the goods—this is because deep down, therapists are gossips, and I can respect that,
but you’ve got to keep some kernel of privacy in this world, and if that means lying to a
therapist, then it’s probably the healthiest thing you can do. My regular Friday guy
worried that the letters, handled improperly and without supervision could trigger a
personality split and/or low-grade schizophrenia. He suggested, as an alternative exercise,
that I transfer Fawn’s beauty and sexuality onto a large blue pillow that he kept on a
rocking chair in the corner. I was then to share my feelings with the pillow, tell it
honestly how it affected my world view, my relationships.

I told him, “I don’t really think I can talk to a pillow.”

He steepled his hands in front of his mouth. “What about this. What if you were to
transfer your passivity for the pillow to the pillow and talk to the pillow about that. You
could beat it or hug it—whatever—just go with it.”

The pillow looked unclean to me. I told him I didn’t want to hug it.

“Sometimes that’s exactly the time to hug it.”

“I’m not going to hug it,” I said.

“Hug it.”
Meanwhile, at home, I was writing myself once or twice a day by now. I wrote at my kitchen table on plain lined linen paper. It was nothing I looked forward to, but once I sat down and got going, I gushed. This was no diary or bookkeeping, let me be clear on that. There was a sender and a recipient, and only in body were we one and the same. I didn’t realize how I’d come to depend on my correspondence until one Saturday Stuart came to pick me up for a party at his boss’ house. The mailman had entangled himself in a thicket of bougainvilleas up the street, and the idea of heading out and missing my letter put me on edge. I almost told Stuart to go on without me, but he was up for a raise and we’ve all read the studies correlating copulating males with higher salaries. For the life of him Stuart couldn’t drive at a constant speed. In his rattling Pinto we surged and dipped while he explained how the toilets of the future would analyze our urine and suggest changes to our diet. Stuart knew everything about science and social studies. His favorite topic was computers taking over the world.

At the party, his boss’ wife cornered me. She’d heard about Fawn, the adoption, the recent trouble with Sam. Slurring, tipping wine on her shoes, she confessed with parsley in her teeth that she wanted to commit her autistic daughter to an institution. “As far as I’m concerned, she’s retarded. You try and do something nice? The answer is screaming.” All I could think was that the mailman was at my door now. Or now. After an hour I feigned fever and Stuart drove me home.

He tucked me in, told me a bedtime story. I listened for his car to scrape backing out of the drive, then I hopped out of bed and ran for the mail. One of my shorter and shallower letters had arrived that day, but it was no less enlightening for all that. Halfway through my third reading, I got a ticklish feeling and looked up to find Stuart standing in
the doorway, holding a brown bag. He set the bag down on the table. “Here’s soup,” he said. “For your fever.”

He looked around the table, scattered with letters. He glanced down at the signature on the letter nearest him, An Admirer. He resisted, then picked one up and read it, read another and another, and I let him. “These letters are from you,” he said.

I lowered my head.

“How long has this been going on?” he asked.

“A while now.”

He nodded, like he’d expected as much. “Who all knows about this?”

“Just my shrinks and me.”

“Your sister?”

“You know how she is, she just knows things.”

He kept nodding, shuffling the letters around on the table as if he might find some magical arrangement where things didn’t look as bad, maybe the pile would form into a giant flower-shape or duck and we’d have a good laugh, order a pizza. Then he stopped dead, pulled his hand back as from a hot door handle. He said, “You know, Gild, I’m here every day. Every day I see you, talk to you. Every day I ask you how you are, and I mean it, and I want to know, and you tell me nothing, nothing, and now this—“ He gestured over the pile.

The impulse was there to indulge myself—tell some lame lie that would make things worse, gloriously worse—but Stuart was the best person I knew, and though this made it hard to love him in a complicated way (that horrible necessary missing thing) I watched my p’s and q’s with him, with him alone.
“I’m sorry, Stuart. I’m a compartmentalizer. This is what we do.”

“This is what who does?”

“I don’t know. It was never fully explained to me.”

He was spinning his keys on his index finger in a way that filled my heart with panic. I wanted to rush him, say whatever had to be said to keep him from getting in his dumpy machine and driving off, but I knew I had to let him go. He half-turned on his way to the door. “You know,” he said, “even this can go away. Even us.”

In seven years, Stuart had never doubted us.

He said, “I’m going to need some time.”

Mavis called the next day. I stood over the answering machine and listened while she left a message. “I think there may have been a mix-up. Or perhaps I called the wrong number? In any event, please call me as soon as possible. We’re trying to move on Samantha’s file right away.” She sounded polite and undeterred. I knew it looked bad—Fawn’s main recommender indifferent or gonzo or both—but I wasn’t in the mood for conversation, of any kind. I’d called in sick and spent the day in my bathrobe eating baker’s chocolate and whatever else I could find in the closet while I waited for Stuart to call or come by. I wrote myself a letter chastising myself for not calling Mavis back immediately, and, probably out of guilt, agreed to accompany Fawn and Sam to the county fair that weekend.

We got pictures taken in pioneer outfits with anachronistic jewelry and furniture. We ate cotton candy and walked behind horses that shat while walking and wagging their
tails, not breaking stride, not a care in the world. The feature band that night had been big news in the sixties until a car wreck half-paralyzed the lead singer. Now they played venues like this, those same old sixties tunes, the lead singer dragging his gimp leg around the stage like an extra instrument. Men in cut-off jean shorts bought Fawn beer after beer after beer and sometime before the Ferris wheel generator died a man on stilts—not, I think, an employee of the fair—turned to get an eyeful of Fawn and went down, and went down hard. Watching a man on stilts fall—what this does to the human soul, perhaps only a mime can capture, and not a sober one.

I ate a corndog and watched Fawn and Sam have a caricature done. They sat side by side in directors chairs. Fawn looked to be buzzing hard. It was hard to tell; she always looked brightest and most alert when she was using. Beside her, Sam mimicked her every gesture and moue. I tried to remember if Fawn and I had shared such a moment as girls, but we were not close when we were young. I was the tomboy, big-boned, elbow-kneed. Waitresses pointed me to the Men’s Room when I needed to go. I abused Fawn a good deal—nothing sly, just the typical thuggish beatings and ambushes—and when she’d start crying and run to tell on me, I’d pull her into my lap and hug her and tell her that that was bad Gilda, and good Gilda was here now, and bad Gilda was gone, and she’d be fine now. “Good Gilda,” she’d say, “I hate bad Gilda. Why’s she so mean?” I’d tell her I didn’t know.

I watched them in their directors chairs, Fawn drunk and possibly high and half-adorable nonetheless; Sam, with teenage pregnancy written all over her, and I thought hell, maybe they were the best thing for each other. It was hard to get a handle on things, at the fair there, with human children getting led around on leashes and scolded in the
open air. Then, while I watched, Fawn and Sam turned to each other at the exact moment and Fawn licked her finger and dabbed an eyelash off Sam’s cheek. It was a simple gesture, common. Maybe it was the way Sam gazed at my sister, the wet blinking eyes of a baby recognizing its mother for the first time, but I was suddenly spinning. I felt I’d missed out on something in life, missed out on it for good.

When I caught sight of them again, I saw the technician of the Zipper slip something into Fawn’s back pocket, then the two slipped into the maintenance tent. When I tried to follow, Sam barred my way and said, “You can’t go in there. My mom’s jerking off the cami.”

I took the rascal by the hand and led her to the community bathroom. My notion was to wash her mouth out with soap, but there was only the soft soap dispenser dispensing frothy little pumps. I pulled her into one of the doorless stalls and started rooting around in her miniskirt to find the derriere. In the hot pink tights her legs were like large powerful drumsticks. I had never spanked anyone before. It felt… not as bad as I thought it should have. It was work; as I say, she had size and strength and she fought me, the ruffian. Between our huffs and grunts, the rustle of her slip, it sounded like someone trying to give birth in the most primitive circumstances, with no health care and the father on the lam. People came and went, but spank someone at a county fair, no one bats an eye.

Then something strange happened. She quit fighting, went limp. She slipped to the ground, covered her face in her hands and made a noise like a heavy person sitting on wicker. Through splayed fingers she said, “I want to die.” I didn’t know any children to know if a child could want such a thing. At what age did the human mind comprehend
death? I didn’t know. I didn’t comprehend it enough myself to want it. Then her shoulders began shaking and she clawed her hands down her cheeks and gradually I realized she was—laughing, then laughing hysterically, like she’d just killed everyone she knew with a salad fork. I’m sure there were deep psychological wounds at work here—her unforgivable parentless godless life—but I decided to take what the little crazy was offering.

I called Stuart to come pick us up. We had not spoken in a week—the longest we’d gone without contact in seven years—and it left me breathless when he answered, a tinge of unfamiliarity already creeping into his voice. So fast we lose one another, so fast.

In the McDonald’s drive-through Sam screamed, “These aren’t my parents! Call the cops!” By the time we got home she’d cursed herself to sleep. She lay half on the seat, half on the floor, her hand curled around a strawberry shake oozing from both ends. Fawn was passed out, mumbling, touching herself. I carried Sam to my bed, Stuart carried Fawn. I pulled Sam’s skirt and bobby socks off, as so many men after me would do. It was all I could do, and all I was willing to do. The light from the hall fell across her face, and I saw again she would be a beautiful woman, providing she found someone to fix her teeth.

When I came out of the room, Stuart was pitched forward on the loveseat. “That girl in there,” he said, “she’s eight, ten. She sure as shine isn’t five, I can tell you that.”

I said, “It doesn’t surprise me.”

I came and stood between his knees, pushed my hand through his hair. His head was hot with thought. He touched the fabric of my sweater, curious to see what it was made of—you didn’t find men that age curious on the level of warp and woof. The first
sprouts of silver were coming in behind his ear and I thought Stuart, we’re growing old, every minute, all the time.

“You know there’s nothing I can do,” he said, “This is all you.”

I pressed his face to my stomach, like a pregnant wife might do. It was the convenient gesture, but maybe I was trying it out too. Half a love, I thought, was not nothing, if I could have all of Stuart in the bargain.

The next morning I was up before dawn. Before me on the kitchen table sat Mavis’ home number and my cordless. I wouldn’t have to tell half of what Fawn was up to and Sam would be gone, I knew. The wagon from the orphanage would come, its marksmen with lollipops and tranquilizer guns, or however they did it. This would be the thing Fawn never forgave—if I ratted her out, carried Sam away—whether I was right or wrong to do it, which I wouldn’t know for years. From the bedroom Sam called for me. I brought her orange juice, but she was asleep again before I reached my room. Fawn was curled up spooning Sam and I could smell her boozy breath from three feet away. I thought only sleep kept some people safe. I wanted to see Stuart, wanted his advice and apelike tenderness enveloping me as I—outrageously—decided the fate of those crazy slutty sleeping girls.

I dialed Mavis’ number. I apologized for the time lapse in returning her call; I’d been out of the country. We talked for a long time. I don’t remember much of the conversation except I was glad Mavis was on the side of the Sams of the world. I told her I thought Fawn and Sam were made for each other—perhaps the one truth I told, biting my tongue, because of course that didn’t necessarily mean they were good for each other. I wouldn’t know for years.