Family

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When their wagon came in sight of the courthouse, the boy immediately looked to the barred windows of the jail. Since the journey had begun, he had been waiting to see her at those windows—he had even expected her to call his father's name—but now, confronted by a building that looked more like a log cabin than a center of government, he saw no one.

They tethered the mules, then walked to the sheriff's office, where they found an overweight grey-headed man sitting at a roll-top desk, fanning himself with a folded newspaper. The boy's father introduced himself, and the sheriff, who looked much too old to be startled by anything, raised his eyebrows.

"We come to see Mrs. Crawford," the father said in the level tone he normally reserved for reprimanding the boy.

"That a fact?" the sheriff replied.

"Yessir."

"You all her kin?"

"Son and grandson."

"That a fact?"

The boy wanted to announce that she was the finest grandmother in the world, but he had long ago learned to be silent when his father was talking. He bit his lip and stared at the floor. The father was as short as the sheriff was overweight, as bald as the sheriff was grey-headed, as calm as the sheriff was apparently hot. Slouched, the father again asked to see the prisoner.

The sheriff fanned himself with the folded newspaper. "Why?" he said.

"She is my mother."

"Maybe I believe that," the sheriff said. "Maybe I don't."

"Believe it," the father said.

The sheriff's face was narrow and flat, like the chinking between the logs of the jail. He seemed to hear not just with his ears but with the entire face, as though he could determine everything he needed to know about a situation merely by carefully analyzing the shape of a particular sound.
From the single office window, the sheriff watched the wagon’s slow progress around the square, until at last the vehicle disappeared down a side street. Then the sheriff returned to his desk and did a bit of paper work, drumming his fingers on the blotter. He finally rose, wiped the sweat from his eyes with a soiled handkerchief and went to the woman’s cell. She was sitting on the neatly made bed and looked up, from needlepoint, with eyes so dark, so accusatory, that the sheriff almost turned and walked back to his office. Before he could, however, her expression modulated, like a small piece of blue sky slowly becoming visible through storm clouds.

“Listen,” the sheriff said, “was that your son? I mean really.”
““Yes,” she replied.
“Where is the boy’s mother?”
“Don’t know.”
“Why not?”
“It’s not my bidness,” the old woman said sharply.
“Why even bring the boy?”
“Don’t know.”
“Not your bidness, right?”
The woman did not respond.
“Is it my imagination,” the sheriff said, “or does that boy look more like you than your own son?”

Busy again with her needlepoint, she did not bother to look up.
“My boy favors his father,” she said. “His boy favors me.”
“What did he ask you?” the sheriff said.
Now she looked at him, needle poised, eyes narrow. “He asked me,” she said, “where Williston lives.”
“I thought so,” the sheriff said.

When the boy awoke, the wagon was in a clearing, at the end of which stood a house larger than anything he had ever seen—a great mass of pillars, cupolas, chimneys, red tile and windows. The wagon was on a long gravel drive, flanked on either side by small oak trees. Beyond the small oaks was a grass lawn as smooth and without blemish as fallen ash. This place, the boy understood, was special—what heaven must look like. It seemed impossible that men could have built it, because the house was taller
than the hill behind the cabin where the boy lived with seven others. He felt like laughing or shouting but did not, because his father did not allow it.

"Your name is Crawford," the father told him at least once each day. "You don’t act like other people."

Being a Crawford, the boy understood, was something special, but, like balancing on a thin wire, it was also something very difficult. Not everyone could do it.

He watched the father, noticing how the lightest tap with the whip controlled the mules, realizing that, at some time or another, he had whipped them, too.

The wagon came up the drive slowly, wheels creaking, the father tapping the mules lightly, whistling softly to himself. The boy looked at the huge house, the enormous white columns which overwhelmed him as a thunderstorm would. Then he realized, without understanding where the thought came from or what it might mean, that when the small trees along the drive were fully grown, he would be dead.

The wagon stopped directly in front of the huge house. The father, leaving the mules untethered, told the boy to wait, then climbed down from the wagon, mounted the gallery steps and knocked on the door. A dark man in a coat answered, the two whispered at each other, then the father was led inside and the door was closed behind him.

The urge to climb down from the decrepit wagon and explore this magnificent world was overpowering, but should the boy’s conduct be discovered, he would be beaten, so he remained silently on the splintered wooden seat. His eyelids drooped. In his mind he saw children crowded around, laughing. He wondered what they were laughing at. Then he felt himself falling off the seat, and his eyes snapped open wide, and he realized that he had almost fallen asleep again.

He heard something in the grass and, turning, saw a stranger come around the side of the house, stop suddenly, eye the boy and the wagon, then walk on. He was tall and, to the boy, looked almost old enough to be a man, but not quite, with bright eyes and a wide-brimmed hat too large for his head.

The stranger, with an unfamiliar accent, said, "Who are you?" "Calhoun," the boy said.
The stranger considered this a moment, as though he were trying to make a decision, then said, "How old are you?"

"Seven."

"Where's your father?"

"We come across the mountains," the boy said.

"In that?"

"Yes. Daddy says this is the best wagon in the county."

"Then your father must be blind. We have at least twenty in better condition than that. You want to see them?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then, and I'll show you."

The boy shook his head slowly.

"Come on."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Daddy said to wait."

The stranger smiled, then spoke again in the same odd accent. "You're fine," he said. "You're waiting."

"I got to stay in the wagon."

"Why?"

"Daddy said."

"What's your father's name?"

"Calhoun."

"Same as yours?"

The boy nodded.

"What's your first name?"

"That's it."

"Your first name is Calhoun?"

The boy nodded.

"Good Lord," the stranger said. "What kind of first name is that?"

"It's my first name," the boy replied.

"Okay, then. What's your last name?"

"Crawford."

"Calhoun Crawford?"

The boy nodded.

"I know you want to see the barn. Come on down. I won't hurt. Promise."
The boy shook his head stubbornly. "Daddy wants me to stay in the wagon."

The stranger thought for a moment. The skin on his face was very light and smooth, like a girl's. Suddenly, smiling, he climbed into the wagon and sat on the seat beside the boy.

"What a mess," he said.

The boy looked at him.

The stranger took the reins and pulled lightly, saying, "Hup now. Hup up, boys."

The mismatched mules lurched forward, and the stranger guided them around the gigantic house where stood a white barn almost as large, almost as magnificent, as the house itself. The stranger stopped the mules directly in front of the open barn door. The boy peered inside and saw row upon row of freshly oiled and painted wagons.

"Father owns them all," the stranger said.

"How old are you?" the boy replied.

"Twelve. My brother is, too. We're twins. My name is Warren Williston, and my brother's name is Warner Williston. Nobody can tell us apart. Sometimes, even Mother can't. Father owns most of this valley. We're rich."

The boy was certain that this place was magical—like a castle. He thought of the one room where his family lived, of the mosquito netting across the windows. He looked at his own bare feet and at the polished boots of the stranger, and his face burned.

The stranger named the place where he and his family had come from. The boy had not heard it before. You could ride all day on a horse, the stranger said, and not cross their ranch. They were, they had been told, the biggest landowners in the state. The boy listened to the strange accent, trying to figure where it had come from, then said, "Do you own all this?"

"Father does," the stranger said, laughing. "But I will—some­day. And Warner. We will each take half."

The stranger pulled the reins lightly again, said "Hup," and the mules brought the decrepit wagon across the grounds, past the smokehouse and corrals, the stables and bunkhouse. A white-tail doe came out suddenly from the trees, peered at them, as surprised as they were, eyes black and very wide, then turned and disappeared again into the woods. All the fences were freshly
whitewashed, the buildings freshly painted. It was, the boy thought, it had to be, the finest place anywhere. Someday, he promised himself, he would live in such a place.

Eventually, the stranger directed the mismatched mules and the creaking wagon back to the front of the house and stopped in front of the huge white columns.

"Has your father come to talk business?"

"I think so," the boy replied.

"What kind of business?"

"Don't know."

"I like you," the stranger said. "I'll go find Warner."

He climbed down from the ancient wagon, bounded up the gallery stairs, opened the front door, turned and waved at the boy, then disappeared inside.

The boy sat alone in the wagon, rubbing his bloodshot eyes, watching a parade of squirrels climb down an oak tree and race across the freshly mowed lawn. Then the front door opened and his father appeared. Someone shut the door behind him.

The father stomped down the gallery steps, looking neither left nor right, climbed aboard the wagon and touched the mules once, lightly, with the whip. His eyes had narrowed and the line of his mouth was sharp, like the edge of a sheet of paper.

"You got to learn," he said, though he did not appear to be talking to the boy. "You got to learn. . . ."

"Daddy," the boy said.

"Hush," the father said, and the boy did.

They camped that evening deep in the woods by a stream and ate the jerky which the father had packed before they left, sitting along the bank of a stream, watching the evening sky close above them like a door. In the last few minutes of light, the first dark, the father placed a row of stones along the bank, and the boy, as he did each evening, practiced shooting with the Winchester almost as long as he. He sighted with the perfect eyes of youth and squeezed off each round slowly and patiently, as his father had taught him. The father watched silently, giving occasional advice, tone abrupt but not harsh.

"You may git angry," the father said, "but you cain't shoot that way. Drain it out yourself. Drain every bit of it."

The boy took one deep breath, then squeezed slowly.
“Good,” the father said.
Another deep breath.
“Good.”

When he was with the rifle, the boy felt as though he were holding onto his father, as though the blood of the older were circulating and merging with that of the younger. “Good,” the father said, a compliment of the boy, not his aim.

“When you are ten,” the father said, “and if you practice, you will be as good as any man.”

In mid-afternoon, the sheriff mounted his bay and rode across the long valley. The mountains were like storm clouds in the haze. Dust above the pines, searching for a breeze, hung motionless. On the road he passed the father and son in the decrepit wagon, coming the opposite direction. The boy was slouched in the seat, asleep, and the father’s eyes were upon the mules.

“Afternoon,” the sheriff said.
The old man stopped the wagon but did not take his eyes off the mules.

“You coming or going?” the sheriff said.
“Going.”
“Across the mountains?”
“Yessir.”
“Well, that is one long trip.”
The old man in the wagon said, “Yessir.” But his eyes were still upon the mules.

“I don’t suppose you want to talk,” the sheriff said.
“Nope.”
“I like that boy.”
“So does his mama.”
The sheriff rode on, stopping at a bend in the road to look back at the image of the wagon, a speck now on the landscape, moving so slowly that, had it not been raising dust, the sheriff would have believed that it was not moving at all.
The sheriff reached another bend in the road, and then he turned onto the long drive which led to the enormous, white-columnned house. When it was under construction, the sheriff had attempted to appear unimpressed, but, in truth, he had been and still was astounded.
One of Williston’s servants, an old dark-skinned man named Tidewater whom the sheriff had known forever, answered the door and led the sheriff to a two-story tall foyer surrounded by a balcony. Williston appeared on that balcony, then came quickly down the wide staircase.

“Well, good to see you, too,” the sheriff said.

“He was here,” Williston said in a voice more agitated than normal.

“I know that.”

“He wants me to drop the charges.”

“Know that, too.”

“I want to know what you plan to do. I’m law-abiding. I pay taxes. I have my rights.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him I would not drop the charges.”

“I figured,” the sheriff said.

“I will not allow people to destroy my property.”

“So you lose one horse. Better than someone’s life.”

The sheriff watched Williston emotionally step backward, though he physically did not move an inch. It was as though he had walked through an open glass door, then closed it in the sheriff’s face.

“Whose side,” Williston said, “are you on?”

“I’m not on anyone’s side.”

“Look,” Williston said, voice rising, echoing off the tall arched ceiling of the foyer, “if I don’t stand up for myself, those people will keep pushing me farther and farther until one day I will just fall off the face of the earth.”

“She shot a horse,” the sheriff said. “That’s not quite the same thing as looking Jesus in the face.”

“It’s the principle, man. The principle. Don’t you understand?”

“I understand that you are a stranger to these parts, a Yankee, no less. I understand that is not a crime. I understand that she and her people been here since before the Choctaw came, and I understand the Choctaw came a long time before my daddy was even born. I understand that her son is dangerous. I understand he would as likely fill your belly full of shot as tell you the time of day.”

“I refuse to be intimidated.”
I know that. That's why I rode out here. Any man can make the kind of money you have is not a stupid sonofabitch. Principle is fine, Mr. Williston, but so is a little common sense.”

Williston clasped his hands and squeezed so tightly that veins began to show. “I assume you want me to drop the charges.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I won’t. I simply won’t. I didn’t get to where I am now by running away from thieves. I will protect myself if I have to, but I thought that was your job.”

“My job is to keep the peace. That’s why I’m here.”

“Then talk to Crawford.”

“I did.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said the jail needs a better cook.”

The boy mentioned the stranger, with the odd accent, who had shown him the barn, the son of the man who owned the big house. The father raised his brows.

“He has a son?”

“Yes.”

The father considered this information a long while, whittling idly on a pine branch.

Sometime in the early afternoon, they loaded the wagon, and the father whipped the mules to life. Clouds had moved in that morning; the boy now smelled rain. Above them, beneath a purple sky growing steadily black, a chill wind rustled the tops of the pines.

They waited in an oak thicket beside a road. The father did not say a word, had not said a word in hours, and the boy began to daydream. He saw a freight train climbing the mountain grade, dark plume of smoke rising like a fist, and imagined himself an engineer.

“There,” his father said. The boy looked up in surprise.

Down the road at the base of the hill, three horses and three riders came on. As they neared, the boy recognized one rider as the stranger who had shown him the barn. He rode a sorrel. Beside him, on another sorrel, was his duplicate—same hair, same eyes, same dull expression. Now the boy could not decide which one had shown him the barn. Beside them rode a man older than
the boy’s father, a man who did not look anything at all like the two sons. A black patch covered one eye, and he wore a wide-brimmed hat.

The boy’s father flicked the mules, and the wagon creaked into the road.

The boy was looking squarely at the twins, at their twin expressions of surprise and bewilderment, remembering the huge barn filled with the shiny wagons, and the enormous white pillars of the fantastic house.

“Yessir,” the father said.

“We have nothing to talk about,” Williston said.

“Yessir,” the father replied.

“Then move that wagon, and we will pass.”

The father sat quietly, looking at Williston, smiling slightly through the lines of his gaunt face, narrow and sharp, like a shattered piece of slate. The boy continued watching the twins.

“Move that wagon.”

“Why?” the father said.

Williston slowly climbed down from his mount, stood a moment in the dust of the road, then approached the wagon. “See here,” he said. “I am a law-abiding citizen. I pay taxes. I’m a God-fearing man, and I trust you are as well. Your mother killed one of my horses.”

“On her property.”

“That is not her property.”

“She has lived there seventy-seven year.”

“That is entirely beside the point. I own that land. I told her I wanted her off it, and in return, she shot one of my horses.”

“You are lucky it was a horse.”

“Don’t threaten me.”

“When I decide to,” the father said, “you will know it.”

As the boy watched, the expressions on the faces of the twins deepened from surprise to something approaching concern or even alarm, though not yet as deep as simple fright. The boy could see no difference at all between the two, and thus could not be certain which one had actually shown him the enormous barn.

“Would you care to step into the woods?” Williston said.

The father looked at him.
“Away from the children.”

“He is old enough,” the boy’s father said.

“I am not raising mine to be savages. Either step into the woods with me, now, or move the wagon.”

The father’s expression grew steadily more intense, like the north wind fanning the trees, and his whip tapped rhythmically on the side of the wagon. Something in the relationship of man to man changed, though the boy could not give it a name. The next thing he knew, his father had reached into the bed of the wagon and produced the Smith and Wesson.

The twins’ expressions passed then to outright shock. The father held the rifle loosely in his palms, and it began to rain.

Williston said something which the boy could not make out, but the father did not respond. Above him the wind swirled; the rain came harder, splattering the boy’s arms and bare feet. The boy’s father handed him the rifle.

“Stay here,” he commanded. “Watch them two.”

He climbed down from the wagon.

The boy saw the two men leave the road and enter the woods. Then he was alone with his rifle, staring at the twins. He felt the sudden and completely unexpected weight of responsibility, of knowing that his father had entrusted to him this important job. It was, as nearly as he could determine, the first time his father had trusted him with anything of importance, and he was pleased. From the woods the boy heard the voices of the two men. The rain slackened, and one of the twins started to climb down from his horse. This, the boy understood, was not allowed.

“Don’t,” he said.

The twin, halfway off the horse, stopped and looked at him.

“He won’t do anything,” the other twin said. “Go on. I’ll watch him.”

“Don’t,” the boy repeated.

“Go on.”

“Which one is Warren?” the boy said.

The twin who was halfway off the horse hesitated a moment, then smiled, then put one foot on the ground. Above the rush of the rain, the boy thought he heard his father’s voice. “Your name is Crawford. You don’t act like other folk.”

He felt the sudden touch of anger, then, remembering, took one deep breath and slowly squeezed.
DINNER OUT was my last, best idea. "Because you're thin," I told her.

"Of course I am," she said.

"Order anything you want," I said. The waiter was doing his job, waiting patiently, smiling at us. Sharon lit up a cigarette.

"What's the point?" she said.

I ordered dinner for both of us. Sharon caught me staring at her crooked yellow bangs. She adjusted her wig.

"There is always a point," I said. "Look." I showed her my little silver pocket watch. With a grand flourish, I pulled up the small winding knob, exposing its throat. The watch hands froze.

"See," I told her, "how easily it stops?"

"Cute," she told me, carefully sipping her water. I held up my wine glass, the chardonnay a deep gold in the poorly lit room.

"Sure you don't want something real to drink?"

She shook her head. "Chemo," she said. "All tastes the same."

I held the glass out to her. "Try," I said.

"No, thank you."

I threw back half the wine and held out the glass by the candle, so she could reach.

"Try," I said.

"No," she said, and pushed the glass away. The glass was sweaty, and she pushed the base first, and I lost my grip and I guess it slipped. They empty wine glass lay between us.

I tried smiling at her. She tried smiling back. The wine I had spilled was creeping to the edge of the table, and I don't know how long we sat there, quiet, watching the stain spread.

The waiter brought us garden salads, loaded baked potatoes, big steaks that flopped over the sides of the plates.

Instead of walking home, Sharon asked to take the bus.

"It's only seven blocks," I told her.

"It's cold out here," she whispered.

To get out of the wind, Sharon sat on the covered bench.
next to an old toothless man. I draped my black coat around her shoulders and she shrugged it into place, pulling it across her chest. She started rummaging through my coat pockets. She found my Wayfarers and grunted. I removed my silver flask of whiskey from my back pocket and took a long, thoughtful, throat-burning swallow. When I stopped, the flask felt lighter.

"Is this what you’re looking for?" I asked her. She nodded. Sharon took it from me, barely sipped from it like a baby bird, and put it in her purse.

"No more tonight, OK?" she told me.

"Sure, no more for you," I said, smiling. "You’ve reached your limit. We’re cutting you off."

Sharon wasn’t smiling. She wasn’t going to give the flask back. "Hey, come on. The night is young." I held open my hands to the old man. "Can you believe this?" I asked him. He didn’t move.

"Come on, baby," I said, "why you do me like this?"

"You’re stumbling, sweetheart," Sharon said.

"I am not." Sharon looked away. The old man watched for the bus down the street. I said it kind of loud.

Sharon put on my sunglasses. She swiveled towards the old man, tapping him on the knee until he looked at her.

"Look," she said, the black of the glasses accenting her red lips, yellow wig. "I’m a queen of the soap operas."

Under the bright humming lights, Sharon looked fluorescent, and the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth shone like the white scratches keyed into the plexiglass behind her. Sharon was very animated, smiling at that old man the way starlets do when signing head shots for adoring fans. Sharon couldn’t deal with silence, and strove always to fill any dead part of a conversation with something “familiar and gay,” as she would say. That poor old guy. He handled it well, I guess. He didn’t say a word, just let her pat his leg and make up stories about how gloriously the cast was treating her, how the maid was letting her wall of acting trophies collect dust. No, that old guy just looked at her. Maybe he saw how transparent her teeth looked, how thin her fingers seemed against the fat, lead-colored veins on the back of her hand, how her eyebrows were no more than tracings in a light pencil.

"Darling," I said, my hands stretched out dramatically towards

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her. Sharon loved it when I played along. "Darling you look heav-

I sat down between Sharon and the old guy. She seemed genu-

I rubbed my nose under Sharon’s ear. That always made her
crazy, the whole four years we were together. She murmured a
little protest, wiggled, but it was nothing a little persistence
couldn’t cure. I felt her head fold over mine, our cheeks touch-
ing. Sharon was rubbing the cold Wayfarer lenses under my chin.
And as I kissed her awhile in the windy night, under the hum-
ning fluorescent lights of a bus stop, I dropped my free hand
between her legs and slipped it into her purse. I stood up fast,
the silver flask in my left hand, bright and triumphant against the
dark violet clouds.

Sharon’s face was twisted and her neck was slick where I was
kissing it. My nose was wet and cold. I closed my eyes and took
a drink. When I peeked, her face was the same. I took another
drink, longer this time, tilting my head way back, looking straight
up into the night, and the whiskey warmed me. The flask was
very light, the faint tapping when I shook it said a thimbleful was
left. When I looked again, Sharon was frisking my coat for some-
thing. I held out the flask to her.

“Wanna kill it?”

Sharon did not look up. She wiped her eyes with the back of
her hand. She slipped the sunglasses back on, and fumbled in
her purse for a cigarette.

Somewhere between the dinner salad and the check I was sup-
posed to have ended it. I had it planned so well, too. She’s very
calm, rational. *I understand,* she says, *I wouldn’t want to watch it hap-
pen to you, either.* I pay the check, tip very well, call her a cab, and,
with a peck on the cheek, it’s done.

I in no way intended, at any time, to be standing on the stairs
to her loft.

Sharon was hunched by her door with a bundle of keys, the
echo of the opened lock bounding down the stairs, when I said, "I should probably get going."

"You can't stay tonight?" she asked.

"I shouldn't."

Sharon was not a stupid woman, just one who didn't want to face facts.

"It's the holidays," she said, as if that explained everything.

"True," I said, and stepped backwards two steps, holding onto the rail.

She looked really surprised. "Well at least come have a drink."

The door downstairs opened, the breeze from outside fanned hair into her eyes. She pushed it aside, grinning.

"Come on," she said, "just a drink?"


Sharon fumbled around in the fridge. She kept popping her head over the refrigerator door and seemed shocked when I was still there. I had, after all, agreed on one drink. She pulled out a festive red and green carton of eggnog. She was using her interview smile, all teeth.

I sat on the couch while Sharon cut the eggnog with rum.

"Nutmeg?" she asked.

"Uh... yeah. Sure."

"Sit back," she said. "Relax. You look all tense."

I was sitting on the edge of a sofa cushion. I smiled meekly at her but did not move. She stood very still, the short bottle of nutmeg poised over the cold yellow drinks, and I knew she would stay just like that, eyeing me, until I did what she said. So I slid back and settled into a corner of the sofa, gingerly, like I was on a small boat too easily overturned.

She put the glass down on the coffee table out of reach. The top of my drink was well dusted with nutmeg. Hers was clean and thick, missing rum.

"You're not having any spice?" I asked her.

Sharon looked at me coldly, a quick moment, then snatched up the bottle. She dumped spice into her glass. It came out in old clumps, dirty islands floating on her drink. She looked like she was going to cry.

I slid over towards her but she held up her hand. I stopped. Sharon slowly, methodically spooned out the brown clumps into
the ashtray. She lit up a cigarette, then took a sip of her drink. She slurped when she drank. I killed mine quickly, watch in hand. She studied me. Outside the loft windows, the city was smothered in dark clouds. We sat there a long while on the verge of speaking.

Big chunks of ice in her drink had frozen together, the whole mass sliding up and down in her glass. I watched her. She was working her tongue below the ice, licking at the reservoir of eggnog beneath when the whole chunk popped her in the nose. It caught her off guard, and suddenly, beautifully, she was grinning. I was too. A bead of yellow shivered on the tip of her nose.

“You know what’ll melt this ice?” she said. Sharon reached across the table and poured rum in her glass. The ice popped.

“Guess I’m off then,” I said.

“You’re going to make me drink alone?” Sharon took a big swallow of white rum, and choked it down. She was making faces.

“Damn,” she said, “that’s smooth!”

“It’s just... I’m not sure I have the time.”

She looked at me seriously, honestly. Sharon said, “We have all the time you want.” She was squeezing the neck of the rum bottle.

I am, at my core, hopelessly weak.

“OK,” I told her, “I’ve got about five minutes.”

Sharon got up and went straight for her albums. The couch was lumpy and I spent a minute trying to smooth a spot out, but it was no use. Her hands worked quickly in the colorful stack of albums. They were on the floor, arranged like books, and Sharon was flicking their spines from right to left with her pinkie. Like a card trick, one appeared in her hand.

“This one,” she said. “My great-grandmother’s favorite. I was 11 when she first played it for me, to drown out my family’s New Year’s drinking.”

“I remember the story, OK?” I told her. She was quiet. I started fiddling with my pocket watch, unlinking the chain, winding the knob, tapping my initials on the silvered back. Sharon had bought me that watch, a long time ago. I held it up and showed her the looping script of my initials. I smiled. Sharon
stopped looking at me, tipped the bottle back and swallowed, wincing hard.

“Careful,” I told her. Something in me wanted to go to her, to rub her shoulders, but I stayed on the couch. She was busy putting the record on.

Sharon said, “Can we hear the whole thing?” I checked the time, but the hands of my watch had stopped moving. I pushed the knob back in. Then, thinking better of it, I pulled the knob back out.

“Put it on,” I said, “and we’ll see.”

The needle skipped, clip-clop clip-clop, and dusty burlesque horns mingled in harmony with the hollow tin plinking of piano. I had heard it before. When we first started sleeping together, Sharon liked the radio on this AM oldies station, a ‘40s format. The whole first year some DJ must have been in love with that tune because we heard it damn near every night. So it seemed every night I heard this story from Sharon, curled up in white sheets, about how her friends from high school couldn’t ring in the New Year without this song. Like it was some tradition.

Sharon was standing by the loveseat, eyes on the spinning turntable, looking sad. The phonograph spun. The record stopped, the arm lifted the needle automatically to bed, and even long after the spinning had stopped she did not move. It was awkward. I got an idea.

I tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to me with those pale blue eyes, so big, so sad. The damn song had done that to her. I reached out my hand and she closed her eyes, breathed in deeply. And I took the bottle from her. By the coffee table, I poured us both a finger of rum. I placed her glass in her hand.

“Let’s say we start a new tradition,” I said. “Mind if I play a tune?”

Sharon exhaled, a wheezy sigh. “Sure,” she said. She sipped her drink, wincing.

I played Chopin. It was a record I’d bought for her long ago, when her hair smelled light as new snow. Sharon did not collect compact disks, ever, swearing up and down that music sounded better on vinyl. When I gave her this album, she smiled big and hugged it to her chest. I told her it took me back to carriages in the rain, to cobblestone streets with wet people under soaked
awnings, and how silly they were to worry about staying dry. I told her lots of things.

“Yeah,” she would say, no matter what I told her, “I can almost hear that.”

Sharon tilted her head closer to the music and kept drinking. She killed that finger of rum quickly and retreated to the bottle. She was very pretty, once. But then she looked so dejected, slumping her shoulders as she stood by the record player, that it seemed only the tightness of her white sweater or the firmness of her blue jeans kept her in place, kept her from melting to the floor. She was swaying chaotically with the music, back and forth, like a bridge in the wind.

“The room is spinning,” she said. I helped her to the sofa, propped her head up on the armrest. My fingers were in her wig. It crackled from so much hair spray. A few strands were loose and I tucked them behind her ear with my thumb. Sharon’s cheek was warm from all the rum. She tried to cradle my hand softly against her shoulder, like a pillow, but I wiggled my fingers free.

“It’s getting late,” I told her.

She shook her head no. Sharon was drunk, sweating, she looked waxy, her lips were pale. I couldn’t stand to see her like that. A red stain had collected on the lips of the bottle. I took it from her and poured myself a shorty.

“Get me a cigarette,” she said. She was out of it. “Get me another drink.”

“I’m going,” I said again, “it’s late.”

“It’s early,” she started, but there was no more actress in her. Sharon looked half dead.

There were nights, years ago, when I was the one on the couch. But it was temporary, and my own fault. She used to chastise me, softly, the sweetness of her perfume making me ill. But she would kiss me on the forehead, and I would sink into the cushions, sink deeply to sleep.

I bent down and kissed her. I kissed her on the lips because I refused to put my lips close to that wig. I tasted rum, eggnog, a hint of steak. She did not return my kiss—all she could do was lie there.

And I knew she’d be the same six months from now, her white bones pocked with cancer, her veins sucking on tubes
governed by a grey box with a grey, digital readout, tubes that give the magic water that stings like ice crystals in her arm, and over the click and whirr of the morphine drip she'd open her sweaty eyes and thank me, can you believe it, thank me, for the extra time. Even if her room, with its antiseptic walls and plastic sheets, were empty.

I tugged the comforter onto the floor, peeled back her sheets. They were a shiny material, smooth, sheets that when rubbed between two fingers sound like elk walking in snow. I got her ready for bed; all she had on was a big T-shirt that fell to her thighs. When I touched her, though, I felt it, the cancer, hard at work.

I made love to her that night, softly, like she was a paper lantern.
INSIDE AN ANGEL

Angels are clever, and do not exist,
sitting on branches
when the birches are bare,

contending an entrance
that burns in clouds
has nothing to do with God.

Drawn by a blue thread
attached to a sleeve
into cities whose nights are lit,

through false doors of churches and fields
and out of the paths of runaway taxis,
they keep walking down into the world.

Did one just pass in a dress?
Soon others will come to tie its wings,
and paint its mouth shut with a crooked white X.

I say angel over and over.
Each time I say it, one more disappears.
They tell us we live on one side of the veil.

They tell us to dance and throw sparks.
When we pause, so do the clouds:
out of the sky each follows another.

A blue and white shawl covers their shoulders.
They believe we remember,
and ride down on breezes to keep us