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SABOTAGE! AND OTHER STORIES

By

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Bachelor's of University Studies, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, 2006

Thesis

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Sabotage! And Other Stories

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This is a collection of short fiction written between 2008-2010.

# Schooling

Somehow I was the last to get the news. Eric Sullivan knew a guy in Modesto that was friends with the son of the teacher, the actual dude, Mr. Perkins. Guy lost his job because of her.

“What school, again?” I asked.

“You're missing the fucking point here, man. There were *photos*. Then an anonymous phone call was placed to the administration and boom. Done deal.”

“Could've been photoshopped.”

“Yeah except the guy fessed up.” Eric slung his backpack over his shoulder. “Lighter sentence.”

“Is she the same age as us?”

“And the photos are long gone, man. Even Eddie couldn't find them.”

“Really, you told Eddie?”

“Eddie knew, man.”

Everyone else knew too. Maybe that's why she had approached me earlier that day; I was the only one not staring. She was wearing glasses, thin frames, thick smudges. I was trying to locate a homework assignment. Not an easy task with my locker.

“You want to show me the way the lab?” She asked

“I guess,” I said.

She scooted close, peered into my locker. She smelled richly of underarm deodorant.

“So,” I said, turning toward her, “What brings you here in the middle of the semester?”

“It's not *that* weird to move in the middle of the semester.”

“It kind of is.”

She punched me in the shoulder, harder than she'd meant to, and she blushed in embarrassment.

It was odd, but not uncharming.

“At my other school I had lots of friend's who moved.”

“Where was your other school?”

“South of here,” she said.

She glanced over her shoulder. I did the same and registered the following eavesdroppers: Chiara Callione, Heather Locke, Eric Sullivan, Rosalyn Sheer, the twiggy girl with the locker below Rosalyn's, Austin Wilde, Austin Smart, and Austin Henderson. Anna Nielsen, the girl I'd been in love with for four years, paid no attention.

“You know, it's just down the hall, past the mural. You'll find it without me.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said.

It's easy. I crushed a few more papers into my locker. And I'll see you around, right?

She was already halfway down the hall. Her bulky backpack, which she'd forgotten to zip, yawned dangerously. Just as I caught up with her, the bag vomited its contents on my feet. Loose change, receipts, barrettes, a bicycle lock, a camera phone, a pair of short green gym shorts, a sports bra (unconfirmed sighting), a half eaten banana, and lipstick in four alluring shades. Also, the same book I was reading in Meyers' sixth period, *Anthem*, by Ayn Rand.

She dropped to her knees. It was, without a doubt, the closest I'd ever been to receiving oral sex. Finally, I squatted, and slid her the book.

That night, in bed, I read:

And there it was that we saw Liberty 5-3000 walking along the furrows. Their body was straight and thin as a blade of iron. Their eyes were dark and hard and glowing, with no fear in them, no kindness and no guilt. Their hair was golden as the sun; their hair flew in the wind, shining and

wild, as if it defied men to restrain it. They threw seeds from their hand as if they deigned to fling a scornful gift, and the earth was as a beggar under their feet...

We do not think of them as Liberty 5-3000 any longer. We have given them a name in our thoughts. We call them the Golden One. But it is a sin to give men names which distinguish them from other men. Yet we call them the Golden One, for they are not like the others. The Golden One are not like the others...

The other women were far off in the field, when we stopped at the hedge by the side of the road. The Golden One were kneeling alone at the moat which runs through the field. And the drops of water falling from their hands, as they raised the water to their lips, were like sparks of fire in the sun. Then the Golden One saw us, and they did not move, kneeling there, looking at us, and circles of light played upon their white tunic, from the sun on the water of the moat, and one sparkling drop fell from a finger from their hand held as frozen in the air.<sup>12</sup>

Lyle Snodgrass wiped his nose on his sleeve. He had seen Angelica making out with somebody out by the dumpsters. Allison Reed caught her smoking. Rosalyn Sheer saw her on the couch in the school psychologists' office. The list of dudes who banged her went as follows: Chad Doughty banged her, Will Hutchinson banged her, and Steve McMurty banged her. The fourth grader, Alex Forbes—who is to women, what the Rain Man was to numbers—he finger-banged her. By lunch, however, all claims of banging had been reneged, and it was unclear who exactly Angelica Paz was, what she might have done, and if she did or did not have the herp. She wandered the halls in a sad, insulating fog. It

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- 1 In her illuminating essay on Anthem, *One Flame the Fire: The Rise of the Promethean Figure in Ayn Rand (1998)*, eighth grader, Heather Locke writes: “The characters in Anthem don't even have full vocal utilization of what is commonly called “the singular pronoun.” At first a common reader might be confused. The characters use what is commonly called “the plural pronoun” even when speaking strictly of themselves. Rand uses this method to illustrate a lack of individuality, a common problem in Communist nations.” (p. 1)
  - 2 Outspoke Feminist critic, Rosalyn Sheer, fired a scathing criticism of the book and its inclusion in public school curriculum. From her 1998 op-ed, *Ayn Rand(y)*: “I kind of got this weird feeling in my stomach about all this 'kneel before me' stuff.” (p.1)

was Wednesday, and she was wearing the same once-white sneakers, acid wash jeans, and ruffly pink shirt she'd worn since Monday.

Niederhoffer was out with strep, or staff, or mono, I couldn't remember which, so I was walking home from school alone, when Angelica pedaled up on her bike. She waited for a sign from me—a nod—then she ventured a wave. I stayed on the sidewalk. She pushed her bike in the gutter.

“So you live in this neighborhood?” she asked. “Me too. In that one on the corner.”

“Really?” I asked. Huh. “The lady with the wiener dog moved?”

“No, that's my Aunt. I moved in with her. You don't think we look alike?”

“Who? You and the wiener dog lady?”

The woman had sad, pillowy breasts, and her face was peppered with freckles.

“Yeah, it's my mom's older sister. What? I've got freckles.”

“Yeah like three.”

“My mom's a redhead.”

I looked more closely and it was true. A patch of freckles bloomed on her nose, but, for the most part, her glasses concealed them.

We were silent for a moment. The gravel crackled beneath her tires.

“Why'd you move in with your Aunt?”

“I don't know.” She shrugged. “Why? What'd you hear?”

“Everything, all kinds of things, things you wouldn't even believe. Like, both your parents died in a helicopter crash.”

“Oh god.”

“Or...” I counted them off on my fingers. “You smoked meth. You had sex with your teacher. You got an abortion.”

“Everyone liked that one, didn't they? Had sex with my teacher.” She glared at me, then burst

into a weird, high pitched laughter. “That's all you boys ever think about.”

We reached my driveway and I gestured at the house with my thumb. No one was home. The blinds were shut. The house shined pearly white in the sun. Angelica gazed over my shoulder at it, absently squeezing her brake lever. In the right light, she could be cute.

“So,” she said, “Meyer's class tomorrow? See you then?”

“Or, you could come in if you want.”

“Well,” she gave me a mischievous look, “what is there to *do* in there?”

I couldn't, for the life of me, come up with answer, and Angelica must have noticed.

“You could always give me a tour, right?”

I was on the verge of offering her a tour, when the garage door sprung to life. My dad eased his car into the driveway.

“Maybe later,” she said. “I should probably do some reading. I'm way behind.”

In *Anthem*? I asked.

She nodded and we parted ways.

Once inside I took the book out of my bag and curled up on the couch. I found my place and read:

Yet our brothers are not like us. All is not well with our brothers. There are Fraternity 2-5503, a quiet boy with wise, kind eyes, who cry suddenly, without reason, in the midst of day or night and their body shakes with sobs they cannot explain. There are Solidarity 9-6347, who are a bright youth, without fear in the day; but they scream in their sleep, and they scream: Help us! Help us! Help us!” into the night, in a voice which chills our bones, but the Doctors cannot cure Solidarity 9-6347.<sup>3</sup>

Angelica crossed my mind. I imagined her holding the book, reading the same lines, only a few blocks away. The chubby wiener dog panting on her lap. I read on:

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3 Lyle Snodgrass examines cultural illness in his 1998 piece, *Anthem: Weakness in Numbers*. “These inexplicable illnesses, that 'the Doctors cannot cure' are actually quite explicable. They come from over dependency on others. This society is crushing their very souls.” (p.1)

We do not wish to look upon the Uncharted Forest. We do not wish to think of it. But ever do our eyes return to that black patch upon the sky. Men never enter the Uncharted Forest, for there is no power to explore it and no path to lead among its ancient trees which stand as guards of fearful secrets.<sup>4</sup>

My project for *Anthem* didn't turn out nearly as cool as I'd hoped. It was a clay sculpture of Equality 7-2521 holding a light bulb. The light bulb was supposed to turn on, but I ran out of time. So he just stood there with an unlit light bulb. At his feet, in little worms of clay, I shaped the word EGO, then called it a night. It was a good book, by far the best book I'd ever read, but I could only take so much of one thing. It didn't help that *every* time I saw Angelica Paz she talked to me in her Anthem voice. Ayn Rand never said they talked like robots, but Angelica got it in her head that they did. *Our aunt are taking us to the aquatic center today. They look like an elephant seal. We laugh so hard we cry. You should come with us, Equality 7-2521.* Um... No thanks.

Although I didn't want to talk to her that much, I was glad to see things were going better. She was no longer the new student. There were bigger fish to fry: a new seventh grader had moved into the district. From Canada. If it weren't for the one persistent rumor—no longer talked about, it hummed always in the background—everyone might have forgotten Angelica Paz existed.

We were in Meyer's sixth period English. Along the countertop, near the window, sat all the projects. The Uncharted Forest had been recreated, in a shoe box, with painted green q-tips. A council of paper mache scholars convened over a stone. Lyle Snodgrass, the fucker, had a working lightbulb. Eric Sullivan, in a feat of daring brilliance, had reconstructed the infamous “Palace of Mating”<sup>5</sup> out of popsicle sticks. Every project featured our protagonist, the Unconquerable, the unequaled, Equality 7-2521. The golden haired Liberty 5-3000 was noticeably absent.

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4 Of this passage Locke asserts with brevity that, indeed, “The Uncharted Forest is a metaphor.” (p.1)

5 In the Q&A session following Linda Meyers 1998 lecture on *Anthem*, renowned thinker G.E. Luther was heard to say, “I wish I had a Palace of Mating.”

“Today,” Ms. Meyer said, “we’re going to talk about some of the varying criticism of Anthem. We’ve focused a lot on Collectivism vs. Capitalism, right? Eric? Right? Ok. But there’s a lot more to the book, some of which is controversial. So, to begin with, if I could get you to turn to page fifty-six.”

Ms. Meyer opened her book, then balanced her reading glasses on the tip her nose.

“The head of the Golden One bowed slowly,” read Ms. Meyer, “and they stood still before us, their arms at their sides, the palms of their hands turned to us, as if their body were delivered in submission to our eyes.”<sup>6</sup>

She paused and looked over the top of her spectacles at the class.

“What’s going on in this passage?” She asked.

Chad passed a note to Chiara. She read it and giggled.

“Any ideas? Anybody? No? Let’s look at one more. Page eighty-two please. Last line.”

The pages rustled.

“Everybody there? It’s the Golden One speaking here. Angelica, will you read for us?”

“Your eyes are as a flame?” Angelica asked.

Ms. Meyer nodded.

“Your eyes are as a flame, but our brothers have neither hope nor fire. Your mouth is cut of granite, but our brothers are soft and humble. Your head is high, but our brothers cringe. You walk, but our brothers crawl. We wish to be damned with you, rather than blessed with all our brothers. Do as you please with us, but do not send us away from you.”

Ms. Meyer interrupted. “*Do as you please with us, but do not send us away from you.* Keep reading, please. One more line.”

Then they knelt, said Angelica, and bowed their golden head before us.

So, what’s going on here? Ms. Meyer removed her glasses. How is the Golden One being

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6 Sheer, again, with her neo-feminist slant: “I mean, if the book’s supposed to be about becoming an individual, then I don’t get why Liberty 5-3000 is always delivering ‘her body in submission,’ to Equality 7-2521. What kind of individuality is that?” (p.1)

characterized?

She scanned the class, but we kept our heads lowered.

“Ok, let's start with this. What do we know about Liberty 5-3000?”

That she's hot, said Eric Sullivan, and the class tittered with laughter.

“Eric,” said Ms. Meyer and the class grew silent. “Her eyes panned over the room and I knew they would lock on mine.” Sure enough they did—but the fire alarm sounded.

She clutched at her head and listened to it ring. “Ok, alright, I forgot this was happening today. We will continue this discussion when we get back, and possibly on Monday.”

We scooted in our chairs and moved for the door.

“No, no phones. We are not grabbing our phones. Let's line up. Our spot is on the chain link fence. The chain link fence. Next to Ms. Nickerson's class. If I see anybody running--”

We filed out of the room behind her. Doors creaked. Lockers banged. Class after class snaked down the hall, feet stomping in well orchestrated chaos, while high above it all, the lonesome alarm wailed. Outside the light on the concrete was unbearably bright. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust. Students poured out of every door, a couple thousand at least, K-8. I'd been here for every year. Next to us, Nickerson's fifth grade class raised their hands and asked questions. Was their really a fire? What if someone was caught inside? I spotted a third grade group, Ms. Bukovatz's, beneath the tree. She was well prepared. Each student had coloring books that they worked on, silently and alone. The kindergartners, on the far side of the yard, were skipping and shrieking in their personal oblivions.

Then came the role call. Every name in the entire school had to be collected and turned into the office.

“Lauren Ashberry?” called Ms. Meyer. “Buck Buchanan? Chad Doughty?”

Next to Ms. Meyer, Ms. Nickerson did the same, next to her Ms. Pyle. An endless drone. We only half paid attention, listening, with one ear, for the right combination of phonics.

Gregory Elliott Luther, said Ms. Meyer.

Here, he shouted. The sound was lost in the babble.

A bell signaled our return to the classroom and a mob of us collected near the doors. We crammed into each other, we breathed in each other's ears, we smelled the sweat being wicked off us by the sun. Someone in the back began to push. We felt a weightlessness. We laughed and teetered and rolled, like a field of grass in the wind. Then Angelica was in front of me, in a tank top, all elbows and shoulder blades, her skin bronzed and glistening. In my best Anthem voice, I whispered, "Liberty 5-3000, it's us."

She didn't turn around, but she crushed her body against mine.

The words flowed out of my mouth without a thought, "We have given you a name in our thoughts, Liberty 5-3000."

"What is our name?" she asked.

Our lines came directly from the book. She knew my answer and she waited with her head canted to one side.

"The Golden One," I said.

With that she reached back, and, as if scratching a dog under the chin, she cupped me in her hand. She gave me a squeeze, then tried to withdraw her hand, but I held her fast. Someone clapped me on the back, unaware that just below, out of sight, my zipper was being lowered tooth by tooth. Her cool, dry fingers worked their way in, searched blindly for the slit in my boxers, curled around the base of my stalk and squeezed. Then the crowd shifted, and we broke apart and flowed through the door. I zipped up and covered myself. Easy enough, no one noticed, I was well practiced, I'd been hiding spontaneous erections since the sixth grade. We flowed down the halls, down, down, through the doors, into the classroom and we regained our seats as if nothing had happened. I glanced down to see a book open on my desk. Ms. Meyer had been at the front of the room for some time, spectacles in

place, pointing, reading aloud, mouthing words that I failed to hear because in my mind, and my mind alone, a sound, like the fire alarm, continued to ring.

A short frumpy woman loomed in the doorway. She was asking for Angelica, Angelica Paz. It was the school psychologist. She wore glasses, heavy black frames.

After Angelica went to the Acquatics Center she brought the wiener dog over to my house. I'd never seen it up close. Her aunt had no backyard, only a front, and every morning, for years, I'd seen Angelica's Aunt outside, in a powder blue bathrobe, waiting for the dog to crap on the lawn. It never got exercised. The patch of grass must have been the highlight of the dog's day. Otherwise its life consisted of television, and judging by the dog's smell, a slice of daily bologna. Maybe two. It was a big wiener dog. The journey to my house took its toll. The dog was suffering from an asthma attack, or an epileptic fit, I couldn't tell which.

“Is it gonna live?” I asked.

“Of course. How could you even say that? He's gonna be fine. You're gonna be fine, aren't you, Stewie? What would we do without you?”

She smoothed his coat, and he wriggled beside her. His tongue darted between her toes.

“He's the same age as me, in human years. My aunt got him a couple of weeks before I was born. There's even this baby photo, you should see it, we're all curled up together.”

“God, I could go for a nap. I was up *so* late working on that Anthem project. At least we got out of class for a bit.”

We watched a car drive past, then looked at each other again.

“Isn't he just adorable?”

The dog was licking its way up her ankle. It didn't seem to bother her in the least.

“He likes the salt,” she said. “I bet he's thirsty. Is it ok if he comes inside?”

She tugged on the leash.

“I don't know. My dad's—it's just, he's got really bad allergies.”

“Your dad's home?”

“No no no no no. Nobody's home. But it's the dog hair. What if we brought a bowl out here?

And a snack or something.”

She looked skeptical.

“A piece of bologna?” I suggested.

“Maybe I should take him home. My aunt's a little crazy about him.”

We were silent for a moment. We turned to the dog, as if he might make the decision for us, but he just wagged his scabby tail.

“Fuck it,” I said, “let's bring him in.”

I swung the door open.

“But your dad...”

“Dad schmad. He'll get over it.”

The house was disturbingly quiet. Stewie's toenails clicked on the tile like dice. I set out a bowl, and we watched him drink. We watched him drink and we stood in the middle of the kitchen. We stood in the middle of the kitchen, aware of every sound, the bowl scooting along the tile, the click of the refrigerator, a buzzing light bulb. She started to say something but I kissed her on the mouth. She kissed me delicately, at first, with thin lips. She tasted of watermelon jolly rancher, and beneath that a subtle metallic note, like fingernail polish. We kissed our way into the living room, kissed our way onto the couch. The dog skittered after of us on the tile. Angelica's hair was matted and damp with pool water, the same with her clothes. I tugged at them, but they stuck to her skin. Her throat, her collar bone, her hair, it all smelled like the pool, like sunblock, mildew, cotton, chlorine. I rubbed at

her through her jean shorts but she whispered no, no more like this. Then, with a smile, she whispered, “Have you ever had a girlfriend before? Have you ever done this?”

“Done what?” I asked.

“This,” she said. She squeezed my hand between her legs. “This,” she said, and she rubbed me through my jeans.

“I don't know,” I said. “Have you?”

“Sure,” she said.

“Like with other kids?” I asked.

“Kids?”

“Yeah, like at your old school. Or somebody here. I heard you maybe hooked up with Alex Forbes.”

She paused. “Are you jealous? You're jealous.”

“No, I just wanted to know.”

“Sure, sure,” she said. A goofy, satisfied smile crept onto her face. “Don't worry. I didn't hook up with Alex Forbes. I haven't hooked up with anybody. Not since I've been here. She kissed me on the lips, and snuggled her face against my neck as if looking for protection. Except for you.”

She cuddled even closer, wriggling beside me. Her dog scratched at the couch.

“Do you want some water?” I asked. “I am really thirsty.”

“Oh, don't leave,” she said in a baby voice. She nibbled on my ear and the heat of her breath, like a hot wind, melted me. Her fingers crept down my stomach. Nothing had ever felt so tender and dangerous at the same time. She unzipped my pants and pulled me out into the cool air, wrapping her fist around me. She slid to the floor and when she took off her glasses, she was three years younger.

The words tumbled out of my mouth: “Did you have sex with your teacher? Or something. Is that why you moved her? Cause. I don't know. That's what—I don't know what I'm talking about. It's

not like it really matters.”

She was already on her feet. She was muttering to herself and looking for the leash. The wiener dog waddled behind her. I was stuffing my penis back in my jeans and struggling to my feet when she shouted, “Fuck you,” and slammed the door behind her.

I went to my room where the silence wasn't so large and cold. A patch of light drifted across the wall, shifting in shape. I tried to think about what had happened. It was impossible. My mind was scattered. Useless things drifted through my head. The diorama of the Uncharted Forest. A photo of a naked girl I saw on the internet at Eric's house. That one passage from *Anthem*: I am. I think. I will. My hands... My spirit... My sky... My forest... This earth of mine... The wiener dog, with goop in its eye.

An hour or so later I came downstairs. My mother was home. She was already cooking me dinner.

# Sabotage!

It was an accident., at first. My girlfriend at the time was allergic to gluten, not that she was born that way; it developed suddenly, the result of a severe food trauma she suffered in Peru. She'd been forced—by custom, circumstance or the local savages, I don't know—to eat guinea pig. Guinea pig wrapped in a flour tortilla. It was a pity that she didn't develop an allergy to guinea pig, because you have no idea what a pain in the ass it is to be allergic to gluten. It turns out that almost everything worth eating on God's green earth has gluten in it. I should know. I'm not saying I was an expert, but I did do my fair share of eating back then. I did a lot of sitting and napping in that period of my life. Nothing much seemed worth the while. I'd dropped out of college. I wasn't employed. I couldn't stand the taste of light beer. Sometimes I wouldn't see the sun for days. Lint lived to hide in my belly button. I tell you this, not to complain about how lousy things had gotten, but to highlight what was to me a genuine mystery: how had this delicate, honey-lipped creature—Ellie was her name—taken such a fierce liking to the likes of me?

The accident occurred one night as I was preparing what should have been a gluten free dinner. I made rice noodles again—a stir fry—and of course, I had on hand, an expensive bottle of coldpressed, shade grown, fair trade, organic, local soy sauce alternative that just so happened to be, you guessed it, gluten free. Problem was I grabbed the wrong bottle. I didn't realize it until we'd nearly finished the meal. She scraped the sauce from her plate, laid a salty kiss on my lips, and told me that the food was delicious. Of course it was delicious. It had gluten in it. I knew nothing about chemistry—I'd dropped the class—but, through some random thought association, I'd come to view gluten as a distant relative of monosodium glutamate. It simply made food yummier. I'd seen the effects of Ellie's allergy; she'd accidentally eaten a piece of penne once, and it wasn't pretty. I decided the best course of action was

no action; typical of me. I didn't tell her. No one wants to know, once there's no hope of avoiding it, that they'll be spending the next hour vomiting, especially in the bathroom of *my* apartment. She cleared and washed the plates. I locked myself in the bathroom and began to scrub. I scrubbed and I scoured and when my arms grew tired, I imagined her retching into that pea green pit, and I scrubbed some more. Later she knocked at the bathroom door, and chirped, "Is everything... ok?" Poor thing, the gluten hadn't hit her yet. She was one of those tiny, unsuspecting birds that eats the rice scattered at a wedding. Little do they know they're about to burst.

But she never got sick. We cuddled all night, without incident of any kind. Ellie loved to cuddle. She studied cuddling the way some people study the Kama Sutra. While standard positions like spoons did play a part in her nightly repertoire, she didn't restrict herself. She was no prude when it came to cuddling.

It was around this time that I first saw the fliers for the HealNow organization. They were posted all over the city, in the grimmest of places. *Are you Toxic?* the post cards asked. Well, I certainly hoped I wasn't, but now that they'd put it that way, I had to wonder. I turned the card over. *Tired?* it asked. Yes, come to think of it, I was. *Crave Sweets?* Stupid question. *Trouble sleeping?* Not exactly, but—*Need more energy? Feeling fat or bloated? Are you in a 'brain fog?'* *International Speaker, Peter Greenlaw, will lead an informative and life changing workshop that explores the topic of toxins in your food, your home and your environment.* The postcard went on to say there were over one hundred thousand chemicals in commercial use and less than fifteen percent had been tested for what they did to humans. I didn't doubt it. Incidents of asthma, for example, had doubled in major cities in the past decade. My mom told me that—like fifty times—when I got diagnosed in middle school. It was as if the fact absolved her—and me—from feeling any guilt or shame about it. Like I cared. Asthma was a godsend. It absolved me from the obligation to participate in gym class. *Squat-thrusts?*

*Uh, sorry, gonna have to sit this one out. Medical reasons.* The thing I failed to understand was what Peter Greenlaw thought he was going to do about this chemical onslaught. Other than sell something, which was probably all it was, not that I was planning on going. I mean, sure, sometimes I felt a tad bloated. Big deal, who doesn't?

Ellie didn't. Not after the soy sauce incident. I might have thought it a freak occurrence had we not found ourselves fall down drunk in a donut shop a week later. I should clarify. Ellie was fall down drunk, I was par for the course.

Dale's Donuts is this hip downtown donut place with an enormous statue of a dairy cow out front. They did big business on the weekends after the bars shut down, and they sold gluten free donuts, which were impossible to find elsewhere. I used to frequent the place about once a week, before Ellie and I were together. I *usually* loved Dale's. Somehow, mystery of mysteries, the baristas, cute alternative girls every one of them, actually talked to me. They knew me by name. Hey, Ernie's here, they'd say. I'd crack some jokes about my weight, about being addicted, literally addicted, to donuts. They'd laugh and pour me free milk and shower me with the absolute worst kind of affection, the kind that said, *oh Ernie, you're just so adorable that I want to pinch your cheeks and put my hands on every part of your body, except, of course, any of the erogenous zones.* But, hey, I didn't complain. Little brother affection was better than none at all.

That night, the place was packed. The line ran all the way out the door, and by the time I reached the counter, Ellie, in her drunken state, had wandered off. I looked around. I called for her. The cashier was growing impatient. Then, the guy behind me, a tall bony kid with an enormous adam's apple, began to moo, like a cow. Maybe it was just the heffer out front. Maybe I'm reading too much into this, but soon the entire place was mooing, and it all seemed a thinly veiled criticism of me, the fat guy up front, taking his sweet sweet time with the donuts.

I was about to blow Ellie off, when she pitched into me, "Moo," she said, in my ear, to scare

me, as if it were *boo*.

“Where were you?” I asked. “Come on. People are waiting.”

“God,” she said. “I don't know. I am so wasted. Why did I drink this much? Why did you let me do this to myself?”

“You had like three drinks. It cannot be that bad.”

“I'm *little*,” she said.

I didn't even feel like ordering a donut now, what the people mooing at me and all. But then I decided I wasn't going to let those fuckers get me down, and I ordered two maple bacons just to prove how little I cared. Ellie, on the other hand, couldn't find *anything* she liked. She complained about the lack of gluten free options. She lamented living in a world oriented towards wheat eaters. Finally, I grew tired of it.

“Well, this is what they *do* have. So you can either pick one of these. Or get over your allergy.”

She crossed her arms and pouted. I ignored it and paid the cashier. As we were leaving I unwrapped my donut, and Ellie took a bite.

“Gluten,” I shrieked, but she was gone. Out the door, down the sidewalk: she expected me to give chase, but I refused. I ate one donut, then the other. When I caught up with her I didn't even mention the gluten, and when she realized that I wasn't going to coddle her, that I wasn't going to rush her home, she lifted her nose up in defiance. We didn't mention it the whole walk home, and in this way we both pretended it had never happened.

Now, I could no longer explain this away. She *knew*, even if she was drunk. On some level she knew. This wasn't an unconscious psychosomatic disorder. It was something else, but she was so defensive in regards to the allergy, that I couldn't bring it up. She was always explaining it to someone, assuring them that, yes, it was called Celiac disease and it was a real medical condition. I didn't want

to piss her off, because I didn't want to lose her. She wasn't the *only* woman that had ever showed interest in me; I'd dated that one girl with a congenital heart defect back in high school. Kayla Barnes. It only lasted a couple of months though; we couldn't take it too far; there was real concern about her heart's ability to withstand vigorous makeout. In effect, Ellie Maddox was my first real girlfriend, and I wanted to be sure of the situation before I breached it. So, instead of sitting down and communicating like an adult, I conducted a brief period of testing. The gravy I served her? It wasn't made with corn starch. The sorghum beer? Brewed with barley. That batter? That batter was chock full of gluten. A pinch here, a pinch there, I snuck it anywhere I could hide it. The results were unequivocal.

I didn't want to suspect her of an outright lie. She simply wasn't the type. She was the most active, involved woman I'd ever met. She played protest songs on the ukulele, for Christ's sake. She donated thirty dollars, every month, to the Defender's of Wildlife, and in return they sent photos of her adopted wolf pup, Destiny. She once mailed a rhyming poem to her senator in support of immigration reform. She claimed it was a villanelle. The first stanza ran: *You dam the tide with iron wall/ water will seep and find its way/ the right to dream you cannot stall*. A woman of deep, poetic vision? I don't know; I'm not that into poetry. But a woman of integrity? Yes, I told myself.

A few weeks later, we went to her mother's house for dinner. I'd never met her mom before, but I'd heard about her. Ellie's parents had divorced when she was young, and her mom had gone galavanting across the country on another man's motorcycle. Her and Ellie weren't very close, but we went over for dinner because her mother had recently inherited a macaw, named Edgar. Edgar spoke, but he only spoke one word, over and over again, "Dolittle," like the doctor. The irony was he *did* a lot. He attacked visitors. He ate her carpet. He shat on her pillow. When we arrived, he was sitting on his perch ripping out his own feathers. He was half bald, and his little glass eye sloshed with tears. "Dolittle, dolittle," he screeched at me.

Ellie's mom was puttering about the kitchen in house slippers and a kimono. I liked her. A sweet lady, a little eccentric. She made a living selling things on Ebay. For dinner she'd gone to the trouble to prepare us microwaveable pot pies. She'd forgotten about the gluten allergy, so Ellie ate some carrots that were meant for the bird.

"I'm sorry, honey," said Ellie's mom. She was watching her gnaw on a carrot. "Are you sure we can't just scoop out the insides. Kind of like a low carb pot pie. You know how they do those low carb burgers? Just a burger and lettuce."

"It's not about the carbs, mom." She poked at a carrot with her fork and it rolled across the plate.

I whispered to Ellie. "We'll stop and get you some food on the way home."

"Was this after you got sick in Peru?" asked her mom. "That's what caused this whole thing, isn't it?"

"I just don't understand how you always forget," said Ellie. "I reminded you on the phone."

When I heard this I was shocked. Ellie was lying. I'd been cuddling with her, when her mom called. Ellie hadn't mentioned *anything* about her gluten allergy, not unless she'd spoken with her again, and the odds of that were slim.

"You know what," said Ellie's mom. She was clearly upset. "I'm going to order some take out, and I don't even want to hear it, it'll take like ten minutes, and we'll have a good, healthy, low carb dinner." She scooted out of her chair. "Stop eating that, Ernie." She swatted at my hand. "I'm calling Ho Ho's."

"Mom, no."

"Honey, it's not that big of a deal."

"Mom, do *not* order that food. I won't touch it."

She paused with a phone book in her hand.

“These carrots are fine,” said Ellie. “I promise. I'm used to this by now.”

Her mom tentatively pulled up the chair. “We've got ice cream for desert,” she said. It's cookie dough, but I'll pick the pieces out.”

The bird screeched in the far room then began hammering on the wall.

“Oh god he's tearing up the door, again,” she said. She darted off to the living room. “Edgar? Edgar? You need to stop it.”

I turned to Ellie. “Why did you say that? You didn't mention your allergy the other day. I was right there beside you.”

“What?”

“Look, I don't know, you're mom already feels bad. I just don't why you need to lie about it.”

“Lie? You're calling me a liar now? Did you ever consider that *maybe* I talked to her again?”

Edgar screeched.

“Big bird, coming in hot,” said Ellie's mom. “Watch out.” She was hauling the bird and its perch into the kitchen. She set Edgar over by the window. He plucked out a few feathers and spit them on the floor in protest. Ellie's mom sighed and collapsed into her chair.

“I think I'm gonna put him on Craigslist,” she said. “I can't take it anymore.”

“Craigslist?” said Ellie. “I talked to you like --well let's see, I talked to you *yesterday*,” Ellie turned to me and smiled, “and you didn't say *anything* about that. You can't put a bird like this on Craigslist. I'm sorry, but no. It's not the right place for endangered animals.”

“Not all macaws are endangered, honey. We're looking into what type it is.”

“Why?” asked Ellie. “So you can find a good asking price?”

“I just don't get it,” I said, “If you're not a bird person, then why did he give it to you?”

“Please don't do this, mom. This bird has suffered some serious trauma. Putting him up for grabs on the internet is not a good idea.”

“Honey,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I never should have never inherited this bird. But Billy didn’t have any family left, and what was I supposed to do? I said yes, cause that’s what you *have* to say. I didn’t think he’d *actually* give me the bird.”

She ashed her cigarette in the ficus. It was wilting. She couldn’t even keep a plant alive.

“Dolittle, dolittle.”

“Do you now how we get birds like this?” asked Ellie. “Wildlife traffickers. They steal the chicks. And do you know what happens to the parents?”

“I could take him out,” I said. “Maybe he needs exercise.”

“The parents stay at the nest, and they die,” said Ellie. “That’s what they do. They wait.”

“Thanks for the offer Ernie, but its probably not a good idea. He’ll just attack you. They’re vindictive like that.”

“Are you done, yet?” Ellie asked me. “Cause I finished my carrots a while ago.”

I had yet to even touch my second pot pie, but something told me it was better not to mention that. Edgar and I looked at each other, a deep, soul searching, man-to-bird look. Lifelong friends? Mortal enemies? Who knew.

“Craigslit?” asked her mom.

I was locked in a stare-off with the bird. I tried to imagine him in the jungle, Peru maybe. God, he must have been something fierce once. Now half his plumage was gone and his skin sagged like a scrotum.

“Craigslit,” I said.

The drive home that night was predictably awful. I’d been insensitive. I’d sided with her mother. I’d accused her of lying. Ellie and I didn’t speak for over a week. I wondered if it was the end, if we’d just let the relationship fizzle out, but she called one night, asked if I wouldn’t mind coming over. I took a couple of shots of whiskey, then a couple more, to steel myself against the breakup

conversation, but when I knocked on her apartment door she showered me with remorseful little kisses. A brief battle of apologies ensued. She won, hands down. *Everything*, she said, was her fault. She didn't mean to be so difficult, but sometimes she couldn't help it. It was her, "abandonment issues." I tried to initiate some make-up sex, but she wasn't into it. She curled up, head in my lap. Then her tabby cat joined the cuddle puddle, purring and spooning with Ellie. Up next, I thought, a mouse would come, then, I don't know, a bark beetle, followed by an ant, an unending chain of comfort, warmth, dependency. Who was I to head this show? I couldn't even take care of myself.

About a week later I woke up, on the floor of my apartment, with a real discomfort in my jeans, a crackling sensation, *under* my underpants. Come to find out it was ramen noodles. Uncooked. I must have opened the package, in the middle of the night, for a drunken snack. Somehow, during my sleep, they'd made their way into my jeans. I preferred not to think too hard about the hows and the whys. I simply got up. I didn't have to get dressed; I was already dressed; it was rather nice. And I admit that I did it; pathetic as it was, I drove over to the Ramada Inn to hear International Speaker, Peter Greenlaw, talk about healing.

"Toxins," said the man on stage. "are everywhere. Let's not deny *that*." He had a soft southern accent that enhanced his religiosity. He wore a headset microphone, a black turtle neck sweater, and a pair of gray tube-like slacks. The polyester piled up softly on his shoes. "These toxins are pervasive and persuasive and they're in this very room. Ladies and gentleman, I cannot even *begin* to number them, that is how ubiquitous these chemicals are."

I nursed my hangover with a cookie and a cup of coffee. The crowd was an interesting mix of house wives and well-heeled hippies. Many crossed their arms over their chests as if to deny the interest that their presence belied.

"If the very water that we drink and the air that we breathe has been debased and defiled by

these chemicals, then imagine—imagine!—the number of mood altering pollutants we might find in our homes, in our offices, in our foods.” He reached the end of the stage, turned, and winked at a senior citizen in the front row. “I suspect that more than a few of us have eaten highly toxic food in the last month. Even in the safety of our own homes. Hamburger Helper? Is everyone here familiar with that product? Or ramen noodles? Have you prepared *that* on occasion? Perhaps when you're tired? Too tired to prepare a good meal for your family?”

Peter Greenlaw paced and gestured and orated about the “ubiquity” of these toxins. And I was with him, for much of it. Our world *is* unhealthy. No doubt about it. But then his topic shifted, and I knew, why I was there.

“Anxiety,” he said, “and depression: We know them well. Is it mere chance that the preeminence of these *distinctly* modern diseases corresponds with the emergence of the industrial revolution? Or might these conditions have a correlative relationship with the levels of toxicity in our bodies? Might that perhaps... be the cause?”

I waited through the rest of the speech. I endured the sales pitch for HealNow vitamins. That wasn't even what infuriated me about the guy. Rather, it was this excuse making, this reasoning that said our anxieties and fatigues and depressions had nothing to tell us; they were simply caused by malignancies outside of ourselves. What a jerk-off, I thought.

When everyone lined up to meet Peter Greenlaw, I lined up with them. And when he extended his hand, I extended mine, and I whispered, “You're full of shit, you know that?” I'd never done anything like it in my life.

“What?” he asked.

I shook his hand with even more gusto.

“I don't even think that's your real name.”

I was willing to own up to it, now; I had betrayed Ellie by putting gluten in her food, and that lie was poisoning our relationship, or so I believed. But if I was going to come clean about it, so was she. I asked her over to my apartment and I prepared her favorite meal: farfalle with fresh tomatoes and basil, garlic, olive oil and mozzarella. She'd given me the recipe before, to be used with rice noodles. I enjoyed making it. This time I made it with wheat pasta. It was a simple meal, bursting with water and sunshine. She'd lived in Liguria for a while, in high school, on a scholarship. Farfalle, she told me once, meant butterfly in Italian.

She appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. I kissed her and told her I'd bring the food out in a second. But she held up a postcard. I'd left it on the coffee table. *Are You Toxic?* it read.

"Where did you find this?" she asked.

At first, I thought I was being accused of something, but she wasn't upset, she was excited.

"I've heard about this guy," she said. "This looks awesome. He's got another workshop next week. We should go."

"Yeah," I said.

She gave me a funny look.

"Yeah," I said again, as if it were the only word in my vocabulary.

"Ok...?"

"Well, just hold on," I said. "I'll be out in a second."

I stared into the pot, the rising steam, all the little butterflies being boiled alive down there. This was never going to work, and part of me knew it, and wanted it anyway. I plated the pasta and carried it into the living room.

"It smells so good," she said.

She took a few bites, savoring the food, but soon her chewing slowed. She pulled a half eaten piece of farfalle from her mouth.

“What is this?”

“Ellie,” I said. “I don't know how it happened, but I can tell you, for sure, that you are no longer allergic to gluten.”

“This is pasta?” She shuffled the food around in her mouth. “Are you kidding me?”

“It's pasta, but I promise you it's safe to eat.”

Ellie went white, wonder bread white.

“Just try it,” I said. “Please? You ate gluten the other day and you were fine.”

She spit the food onto her plate.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Ellie, I'm sorry.”

She watched me, fork in the air.

“Look I've been putting gluten in your food for a month and a half. I don't know how to explain it, but you don't have Celiac's anymore. It's all in your head.”

She lurched forward, and the first stream of vomit—the first of many—landed on my plate.

Now, I'm no expert, but I *have* seen my fair share of upchuck. Once, in the eighth grade we attempted the gallon challenge. (It took me a long time to grow up, I suppose. Longer than most.) If anyone one of us guys showed promise of completing the challenge, and drinking a whole gallon of milk in one hour, it was Noah Hayes. That boy was built like a kettle. Unfortunately, we came to the decision to do the challenge *after* we'd eaten mexican food. Noah ate too. He chewed his burrito like the rest of us, and later we *all* threw up. Noah was no exception, although he did, as expected, drink more of his milk. That wasn't what was remarkable, though. What was remarkable, miraculous even, was the transformation that took place in his pressure cooker of a stomach. We all saw him chew that burrito, and I don't know how it's possible but I swear on my mother's grave that when he threw it up,

that burrito came up whole, flawless, untouched, like a newborn baby swaddled in tortilla.

Yes, I admit, the transfigurations of life and love, even the silly ones, have often baffled me.

But in my memory Noah Hayes holds no flame to Ellie Maddox. Hers was a display of digestive pyrotechnics the likes of which I hope to never see again. This was the traumatic end of my first love, an end that I needed but didn't know how to affect. She threw up everything, not just that night's food, or that day's, but week's and week's worth. She purged herself of me and her tolerance for my lazy ways. I held her hair. Sweat gathered on the nape of her neck. Soon, I too grew nauseous, and I puked in the sink. It's such a strange, good feeling, not the puking itself, but the moment after, when you believe, for a second, that you're good, that you've got it all out of you. Your breath comes back. Your body relaxes. I straightened up. But it was still me in the mirror, and it still would be, weeks later, when I was drunk and lonely and Ellie refused my calls. It was still me, and I wasn't going anywhere fast.

# Lucky

When I close my eyes, this is heaven. The clean cold air. The soft whirring sound. The chime of the bell as a customer passes through the pearly gates. What is it about 7-11 that makes me think of eternal bliss? It is one hundred five degrees outside, but it's not just the air conditioning. Is it the white of the dairy products? Haggen Daaz. Klondike bars. York Peppermint Patties.

Oksana has been out in the heat all day, panhandling with the baby. I stopped in to buy her a snack and found myself paralyzed by all the options. Russians don't have this problem; that's what Oksana tells me. You go to the minimart in Russia, you leave with potatoes. Maybe a turnip. If you're lucky. You go the grocery store in Russia, and you don't have *eight* different types of Cheerios; you don't even have Cheerios; you have Flakes. Potato flakes. And if you don't hurry home with your potato flakes, your stepmother will flog you with a cane. That this is not an *entirely* accurate portrayal of the country, I'm willing to admit, but I bet this scenario is being played out, in more than a few Russian homes, at this very moment.

I grab a Dreamsicle for Oksana, slap a few quarters on the counter and step into the heat. It's almost unbearable. My mom moved to Phoenix about a month ago. She wanted me to come with, but it's even worse there, and I'm tired of moving. That's all I've ever done: one state to the next. I'm staying here, no matter what it takes.

I spot Oksana on a bench at the university. She's doting on the baby—it's part of the act—and I don't want to disturb her. From here it looks so legitimate. Her outfit is perfect. We wanted something that said, Old World/ New World. We bought her a couple of “peasant blouses” at the Albuquerque

Renaissance Fair, and she wears them, no matter how hokey they look. She's taught me well: never underestimate the hokeyness of American consumers. The numbers don't lie. We saw a significant increase in daily profit when she wore the blouses. She always pairs them with a touch of Americana. Levi's or plastic flip-flops. A scrunchie. The baby is swaddled in white. It's not what the parents dress her in, but it works best for our purposes.

Oksana gets up and begins to pace. A “prospective buyer” must be in the vicinity. She's a first rate actress. Sometimes she remains aloof, beguiling, beautiful in a malnourished sort of way. The men come to her. Other times she approaches her targets in a fluster, full of broken English and an intense wailing that seems, for reasons I don't understand, very, very Russian. Today, she simply stares at the sky.

Here he comes, loping down the promenade. An overgrown boy. He has money though, or his parents do. He's wearing a baseball cap, a football jersey, and basketball shorts. Several hundred dollars worth of clothing, easy. A large cross, with diamonds, swings from his neck. Oksana's spotted that too; she's crossing herself vigorously. This woman! She's unlike any I've ever known. She steps in the boy's path, but he dodges her. The chase is on. This is like Animal Planet. Sly feline hunter pursues rich baby hippo. Oksana touches him on the arm. *Now* he stops, the bastard. She stares up at him with pleading eyes. *She would do anything*, they seem to say. Not that she would. Sex appeal, she assures me, is just part of the game. I don't let it worry me. She parts the swaddling and coos to the baby in Russian. It's not a harsh language, not like some people think. Sometimes, when she misses home, she speaks to me in Russian—soft, lilting sentences, like something out of a fairy tale. This guy's falling for it. Oksana exposes more of the baby's face. The slanted eyes make the child look eastern, Siberian maybe. If he only knew. She takes his hand, squeezes it. I imagine her voice, the pleading, the heavy accent—*one dollar, just one American dollar*—but he shakes her off and walks away.

He reaches the stairs, the book store, even the stoplight, before he comes back. Oksana has already forgotten him, and then, there he is, twenty dollar bill in hand. Oh how we appreciate you! You gullible coeds with your open eyes and open hearts and open wallets! We'd be in such very deep shit without you.

The baby belongs to the Bloomquists. A lamentable fact, but an unavoidable one. The Bloomquists are a sturdy middle class family with sturdy jobs and sturdy sofas and a sturdy home in the northeast heights (or, as we in the valley like to call it, the northeast whites, or the northeast frights). They have a healthy, ruddy cheeked, American faith in the kindness of people. Their direct contact with the world has taught them little else. The only real “trial” they have suffered—as far as I can tell—is that their only child, her name is Charlotte, was born with Down Syndrome. Even this they surely count as “a blessing.”

Is this a complete and unbiased picture of the Bloomquists? Could I be made to admit that I am mysteriously attracted to these people? That I am perhaps *jealous*? That I watched Mr. Bloomquist with shameless fascination as he tossed his little girl into the air until she giggled and cooed and vomited on the shoulder of his suit?

These poor misguided souls, the Bloomquists, have entrusted their only child to Oksana. She's their baby sitter. Why? Maybe they—and by they I mean Mr. Bloomquist—were wooed by the fantasy of employing a submissive Russian nanny. Or? Maybe they thought it was cool that Oksana shares a name with that famous Ukrainian figure skater, the one who beat poor, poor Nancy Kerrigan for the gold. Or maybe—and now we're getting to it—they simply wanted to be kind. After all, what did the Bloomquists see when Oksana first came to their house to give the madame her Russian lessons? A hardworking, former international student, struggling to make ends meet in America. They offered her the job within three weeks. And now we beg with the baby in the streets.

For the record, though, I don't like the word begging. *She's begging. We're begging.* It sounds so vile in those declarative sentences. It lacks all subtlety. I could give hundreds of reasons for our actions. I could cite our poor immigration policy, the unemployment rate or the lack of public health insurance. I could tell my pathetic tales of neglect and abuse, fatherless days, motherless nights, that shameful day in kindergarten from which I remember one thing: being pinned inside a bathroom stall—but I won't. They're such downers. And they don't get us around the rather obstinate facts. We *do* panhandle four days a week. We *do* deceive people out of their change. We *do*, after buying the essentials, occasionally splurge on a decent bottle of wine. I implicate myself.

But!—and of course there's a but—we treat the baby exquisitely. Lotions, powders, creams. Breathable cloth diapers made with Egyptian cotton. Handmade Spanish fans. PABA free sunscreen, seventy SPF. Seventy! Safe on babies, laboratory designed for hairless cats, endangered white rhinos, and the Scottish. On baby maintenance we spare no expense. And the parents suspect nothing. They say they've never seen her so radiant. She's an outdoors-woman, the baby is. She's a people person.

I don't recall exactly how the idea for the scam came to me. To quote my mother's favorite book, the *Celestine Prophecy*: It was a moment of ethereal disembodiment. A memory clouded by the celestial white billows of divine inspiration. Simply put, it was a moment of brilliance.

“Oksana,” I said. “I've just had a moment of brilliance.”

“You speak a strange kind of English. Not like other men I've known.”

I was taking off my shoe, but I paused. “What other men?”

If she heard me, she didn't bother to respond.

I was sitting on her mattress, which in turn was sitting on the linoleum floor of her studio apartment. She was wearing nothing but a t-shirt and panties. She was boiling water for tea. I want to make it *very* clear that even though I don't know what a samovar is, she does *not* have one. Contrary to their national literature, not all Russians do. Especially émigrés. She has a pot and a couple of mugs.

She has a collection of plastic knick knacks that I've given to her. She has a card table and one wooden chair. That's why we spend so much time in bed. Well, one of the reasons.

"The baby," I said. "You use the baby."

"Do you want sugar in your tea? Because I do not have any."

Oksana drifted toward me with the mugs in her hands, and I was struck with a thought: she no longer looked the same. It was as if she had grown. She hadn't put on weight; it was nothing like that. It had to do with the vantage point. With her looming above me, she seemed enormous and motherly. A mythical woman figure. A giantess. I hugged her thighs and nuzzled my face between her legs. Her panties smelled like fabric softener, or to be romantic about it, summer's dew. The cotton was soft and worn. I buried my nose deeper until I could feel the real warmth of her body, but she tapped me on the shoulder and shook her head no. She giggled and sat beside me. Her hands are wrinkled, her knees a little boney. We're friends as much as we are lovers. We drank tea, and I told her about my plan.

"What?" she said. "You want me to steal the baby and beg like a gypsy in the street?"

"Not steal," I said, "*borrow*. Just a couple hours a day. They're not even paying you minimum wage."

She blew on her tea, a very pensive thing to do, then she shrugged her shoulders. "I do not know why I did not think of this earlier."

"What? I was only halfway serious."

"I do not understand. *You* thought of it."

"Yeah, but, I don't know. I expected *some* resistance."

"No," she said. "It is a very good plan. Tomorrow I will start."

Whoa. I was taken aback. This required some thinking. Now, I blew on *my* tea.

"This does not mean," she said, "that I am going to pay for you. You still need to find some jobs."

After that conversation, I began to suspect that despite Oksana's rather innocent appearance, she was a shrewd woman, a shrewd capitalist. She doesn't talk much about her life in Russia. She doesn't come from a rich family; I know that much. She sends money home to her sister. And? It couldn't have been easy to save the money necessary for her visa, let alone her flight. I suspect the story involves all kinds of sordid details, but I'm not going to worry about it. I don't want her to either. Still, after that conversation, somehow, I *knew* that she was going to be the one to leave me, not the other way around. Like I said, she's shrewd. She'll find a balding schmuck with a steady job and a 401k and she'll convert herself into a bona fide, legitimized American citizen. That's what I'd do if I were her.

I set my mug of tea on the floor. "Ok. If you want to do it, let's do it."

I kissed her, again, but this time she didn't push me away. She kissed me as she often does, ferociously, with an urgency that is both intoxicating and worrisome. She shivers in my arms when we make love. There's a tremor in her pulse that I don't know how to quiet. It's as if she aches to have sex, but at the same time, she yearns for it to end. I'm younger than her, but when it comes to sex I feel like the older one. I wonder if it would be different with another woman, if this is normal. But I don't want another woman, so I try to make her feel safe. I move slow. I use my weight. I try to be solid, like smooth warm stone.

I sneak up to Oksana, sit on the bench, and launch into character.

"You poor Russian mother, you."

She rolls her eyes, a trick she's learned—I'm sure—here in the states.

"Alone, in the wilds of America. With a sick child. You're... you're so beautiful and yet so helpless. My favorite combination in a woman."

"Is this true?"

"Perhaps I can be of service to you. I've been told I have the heart of a lion. Yes, yes. Here.

Here is twenty American dollars. I want nothing in exchange. Nothing.”

“Where? I do not see your twenty dollars. You never have twenty dollars.”

“Well, if I *had* it, it would be yours.”

I hand her the Dreamsicle. She opens it and orange liquid pours onto the concrete. A Dreampuddle. She's not impressed.

“Baby Bloomquist seems to be doing well this morning.” I rub noses with her, but Oksana pulls her away, as if to protect her. I swear, sometimes, she thinks she's the real mother.

“Did you find a job?” she asks.

“The unemployment rate is at like--.”

“This means no? No, you did not? Did you go to the office of student employment?”

“I'm not a student. I can't go there.”

“There is a student newspaper.”

“Yeah, but it doesn't really have good classifieds.”

“I do not want to to do this anymore.” She nods at the baby. “For me, you will go? Please?”

She pouts. She whispers to me in Russian. The same tricks she uses on everyone.

There's no point in going to the student employment office, so I go to the University Center to kill some time. I've been searching for work everyday for a month. It's not that easy. Would it be easier if Oksana wasn't making so much? Maybe. And I know that begging with the Bloomquist's baby isn't exactly a career path. It's fucking dangerous. I'm surely an accessory or a conspirator at this point. What's the crime? Fraud, maybe. Reckless endangerment. I don't think they could make kidnapping stick. Oksana's going to quit, as soon as I find work. I joke around with her about it, doing an imitation of a Hollywood hit-man, *Dis is my last job, you unduhstand? Dis is it. I'm done. I'm out.* In fact, there's a cinematic quality to the entire scam. I'm the director, sitting in the shadows, watching.

Oksana is my starlet. But this is where it gets strange; the illusion extends beyond her performance. She licks her thumb to clean the baby's face. She applies sunscreen with gentle adoration. I've even caught her, late at night, referring to the baby as her own daughter.

She's not the only guilty one though. As she becomes more enmeshed in the fabric of the scam, I get more distanced from it. I'm much more the spectator. It's the nature of the situation. And for some reason, when I watch her work, I cannot get rid of the lurking sensation that what I'm watching isn't real. When Oksana comes home in the evening I can't convince myself that she *actually* spent the day begging with a baby. Maybe it's a way to keep ourselves from recognizing the reality of the situation, that if we get caught we are really, really fucked.

I'd like to find a newspaper, at least, so Oksana will know I've done *something*, but I can't find one, not in the entire building. I go upstairs, downstairs, nothing, but the place is swarming with security guards. It's like the president is coming. Or maybe I'm just paranoid.

I spot the sign as I'm walking through the cafeteria: *Now Hiring*. It's taped on the register at the chinese restaurant. Not *exactly* the sort of work I want, but hey, I'm comfortable with my manhood; I can wear a hairnet. I pick up an application and a wonderful idea occurs to me: I won't even tell Oksana that I've got the job. I'll pretend that I'm still on the search, meanwhile I'll save up my paychecks, and then, one day, I'll come home with *all* of the rent money, *and* flowers, *and* a samovar, *and* maybe even some Babushka dolls. Mail order from Russia. Anything to make her house feel more like a home. Not that I'm worried about it. Ok, I confess, clearly I'm worried about it.

Example? It was my birthday a few days ago. Oksana gave me the strangest gift. A rabbit's foot. She loves that kind of shit and assumes everyone does. In May, when she was making sixty-seventy bucks a day, Oksana'd give me a couple of dollars to spend on whatever I liked. I always bought her gifts at the dollar store. Charm bracelets, bubbles, crazy straws, she loved it all. Where I saw nothing but cheap plastic crap, she saw delightful tokens of America, talismans of levity and

sunshine. I'd give her a kazoo or something and she'd squeal and giggle and shower me with kisses in this endearing, but slightly disturbing way. Afterwards when I'd tell her that I loved her, she'd grow quiet.

"No," she'd say. She'd blow on her kazoo. "You do not know what love is. You are too young to know what love is."

But I *do* know what love is. So what if we come from different worlds? So what if there are things in our pasts that haunt us? We're here now.

I don't know. Enough of that. Back to my birthday. At first, it was a series of disappointments. She claimed she had the perfect gift for me. It was a rabbit's foot. She wanted to cook authentic Russian stroganoff. The cream curdled. We drank two bottles of wine on empty stomachs. She drank most of it. Then she told me that she had one more gift. She sat me on the mattress, and said, "Relax."

She walked over to the boom box. This should have been the first clue that her strip tease would *not* go well. Her taste in music is horrid. I chalk it up to cultural difference; it's the only way I can forgive her for it. She hit the play button—it was John Mayer. She started gyrating her hips and singing *Your Body Is a Wonderland* in a thick Russian accent. Under normal circumstances, I might have peed myself with laughter. She would say, *What? What is funny?* Soon she'd be laughing too, and we'd be rolling in bed, tickling each other and struggling to get our jeans off over our shoes. But not this time. For some reason I couldn't laugh. I couldn't even smile. She was so drunk that she didn't notice.

There was much shimmying. There was much undulation. Pirouettes were not excluded. She would peel off an article of clothing (I swear she wore extra layers, to heighten the effect) and she would cup her breasts and offer me a coy smile, but her teeth were stained purple from the wine. I felt trapped. I should have stopped her, but I let the show run its course and soon she was on top of me, fucking me hysterically.

Did I watch too much porn in middle school? Why did Oksana seem so isolated and vulnerable right then? Alone atop the tower. Why did I have the keen sensation of watching, not participating, as if whatever was occurring, was not actually occurring to me? The damp, rhythmic sound hitting my eardrum was, in fact, the sound of our bodies slapping against each other. The liquid on my neck was the mingling of our sweat.

I opened my eyes. Oksana sat upon me, ragged and spent. Tears streaked her face. She was despondent. She looked frozen, back in some dark Russian winter, where I'd never been and would never go. I wanted to break her out of it, but a gulf separated us, and when I spoke to her, my voice was like a dinghy alone at sea. I propped myself up. I pushed the damp hair from her face. When I kissed her eyes I tasted the salt in her tears.

I finish the job application and charge out the door but soon I slow down. There's something happening ahead. What is it? What's clueing me in? It's the way people are walking. They're shying away from the row of benches and trees that line the promenade.

Soon I see that Oksana is held captive on one of the benches. A campus police officer is standing beside her, speaking into a radio. I can't hear the words, just the cadence of his voice. It has the rhythm of protocol. Numbers, locations, a wisecrack. Beside him is a woman I don't recognize. She's cradling a baby, *the* baby, Charlotte. Oksana is feigning disinterest, but her limbs are glistening with sweat. She's sprawled on the bench. The soft white belly of her forearm is exposed. I look around, as if the sky or the cement or the kids on skateboards might come to our aid. I've got nothing, nothing but absurd ideas: call in a bomb threat, karate chop the policeman in the neck. I walk over, trying to appear casual.

“Hey baby, what's going on?”

The officer asks me to step away.

“No,” I say, “she's my girlfriend. I want to know what's going on.”

“I'll tell you what's going on,” says the woman holding Charlotte. The officer raises his hand to quiet her. “This isn't her child. This is my niece.”

“Of course it's not,” I say, “she's the nanny.” I turn to Oksana. “Do you have your phone on you?”

There is no phone. Neither of us have one, but I give Oksana a look and she catches on.

“No,” she says, “I do not have it. I have left it at the Bloomquists.”

“Why is she hitting me up for money, then?” asks the woman. She rocks baby Charlotte, who is crying softly in her arms.

“She probably needed change for a phone call,” I say.

“Twenty dollars? She asked me for twenty dollars.”

“Officer,” I say, “what is the deal here? This is crazy. She's the nanny. She takes care of this kid every day.”

He twiddles the buttons on his radio, watching Oksana. Wonderful actress that she is, she doesn't smile. She projects an air of bewilderment. She sighs: a touch of resignation, as if to say, how long will it take to get *this* sorted out.

“We're supposed to have the baby home in like fifteen minutes,” I say.

“They are *not* touching my niece.”

The officer takes his phone out of his phone holster. “Can someone please give me this woman's number?”

He calls and we wait. If he gets a hold of her then she'll confirm that Oksana is in fact the nanny. She'll probably lose her job, but that's it. The officer clears his throat, but the phone rings and rings and rings in our ears. He leaves a message and after hanging up, tells us that under the circumstances, he'll have to take Oksana down to the station.

“This is crazy,” I say. “I’m calling my lawyer.”

I kneel in front of Oksana. The cop makes a call on his radio, saying he needs another officer to escort a suspect.

“She’s not being charged,” he says, “but look, we’ve got conflicting stories here. We’re going to have to hold her until we get it straightened out.”

No, they’ll keep her until they find out she’s illegal, then she’ll be shipped off to some clandestine holding facility where she’ll live in a cell for months until they deport her. Does Oksana understand all of this? The look on her face is inscrutable.

The officer calls the Bloomquists again, but no luck. By now the other cop has arrived. He doesn’t even bother to cuff Oksana. I accompany them to the patrol car, but the bastard won’t let me ride to the station.

“I do not believe this,” says Oksana, acting to the very end, but her voice has begun to crack. “You must talk to your lawyer.”

She knows as well as I do that there is no lawyer.

“Yeah,” I say. I kiss her on the eyes, the cheeks, the mouth. “I’ll call him. We’ll get this straightened out.”

The officer shuts his door and they ease into traffic. I need to find a lawyer. I need to call the Bloomquists. I need to get down to the station, but before I can do any of it, I need money. I run all the way to Oksana’s apartment, but the door is locked. I didn’t think to get a key. I yank the screen off only to find that the window is painted shut. Everything inside is the way we left it: mugs on the card table, a kazoo on the shelf. It’s like a museum exhibit. It’s dawned on me that I won’t get in, but there I am cussing and sweating, scraping at the paint with my fingernails, when a toddler with a big orange tootsie roll pop waddles out from the apartment next door. She takes one long look at me and breaks into tears.

## Neighborhood Watch

Gibbs lived with his young wife, Kat. Same house, same dinky porch, same plastic patio furniture, same aluminum door, same life, same same, same as all of us, except that, someone robbed *him*, at *his* house, bit by bit, bite by bite, not us, not ours. First it was the screens. Then it was the shutters. Then it was the gutters. Then it was the sod. We offered condolences, all of us, saying: Why just your place? We don't get it. Same stuff. Same house. Same same. Who are they, these creeps? Why not *distribute* the stealing? Why not spread the stealing *thin*? But amongst ourselves we whispered: We're next. It's coming.

Next they stole his vinyl siding. His vinyl siding! Gibbs came out to inspect. He looked a tad slimy in that satin bathrobe but he called the police, and we overheard: outrage and indignation. Bravo! All the reports were filed. Then he went inside to face his wife, Kat. Boy were we glad we didn't have to explain *that* phenomena to *our* wives, not because Kat was cranky and middling like *some*, but because we simply wouldn't have wanted to fail her, what with a beautiful face like that, lit with wonder and innocence. Maybe of hint of mischief. Bathroom sex. Shame. Desire. So, in order to help her—and him!—we formed neighborhood watch. Nothing, we thought, would escape the vigilance of our vigilantes. No stone unturned, no immigrant unscrutinized.

The next night they got his hedges, the night after that, his mulch. Gibbs was hardly himself. Who could blame him? No explanations, no leads, no sleep. He called the police—daily. We overheard: supplication and defeat; his voice, we hated to admit, had turned a tad fem fem. The police said, maybe it's an illegal salvage operation, or a vendetta, or a form of cosmic retribution akin to the oriental concept of Karma. They promised to send more patrol cars. Then somebody filched the

doorbell.

Strange how it's the littlest things. They stole the doorbell, and, who knows, maybe, for Kat, it was symbolic of something, of isolation, silence, death. Maybe there were other problems: domestic malaise, trust issues, erectile dysfunction. Whatever it was, that morning we heard glass shatter in the bedroom. Kat burst from the front door and sought shelter in our arms. In the snap of a finger, Gibbs was gone.

Sometimes we say, Barcelona, maybe Gibbs is in Barcelona. We hear its nice. Urbane. Beautiful women, those Catalonians. There's other rumors, too. He went back to college. He came out of the closet. He's a swinger, now. He learned a second language. He lives off the land. But mostly, we say, Barcelona. We like the hope of it in our mouths. When the dollar recovers, we're going. If not for retirement, at least for vacation. And if we don't, it's only because we're happy here, in our houses, where we live most of our days, until they too vanish.

## Decommissioned CCPS School Bus #374, Cleveland, Ohio

Even now you come back to me and so does that chicken bus, the smell of it: french fries, chile, mango, urine, body odor, vinyl, rust. The trip that day, to Momo, began simply enough. How many trips like that had I made? Enough to think that I knew. Just out my window a woman sold incense and candles for some sacred Mayan ritual. She sat with her red skirt spilled on the ground around her, and she drank pepsicola through a straw. The bus hiccuped to a start, and it drowned the marimba being played on the plaza, the sing-song voice of a vendor: *pollo, pollo frito, pollo frito, pollo frito*. I felt young and ebullient. The fat, southern sun sagged in the sky like an egg yolk.

You were not there yet. You were not even you, yet. There was a mother with long nipples suckling her child. Another Guatemalan—a smiling man with no teeth—wore a grave, black top hat. He had seen the war, they all had. Dust rolled in and we shut the windows and it grew stiflingly hot. The chickens squawked, and one of them, a young, redbreasted thing popped his head out of the basket as if curious. I sat alone—the only white person on the bus—alone and exhilarated in the back on a seat that creaked with broken springs, bobbing to the radio and safely admiring the spectacle, until the drunk women stumbled aboard.

Her husband gave her another shove. She was dead drunk, eyes lolling. He had a beak of a nose, and a large bony head that wobbled atop his delicate neck. He shoved her again, and she came wheeling into the seat in front of me and I stood. Every pair of eyes fell on us. I didn't speak Spanish well, but it didn't matter. *No*, I said. I didn't normally do such a thing. It made me nervous, but now, I enjoyed it. I noticed some new depth in my voice, as if it had sounded from some deep well of the past. *No*, I said again, but I wavered now beneath so many stares: small, dark, distrustful eyes. The man gave me a dismissive chuckle and settled into his seat. I tried to do the same, to enjoy the ride as I

had before, but the bus was no longer a place for my amusement. The civil war had ended only a few years prior. Why did I go there, why did anyone? For an authentic experience? To traipse about the jungle and eat fried plantains? Wasn't I just acting out a charade of colonial exploration? There were mass graves hidden in the mountains we were driving through. I had seen the pictures, but you, you might have smelled the stink of the bodies. Perhaps you saw your father in one. Perhaps you didn't. Perhaps he'd simply disappeared.

A little girl several seats ahead watched me curiously, but when I tried to smile at her, she hid her face. A burn scar stood out on her hand like a caterpillar. The bus stopped to pick up a another passenger, when up front—it took so long to hear it, to understand what was happening—someone was screaming. Someone, I couldn't see who, was shouting at the driver. The boy with the machete stormed down the aisle. He was wearing black slacks with dinged up dress shoes. A bandana covered his face. He was not particularly poor, not by Guatemalan standards. There was too much gel in his hair for that. I'd met Guatemalan kids like him, good kids, kids who talked about nothing but their dreams of going to California.

You stumbled onto the bus like an afterthought. It was clear that you were not in charge, that you had not done this before, that you had been brought along because you owned the pistol. How? Maybe you'd stolen it. Maybe, during the war, your mother had hidden it under the mattress, just in case.

The sun was setting and the light in the bus grew heavy and viscous. He worked his side of the aisle and you worked yours, slower, your voice higher, almost feminine, the gun shaking. You both seemed distracted and you stared nervously out the windows. It was all taking much too long. Experienced robbers got it done and got out. Why couldn't I have gotten some hardened criminals instead of a pair of clumsy boys my own age? You were more liable to mess it up. I knew it. It all had to end as soon as possible, if it drug on, even by a few seconds, the balance we'd struck up would

tumble out of control. And then you dropped your pistol.

It fell to the floor with a thud. We all looked at it, everyone one of us, paralyzed. You swooped down for the gun and swung it around and when your accomplice chided you, you barked back. He shouted at you to hurry. You were arguing now, and the passengers began to fidget. The boy with the machete started working both aisles, and he reached the drunken wife and her husband, just as you were finishing with the others. I stood up. I was the last. At first he wanted only my wallet, but then he asked for any other money. You must remember this, wherever you are, now. You told him no, *vamos*, but he wasn't listening. *Pasaporte*, he said, and you argued again, gesticulating violently with the pistol. There was no longer any agreement here. They no longer believed in their own authority. The other boy won out. You shook your head and swung the gun around and screamed at the passengers to be silent. Everyone was already silent. I handed him the passport and when he told me to grab my backpack from beneath the seat, you simply said no, and leveled the gun at my face.

I believe you wanted to shoot me. Not at first, but as you held my gaze, this reckless look slipped into your eyes. Recognition, maybe, of how easy it would be to pull the trigger. Freedom. For once, you could do anything in the whole wide world. But you couldn't, you soon found yourself contained again—I saw it creep over you as you stared at me—your broad face darkened by some perverse envy and love and hate. You couldn't. Then, in the seat in front of us, the dark, wormy man from earlier let out a chuckle. Perhaps at me. Perhaps at you. His face was flat, as flat as a mirror. You looked surprised. You shot him once, twice through the chest and you ran from the bus

It was dark when we arrived in Momostenango. I explained the robbery to a hotel clerk and he gave me a room for the night. It was clean and quiet and dark, but I didn't sleep. I wonder where you slept. I wonder if you're still alive, if you have a daughter, what secrets you keep. I could barely bring myself to crawl into that small, coffin like bed in the middle of the room. Mosquito netting was draped over it. It looked like a cocoon. I imagined the netting filling my mouth like gauze.

I did sleep some that night. I must have because I awoke to the sound of an old rooster crowing outside the window. I say “old” because he seemed to be confused, confused about the time. The room was black. Morning was hours off.

## In Sickness and in Health

His wife's email is open on the computer and he—his name is Robert Goodall—browses through it. He stumbles on one from the principal at their son's school. His son is there now. His wife is at Pilates. She likes it because it she needs to re-tighten her kegels. He wipes his hand on his jeans and opens the email. There are four in the series: me, Douglas Quinby, me, Douglas Quinby.

Thanks for understanding. You have no idea how much this means to me.

Rose

ps. 728 – 3391? And good memory!

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Rose,

Thanks for the update. I'm afraid I wasn't aware of your situation. I don't know how this could have slipped by me. I apologize for that. Please, keep me abreast of any developments,

and if you ever need someone to talk to, you can always call me. I gave you my card right? At the open house? You were in the library and you had that black skirt on. I remember only because Benny was hiding behind it. Please, if you need anything, don't hesitate to call.

Also, you needn't worry about Benny's privacy being compromised. We'll keep this quiet. I do think Ms. Miller should know. She'll be tactful about it, she's got our student's interests at heart. I wish I could say the same about everyone.

Please know that you and Benny will be in my prayers.

Doug Quinby

p.s. I'm serious. Call if you need anything.

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Doug,

Did he really? Oh god. I can write you a check for that. Just tell me how much.

I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, the way things have been going. It's a madhouse around here. Benny just came out of remission. That's the main thing. We probably should have let you guys know earlier, but I don't know, it's hard.

The whole thing is messing with his behavior, horribly, even here at home. He knows something is wrong, I've talked to him about it, but he can't quite process it, you know. He doesn't quite know what it is, or what it means for him. So it's not even just the disease, it's these emotions raging around inside him. He doesn't have the words for it. And I'm shouldering the brunt of it cause of course, perfect timing, Robert's up for tenure. Not that it was terribly different before, with the book, and the visiting gig at Pacifica.

Will you send Ms. Miller my apologies? And will you please keep this quiet? The last thing Benny's going to want is attention about this whole thing. I mean, don't misconstrue me, I'm going to sit down and talk to him about his behavior. This is no excuse. I just don't want a whole bunch of kids looking at him like he's some kind of weirdo. Thanks for understanding.

Sincerely,

Rose

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Mrs. Goodall,

I tried to reach you by telephone, but whoever answered hung up immediately.

Benjamin spent a few hours in my office today after an episode in Ms. Miller's class. He tore the pages out of three new books, and hit another student in the face, in the eye to be more exact, with the a hardback. We had to rush the other student to an eye doctor. We may need to have a conference. Please get in touch with me.

Sincerely,

Douglas Quinby

Robert finishes reading but he continues to stare at the screen for a long time, his hand over his mouth. Quickly now he closes her account and opens his own email. Yeah, of course I can find it. What do you take me for? I'll come by at 1:30. It's one o'clock now. He deletes the series of emails, and then empties the recycling bin. He makes himself a turkey sandwich, but only eats half of it. He clears the magazines from the coffee table, and arranges a couple of manila folders, a stack of student papers, and his own book. He has just settled onto the sofa with Bloom's *Herman Melville's, Moby*

*Dick*, when the doorbell rings. It's a slim young man with a backpack slung over one shoulder. He wears a snug pair of jeans, and a teal and white cardigan.

“Professor Goodall,” he says with mock surprise. “Imagine finding you here.”

Robert holds up the book. “You caught me at my studies,” he says.

“Sure I did,” says the boy, and he puts his hand on Robert's chest and pushes the two of them into the living room.

“Come here,” says Rose. “You've got chocolate on your face.” With a running start Benny hops into her lap.

Robert lays his book down and watches them. She licks her thumb and presses hard against his forehead. Benny winces and squirms out from under her.

“How did you even get it up there, you dork? You think you've got a mouth up there?”

“I've got one here and here and here.” He points to his forehead his elbow and his knee.

“That's three more cookies, if you ask me.”

“If we ask you, huh? Well, if you ask me, it's bed time pal.”

“I can put him to bed,” says Robert.

They go up stairs. Benny brushes his teeth and clutches at the hem of Robert's shirt. Robert watches his hands again, third time tonight. He then takes Benny into his room and tucks him under the blanket. He folds it back. Benny's shoulder is exposed.

“Where'd you get that?” Robert asks. He points at three bruises on Benny's shoulder, aligned like fingerprints. Benny looks at it like he's only now noticed that. Robert sits on the edge of the bed and folds his hands between his legs. “How's school?”

“I don't feel like talking, anymore” Benny rolls onto his side. “I'm sleepy.”

“Alright bud,” says Robert. “See you in the morning.”

Back downstairs Rose is reading a magazine in the study. Robert stands there, leaning, with a hand on the bookshelf.

“You see that bruise on Ben's shoulder?” he asks. “Where'd he pick that up?”

She doesn't look up from the magazine. “I don't know, hon. The playground or something.”

“Is everything all right at school, with him. I mean, he's doing well in class and everything?”

She closes the magazine and tosses it onto the pile on the end table. “You're being weird,” she says.

“No, I'm not. He's got a big bruise on his shoulder. I'm just concerned about him. What's weird about that?”

“Now you're concerned?” she says with a chuckle.

“Okay,” he says. “Not having this conversation.” He goes to the living room where his work is still spread out on the coffee table. He sifts through the essays, finds the one by Olen Wright and sets it atop the pile. He doesn't read it though. Instead, he picks up his book, looks at the dust jacket photo of himself and sets it down. He sits there for a long time, the house creaking like an old boat.

Later she comes up behind him. “You look deep in thought,” she whispers. There's a tone to her voice. Her earring dangles at his neck. “I'm sorry if I was sharp earlier.”

“No, I'm just distracted by school stuff.”

“I bet I can take your mind off of this tenure stuff.” She is at his other ear now, nibbling on it. “What do you want to bet?” She reaches over him and rubs his crotch. He takes her hand and stands up, leading her around to the edge of the couch, where he turns her around, her skirt twisting the opposite direction. He reaches under it and touches her and bends her over the arm rest. The leather squeaks against her skin. When he goes harder she moans and her voice grows husky.

Robert waits for a response to the question he's just asked. A girl in sweatpants, with a leopard

print headband is drawing whales in her notebook. A couple of students stare out the window. Robert paces slowly at the front of the class. He laces his fingers, drops his hands, then his head.

A slim young man in the back of the class perks up. "I don't exactly know the answer," he says "but, I'm interested in the way that the Ahab seems to be both lusting after the whale and trying to subdue it, or reel it in."

Robert raises his head, opens his eyes. "Can you link that up with the movement of capital in the industrial revolution?"

Olen chuckles under his breath.

"I guess, but frankly I'm more interested in how that echoes with the book's homoeroticism." The girl up front stops doodling.

"Go on," says Robert.

"Well I mean, it is *Moby Dick*, right?" A few snickers. A shuffling in the seats. Olen looks at Robert, crinkling his nose in a playful way. Robert turns on his heel, slowly now, and begins to pace. "And he is a *sperm* whale," Olen continues, "And he sleeps, Ishmael I mean, sleeps in the same bed with Queequeg on like page three. I just don't know why we haven't talked about any of that."

"Go right ahead," says Robert, gesturing to the boy palm up, as if he were offering him an apple. "Take it away, Captain."

"Well, he's a big white whale, for one," says Olen. Now people are outright giggling. "I mean just look at the cover." Everyone in class closes their books. "I mean that's pretty phallic, if you ask me."

"That's so *astute* of you, Olen" says Robert. "Keep going."

"Well." Olen scratches his head. His voice is quieter now, infused with a touch of hesitancy. "There's the scene where they run into *The Bachelor* and it's chalk full of sperm oil."

There are a few more giggles that soon peter out under the professor's gaze. Robert is still now,

hands clasped behind his back.

“What of it?” he asks.

Silence, save for a woman's heels clicking down the hallway.

“There are clearly homoerotic threads woven through the book,” says Robert. “I'm asking, what of it?”

No one ventures an answer. The muscles in Olen's jaw pulse silently.

“I ask because I've never found it all that compelling. Do you guys know Glen Davis? He's an associate professor here.” Robert scratches behind his ear. “A good guy. He teaches a queer theory course in the spring, if you're interested. They read Hawthorne and Melville along with some other things. He may have a better idea of how to take it a little deeper, but I've just never found you can *go* anywhere with the argument.”

The next day he has office hours, but no one has come, so he goes to the drinking fountain to fill up his little electric water heater. When he returns Olen is there, sitting in Robert's chair thumbing through a book on his desk entitled, *World Systems Analysis*. Robert leaves the door open.

“God this book looks awful,” he says. “This is really what were doing next?”

“Out of my chair, Olen.”

“Oh come on *professor*, I thought you wanted to see me.” He picks up the wooden apple that holds Robert's pens. “You have a change of heart?”

“We need to talk. This has to stop.”

“What?” says Olen. “It *has* stopped. Nothing's happening. I'm only here because *you* told me to come. I thought we were going to--” he makes the quote sign with his hands, “steer clear of each other.”

“Out of my chair. I'm asking you nicely.”

Olen pushes back from the desk but he doesn't stand.

“Why did you invite me to your house, then? That's what doesn't add up. If you really wanted it to end it then you wouldn't have invited me over and had me fuck you in the living room.”

Robert shut the door. “Get out of the chair, now.”

“Ooh,” says Olen, “look who found his *balls* all of a sudden.” He stood up and pushed the chair toward him. “Here, it's yours.” Robert barred his exit.

“Please,” he said. “Can you please please please just be a little more... tactful.”

“That's a hell of a word for it.”

Robert cancels class the next day, leaving a note on the classroom door that claims he's come down with the stomach flu. It frees him up to pick Benny up at school, who would otherwise have to ride the bus home. It's early out.

The parking lot is quiet though, as are the halls. No kids or parents. Robert heads for the office, but runs into the school mascot, a tiger in a basketball uniform. The tiger motions with his arm and trots down the hall towards the gymnasium. The bleachers are rumbling with tiny sneakered feet. Robert spots Ms. Miller's class, at the far end of the bleachers. She has her mouth closed, her cheeks puffed, and the kids are doing the same. It's a way to keep them quiet. Benny's hood is pulled over his head. The tiger mascot takes the floor and the gym grows quiet.

“We have something very special planned for you guys today...”

Robert sneaks around the front of the bleachers. Ms. Miller says it's fine if he takes Benny home. Robert waves him down. Benny squeezes through the row of classmates and down the benches to his Robert's side.

“Let's go, bud.”

“No, I don't want to. It's the StrongMen today.”

The mascot is handing the mic over to an ox of a man, dressed in a blue t-shirt that says StrongMen in white. On the back it says, John 3:16.

“What is this?” Robert asks, pointing at the Ace bandage that Benny is wearing on his wrist. “You hurt yourself?”

Benny shakes him off, trying to see around his dad's legs.

“We're here with a message,” says the StrongMan. He's pacing from side to side. “If you believe in yourself, then you can do anything you want in life. All you have to do is believe. So let's hear it. Before we show you what we can do, we want to hear it from you. So, chant after me, let's hear it. “I believe in me.”

Benny shouts it, along with the rest of the gymnasium.

“You call that believing? I want you to get real deep down.” The man hunkers down as if he is lining up to take a snap. “Right down low, from the bottom of your gut, I want to hear it. I believe in me!” The kids roar. “Now that's what I'm talking about. Now, you ready to see some feats of strength...”

“Benny,” said Robert. He presses against his cheek, drawing his attention. “What happened to your wrist? Did you hurt yourself? Or did mommy put that on you this morning?”

“Dad,” he says. He tries to squirm around him. A spiderman bandage is pasted on his elbow Robert catches the end of it and yanks it off.

“Hey,” says Benny. There's nothing underneath it but healthy skin.

“Did Mom put this on you?”

“That's my Spiderman bandaid.”

“This is just your standard phone book here,” says the StrongMan. “It has not been altered in any way. And my volunteer here, is going to inspect it for me.” He hands it over to a little girl in in cowgirl boots. She thumbs through it. “Any pages cut? Anything strange about it?”

“No,” she squeaks.

“Now, do you guys believe I can rip this thing in half? Yeah? Let me hear it, 'I believe!'”

Robert grabs Benny's hand. “Come on. We're out of here.”

“Please just this one, please, please, please.”

The man in the middle of the basketball court is doubled over, grunting, as he rips the book bit by bit. When he finishes he shoots two free throws, one with each half of the book. For a moment the kids are awestruck, then they begin to chatter with each other. Robert leads Benny toward the exit, but leaning there, in the door frame, is the mascot. He's taken his tiger head off. It's the principal, Doug Quinby.

“Oh, hey,” he says, catching Robert by the shoulder, “You must be Robert Goodall. I don't think we've had the pleasure. Officially anyway. I remember seeing you at the Open House.” He extends a tiger paw, notices the costume, and retracts it. “Can we, uh, talk for just a second?”

“We're really in a hurry,” says Robert, inching his way down the hall. “I'm sure Rose will be in touch though.”

Doug puts his arm around Robert and ushers him away from the noise. The StrongMan is now discussing all the thing you can be if you simply believe in it, Astronaut, Firefighter, but not just those, other dreams, whatever you want, heck, even a computer programmer.

“I, uh, heard about...” He nods towards Benny and fails to finish the thought. Benny is walking beside them, dragging his hand along the tiled wall

“I don't know what you're talking about, and I'm afraid we have to run.”

“Rose has thankfully been, keeping us, up to date. She, uh, sent an email, to the nurse about the,” he hesitates again, “the situation.”

“Is that right?” says Robert. Doug is still trying to console him. His tiger arm wrapped around his shoulder. “I'll have to ask her about that.” Robert raises his eyebrows. “But we've got to run.”

“Doctor's appointment?” asks Doug, voice full of contrition.

“Sure,” says Robert. “Doctor's appointment.”

Rose sets a plastic bag from Walgreens on the coffee table, before putting on water for tea.

“The cold season,” she says, with a snuffle, “is upon us.” Robert rustles through the bag: Dayquil, Nightquil, Sudafed, Robitussin, Zycam, a value pack of five hundred Ibuprofen, EmergenC's, Vitamins B, C and E, Echinacea with Golden Seal, Licorice Root, and a LiquidSilver tincture. The receipt totals over a hundred dollars.

“Will you call Benny down here?” Rose asks. “I'm going to make him some tea. There's something going around.”

The Ace bandage is still on the table. Robert crumples it into his pocket and calls for Benny.

“I ran into Doug Quinby today,” says Robert. The kettle has begun to whistle, but now it stops. The stove clicks when Rose turns it off.

“Do you want a cup too?” she asks from the kitchen.

“We need to look into that gifted program again. That school is awful. There was an assembly with this Christian organization.” Tea mugs clatter on their plates. “You know Doug, don't you? The principal? He was wearing this ridiculous tiger costume. That's the sort of place it is. The principal's dressed up as the fucking mascot. Real *enlightened* education over there.”

Rose came about balancing three tea mugs on three platters. “Wait, you were there *today*? Didn't you have class?”

Robert tears into the box of Licorice Root Tea and rips the tops off the tea bags, all three at once.

“You're just skipping class, now? How's *that* go over at the department?”

Robert dismisses it with a flick of the hand.

“No, I'm serious, hon” she says. Her voice intent now. “What about tenure?”

“Oh come on. I'm a shoo in.”

“A shoo in, huh? So why so much time in the office? Another *book* idea you're flirting with?”

“Just a lot of work getting ready for lecture. I don't get to dress up in a tiger costume all day.”

Robert blew on his tea.

“God that guy is such an idiot.”

“That's a little unfair, isn't it.” Rose dunked her tea bag, and set it on the platter. “I mean, it's not like you actually talked to him.”

“No, I did,” said Robert, watching her. “We had a little chat.”

“Hmm.” She took a quick sip. “Oops, I forgot the honey. And did you call Benny? What's the deal? His tea's getting cold.” She stood up and headed toward the kitchen. “BENNY!”

No sound from Benny's room upstairs. In the kitchen, a spoon was clinking against the mug, then silence. He fingered the bandage in his pocket, then went and stood in the entrance to the kitchen. Rose leaned against the counter, cupping the tea in both hands.

“I meant to ask you? Did Benny hurt his arm? He had that bandage on.”

“No. I don't know.” She shook her head. “I didn't see anything wrong with it. But he was complaining so I helped him put it on. He said it made him feel better.”

“Is it a good idea to encourage that, like if he's not actually hurt?”

“Wow Robert,” she said. She smiled over her tea. “You are just *full* of parenting suggestions recently. It's so sweet of you to care--”

“Would you stop with this negligent parent shit? I'm in the office a lot. I have a job. Sorry if it takes a little bit of time.”

“A *job*, huh. What kind of *job* we talking about here?”

Robert toes at the carpet, where it meets the tile. “What is that, like an attempt at wit? A double

entendre?”

“You're just really into this *job* of yours.”

“I'm not going to have this conversation again.

He retreats to the living room, but she pursues him.

“Oh, *now* you don't want to talk. Come on. It's only a question of who. I bet I could dig around a little and find out.”

“This is a waste of time. I've got more important things to be doing.” Robert grabs his briefcase.

“Let's throw out a couple of names. A litmus test of sorts. Anna Kourbel? Is it her?”

“So, you're looking through their essays now? You should be proud of yourself, really.”

“You gave her an A on that last one. God, it sounded like it was written by a fifteen year old.

Of course that's probably part of the appeal.”

“You are out of your mind. I'm not sleeping with Anna Kourbel.”

“Oh,” she scoffed. “*That's* reassuring. It's not Anna Kourbel, everybody.”

“Or anyone else for that matter.”

“OK, Robert, sure.”

They are silent for a moment. Rose brushes a few cookie crumbs from the arm rest of the couch.

“You ever bring her here?” she asks. The ceiling creaks. Rose is on the verge of tears. “Have you?”

“Mom?” It's Benny. He's upstairs, clutching at the rails of the banister. “Have you seen my lego man?”

“It's bed time, Benny.”

“It's not time for toys,” says Robert. “I'll be up in a second to tuck you in.”

Ben lingers for a moment, then dashes off to his room. Rose raises her wrist to her forehead as if she's checking for a fever.

“Oh god,” she says.

“I should go up.”

They stand there in silence for a minute longer.

“What?” says Rose. “You look like you're going to say something.”

Robert pats her shoulder and heads upstairs. Benny is lying on the floor with a coloring book. He doesn't want to go to bed. He says it's too early, but Robert bribes him with a story.

“Where do you want the story to be set?” asks Robert.

Rose walks down the hall, shutting the bedroom door behind her.

“Africa,” says Benny.

Africa it is. Robert makes up a story about a boy lost on the Serengeti. He is making his way to Nairobi, where his parents await him, but there's no food or water. He drinks from puddles, and later he finds an egg, an ostrich egg, which he eats. Hyenas are circling in to eat him when a jeep pulls up. Hunters. Amongst the group is the boy's father. Benny misses the ending, as he's already asleep.

In their bedroom, Rose, too, is under the covers, not asleep, but eyes closed. Robert undresses quickly. When he shuts the blinds, a draft from the window gives him a chill, so he hurries to the closet and pulls out a heavy wool blanket, one more cover for the cold.

**Others Fish for Water**

Judy remembered a photo that her mother owned, a photo taken in the year that her older brother, Charles, kidnapped her father. Kidnapped him, when just before she had been poking at the keys of the upright piano. Yes kidnapped him, while a policeman just stood there and watched, drug him out to the navy blue Buick, her brother's hands like cuffs on her father's wrists. His spectacles shattered on the stoop. Her mother sat placid and unbreathing in the plaid upholstered chair. Kidnapped, she had thought, at the time, and continued to think, even when told otherwise.

The three of them were just now sitting down for coffee, Judy, Charles and Charles' second wife, Fawn. It was almost noon, and Judy had yet to change out of her bathrobe, but what did it matter, it was her day off.

“Isn't she just the most adorable little grand daughter?” Fawn passed the photo to her.

Charles reached for another photo. He was wearing a watch, a garish watch, sleek and gold banded, with a black face and slim metallic hands.

“Have you guys seen my lighter?” Judy patted the pockets of her robe. “I swear I had it a minute ago.”

“Did I tell you that Fawn quit smoking?”

Charles squeezed Fawn's arm and they exchanged a look that made Judy ill.

“Is today the first?” she asked. Fawn began to count on her fingers.

“Well I guess *she* didn't steal it then did she?”

“Seven months ago now,” said Fawn. “But that's not that long, not really. I quit for three years once.”

“Three years, huh?” said Judy. She found a book of matches and lit up. “I hope this isn't too much of a temptation, me smoking inside like this.” Judy set the pack, still open, next to the stack of

photos.

“Oh no no no. I'm fine.” She stiffened. “It's your house.”

“So,” said Charles. He was leaning back in his chair, hands interlaced behind his head. He was more handsome now than he'd been twenty, even thirty years ago: black and silvered hair, dark glinting eyes. Judy was eleven years younger, fifty one now, but she hadn't aged as well; then again, she wasn't as concerned.

“How long's it take to get from Butte from here?” asked Charles. “We probably ought to get going, if we're going to do it.”

“What's in Butte again?” asked Fawn.

“We've got plenty of time.”

“I just don't want to get back too late. We got to be at the airport early tomorrow.” He'd said to this to Judy six or seven times now.

“That reminds me,” he said, scooting away from the table. “Mom wanted me to give you something.”

Charles and Fawn had flown to visit Edith on the first leg of their vacation, then stopped off to say to hello to Judy before jetting back to the bay. When he returned to the kitchen, he had something cupped in his hand. They clicked like dice on the table: little brass mummies, the size of crickets. They were from Egypt. No one knew how their father had come by them. They used to lie on a doily, on the piano at home. Judy had always wanted to play with them. She hadn't seen them in years.

“They were dad's,” said Charles. “Mom's worried she might lose them.”

“I know whose they are.” Judy looked at the pair. They were nearly identical, tiny sarcophagi painted with blue enamel, except one had an eyelet at the top. She pulled at it, and sure enough, it still worked, the tip of a pencil slid out from the sarcophagus' feet. The other was a penknife with a mean little blade.

“I just figured you'd want them.” He stuffed his hands into his pockets.

“Wait, so who's giving them to me now? You or mom?”

“Well,” he said. “I mean, come on, Mom can't even dress herself anymore. Maybe if you went to visit.”

Judy slid the figures toward Charles. “You should just keep those for yourself.”

Judy's mother, Edith, taught piano lessons at the local church and she played spotlessly, with dainty fingers and a rod straight back. How Great Thou Art. Abide with Me. A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief. Hymns chosen more for their simple, protestant melodies, than any religious fervor. Her father played too, had played a lot when he was younger, but Judy didn't remember it well, though it was rumored that when he did play it was something to be heard. Edith taught Judy until the night of her first recital, after which Judy refused to play again. The lessons were held in the afternoon before Edith started on dinner, chicken, maybe, that John would wash down with a touch of bourbon.

In those years summers came to town with grace. The sunlight in the practice room shone through the blinds with honeyed warmth. Kids gathered in bike gangs to roam neighborhoods, hop off curbs, skin their elbows. Little boys got stuck high in the spruce trees and the bravest of girls teases them, then climbed aloft to coach them down. Bluegrass thrived and lawnmowers hacked and the irrigation ditches swelled to their brims, the occasional kid caught and drowned in the muddy manure smelling water. And the fathers, the fathers piled into their trucks beside their sons and drove down to fish the north fork of the Shoshone.

“Keep your arms still,” her mother would say. “Move only your hands. Practice, practice, practice.”

Her mother sang along to her playing, and Judy remembered the sound of her voice fondly, the small, pure, woeful tone of it.

A poor wayfaring man of grief  
Hath often crossed me on my way,  
Who sued so humbly for relief  
That I could never answer nay.  
I had not power to ask his name,  
Whereto he went, or whence he came;  
Yet there was something in his eye  
That won my love; I knew not why.

Jonathon Davis Kerr, Judy's father, took her fishing only once, on a Sunday afternoon, two weeks after he was let out of rehab, only a month and half after his wife and son had had him committed.

“What do you say us kids go fishing, huh? Get out of your mother's hair.”

Judy had always watched as her father and brother loaded up their gear, watched as if it were a ritual she was forbidden to take part in, the lowering of the vests from the garage wall, the inspection of flyhooks for rust, clamping a barb or two, and she watched now from the grass near the driveway, so giddy with the thought of fishing, that she failed to notice that the men were not discussing leader length or the latest hatch; they were silent and wary as they loaded their fly rods into the bed of the truck. Judith was given a spinner. On the way out of town they stopped Red's Gas and Liquor and John came out with a small paper sack.

“Got a little bait here,” he said, setting the bag on the floor near Charles' feet. “That's for you, Pumpkin.” He mussed the top of Judy's head.

“Bait?” Charles nudged the bag with his toe. “We don't bait fish.”

“Oh. Sounds like we got ourselves a volunteer. Is that what I'm hearing? You're gonna teach

your sister how to fly fish?" said John. "What do you think, Pumpkin, you want Charlie to teach you?"

"Yes," she said, "but what's bait?"

"Worms, darling, worms. I'll show you when we get there." John shot Charles a look that caused him to turn away. He was now staring out at the horizon, at Heart Mountain, his arm draped along the window, muscled and bronzed in the sun.

They drove past Buffalo Bill Reservoir and into the conifers near the east entrance of the park. Alder patches clung to the banks of the Shoshone and soon they were scraping through them. A shallow riffled flashed in the sunlight. A log lay stranded across the river, and just below it the water eddied and deepened.

Charles was already hiking upstream when John said, "Judy, have your brother show you how to tie that hook on."

Charles paused.

"You change your mind about the bait?" asked John. He turned to Judy. "Looks like you're brother's a little busy today. We'll get him to teach you some other time. Schedule a lesson. Today it's you and me."

Judy's father set the ferrules and strung up the rod, while Charles disappeared through the brush. He explained how to tie the knot: thread the line through the eyelet, twist five or six times, back through the hole, wet it and pull.

"I know how to do it," said Judy.

"Oh, you do now?"

"Sure I do."

He showed her how to cast and retrieve and soon Judy was slinging night crawlers into the hole while her father's fly line whistled upstream. He kept glancing up river, but the never wandered up

there. Instead he took frequent excursions back to the truck, returning each time a little rosier in the cheeks, not the way he was in the morning, quiet and blue, but jolly evening time dad, just the way Judith liked him.

On the night of the recital Edith did Judy's make up. It was the first time she'd worn it. She was twelve. The three of them ate a good meal, pot roast with potatoes, carrots and gravy. Charles was living in Laramie by then. John had drunk two glasses of wine, and when he went to pour a third, Edith took the bottle —without so much as a word—and tossed it into the trashcan. She then doted on Judy, assured her of her ability and reminded her of things she mustn't forget: don't rush the tempo, it's easy to rush while performing; curtsy before and after the piece; dynamics, dynamics, dynamics.

That night the hall behind the altar seemed a dimly lit passage preceding a great stage, and there Judy waited. She spotted one of her mother's students, Kelen Albright, and her family, all seven of them, huddled up in the corner exchanging hugs. Kelen was to play first, Judy second. She looked over her music. She twiddled her fingers through the air. She peeked out the door that lead to the altar. Kelen Albright was plunking away at the piano. Judy had to smother a giggle; Kelen played just the way she looked, thick throated, floppy armed, meaty fingered music.

The song ceased its plodding. Applause rustled through the room. And Judy, with a nudge from her mother, scurried out to the piano. The bench was a little ways from the keys but she didn't want to scoot it forward. As the back of her legs brushed the wood, she realized she had not curtsied. She straightened up, but no she couldn't curtsy now, now that she had turned her back to them. So she sat again. Then she realized how far she was, truly, from the piano. She slid to the edge of the bench. She reach the whites, almost, but not the black keys.

She would have to move the bench. She would have to.

A cough echoed off the church walls. People shifted in their pews. Judy stood and scooted the

bench and it shuttered across the floor. She dried her hands on her dress and looked at the keys in front of her. Für Elise. A door opened and she heard the swish of a car. She looked at the keys, at her hands. Für Elise. The lights buzzed. The keys, the long white teeth and stubby black fingers, the keys, the patterns, two then three, they swam in front of her. She pressed a note and it sounded throughout hall, it sounded and it sounded wrong. Too high maybe. Yes too high. She plugged another, but no. Judith saw her mother silhouetted in the backstage door, watching. She looked at the empty music stand. No one moved in the auditorium. She looked at the keyboard again. It was useless looking at it. She swallowed, and then, thankfully, her legs lifted her up, and she floated from the seat. She floated faster now. She was being whisked from the people and the altar and the lights flashing beside her. She ran past her mother and down the hall and out a doorway into a cool fall night. Two men stopped their conversation and turned to look at her with cigarettes in their hands. *Well look what we have here*, one said. She tucked back into the hall and cowered near the door. Her mother was gone. The other performers turned to look at her but said nothing. The next pianist struck up her recital number, Handel, a light fingered, joyful, allegretto piece.

Judith's father drove her home that night. It occurred to Judy that perhaps he had missed the botched performance. Maybe he'd been out in the lobby sneaking a drink; it would be just like him to do that. He killed the lights as the truck slid into the driveway. He didn't move to get out; he looked straight ahead at the white panelling of his house, at the concrete stoop where his spectacles had shattered four years earlier. She knew now that he had seen it. He was going to tell her something, some useless thing like "I'll love you no matter what." She squeezed her eyes shut and wished more than anything that she could disappear.

"Fuck recitals," said John. "Fuck em."

Judy looked down at her hands. They were clutching at the pleats of her dress

"I never liked em. It's not the real thing. It's practice." John then imitated the sound of Edith's

voice and he smiled just a little. “Practice, practice, practice.”

He smacked the steering wheel with the butt of his hand. “Let's go in and have some warm milk. It'll help us sleep. It'll be good to sleep.”

Judy took a certain sadistic joy in leading Fawn and Charles around Butte. Charles lived in Sausalito now. Fawn had a “little place” in Sausalito. They said it in that way, too, every chance they got, *Sausalito*. They wore seersucker and sat on wicker chairs and drank Napa valley Chardonnay. Judy wanted to show Fawn some Kerr family history. Their father had grown up in Butte. His father had worked in the mines, and died young because of it. So Judy carted them around to all the shoddiest places in town, as if the Kerr family mettle was forged in those smoky rooms, as if *dive* were code for *authenticity*. All a bunch of noble peasant, working class hero bullshit, that she herself didn't believe in; they'd had a beautiful mahogany piano growing up. Their father's drink was the Old Fashioned. The only member of the Kerr family sliding towards lower class was Judy herself, and she couldn't even do *that* right: she'd secretly Googled “dive bars in Butte” that morning, before they left town. They ate pasties at Joe's, and drank light beer at Jim's. Charles picked up a rural accent, a slight one, stupidly southern. Judy couldn't tell if it was ironic or not. Who was kidding whom, here? He was having too much fun, which was suddenly *not* the point. Maybe it had never been. Then what, pray tell, *was* the point? Something something trappings of success. Which wasn't *all* jealousy on her part, but most of it was. She knew that. Just like she knew that measuring the height of someone else's success was as difficult as measuring the depth of one's own suffering. Or anyone else's for that matter.

“Whadda ya'll think?” asked Charles. “We headin' down to the mines? Or ya'll up for another round?” He slapped the bar. All the patrons turned to look, save one drunk hunkered down at the far end, an old man with ears as big as catcher's mitts. Looked like he hadn't found reason to move in ages, simply refilled his drink with his tears.

“I’m feeling kind of tired. Maybe we should head on home.”

“I’m with Judy on this one,” said Fawn.

“Come on, I thought that was the whole point. Go to the Berkeley Pit.”

Judy had saved the pit for last. After they shut down the mine, the crater filled with water, creating a lake. It was Butte's biggest tourist attraction. The water itself was blood red, acidic, rich in heavy metals. Three hundred fifty two geese landed there once. All of them died. Now a man was paid to shoot blanks to prevent birds from landing. There was also a gift shop. It sold cute copper trinkets.

“We have to check it out,” said Charles. “It’s a part of the Kerr family heritage.”

“You see that?” asked her father. He pointed out at the fishing hole. He had leaned in too close and she could smell his breath, warm and sweet, a little rotten. Judy had thrown her rod onto the rocks because she hadn’t caught a single fish and when her dad came back from his most recent excursion to the pickup she was sitting on a boulder pouting.

“See how there’s no ripples. No rings in the water.” His head weaved beside her and he stumbled over a rock.

Judy looked out at the hole and she heard a tiny plop and saw concentric rings spread across the surface.

“There’s nothing. It’s like a mirror. There’s nothing rising. Got to go subsurface.”

Judy heard another plop and saw the rings again, but her father was clenching her by the shoulder and the look on his face was so straight, so serious that she didn’t dare tell him otherwise.

“This is one of most mysterious parts of fishing right here. Fishing the water.”

He looked up at the river’s surface, which was now still. He nodded to himself.

“Fishing the water, he said in a whisper. “Those trout are out there, Judy.”

Another plip sounded from the water, this one smaller. He was attempting to clamp a lead weight around the line.

“But they’re not going to tell us where they are. Not right now. But they’re out there. They have to be. This is perfect water. They have all the cover they could ever want.”

A girl in Judy's class, Maggie Hunter, held a soiree for her birthday. She insisted it be called a soiree. Judy took that very seriously. It was, after all, her first birthday soiree. The girls mingled with the girls, commenting on their dresses in shrill, self-conscious voices. The boys huddled together like a football squad. Occasionally one would get pushed out into the open carpet. He would turn red and muscle his way back into the group. The adults lingered in the kitchen with the adult drinks, trying to let the party develop on its own. It never did. Maggie switched albums after one or two songs. None of the boys asked any girls to dance. Soon they were talking loudly about going for a bike ride or scaling the water tower.

Someone flicked off the lights and the adults paraded out of the kitchen with a candled cake. The adults were all singing happy birthday, but one was singing louder than everyone else, belting it out in a drunken baritone: Judy's father. The kids hardly joined in and after the song finished and Maggie blew out the candles and the lights came on, Judy's dad just stood there in the middle of the room.

“You call that singing?” he said to the boys. “It's a birthday party. You're supposed to sing”

“Soiree,” someone said.

The uncomfortable silence was punctuated with the sound of forks scraping up frosting.

“You know what this party needs,” said John. “Some live music. That'd get it going.”

He'd meant to say it only to Maggie's dad, but he could no longer gauge the volume of his voice. The whole party turned to look. Edith sidled up to him.

“What do you say we leave, honey. Judy’s ready to go.”

“It was a pleasure to have you,” said Mr. Hunter. He reached out to shake his hand, but John didn’t take it.

“You guys don’t want some live music? I’ll play something. I don’t care.”

“Maybe some other time honey,” said Judy’s mother.

“I don’t know about that.”

John whispered something into his wife’s ear. With his nose like that he was the party clown. Judy didn’t know if she’d ever hated someone so much. Her mother was listening but frowning. She shook her head finally, in resignation, and kissed John on the cheek. He ambled up to the piano bench and lifted the lid on the keys.

Judy moved to her mother’s side. Edith’s breathing was shallow, her body still, as if *her* concentration might aid him. John hit a few notes. He paused, then he leapt into a number Judith had never heard, a jumbled, bluesy piece. He faltered over a few chords, the rhythm jagged, like it might disintegrate, and Judy felt her mother tense.

But he fell back into the rhythm, a rambling, syncopated, shuffle that came jumping out of his left hand. A rumble. Bass notes. His fingers bounced, but they fell with weight, not plodding, or plunking, but firm, sure. His foot tapped out the beat on the carpet, just a soft thump in the floor boards and he had folded himself over the keyboard, his face damn near his hands, like he needed to be that close to hear the music at all.

When his right hand joined in, twinkling like rain, high, high up in the register, before falling into those warmer, surer tones, Judy felt her mother soften beside her, and she was almost able to forgive her father for the stunt. He slapped out grace notes and chromatics, sliding into those eery blue tones, his left hand riding always on the back beat, his right hitting half a note ahead, slurring some of it together, punching out others so they pierced you right through. He thumped out a mean boogie.

Boogie with some slop thrown in. He played and he played the only song that he could have played, blues with too much bourbon in it, the bourbon creeping up on that bass note shuffle until it drug on the notes and weighed on his fingers, until the rhythm fell apart, notes jangling against each other, train wrecking into the silence from which it sprung.

The room was quiet suddenly and Judy's mother was smiling and she started to clap. The others in the room were stunned, but they gave John a courtesy clap. Judy felt them watching her and she wished she were invisible. She didn't think her father deserved an applause; he didn't deserve a damn thing.

Six months after their father died, Charles passed through town and stayed one night with Judy. They hadn't seen each other since the funeral, when the three of them, Judy, Charles and their mother had spread John's ashes near the east entrance of the park, up at a spring that fed the Shoshone. A large bird flew over the sun as they scattered the ashes. He had died, not of cirrhosis as Judy might have expected, but of throat cancer. She remembered standing in the mortuary with her mother. Her mother said something to the effect of *well at least he's at peace*, but Judy didn't think her father looked at peace, he looked jaundiced and remorseful.

It was a difficult and definitive time in Judith's life. It was the year she tried and failed to finish her bachelor's degree. It was the year Jimbo, her longtime boyfriend, started using meth and ran off with another woman. He would be found dead, seven months later, a single rifle round in his chest. It was the year Judy turned thirty-three.

Judy and Charles had just finished eating. She stood over the sink, scrubbing a plate.

"School's just not for everybody. It might've been the right thing for you, but it doesn't mean it's the right thing for me."

"Ok, yeah" he said. "Maybe, but I know Dad wanted you to finish."

“Oh come on Charles,” Judy scoffed, “let's not pretend you know what Dad wanted.”

Judy stacked another plate on the rack. The suds crackled and dissipated in the water, and Charles took another sip from his beer.

“Did mom tell you about Ronald Carson?” asked Charles.

“I haven't talked to mom in a while.”

“You remember Ronnie.”

Ronnie was a couple of years older than Judy. They'd never been friends, but everybody from Powell knew Ronald. He'd burnt down a barn once. He poured gas on the straw and lit a match, and torched his parents barn. He was eleven. He missed a year of school, no one knew where he went, and when he came back he went to Greybull to avoid the attention.

“He's running for State Representative. Burning down the House. That's his slogan, would you believe that? I can't get over it. I saw his TV ad, too. Little Ronnie, in cowboy boots. He's got his hands all stuffed in his pockets, thumbs out. *Ronald Carson. Burning down the House.* He's running on some Libertarian platform. Deregulation. No sales tax.”

“You've got to be kidding.”

“He might win, too. People like him.”

Judy hadn't seen the barn on fire, but she often saw it in her memory. The field, the water tower, miles away a toy fire engine races down the dirt road, and a little match stick barn in flames.

“Anybody ever figure out why he did it?”

“Just goes to show.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “Tell me,” she said. Her voice came out sharper than expected. “What's it show, Charles?”

“I don't know, Judy, it's just a saying.”

She wrung out the dish rag, and slapped it over the faucet.

“That Ronnie Carson,” she said, imitating Charles. “He sure made something of himself, against all odds.”

“You're reading too much into it, Judy.”

“I bet he even finished college.”

“Come on Judy this is crazy. What is this about? Is this about Jim leaving?”

“This is you and me, Charles.”

“Cause if not, then what is your damage?”

This shut Judy up. She chewed on her her top lip, and glared at Charles. He was picking at label on his beer, and he spoke, more quiet now, but with some resolve.

“You're just like Dad,” he said.

“Yeah?” she challenged.

“Yeah, you're unhappy, but you won't own up to it, and you resent other people because of it.”

“Bullshit,” she said. “Dad didn't resent anybody else. Nobody.” Judy dried her hands and tossed the towel onto the stovetop.

“OK, said Charles. “I'll give you that. He did one better. He took responsibility. He only resented himself.”

“God fucking damnit.” Judy's father tugged at his fly rod. She watched from the boulder, her knees pulled up to her chest. She hadn't caught a thing and it was official, she now hated fishing.

“How in the world did this--”

He laid his rod out behind him and began lifting at the yellow fly line, which was knotted in the alder patch beside the bank. He stood on his tippy toes and tugged up on the line. He tried to part the slender branches of the alder, but they were too tightly spaced and he thrashed about trying to break them, but the wood was too green. He couldn't get through. He looked up at the knotted mess and he

pointed at it.

“Fuck you, fly line.”

He slurred out the words, then he staggered backwards, caught his heel on a stone and spilled into the rocks. Judy stood to help him up, but he let out a shriek. He leapt to his feet and grabbed his fishing rod, and when he yanked it into the air, the tip snapped off with a crack.

He stood still and his arms went limp. He dropped the rod onto the rocks and turned around to look at Judy. His mouth hung open. Judy took a few steps toward him before she heard a rustling in the brush upstream.

Charles stopped when he saw the broken fly rod. The sun was getting low, dropping down into the canyon, and the light shone on the three cutthroat trout that Charles held on a stringer. They were tawny and beautiful in the sunlight, as if their scales were made of opal and brass.

“Get out a here,” said John.

Charles stepped back, struggling with his footing on the rocks.

“Me and your sister are having a moment, here. Me and her.” The two men stared at each other, then Charles made his way back into the brush.

He turned towards Judith.

“We--you and me--are having a moment here. There’s something to learn, here, from this whole thing.”

John stumbled forward, and she winced.

“There’s a lesson here, Judy. Sometimes you fish and you fish and you fish and you fish and you fish. And you fish and you fish and you fish.”

Judy looked up at her father; her hands were trembling. He swallowed, swallowed like he was swallowing a pebble from that very bank and he closed his eyes and didn’t say another word.

“Oh my god,” said Fawn. “Did you read this about the geese?”

The viewing stand jutted out over the water. No one had fallen in, yet. The distant, sulfurous hills were cut with roads and pricked with telephone poles. The sun was hideously bright. It seemed like a dream, like they had stumbled into someone else's bad dream.

“Well, we're here,” said Judy.

“This is disgusting,” said Fawn. “Disgusting. How could this happen? Who's fault is this?”

“Welp,” said Charles. He was still hamming it up with the accent. “I reckon it's somebody's fault, and I reckon that *same* somebody got off scot free.”

Judy was leaning over the rail, staring at the splotchy, red water. “Give me those mummies,” she said.

“What?” said Charles. The request had snapped him out of his accent. Judy liked that. It strengthened her resolve.

“Yeah, let me have them. Don't you remember? Mom *wanted* me to have them.”

They stared at each other, a standoff. Fawn tried to butt in, but Judy shot her a sharp look.

“Are you going to throw them in?” asked Charles.

“Yes,” said Judy, with a mean smile. “Yes, I am.”

She stuck out her hand, palm up.

“Ok,” he said. He set the figurines on her palm. “They're yours.”

She knew they were hers. Charles had never really shown any interest in them. They were hers and only hers, and somehow that prevented her spite. If she threw them in now, it would be for other reasons. Something she could not begin to articulate. She looked out at the water, then turned to Charles.

“You didn't actually think I was going to throw them, did you?”

“Judy, sometimes I just don't know what to think about you.”

“I mean, come on,” she said, “give me more credit than that.” And she slipped both of them into her pocket.

## Strictly for the Birds

I slept on the couch at my buddy Jim's house last night. Now, he and I are drinking in the kitchen, but it's yerba mate because Jimbo's on the wagon this week. I try to respect that. Coffee gives the both of us heartburn. He's found this mate stuff at the health food store. It's chock full of anti-oxidants and natural energy enhancers. The Argentinians, he says, have been drinking it for years. It's bitter though and it smells a little like a stable. Jim says he loves it, but he cringes at every sip. I can't help but think of how pathetic this all is, and how much I'd like a bloody mary about now, but I put it out of mind.

“You know what they say right?” he asks. He's still talking about not drinking. A sure sign his resolve is wavering. “They say it's a spiritual disease.”

“Would you get off your high horse and let me tell you what happened?”

He nods. Here's what I tell him.

“So when I left for work Rita said she was going to take the bird in to be put down. Did I already tell you about this? It's that macaw she got on Craigslist a couple of years ago. It's dying. It doesn't even have any feathers left. He was doing alright for a little bit. He had some spunk. He even tore apart that closet door. I told her he was just doing that remodel work for me, since I never got around to it. She failed to see the humor.”

“Huh,” says Jim. “Wonder why.”

“Well, he's not doing so hot now. Doesn't even have the heart to shit on my pillow, anymore. So, Rita's supposed to take him in while I'm at work. Anyway, we have this big accident at the mine, and I had a ton of paperwork to do, all kinds of accountability stuff, and after that I end up going to the bar.”

“Somebody get killed?”

“No, one of the guys who does roof reinforcement had a cave in. Crushed his leg, but he's alive. The whole day could've been a lot worse.” That's one way to think of it.

“So I get home a *little* late, and Rita's pissed. And she hasn't taken the bird in. He's molting all along the back of the couch. It's his skin now. He doesn't have any feathers, so he's shedding skin. I never understood why she got that thing, you know. Not that I had anything against it.”

“No, of course, not,” says Jim.

“Right,” I say, despite the tone in his voice, “I just hated to see the stupid thing suffering. So I tell her, Rita, this is a living breathing animal here, even *he* deserves a dignified death. Something to that effect.”

“So'd you shoot it?”

“I'm getting there.”

“Well, it's not like we got all day.”

In fact, all day is exactly what we have. I *could* get a room over at the Acoma. They've got weekly rates. Soft-core porn on the TV. Semen in the carpet. An aging bachelor's *Paradiso*. But no, Jim and I've got a full Saturday ahead of us. Rita's not letting me back in the house, not that I'd go back. And it's Jim's first time on the wagon. He doesn't know how long a day really is. Especially in a place like this. Two metal chairs, a table, a pot of yerba mate. Your whole life ahead of you. Except for the half that's already gone.

“Well, you wouldn't believe what happened,” I say, trying to recapture Jim's attention. Hard to hold the attention of a recovering drunk, first day out of the blocks. Either that or I'm a shitty storyteller.

“Were you drunk?” Jim asks. “Cause if you were drunk I'd believe it.”

“I stole the bird,” I say.

He just nods as if to say, yep, I would believe that.

“Well I didn't steal it, but I threw it in the car. And I said to her, Rita, this creature deserves a little dignity.”

“Clearly, this isn't about the bird.”

“You know I never liked that animal. I wanted a dog.”

Of course, I'm always telling myself that: if I *only* had a dog. I'd get out more, get some exercise, maybe form some kind of spiritual connection with nature. Sure. I'd probably stop drinking too. Fall back in love with my wife.

“I just don't see the point in telling yourself it's about the bird,” says Jim. “It's about Rita.”

“Jesus Jim that's brilliant. What'd you get on your SATs?” I sip at my coffee, oh *not* coffee, fucking hay bale in a mug. “One day on the wagon and you sound like you studied with Freud himself.”

He tugs on his chin.

“Yez,” he says, “I am senzing a leetle beet of reziztance. Iss zis a repressed anger towards ze ur-father?”

“Anyway I put Truffles in the car and drove all the way out to the Bisti. And I've got a whole box of shells with me, in case, I don't know, drunk as I was, I missed twenty times.”

“Hold on. What did Rita say?”

“What *could* she say?”

The truth is she didn't say anything. Not a single word. And what did *that* mean? That after a year of bluffing this is finally the end? That she didn't want to wake Hannah with another fight? That she *wanted* me to do it, because frankly that bird *needed* to be put out of its misery? That she— questions questions questions. You know what? I'm just not going to think about it.

A smile creeps onto Jim's face, like he's just realized something wonderful. “And the bird's name is Truffles?” he asks.

I give him a look.

“I just don't remember you ever calling him by his name. I can't imagine *why*.”

“It's a fine name,” I say, “An old family name as a matter fact. My great, great ur-father's name.”

This elicits a smile.

“Anyway, we're cruising along, Truffles is in his cage, on the seat beside me, and, I shit you not, Bob Dylan's version of that one song comes on. You know, *I see my life go shining, from the west down to the east*. And Truffles, is just kind of, you know, bobbing his head to the music. Like he *knows*.”

Jim shakes his head as if to say, you're a terrible liar.

“Ok,” I say, “that part didn't happened.” I swirl the mate around in my mug. “So I guess the thing is, we're out there, I've got Truffles out of the cage and I've got the headlights on him, ok?”

“He didn't just fly away?”

“No,” I say, “this isn't that type of story. His wings are clipped. Anyway, I've got, what, *three quarters* of a bottle of whiskey in me. I'm saving the rest for the drive home. The whole thing *should've* been easy. I've never had any problems killing animals. Never. You know me. I can't even *count* how many animals I've killed.”

“Countless,” says Jim.

“Innumerable,” I say. Utter bullshit. For what it's worth, I'm glad he's off the sauce. Even if it won't last more than a week, which is the best I've ever done.

“And anyway, I didn't shoot him,” I say, “I just left him out there.”

“You're shitting me.”

“I know,” I say. “I know, I know. He chased the car for a while. Or I imagined he did. He couldn't have gotten far though.”

Jimbo sets down his mug, as if he's going to say, that is the most lowdown, despicable, shit bag thing you've done in your entire life. But! Good man that he is, sensing how that would play right into the way I'm just *reveling* in self-destruction here, he changes his mind. He lifts the mug and launches into his Viennese bit again. "Zis iz a clear case of ze clinical impotence," he says. "Ze gun," he pauses, "iz a symbol of ze penis."

"Well, I've got a different reading." He smiles, knowing, of course, that I know, that he knows, I *would*.

"Just so happens," I say, "that on the way home that one Elton John song comes on. The one from that kid's film. *It's the circle of life...*"

The Lion King just so happens to be Hannah's favorite movie. I know every word of it—but, but, hold the applause everyone—only because I put it on every chance I got, to keep her occupied.

"So I'm listening to this and I realize, hey, no need to feel guilty, right? This is the natural order of things. I mean, Truffles was *excited* to be out there. He's thinking he's got a whole new life ahead of him. Next thing he knows, boom, a hawk's on top on him."

"Or a coyote."

"Quite possibly."

We sit in the quiet, and I chew on my mustache, thinking. I kept hoping that Truffles would speak—one last word, you know—but he didn't. And that was the only thing the bird was ever good for. Like when we took him to show and tell and Hannah got him to speak for the class. None of them had ever seen anything like it. They thought it was pure magic. Imagine, another animal that can speak. The previous owners must have taught him. "Doolittle," was his only word, like the doctor, over and over, day and night, "Doolittle." It got old quick. Hannah though, she couldn't get enough of that. Killed her every time.

"He could speak, you know." And that's as close as I can get to telling him how I feel.

Jim brushes a few crumbs from the table. “He won't suffer much.” He's got to be as disgusted by me as I am, but he just won't give me the pleasure of telling me what an asshole I am. Crafty son of a bitch.

“So,” he says, “what are you going to tell Rita?”

“That at the sight of the gun Truffles died of an instant, painless heart attack and I dug his grave with my bare hands.”

I drain the last of the mate and chuck the mug into the living room. It hits a wall. Doesn't break. Fucking pointless. “I don't know what I'm going to tell her.”

Jim looks at me.

“Don't throw my mugs, man. If you want to throw mugs, go throw your own god damn mugs.”

That got him. We have a bit of a stare off, where he expects an apology that I *won't* give, despite wanting to. Not exactly ingratiating myself here. Of course it would be rather satisfying if he *didn't* let me stay.

“I have relinquished any right to my house,” I say, “And its mugs.”

“Is that what this is about? You need a place to stay?”

Jim sets his mate down. He's going to make me come right out and ask for it. This guy. Wow. The late-night cable at the motel is sounding better and better. What would be on? *Showgirls*? A Slim Whitman infomercial?

“Yeah, I do, actually.” I fold my hands on the table. “So? Can I?”

“OK. For a little bit. But no drinking. Not here. I don't need it.”

I pretend to mull this over, in order to give my response some gravitas.

“I can do that,” I say, thinking, there's no fucking way that's going to work, while a tiny hopeful part of me, with a squeaky little voice says, c'mon champ, you can do it. And to top it off Willie Nelson's *It's a Bloody Mary Morning* is on repeat in my head. That's the song that was *actually* on the

radio. On the way out anyway. On the way back I flicked it off, drove in silence.

“You ever been out there at night?” I ask.

“I’ve never been out there at all,” says Jim. “Wouldn’t go out there to save my life.”

The Bisti. What an awful place. You could spend your whole life wandering that desert and never find a thing worth finding. It looked frozen too, under that moon. And there I am shooting that stupid rifle. First at Truffles, who I missed by several Truffles. Must not have wanted to hit him anyway. Then I turn, shoot at the tire, hit the rim, it ricochets, doesn’t kill me, or Truffles, unfortunately. Last shot, the moon. A real herculean feat, that one. Bang, bang, bang. Doesn’t matter what you do. Just trying to fill the silence. Only made it bigger.

Jim finishes his mate and sets the mug atop the pile of dishes. “You’re going to be fine. We’ve got ourselves a bachelor pad. Might even be fun, right?”

He claps me on the shoulder. All that bluffing, and he’s downright *excited* to have a house mate. I guess he would be.

“Yeah.” I say. The squeaky little voice is cheering me on. “Maybe it’ll be all right.” I have to admit, it feels kind of good to say that. Or maybe it’s the mate. My energy is enhanced. My oxidants have been safely neutralized.

“Better than all right,” says Jim. “I’ve got some new cd’s.” He points to some discs spread out on the carpet. “I joined a cd club. So just poke through those whenever. And let’s grab you a couple of blankets. And a clean towel. What else?”

He scratches at his head.

“You’re more than welcome to the fridge,” he says, “but I don’t guarantee there’s anything in it.”

I go to pick up the mug, and I linger there for a while. The window’s open. Not much of a front yard. A big yucca is bending in the wind. You can hear it, a hoarse, papery sound, as if it had something to say.