

# cottonwood



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**S. A. Griffin**

## LARRY AND LARRY'S MOTHER

Larry parked his cruddy old Impala at the bottom of the hill. His cat, Guinevere, was under the seat with her nails dug into the carpet. "I'll be back," he told her. He retrieved a brown shopping bag from the back seat and, like a war-weary soldier returning from the battlefield, trudged up the quarter mile incline to the home of his youth. His back hurt, he was tired, and his shoes offered no support.

As always, the lawn was mown, the box hedge trimmed, and the flower bed weeded. His mother, the house's sole occupant, was a meticulous groundskeeper. There was a large walnut tree in the center of the lawn and a row of geraniums under the front window. A hedge ran down the side of the house. On the porch, there was a potted fern. Larry nudged it with his foot, took the key from underneath, and let himself in.

"Oh, look who's here," his mother said, bending her newspaper down, and resting her elbow on the couch arm. She peered overtop her reading glasses with an expectant expression, always on alert.

"It's me," Larry said. He sunk into the armchair opposite his mother. She was sitting in her spot, at the end of the couch nearest the front door. She never sat at the other end, nor reclined with her feet up, or sat in the other chairs. Yet, because she routinely rotated the cushions, there was no indentation to indicate her devotion to that one position. Likewise, she turned the rug at regular intervals and flipped the throw pillows so that nothing would be worn or sun faded unevenly.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" She folded the newspaper and placed it on the coffee table, not necessarily to give Larry her undivided attention, but because she didn't like to be halfway doing one thing and halfway another.

Larry was overcome with extreme fatigue. He fought to appear to be in a fine mood. "Nothing," he said. He didn't have the energy to tell her about the morning's ordeal just yet.

He'd always heard how hard it was to actually evict someone from his apartment. How laws were in favor of renters, and once

you had gotten yourself in a place it was hard to get removed, even if you hadn't paid your rent in over a year. He'd known he was in trouble. He'd ignored the letters demanding he show up in court. But he figured he'd be held accountable for back rent. He didn't imagine that they would send two eviction officers to his house at five in the morning. Why had he opened the door without first asking who was there? There was no way a knock at five in the morning was good. He'd been disoriented. That's what they counted on, why they came at that ungodly hour, and rushed past him into the room before he could gather his wits enough to slam the door on them. Instead, he'd stepped back, allowing their entry, awash in a mixture of fear and confusion, trying to make sense of his pre-dawn callers, as if they were two old friends he couldn't place. Guinevere had shot like a bullet under the couch.

"Shouldn't you be out looking for a job?" Of course. Her favorite topic. She launched into her often repeated explanation of statistics, how the more places he contacted, the greater his chances of landing a job. There were bound to be a number of no's but he couldn't let that stop him. The only way he was ever going to get a yes was to keep at it and increase his odds.

"I can't look every day," Larry said. "I made a lot of phone calls yesterday."

"Then shouldn't you be at home in case anyone calls? You're never going to get a job if you don't try."

"I'm trying!" Larry said. He popped up and went to the bookcase, as if suddenly interested in the arrangement of his mother's knickknacks. He knew she thought she was being helpful, was blind to her badgering. She had no clue how she constantly chipped away at his confidence, a fragile construct which he'd had to try to build from scratch himself. He took a breath and calmed himself. "It's just frustrating, because I *am* trying and nothing is coming of it."

"Well maybe you're not trying hard enough, Larry. You've got to get out there day after day and pound that pavement if you want results."

Larry looked out the window. "The water went out in my apartment," he said. "I just came over here to see if I could take a shower."

"What's wrong with your water?" she said. "That apartment

of yours.” It looked as if she had more to say but decided to bite her tongue.

Larry stood under the hard, steady stream of hot water letting his head fall forward and his arms hang slack at his sides. He didn’t want to do anything but stand under the stream of water, so that’s what he did for a very long time. He didn’t soap himself or shampoo his hair. He hadn’t the energy for that. But when he finally shut off the faucets and stepped out into the cool air, he felt purified. He walked down the hall in a towel to his old bedroom and took out something to wear from the brown paper bag into which he’d hastily shoved a few things as he was forced from his home. His clothes were stiff and wrinkled. They were not laundered well. He’d been hand washing in his bathtub as a money-saving technique. The state of his clothes depressed him, and he sunk down on his bed and looked up at the glass bulb shield on the ceiling.

His bedroom had been preserved as his. His mother hadn’t transformed it into a sewing room or storage space or anything else. Yet it wasn’t the same, locked in time, either. It was a stripped-down version of what it had been. There were no adornments. No more posters he’d so lovingly unfolded from the backs of magazines and taped to the walls. No special rocks he’d pried from streambeds and lined up on a shelf. The only furniture remaining were his twin bed and a circular bedside table. The rest—his desk, bookcase, and dresser—he’d taken with him when he’d moved out. Now these were long gone, lost in the many moves he’d made from one apartment to another.

His mother appeared in the doorway to announce that she was going to go grocery shopping. She was not one to sit idle. She filled her days with activity, whatever that might be, so long as she kept her momentum going. He was relieved to hear she’d be leaving the house. It would give him the opportunity to rescue Guinevere from his car. She was already traumatized enough, yanked from her home, she didn’t need to be further tormented.

“You’re not planning on laying around all day, are you?”

He didn’t see why reclining on his bed for two minutes should translate into laying around all day, but before he could defend himself, she continued with a list of ideas for how he could best

spend his time. She suggested that he develop a routine. Even if he didn't go to an office every day, he should get up early every morning and have a structure in place. It was important to leave the house each day, get out in the world, involve himself in outside pursuits, otherwise he'd have an empty existence.

She walked into the bedroom and picked her way over the little pile of Larry's things that he'd dumped from his paper bag. She parted the curtains, letting the bright sunlight into the room to rouse him, the way she used to when he was a boy and wouldn't get out of bed in the morning for school.

He should develop a hobby, join a club as a way to socialize, because as far as she could tell he didn't have much of a social life, did he? She wasn't necessarily expecting a reply, and Larry didn't give her one, so she continued with her soliloquy, expanding on the theme of broadening his horizons, and then, finally, winding her way back to his lack of employment and its far-reaching effects. "For goodness sake's Larry you'll never get yourself a wife without a dime to your name."

It was true he hadn't even had so much as a date in two years, but he refused to believe it was because of money. He refused to agree with his mother's antiquated view of gender roles. Never mind that she'd raised him alone, the sole breadwinner. That had been the result of an unfortunate turn of events that, if anything, only made her cling to her conventional thinking all the more. The man has to earn. Says who?

At age 34, Larry had yet to settle into a steady full-time job. Instead he scraped out a living stringing together one low-paying job after another in an effort to free himself up for higher pursuits. Just what those higher pursuits were he hadn't yet figured out.

He wasn't exactly an artist. He didn't play music, didn't draw or paint, didn't write, wasn't an actor. Yet he was possibly any of these things. There was a little kernel of something inside him, a small seed of sorts, that he felt was there, and if given proper attention could one day maybe take form. It wasn't much. And the thought of this piddling seed-thing did little to propel him through his days, but it was there in the back of his mind keeping alive the hope that his future might be different, that things could change.

But there were also times when the idea of the kernel sickened him – a phantom reminder of all he wasn't doing with his life –

and in those dark moments Larry would do all he could to kill it off. You're nothing special, he'd tell himself. You have no gift, no talent, to share with the world. You're just an ordinary guy too lazy to get a regular job. Forget about it, he'd command himself. There's nothing there. But that was the voice of his mother, he knew, now internalized, and he wouldn't let her get the better of him. He'd wrest control from her and refuse to take a regular job. Finally, though, the naysayer voice would win and, along with defeat, would be a great relief. Now he could finally live a regular life. Go get a job, buy a house, get married, and just get on with it. But weeks would pass in which he'd made only a few minor inquiries, sent his resume to only a couple of places, made only one phone call in an effort to find a job, and from the depths of inert depression he would feel the tug once again from the little seed within. It would not die. He was cursed.

"Larry, if you're not going to do anything, you should at least go for a walk."

"Okay, maybe," he said.

She studied him for one quick moment, then said, "Suit yourself," and left the room.

As soon as he confirmed his mother was gone, he retrieved his unhappy cat from the car and put her in the garage with an open can of tuna, a bowl of water, and her litter box, which he'd somehow had the presence of mind to pack in the few frantic moments the officers allowed him to gather his belongings. At least she now looked more bothered than scared. "I'm sorry," he said. He scratched her under the chin, grateful when she stretched her neck under his touch. He whispered to her to stay quiet as he backed out and closed the garage door. He didn't have a plan. He'd have to tell his mother what had happened, but he wanted to put it off until later. At least not spring it on her. He wasn't ready for the look of grave disappointment that would darken her face as she crossed her arms and shook her head in that way that showed she wasn't surprised by yet another failure in the life of her son.

The sound of tires crunching over gravel in the driveway stirred Larry, who, despite his intentions otherwise, had dozed off in the living room armchair. He bolted up, not wishing to be discovered napping. He took a moment to come out of his stupor,

then, to show his mother he was making an effort, went outside to carry in the groceries.

He lifted the two bags from the back seat and used his hip to close the door.

“You don’t need to carry both. I’ll get one,” his mother said.

“I’ve got them.”

“Give me that one,” she said, taking one from his grasp. Accepting Larry’s help was anathema to her, as if doing so would trample her self-reliance and leave them both at sea.

In the kitchen, Larry emptied the grocery bags onto the counter while his mother opened and closed the cupboards, putting things away. She bought the same items as always. Reliable, affordable goods. Lorna Doone shortbread cookies, Chicken of the Sea tuna, canned stewed tomatoes, soda crackers, frozen dinner rolls, Knudson’s fruit-at-the-bottom yogurt, nonfat cottage cheese.

She described how crowded the store had been, how there weren’t enough lines open. She couldn’t see why they didn’t employ more people. At the prices they charged they should have been able to have more than a skeleton crew. She didn’t even have a box boy in her line. The cashier had to bag the groceries after ringing them up. That’s what was taking so long.

“People bag their own groceries now,” Larry said. “They bring their own bags and pack them.”

“I know, everyone has to have their own bags now. That’s your generation’s contribution. There’s nothing wrong with paper bags. They don’t harm the planet.”

Larry was going to say something about the number of trees that had to die, but he knew that wasn’t quite the right rebuttal. He opened the package of cookies and took a bite of one.

“You’re not going to eat cookies are you?”

“Why not?” Larry said, putting the second half of the cookie in his mouth.

She trailed him into the living room where they took up their seats. She told him cookies were supposed to be an after-dinner treat. One box lasted several weeks because she didn’t plow through them and eat them at all hours of the day. You had to be careful with sweets. Too many made you sluggish, maybe that was the problem.

She picked up her needlework from the tray on the coffee table where she kept it. She always had a project in process.

Larry wished to turn on the TV but he knew better than to do so in the middle of the day, and a weekday at that. Instead he read the paper his mother had been reading earlier. He skimmed the headlines and read a line or two of several articles. His mother let her needlework rest on her lap. Larry felt her eyes on him and looked up from the paper.

“What pants have you got on?” she asked.

“These,” he said.

“They’re so worn. I can see through the knees from here. Why are you hanging onto a ratty old pair of pants like those?” She was not happy with his shoes either. When he pointed out that he’d only come over to take a shower and therefore hadn’t dressed up, she paid him no attention and continued to wonder about the state of his wardrobe, until she managed to bring into the conversation what she imagined was his lack of a decent interview outfit and her desire to take him shopping to buy him some interview clothes. Larry insisted he had interview clothes and didn’t need his mother to buy him anything.

“Why won’t you let me help?” she said.

“Fine.” Larry relented. He wasn’t going to be made the bad guy.

Larry dragged a step behind his mother as she led the way into the overly air conditioned store and found her way to the men’s department. The area was largely empty, though the picked-over racks showed evidence of recent traffic.

Immediately a salesman approached. “Good afternoon, ma’am, how can I help you today?” he asked with exuberance.

“We’re just browsing,” Larry’s mother replied, breezing past him. “He leapt out of nowhere,” she said quietly to Larry. He knew she didn’t like being accosted the moment she walked in the door. Salespeople in general rankled her, they were so often pushy. She preferred they blend into the background until needed. She didn’t want someone trying to press items on her or waiting on her hand and foot.

She approached a rack of shirts and started sifting through them, straightening along the way. Larry drifted past the displays,

unable to focus on any one thing. From a distance he watched his mother frowning at the shirts, her look of concentration. Her mouth had a naturally downturned expression, making her look unhappy even when she wasn't. She wore her hair gray, preferring not to get involved with the upkeep of dying it. Yet her athletic build and movements gave her a youthful appearance.

Larry, on the other hand, seemed like someone past his prime. He was often accused of looking tired when he wasn't. It must have been his sallow skin and colorless, thin hair. His hair had always been fine, but lately he'd noticed his hairline had begun to creep back. It occurred to him that he was aging more rapidly than his mother. He wondered if he'd "catch up" and one day they'd look less like mother and son than husband and wife.

Larry hadn't selected any clothing, but his mother had pulled out several pairs of pants and shirts that she'd draped over her arm. With this load she and Larry headed toward the dressing room.

The fluorescent overheads highlighted every detail of Larry's body. He had the unfortunate condition of being thin but out of shape. He quickly got himself into a pair of pants and shirt to get the ordeal over with. The pants were too big in the rear, creating a rumpled bagginess that gave them a worn-out look. What was it about him, Larry wondered, that instantly turned nice things sour?

"Larry, let me see." His mother was directly outside his door in the men's dressing room.

"Wait out in the store," Larry said. "You can't come into the men's room."

"Why not? It's not a bathroom for heaven's sake."

Larry opened the door a fraction and stuck his head out. "Just wait out there. These pants don't fit. There's no need to show them to you." A teenage boy was standing behind Larry's mother inspecting himself in the dressing room mirror. Larry could see the boy's eyes had migrated from his own image to the top corner of the mirror where he could watch Larry's mother.

"Let me see."

"I said they don't fit," Larry said. "I think I can tell what fits on my own."

"I just want to see what they look like, even if they don't fit."

"What for?"

"Just to see."

The boy was no longer making a pretense of inspecting his outfit and was watching them openly in the mirror. Where was this boy's mother? He was still a kid and yet Larry, an adult in his thirties, was the one accompanied by his mother. And wasn't this just the problem? She never treated him like an adult, even when he was one. How was he to make it out on his own in the world if she'd refused to allow him to grow up? She wanted it both ways. To be in charge of him like he was still a kid under her jurisdiction, tell him what to do, what to wear, how to act, only to yell at him later when he didn't act like an adult.

"Wait out in the store. I'll come out when I find something that fits," Larry hissed.

Larry's mother pushed at the door but Larry held a firm grip. "You are not coming in here."

"Why not? Don't be shy, I just want to have a look at the pants." She pushed at the door again until Larry, desperate to end the scene, pulled her into the dressing room and shut the door. "See? They don't fit."

She grabbed at the waistband and pulled it out, shoving her knuckles against his stomach. "There's plenty of room."

"They're too big!" Larry said. "And do not handle me."

Larry's mother sat on the bench, settling in for the rest of the try-on show.

"You're not going to stay in here," he informed her.

"Why not? Go ahead Larry, try on another pair."

"I'm not trying on one more pair while you're in here." His mother must have read the seriousness in his face because she stood, and with a wooden expression, turned and left him alone. Larry tried on the next pair of pants. They fit better than the first pair, though they weren't flattering. Still, Larry took them off and put them aside along with a shirt he pulled randomly from the hook. This would be the new outfit. He could not stand to try on one more thing. He met his mother out in the store where she was pulling more clothing from racks. "I like these," Larry said.

"Did you already try everything on? I have some more things here for you to try."

"I'm happy with these."

"You need more than one shirt."

"You said one outfit," he said with finality.

Without a word, she started to rehang the rejected shirts she'd carefully chosen for their quality and versatility. She put each one back in its place, retracing her steps, as if being made to undo a mistake she hadn't realized she'd made. The salesman reappeared and asked if he could help.

"No, thank you," she said.

"I can take those," he said.

"That's all right," she said, looking for the next rack.

"I'll take those," he said, hurrying after her and reaching out his arms, as if he didn't trust her to place them back properly.

"Here," she said and handed over the shirts, thwarted first in picking out the clothes and then in returning them.

Back at his mother's, Larry hung his interview clothes in the closet of his old bedroom, then busied himself strolling around the house and backyard, taking the opportunity to check in on Guinevere. He found her sitting in a corner staring at him, waiting to watch his next move. He pinched his fingers together and held them out to her, his way of calling her over, but she stayed put. "Okay, never mind," he said. He checked the can of tuna and saw it was untouched and looked in the litter box and saw it was empty. He brought the tuna to Guinevere and held it under her nose. She sniffed it and looked away. "It's good," he said, but she wanted nothing to do with it.

He was going to have to tell his mother what had happened and ask if he could move back in for a while. Of course she would take him in, but it would come with never-ending lectures about the sorry state of his life and constant questioning about why he wasn't making headway in his job search. She didn't understand the bind he was in. No one wants to hire a person who's been out of work for two years, a fact he'd kept hidden from her. What he wanted was to return to school, to do it right this time and pick a subject that mattered to him, not Business Administration from the mediocre state college, the only one he'd been able to get into with his subpar grades. "Larry, you'll have to do better than that," his mother would say when he brought home his report cards. "You're going to have to buckle down." And on she'd go with her disapproving remarks, letting him know he was in trouble but

offering no help in how he was to achieve better grades. She'd said no to a tutor when Larry begged for one. No to music lessons, no to art classes. The last thing he needed were more distractions. He needed to get his grades up before he went looking for other ways to spend his time and her money.

For as long as he could remember, it had been just the two of them. Larry had only a vague memory of his father, impressions more than anything concrete. He'd been only about three when his parents divorced, and then, not a year later, his father was killed in a car accident. All his life Larry longed for the father he never knew. He felt that he alone mourned his father's death. With a child's logic, he'd assumed his mother had felt no grief since she'd already divorced him. Over the years Larry had never amended his assumption as his mother didn't discuss such matters. He was never privy to what went on in her head.

For dinner, there was leftover baked chicken, which Larry's mother reheated and served with potato salad and sliced cucumbers. Larry complimented the chicken. It was plain and simple and, when he salted it, just how he liked it.

"It's not salty enough?" she asked.

"It's good. I said it was good."

"I've never been an elaborate cook. You don't cook the same for two as for a large family. And then you were never going to eat it if I got experimental."

"I might have," Larry said.

"Oh-ho, I've never seen such a picky eater. You didn't like anything."

Larry unfolded and refolded the paper napkin next to his plate. He wasn't going to be goaded into an argument over his childhood palate. He continued to eat without saying a word and together they fell into a silence as they finished their meal.

"You're not much of a conversationalist," Larry's mother said.

"I'm tired," Larry said.

"Are you staying here tonight?" she asked.

"Of course not. I have my own place, I don't need to stay here." He wished he hadn't been so quick to go on the defensive, but his need to stay made him deny it.

“What about your water? When is it going to get fixed?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t say.”

“If you don’t have water, you can’t even flush your toilet can you? What are going to do without a toilet?”

“I’ll figure it out.” He felt compelled to keep up the charade.

“What does that mean? Larry, either you haven’t thought this through or there’s more to the story than you’re telling me.”

“There’s no more to the story.”

When the table was cleared and the dishwasher loaded, Larry announced he was leaving. His mother walked him to the front door and said good night. After the door closed behind him he walked down the path and stood on the lawn as if thinking what to do, but he already knew his plan. He would spend the night in the garage with Guinevere. There were pads and blankets, easily accessed on a lower shelf. In the morning he would take his cat down the hill to his car and go somewhere. Maybe he’d be able to get back into his apartment. Or some unknown opportunity might present itself.

He started to open the garage door, changed his mind, went around to the back of the garage, climbed the fence, and hauled himself up onto the roof. It’s what he used to do as a kid when he wanted to be alone and daydream. He would lie on his back and look up at the endless sky. It was also a prime location to spy from. There was a direct view into the living room and kitchen. He used to like watching his mother inside imagining he didn’t know her. He’d wanted a pair of binoculars so he could zoom in and make a close study. But he never got the binoculars. He never seemed to get what he wanted and asked for. He’d be given something else that was thought more practical or suited to his needs. Such a simple thing, a pair of binoculars, surely he’d had friends with them yet he hadn’t managed to get his hands on a pair. What was simple for most somehow eluded him.

The clouds had rolled in creating a blanket that reflected the artificial light and brightened the outdoors. He sat down and hugged his knees and watched his mother sitting in her place on the couch. She seemed to be doing nothing but looking straight ahead at the wall where the reproduction of Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* hung. Or maybe she was staring into space seeing nothing but her thoughts.

Shortly, she got up and went into the kitchen, filled a glass with water from the faucet, and brought it back into the living room where she set it on the end table, sat back down on the couch, and continued to look straight ahead. She didn't have any knitting or needlework. She didn't pick up a book. This went on for quite some time until she went to the window and stared out, then walked along the perimeter of the room and examined the knickknacks on the shelf before returning to her seat by the arm. All at once, her face filled with worry. And then it crumpled and she began to cry. It only lasted a moment, then she wiped away the tears and took a drink of water.

Larry couldn't believe what he'd seen; in fact, wasn't even sure he'd seen what he thought he'd seen. He never imagined his mother would cry alone in the house. And what had made her cry? It shook him to his core. He was done spying, but he didn't know what to do. His plan of hiding in the garage with Guinevere was stupid. Everything about him was stupid. Things had to change. He had to change.

He stood and walked toward the fence, when, without warning, he lost his footing, toppled over, and rolled off the end of the roof.

He hit the ground with his left leg bent under him in such a way and with such a profound pain, he knew he'd broken it. He didn't know if he'd called out when he fell, but suddenly his mother was standing over him. "Larry," she said. Her voice wasn't panicked. She knelt beside him and touched the back of her hand to his face, as if checking for a fever. She let her hand linger, lightly brushed the hair on the top of his head, and offered him a smile, for reassurance. Presently, she told him to lay still while she went inside to use the phone. He couldn't have moved if he'd wanted to. He stared up at the thickening cloud cover. The moon wasn't visible, but he could place it in the sky. He lay there, gazing at the dim beacon of light, and waited for help to arrive.

## ACCORDING TO OUR CRIMES

When he saw the coffin lid closed, Zeke nearly went back to the car. It was raining, he was two hours from his job, wife totally in the dark—there was no reason to be here that sounded good. But then Tom, the dead woman’s dad (dead *girl’s* dad, he thought, but reminded himself she had been in her forties), saw him and started moving through the few weeping women like a drunk weaving a ballroom. He was almost unrecognizable—his flattop was now simply a bald top, his stiff shoulders-back bearing was lost in the slump and swerve of his new walk, and he sported glasses and a scarred, red nose.

“Zeke,” he said, pumping his hand, then saying his name more and more. He smelled like liquor, and Zeke wondered how tight he had to tie one on to be here.

“Would’ve liked to see her,” Zeke said. “It’s been a few years.”

Tom looked at him like he was inspecting the pores of his face.

“No viewing,” the man said. “I—” and he stopped, nodded and, without a word, turned and drifted into the milling sea of black pant suits, and the strange clusters of young women, all seemingly with long drapes of blond hair and narrow, fragile shoulders.

Zeke wiggled his fingers in the pockets of his pants, in the clutter of his life now—change, keys, phone, pager—longing for a lighter. And something to light. That woman in the coffin, that woman who used to be a girl, a homely girl, a girl always willing to burn one down, willing to do whatever you wanted, and to do it with gusto. She was a girl who drove over when you called, who was usually home when you stopped by, who never hesitated to get in the car. No matter whom he was with, where he was in the blur of years in high school and, later, at college, no matter what his life was like for a while, she was a constant. And every time she pulled her shirt off with him in the dark, he could hear the long sigh that came with it, an exhale like the low rumble of a big car getting started, like someone leaving home for something bigger.

“Hard to believe, huh?”

Zeke turned and said, “Shit.” He didn’t know if he should laugh, but it was hard to control the urge.

“Been a long time. And you haven’t aged well, bitch.”

For a moment, it felt like hallucination, as if it had not been twenty years. But the asshole standing there still looked the same—old jeans and combat boots, an Aerosmith t-shirt, but now with a black sport coat over all of it. He could almost hear him say, *well, it IS a funeral, had to dress it up*. The face was older but had the same snarky smile, like a permanent crack in the jaw.

And then Zeke did laugh, turned from the group, and Mitch followed him.

Outside, as old couples in Town Cars crawled into the lot and bleary-eyed attendants with slouchy ties directed them where to park, Zeke and Mitch stood by the dumpster smoking. For Zeke, it was the first smoke in probably five years. It was going to complicate his story later, however that went.

“Do you live around here still?”

Mitch shook his head. “No. I’m in Philly.”

“How’d you hear about this?”

“She’s on Facebook—or was. Her mom’s on there, too. She posted the date one day. That was it.”

“She just, like, put it up on her page.”

“Yep. No note or shit. Just a post. That was it.”

They smoked. Mitch lit another, offered Zeke one. His hand shook when he took it.

“You know how she did it?”

Zeke looked at Mitch. It was not clear if Mitch was asking because he was trying to figure it out or if he asked because he knew and wanted to hold it over him. Knowing and being a dick about it would be vintage Mitch.

“I don’t,” Zeke said, taking a drag and holding his gaze on Mitch.

Mitch looked away, inhaled, let it out, then said, “Shot herself. In the mouth.”

“*Shot* herself? Jesus.”

“They say chicks usually take pills or do something like

that, less violent,” Mitch said, suddenly an authority. “Guns and slashing wrists and all that—that’s usually guys.”

“Never saw her as having that kind of—well, having balls, I guess,” Zeke said.

Mitch chuckled, and Zeke hated the scrape of it. “She could be bad-ass. She had a pair when she wanted them.”

Zeke glanced around, felt like he needed to do something with his hands other than smoke, other than flail. He bent and pulled some grass out of a crack in the asphalt. Roots pulled out, too, and a spray of sand.

“What are you doing?” Mitch said.

“I dunno,” Zeke said. “Something. I don’t know.” He stood. “Was she—like, sad?”

Mitch shrugged. Zeke could see that he knew, recognized the set of his jaw, the aversion of his eyes, the way Mitch always would, the way he’d keep a thing to himself. And he’d grip it especially close if he knew you wanted it.

Zeke wanted to hit him. As if twenty years had disappeared, he remembered why he, and Bootsy, and Jamie, and hell—he would never have thought of him, except in this circumstance, but Claude, too—why all of them eventually just gave up on Mitch. He made it too hard. Any time a guy got a little weak, or a little curious, or a little unsure, Mitch would get like this—fake cool, removed, superior as if he owned the street and doled out opinions on your experience. He acted as though every smoke was a statement and that he was still walking around in combat boots with a knife in them. Every time a guy grew up a little and got less sure of the world around Mitch, he was like a punk turtle, kicking his way back into the shell but not before snapping at you.

Zeke said, “Man, you have not changed a bit,” and he walked back into the funeral home.

As the minister intoned the virtues of *she who has died too young*, Zeke watched Tom’s shoulders. The big man heaved and shook throughout, and as he did so, Zeke noted no hand of comfort on him. In fact, no one sat too close to him. There was easily room for a person on either side of him, and no one sat behind him. Zeke looked for Tom’s wife and finally found her across the aisle, two rows back, sitting with women who appeared to be her sisters—

the same thick red hair, the same sun-burnt complexions, the same height to the chins.

They looked like what Bess would have grown into, and maybe already had. Each was now old enough to let the curl and height of their red hair pile as it wished. Bess had tried a different hairstyle every few months to get her frothy, thick red hair to do anything other than curl in on itself and form an unruly beehive. Her forebears clearly had grown comfortable enough to make peace with it. Aside from the black they wore, they accessorized in green, as she had done. Zeke would not have remembered that fact had he not seen them. She wore green bandanas roped around her wrists, when that was the thing to do. She had green Chuck Taylors. Green t-shirts, hair scrunchies—for when her hair was long enough—and green earrings of all kinds. Even green eyeglass frames at one point. The details he could pull back, suddenly, as if they had rested under his collar or behind his head all this time.

The green earrings she wore, some stone long and dangling from her earlobes. They looked weighty, but she never took them off. Even in the awkward gropings that he thought passed for affection, he loved to see the sway of the earrings, or the way they would rest in her curls or on her neck as she appeared to drift into herself, enraptured with something beyond him. He would disappear for a moment in that glimmer of green, watching her, suspecting it almost didn't matter who he was.

In fact, now that he thought about it, having heard what Mitch had to say, the innuendo there, the implication that *he* had known more than just what Zeke might have said—he was certain. He would not have mattered at all. He *had* not mattered.

The minister was winding down, preparing to pray. Zeke looked for Mitch, turned and saw him near the back, hands folded, head bowed, looking to all the world that he was praying. *It's a good thing God knows all*, he thought, *because that prick has everyone snowed*.

Zeke's phone chimed softly—a text. His wife. “Where R U?” He ignored it.

Mitch found Zeke again in the line that formed to exit. Far ahead, eclipsing the light from outside, Tom filled the church door, receiving hugs and handshakes, weeping openly now, his

face mottled from the effort. Mitch rocked on his heels, nodded at people who caught his eye, and occasionally breathed a low whistle for a few bars of various tunes. Zeke didn't recognize any but figured none were appropriate. Velvet Underground, Stones, Kinks—that kind of thing. All Mitch's speed. If the guy could have lived in crushed velvet trench coats in forever crumbling ballrooms in years before he was even born, he would.

As Zeke got caught in a thought circle wondering where ballrooms ever might have been, Mitch started talking at him.

"Don't shake that sonovabitch's hand. Don't even acknowledge him."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tom. Look, just—do what I'm telling you," Mitch rolled his hand over. He looked truly concerned—a fact bizarre enough on its own without the strange direction. "Hug her mom, talk to her, and then push through. Get past that guy."

They were three people back. Tom was making eye contact with Zeke. He turned back to Mitch, his face a question.

"I'll take Tom," Mitch said. He acted like he was about to fight.

And then Mitch stepped forward, and Zeke turned and faced Bess's mom, whose name he instantly forgot. She might have forgotten his, too, as she said only *thank you for coming* and, when he hugged her, *it's been years*. Her face was still wet, but he felt on her cheeks the same soft wooliness that had been on Bess's, the same dominating press of her chest, and while she smelled vaguely floral and a little like makeup, he couldn't remember if that was how Bess smelled, too. He caught a glance of Mitch, basically punching Tom in the shoulder, a bit harder than mere play, and giving the old man a nod. When Zeke broke off the hug, she handed him a card, printed with a prayer and the illuminated head of Christ. Then Mitch had his arm, and they were through the door.

"I will buy you a beer," Mitch said. "Unless you have some fucked up wish to go see them put her in the ground."

Zeke actually had a fucked up wish that they would open the damned casket.

"But this isn't the end—there's a wake or something."

“Yeah, the place is just up the road. We’ll make it,” Mitch said.

Zeke shrugged. “Ok. You wanna take my car?”

Mitch laughed, a bit of derision. “We’re not driving together. Just pull around and follow me.”

When he saw Mitch’s car, he chuckled. It was clearly as dirty and poorly cared-for as he would have expected. An old Chrysler LeBaron missing all the hubcaps.

They drank a beer each at an Applebee’s on the retail strip. Mitch said he didn’t know where any bars actually were, but since their beer was as cold and yellow as anyone else’s, it was fine. At three in the afternoon in an Applebee’s bar, Zeke felt like the lamest and most dissolute loser in a ten-mile radius. They watched SportsCenter over the bar. They talked about the Eagles, complained about the Phillies. They said nothing of consequence and, to Zeke’s irritation, nothing of the girl being lowered into the ground while they drank. Mitch made no reference to Tom, to his dramatics about Zeke not shaking his hand, nothing. Though he burned to know what about Bess had compelled Mitch to show up here, after so long, he was not going to ask. He was not going to give Mitch the pleasure.

His phone chimed twice while they sat there, his wife each time, the same text, *Where R U?* On the second time, Mitch asked about it.

“So she doesn’t know you’re here?”

Zeke drained the last of his beer, and shook his head no at the bartender’s arched eyebrow. “She doesn’t know a whole lot about this.”

“How long you been married?”

“It’ll be five years this May.”

“I was married once,” Mitch said. He sipped his beer, giving Zeke the pause where he was supposed to ask Mitch the question, supposed to beg for the story, supposed to give the man the cue to launch expansively into a tale of exploits.

Instead, he pulled out his wallet. Mitch put his beer down in a hurry.

“I said I’d get it,” he said, holding out a hand. He pulled a crumpled fifty from his coat. It rolled onto the bar.

“Do I know her?” Mitch asked.

“Not a chance.”

They watched a piece on this year’s homerun king, some new guy with forearms like Popeye in a game hardly anyone cared about anymore. Then Mitch said, as if raising a toast, “Bess was a lot of things, but man, she could suck a dick, right?”

There was a day when Zeke would have said, *you know it, brother*. He might have just laughed. Even though what he just heard explained a million little things in a sudden wash of retrospect that made his heart race and his throat itch, and even though he felt the first prickles of an anger he knew would build through the rest of the afternoon, he began to sense that the less said at that moment the better. He might later regret it, and even in the instant he started a fantasy he would hone to a sharp edge later—of standing up, turning to Mitch, and punching him so hard in the jaw that he would topple off the stool. And yes, it would have something to do with Bess, but it would have a hell of a lot to do with other things as well—the long weariness of putting up with Mitch’s illusions of being a hero, of being Mick Jagger, of being some shiny thing grander than his surroundings, rather than facing what was there and earning a little dignity. He almost worked himself back around to resignation, to actually saying, *you know it, brother*; just to get through the next hour or so, given that he had his own satisfaction he sought somewhere in the mess of this day, but he didn’t. He found a way to focus on getting done that inchoate thing he had come here to do.

“You need Jesus,” Zeke said, pushing the prayer card from the funeral across the bar. He tried to laugh. Mitch picked up the card and looked at it for a few seconds before putting it in his pocket.

“It’s time to go,” he said.

Zeke’s phone chimed again. Mitch collected his change and didn’t tip before they left.

The family had rented the back of a restaurant nearby, the kind of place that might once have been grand, name in script over a brick face, fronted by cedars now clotted with leaves and cigarette butts. The red canopy leading from the parking lot to the door was faded near white where the supports held it. In the back room, amid dark wood tables and chairs, no one other than Mitch looked

familiar to Zeke. He overheard enough introductions to deduce that Bess had been a teacher, then worked at a college, somehow counseling students (mostly women, it seemed), and surprised everyone. No one, either, apparently thought the event they now attended was the right thing to do. At all. But they were there, they said again and again to one another, out of support for Bess.

Zeke tried to avoid Mitch, lingered at the edges of conversations, tried to nod and join in, but nothing worked. Even Tom, who had greeted him with such force, stuck near the bar, drinking what appeared to be tumbler after tumbler of whisky. He spoke only to wait staff and no one appeared to talk with him.

There had been no picture on an easel at the funeral. No pictures of any kind. Not even her name. He couldn't recall flowers, either. It was as if the person they remembered and honored was not even there.

He told himself *one whisky*, to brace the nerves, to close the day, to close this chapter. Down the bar from Tom, he signaled the bartender and then watched the man pour, surprised at how suddenly he felt salivation, how the back corners of his jaw waited for the drink. When he finished it, the next one felt even better, and soon Mitch was at his side, like a cartoon devil perched at the shoulder, and they toasted Bess as the rest of the room felt like it fell away.

When Tom lurched off of his bar stool, Zeke looked up, and the man's gaze locked on him—to the extent it could. Eyes rheumy, neck little more than a fleshy unsettled perch for his head, Bess's father clearly was in a bad way. Mitch was in the middle of saying something when he turned to see what had Zeke so rapt, and then he moved in a single quick motion to his feet. Tom said something—"Wait" perhaps—but Mitch pointed at him.

"Who does this?" Mitch said. "Who has a party for a fucking suicide?"

Zeke looked around. Almost inconceivably, no one heard this.

"Dude, take it easy," Zeke said.

Mitch pointed at Tom again. "Stay away from me."

Mitch grabbed his beer and drained the last sip, keeping his eyes on Tom. When he put it back on the bar, he pushed it over so it rolled and then dropped behind. Dull thud as it hit a rubber mat.

They walked, swaying and breathing hard, for a few blocks. At a pizza place, they bought a pair of forties and caught their breath. They made their way back to the restaurant, to their cars at the back of the lot, and sat on the curb against a row of hemlocks defining the back of the property and the edge of the neighborhood behind. Amid the noise of parents returning to children from a day's work—car doors slamming, doors opening, TVs loud through open windows, the chaos of evening beginning—they drank the beer. Occasionally, they would hunch a little lower as someone wandered out to the lot to find their car and, weeping a little, get in and drive home.

At length, Mitch said, "Do you ever hear from anybody?"

"No," Zeke said. He did not say that he knew Bootsie had joined the service, or that Andy actually got a degree and wears a tie somewhere. That Stewy still did odd jobs and, despite several stints of a few months living away from home, had returned to the basement of his parents' place, now to take care of them as they slowly died and the place fell apart around them all. That Wacker was in jail on drug charges, that Slim ran a pet grooming business, that he had visited the diner in Wilmington years later and saw Blaze still there, older, a wedding ring, the figure of a woman who'd had a kid. He did not say what he had discovered himself with a bit of Facebook lurking, what he knew from rumors heard. Or that he got an e-mail every few years, sent late at night, typos and misspellings a sign of the drunkenness or the rage welling up when she was alone, from the girl buried not long ago, and that he knew more than he wanted about how almost all of them turned out.

"Me neither," Mitch said.

Zeke thought of what question he could ask next—*did you think it would turn out like this? Do you still play? Ever think about juvey?* But the only one he wanted any answer to was what the hell was between Mitch and Tom. Again, he felt the urge toward recalcitrance, away from giving in to any of Mitch's drama. But it was late, he knew he still had quite some time left to sober up before he could contemplate driving back, then dealing with the woman whose texts had stopped a few hours ago, with a final jab: "DON'T EVEN THNK BOUT SLEEPIN HRE 2NITE."

So he asked. "What is the fucking deal with you and her dad?"

Mitch inhaled, and for once, it was not so he could set his pose or get his badass-edness in order. It appeared as if he was actually struggling to get the words right.

“C’m on, man, don’t make me say it,” Mitch said.

He said it without his smarmy lip curl, without any trace of a wink.

“When she left that place, she stayed at my place. Just, like, crashed on my couch for three days and then I never saw her again.”

“When was this?”

“I don’t know, after you went off to HACC. You weren’t around,” Mitch said.

Zeke considered the beginnings of many questions until he just wanted Mitch to stop talking. Stop making what must have been some kind of horror show for Bess a cheap flavor of his own theatrical suffering.

They were silent for a minute, sipping at their beers.

“I freaked out her old man, huh?” Mitch said. His laugh was a scrape, and as if nothing had just happened, familiar, wise-ass, bravado Mitch was back.

The fact annoyed Zeke—he wasn’t done. He’d just waded into a life he wanted to know more about even if he felt he got there through a cheap back door. He felt a sense of betrayal that, though he fought it (*she* was the one who suffered, right? And kept it to herself for so long? The story that *hurt* was *hers*, right?), was surging, and he could have used the different version of Mitch he just saw, the guy who sort of acknowledged a past that *meant* something. But no, the current and too familiar asshole, resplendent in his disregard, was here, his crude ironies, the chip on his shoulder, right where it had always been.

“She was a teacher for years. Did you know that?” Mitch said.

His tone was straight. Zeke closed his eyes. He didn’t want to say anything. Wasn’t sure he could at the moment.

“I mean, she was around little kids all the time. And she was—” he struggled for something, Zeke could hear it—“she was *messed up*. That fucker *messed her up*.”

With great effort, Zeke said slowly, “What are you trying to say?”

“I don’t know.” Mitch said. “I just want to get the fuck outta here.”

Mitch stood, threw the bottle back through the trees, and pulled out a cigarette.

“It’s been real,” he said.

“It’s been anything but, my friend,” Zeke said. He stood. “Tell me something: how long were you fucking around with her?”

Mitch lit his cigarette without breaking eye contact. After a drag, he said, “Not as long as you were. I was second in line, man. Second. In. Line.”

Zeke nodded. Mitch nodded back, then smoked with deliberation.

Zeke walked back to the Applebee’s, sat almost on the same stool, and drank coffee. He deleted one by one the texts his wife sent, including the last one. He wanted to call her, but couldn’t. Unsure of even what to do, he wanted to tell her he was OK, so she wouldn’t think he was dead, but she obviously knew better than that. She’d *say* she thought he was dead, or that she wondered about calling the cops, but she drove an ambulance. She knew that when someone dies, and has a cell phone, calls are made. And so she’d lord it over him, but she knew he wasn’t dead. Which made her anger the more powerful.

There were only two e-mails from work, both service calls he’d have to arrange when he returned. Unlike at home, it was as though no one in the shop noticed he’d been gone for most of the day.

He rifled through his pockets for cash and realized Mitch had taken the card from the service, the one Bess’s mother handed to him. It had used the Christ picture, the one all churches love—clean jaw (despite the beard), clear eyes, light rays popping in every direction, crown of thorns looking more pretty than painful.

He struggled to remember the verse they had chosen, because it caught his eye. It was different than the usual one about the valley of the shadow of death. It had said something about the Lord being slow to anger, and abounding in kindness. How the punishment is according to our crimes and not because of who we are—more about whether we fear the Lord. So, basically, as long as you’re terrified, it’s cool. Being sad more important than being good.

Besides his van, only two other cars remained in the lot behind the restaurant. One was a Chevy Malibu with a Lackawanna County Courthouse parking tag that he realized immediately had to be Tom's. The other was a Mercedes, so that was out. Zeke had forgotten about the old job at the courthouse, chief custodian, rubbing elbows, *all that happy horseshit*, as Bess used to say. The windshield wipers were worn down, the inside of the car buried in coffee cups and newspapers, the driver seat permanently bruised and leaning from his form, steering wheel leather worn to white in places.

He saw a parking ticket under the wiper blade and considered how it was sort of a shitty thing to ticket cars at a funeral home. Then he saw the light, the flowing locks—it was the Jesus card. When he pulled the card out, he saw scrawled across the face of the Lord, "I know." It was underlined so hard so many times that the pen had cut through the paper.

For a long time, standing near his van, he thought about that card. Each time Zeke felt like taking a step, asking himself what that card would do, he thought of her, whatever went through her mind, if there had ever been a husband, any hope for a little girl of her own to protect, or if he had any right to wonder at all what she thought. He'd been just as horrible to her in another way, taking her for granted, using her just as much as he did. And even when he said, *I'm not her father*, he knew it was an excuse. Valid, perhaps, but still an excuse. It was time to leave her alone.

He took the card and tore it in half. Then he dropped it on the ground a few feet from the car. *Let fate fuck with it* he said to himself.

As he stepped into his van, his phone flashed to life, and he saw that his wife was trying again. "Where R U?" He wanted to write back *I don't know*. Sure—a street sign, a funeral home, an address. Trees and a breeze and the taste of beer and the smell of a dumpster. A new coffee stain on his pants. His van starting with its usual shake. But he didn't know where he was, just felt a tingle in his hands. Something antsy. A wish of sorts. To just let it loose, to get on with it.

Patricia Corbus

## PICNIC UNDER THE TREES

Yahweh, day-dreaming, leaned back, ate  
and drank. In that hour impossible  
intimacies, fortunes, crimes, panics,

babies thrashing with vitality, spawned.  
Jungle babblers went mute, idiots sage,  
he-goats became she-goats, pious people

abandoned all hope--the hopeless, a fire  
doused with gasoline, blazed up, scorching  
the lower branches of the terebinth trees.

A great saint, lifted upon his deathbed,  
fell back, baffled. But the Tree of Life  
rested inviolate--rustling an ah in wander,

the ass in fantastic, fire in sapphire, ringing  
bell in embellish, shhh in spaciousness,  
a flashing oar--the opening door in splendor.

Antony Oldknow

## UNDER AN UMBRELLA

Under an umbrella with her and her dog,  
under gray swirling clouds,  
this afternoon we've a symphony to write  
in between grocery shopping, dentist visits,  
barbers who see me quickly,  
a jeweler depositing a gold ring -  
now it's simply a matter of loud singing  
if conductors permit and concert masters  
in mid-phrase fail to frown.

With umbrellas furled we sat in a shed  
and practiced our penmanship:  
I'm particularly good at drawing treble clefs.  
Sharps and flats flow in her hair.  
Look, grace notes approach,  
spice images savored till they quietly fade.

Parsons by the sea with fingers like worms,  
butchers with flat feet planted in sand,  
policemen inside me know my notes,  
compositions I've tried-  
but this is joint work,  
something may come of it.

Soughing in the bent trees,  
organ-calls of wind preparing,  
she saw me when as I lingered  
by my garden cat-and-dog music,  
clattered up behind me,  
clapped shy hands over my eyes,

"I know you. Guess who?" she said,  
but I'd never known her, nor she me,  
just tips of fingers occasionally  
eyes at times catching purple,  
in some clouds when she saw green swirls  
and sudden sun-glow inside me.

This is surely umbrella season,  
green and gold flowers in her hair  
bloom so delicate I almost smell them  
as my lips nibbling up to her lips  
taste landscapes in her eyes,  
umbrellas lowered while she sings.

(suggested by Claude Monet's *The Beach at Trouville* [1870])

Donna Pucciani

## LOSING THE LIGHT

Winters get longer as I age,  
and summers fly by faster than  
the wasps flitting among the zinnias,  
chasing me indoors to contemplate  
the end of summer.

I've always hated the deception  
of June darkness lowering itself on its belly  
after the glory of the solstice,  
knowing that the sunlight  
is quietly devouring itself  
even as we celebrate the long evenings  
when sweaty children run among  
the backyards catching fireflies.

Once, in a friend's attic room in Denmark,  
the midnight sun found me bedded alone,  
breathless, eyeless, its bright heart beating in mine  
when I wanted only to sleep under a black sky  
with a moon tacked on and a few stars  
flung on the ebony ceiling.

*Be careful what you wish for,*  
my mother used to say, but still,  
September brings the dread  
of winter's shroud. The sense of loss hits  
when autumn kidnaps children into schoolrooms  
and the days shorten to steal the salutations  
of neighbors going to work in the slanting sun,  
knowing we must soon shut our doors against November,  
shivering into night.

William Virgil Davis

## WINTER SOLSTICE

For weeks we'd waited for snow.  
Then, suddenly, overnight a wind  
blew it in. When we woke everything  
was white, the branches of the trees  
outlined in white, the twigs aglitter.

The finches have found the feeder  
we'd hung at the edge of the woods  
and are fighting each other off  
and eating the feed so quickly that  
we will need to fill it every day now.

The numbers have turned around,  
this first day of winter, when the world  
was supposed to come to an end.  
Last night, laughing, we wondered  
what the next life would be like

and gossiped over our vain attempts  
to explain how the Aztecs had gotten  
it wrong. I've written this out in a single  
sitting, while watching the birds, and  
thinking about the ends of various things.

Richard Jordan

## SISTER AND BLUEBIRD

I'm thinking back about a bluebird when  
my sister texts, *Don't worry, but they found  
a lump*. Our mother died of cancer and,  
on our father's side, a couple aunts.

I don't type that, of course. My sister tried  
to bring the bird back after it had flown  
into the picture window, left a smudge  
and some pale fluff that stuck but then blew off.

She liquefied suet in a blender, fed  
the bird through a syringe, but it soon stopped  
swallowing. *So, anyway*, she texts,  
*we always knew the likelihood*. I guess.

I place my phone down, pick up pencils—blue  
and rust. It's time to finish an old sketch.

Bill Snyder

## OH THE WOMEN, WHY NOT?

*Drawbridge at Arles with a Group of Washerwomen*, Vincent Van Gogh, 1888

Who am I to say, much less to him—but why  
the bridge, why not those women? Their backs.  
Their hands. Their wet and pruned  
and ruffled skin—red skin tonight, rough  
and dry, the soap so strong you can smell  
it from where he paints. But I watch the image  
shaping on the easel, and it's the bridge  
that matters most, it seems. I do understand—  
I too, like mechanical things—pulleys, winches,  
joints, axles, weights, rollers, chains, and who  
could have imagined chain, before  
there was a chain? So I understand  
the lure, and even the cart—the harness and bit  
and bridle, mechanical things, and the wheels  
and spokes and the hard steel tires that keep  
their round over rocks and ruts. But why not  
those women? Sure, he's placed them  
where they are, and he's done well with their spirit,  
their motion, but all of them constrained  
behind a punt half sunk, beyond a rough, reed fence  
at the foot of a steep grassy bank, their clothing  
dark—maroons and indigo—no shine there.  
Let one of them, or two, or all in a group,  
slip up their sleeves and we could see  
the strands and coils of pull and push, knead  
and slap stretching skin. Lift a skirt, and even  
beneath the thick wool stockings, see the calves,  
hard flats and angles there for planting weight  
on the muddy, pebbled bottom, for stooping  
at the waist. Do it when they're finished  
with this batch of wools and cottons and canvas.  
Before the cart arrives with another load.

Marisa Lin

## THE MEMORY THAT NEVER WAS

*"if we imagine ancestral memory as a museum with only entrances, then everything that has ever wished you dead might still be inside"* (Julian Randall, Refuse)

might still be the everything of yourself, might be you fighting you for your last breath, threats knifing through the windows of the *you will never's* and *breathe one last time's*. each solemn remembrance dripping ancestral faces into smoke: noses melting into cheeks melting into lips softening into the chins of your foremothers, their skins stirring into a glaze of generations, each one as forgetful as the former, as vengeful as the next. reincarnated as a crane fly, even then I see my mother's tears, witness them dripping from a leaking bathroom faucet, unsanctioned drops falling, flattening on the porcelain, as silent as the eve of a murder that never took place. a chinese infant born in a country of one children, my parents' first and disappointing hope, I could be dead, and so too, my descendant daughters. my parents' next hope: my brother birthed in a cousin country, this one of second, third, and fourth children. scooting around the cul-de-sac, him & I breathless and unfettered, the call of our mother to come inside reminds us that we are not free, our memory selves locked in the museum of the past. which is to say, if you believe the son of generation and trauma is a hospital full of corpses giving birth to their own bodies, then you might be the beginning and the end, might be the very one you have been waiting for.

Angie Macri

## HIDE

Listen to her skin: the back of her neck rising.  
An itch in her nose meant company coming,  
a chill across her body, somebody walking  
over your grave, the old women nodded.  
Each freckle formed a flaw, each line a fault,  
and her mother's creams didn't remove them.  
Scars, first one then another, marked mistakes,  
the wrong company, the wrong movements.  
Sunburn told everyone she was too tender.  
Sitting out in the sun summer on summer  
never toughened her up as they told her  
it would. Flesh crawled, muscles tense but skin  
its own organ under the steady weight of vision.  
With scars, there was no sense but pressure.

Clayton Adam Clark

## BACKBONES

With vertebrae  
pinching across  
vertebrae,  
I see my chiro-  
practor, who pushes  
and twists the bones  
to line, and hear  
gases released  
into space  
opened between  
cervical backbones  
snap like firecrackers,  
the lymph and fluid  
suffusing, back-  
filling, and for  
the first time all  
month, I can feel  
nothing back there.  
She says, *Apply*  
*ice*, but I won't  
remain relieved,  
this dull pain, bones  
compressed and muscles  
knotted and drawn  
against my nervous  
system, pressure  
submerging me  
beneath, behind  
myself, a constant  
longer than I  
have known, this feeling  
I couldn't feel  
until for once  
I felt an absence.

Robert Stewart

## ACCOUNT FOR THIS

*for Willis Barnstone*

An account comes two days later  
when the daughter on social media  
says he was giving a talk at Harvard  
Divinity-the divine, I imagine  
always present, though he giving  
the talk had written, "no sad /  
faces, no body or sick word of God,"  
capitalizing yet the name,  
leaving us to wonder of both He  
and he, author and translator  
of the Testament Restored, giving  
the talk at Divinity, when he lost  
sight in one eye, "And then,"  
the daughter says, "it came back."  
(He read most of the talk with one eye),"  
and no one could account for that  
or get him to Tufts for a checkup,  
even the next day when half light  
struck again at a museum—  
this being Cambridge, after all—  
with Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel*  
and Sullivan's *Canyon de Chelle*,  
secular enough for single sight until  
one understands the ever-present  
stones and flowers, the present  
feeling that comes to those we love,  
father, friend, though getting him  
to ER's machines and needles  
would take the daughter, her brother,  
and one whose voice I do not know,  
a certain mystery that won't account  
for limitations of the body, or admit  
to less than he of whom we speak.

A. A. Khaliq

## LOVE! (LOVE AS FACTORIAL)

a man comes to the bakeshop each day  
bearing grain in a factorial manner, first  
1 and then 2 and then 6 and then 24.

the baker is pleased, thinks of the grain  
as pearls, as tribute, as tithe. the pastry  
case becomes obscured, then the till,  
then the little port window into the kitchen.

like sawdust, inhaling the chaff abrades.  
the baker wants sand, not pearls. i cannot  
mill, she tells the man. i have no stone,  
no mortar. the grain will flatten me, my  
ovens, my bakeshop. i cannot breathe.

the man says something, but the hungry factorial  
proceeds. he is a mathematician, not a milliner.  
he cannot stop counting the grain, that flow of  
polished brown seed at her feet. the bakeshop  
disappears, the baker wades—gone are the  
lovely ankles, the corded calves, the plush thighs.

gone is the shape of the beloved. her brown  
eyes blink at him. not owl, but fawn. not dawn  
but sunset at the cliffside. brown eyes, brown  
pearls. no flour. no sugar, no pastry. the baker  
thinks of inequalities, the mathematician shudders.

grain or flour? words or actions? much or little?  
the factorial reverses. 24 and 6 and 2 and 1.  
just a man and one grain and a promise that  
is half-curse. a baker needs flour, she says.

the man vanishes with the last grain.

zero.

Marisa Lin

## ICARUS (SHE/HER)

& she perched on a crest  
of bloodied rags,  
                    queen of the flowered mouth,  
            the everymonth  
cleansing.

the fingers who inspected  
            her intimates  
            to verify  
her purity,  
            *to make & to be made*  
            she scoffed

*by all who come from  
me, these men.*

the refrain *i don't*  
            & then *i won't*

            was her refusal to be contained  
within this box of life

            this stallion mirror.

*time has not reached me yet,*  
            *i am both ahead of it & above it*

so she flew, she flew,

            nevermore a paramore to be

            any man's

            nor any master's

            unfastening herself

            from the quilt

of prisons                      now bursting whole-bodied

into sky's rooms, birds feasting  
on the scarlet trailing  
after her like a kite's tail,  
a signature in the air.

*or else i shall never love again,*                      *for the fall will kill me*  
—i.e., theories of

throats swallowing  
her mouth wanting

the meet of atmosphere &

tailspin  
conjoining

*to my flesh, my very very flesh*

winged like a sister  
-bruise  
a betraying  
-brother  
the wound which had  
no ocean to cascade into

only the wind-howl  
beneath  
her fowled fingers  
recalling the grave  
of the day

they ripped the womb  
from  
her youth

*& they carved the animal out of me*

—riven beast, her  
feathers scything through the lamplight of  
a thousand starry candles

*just another one dead, they will think,*  
*landlocked*  
but in her queendom, freed—

leaping—  
in this fearless folly  
she watched herself smile, laugh  
the stained rag a fire flowering in the air,  
her shadow thrown  
against sky's rim

*as if the night had kissed my body* then

so, as a child yearning for its mother,  
the water rushed its hands upward

softer than a man's flesh  
& she plunged  
into its darkness

into a womb rebirthed  
her heart a scream  
flung open

## THE CLEARING

The sun is particularly punishing today, even this early in the morning. It's always sweltering hot this time of year, but the two-mile walk from the house to the Gas & Feed makes it that much hotter, and I feel beads of sweat tickling down the length of my spine under my dress. Might've been a bit better if the Ford was working and I coulda driven it, but the old truck wouldn't turn over this morning, again. "Doesn't have AC, anyway," I mutter to myself with a twitch of a smile. Instead, I'm hauling the eggs from the coop, plus a couple of crates of late summer veggies and jams, in an old Radio Flyer wagon down the two-mile stretch of packed dirt road. Gonna sell 'em to Bo, just so he can turn around and mark 'em up, then sell 'em to the tourists when they stop for directions and fuel.

No matter. Gotta be done. Every little extra bit of money helps, now that it ain't just my mouth that needs feeding. They said nineteen was too young to get knocked up, and who knows, maybe they were right. But what can I say? Young love and all that. The very second I met Hank – Henry – I was a goner. I woulda followed him right on up to the moon if he'd asked it of me. He told me he felt the very same, and the next thing I knew... Well, what was done was done. A few months later, I was hauling around a big ol' pregnant belly. Had to start thinking about how to be a mama, how to provide.

My own mama did her best. Daddy took off before I had a chance to make a memory of him, but Mama stayed as long as she could. Not her fault she got sick, that just happens sometimes. She gave me what she could before she went. Even now, as my flipflops plod down the dirt road to Bo's, I hear her voice in my head: "You got this, my girl. Just keep your head down, take care of your own, make use of what life gives you, and keep on movin'." Not bad advice, all told.

As the tangles of angel oaks and the wispy Spanish moss dangling from their limbs fall away, I make out Bo's place just a hundred yards off and give a little sigh of satisfaction. I can finish this 'lil errand up and be home before morning naptime's

over. I feel purpose in my step as I close the remaining distance to the Gas & Feed, where the rickety old place is sheltered under a thicket. There's a muddy pond out back where Bo breeds live bait fish, and a little swamp has sprung up around it. The sun's already cleared the tops of its branches from where I'm standing, but the roadside store's still in the shade, and I can already feel the cool air that awaits me, practically whispering across my overheated skin.

Just as I pass the gas pumps and head up the ramp on the side of Bo's covered front porch, I hear the scrape of tires on gravel, and spot a rusty Chevy pickup pull off of the crossroad and into the fueling area. I don't recognize the powder-blue truck, and that's enough to set my back up; I know all the vehicles around here. I don't veer from my path towards the entrance of the store, but I do peek over my shoulder at the three men climbing out of the Chevy's cab and bed. I don't recognize them either, confirming my suspicions: tourists. Going by the gunrack in the rear window, I'd reckon deer hunters passing through for the start of the season; going by the two sizeable lumps under tarps in the truck bed, I'd say they had a successful morning.

As I turn my gaze back towards Bo's, I accidentally lock eyes with one of them, the driver. He's tall and well-built, with shaggy auburn hair escaping from under a grungy orange Carhartt beanie. He's removing his woodland camo jacket to reveal a sweat-stained white t-shirt, and giving me a flirty grin like I should be enjoying the show. He says something quietly to his companions in a deep voice, and I know it's about me, because they look over my way with low laughter that sets my hair on end.

"Keep your head down," I mutter to myself as I swing my focus forward, picking up the pace. I throw open the door to Bo's store, taking only the briefest of moments to enjoy the rush of cool air from within. The beat-up bell over the threshold lets out a low clang, and I immediately spot Bo hunched over a newspaper at the counter, just the same time as he flicks his eyes up to me and greets me with a grunt. I nod at him, turning around to focus on maneuvering my wagon through the narrow doorway, and stiffening as I do. The tall fella is right behind me now, his friends flanking him on either side, and all three regarding me with wolfish grins. Reaching out and placing one meaty paw on the door panel,

Tall Boy pushes it back open as far as it goes. "Lemme get that for you, darlin'."

I mumble a thanks, my eyes dropping to the wagon so I can quickly wiggle it through the door and towards Bo's counter. I hear the footfalls of the three men as they enter behind me and the soft swish of the door closing after them. Their quiet, rumbling conversation continues in the background, but I focus on Bo and making our transaction. The stout older man sighs and releases his newspaper as I approach, letting the pages flutter down to the counter. He straightens, lifts the brim of his ballcap, runs a hand through his thinning hair, then replaces the hat a little higher on his brow. "Whatcha got for me today, Red?"

I blush as my childhood nickname sends a chuckle through the men milling about the feed store behind me, and unconsciously hunch my shoulders just a bit. "Th-three dozen eggs," I sputter out, pointing to my wares as Bo looks them over. I clear my throat and straighten my spine before continuing. "'Bout two pounds of summer squash. Couple zucchini, sweet potatoes, pound of green beans. And a few jars of jam."

Bo's eyes snap up to mine. "Strawberry?"

I smile shrewdly. Everyone 'round here knows my strawberry jam is about the best in the Carolinas. Mama's recipe. "The very last of the season, just for you. Few jars of blackberry and raspberry, too."

He grumbles and straightens quickly, as if to hide his earlier interest, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. "Good. Tourists love that stuff. Sells pretty good. How 'bout forty bucks for the lot?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Bo."

His eyes tick to the men, and I can still feel them stalking around the low rows of shelves behind me, listening to our conversation with interest. "Fifty. Final offer."

What game is he playing, here? He knows what I got is worth more. Is he trying to prove something to these out-of-towners? Far as I recollect, Bo's got about as much patience for the folk who pass through here on their way to somewhere else as any of us locals do, which is to say not a heck of a lot. Meanwhile, I just wanna get outta here and get back home. "Bo, you know you'll charge ten on each of the jars of jam alone," I counter, my voice soft but firm.

He heaves a long-suffering sigh and regards me for a few more seconds before giving a begrudging nod. "Fair point. Seventy-five. Fifty in cash and twenty-five on your tab. Deal?"

"Yessir," I reply with a gentle smile, and he gives me just a hint of one in return. Bo's not a bad one, really. Mostly, he's just set in his ways. He produces a logbook from underneath the counter, scratching out a few lines of shorthand and numbers as I lift my wares from the wagon and set them beside the register. Bo taps a few buttons on the old machine with well-practiced movements, sending the cash drawer jangling open just long enough for him to slide out a few bills before he slams it shut again and hands them to me.

I take the money and fold it twice, tucking it into the bustline of my dress; the action seems to elicit a soft groan from somewhere behind me, and once again I feel my blush and hackles rise. Shaking it off, I meet Bo's eyes with a brisk nod. "Gonna grab some gummy bears and a Coke on the way out. Put it on my tab?"

He huffs an affirmative, and I head toward the cooler on the other side of the store at as fast a walking pace as my flipflops can take me, keeping my eyes down. Still, I only make it halfway before I hear one of their voices low in my ear.

"Sure would like a sample of them sweet potatoes, 'lil Red." It's the other one from the cab, shorter and lankier than his tall friend, closer to my size. He's nearer than he has any right to be, and loping nearer still as he keeps pace with me. "They your speciality, sugar? Or would you say you're a gal who prefers a nice, big zucchini?"

I hear a round of laughter from all three as I quickly open the cooler door, grabbing my can of Coke and bringing it tight to my chest. Never letting my gaze leave the peeling checkered linoleum floor, I try to sidle between the other two - Tall Boy and the stocky fella in the faded "Make America Great Again" hat who was riding in the truck bed - towards the candy stand and the exit. They bring their shoulders together, blocking my path. "Naw, clear as day, boys," MAGA Hat says, and I can hear the toothy grin in his voice and the sound of his tongue licking his lip. "It's them sweet little pots of jam. I bet those taste just..." - his voice rumbles down low as he lecherously growls out the last word - "*heavenly*."

I tuck my chin further into my chest and let the curtains of

my red hair fall forward a little more to hide my eyes, then duck to the side of the tall one and take the long way through the aisle of shelves. I grab the handle of my now-empty wagon, cutting a glance at Bo as I pass, and he regards me with a bored expression before turning his eyes back to his paper; he has no interest in getting involved with rowdy tourists today. "Now, fellas, you're scarin' the poor little darlin'," Tall Boy jokingly chides, and the two others respond with another round of laughter. "We're just bein' friendly, sweet girl. Where you headed off to? We'd be more than happy to give you a ride."

"No, thank you kindly," I bite out, even if it still sounds kittenish in my soft, high-pitched drawl. I grab my gummy bears from the candy stand near the door, holding them and the can of Coke aloft so they can be seen from the counter. "Bo?" I call, and he waves me off with an acknowledging grunt and nod. I tuck the snacks into my dress pockets and open the door out into the muggy morning, wedging my wagon through the exit swiftly, before the men can offer their help again. I clatter down the front steps, skipping the ramp entirely, and bustle off down the road to home. "Keep your head down," I whisper to myself. "Keep on movin'."

I've only been walking ten minutes when I hear the rattle of their truck behind me.

I know it's them; I don't even have to look. Their windows are down and I can hear the two in the cabin hollering to the one in the truck bed. Some country song I don't recognize is floating through the windows too, so I can't quite make out what they're saying, but I can feel them. I wonder for a moment if they're just going this way by coincidence. Maybe they're just taking the same road to wherever they're headed.

That notion is quickly killed when I hear the truck slow to a crawl, and I feel the big metal body pull up beside me.

"Hey, darlin' girl," Tall Boy calls to me out the driver's window, giving me a smile that I suppose is meant to be sweet but doesn't match the hungry look in his eyes. "We was just jokin' around with you back there. No harm done. Why don't you let us give you a lift to where you're going?"

I keep my back straight and my pace steady, eyes on the road ahead. "Thank you, but no, it's not far." I can practically feel his

eyes sweep over my exposed legs and the curves of my chest, still a little fuller in my dress on account of the breastfeeding. It sets my teeth on edge inside my mouth, but I keep my gait even and calm. "I don't mind the walk."

"Baby girl," Lanky shouts from the passenger seat, leaning over his tall friend. "Don't you know you shouldn't be walkin' quiet country roads like this all alone?"

"Who knows what kinda people you might meet," MAGA Hat croons from the truck bed. "Could be someone might want to sample more than that sweet jam of yours." Low, menacing chuckles rumble through all three of them. "Could be a fella would find it hard to resist them big, pretty eyes you got."

"Or that long, shiny hair," Lanky adds.

"Or them soft 'lil curves," Tall Boy growls. He leans a bit further out the window, and I can feel his breath on my neck, he's so close. "Come on, darlin'. Don't you wanna show us what you got under that dress?"

My heart kicks into lightning pace in my chest as I drop the handle of the wagon and hear it thunk into the dirt. I turn towards the groves of angel oaks and take off at a run, my foam flipflops flying from my feet and the long grass and dusty soil slipping between my toes. I don't slow when I reach the treeline, barely registering the shock of the cool shade from the limbs that weave together overhead as I sprint deeper into the woods. I can distantly hear the men cursing and the Chevy being thrown into park, doors slamming and boots pounding the ground as they give chase. I try not to let the sounds distract me. Keep on movin'. I remember there's a clearing up ahead, far enough from the road. If I can get there before them, it should be safe. I should be safe.

I really hope they didn't bring their guns.

Hold it together. Keep your head down, keep on movin'. I feel the sweat streaming down my back and my temples now, and the muscles aching in my limbs. I listen for the sounds of the men as they crash through the underbrush and over gnarled roots, as they call out to me with voices that are getting less and less saccharine, and sounding more and more like dogs on a hunt.

"Come back here, darlin'!"

"How far you really think you gon' run?"

“You’re only gonna make this worse.”

“Get back here, little bitch!”

They’re still a ways behind me when I burst into the sunshine of the clearing and spot my hiding place on the opposite side: a giant oak, one that’s wider than I am tall. I scramble towards it, dirt and leaves caking my feet, scratches up and down my arms and legs from the race through the woods. My shaking fingers dig into the bark of the solid trunk, and I use it to swing myself around to the opposite side, crouching in a nook where the rain has washed out a hollow between the tree’s big, thick roots. I make myself as small as can be, trying to control my breathing and the blood that feels like fire pumping through my veins. Quiet as you can, I think. Just as quiet as you possibly can.

It’s only the space of a few breaths before the men enter the clearing behind me, and I peek up through the gaps in the roots to catch sight of them. They’re looking and listening for a hint of which way I might have gone, where I might be hiding. I feel the barest moment of relief when I see their empty hands; no guns. “You see her?” MAGA Hat gasps, hands on his knees, breathing harder than his friends.

“She’s ‘round here somewhere,” Tall Boy growls impatiently, casting his eyes around the edges of the clearing. I dig my nails into the dirt and crouch lower, flattening my belly to the ground as I see him spot the giant oak, a sinister half-smile slithering up his cheek. “Come on out, ‘lil Red. ‘Nuff of this.” He takes measured steps towards the tree, his eyes never leaving the overgrown roots on the far side, his toothy smile never leaving his face. “I promise, darlin’, you just come on out and let us have our fun and we’ll let you go on home after.” Behind him, the dangerously calculating look on Lanky’s face seems to suggest otherwise.

I’m as low to the ground as I can get now. The time for running is over. The three approach the tree slowly, spreading out to block any escape routes. My eyes follow them and my mind races, trying to form a plan. There’s three of them, and one of me. I have to time everything out just right, move in just the right way. My muscles twitch and bunch, and a deep, shuddering breath rushes into my nose, fills my lungs, then blows out silently between my parted lips. My eyes focus on the men’s positions, my ears perking

with every blade of grass that bends beneath their boots as they edge closer.

Closer.

Closer.

And then, stopping in their tracks just a few feet away from my hollow when they hear the thunderous growl that echoes through the clearing.

Tall Boy dies first.

There's something distinctly satisfying about the brief look of shock in his eyes when I lunge at him, my jaws snapping shut around his neck, the smell and taste and feel of his arterial blood spraying from his carotid, the warm impact it makes as it splatters over my russet fur. The force of my bulk takes him off his feet, and my claws dig into his shoulders, tearing his shirt as the white cotton becomes saturated in the red rushing from his neck and dripping down from my muzzle. I lock my jaws tight on his throat and shake a bit, and I can *just* see, from my periphery, the moment the light leaves his eyes.

Straightening all four paws back onto the earth, my ear flicks toward the other two. Turning my head, my vision confirms what my hearing's told me: they're standing and staring at me as I loom over their late companion with gaping mouths and lilywhite faces, and while I can't exactly smile when I'm in this body, I do feel the corners of my jowls tick upwards just a bit.

Lanky's next; he belatedly remembers to break into a run once I'm halfway to him. Too late. Before he can make it four steps, I'm tackling him from behind and feeling the snap and crunch of his skull between my teeth. I look up again to see that MAGA Hat has made it to the treeline, retreating off in the general direction of their truck and weapons, but I'm not worried. He won't make it far.

And he doesn't.

The sun is much higher in the sky by the time I get all three corpses loaded into the bed of the Chevy and hidden under the tarps. Takes a while to haul three grown men out of the woods with one little red wagon.

I'm glad I remembered to take off my dress before I turned; it's stuck to my skin with sweat and dirt after all that work, but those things are a lot easier to explain to a curious passerby than

torn fabric and blood. I'm not overly concerned, though. This road stays fairly deserted most of the time, and even if I'd had the bad luck of someone driving by, windows down, at just the *exact* right moment, I feel confident that I lured those boys far enough into the woods that no one woulda heard the screams.

Besides, I'm only a mile and a half from home, and I have the Chevy now. After checking that my cargo is secured in the back, I climb into the cab, smiling when the engine turns over with a throaty purr. I grin even wider when I flip the AC on and feel cool air rush into the cabin. My, what a nice little truck. All it really needs is some sanding for the rust, a paint job and some new tires, and that's no big chore. I'll have to swap out the plates and the VIN of course, but I know Bo will help me with that if I ask real nice. He's done it with the tourists' cars before, when those kinds of folk go missing near the Gas & Feed; the ones who get lost on these backroads and stop in for directions, the ones so off-grid they can't get cell service. Folks like that have a way of up and vanishing into that swamp behind Bo's, 'specially when they're the disrespectful type. Bo's older, but he's got a temper, and his teeth are just as sharp as mine. Plus, he's got a nice little side business chopping up and reselling the cars left behind when they disappear.

He might even give me a deal for the rifles in the Chevy's gunrack, if he thinks he can make a buck off of them. If not, I'll probably just chuck 'em into the lake. Not much need for guns around here.

And really, the best bounty from my morning is the meat. Not only do I have three strapping, tender young men to butcher up for the deep freeze, but two whole ten-point bucks as well. I know the venison will be a treat for the pups, and they can have fun playing with the skins and antlers and deer bones after. I feel bad, never letting them keep the bones or skins of the human ones, but that would raise too many questions, I think, should an outsider notice.

I know Henry will be a little disappointed that he missed all the fun, but he wanted to stay home and care for the pups when they woke up from morning naptime and, well. When he gives me those big, moony eyes, it's hard to say no. Especially when I see how dear and gentle he is with our babies, when they scamper all over him and nip at his tail, and he curls around them with kisses

and nuzzles. Such a good, lovin' daddy. And anyway, he'll enjoy the story, and the meat. He teases blushes out of me when they're redheads like Tall Boy; he insists that ginger-haired folk simply taste better. He'll kiss me 'til we're breathless, wink at me, then say real sly-like, "Y'know, Millie, I reckon I do have a fondness for the color red."

I smile as I ease the truck up out of the soft shoulder and onto the road, starting the short drive toward home and feeling pretty satisfied indeed. I can hear Mama's voice in my head again, pride in her smile. "You got this, my girl. Just keep your head down, take care of your own, make use of what life gives you, and keep on movin'."

Damn good advice, Mama. Let's head home. My babies are waiting, and hungry by now.

Mike Neis

## A WAY BETWEEN HYSTERIAS

When she was still alive, Guadalupe María Torres Cardoso would lead her little brother in singing the monastic offices. He would untie her long black hair and play with it as they sang.

Some nights Guadalupe would sit at the piano and play Spain's musicals like "La Lavandería de Salamanca." Ramón, the middle brother, would play the guitar. Father, who had been a celebrated tenor when he was with Madrid's Teatro of Zarzuela, would sing. Francisco listened, unmoving, in his mother's lap.

It seemed like they would go on forever with Guadalupe's poor health, but tuberculosis took her when Francisco was ten. It was only a few days after her death that Francisco heard her voice, as if she were at his side.

*You should visit the monastery for Nones, after school.*

"But could I have some caramels first?" he asked as he sat down at the breakfast table.

"Who were you talking to?" asked Francisco's mother.

"Guadalupe," said Francisco.

His parents looked at each other. Mother's face contorted as if struck. Father's eyes pressed down.

"Guadalupe is dead. You must not let your imagination get away with you. Besides, it's upsetting your mother."

"But Father. It's not my imagi..."

"We are to hear no more of this talking to Guadalupe. These times are difficult enough for us already. No more, got that? Enough!"

*Agree with father, Panchito. You do not need to say anything aloud. I can still hear you. Agree with Father.*

"Yes, Father," said Francisco.

His parents hired a piano tutor to take over the lessons Guadalupe had been giving him. Francisco's progress was quick and soon he was playing Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff.

At the monastery, the monks had many boys. They dressed them like dolls and used them to carry candles, books, and chalices

for the offices. Francisco assisted Brother Samuel, the organist, who did not even need to nod at Francisco anymore when it was time to turn the page.

Once Francisco thought that Samuel would hurt himself as he played.

“Brother Samuel, why are you digging your fingers into the keyboard?”

“Because that Abbot Jiménez is a jackass,” said the old monk, his voice, a low hiss.

When Francisco was 15, he walked in front of “The Andalusian” during siesta. He heard piano notes tumbling out the door like disorderly drunks.

This music could not have come from any score. Like a story with surprise twists, it held Francisco’s attention. From then on, he passed in front of “The Andalusian” as often as he could. He leaned against the outside wall and listened while the rest of Madrid slept in the midday heat.

On a day when no one was playing, he entered. Francisco breathed in the smell of cigarettes and heard the clunk of glasses getting washed in the back room. The fall board’s knobs were missing, and the keys stuck out at him like rotted teeth.

Francisco played a triplet riff he had heard the day before with his right hand. Then his left hand joined in, playing bass chords. Francisco became lost in the musical musings of his hands.

The slap of a kitchen door broke him from his reverie. He straightened himself and turned to see a man and two women behind the counter. Others had come in and were sitting at the tables, watching him, their dark outlines still and attentive. The man behind the counter, bald and with hairy arms, held out his hand, palm down, and rocked it back and forth as an indication for Francisco to calm down.

“I know someone you should meet,” the man said. “Come back here tonight—sometime after dinner, but not too late, okay?”

Francisco nodded, and then sprinted out the door.

Francisco was soon playing at “The Andalusian” on weekends and some weeknights with a group of about 15 men on brass, woodwinds, and drums. They played big band and jazz. His mother did not like it, but his father was delighted at how the quiet Francisco was engaging the world through music.

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When Brother Samuel died of a heart attack, Francisco was called upon to take his place at the age of 18. He was still only an outside postulate. He alternated between joy at the opportunity, grief for Brother Samuel, and fury at how the abbot threw him into this job unprepared.

Francisco had to practice for Vigils by candlelight since Abbot Jiménez would not allow electric lights after the offices. The empty sanctuary used its cavernous size to play tricks with Francisco's head as he played.

Francisco did not mind playing the organ. Singing, however, was exposing too much, too intimate. He knew that his misgivings were pure vanity and pride. "Engage the world, engage the community," Fr. Zúñiga, novice master, always insisted to him.

The organ bench was feeling hard. *Time to stop Panchito. You will not get much more out of practicing now,* said the voice. He changed out of his cassock and into slacks and a coat. Like the monks he should have gone straight to bed, but he had other things to do.

His destination was eight blocks away. He walked down Calle de la Academia and onto Calle de Ruiz de Alarcón, hopping from the curb onto the street's pavement. He hummed the chant for Psalm 63.

It was easy to see his way with the lampposts spread 20 paces apart. Madrid, built by monarchical power, was proudly urban, with massive buildings taking out large swaths of sky. Mannequins in store windows, elegant and slender, posed with short, meticulously styled hair and draping clothes. Corners of the buildings were ornamented with statues, pillars, and domes.

Ramón Torres Cardoso had made his little brother Francisco look beneath this veneer of urban splendor to the seething agony of Spain's working poor. It was the bitter fruit of arrogant property owners and aloof governance, backed by a church that could barely attract even a small percentage of the faithful for Sunday Mass.

Occasional groups of people, some quiet, some drunk, passed Francisco on the street as he walked. A pair of old men in fedoras and black jackets slouched at a table laden with a plate of olive pits, and an empty bottle of wine.

As he passed an elephant-sized gold statue of Hermes at the corner of a tall building, Francisco slipped on some grime and fell. He took out a handkerchief and wiped the filth from his hands. The street cleaners would come in the early hours to take this dirt away, making the city appear bright and clean once again.

As he approached “The Andalusian,” music was the first thing to call Francisco, then the laughter. Diners sat at tables on a wide sidewalk. The musicians had just started playing “Sweet Georgia Brown” at a blazing tempo.

Francisco was approaching the entrance, when someone grabbed him, took him off his feet, and slammed him against the wall. A face showed up so close, Francisco could barely make out the features of Gonzalo Sanchez, whom he had known since the academy. “What the hell are you doing here?” Gonzalo asked. “Why aren’t you in church, where a clerical patsy like you belongs? Eh, Monkey?”

Francisco slackened like a scarecrow on a stick. The wind had been knocked out of him. *Say nothing. Do not be afraid*, said the voice.

“Gonzalo, lay off.” It was Ramón, who rested a hand on Gonzalo’s shoulder. “You know Panchito’s harmless. He just likes music, that’s all. And the band is expecting him now.”

Gonzalo released his grip on Francisco. “Yea—right—harmless—that’s right—harmless, little ol’ Monkey doesn’t mean anything, right? He just likes his piano and stuff. Means nothin’.” Gonzalo mussed up his hair. “Run along now. Your band’s waiting for you.”

As Francisco passed through the door, humidity, cigarettes, and booze enveloped him. But for the music, Francisco would never walk into this deluge of people and mindless banter. He was not like his brother, who always seemed to be in the middle of the noises and crowds.

He sat down at the piano as the trumpeter soloed, sweating, and playing with a sort of fire that was an offense to common decency. For a couple of measures he syncopated eighth and quarter notes, waving his trumpet as he blasted out each riff. He brought his instrument to a roar as he finished the refrain. The sound was lawless, horrifying, and fascinating. It made Francisco think of the Lavapies district, with its hollering hawkers, laundry

in the balconies, and roaming dogs.

Francisco warmed up with supportive chords as he looked around. The dance floor was a turbulent boiling of heads, shoulders, and other appendages.

Alberto, the director, turned to Francisco as the trumpeter closed. Francisco would be taking a turn soloing. He could not have done it when he first sat down; impossible to go from monastic to jazz so quickly, but now he had been surrounded by the big band beat, the cigarettes, the noise. He had forgotten that someone had threatened him only moments before.

He started playing by echoing the eighth and quarter note syncopations that the trumpeter had been doing. Then he banged out chords, jumping about the keyboard in a series of dramatic sweeping fifths. A new riff. The trombonist looked back at him.

*Panchito—stealing from psalm 63?*

The voice was laughing, but it was right. He had gotten that riff from the chant he had been practicing. He went back to a harmony line about a third below the melody, syncopating at will.

The trombonist was next. He opened with a series of staccato bursts, flowing up and down like fat sausages on a frying pan. Francisco noticed something about his slides that sounded familiar. Then he figured it out. The trombonist was working Francisco's sweeping fifths into his own solo. Francisco responded with some echoes of his own, and the two went back and forth with that sweeping fifth riff for the rest of the refrain.

Alberto signaled that he was going to wrap it up, and so everyone played what they wanted, all but forgetting the melody. Francisco never liked the disorder that ensued whenever Alberto "tossed the music to the wind," as he called it. The band finished and it was time to take a break.

Francisco made his way to join Ramón and his friends at a table close to the bar. Ramón had Francisco's *tinto* ready.

"The Andalusian" was a *cervecería* patronized by those who supported the newly elected government. The liberal Republicans and the conservative Nationalists kept themselves separated, each into their own hangouts. It seemed to Francisco, however, that even amongst the Republican side, there was still potential for trouble.

Ramón raised his glass to Francisco. “Drink up little brother. The republic must be getting somewhere.” He looked about the table, and others with glowing faces were ready to hear what Ramón would say next. “The Fascists, the landowners, and Francisco’s brethren in the monasteries are getting all excited. We must be having some effect, ha ha!” The others raised their glasses. “Yea! Ha!”

“To the Communists!” Ramón bellowed with a flourish. His voice carried across the floor.

“And the Socialists,” added someone from another table. The voice put a double emphasis on the “so” in “socialists.”

“And the Anarchists,” came a voice like a ragged trumpet blast from the far wall. A couple of men stood up and a fist slammed down upon a flimsy table somewhere. The floor became noticeably quieter. Francisco held his breath and checked how far he was from the door.

“Long live the republic,” called out a final voice, and everyone raised their glass.

“Hear, hear!”

Francisco took a sip of his *tinto*. His lips formed a tiny circle as he pushed out hot breath.

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Francisco’s alarm went off. At first, he thought that the alarm clock was part of his dream, in which he had been in Marbella, trying to negotiate his way around his uncle’s yacht in a race against his brother. The voice finally got him up. *Wake up my Panchito. The monks need you. If you don’t leave now, you’ll be late.*

He arrived before anyone else and turned on the lights. The organist always arrived first. The monks came in precisely at 2:00 AM on their own, faces gray with sleep.

Father Mateo did not have to look over at Francisco, who was ready with the opening three notes that would give the first pitch. Father Mateo chanted.

“Deus, in adiutorium meum intende.”

And the monks responded.

“Domine, ad adiuvandum me festina...”

And so they chanted versicles into the night while the rest of

Madrid slept. Francisco watched for cues and played through the early morning offices. The other monks had each other for support if one of them began to nod off, but Francisco, at the organ, had no one.

Father Zúñiga, approached him after the end of Matins. "This morning, after Terce, we must talk."

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When his alarm woke him for lauds, Francisco had been in a dreamless sleep. It was still night. The monastery represented a peaceful sort of night, different from the night he knew as a jazz musician. Music gave him a place with both kinds of nights.

His meeting later that morning with Father Zúñiga began as it always did, with confession.

"Bless me Father for I have sinned..."

Confession was remarkably comfortable for Francisco. He confessed laziness, gluttony and looking at some of the girls in "The Andalusian."

Father Zúñiga had other pressing concerns.

"The Abbot has decided it is time for you to become more a part of our community. We have been able to work with you and your family, but you are to live here now. So prepare yourself for this change."

"Thank you, Father."

"And you are to carefully review your other activities. You will not be able to engage in them once you are here with us. To be honest, Francisco, I do wonder about your suitability as a monk. I have told the abbot I have serious misgivings about you, given your ongoing outside activities. Will you think about this?"

"Yes, Father."

When he arrived home, he found his Mother at the breakfast table reading *El Día* while his Father's face was behind *El Debate*.

"How was Terce?" asked Mother.

"It was fine," Francisco said. He grabbed a Magdalena, took a bite, and poured himself a coffee. They were both fresh. Concepción, their maid, had outdone herself yet again.

"Where's your brother?" asked Mother.

"I don't know. He was at 'The Andalusian' last night."

"Well that idealistic republicanism has gone far enough," said

Father. "Things are getting worse, and Madrid is ready to blow up. This is not a good time to stick your neck out with that lot."

"I'll tell him," Francisco said. He would, in truth, do no such thing. Ramón had been a Communist since his days at the academy, and Francisco agreed with him when he talked about politics.

He ate his Magdalena as he went to his room. He flung himself into bed and fell fast asleep. He dreamt of shouting, breaking glass, and running. He woke before his alarm sounded and went downstairs. Mother and Father were both by the radio. The whites of Mother's eyes shown, and she held a hand at her neck. Father spoke.

"There's been some trouble on Alcalá, and now we have rioting in the streets. They say that the churches and the conservative press—*ABC* and *El Debate*—are being attacked. Is it not enough for the left to have control of the government?"

"We still have not heard from Ramón," said Mother. She put her hand down and fixed Francisco with an authoritative stare. "And you are not going to Sext. Nor will you be going to any of the offices until things calm down."

Francisco put his coffee down. "If the monks are in danger, shouldn't I let them know they can come here until it's safe? You know that's what Uncle Carlos will be doing."

Mother and Father looked at each other. Father spoke. "Yes, we must do that. Let the brothers know they can come any time, day, or night. Tell them but be careful in the streets."

Then Mother spoke. "And then immediately come back. Immediately. You will not be playing organ today. They will have to get by without you."

The streets were quiet, but it was not the kind of quiet that Francisco had felt while walking to Vigils. This was the quiet of a tiny fawn, hiding in the heather, sensing a pack of wolves nearby.

He was about to cross Avenida de Menendez Pelayo and enter the Parque de el Retiro when he heard shouting. Francisco drew close to the corner of the Banco de Vizcaya and peered around it. He saw Ramón, accompanied by seven or eight others, walking down the street at a brisk pace.

Francisco came out in plain view. "Ramón!"

"Francisco!" said Ramón. "Come with us. There is action

everywhere now. We're going to the *Convento San Luis*."

The group picked up its pace, almost jogging. Francisco struggled to keep up. "Ramón, you must come home now. Mother is worried."

"Ramón must go home now," said one of the men in a sing-song voice.

"Ramón—you'd better go home to your Mama," said one of the others. They all burst out laughing.

Ramón caught his breath, and then laughed himself. "No Francisco, I'm not coming home now." "But we're not in any danger. We are on the side of the ruling government, and they would not dare call out the Civil Guard. And no one is getting hurt. The mobs are only attacking buildings, not people. Javier is documenting all this, right, compadre?"

One of the men was carrying a camera. He held up his arm for Francisco to see. The camera dangled from his wrist like a toy.

"We are witnessing the downfall of the corrupt and exploitative church in Spain. It is finally getting what it deserves. Besides, we're only watching, isn't that right, guys?"

Nods of agreement followed from the band of young men, whom Francisco knew as idealists at the academy—not the embittered working class.

Ramón and the others turned left at Calle de Hermosilla, and then broke into a run, for the *convento* was under attack. Rocks smashed through windows. A tight knot of men was trying to break into the sanctuary.

One of the rioters who had slipped in through the broken windows opened the fortress-like doors. With a chorused shout, they rushed inside, overturned pews and advanced to the altar. *Get the monks out of danger*, said the voice.

Francisco grabbed Ramón and they went to the living quarters around the back. Francisco shouted and knocked, but no one answered. Francisco was sure he and Ramón could have safely accompanied the monks to San Jerónimo.

By the time they went back to the church, it had been cleaned out of its statues and artwork; the marble altar was overturned and in pieces. Chalices, monstrances, and censers had all been stolen from the sacristy. Francisco closed his eyes and leaned against a wall.

After some argument, Ramón and his friends decided to go to a *cervecería*. Francisco went with them.

Chicote's was bursting with boisterous discussion. How would the church respond to these attacks? Ramón and his friends postured and yelled into each other's faces. Francisco rotated his glass of *tinto* and massaged his temples.

*It's time for vespers*, the voice said. Francisco got up and made his way back to San Jerónimo's.

He practiced everything and checked his watch. It was late and vespers had not started. He heard the door open.

It was Fr. Zúñiga, accompanied by Abbot Jiménez, and another monk who looked familiar.

"There will be no vespers tonight," said Fr. Zúñiga.

"Oh."

"But there is something else we must discuss with you. He turned to the abbot and the monk, who had taken on a bright shade of pink, noticeable even in the light of dusk inside the church.

"Yes, that's him," said the monk.

"Thank you," said Abbot Jiménez.

The monk remained standing.

"You may go now," said the abbot.

The monk drilled a look at the abbot, and then left.

The abbot began. His voice was low. His words were measured.

"As with all our postulates, I have been trying to work with you. Everyone needs time for discernment. You, in particular. We know you like to play piano at the clubs of Madrid. I have been willing to work with this."

The sanctuary creaked somewhere in the back.

"But no one could have anticipated what we heard about you this evening."

Francisco felt a wave of cold, starting at the crown of his head and showering through his body. He gripped the pew he was sitting on.

Father Zúñiga took over. "Francisco—that monk, Brother Gómez, says that he saw you among the rioters that attacked his monastery. He says that you were throwing rocks and smashing precious items there. He says that you were banging on the door of the living quarters, trying to break in. Is this true?"

Francisco looked back and forth at the abbot and Fr. Zúñiga.

“I was at the *Convento San Luís*, that much is true. My mother had asked me to bring Ramón home. I had no intention of destroying anything, certainly not attacking a monastery. Ramón himself did not participate in the attack either. He only wanted to watch.

“It occurred to me that the monks might be better off somewhere else. Ramón and I went around to the door of the cloisters and started knocking so that I could bring them here. I felt that if the monks were with Ramón and me, then others would leave us alone. I was not attacking the monastery nor the monks. I was trying to help them.”

The abbot snorted and rolled his eyes. “And why should I believe you?” he asked. “It would not surprise anyone here that you might be a Communist, or an Anarchist or God knows what.”

Francisco had no idea how to respond. Fortunately, he did not have to.

“You should believe him because I believe him,” said Father Zúñiga. “Francisco has shown the utmost dedication in serving the monastery and thank goodness he has developed his skills as a musician. He has always arrived before the other monks. I do believe he would pursue his brother and ask him to return home to safety. His playing piano at the *cervecerías* is only another expression of the music he loves. It has nothing to do with communism or anarchism.”

Fr. Zúñiga stepped around behind Francisco and laid his hands on his shoulders. “I might remind you, Abbot, that Francisco’s parents have shown seamless support for us. And so I have every confidence in what my postulate has said. That is why you should believe him.”

Francisco felt a pressure on his eyes. His neck felt like it was swelling.

The abbot slouched in the pew he was sitting in. He did not even seem to be breathing. Finally he straightened up, put his hands on his knees and rose. “Okay. I believe you, Francisco. Father, instruct Francisco in what he is to do for the coming weeks.”

The door slammed as Abbot Jiménez left the room. The sanctuary was restored to a dead quiet once again. Francisco turned to Fr. Zúñiga. “My instructions, Father?”

Father Zúñiga covered his mouth with his hand, as if in

thoughtful consideration. “You will come and play for the offices after I tell you to. And you will seriously reconsider your activities at the *cervecerías*. We are living in an age of hysteria. The monks are ready to extrapolate the strangest things out of what is, in fact, entirely innocent.”

“I love the offices,” said Francisco. “I love the music and playing the organ. And I love the monks. I even love the abbot. I could never, ever do anything to hurt any of them.”

“I know, I know,” said Fr. Zúñiga. “I am so sorry about this. But with these awful times a moment of reckoning has come for you.”

The priest rose. “And please be careful on your way home.” He left the sanctuary, leaving Francisco alone in the darkening church.

Francisco opened his music book. He played as accusations pounded in his head. He made mistakes.

“I am so restless.”

“Why can’t I just settle down and be a monk?”

Francisco began practicing the music for vigils yet again.

“I am making things difficult for the abbot.”

“Father Zúñiga does not think I belong here.”

“Why am I making so many mistakes?”

Francisco kept his eyes away from the torches appearing through the stained-glass windows. He ignored the shouts. He was holding a B-minor chord when the sound of smashed glass desecrated the church. The voice spoke.

*Brother. You should leave now.*

Another crash banged out from the opposite side of the sanctuary. The shouting became louder. Francisco bent down closer to the keyboards.

The voice became insistent.

*Stop playing the organ. Get out.*

Francisco stopped playing and got up. He drifted to the one stained-glass window that meant more to him than any other.

Rocks were crashing through window after window. The shouting and cursing were building. The window of St. Cecilia was still intact. He approached it as it glowed with pulsing lights and shifting blues, whites, and greens. St. Cecilia was focused on playing the organ, just as he had been. He approached the glass

and touched it.

More movement outside. Shadows. Whirling. Then St. Cecilia exploded, and a biting shower of glass rained down upon Francisco. He felt the glass slicing his hands and his neck. Something heavy struck him high on his forehead. He fell.

*My brother...*

"I did not betray the monks."

*I know, brother.*

As he lay on the hard floor, his hand felt something that had been tickling his neck. It was slick, dark, and warm. His chills were getting worse.

*You are hurt, brother.*

Francisco tried to prop himself up, but the floor was slick. He collapsed back down, and his head smacked on the hard floor.

"I'm hurt badly, aren't I?"

*Yes, brother.*

"And now I shall die, like I deserve."

*Don't talk that way, my dear Panchito. I am praying for you.*

Francisco argued. "But you can't pray for me. You're only a figment of my imagination."

*Am I?*

He felt pressure on his chest and on the side of his neck. It radiated warmth.

*Brother, you have been blessed. You have extraordinary gifts that you are not fully aware of yet. And I am not just talking about music.*

"No sister. I have none of your gifts. You were always better than me."

*You are still so young, brother. You are so completely without guile. You are driven by your simple love, your trust. That is what protects you.*

The warmth was spreading into his arms, his legs. His neck was not tickling him anymore.

*Panchito, you are going to live. And now it is time for you to get up and leave.*

Francisco opened his eyes. He was on his feet faster than he should have been. He made it home safely that night.

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As the country plunged into civil war, music and the voice

would remain with Francisco. They supported him when his mother died during the many shortages, and when Ramón was summarily executed outside of Madrid.

Francisco's activities at "The Andalusian" made him vulnerable to accusations of being a communist sympathizer. He fled as Franco's troops closed in.

He was alone in a mountain valley. Snow was piling up on the ground. The moon's glow barely seeped through the clouds. He could not feel his feet anymore, and it would be many hours before the sunrise. The voice directed him.

*Turn right, here, Panchito. You will spend the night at this place.*

The voice had drawn his attention to a house imbedded into the hillside. He knocked on the door. He knocked again. Finally it creaked open and a large man with thick red whiskers looked down at him. "Who are you?" he said. "Not one of those republican cowards fleeing like sparrows now that you've lost, eh?"

"I'm a musician," Francisco said. Then he noticed the upright piano against the far wall in the dark. "I'm a pianist," he added.

"A pianist?"

"Yes."

The man stepped aside and allowed Francisco in.

"So play, then," said the man.

Francisco sat down at the bench. He began playing the overture of "La Lavandería de Salamanca," losing himself in the music.

His family always sat in a box on the second level to the left of the stage. The red curtains remained closed during the overture, filling Francisco with anticipation. Silhouettes of people in the boxes on the other side of the theatre leaned back in their chairs and whispered.

Francisco began the first song of act one. The curtains opened, showing a happy *plaza* with a fountain that actually worked. The lights turned brighter as the music built. The protagonist, Félix, entered from stage left. The spotlight glowed, and Felix stepped into it, revealing a melancholy face. He turned to the audience and took a deep breath.

And Francisco, from the bench of that old piano, began to sing.

Chuck Boyer

## BEFORE THE WAR

The boy melted a spot on the window frost with his forehead, letting the cold slowly numb him.

Mama and Gram had often said his daddy would come home after the war. They talked about the war every day. He did not understand their talk except that there was always a war. But now there wasn't a war anymore. And just yesterday after church the man in the black dress who Mama called "Father," said he bet the boy was excited that his father was coming home now that the war was over. The boy had thought, *No, Mama said daddy was coming home, not a father.*

After, Mama had explained that a father and a daddy were the same thing. The boy was not sure what this meant, except that a daddy who was also a father was coming to their house tonight. So he had asked, "Is that father at the church who talked to us, is he a daddy? Is he your daddy?"

That made Mama laugh because, she said, it was hard to explain.

The boy did not ask the next question. He just hoped that when a daddy came to their house he would not be wearing a black dress.

The boy could not tell what the man in the picture on the top of Mama's bureau was wearing. It only showed his face and the top of his shoulders. She said he was the boy's daddy. But he did not know the man and Mama said people he did not know were strangers. And though he looked like he was probably nice, Mama always reminded him never to take candy from strangers, or even talk to one, no matter how nice they seemed. What if the man who was his daddy brought candy?

He thought about how every night before the "God blesses," Mama always helped him say the "Our Father who is in heaven." He was also called God the Father. Because of what Mama said, that meant he must also be a daddy. So *Our Father* was the same as *Our Daddy* and God the Father was the same as God the Daddy. He was Mama's and Gram's daddy, too. That meant they all three

already had a daddy. So why was another one coming to their house? Maybe it was too hard for the one in heaven to come. Heaven was way up in the sky. He would have to fly down or use a ladder or something like a beanstalk. He had asked Mama how many daddies someone could have. She said everyone just had one daddy. But that was not true. He knew he had at least two different daddies: God the Daddy and the man in the picture on Mama's bureau.

Billy and Joanne, who were his cousins and lived downstairs, already had a daddy living in their house. His name was Uncle Stanley. Billy and Joanne were mostly happy Uncle Stanley was their daddy. They said he was nice to them except when they were naughty. Then Uncle Stanley got mad and they were scared. Mama said his daddy that was coming to their house was even nicer, especially to good little boys. He would try to be good so his daddy would stay nice and make him happy like Billy and Joanne mostly were. Now when he was naughty, he made Mama and Gram disappointed, but they did not get mad like Uncle Stanley. And God the daddy never got mad either that he knew of.

The daddy at the church who was called "father" said all of them were the children of God. Mama always called him her child, but said he was his daddy's child, too. So being God's child made three. Maybe he would find out there were even more that he was the child of. Still harder to understand was that grown-ups could also be children. But they could, he guessed. Because Mama said she and Uncle Stanley were not just God's children, but Gram's children, too. Except Mama called her "Mom" and Uncle Stanley called her "Ma." But they were all grown-ups. So even when children got big and were called grown-ups, they could still be children.

Mama was often telling him that God loved him. She said that he must love God back and be a good boy so that he would not make God unhappy. Almost as often—but even more now for some days—Mama and Gram told him almost the same about his daddy coming to their house. The boy wondered how Mama knew so many of these things. How could God and his daddy even know him, the boy puzzled, when he did not know them? He did know two things: he loved Mama and Gram; he did not love God or this daddy.

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The boy's mother called him to dinner. He did not like eating most things. They had bad tastes or felt bad in his mouth. He mostly liked milk, oatmeal, pancakes, jelly bread, cheesy macaroni and dessert. Except dessert, Mama never cooked any of those for dinner. So he hated dinner. He especially hated meat, which was dirty brown and hard to chew, and greenish things like beans. If that was the food tonight, he would not eat them again, the boy decided as he climbed onto a kitchen chair, even if it meant he could not have dessert.

Gram followed him to the kitchen. The boy watched her skin wrinkle up between her eyes as she walked through the doorway. He watched the funny way her head went up and down just like the chickens he had seen in a cartoon at the movies. Her tongue kind of went cluck cluck like chickens, too. Mostly this happened when she said something gave her such a worry. Sometimes it was mama; sometimes it was him. When he shoved the pieces of meat, which Mama had cut up for him, to the edge of his plate, Gram sighed. "I know you don't much care for meat, Bobby, but it will make you strong so you can get big like Uncle Stanley and your daddy." She had a kind voice. Her eyes blinked at him through the last light of the day going out the window into the winter.

"Just eat three pieces," Mama said. "And three spoonfuls of peas."

The boy shook his head and pushed away his plate.

"Your daddy really likes a good eater, you know."

"Don't you feel well, Bobby?" Gram asked.

He knew she was on his side. He was her grandchild, like Billy and Joanne. That's why her name was Gram. But if he said he didn't feel good, Mama would put him to bed until he got better. There was nothing to play with in bed.

"He's too stubborn to be sick," Mama said.

"He could be nervous, Janet," Gram said; "You know; about tonight. Why not let him eat just the jello and some potatoes." She turned to him. "Would you like that, Bobby?"

He would. He liked red jello when it didn't have fruit things inside, except pineapple. He never ate green jello with orange

carrot pieces in it.

“Potatoes and jello!” Mama shook her head. “He needs vitamins and healthy food. I can’t even get him to swallow his cod liver oil. He just holds it in his mouth until I let him spit it out.”

The boy recognized the bad mood in his mother’s voice as she yanked on the thin gray string that hung down from the light on the ceiling. The two light bulbs showed that the kitchen walls were whitish at the bottom and yellowish toward the top. Mama said the yellowish was from the cooking smoke. “Anyway, I don’t have the time or energy to deal with his eating tonight,” she complained. “And, you know, it might help if you would stop giving him little treats all day. He has got to eat something besides sweets.”

Gram said nothing because she was getting in trouble.

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After dinner the boy went to the bathroom and emptied into the toilet one piece of meat and the few peas he’d managed to sneak off his plate and into his pockets. He was not sure he wanted to get big like Uncle Stanley.

Mama once said that his daddy was a lot like Uncle Stanley and loved him very much. “Is Uncle Stanley my daddy, too?” he’d worried.

“No,” Mama had laughed. “He is just your uncle.”

“Is my daddy as big as Uncle Stanley?”

“Uncle Stanley is a grown-up and so is your daddy.”

“But is he big?”

“Yes; he’s big like a grown-up, but grown-ups are all different sizes. Your daddy is not as big as Uncle Stanley.”

“Does Uncle Stanley love me, too?” the boy had wondered.

“Yes,” Mama said. “But his love is not as much as your daddy’s.”

So Uncle Stanley was bigger but his love was less than his daddy’s who was smaller.

“Does everybody have to have a daddy? Do they have to?”

Mama sighed. “Yes; everyone has to have a daddy.”

“Where is Gram’s daddy and your daddy?”

“Our daddies have gone to be with God in heaven.”

The boy had remembered that God was a father and a father was a daddy. Maybe all the daddies went up to heaven to be together. "How did your daddy go up to heaven, Mama?" he'd asked.

"My daddy died when I was just a little girl like Joanne. That's when God brought him up to heaven."

"What is died?"

Mama didn't answer right away. She just seemed to be looking far away. Finally she said, "Dying is when God takes you away because he loves you so much that he wants you to be always happy with him in heaven."

So you didn't always have to have a daddy, the boy thought. They could die and go to heaven. Even when you were little.

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The boy had never seen his mother's father, or his grandmother's father, or God the Father. Uncle Stanley and the man in the black dress were the only daddies he knew. Uncle Stanley was the biggest person the boy knew. Gram said he was getting fat. He was as big as the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, one of his scary books. Mama didn't read that one to him anymore because she said it gave him nightmares. Usually when he was scared at night, she left the light on when he went to bed. But even so, he still had bad dreams sometimes. Mama called those "lightmares."

Uncle Stanley's stomach was his biggest part. Once the boy had touched it and asked if he had a baby in there. Uncle Stanley said men could not have babies. His voice was in a bad mood. Mostly, though, he was nice. He gave piggy-back rides. But he did yell sometimes at Joanne, but mostly at Billy, when they were naughty. Sometimes he was so mad he spanked them and they cried. He also yelled at Aunt Ruth a few times. But he did not spank her. And sometimes he shouted at the boy, too, but never spanked him either. Only Mama did that. But it didn't hurt so he didn't cry. And he loved Mama anyway; and Gram, too. And he liked Billy and Joanne. But Uncle Stanley? The boy wasn't sure. If only he was not always spitting brown smelly stuff into a cup. Mama said he chewed on tobacco because he liked the taste. The boy could not understand how something so stinky

could taste good. It looked worse and smelled worse than the chili Mama cooked sometimes. And if it *did* taste good, why didn't he swallow it?

The boy wanted to ask if his daddy might spank him and make him cry, too. But he knew Mama would say "no" so he wouldn't be afraid. Slowly, he made up his mind: he would not be naughty when Mama brought his daddy back from the train. Maybe he would get a piggy-back ride.

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The boy watched the food flush down the toilet. When he looked up, Mama was standing in the door, looking at him. "What am I going to do with you?" Her voice was quiet. "You eat less than a bird." He knew what she would say next. "That's why we have to keep going to see the doctor."

The boy did not like the doctor, who always hurt him when he pricked one of his fingers until a little red drop of blood came out which the doctor kept. No matter how much he kicked and screamed and pulled away, Mama always made him go into the clinic anyway. She always said it was for his own good, that his blood might be weak because he didn't eat the healthy food.

Mama took a wash cloth and bent to wipe his face and sticky fingers. He pulled back because most times she rubbed his mouth too much. "Maybe when your daddy is here you'll eat all your supper. You'll want to show him what a big boy you are, won't you?" she said, drying him with a towel. The boy could not think of an answer. "And now," Mama said, kissing him on the head, "I've got to get ready, so I look nice when I meet your daddy at the station. Won't it be wonderful to finally have him home?"

The boy had been hearing about his daddy for many days now, maybe longer, he couldn't remember. At first it had meant nothing, but gradually he understood there would be a new person coming to live in their house. And with that understanding, his stomach became more and more jumpy. Now, tonight was the night. Tonight his whole body was jumpy.

Sliding his Roy Rogers pistol into his holster, the boy went down the hall to the living room where Gram was reading the newspaper.

He pushed against the paper. "Do you want my daddy to

come to our house, Gram?”

His grandma lowered the newspaper. “Of course, I do. He is a good man and we have missed him terribly.”

“How is he a good man?”

Putting away the newspaper, his grandma took the boy onto her lap. “Now, now, Bobby,” she said softly, “Gram knows you’re worried. But don’t be.” She hugged him tightly. “Trust me. When Mama comes back, you will be happy because instead of two people loving you, from now on there will be three. That’s why Mama and I are so glad he’s coming. And guess what? Maybe your Mama and daddy will bring you a surprise if you’re a good boy while she’s gone.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“Oh, something I’m sure you will like. But not as much as your daddy.”

The boy thought about the little yellow plastic truck, he had seen in the store window when he went shopping with his mother. Its back part was filled with different rolls of Lifesavers.

He felt better that Gram was glad and happy his daddy was coming. Just as long as they would all be happy.

The boy slid off his grandma’s lap to go to his mother’s bedroom. Actually, it was kind of *their* bedroom because his bed was in her bedroom’s large closet. It had no door, so he could check on her whenever he wanted.

As he passed the bathroom, his mother stepped out, nearly knocking him down.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry. Mama is in a hurry,” she said over her shoulder as she went through her bedroom door. The boy followed her as she sat down in front of the vanity table and began to put colors on her face that she called “make-up”. She made lots of funny and scary faces while she did so. He noticed she kept wiping off what she did and starting over, saying “Ohh!” each time like when she said she was losing patience with him.

“Will you come right back, Mama?” the boy asked the vanity mirror.

She looked back at him through the mirror as she rubbed red cream into her cheeks. “I’ll only be gone a little while. You can stay up with Gram until I get back with your daddy. We’ll finally

all be together again, one happy family.”

“I’m happy now.” He wondered why the coming of his daddy was so important to Mama. He was not even her own daddy.

“Well, you will be even happier when your daddy’s here to love us all.”

Mama sounded so sure and already happy. He wanted her to stay happy. “You and Gram love me, right?”

“Of course, we do. You know we do.”

“Gram said if I’m a good boy until you come back, you will bring me a surprise.”

“Isn’t your daddy going to be a big enough surprise?” she asked as she bent her head to one side and brushed her long dark and shining hair that went down past her shoulders.

The boy definitely preferred the toy plastic truck loaded with Lifesavers. That was something he really wanted. He didn’t need more love. His daddy must be something special, though, to make Gram and Mama so excited. He was even getting excited himself, but in a confusing way. What would this man be like? He must be good because Gram and Mama loved him. But Gram said that Aunt Ruth loved Uncle Stanley and he wasn’t always so good.

He watched as his mother began to do something with the hair on her eyes. He almost asked to go with her, but stopped himself. He didn’t know exactly what he wanted to do. “Why is... daddy....” he sounded the word carefully “...why is he coming to our house now?”

Mama turned around on the vanity bench, holding the red lipstick that made her lips look like cherry candy. “Like I’ve told you before, Bobby. The war on the other side of the world is over. He was there fighting bad people to keep us safe so they wouldn’t come here. When they gave up, we won. So he can come home now.” She turned back around and drew the lipstick across her lips, which she kept squeezing together almost like she was going to kiss something.

“Was he here before?”

“Not here in this house. But in other houses he was with us when you were a baby.”

The boy could not remember being a baby. “What is a daddy anyway?”

Mama stopped patting her lips with tissue. She looked closely at the boy. "Well," she began, "he's a kind man who loves you very much; and he loves Mama and I love him very much." She held out her hand to him.

The boy took hold of it and followed her arm to her. "But how does he know us, Mama?"

As she lifted him onto her knee, she seemed to be staring at something he could not see. He held to her tightly, hiding his face against her shoulder.

"Mama and daddy have loved each other for a long time, even before you were born. You know, because we loved each other so much, God gave you to us so we could be a family."

The boy thought about that. It meant that his daddy and Mama knew each other before they knew him. He shivered with his thoughts: *This daddy is not a new person. He loved Mama before I did. And Mama loved him before she loved me.* "What's a family?"

"A family is a father, a mother and their children."

Billy and Joanne were children. "But we don't have children," the boy reminded Mama.

"You are our child. If Daddy and I have another boy like you, or a girl, like Joanne, we will have children. Children are brothers and sisters. Wouldn't you like to have a brother or sister living with us, to play with? And probably you don't remember," Mama continued, "but your daddy used to play with you, too, when you were just a little baby before the war took him away from us."

Billy and Joanne were fun to play with. They had a swing which was fun and scary at the same time, but a little more fun than scary. With a big push from Mama he would go up into the sky from the ground, then go backwards from the sky toward the ground. He always held tight, wanting to stop, but also wanting not to. He did not need anyone else to play with. Too many people were coming to their house. "I don't want to have children," the boy pronounced. "I can play with Billy and Joanne downstairs."

Suddenly his mother jumped up. "Quick, Bobby, help Mama choose a dress to wear. I've got to hurry or I'll be late." She went to the closet. A dark blue dress with white trim was the boy's favorite and he knew it was her favorite, as well. But something

in him did not want her to wear it.

He watched her arm reach for the hanger holding the dress. He wanted to say *Not that one*, but he didn't want her smile to go away. He nodded.

"Good," she smiled. "I agree. I know your daddy will like it, too."

If his daddy liked it, he would be happy. And if he was happy, he would probably be nice.

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When his mother was ready, she went into the living room where Gram was mending their stockings. "How do I look, mom?" she asked, twirling, her voice sounding to the boy different than usual, like when she was showing him something she thought he would like.

"That dress is very flattering. He will be over the moon. But come closer. There's lint on the back. And stop fussing with your hair. It's fine."

The boy was a little surprised because usually Gram didn't like his Mama's hair. She said his Mama shouldn't color it, to let it be natural. Gram had natural hair. It was the color of his bathtub water after he was playing outside. He liked Mama's dark reddish brownish hair better.

"There, you're perfect," Gram said. "He will be so pleased."

The boy knew Gram was not talking about himself. Mama was getting beautiful for *him*.

His mother shrugged herself into the mouton coat she always wore when it was cold outside. She turned and bent to kiss him. "You are my big boy." She searched his face. "Do you know what? You have your daddy's eyes; and they are such very beautiful eyes." She stood. "Now you be a good boy for Gram, my brave cowboy."

The boy nodded, rubbing his face, his eyes closed, against the coat's furry softness. "Goodbye, Mama," he said, his voice muffled by the coat he did not want to let go.

"Goodbye, Bobby; goodbye, mom." She was already at the top of the hall stairs.

"Goodbye, honey. We'll wait up for you. I know you're nervous, but please drive carefully. The streets are slippery and--"

“Goodbye Mama,” the boy said over Gram’s words.

“Goodbye dear.”

“And good night!”

“Good night.”

He waited until she reached the bottom of the stairs.  
“Goodbye!”

“Goodbye, Bobby” she chuckled back as she swung the door behind her.

“And good night, too!!” No answer. “And good night, too!!!” the boy cried anxiously. Again, no answer. “And good night, too!” She was gone.

He waited until he heard his Uncle Stanley’s car start, then returned to the living room. Twirling his pistol aimlessly, he went to Gram and poked at the stocking she was holding away from her to examine. He did not want to play cowboys all by himself. “Can Billy and Joanne come up and play?”

Gram lowered the stocking. “No; not tonight, Bobby. You play by yourself while grandma mends, okay?”

The boy was sorry he had bothered Gram because she had to fix her glasses and wrinkle up her eyes to look at the stocking for holes all over again. She was using the hassock for her feet, which she said were always barking though the boy had never heard them. She let him take it from her. She knew how much he liked to lie across it. He loved to rock it back and forth with his stomach against its cool brown leather. From that position he could play with his cars on the rug in front of him, or put together a puzzle, like the one almost finished of Bambi and Thumper.

But this night he rocked across it to calm his stomach which felt like it was somersaulting inside him. His thoughts were somersaulting as well. And then, suddenly, a sickening fear filled him, souring his mouth. He had forgotten to ask Mama one last time before she went out if she loved him. He knew the answer: “Of course Mama loves you. What makes you ask such a question?” But he asked often anyway because those answers made his face happy and warm. He wanted to hear them now.

Gram put her mending down and went into the kitchen. The boy did not like being alone, even with the hassock to himself. He rocked a few minutes more, then destroyed the puzzle with a

rush of his toy cars, scattering pieces everywhere, and followed her. She was carefully drying the dinner dishes, the cracked white plates and jam glasses she had just washed. She always laughed that the dishes were not as pretty as china and crystal—whatever those were—but they were *pretty* cheap so she didn't have to worry about breaking one.

"When will Mama come back? I want her to be here right now!" the boy demanded, yanking on his grandmother's dress.

Gram stooped and put her arms around him. She looked up at the wall clock. "I bet Mama will be back sooner than two shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Will my daddy stay here for always?" The boy could not stop his voice from shaking.

Gram dried her hands and kissed his forehead. "Yes; your daddy will always take care of your mama and you."

"What about you?"

"Yes; and me, as well."

"Where is he coming from?"

"He's traveling from far away, from another country, across the big oceans on a ship."

The boy remembered Mama saying that Little Black Sambo lived far away in another land across the ocean which was water. The people there were a different color and wore strange clothes. "What color is my daddy?"

Gram's laugh made her stop on her way out of the kitchen. "Why, silly, he's the same color as you. You've seen his picture on your mama's bureau."

Yes, he had. But Little Black Sambo had made him forget. He could see the picture best when bouncing on Mama's big bed. She always told him to stop because he might ruin the mattress or get hurt. He loved her big bed, especially in the early mornings when the sun peeked in at the edge of the window shade and made a stripe across the jumbled sheets. Then he would climb into the big bed with Mama and snuggle under the covers, smelling her shampooed messy hair. "Morning wild" she called it. She said his tossings and whisperings kept her half awake, but she liked him there. It was his most favorite time of all. Playing with Billy and Joanne was fun, too. But that was different.

Mama had talked about the picture before. She had said it was his “daddy,” but the boy had never really listened even though he could tell it was important to her by the way her voice sounded. But it had not been important to him. She could have been talking about anything. He had a picture of Peter Rabbit by his bed that he liked to look at. They talked about *it*, too. But Mama said Peter Rabbit was only make-believe.

Gram was just about to sit down again in the living room when she turned around instead. “Wait a minute. I’ve got an idea, Bobby. I have lots of snapshots in my bedroom of your daddy from before he went to the war. Let’s go see.”

The boy followed her into the bedroom where the lamps only glowed a little but where everything was always picked up. Pictures she called “holey pictures” were on the wall. A string of beads, which was always in her hand when she wasn’t doing something else, hung from one bed post. And a book she called “The Holy Bible” was open on the little table next to her bed. He had looked at it once to see the holes, but there were none, and no pictures either.

And above Gram’s bed was a small man sticking to a cross who she said was Jesus, but was also God. In fact, he was called God the son. *He is a son, just like me*, the boy thought. *I’m Mama’s son*. Except that man was also a grown-up. You could tell he was a grown-up because he had hair on his face. The boy hoped he would never have to have hair on his face. And that was an extra thing to learn: that grown-ups could be sons, too, not just small boys like himself.

Another thing, there were two with the same first name, God, but different last names, *The Father* and *The Son*. Mama said that often a father and a son had the same first name. She said his daddy who was coming to their house tonight had the very same name as his, Robber. Except his name was Bobby, not Robber. But Mama said Bobby was a nick name, just a different way of saying Robber. He guessed that was like *father* and *daddy*, and that *Jesus* was probably a nick name, too. But he did not like Robber. Bobby was better because the first part, Baa, was what little lambs said; and the last part, Bee, was a bug that made honey, which tasted good. Sometimes Mama called him her honey bug.

He wondered what Jesus's daddy looked like. Did *he* have hair on his face? Mama and Gram did not have a picture of him. They said no one did. No one knew what the daddy in heaven looked like. Only his son. But they did know what God The Son's Mama looked like. On Gram's chest of drawers was a statue of a lady named Mary. She was the Mama of Jesus.

The boy watched as Gram dug around in the top drawer of the chest, clucking to herself. "Ah, here we are," she said, pleased, and pulled out a thin bunch of pictures held together by a rubber band. She held it up. "Let's go back where the light is better and take a look at these snapshots. Come on."

Gram sank back into her living room easy chair. The boy leaned on the chair's arm. The first photo showed a man holding a baby. A low row of white houses and some trees like the ones in *Little Black Sambo* stood behind them. The man was smiling at the baby. The baby was not smiling, but it did not look sad.

"That's your daddy holding you when you were just a baby in Florida before the war took him away from us."

The boy looked hard at the baby. He did not recognize it. He often looked at himself in Mama's vanity mirror. That was not him in the photo. But the man...the man was the same one as in the picture on Mama's bureau. He looked very kind, like he would be nice. "Can I have it, Gram"? he pointed at the photo.

"Why, of course, you can." She handed the photo to him. "I remember when you were a baby like in that picture, how your daddy used to make you laugh. He would make all sorts of funny faces and call you his 'snookums.' You two had such fun together. You even liked him to hold you sometimes more than you liked your mama to hold you."

The boy put the snapshot carefully into his pants pocket. He was feeling some of Gram's excitement now.

She showed him another. "Here's one of your daddy with some of his friends in the army. They all liked you very much, too. This one is Barney. He was your mama's and daddy's best man at their wedding."

Each man had his arms around the shoulders of the man on either side of him. His daddy was in the middle. All the men were dressed alike. They even wore the same kind of hats. Barney was

next to his daddy. He had a big stomach, but not as big as Uncle Stanley's. He also wore funny-looking glasses. And his tongue was sticking out. How could he be Mama's best man?

"This one is your mama and daddy at their wedding. You were not with them yet."

Mama was so pretty. Her smile made the boy ache. He could not stop staring at her. Her soft dark hair went down to her shoulders and around her face making her smile all beautiful. The man had a silly wide grin dividing his face, like the circus clowns that sometimes scared the boy.

He was certain now. Mama had known and loved his daddy before she knew him, before he came. She had loved his daddy first. Now they would be with each other again like before him. A question choked him. Where was he before they knew him?

"And here's one of all three of you," Gram stopped his thoughts. The same houses and trees stood behind them. His daddy was holding him like before. Mama was standing next to them, looking very pretty and happy. Gram offered him that photo, too. He wasn't sure, but took it anyway.

He wondered how his daddy could stay with them. He would have no place to sleep. "Where will my daddy go for sleeping, Gram?" he asked.

"Your daddy and your mama will both sleep in her bed, right by you. Actually, it will be their bed now. Maybe we'll move your bed to my room, so they can have some privacy. I'd love to have you sleep in my room. I'm sure it's big enough for the both of us. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Why can't my daddy sleep in your room?"

"Mamas and daddies always have the same bed, because they love each other."

The boy thought this over, he loved Mama and Mama loved him, but they had different beds. He wondered if Uncle Stanley with his big stomach could fit in the same bed with Aunt Ruth. He would ask Joanne and Bobby in the morning.

Suddenly feeling very warm and weak, he moved over to Gram's jack-frosted bedroom window and melted a palm-sized hole in the ice to look through. He wished Mama would hurry and come back at the same time he wished she wouldn't. Snow

was still falling. He watched it fall through the light of the corner street lamp. No footprints were on the white sidewalk. As his peephole slowly froze back over, he felt again like winter was coming inside him. His hands and nose were icy.

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Mama hardly ever went away at night. Only in the daytime when she worked at the factory and he stayed with Gram. The boy thought about how she helped him say his prayers each night before she pulled the covers to his chin and bent over him with a warm, soft kiss-goodnight. "God bless Mama, God bless Gram, God bless...DADDY...God bless Billy, God bless Joanne, God bless Uncle Stanley and Aunt Ruth, and make me a good boy." Suddenly his head hurt. He had been saying "God bless daddy" without a thought for as long as he could remember. Now, the man that Mama was bringing to their house was the same daddy in the prayer with God, another daddy. *But God doesn't have to come here to live and love me*, the boy thought.

The boy did not like Mama to be gone when it was dark. He did not like to go to bed without seeing her, without knowing when she would come back to sleep in the big bed. Until this night, he had never been allowed to stay up until Mama got home. He wondered if the surprise Gram said he might get for being good and this special treat of staying up late were like the ice cream cone Mama always promised when they went shopping on Saturday mornings. He never got the ice cream until she made him go into the clinic.

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A car door chunked shut outside. The boy opened the apartment door slowly, quietly. Moments later heavy thumps sounded downstairs, from outside the front door. People stomping their feet to get the snow off. He heard the door creak open and low voices. She was home. He was with her. A quiet laugh reached him. She was happy. That made him feel a little bit happy himself.

They must have heard him come to the top of the stairs because the voices stopped. He did not move, standing in the extra bright stairwell light that showed peeling lily-of-the-valley wallpaper. Some fluttered slightly when the downstairs outside

door closed. But he had the feeling of moving, without trying or wanting, flying wildly out into the sky, then falling back, falling away. He was becoming dizzy and knew he had to make himself stop. He just had to. He held tightly to the staircase banister, which groaned, startling him, but also stopping the motion. He waited, hardly breathing, watching in the shadowless light for... something. For a moment he thought he was dreaming. Was it a nightmare? He didn't know. But just like in those dreams, he wanted to go back inside to Gram, yet he could not turn around.

Footsteps slowly climbed the stairs. The two of them, still shaking snow from their coats, came around the turn at the landing and saw the boy clinging to the railing as if he might fall. They stopped.

Then, "Why here is Bobby to meet us," Mama said in her nicest voice. She sounded just like she did when she promised him an ice cream. After her words the stairwell seemed filled with watching. And the silence seemed very loud.

Then, very slowly, Mama stretched her arm toward the man standing next to her, touching his shoulder. "Bobby, this is your daddy: remember?" She looked like a doll with a smile painted onto her face. Except it was wobbly; so was her arm. Even her eyes looked worried.

The man wore the same clothes that the boy had seen in Gram's snapshots. His sleeves had stripes on them. The boy sneaked a quick look into his face, but saw nothing. It was like that word, *daddy*, heard so often in the past, and every night in his God Blesses, but never truly listened to until the last few days. The man's face looked at, but not seen. In the boy's frozen imagination, the man had no face. And the face in the picture high up on Mama's bureau had also disappeared. He quickly looked back at Mama. He suddenly wanted to rescue her from this man. But he knew she didn't want to be rescued. He was the one who wanted to be rescued.

The man spoke, softly. "Hello, Bobby...son. I...I understand you've been giving Mama a real time at meals." He looked kind of shy, even worried.

The boy ignored the man's shaky smile. He did not care how shy or worried the man was.

Mama tilted her head. "Aren't you going to kiss your daddy, Bobby?" she said in a pretend scold. "He's been gone for such a long time."

The boy did not move. Then, just slightly, without knowing it, he shook his head.

Mama put her arm through the man's and, leaning against him, they came all the way to the top of the stairs. The man patted her arm like she was his child and he would take care of her.

"Come on, now. You give your daddy a hello-kiss," Mama coaxed again. "You always liked kissing him before the war."

The boy shrank back, not believing her, until remembering Gram's snapshots. He wanted to please her hoping eyes. But he did not even want to kiss her in front of the man.

Suddenly, the man shot out his hand. The boy flinched.

"He's a big boy now. I think he would rather shake hands, like a man. Wouldn't you, Bobby?"

The boy did not answer.

"Oh, certainly he will shake hands," Mama said. "After all, he's been the man of the house while you were gone."

"Shake, son?" the man said, sounding to the boy like Mama did when she asked him to please take at least one bite of meat.

Slowly he put his hand into the man's, feeling how strong it was as the man lifted it up and down. Finally, the boy stopped him and, without a smile, withdrew his hand.

"Okay, son, let's go in and see your grandma."

The boy said nothing, but went instead to the side of his mother opposite the man and took hold of her hand.

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Usually the boy tried to stay up as long as he could. But tonight, while his mother, grandmother and the man sat in the living room talking about many things that he did not understand, he interrupted to ask if he could get ready for bed.

"You can go and put on your pjs," Mama agreed, "then call us when you're ready."

"So you can put on your pjs all by yourself?" the man said, looking like he was pleased.

The boy nodded, feeling pleased himself.

"You have really grown up while I was gone, Bobby." His

daddy was quiet for a moment, like he was thinking. "I tell you what," he said suddenly. "If you go right to sleep, too, like a big boy, maybe some mornings your mama and I will let you get into our bed with us. How would you like that? A special treat once in awhile."

"Oh, Bobby, won't that be nice? Now you'll have two of us to cuddle with instead of just me. It will be like Winnie the Pooh said how two is more fun than one."

Undressing, the boy felt the snapshots in his trousers that Gram had given him. He put his hand into the pocket. Wrapping his fingers around them, he crushed them, digging his nails into the smooth surfaces, grinding and tearing them to pieces. Then he found the pajamas his mother had just bought for him because she said he was growing so tall.

"I'm ready," he called. But the talking in the living room continued with no sign that Mama had heard him. "I'm ready!" he shouted in a hard voice.

This time the talking stopped. Mama came and fluffed up his pillow before turning back the covers. The boy climbed into bed and Mama tucked him in. As she straightened up after his goodnight kiss, the boy noticed the man standing in the doorway looking at him. "Good night, son," he said as Mama passed by him on her way out of the room. "See you in the morning."

He closed the door. All the way. The boy lay rigid with fear in the total darkness. He was afraid to breathe, lest the darkness get inside him. After some moments he made himself sit up. Sobbing, he noticed a thin line of light under the door. He slid out of bed and crawled toward it. He put his face as close to the crack of light as he could. He heard the sound of talking, but not any words. He stood, opened the door and went down the hall to where they could see him.

Mama noticed him. "What is it, Bobby?"

"You always leave the door a little open," he said weakly. "Not shut." He looked at the man.

"Oh, gee; I'm sorry. I didn't know," the man said, rising and waving at Mama to stay where she was. "Let's get you back to bed and I'll fix it."

He followed the boy into the bedroom. "I'm new around here," he said after the boy climbed into bed and turned on his side to face the wall. "I have to learn how to do things right. I forgot that some little boys are afraid of the dark. You'll grow out of it when you get older. I guarantee it."

The boy said nothing.

"Well, goodnight again, son. Have some good dreams and I'll see you in the morning."

After he left the boy turned back over. The door was open a little, but not as much as when Mama did it. He was about to call out that she'd forgotten to have him say his prayers like she always did, but stopped himself. Staring from his pillow through the slightly open door into the hall, he whispered them quickly. "God bless Mama, God bless Gram, God bless Billy and Joanne, God bless Uncle Stanley and Aunt Ruth, and make me a good boy. Amen."

## CONTRIBUTORS

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