cottonwood

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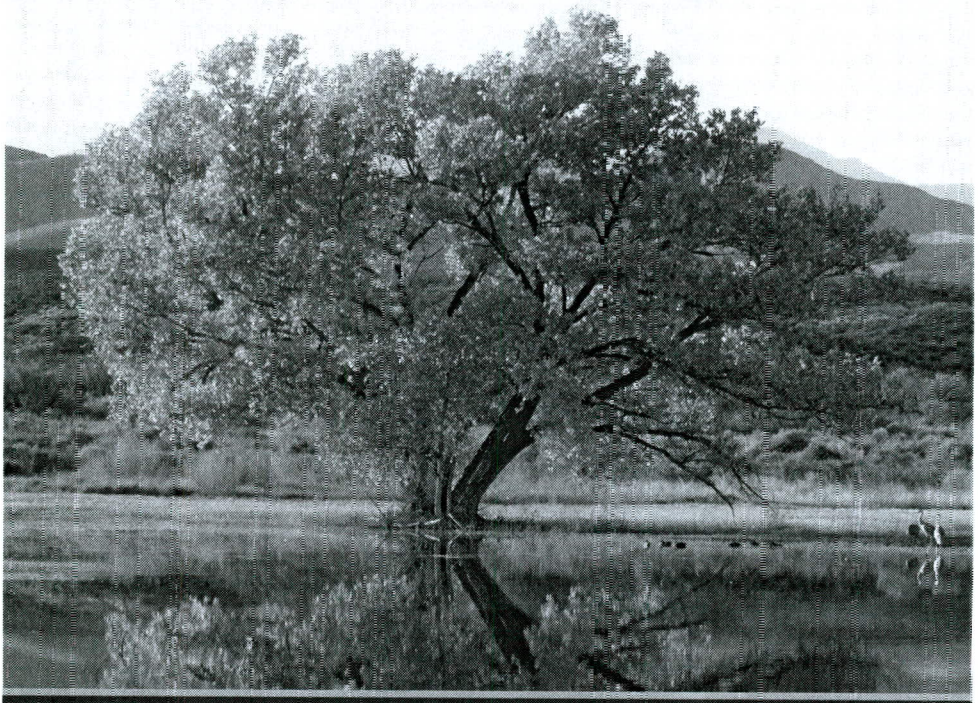

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Gillian Wiley Rose

TO THE DOGS

The dogs bark all night. Their song gets carried back and forth across the town like a canine game of telephone, the tones changing as the message gets rearranged by time and space. The dogs run in a pack, up and down the dusty streets like a gang of schoolboys.

That one's the bully, and the little cocker spaniel the know-it-all. That one, the gray, oversized mutt, always has to go home when his mother calls. And the unlucky beagle takes the blame for the others' misbehavior, its fur beaten and scarred into unusual patterns along its back.

I moved here in the spring, and this is where I'll stay. The countryside is simple and the town is even more isolated than the one I left. Dirt roads run along a rocky beach that goes out to the ocean. Behind the town a mountain range rises into the sky. I have come at a strange time. I have come in time for a brutal crime, a trial and a hanging.

I watch the dogs from the balcony of the little apartment I am renting on a cobblestone side street above a butcher shop. The walls of the apartment remain unadorned. I have been here months now but they are white and blank. The smell of blood wakes me up in the morning. The front windows have no glass. The balcony doors stay ajar, even when it rains. And then, there is the smell of blood. A pork chop could not be fresher than the one I eat for dinner, after I have stared a pig in the eye that morning and said to it, "You will be mine."

I read books all day; this one about Kafka, that one about the Ramones, and this, an in-depth look at ancient Grecian bisexuality. I want graphics. Limbs coming off the page.

I walk on the beach. The sea is the same gray color as the sky and the thin line on the horizon where they converge blurs in the watery air. I walk through the windy streets of the town, up

and down the mountainside into which it is built. The restaurant where I eat my dinner is a cave. Recessed pockets for candles. The exaggerated shadows crawl up the rocky cathedral ceilings. I point at what I want on the menu although I speak the language. They know I am foreign, the waiters, so they just nod when I point. Fingernail against the house red. *Tinto.* Fingernail against the linguini with clams. *Almejas.* The menu is taken and I am left alone with my candle. To stare at it. To stare at the walls. To take in the smells of the best food I have found in town. Prepared in a cave. Served in a cave. Consumed, every mouthful, in a cave. I come here when the pig is too dead to stare in the morning.

Alfonzo wants to chat when I buy groceries. Cheese and bread. Water *con gas.* He doesn't pick up on my silent cues. *I don't speak the language.* Which is a lie. *I have come here to rest.* He doesn't see this. His thick hair falls in his eyes and there is the toss of his head to move it out of the way. His fingernails are dirty. He is what I think you call handsome, a smile always ready in the corners of his mouth. I put the groceries in the cloth bag I have brought with me, although his hands twitch, wanting to help. I give him a glance and then look down and leave without a word.

As I walk home with the groceries, the sandals I have brought with me cut into the sides of my feet. Especially the left one, the foot slightly wider after a break and a slow healing. If I go into a store in the town to buy another pair, it is just as likely that they will also cut into the sides of my feet. And so I limp slightly as I walk. The sandals are leather, Moroccan, haggled over and purchased for far less than they are worth.

As I cross the square I see that three men are building something out of wood. They have thrown together a rough frame and are supporting it with two-by-fours. One of the men tips his hat as I walk by. He sees my limp and for a moment his eyes show concern. It is the gallows they are building.

There is only one woman who has caught my attention. She is different from the others. She rides a scooter all through the town. At her tiny feet she has two enormous dogs. They stay on the

scooter somehow, despite how she races around town, snaking on the skinny, unpaved roads, echoes of dust in her wake. They press their furry bodies to the scooter's baseboard. If dogs pray, then they pray. They cover the woman's feet, which are tiny, although she is tall. Her wild hair trails behind her, an afterthought, and her expression is pinched and grim as she takes a corner too fast. I watch her. Seen, unseen, it does not matter. I watch her hair. It is dyed an awful orange color, tangled and forgotten, streaming behind her. The dogs are mutts. Mongrels. They belong with the pack of schoolboy dogs I see around town. The scooter is red. I could not imagine it being another color.

When the food and wine come, always at the same time, the clams are far too hot to eat, the noodles steaming. The wine glass has too many fingerprints on it to have been washed properly. The fingerprints are revealed by the steam issuing from the pasta next to the glass, each whorl intact. Katalina Minosa has a good alibi. Although she doesn't know it. The food is so good I forget about the wine. Then the wine is so good I forget about the food. I order another glass. I order another plate. The soft wax of the candle is not the kind that burns away, but the kind that collects in the bottom of the jar the candle is stuck into until it drowns out the flame. When this happens my table goes dark. The new plate of food comes, and the glass of wine- equally unwashed- so I point at the flameless candle. It is replaced, the waiter nodding at nothing.

The view from the balcony is of the whole town and the sea. While I am watching people move about the town from the balcony one afternoon, I overhear a conversation. There are two men below the balcony. One of them begins to speak in a loud whisper. He knows something. Something he should not tell. He does not wait to be interrogated. He wants to tell his secret.

Katalina Minosa has escaped from the town's one room jailhouse. The young man who was guarding her cell helped her escape. The local authorities are beside themselves. Not in one

hundred years has a crime this brutal been committed in their town and they cannot allow the information to slip that the only suspect, the one whose guilt they are certain of, is on the loose. The young guard thought her innocent. He also believed that, although he had helped her escape, she would be found soon and hung in the town square. He knows he, too, will be punished. The man whispers on. He only knows of her escape because he was standing in the office of the jailhouse when it was discovered, an outstanding ticket in his hand. He could hear the young man's sobs from behind a wall after admitting that he unlocked her cell door.

The man telling the story agrees with the guard. He has known Katalina Minosa his whole life, he says. He knows she could not have committed such a crime. The other does not see this. Who else had such a motive? The bodies of her husband and sister were found, murdered in their bed. It is a classic story. A crime of passion. Still, the guard sat with her night and day, listening to her life story told between the bars, and he believed her innocent. *La Inocente*, he called her. The conversers are quiet for a moment. They have stopped in front of the butcher shop. Now one of them comments on the oddness of the shop being closed and they move on down the street, their conversation fading. She was gone like a thrush from the jaws of a tomcat.

I sell my stories and that is how I have the money to eat this food and drink this wine. Although some days I eat nothing. I don't want to leave the apartment and am out of groceries. I will make due with a bottle of wine, sipped out of a thimble, sipped all day until it is gone and the sun has made haste to leave the sky. There is no electricity in the apartment and so I read by the light of a gas lamp once the day is dark. There is no running water so when I run out of water *con gas* I go thirsty. I read about vampires and other sorts of night creatures. I read about Italian sculptors of the sixteenth century.

The dogs howl and yip in the street outside my window. There is a new pig for tomorrow and several dogs are barking at the pig. I can picture its slow, scared blink. Just one blink. I feel sorry for

that pig. That it should suffer fear before death. Death is one thing. Fear is another. A foghorn sounds on the water and I look out to see that, yes, it has gotten foggy. It is that lullaby of sounds that puts me to sleep.

That night I dream of the woman on the red scooter. But her hair is a mile long and her mongrels have blood on their teeth. They tear around the town on that red scooter, in and out of the fog, not staying on the roads or even on the ground. They have stolen my pig from the butcher downstairs and taunt me with it. The pig squeals, reaching for me, not knowing I offer it the same fate as they.

The next day I am at the grocery store and the woman is there. She has brought her mongrels inside and Alfonzo has cornered her. He is in the process of telling her that she cannot have the mongrels inside. She doesn't seem to understand him, or pretends not to. His hands are in the air in exclamation. Although he seems flustered, the smile has not left the corners of his mouth. The mongrels do not notice him. One of them has gone down a different aisle and is licking something off the floor near the butcher's counter. Alfonzo explains. The woman smiles and blinks. Then she stops smiling. It feels as though they have had this conversation before. I cannot hear their words, but the gesticulations and movements are practiced. Alfonzo leans in, eyes searching her eyes. She folds her arms across her chest. There is a spark between them. Passion. She is pushing his limits on purpose. She is pushing him to see what he will do. I remember passion. I turn to gather the groceries.

Crossing the square I see that the men have finished the platform of the gallows, the square hole in the middle purposeful, blank. They have moved on, building an open frame above the finished plywood floor. They are not present, but a hammer and a level remain where they have been. They are trusting to leave these valuable tools.

That night a certain wind begins to blow and it does not stop blowing for three days. I don't leave the apartment on those three

days. I have my fresh pork chops. I have five bottles of water *con gas.* I have a case of inexpensive red wine that is made in a neighboring valley. I read about torture acts committed in China during the rise of communism. I read about the planet Mercury. I will not go out in this kind of wind. The dogs are going crazy. They know things. They bark their throats raw trying to explain. They don't want to be out in this wind, but they have nowhere else to go. I read Proust. I read about embroidery techniques. I will sell a story about the woman on the scooter and her mongrels. With this money I will go to the restaurant in the mountainside. Just as soon as the wind dies down. It comes in my open windows. I have blockaded the doors to the balcony but I need the light from the windows to read during the day. To preserve the lamp oil. And so the wind comes in, ruffling everything within reach. Sending papers to the floor.

When, after three straight days, the wind begins to die, I undo the blockade. The wind has settled enough for me to leave the apartment. To go to the grocery. Return to my daily rituals. It is these habits, this meticulous way of being, that keeps the mind still.

Because of the butcher's absence, I go to the restaurant for dinner that night. I am at my table and I have ordered from the menu when the woman with the long orange hair comes in. She has the mongrels with her. No one here seems to take notice or care that the mongrels are inside the restaurant. Perhaps they are familiar with the woman and her beasts. There are no empty tables. I look away, but still she comes. She speaks to me and sits at my table. I look at her blankly, but still she speaks and sits herself down. A waiter is called. She orders from the menu. She points at the menu, but she also speaks. The mongrels sniff my hands and feet. Our food is brought at the same time, as though we are old friends. For a moment we are old friends and she is all I have known in a friend. We laugh together. I speak to her. It is the first I have spoken since my arrival in town. We are oddities here, she and I, joined now by our oddness. We may both exist only for

the purpose of making the other feel less alone. When I get up to leave I say something to her. A small thing, and she smiles.

I go away for the weekend and when I return I find that someone has been living in the apartment during my absence. There are chicken bones scattered around the cot. The blankets are piled oddly. The case of wine is empty and the bottles have been arranged on a windowsill. One of them has a dying flower in it, barely surviving on two inches of water at the bottom of the bottle. My books have been pawed through. One tower of them has been knocked and scattered across the room as though in haste.

I clean all the chicken bones and take the empty bottles, all except for the one with the flower, back to Alfonzo. I trade them for full bottles. He points out that one is missing. I look at his face and shrug. It is the one holding the flower that is missing. I offer an extra coin or two to compensate for the loss and Alfonzo is content. He offers to carry the crate of wine to the apartment. It is a day when my foot hurts and the wind is still strong, so I don't say no.

We cross the square together, the canvas bag over my shoulder, my head down. Alfonzo makes slow conversation, as if, speaking slowly, I will understand him. I do understand, but still say nothing. He grunts over the crate of wine. Here in the square is where Katalina Minosa will hang for the murder of her husband and sister, he says. They have completed the gallows. The townspeople will come to watch the hanging and the children will throw stones at her shrouded face. If they have found her. I will stay home that day with my head under the pillows.

The cobblestones are slick on the incline that leads to the apartment and Alfonzo stumbles. We stop and I have him set the crate down. I will carry it the rest of the way, but I don't wish to pick it up while he watches and so I wait. I wait through an eternity as he makes conversation with the stones at his feet, the sky, my silky blouse and finally my eyes. He leaves and I labor to pick up the crate, carry it up the hill and lay it to rest on the bare floorboards of the apartment. I stand on the balcony of the apartment with a thimbleful of wine.

The morning of the hanging I go out to buy bread. I do not know if they have found Katalina Minosa. Everyone is assembled and waiting in the square although the hanging is not for hours. Perhaps it will not happen at all. The woman has stopped her scooter in the square and is perched on it as though she may leave at any moment.

Alfonzo leans against a tree, apron still tied around his waist. He rushes inside to sell me bread and then rushes back out again only to linger under the tree. The butcher is there, and the waiter from the restaurant in the mountainside. Everyone looks as though they have dropped what they are doing to come to the square. It is hours before the hanging and yet I do not know if they have found her. Or if she will be hanged. Perhaps she is still hiding in my apartment. I did not check every dark corner. And has the glass been washed of her fingerprints? The glass she drank from as her husband and sister were murdered? The waiter is too cowardly to say that he served her that wine. And that she looked up at him with warmth in her eyes when the wine was brought to her. I am unsure if he is just a coward, or if his motive is darker than that, if he knows something about the real murderer. Perhaps he just wants to see someone die. I watch him fidget, staring at the gallows. One word from him could change her fate.

The woman on the scooter sees me. Her eyes meet mine. *You are part of this world* her eyes say. *You must bear witness.* The mongrels are at her feet. I do not want to bear witness. I have come here to be left alone. Somehow I have become a part of all this and it is not what I want. Our eyes are still locked. Maybe she sees that it is useless. I am not willing to take part. It is she who turns away first.

I walk through the square with my head bent down, gaze to the stones at my feet. I go up the street to the apartment, retreating unseen, sickened by the eagerness, the murderous hunger to which I am foreign. She may never arrive. I will stay with my head under the pillows and hope that she does not arrive. And they will wait. And they will wait hungrily.

Michelle Brooks

THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL

The first time the man called the girlfriend by the child's mother's name, the child was holding a slug in her palm that she found in her grandparents' garden. The girlfriend looked closely at the slug, surprised it wasn't as bad as she had feared. *A snail without a home*, the child had said in her squeaky little-girl voice. Despite being a decade younger than the man, the girlfriend's parents had been dead for many years, existing for the man only as photographs the girlfriend kept on her desk. The man took a picture of the child and asked if the girlfriend wanted to get into the frame. He called her by the wrong name and while it was the first time, it wouldn't be the last. She couldn't know that then, of course. All she knew was that when she flipped through the digital images on her camera, she saw herself with the child and the slug, smiling although half her face had been cut off.

When they first started dating, the man told a story about hiking with the child's mother, eight months pregnant. The girlfriend had grown to loathe the story and could predict each action, how the child's mother got a burst of energy toward the end of the hike and pulled ahead of him when she chanced upon a five foot rattlesnake sunning itself and leapt into the man's arms. He then recounted how he'd told this story to his class and that his one Navaho student told her father who was a medicine man who said that for a pregnant woman to see a snake meant the child was going to be a healer.

When the man told the story at parties, the girlfriend smiled. She'd had a lot of practice at this sort of forced merriment, having experienced the horror of working as a model at the Detroit Car Show and the Detroit Boat Show in her early years of living in the city. She missed it, the snow, the raw industrial edge, her friends. People in the desert breathed thin air and sat around in the blistering sun until their skin turned leathery. Like the child's mother for

one. The child's mother was rail thin with huge natural breasts. It wasn't fair. But if her body was Barbie, her face was more Golden Girls, which provided some comfort. And the girlfriend took her comforts where she could.

During her first year in the desert, the girlfriend tried to adjust to the way the man and the child's mother were enmeshed—the phone bill, the video store account, their Costco card. One day the girlfriend and the man were at Costco to stock up on necessities, an activity the man loved, and his membership card wouldn't work. The manager returned and looked at the girlfriend in her black slip dress, a bullet hanging from her neck. "Your female primary removed you from the account," she said. "You're welcome to start a new account with, umm, anyone you wish."

The girlfriend paid for the new membership, but refused to be listed on the account.

"She just don't want to spend a bunch of money here. Make a commitment," the cashier said with a strange smile on his face, the odd joy of seeing a mini-emotional drama play out during the tedium of his shift, ignoring the fact that the girlfriend was the one, at least at the moment, paying.

Even that episode didn't prepare her for seeing the child and the child's mother at the outdoor pool located at the gym to which they all belonged. She and the man put their towels on the opposite side of the pool and then the man went to say hello to his old life and his young daughter while the girlfriend hid behind her sunglasses and listened to some teenagers talking about a recent dentist visit.

"You're awake, but you don't feel anything," one said.

"It's called conscious sedation," his mother said.

The girlfriend knew something of the sensation as she had stolen her dead mother's bottle of Vicodin to get her through the funeral and the long days to come where her mother rose from the grave in her dreams, telling her that she hadn't really died, why would she do something as stupid as die, did she think she was stupid?

After a few minutes, the girlfriend rallied and played in the pool with the child in the shallow end near the steps. The man and the child's mother ventured into another lane to discuss the debts they still owed together and how they would divide them.

The child had a long beautiful name, the first part the name of a flower. The girlfriend sang her an old hymn with the flower name in it, a hymn from the old-time churches the girlfriend had attended in her youth. While a decade younger than the man, she had the same cultural references as his parents did. His mother told a story about her sister having a dog named Nicodemus and the girlfriend nodded—Nicodemus was the man who asked Jesus what he must do to be saved and Jesus told him that he must be born again and Nicodemus asked how was he supposed to return to his mother's womb. That wacky literalist, Nicodemus! To be born once was so difficult, the girlfriend thought, knowing that her mother had been alone during her birth, only the doctors and nurses attending to her, her own parents long gone, the father in the waiting room as men were in those days.

During her first winter in the desert, the girlfriend almost died of a ruptured appendix which resulted in septic shock, two weeks in a trauma unit. That bright blue desert sky had finally turned gray and once she got out of ICU, where she had hallucinated that she was being held captive in a Pizza Hut, she could see a thin swath of it from her window, reminding her of life in the city. People came in and out to change her wounds, to bring her food she couldn't eat, to help her with the bedpan, and to make her walk the halls in order to heal. The boyfriend brought the child to see her, even though it was against the rules. Someone in the next room screamed and yelled, detoxing from meth. His teeth had rotted, and he could start to feel them.

Despite the grim prognosis, the girlfriend had recovered almost entirely by the summer. She and the man would run into the child's mother and her new lover at the pool, and the girlfriend would whisper, oh, the happy days of summer! And smile, all

teeth, no eyes. She dreaded these encounters, the inevitable body comparisons. One day several months after the surgery, she wore an old bikini to the pool, too tired to hunt for her recently purchased one piece. The girlfriend and the man had the child with them and the child made up stories about the scar. "You could say a shark nibbled you," the child told her.

"That's a beautiful scar," the child's mother's boyfriend said.

"It makes itself known," the girlfriend said. She got that line from the Romanian night nurse, who told her that she would want the scar revised. "You do not want memory of such sadness," he had said, covering her eyes against the bright lights while he changed the wet/dry wound for the last time before she got out and the boyfriend would have to do it for another month.

"I'm not going to play that little passive-aggressive game with any of my organs again. I won't be saying, I don't *really* need you," the girlfriend said.

Even though she'd done a fifty-four day novena to Our Lady of Pompeii to bring the child's mother a boyfriend, she wasn't crazy about the results—an aging hippie high school English teacher who claimed that each day was one delight after another while tapping on whatever surface was available. The girlfriend watched for any signs of perversion toward the child, vigilant given her own troubled past with a next door neighbor, a mortician named Al who had molested her at a party.

The talk turned to other things and the girlfriend thought about what had happened. Sometimes she liked the scar and felt it connected her to the suffering of the world. And then there were times when she wished to have her old life back, the one where she didn't know what it was like to have a tube shoved down her throat, breathing for her.

At the dinner following the slug, the girlfriend sat and sipped a martini—half-gin, half-vodka—with a tiny olive. The man's father had mixed them, and they didn't taste good, the way the liquors played off each other. And the girlfriend knew she shouldn't mix or she'd regret it, but it was all that sat before her.

"When my bedroom's paint chips at Daddy's house, I want a new color," the child said.

The man painted her room pink based on a card sample the child liked out of the Disney collection.

"Do you want it lighter or darker or something different altogether?" the girlfriend asked.

"The same one. The fairest of them all."

The girlfriend thought about how she never imagined being someone's stepmother and was glad that she and the child loved each other and that they both had the same wish, to return to what was. But no matter how many fairy tales you read, you still couldn't make yourself believe in a happy ending. When the fairest of them all wore off, the child probably wouldn't want it, would think it too saccharine, too babyish. The girlfriend didn't know she'd be cut open soon, her insides washed out to prevent infection that was already in her blood. But what she did know was this: even with as many coats of paint the man had used on the child's wall, the original gray still peeked through, like a cloud threatening the perfect afternoon picnic.

Shelley Griffin

MIND'S EYE

I don't like when a person doesn't notice the funny things I do, especially when I do them for their entertainment. For example, I was dating this man once. He was an arbitrageur. I didn't really understand what that was—it seemed so abstract, but then I make my living in the kitchen of the Augustine restaurant deboning, slicing, and simmering chicken and lamb, real things that are there before you. So I was at this man's house, and the conversation between us was slim. We couldn't think of anything to say to each other. Whatever we tried ended quickly, and we'd have to start over with something else. It was getting tiring. It seemed the only thing left to do was get into bed together, but I wanted to postpone that for a while, so instead of sitting on the bed next to him, I sat in his office chair in front of his computer. I fake typed on the keyboard and said, "I'm arbitraging." This was the thing I thought was entertaining and funny but was lost on him. He stood up from the bed, came over to where I was fake typing, and put his hand on my breast. It was not the reaction I was hoping for.

What I would have loved would have been for the man, or actually a different man, to have smiled, given a little appreciative laugh, and said something clever. I'm not sure what the clever thing he said would be because I'm not good at imagining clever repartee, but I can see myself and this other, fun man engaged in a playful conversation. I imagine him with thick, unkempt hair in clothes that are to his liking and have nothing to do with the general population's idea of proper dress. And I see us making a game out of our conversation, laughing and enjoying each other.

There was one time I had a funny and clever interchange with my friend's husband, though at the time he was her boyfriend. A group of us were at the beach house one of us had rented for the summer. This was the first time my friend Natalie brought this new man of hers to meet us. She introduced him as Benjamin and

when someone called him Ben, he said he only went by his full name. He seemed different than we were. He was much quieter than the rest of us. He didn't stand up and take the floor when he spoke like several of the other men did. He also didn't drink or smoke and I imagined that he must have been through a lot in his life to reach this stage of abstinence and restraint. I felt he knew more than the rest of us and that's what set him apart.

We were on the deck eating and drinking when I went into the house to get a new batch of the bruschetta I'd made. As I was leaving the kitchen with the tray in my hand, Benjamin came out of the bathroom and we met in the hall. There was an ugly piece of driftwood art hung on the wall and he commented on it.

"Who puts this on their wall?" he said.

"Who makes it?" I said.

"Exactly."

"Someone's cousin made this."

"No, garage sale," he said.

"The neighbor gave it to them with a tin of raisin cookies."

He clapped once and repeated, 'Tin of raisin cookies,' yes."

Somehow "tin of raisin cookies" was funny to us both and I was glad I'd said it. This is what I meant by a funny and clever interchange, although I'm certain this would only be funny and clever to me and no one else, except perhaps Benjamin. At least he found the conversation enjoyable enough to continue standing with me in the hall, talking further about other topics. He told me he was from Utah, and I developed a greater sense of him based on this information, though Utah is one of the many states I have never been in. But I imagined him walking alone along the red sand ridges in the sunset while in the valley below everyone worried about the sins they were committing. He had pronounced eyebrows over heavy-lidded eyes and a long, straight nose. It was a strong, confident face that was tempered by gray at his temples, which seemed to indicate a vulnerability.

When there was a pause in the conversation I lifted the tray and said, "I better get this out there." As I stepped past him he took a bruschetta and popped the whole thing in his mouth. He followed

me down the hall and made an appreciative noise, which I took to mean that he liked the bruschetta. I myself was happy with my bruschetta this night, which I'd made with tomatoes, capers, and olives, and a little lemon zest.

My dates usually want me to cook for them at some juncture, since that's what I do. They present themselves as understanding and say how I must not like to cook once I get home since I do it all day. It's actually not true. I almost always enjoy cooking. Especially at home in my own kitchen, and especially for myself. When I cook for myself I can cook any way I want. When it's just for myself I'm willing to make wild experiments with a dish. When I cook for a date I'm a bit more cautious. The reactions are varied but never what I want them to be. For example, one man told me my pork sausage risotto was hot and spicy and he wondered if the cook was hot and spicy too. I smiled and laughed but it bothered me that he found my risotto spicy. I thought it tasted very mild that night. In fact it was too mild and I wasn't happy with the meal. I was going to use some crushed red pepper in the recipe, but I went with garlic instead even though I knew it wasn't the ingredient I wanted to use. I often make wrong choices. I think other people are better decision makers than I am so when I look at their way of life I can't help but feel it is better than my own. It's not hard to feel that way, especially when it comes to men and marriage. I am forty-two and I am not married. I will not have children unless I inherit stepchildren or adopt and I don't want to adopt because I would be afraid that when my child grew up he would resent me for not being his real mother.

Still, I fantasize about getting married and having children. I know it's not impossible and this fact is enough to fuel my unlikely fantasy of motherhood. The fantasy is the same one I've had since I was seven and went to my cousin's christening. It is very simple. In my fantasy the baby in the christening gown is mine. I stand on the podium in a very nice dress made especially for the occasion. The father of the child is implied. I don't think him out in much depth but he is there, he is my husband, and after the christening he drives me and our baby home.

After the interchange Benjamin and I had in the hall, we joined the group outside. Natalie was sitting on a wood bench and patted the empty space beside her indicating to Benjamin to sit there. But because it was the last open seat, he insisted I take it. I sat on the arm with my feet curled against the bench, which put my eye line even with his.

"I wish I could cook," Natalie said to me as she took a bruschetta from the tray I had set on the table next to her.

"I wish I could sing," I said, paying back the compliment, as I knew she had a talent for singing.

"I can't carry a tune either," Benjamin said.

"He can't," my friend said. "He's awful. Worse than you."

He nodded when she spoke, yet because he was looking at me, he and I seemed to be engaged in a separate conversation over her head. The group began to talk about talents they wished they had but did not. One of the men stood up and yelled "ESP." "That's not a talent," another answered.

"Yes it is. It's totally innate."

Someone else suggested that it could indeed be learned. That all of us have the ability and it takes practice and exercising it to get it to work. Natalie made a comment that she really wouldn't want to have ESP even if it were possible to learn. She said it was because she wouldn't want to read other people's minds; she didn't want to know all the things people think but don't say.

"But what about predicting the future?" someone asked her. "What if you could prevent a terrible accident?"

"Maybe," she said.

I think if it were me, I wouldn't know when to trust my premonition. If, for example, I had a funny feeling about getting on an airplane, I wouldn't know if I should follow the feeling, especially if I really wanted to take the trip.

My foot had fallen asleep tucked under me so I had to get up and stamp it on the deck. I told Benjamin to take the seat beside her, which he did. She smiled at him, her face flushed from the wine and also possibly her feeling toward him.

As the night wore on, our group dismantled. Some people went

to bed, a couple went for a walk on the beach until it was down to the three of us. I announced that I was going to go to bed, so as not to be a third wheel with Natalie and her new boyfriend, but then he said, "You're not tired, are you?"

And he was right. I wasn't tired at all. Even after all the wine I felt really keyed up. "Not really," I said. "Stay up," Natalie said. Her arm was linked through his and she was resting her head against his shoulder. It was quiet enough that we could hear the water on the bay lapping against the boats moored out there.

I started to feel self-conscious about drinking so much with Natalie while Benjamin had none, and I stopped with the wine but Natalie kept pouring more for herself. At one point Benjamin asked her if she'd had enough and she said no and he let it go at that.

Natalie and I used to drink together quite a bit in the days when we were both waitressing. After we'd get off our shift at one in the morning, we'd go out because neither of us wanted to go to our empty homes. We were also younger then with more energy. We would talk about our lives, examining how they'd ended up as they had and where they might take us in the future. What she really wanted most of all was to have a man to go home to instead of rattling around the city with her girlfriend, and I sensed that once she got the man, she would not need me in her life in any significant way, which eventually did come to pass.

I wanted the man to go home to, but I also wanted peace and quiet with time to think. For me the man would be there, waiting, in the background, while I got my thoughts straight. I wanted time to sit by myself on the couch or at the kitchen table, to be able to stare off and let my mind wander without feeling like I was supposed to be doing something else, and then when I'd had enough of that, in would walk the man now that I was ready for company.

The more Natalie drank, the less she was able to take part in the conversation. She sat quietly, slumped into Benjamin as he told me about how he had cared for his great aunt during the last few months of her life. Because she had never married and had

children of her own, the aunt had been close with his mother and, by extension, he had been close to the aunt too. His face conveyed a great sadness when he talked about her but at the same time a peaceful acceptance, and some of the stories he told about this woman's last moments in the world were funny. He ran his hand across the top of his head, ruffling his hair into a pleasing disarray.

Natalie, who had been so quiet leaning into his arm, sat up, looked at us and said, "Where's my glass of wine?" She went to stand up but fell back onto her seat.

"Okay. Time for bed," Benjamin said.

"Not yet," she said.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go."

"Not until I finish my wine," she said, reaching clumsily for the glass she had set by her feet, but he quickly moved it out of her way.

"Upsy daisy," he said, slipping his arm around her and pulling her up. I got on the other side of her and helped walk her into the house. Her footing was sloppy and this made her laugh.

We brought her into the bedroom and sat her on the bed. I took off her shoes while Benjamin undid her shorts and we got her under the covers, brushing her hair out of her face and soothing her like she was our over-tired child. She stirred a little then rolled over and sighed into the pillow. He gave me a knowing look, as if to say, well, that's no surprise. He put his hand on my shoulder and gently nudged me toward the door. We stopped in the hall while he pulled the door softly shut and whispered, "She'll sleep it off." I nodded and we tiptoed away.

On the deck we went back to our regular voices. The bug candles were still burning though there wasn't much left of them and the empty wine glasses and bottles were spread out on the tables and floor. The marine layer seemed to have thickened in the few minutes that we were inside. We sat across from each other with a bench in between for our feet. I felt full of questions and things to say to this man, yet I couldn't think what they were, so I spoke about the weather, how calm and nice it felt to be at the beach late at night. He agreed and talked about other nice settings

he'd been in and how each made him feel glad to be alive. Like lying beneath the redwoods in California and looking up at their never-ending trunks.

"Or kneeling in freshly tilled dirt planting seeds," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Finding beauty in your own backyard is better than finding it on a grand scale."

I nodded, glad that he'd pulled meaning out of the simple thing I'd said. He told me he liked life and what he liked most about it was its unpredictability. He felt that whatever life presented him with he would take. Who was he to argue? It was a way of thinking that appealed to me but one I didn't think I'd ever be able to accomplish. I knew that the philosophy would work fine when everything was as I wanted it to be. Then it would be easy to say to myself I am just living this life that has happened to me, no questions. But. I know that as soon as something came my way that dissatisfied me, I would not think, this is just the way things are. I would want my situation to be different and I would be mad at life for serving me something disagreeable.

"Like the randomness of meeting people," he continued. "Some people come your way and pass right on by and others come along and stay for the whole ride."

My wish to know this man was so great that I thought maybe he was referring to me. I thought this was his couched way of saying I surprised him by sliding into his life when he was least expecting it. I wasn't bothered by the fact that he was my friend's boyfriend. I was willing to drop her for him and easily justified this thought by telling myself she would do the same.

"You never know," I said. I leaned my head back and looked up at the sky. I couldn't see any stars since the cloud coverage was too thick but the moon was there, shining through. When I glanced back at him he was staring at me and the look on his face seemed to say that he enjoyed my looking up at the night sky and that maybe he enjoyed watching me to see what I would do next. "And think of all the random things that had to happen to lead you to someone," I said. I thought maybe he was going to try to kiss me.

"How far back do you have to trace it?" he said. "It could go back to the beginning of time."

"Right," I said. "First we have to exist, and then possibly every single event of our lives had to take place in order for both of us to end up here, on the deck of this beach house."

An almost imperceptible look of surprise flashed across his face. "I know," he said. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back into his chair. "I wouldn't have gotten to meet all of you if not for Natalie. And I only met Natalie because we both happened to be given tickets to a movie screening that neither of us was supposed to go to."

I could feel the charge in the air dissipating as he reeled himself in. I didn't like his "all of you." At once I felt foolish and sad.

"Because we both got handed a ticket," he went on. "What if we didn't? I wonder if I would have met her another time in another way. Do you believe in that?"

"In what?" I said to the sassafras tree that was hanging over the deck, unable to look at him.

"Fate," he said. "That things are meant to be."

I thought that was the opposite of what he had been saying before, about randomness, but I didn't point that out to him. I gave him a one-shouldered shrug and let my hair fall in front of my face to mask the color I could feel rising in my cheeks.

We sat in silence for a little while until he said he thought it was time to go check on Natalie, passed out in the bedroom. He asked if I was going to go to bed too but I told him I still wasn't tired, and stayed outside a while longer. I sat there until the last candle burned out and then I carried in all the empty glasses and bottles and set them on the counter.

I didn't make it to the wedding; they got married in Utah and I couldn't get the time off work to go out there, even though I would have liked to see that state. I don't travel as much as I'd like. I often dream of taking trips to faraway places, but when I think of the logistics involved I become discouraged, particularly when I try to come up with a traveling companion for myself. At

my age I'm not interested in backpacking around with a group of girlfriends. I would prefer to travel with a man, one who is in my life in an intimate and significant way. But this man has not materialized. The arbitrageur has already come and gone, though he's not who I'd have in mind anyway.

I wonder what things would have been like with Benjamin. I can see being in some exotic locale with him planning our day's adventure. Perhaps he'd want to visit an ancient church and he'd tell me in an excited voice about all the interesting facts he knew about it. I would say it sounded fascinating and agree that we should visit the relic. But then once I agreed, he'd probably change his mind and suggest a hike through some wild parts, all the while acting as if I'd been the one who'd wanted to go to the old church and that he'd never suggested it in the first place.

I can see that, in time, this characteristic would wear on me and I would probably grow tired of him, preferring instead a more steadfast man, someone who isn't liable to change his mind midstream and pretend he hadn't. And as I walked hand in hand with Benjamin down some foreign road, I'd be picturing myself with this other man, one who I'd believe existed out in the world, but who'd really only be visible in my mind's eye.

Kevin Brown

Leprosy in Middle School

begins with hands and chunks of scaly
skin falling to the hallway floor,
beige and banal, peers put
pieces together, breasts

and hair announce themselves,
voices deep enough
to date, leave us lepers
in a colony of consensual abstinence.
In adulthood, it's easier to endure,
everyone's body parts bound

with bandages, lost part
of their lives; even the cool kids
come undone: the homecoming
queen, heart hidden

in a box beneath her bed, post-divorce
dwelling, the quarterback with his arm
in the trophy case at Heritage High,

the final score scarred on his forearm,
fingers curled together to show
we were number one, or the cheerleader,
her stomach with her stretch
marks in a closet full of clothes,
slimming black blouses and elastic skirts.

For years, we lepers have lived
without, no left knee cap, bones
where biceps should be, one less lung,
difficult to breathe deeply, half a heart
to pump what blood remains,
learn to love the lack.

Lavonne J. Adams

INFLECTIONS

From the time I was five, I knew my father's lovers'
names—overheard arguments in which they were slapped

on the table or thrown across rooms, inside each syllable
something electric that I didn't understand.

But one of those names was a song I would chant
as I took my bath or brushed the hair of my doll.

One Sunday, when my father took me to church,
a lady with a gentle face and melodious voice paused

to ask me a question. I was too young to define
kindness, but old enough to treasure its warmth.

That afternoon, when my mother asked who I had met,
suspicion was a glare that caused her eyes to narrow.

I want to believe it was natural
to combine one face with another name,

that I wasn't to blame for what happened next.
I want to believe that somewhere inside of me,

a small darkness hadn't begun to bloom.
And then, my answer.

Emily Hayes

SUMMER AFTERNOON

You can see Protection's grain
elevators as far north as Coldwater,
spot its water tower just over
the Clark county line. Closer
to Woodward, Oklahoma than any
Wal-Mart in Kansas, you know
that every creek leads to the Cimarron
River, almost every dirt road
to more acres of Kent Woolfolk's
Hereford ranch. You have scoured
the ruins of Comanche City
for railroad ties, only to bloody
your feet on July prairie grass
and sage brush, red clay harder
than the faces of farmhands
after this year's miserable harvest.
They have blazed the side of the library
with crop art in high relief,
finally named the streets off Main,
while the rest home holds shells
of people you once knew: *Walt Roetker*,
Jane Overrocker, *Lily Hopkins*.
And from a train depot turned historian's
home, you hear Dave Webb fire up
his Macintosh again to write, write,
write the fading history of your
Midwestern afternoon.

Betsy Johnson-Miller

[AND SHE DANCES]

And she dances through the streets
this girl who can't believe kites
aren't allowed

in the city but she understands buildings
don't want to share the sky
and the sky has something to do

with time though she has forgotten
that lesson. She dances
past hill, past

field, horse and bird.
Sky and more sky
as the girl makes it

all the way to a river
where she sits
and finds rocks

pulling out the glad sounds
water has carried
all along.

Stephen Lloyd Webber

In Spring Rehearsing Vowel Sounds

On the sidewalk, the three of us were not holding hands
yet no passerby could squeeze between us.

She spoke with a strong, perfumed French accent,

the kind that pronounces *La Sorbonne* and *Mont Blanc*
without error and in almost every sentence.

She said, "I would love to be able
to lift weight with sunshine," as I echoed

to provide an example *horse hoof,*
a model *oak leaf,* a replica *brush of goldenrod.*

"Yes, sounds rounder," her friend agreed.
"I comprehend, I feel it too.
These sounds are hard. Please repeat."

"I would love for the ability
to lift weight with sunshine."

Chin held high, wrists full of airiness,
her friend took heart. "Mmm, *oui*. Again.
Your *ahs* your *ohs*—like this.
Rounder, more round."

Gerald Fleming

As If Depth

were a simple descending elevator of years, stopping at every floor for a quick glimpse—here the mezzanine, now the lobby, now the parking garage, at which point you step off, step into your car, pay the attendant what is left of your pale skin, are free.

As if depth were a train blown backwards across a flat plain, across the steppes of your years, a train that does not stop but slows just long enough at each station for you to see, still waving, still piercing your eyes, those who said goodbye.

Some have claimed you have no *will*, but it's the crux of this sense that you have *chosen*, like the pelican's quick stab at the sea, that has put you here, my friend, sitting beside me on this mountain, the whole of you an ember.

In that gravity, in that hard reverse wind, in that dying fire, in that word from the lips of your lifelong friend—the word still frozen in the air—who could ever have imagined there would remain, one day, in the shade of a blossoming almond, another moment of uncancelled joy?

Stanley M. Noah

Six Dancers In A Small Room

Night, and far off a county dirt road,
below the brilliant bronze moon mirror
that took me to a clearing near to a
house with a gathering of black olive
trees, past the lynx and the owl and
their eyes and ears on the ground of
silent wonderings. There I could see a
square shimmering edge coming from
the window, and movement, and music
skullfully escaping into the warm airy
landscape at the level of pine. Closer
now, and I could see the dancers in
pairs. Their shadows moving larger on
the sepia paper walls. Even a little closer,
their faces were in spaces of uninhibited
remoteness and romance. Then they would
stop and have champagne and their luminous
cigarettes on the front porch of the house
with a window of yellowsilk light where
dancers with their lovely figures danced to
torch songs on the magical wood floor. And
I have seen all of this in the near tides and
tilts of spaces. An empirical observation, I'm
sure. Leaving I cut my hand on a crafty Indian
flint a thousand years old. I could smell the
dancers' cologne, their captivating perfumes,
their voices as if I knew them by names, their
apparel of long dresses and beads like 1930s
fashions. I had been something like a voyeur
of delight and circumspect in the moment.
Time passed, I went back down there in twilight
of the hour, through the empty house, a single

light bulb in the center above, a broken music box, diminishing figures on the four walls. I was fondly satisfied. I had been there as it was not a mystery found. But one that remained.

David Lunde

POEM WRITTEN ON THE WALL OF NORTH TOWER BY SU SHI (1037-1101 C.E.)

In the yellow dusk
there was still only a fine mist of rain,
but during the calm, windless night
the weather turned severe.

I only felt the dampness
of my rain-spattered bedclothes,
not knowing that the courtyard
was already heaped with salt.

In the hour before dawn
the curtains of my study began to color;
the half moon fell with a cold snap
from the painted eaves.

Trying to sweep out North Tower,
I saw Horse Ears Peak
not quite buried in snow,
the two tips sticking up.

[1074 C.E.]

trans: David Lunde

Kate Hutchinson

TRAJECTORY

She finally just yanks the wheel
and veers off into cornstalks,
hollow spines snapping beneath
the tires, mud clots whirling up
behind her, thinking no I won't—
those aching rooms and violent doors,
counters stained red from beets or
blood and dim windows unblinking.
It's not even choice but propulsion—
like what spews from beneath the earth
and rises heavenward never to see
the womb again, cooling and crusted
as it arcs into the air, her eyes locking
on the thin silt carved along the horizon,
just wide enough to rocket through
and launch out into darkness

Oliver Rice

WHOSE CAPILLARIES HAVE REASONS

This is home ground,
a dailiness of crosscountry parkway,
tract houses and industrial strips,

vestiges of meadow and creek,

in the middle distance
beyond the neon diner,
high on the reckless face of a cliff,
ragged splashes of fading white,

John Loves Mary '79

---a stirring,
an irony,
a taunt,
a pretty fable for passing lives.

His, on regular occasions.
And hers,
Who, regarding themselves,
hear unanswerable songs,
whose privacies have grown consequential,
whose name fits his lips
like a small act of freedom,
who twitches in her sleep.

Tim Hedges

FOSSILS

When I return from my morning walk, I find Mia still curled on her bed, eyes closed, purple headphones clamped around her head. She has shoved all of the bedding into the corner, piled her pillows to create a nest, a typical arrangement since kindergarten. Even though her laptop rests beside her, open and glowing, like a promise, I can't tell if she's awake. Back when she was in footy pajamas, I would stand in her bedroom doorway and listen to her sleep-breathing. I'd know right away if she needed a backrub or if she was drifting dreamily across the universe. Now, I am lost. Backrubs have been out ever since I placed my hand between her shoulder blades and was startled by the clasp of a bra.

We're at the Ramada on Triphammer, two miles from campus, four hundred from home. We're sharing a room because I'm an idiot, not realizing until I stepped into A46 and looked at the two beds, three feet apart, that times had changed, that my daughter would prefer her own space. Mia didn't complain, just flopped onto the far bed and slid open her phone. If I suggested a move now, I'd appear silly, uncomfortable, sad. I'd appear to be exactly what I am.

The room is dark, the morning sunlight turning the heavy drapes the color of a dying campfire. I grab my duffel and slip into the bathroom to change out of my sweatpants. The lights in here are too bright, the tile too cold. I brush, floss, and, as quietly as possible, use the toilet.

When I step back into the room, Mia is in her nest, laptop on her knees, her face illuminated by electronic light. She raises her legs and her eyes disappear behind the upraised screen. All I can see is the glowing apple marred by a single perfect bite. She has been awake for five minutes, and already there is a barrier between us.

"Good morning, Bug," I say.

"Good morning, Papa," she says, typing, typing, faster than I can think.

Though it was her idea to come to Ithaca, I know she doesn't want to be here. Since we pulled out of the driveway in Salem, she's been texting non-stop. I know she's missing Megan's party, and Kill Hannah is playing at the Orpheum this weekend. I'm a good listener when Mia talks to friends on her cell. But she insisted, back in May, that she wanted to see Cornell, that watching me play in the alumni football game would be *killer.* The game was during one of my weekends, after all, and Harte, my ex, was happy to get Mia out of town.

My weekends with Mia used to be so much easier: Saturday morning karate, afternoons at Fenway, trips to see the aquarium penguins. But Mia is in high school now. A stripe of her hair is Kool-Aid orange. She wants to be called Amelia. I am running out of ideas.

"So what's the plan?" Mia says, still typing. "Like, for today."

"Drive around," I say. "Campus tour. Practice at four. Then reservations at Moosewood." When Mia doesn't respond, I say, "okay?"

"You're the man," Mia says, closing her screen. "Show me why this place is so great."

After coffee at Shortstop Deli, we swing by Taughannock Falls, one of my favorite places, just across Cayuga Lake. I want Mia to see where I used to sit on the rocks, reading *Invisible Man* and books about evolution for Bio 210. I want to reveal the noble parts of the old me, the parts that the new Mia might respect.

Mia bounces ahead of me on the one-mile trail from the parking lot to the base of the falls. She is wearing a plaid skirt over a pair of jeans and a blue tank top that says "Writing: My Anti-Drug." She is also wearing her wings—a backpack, actually, but the elastic straps fit tightly around her shoulders and black butterfly wings extend from the pouch on each side. Harte told me she wore these to school every day during sophomore year. From where I stand on the trail, Mia looks as if she might take flight.

"Slow down," I yell. "I'm conserving energy." She stops in mid-stride and remains motionless until I reach her side. Then she unfreezes and continues down the path looking up at the ridge of the gorge, 200 feet above.

"Aren't you scared?" she says, turning my way and smiling. "About the game. I mean, won't you feel a little old?"

"Thanks," I say. "And no, I'm not scared. I know how to play football. They give you pads."

"Yeah, pads. And shiny red helmets. Plus, you used to be, like, the star of the team."

"Not the star," I say.

"But captain, right?" Back in May, Mia saw the highlight DVD sent by Coach Collins, the one designed to encourage me to come to this weekend's 25th anniversary of our championship team. She made me point out which fuzzy image was me, number 19, the all-league defensive back. "And it's just lightweight football anyway," she says, taking out her phone and studying the screen.

"Right," I say. "Lightweight. No monsters." I'd explained to Mia that the sport was like wrestling. You have to weigh in each week and you can't exceed 170 pounds. Only a handful of schools have ever played, I told her: most of the Ivies, Villanova, Rutgers, Lafayette. Army and Navy dominate the league.

"Lightweight," Mia says. "Isn't that what they call someone who can't hold his drinks?"

"How would you know?" I say. "We're talking about football."

Lightweight football is not the kind of sport you ever see on TV. The weight limit, however, does make it possible for alums like me, who may have ballooned to 200 pounds, to come back and scrimmage the current team every September before the league schedule gets underway. Rookies vs. Fossils. The game is surprisingly competitive. Never underestimate the ferocity of a 30-year-old linebacker trying to relive his glory days against a bunch of paper-thin teenagers.

"So where are we again?" Mia says, spinning around.

"We're approaching one of the tallest falls east of the Rockies. We'll be close enough to feel some spray."

"Oh, boy," Mia deadpans. "I hope we get sprayed."

To our right I see a couple walking in the creek bed, and I notice that the stream is running low. In my memory, it's a river.

"You used to study here?" Mia says, swatting a bug.

I nod, wishing we had gotten a chance to talk on the six-hour drive from Salem, wishing I'd asked about school and boys and her new job at the Stop-and-Shop, wishing she hadn't spent 300 miles in the passenger seat staring at a phone screen and telling me to "hang on a second" whenever I opened my mouth.

Mia walks the length of a fallen tree, graceful on the balls of her feet. How is she always so at ease? "So," she says, as if sensing that our conversation is about to fall into a black hole, "you still seeing that lady? What's her name? Larva?"

"Dara," I say. "No. Not anymore."

"Ohh," Mia says with what I take as mock disappointment. I can barely see her eyes above her wings. "I thought you guys were soul mates."

"Just friends" I say, my face warming. "Let's not talk about that right now."

When Dara, whom I'd dated off and on for three years, ended it, she said that having sex with me was kind of like giving a test to her sophomore geometry class on Friday afternoon. "They do the work," she said, "fill in the blanks. But their eyes are out the window, darting to the clock. And they're always bugging me about their grades." I knew she'd been seeing other men, men more studious than me. After Dara let the hammer fall, I stared straight ahead and asked what grade I would get.

"C minus," she said. "And I'm grading on a curve."

Sex was never a struggle with Harte. We were young. She was an artist. Our constant battles for moral superiority had not yet begun. I was still in college mode, ready to go every day of the week, getting hard-ons just from watching Harte wash carrots in the sink. Mia was ten when we split, and, for a few foolhardy moments, I was excited to be back in the game. I envisioned romance with my clients' secretaries, that librarian with the freckles. But most of my life still revolved around Mia. I'd be

busy planning weekend trips, attending her Mathlympics meets. I'd see an attractive woman and think, *That's what Mia will look like some day.* It always killed the mood.

I try not to think about what will happen when Mia goes to college, when my nest will be officially empty, when I'll have to place the emphasis more on *single* than on *father.*

Mia and I round a bend in the path, and I know right away what's wrong. I can't hear the falls, the rush of water crashing on rock.

Mia stops and says, "Is that it?"

I look up and blink. The falls are nothing but a trickle, a leaky faucet. Water dribbles off the ledge and hits a sad pool of mud 200 feet below with barely a splash.

Mia is staring up at the sky. All around us are dirty rocks. "Um," she says. "This is a waterfall?"

I take her hand, and we scramble down the embankment toward the creek. Water has pooled in spots, and we leap from rock to rock, making our way toward the basin.

I've never been this close before. We can almost reach out and touch the trickle. I realize the summer must have been extremely dry. Maybe it hasn't rained in weeks.

I spread my arms and spin around. "Welcome to beautiful Taughannock Falls," I say, fighting my feeling of embarrassment, trying to sound like a ringmaster.

"Waa—waa—waaa," Mia says, a cartoonish trumpet of disappointment.

There is a rustling in the trees near the path, and I think of redemption. Maybe we'll spot a deer. I motion with my hand and we move quietly up the hill. At the edge of the trees, I hear another noise. A grunt. A moan. I see a boy, a kid in a red Cornell sweatshirt about twenty yards up the slope, his back against a tree. Mia snorts and then I see the girl, kneeling at his feet, her ponytail bobbing like a mechanical toy.

Instinctively, I reach to cover Mia's eyes, but she is already gone, dancing down to the path, her face twisted in the disgusted expression she used to get while eating brussel sprouts.

I stumble backward, nearly tripping over a rotten log. Mia is posing on a rock in the creek bed, arms outstretched. When I get close, she says, "Your study spot is pretty gross." She shifts to one foot and extends her leg in a slow-motion kick, a kenpo move, the Ban Hao defense.

I look into a pool of stagnant water. The man staring back at me shimmers once and then comes clearly into view.

After the campus tour, Mia sits under a tree on the Arts quad and flips through a glossy brochure. "So what else is good about this place? You know, where did you used to hang out?"

"You saw the library," I say. "Study, study."

"No, Papa. Like where'd you live? Where'd you go on dates? Fun stuff." Mia has always been an inquisitive child, so it feels strange to be unnerved by her questions. Only in the last few months has she been interested in anything that might be considered my social life, and part of me is flattered by her curiosity. It reminds me of the little girl I used to know, Mia before the divorce, the kid who used to hold my hand at the library and call me her best friend.

"I lived by the law school," I say. "Right on the gorge."

"So let's see it."

"It's a walk."

"So walk."

When we get to the familiar facade on Edgemoor Lane, Mia grabs my arm. "This is a frat," she says, staring at the three-story lodge that resembles a Swiss chalet.

"A fraternity," I say. "Yes."

Mia laughs. "So that makes you Brother Jason Carter, class of So Long Ago It Hurts."

"Yes, Mia," I say. "It was a long time ago. Ha ha."

"Let's go in," Mia says. "You can do the handshake."

"Absolutely not," I say, remembering floors sticky with beer, girls with messy hair slipping down the hallways without looking anyone in the eye. "I've got practice soon."

Two kids in white baseball caps kick open the front door and

each one rolls a metal keg onto the porch. They step inside and reappear a moment later with two more kegs.

"Party," Mia says, edging forward.

"Not for you," I say, steering her by the elbow and pointing her back up the hill.

"So you were a fraternity boy and a football captain," Mia says, ticking her fingers as if she's doing math. "If I'm not mistaken, that equals girls."

"Why do you want to know this?" I say.

"It's funny," Mia says. "It's cute."

"It was lightweight football," I say. "And there were lots of fraternities."

"Okay," Mia says. "But there were girls. Admit it."

I think of Audrey's red hair and her sweet pink tongue. I think of Lynn, the tight white sweater that I pulled over her head and accidentally threw out my bedroom window into the gorge. She was a team manager, a cute girl always ready to hand me a water bottle. There's a chance she'll be at the reunion.

It occurs to me that I might ask Mia about boys, that maybe that's what she wants me to do, but the thought makes me itch. Harte tells me Mia doesn't really date, that she just goes out with big groups of friends, some of whom are boys. If I want to believe in Mia's innocence, I'll have to stick with my don't ask, don't tell policy.

"See that slope," I say, pointing to the library. "We used to run that hill on Sunday mornings, up and down, trying to make weight after a wild weekend." Above us, the bell tower chimes. "And thus ends our tour. It's time for practice."

Mia says she'll meet me at the stadium. She wants to check out the library's Alexander Hamilton archive, which she asked about on the tour. She's been on a Federalist kick since studying the founding fathers last winter.

"Still in love with Hamilton," I say. "What's the deal?"

"Well, he led the siege at Yorktown, for one. He built the American economy. And he was a major colonial hottie."

"A hottie?"

"Definitely," Mia says. "Maybe not vampire-hot, but he was tasty. Look at a ten-dollar bill. He's our hottest currency by far."

She's probably right about Hamilton, but she left out one fact. When she was mooning over the Constitutional Convention last year I read a book. I learned that Hamilton achieved his greatness despite his father walking out on the family when Hamilton was ten. It's a passage I underlined, even though it was a library book.

"Go find your hottie," I say. "Meet me at the field."

As I walk away, I look across the quad, a field full of young bodies, scrawny hacky-sackers, a circle of coeds belly dancing in the sun. I follow Mia up the steps into Uris, and then the building, brick and lonely on the hill, swallows her whole.

I walk onto the artificial turf feeling fat, the way I imagine those fancy-suited astronauts must feel when they reenter the world of gravity. My shoulder pads are big, heavier than I remember. I'm surrounded by old guys chucking balls at each other, trying to recall each other's names. We all look pathetic in our uniforms, jerseys stretched over bulging guts, helmets squeezed onto balding heads. Some dudes have wrapped enough athletic tape around their bodies to challenge the pharaohs of Egypt.

I've only played in the alumni game once before, about twenty years ago, when Harte and I were engaged. She spent the whole game reading a book, and afterwards, when I asked if she'd seen my interception, she asked me how many points it was worth.

The '82 team is easy to spot. They're the gang of mustachioed men standing by the goalposts, Coach Collins holding court in the middle of the circle. He's slapping backs and busting balls, calling for a paramedic every time a new guy shows up looking long in the tooth. He knows every player by name.

I'm standing outside the circle, staring at unfamiliar faces, when I hear a yell from near the field house. "Hey, nineteen! J-Bird!"

I turn to see quarterback Kenny Bellamy, my fellow captain. He hoots and fires a ball so that I have to drop my helmet to catch it. His toss is a perfect spiral, a bullet that stings my palms.

Kenny jogs over, pounds me on the shoulder. "Shit, man, I haven't seen you since your wedding. That was what, '85? Your wife here? You look like you can still play."

This is the Kenny I remember, the chirping, the chatter. He was born to be a mayor.

"Bird-man, it's great to see you," he says. "Give me the last twenty years in twenty words or less. We gotta wrap this up and get some drinks." He hits my pads again.

"Well, I live in Boston. Divorced. Stop counting, asshole, I'll keep it short." I shove Kenny in the chest, and he cackles. "Work like crazy. Season tickets to the Pats. My daughter's around here somewhere."

"Hotels," Kenny interrupts, pointing to himself. "Property. Mostly in Jersey. You?"

I explain how I insure doctors and medical groups, that I was lucky to get ahead of the malpractice boom in the '90s.

"Malpractice, that's some money. My wife, Stephanie, you remember her? Lawyer. She says we'd have made a fortune if the doctor had messed up her tits when she had them done. But they came out great, so win-win, right? Listen, we'll talk after practice. I gotta zip a few slants. My kid's on the team this year. How flicked up is that?" Kenny jogs toward the field, windmilling his arm and yelling the name Tyler.

I get in line with some of the old defensive backs and we take turns backpedaling, trying to cover the equally herky alumni receivers. After a few minutes, the action feels good, the sounds so familiar that my heart starts to crack. The excited voices calling out "Deep! Ball! Oskie!" The plastic snap of a well-thrown spiral hitting the receiver's shoulder pads. The laughter of men allowing themselves to act like boys.

As practice winds down, the stadium lights burst on, and I spot Mia in the stands. She's looking to the other end of the field, where this year's rookie team is running drills, working together like a machine. I run a sprint to the sideline, stretch my calves, and take a seat, elbows on knees, helmet dangling between my legs, the classic pose of a gridiron hero. My brain is whirring, my body

electric with the sense memories of long ago games under these very lights: my fingertips stretching to pluck a spinning ball out of the air, my shoulder driving into an opponent's ribcage, my body slamming him to the turf.

I close my eyes and see Paul O'Brien heaving a bomb to Chris Hendricks down the sideline, Brian Weston nailing the Navy quarterback from behind and causing a fumble in the end zone. And that's me, number 19 in red, fielding the punt on one bounce and weaving my way through traffic for the winning score against Army.

When I look up, I see a blonde woman walking my way, a water bottle in her hand.

"Tired already?" she says, dimples creasing her cheeks. Her white polo shirt says 1985 League Champs above her heart. She's tucked the shirt into her jeans and the fabric is pulled snugly against her chest.

"Lynn Logan," I say, a ghostly echo traveling down a frat house hallway. *Lynn Blow-Again.* A ridiculous nickname for the 45-year-old woman in front of me. I look down at my uniform and shrug. "What a sight, right?"

"Jason Carter, you look like you've done all right. God, it's been a long time." Lynn hands me the bottle and takes a seat on the bench. A ball bounces at her feet, and she hurls it back to one of the rookies with some mustard. I picture Lynn shimmying out of her jeans in the back of my old Mazda, and I feel a pulse in my jockstrap.

"Nice arm," I say.

"Please," she says. "I have sons."

"Daughter," I say, pointing across the field where Mia leans on a rail.

"Sweet," Lynn says. "Are those wings?"

"Lly-ynn Lo-gan!" Kenny sings, bounding our way. He pulls Lynn to her feet and plants a kiss on her cheek. "Greatest manager ever. You look terrific." We took turns nailing her back in the day. *Nailed her*, I think. Is that who I used to be?

"I'll be right back," I say, hopping up, uncomfortable in the

presence of a woman I've seen naked. "Mia," I yell, waving my arm for her to come down.

Her purple headphones hang around her neck like a yoke as she slides through the bleacher railing and lands on the rubber track. "Practice equals chaos," she says. "What was everyone calling you? J-Bird?"

"Nickname," I say. "But let's leave that in Ithaca."

"Who was that lady?" Mia smiles, holding her hands out in the universal sign for "big boobs."

"Don't do that," I say. "Just one of the team managers. I don't remember her name."

"J-Bird," Kenny calls from behind, and I turn to see Lynn walking toward the goal posts, leaping like a child onto the back of a guy whose face looks familiar. Kenny presents his wife, Stephanie, and the kids, two boys and two girls: Truman, Hayes, Lincoln, and McKinley.

Mia rolls her eyes and introduces herself as Roosevelt.

"She's kidding," I say. "Everyone, this is Mia."

"Amelia," she says.

"Amelia. My daughter."

McKinley, a little blonde pixie, reaches up at Mia. "I like your wings," she says.

Mia bends down and lets the kids touch her backpack, while I shake Stephanie's hand and try not to look at the cleavage testing the buttons of her navy blouse.

As we're talking, a boy from the rookie team walks over and removes his helmet. His face is clean-shaven, glinting with sweat. Even in pads, I can tell his shoulders are broad, his arms tight with muscle. He has a face made for currency.

He pounds Kenny on the back and says, "What's up, Dad?"

"Oh, Jason, Amelia, this is my oldest son, Tyler," Kenny says. "He's a freshman. Second generation. Not nearly as good as his old man. Plus, he plays tight end, so no glory there." Kenny laughs and nudges Tyler in the ribs.

I shake Tyler's hand, squeezing hard, and step aside as he reaches for Mia's. "Hey," he says. "Nice to meet you guys. You

were captain with my dad, right?"

I nod and put my arm around Mia's shoulder. She shrugs away from the weight and looks down at her phone.

"You're in high school?" Kenny says to Mia. "Future Cornellian, I assume. It's a great school, right, Ty?"

Mia says it's in her top five. This is the first I've heard about any list.

"Listen," Kenny says. "Why don't we take your dad out to dinner and let you grab some food with Tyler. He could show you the stuff you don't get to see on the tour. Let you see what dorm life is really like. You could sneak her into the dining hall, right, Ty?"

Mia looks at me, and I see a determined fire in her eyes, the excitement she used to get when she set herself a challenge such as building a Lego model of the Titanic or learning the Lord's Prayer in Japanese.

"We have reservations at Moosewood," I say. "Mia's a vegetarian. She's been dying to eat there."

"They do vegetarian in the cafeteria," Tyler says, apparently not disturbed by Mia or her wings. "Tofu and rice and stuff."

"You can go," Mia says to me. "I'll be fine."

I shake my head, feeling like an empty barrel heading for the falls. "Moosewood," I say, but Kenny slaps me on the back. "We'll buy you a steak at Joe's. Biggest one they got. I invited Lynn, too. She's here alone." Kenny winks, and I look to see if Mia noticed. She's handing her headphones to McKinley.

"Come on, Dad, you hate every Moosewood recipe I've ever made." She's touching the orange stripe in her hair, something she does when she's thinking.

Kenny taps my arm and says quietly, "Tyler's a good kid. She'll be fine. And Lynn wants to see you."

I feel as if I'm back in my fraternity, watching couples pair off at the end of a party. Kenny's acting the way college boys act, eager to see his buddy get some action, as if it would be a small sexual victory for himself.

"Please," Mia says. "We can get brunch at Moosewood on Sunday."

I look at Tyler, his blue eyes, his fingers flexing in his sticky receiver's gloves. I hear laughter from the group of fossils near the goal posts, Lynn's voice familiar and far away. "Okay," I say. "New plan."

Mia plays freeze tag with Lincoln and McKinley while I head into the locker room with Tyler and his dad. The room is full of unforgettable sounds and smells, as if they've been trapped here for 25 years. Lockers slamming, damp towels. The stink of sweat-stained jocks. The rookies start a chant in their half of the room, clapping and shouting "Big Red!" until the fossils join in.

Tyler approaches Kenny and me. He's wearing only a towel, the knot below his flat, hairless abdomen. He's holding a green bottle. "You guys probably didn't bring shampoo," he says, offering.

Kenny reaches out, palm cupped, and Tyler drops in a pale blob. "Thanks," Kenny says, naked and unashamed in front of his child. Tyler turns to me.

I keep one hand on my waist, holding the towel in position, and extend my palm. Tyler pinches the bottle, and I accept the squirt, a giant splotch of shampoo, more than I could possibly need. "Thanks," I say, and Tyler says, "No problem."

I sit on the bench pretending to look for something in my bag while Tyler and Kenny head into the shower, my hand full of a globular mess. I wish I had remembered to bring shower shoes. Only when the Bellamy boys step out, hair glistening, do I venture into the steamy room. I run my fingers through my salt-and-pepper hair, facing the wall so my junk isn't on full display to all the teenagers. I let the water hit me in the face until colors start popping up inside my eyelids.

When I return to the field, Kenny is on his knees, letting little Hayes tackle him to the turf. Mia is by a bench, holding Tyler's wrist, demonstrating karate moves. You wouldn't expect someone with such an innocent face to be able to break boards with her hands, but Mia's been devoted to kenpo for almost ten years, ever since we took a father-daughter class at the Y.

Mia moves like an elegant robot. Tyler, in a red Cornell sweatshirt, is being jerked around like a doll, but he's smiling.

"Spiraling twig," Mia says, bowing to Tyler.

I don't think Mia has seen me, but as I approach, she whips around and throws a kick at my gut. I flinch and block her foot clumsily.

"You're losing your touch," Mia says. "You can't check that with a kyokushin defense. It has to be a kick block, remember?" She speaks brusquely, exactly like our old instructor, Mr. Parker. "Step inside the critical distance line, roundhouse kick block, back knuckle reverse, check down, punch."

Giving up karate is one of my many regrets. I begged out when it was clear Mia was accelerating beyond my abilities, that my daughter was talented, and I was not.

"Is she hurting you, Tyler?" I say swatting playfully at Mia's arm.

"I'm showing him the basics," Mia says. "Circle of destruction. Let me use you." She turns my shoulders and begins to attack in slow-motion, giving Tyler a play-by-play. "Block, hook, chop, back knuckle, back knuckle rake." Mia's fists are whizzing past my ears. "Then you can come in with a groin strike, step out, and finish with a straight leg raise. Get in there tight, so the individual doesn't have any protection."

"Cool," Tyler says. "And then you can spring the hammer behind the temple?" He chops down and his fist grazes the side of my head.

"Exactly," Mia says.

"Enough," I say. "The punching bag needs a break." I look at Tyler, his hair gelled into short spikes, his jeans sagging at the hips. Mia is guiding his arm, showing him proper chopping technique. Pieces of the kenpo creed drift into my mind: *Should I be forced to defend my honor, here are my weapons, my empty hands.*

Kenny glides over with Lincoln riding on his back. "You guys all set? Let's get some grub." He makes piggy noises and snaps his teeth at Lincoln's feet.

Mia scoops her wings from the ground and shoves them at me. They hang, limp, in my arms. "Put these in the car," she says.

I tell her I'll pick her up at the dorm around ten. ("Eleven,"

Kenny says. "We're meeting the team at the Creeker.") I tell Mia I'll call. I force down the bubble rising in my throat and I tell her to have a good time.

"No worries," Tyler says. "Take your time. We'll get some salad or whatever and then Amelia can show me some more moves."

My fingers clench into fists and long-forgotten defenses flood my mind—*wings of iron, calming the storm, unwinding the whip.* Mia places her headphones around her neck. *Falling falcon, gathering clouds.* Tyler grabs the iPod out of her hand and begins to spin through her library. Mia laughs. *Squeezing the peach, intercepting the ram, thrust into darkness.*

I should be sitting with Mia at the Moosewood Café, acting like the coconut soup tastes good. I should be pulling Mia aside, telling her I miss her. But I hear Mr. Parker's words echoing in a room full of mirrors: *The main lesson of any martial art is simple. Do nothing which is of no use.*

I give Mia one last smile, and then I do what fathers do: I let her go.

I'm drunk. I grip the bathroom counter to steady myself and my fingers brush against Mia's overnight retainer, a pink piece of plastic resembling a fossilized shrimp. She is still at the dorm with Tyler, learning about college life. Lynn is in the other room, half-naked on my bed, as sweet and horny as she was my junior year.

When we slipped out of the Creeker an hour ago, I ignored Kenny's unspoken request for a high-five. He'd been buying shots for the table ever since Stephanie left to take the kids back to the hotel.

I splash water on my face, look at the bulge in my plain white boxers. Neither of Lynn's marriages worked either. Why shouldn't I go out there and act like a man? Why shouldn't I give Kenny a reason to high-five?

"J-Bird," Lynn calls from the bed. "There's a draft. I'm putting up the heat, okay?"

"Yes," I say, cracking the door. "I'm just—" I leave the sentence

hanging. On the counter in front of me, lined up in a row, are a yellow barrette, a bottle of Sweet Pea body lotion, and a small tube of LipSmacker gloss. I think of Mia, sitting on a bed in one of the brand new brick dorms on North Campus, as one of Tyler's floormates, some kid with a ring through his eyebrow, offers her a bong.

"Listen," I say stepping into the room, scratching my forehead.

Lynn is topless on the other bed—Mia's—her breasts disappointing, far from the perfect roundness I encountered the night we beat Princeton. The dimple in her cheek, so endearing twenty years ago, creates too many shadows, gives her the appearance of having been struck. But the familiar dip where her collarbones come together . . . I want it all. She rises to her knees, slips her hands inside her panties. The Texas sun has wrinkled the skin on her chest, but her tits, though sagging, are real, they're ready.

I take her hand, pulling toward the other bed, but she pulls back. "The draft," she says, her free hand reaching for my shorts. "These extra pillows are nice."

When she touches me, a jolt of electricity ripples up my back, and I sink to the mattress, the years shedding with each gawky grope. If I say what I am thinking—that I'm on my daughter's bed, that I keep picturing Mia's hands on Tyler's bare chest—I will lose the moment. I reach for the box of condoms, purchased twenty minutes ago at a gas station, and fumble like a virgin to tear one open and get it on without erupting. This feels good, yes, but each thrust brings a new wave of emotion: guilt, weirdness, sorrow, joy. I am trying to get an A, but Lynn is making faces beneath me, faces that remind me of the pain scale Dr. Reed showed me after my shoulder surgery.

At 11:25 my phone chimes, Mia's ringtone, "The Flight of the Bumblebee."

"Let it go," Lynn says, panting. "Don't stop."

I fix my eyes on the headboard as the electronic music flutters about my head. "Don't stop," I repeat, whispering into Lynn's ear. "Don't stop."

By midnight, Mia has called three times, texted twice: PICK ME UP! Lynn's been in the bathroom for fifteen minutes, during which time I've pulled the sheets from both beds and swapped them sloppily, corners untucked, pillow cases askew. The room smells like Lynn, like molasses and jasmine. I want desperately to brush my teeth.

When Lynn comes out, fully dressed, hair pulled into a ponytail, I'm standing at the door, bouncing car keys in my hand. "Sorry," I say. "My daughter."

"The wings," Lynn says. "I remember. You can drop me at the Statler."

On the way across campus, I realize I'm still a bit drunk, the road signs fuzzy, like my contact lenses are in the wrong eyes. I bear down, concentrate on the white lines as Lynn talks.

"Your daughter must be sweet," she's saying. "My boys live with their daddy in Houston. Probably best for everyone. Twelve and fifteen now. Trouble, right? They can play ball, though."

I nod and make sounds of agreement. When I pull up at the hotel, Lynn leans over. "That was nice, J-Bird. I've been carrying that crush for twenty years." She kisses my cheek, then wipes away the lipstick.

North Campus is two minutes away, and I get there in five. In the parking lot, I pick up my phone, my finger poised to call Mia. There is laughter coming from open windows, strobe lights flickering on the fourth floor. I want to find my daughter. I pocket my phone and hop out, walk as confidently as I can up to the door. I pull the handle. Locked. What will I do if I get inside? Bang on doors calling Tyler's name? I stand aside as a group of girls stumble down the sidewalk. One of them swipes a card through a machine and the door makes a loud pop. I'm a drunken old man swaying on the sidewalk outside a freshman dorm. I lower my head and shamble to the car.

Mia takes my call by saying, "Are you here?" When I say yes, she hangs up.

I squeeze the steering wheel, stare straight ahead, take a deep breath. I grab the tin of mints by the gearshift, pop three into my

mouth. The whiskey shots I had three hours ago are still wringing my brain, narrowing my eyes. I haven't downed them like that in years. I'm startled when Mia yanks the door open and throws herself into the seat, right into a cloud that smells of Lynn. "I called," she says, staring out the windshield, arms folded. "It's 12:30."

"Sorry," I say. "I got caught up. I thought you'd be fine with Tyler."

"Tyler has a game tomorrow," Mia says. "Tyler wanted to get some sleep."

I start the car, pull out to the road, remembering at the last second to flip on my headlights.

"You're supposed to pick up when I call," Mia says. "I was sitting there like an idiot, saying you'd be here any minute for, like, an hour. You at least could have called back."

"Mia," I say, sorrow clearing the cobwebs from my head. "I know. I'm sorry." The words are empty, unable to contain the shame of having to apologize to my child.

I can feel Mia's eyes on me, but I continue to stare straight ahead. "You've been drinking," she says. "You picked me up late, and you're drunk. Pull over."

"Mia," I say.

"Now," she says, and the voice I hear is Harte's, telling me it's over, telling me this just isn't working anymore. "I'm driving."

"I'm fine," I say, pulling onto the shoulder near the golf course. "You don't even have your license."

Mia glares at me, shaking her head as if she can't believe what an asshole I'm being. "I'm not riding with you like this. I've got my permit. And why does it smell like a fucking flower shop in here?"

The cursing pricks my heart. I've never heard her swear. As a kid I taught her to say "scrambled eggs" whenever she felt frustrated, and the lesson stuck. She said it yesterday when her hair dryer conked out.

I get out and walk around the front of the car. Mia climbs over the gearshift, twists into the driver's seat. I lean my head against

the window, feeling the thick throb of a vein in my temple.

"Where am I going?" Mia says, adjusting her seat, straightening the mirrors just as I taught her. "I don't know where I am."

"Straight ahead," I say. "You can't turn around here."

"Duh," Mia says. "We're on a one-way street."

I awake to Mia's typing, the swift click of fingertips. My head feels over-inflated. I am supposed to play football in a few hours. Mia's phone chirps twice, and she springs from her nest. "Yeah," she says. "Sounds good. See you then."

I rise onto my elbow, force myself to smile. "Good morning," I say.

Mia looks at me over the screen, still typing.

"Last night," I begin, sitting up and rubbing my eyes, unsure of what to say next. "You had fun?"

"It was okay," Mia says. "Even though I didn't get drunk "

"The dorm was nice?"

"Tyler's nice. His friends were nice. Everyone was nice. Is that what you want to hear?"

"I just . . ." I am on a ledge, nowhere to place my foot. "I was worried."

"God, we watched a zombie movie, and then they all showed me their fake IDs. And then I sat on my ass and waited for my daddy to pick me up. It's not like they tried to rape me or anything."

The word sticks in my ear like a knitting needle.

Mia gets to her feet, looking at her vibrating phone. "Tyler's like your best friend's son. And, hello, I'm a black belt."

"I know," I say. "I'm sorry. I'm just . . . sorry." Each apology is like falling down a well.

"You had fun last night, I guess. You were with that lady."

I raise my head. Mia's holding a blue foil triangle. I squint my eyes, leaning closer.

"It's a condom wrapper, Dad. It was on the floor."

"How did you . . . ?" I say trying to take it from her hand, my chest caving in.

"God, Dad, I'm sixteen. I'm not from another planet." She flicks the wrapper and it pings against the TV screen. "When did

you get so gross?"

I am sitting on my bed, looking up at my daughter, my head sinking between my shoulders like a turtle's.

There's a car horn outside our room, and Mia looks at her phone. "They're here," she says. "I'm getting brunch with some kids from the dorm."

I want to grab Mia's wrist, pull her into a hug, drag her five years into the past, but she is halfway out the door. "I'll see you at the game?" I say, the question desperate, pathetic.

"Yeah, Dad, that's why we came. So you could play a game." The door slams shut, and Mia is gone.

Two hours later, I jolt in bed, caught in the visceral panic of having fallen back asleep. Pregame begins in twenty minutes. In the rush to grab my duffel, I kick Mia's headphones into the wall where I hear the crack of plastic.

By the time I pull up to Schoellkopf, it's too late to get my ankle taped. I tug on my too-tight pads in the empty locker room and race onto the field as the team huddles near the fifty yard-line. A guy half my age, a former Marine, delivers a pep talk which ends with all of us piling our hands together and yelling, "Beat Rookies!"

I spend the first quarter stretching my stiff legs and looking for Mia in the stands. I spot Stephanie and the kids, but my daughter is nowhere to be seen. Lynn is on our sideline, passing out water bottles, her ponytail sticking out the back of her baseball cap. She nods in my direction, and stupidly, I give her a thumbs-up.

We give up a touchdown on a long post pattern and fall behind by seven, typical for an alumni game. The rookies always take the lead, and then, after halftime, when they put in their third-stringers (mostly apprehensive computer engineers—some of them getting their first game action ever) the fossils will start to roll, pounding on the backups until the game gets close. The problem is that by this point, the old guys are usually getting injured every other play. Pulled hamstrings, sprained ankles, broken ribs. An ambulance is standing by.

I don't want to be here. I don't want to hit anyone, to throw my body to the turf. If Mia's not here to see me play, what's the point?

Kenny goes in at quarterback to start the second quarter, and our 25-year-old tailback busts one up the middle and gets us into field goal range. Our kicker, an orthodontist from California, nails a 30-yarder and we go nuts on the sideline.

Coach Collins yells my name, sends me in for the next defensive series. I stand in the middle of the field, lean sideways to stretch my groin, and, at last, find Mia in the crowd next to the Bellamy kids. She's looking right at me, clapping slowly, saying something to Stephanie. I look over at the team in red, wondering which one's Tyler. I can't remember his number, but he's got to be there somewhere.

The rookies run the ball three times and are forced to punt. I thank God I didn't have to hit anyone. I'm jogging off the field when Coach Collins yells, "J-Bird, get back there and field that punt. Do it like Army." The man remembers everything.

I take a deep breath as the ball is kicked, a wobbler coming right at me. It seems to float momentarily, before plummeting, like a missile, into my arms. The ball glances off my pads, and I bobble it before heading upfield, knowing that any moment I'm going to get thrown to the ground. I jab once to the right and sidestep one of the kids in red. My instincts are telling me to get out of bounds before someone kills me, but my path is cut off, so I whirl to my left and lumber like a grizzly bear down the middle of the field. A boy dives at my legs and I stumble but stay on my feet, looking for open space. Ahead of me I see a wall of white jerseys, my teammates, and I continue to run. I hear the crowd yelling. It feels like a kind of flying. I'm inside the fifteen when my legs are swept from under me and I flip to the turf, rolling and sliding, almost into the end zone.

My teammates lift me into the air, cheering. I can hardly breathe. I look for Mia. She is jumping up and down, hugging Stephanie, slapping fives with Hayes. I almost want to cry. I trot to the sideline where everyone bangs on my pads or cuffs me on the helmet. "Next time, don't get caught from behind," Coach

Collins yells, smiling and twisting my facemask. Lynn sticks a water bottle in my face, hands me a towel. "Looks like you've still got some energy," she says. "Nice run, captain."

Two plays later, Kenny scores on an option lead, and we go into halftime up 10 to 7, thrilled by the illusion that something in our lives actually matters for another hour.

During the third quarter, Mia shows up behind the bench where the wives usually roam, and she taps me on the hip pad.

"I believe you now," she says. "Number nineteen. Mr. Touchdown."

"Hardly," I say, feeling bulky in my uniform, feeling, in a way, naked, like I should be embarrassed for my daughter to see me playing games. "We're winning."

"You guys need a marching band," Mia says, miming a trombone.

"We can go back tonight," I say, an unspoken apology. "We don't have to stay for the banquet."

"No, we'll stay." Mia touches her stripe. "This is probably good for you. Just don't make me sit next to your sex buddy. Besides, maybe I can make out some more with Tyler."

I turn around, fingers tightening around the facemask of the helmet at my side. Mia crosses her arms on her chest, a gesture that usually allows her to stroke her wings. But her wings are absent, lying in the backseat of my car. I can't tell if she is kidding, but the words have filled my head with ugly images of hands touching my little girl.

Over my shoulder, I hear Coach Collins yelling my name. "Carter, get your rickety ass out there and play some ball." Though I'm a grown man, I snap to attention at his demand. The idea of refusing flits through my brain and floats away. I am a player. He is my coach.

I narrow my eyes at Mia's expressionless face and sprint to the field, taking a peek at the clock, wishing the game would simply end. My calf is sore, my elbow burning where the skin peeled away when I hit the turf. On first down, I line up across from the slot receiver and realize it's Tyler, number 84 in red. He charges

forward on the snap, and hits me in the chest, blocking me toward the sideline until the whistle blows. He smacks me playfully on the side of the helmet and says, "The next one's a pass" before jogging back to the huddle.

Mia is back in the stands, her hands in her lap. She looks so small. I picture her in Tyler's room, him patting the bed and waiting for Mia to take a seat, a scene enacted long ago by Kenny and Lynn and my young disgusting self. My heart amps to a techno beat, and I slap my thigh pads, eager to deliver a blow, daring the rookies to run my way.

There's no receiver to my side, so I drop back to the middle of the field, my head on a swivel. I see Tyler coming across on a slant, his eyes searching for the ball. I try to jump the route, but my tired legs can't work as quickly as my brain and I'm three steps slow. The pass is high and wide, sailing over Tyler's head. He reaches back, slows down, the play over. And then I hit him, my helmet striking the back of his head, his body whipping forward viciously as I drive through him and plant him into the turf. My brain explodes in fireworks, and my eyes lose focus as I lie face down on the ground. It's the kind of collision that causes grown men to jump off their couches and bellow.

Whistles are blowing, and I rise to my knees. Five feet away, Tyler sprawls, motionless. I shake my head until my eyes uncross and let two guys lift me to my feet. No one is cheering. Coach Collins leaves the sideline to join the trainers crouching beside Tyler. I lean down, hoping to grasp Tyler's hand and tell him I'm sorry, but he's not moving. Kenny shoves me aside and drops to his knees beside his child. I look for Mia and see Stephanie pushing her way through the crowd. Mia stands tall, silent and motherly with her arms around the shoulders of Lincoln and McKinley. I look back at Tyler and see blood trickling beneath his chinstrap.

Some of my teammates pat me on the butt without saying a word. The field is littered with yellow flags. I feel dizzy and look around for water. Lynn is twenty yards away, a row of plastic bottles overturned at her feet.

On the opposite sideline, the entire rookie team has taken a knee. The ambulance by the locker room begins to beep and back

onto the field.

I slump onto the bench and drop my head into my hands, a fossil, a fool. Mia and I will drive back to Massachusetts tomorrow. She'll wear her broken headphones the whole way, and I'll try to pick up the Patriots game on the radio. We'll stop at the service center in Ludlow and I'll remember when Harte and I stayed here during a blizzard, curling up under a blanket in the backseat and letting the engine run all night, not caring about gas or money or what lay ahead. I won't tell Mia this story. What good would it do?

I look across the field at the men and the boys, each bruised and battered in his own way, and I realize I'll never touch another football as long as I live.

After the ambulance has left—Kenny, in full uniform, riding in the back where his son is strapped to a board—Coach Collins gathers us at midfield for a silent prayer. "Football, gentlemen," he says. "That's why we buckle up." No one has gotten in my face, accused me of a dirty play, but I know what I've done. Coach looks at the scoreboard, which indicates that five minutes remain in the game. He waves his arm as if he's signaling a plane to land. "Game's over. Fossils win." No one celebrates.

Like Little Leaguers, we form two single-file lines to shake hands. "Good game," I say, over and over, amazed by how young these kids look with their helmets off.

I find Mia standing on the track behind our bench. She is alone. Stephanie and the kids must be on their way to the hospital.

I am sweaty and swollen, my ears abuzz. My arm is bleeding and my jersey is untucked. My daughter is staring, toying with her plastic beaded necklace, a rainbow around her throat.

"He'll be okay," I say, a promise I have to believe. "Tyler's a tough kid."

Mia steps forward, and, for a moment, I think she's going to punch me. *Snakes of wisdom, dance of death.* I flinch, raise my arms in defense, but Mia's face is crumbling, a mixture of rage and fear, the two greatest enemies of a kenpo master. "You hit him," she says, her voice choking. "You hit him because of me."

She shoves me once, then grabs my jersey and falls into my chest. *Clutching feathers, wings of silk.*

I touch her hair, and she doesn't turn away. I hang on tight as Mia starts to sob.

I look around at the old men gathering their families and kissing their wives. I see the rookies in their shiny red uniforms talking to their roommates, their girlfriends, their dads.

Someone has restarted the game clock and the time is counting down, evaporating in the afternoon air. I rub Mia's back, sure that I'll find a pair of newly sprouted wings. The scoreboard flashes—Rookies 7, Fossils 10—and I count quietly in my head, waiting for the moment when there's nothing but zeroes and we can all go home.

Janet Freeman

THE ROAD HOME

Enzo's parachute never deployed, that much we knew.

Stumbling, I took off across the grass. Other soldiers had started running, too. They bumped into each other, fell down, got up again. Some were shouting. It was as if the entire drop field had darkened under shadow of a radioactive cloud, and in the midst of the chaos lay Enzo, eyes closed to the sky. I cursed my own to clear them, then took it back just as quick.

Some things a man isn't supposed to see.

A week later I was rocketing south on 401, twenty miles over the limit, when an apparition blew into view. At first I thought it was Enzo, a thinned and tanned silhouette, hazy from heat, hauling the shredded remains of his parachute. But it was a woman. She met me on the shoulder, grinning as if it were every day that found her traipsing barefoot up the yellow divide of a two-lane highway. Before I could ask if she wanted a lift she introduced herself as Samantha and held up a green bean, offering me one. "No, thanks," I said. "Just ate."

"Well, I guess I better get going," said Samantha, kicking a pebble. "Getting late."

"I can give you a lift."

"I don't have very far to go."

"Oh." I put the truck in gear, barely an idle. "I guess I'll let you go, then."

With a little wave she set off, then stopped. She marched back to the truck, brushing dark hair from her eyes. "I don't think you told me where you were going."

I told her I was going to Hattadare.

"Can I come with you, if it's not too much trouble?"

"No trouble at all," I said, motoring onto the road as she set the basket of green beans in her lap. "Maybe Melody would like to meet you. Poor Melody's been through the wringer."

"Melody?"

"My friend."

"She's depressed?"

I didn't explain, and she didn't say more. She rolled a green bean between her thumb and forefinger, wearing a groove that snapped it in two. She smiled at me, eyebrows raised as if to say *Well, here I am. Now what?*

Now what indeed. By now I'd noticed the pale circle around her finger where, on another night, perhaps, a wedding band would sit. I decided it was better not to ask about it—I wouldn't get the truth, anyway. Women as unselfconscious as she was, I'd learned, hid facts about themselves the easiest of anyone.

"What brings you out here all by yourself?" I asked.

Samantha punched out a cigarette from a crinkled pack, shrugging. "I thought it would be a good idea to touch down with a few old ghosts before moving on."

"Ghosts?

"I grew up here."

"Where're you moving on to?"

"To the same mistakes that have brought me this far, probably," she said, with a little laugh. "But if you asked me again, I'd tell you I'm here because I don't want to be home."

"This isn't home?"

"Not the home I have now, if *that's* what you mean."

Clearly, it was time to change the subject. I decided to tell Samantha a story about Hattadare, how it wasn't an Indian reservation at all but a trailer park founded by an electrician who stalked the grounds in a pair of swim trunks, fins, and headdress imported from god-knows-where. At night he peered into the living rooms of his neighbors, eyes ghoulishly magnified behind a filmy scuba mask. Enzo called him "Chief of Little Fuck" and said the only good thing he ever did was leave his wife Melody alone three weekends a month.

Samantha didn't seem to care for that story and so I started up another, this one about the first time Enzo took me to the trailer park. It was a sunny autumn day. He drew up to the barracks in a

little MG the same color orange as the rotted pumpkins sitting on the porches of the houses we would soon pass. He wore a starched white shirt, cuffs rolled to crisp perfection beneath which his tanned skin glowed like an oil lamp. On his wrist, dangling loose like a woman's bracelet, sat a gold watch. From time to time its bulky face slid to the tender part of his wrist, and he flicked it back to position with grace. On base, he was known as "Cool Hand Lo," and loved to free fall. It was easy to imagine him dropping through clouds, weightless, unencumbered by parachute or heavy black boots.

Enzo was at least ten years younger than me. I'd never met someone so worldly and, with the exception of his natural talent for jumping, so out of place in the Army. Rumor had it he was heir to a linen manufacturing empire and had signed the dotted line to piss off his father. We had that in common: I'd signed up to escape an engagement to a woman I didn't love. That was almost fifteen years ago. I wanted to tell Enzo to be careful, that if he didn't watch it he'd become a lifer, too. Every decision we make that isn't our own has a way of re-routing the road so that before you know it, one more bend up ahead has you sliding back to the beginning, ass-backward and spitting gravel.

Enzo had asked me to tag along that day because he was worried Chief might return home in the middle of his rendezvous with Melody. Halfway to Hattadare, however, we caught sight of a dog limping along the side of 401. Enzo pulled to the side of the road, slowing down just enough to grant clearance as I jumped from the car, hitting the gravel in a stumble. I ran across the adjacent field to where the dog now stood, eyeing me warily. "Here doggy, doggy," I called. "Come to Papa." The dog bolted, and it was then I realized she was pregnant.

I threw my arms up, defeated: *What the fuck? I tried.*

To my surprise, Enzo slammed the MG in park, hopped out and gave himself over to the same thankless chase. His white shirt and gold watch gleamed in the sun as he circled the field, returning to the car covered in dust. Sweat ran down his face and his dark aviator glasses were gone. "Some bitches just don't know what's

good for them," he said, shrugging.

When I finished the story Samantha—her back was pressed against the passenger door— regarded me with dark eyes narrowed. "Which character am I?" she asked. "The bitch who needs rescuing or the bumbling idiot masquerading as a white knight?"

I stopped talking after that.

We drew up to the park and I eased the truck under a statue of a black bear reared up on hind legs. We'd trekked past the point where the broken-down trailers thinned out and the woods became more dense when Samantha suddenly stopped. "That's the *millionth* sandspur I've stepped on," she cried, using a live oak for support as she removed a cluster of the thorny flowers from her heel. "Where did you bring me—the beach?"

"I could carry you," I said, pleased at the thought of Samantha coiled newlywed-tight against my chest, a blast of heat warming the stone cold ache that had settled there over the past week. "I'm always happy to lend a hand."

"Gee, thanks," she groused, rolling her eyes to the treetops. "I'll remember that next time I'm tied to the railroad tracks."

Bumbling idiots and sandspurs had become Samantha's enemy.

Mine was the recurring image of Enzo as he appeared in my dreams: mouth twisted in a scream, eyes bolted open.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I walked on.

Through the trailer's open door I spotted Melody on the couch in one of Enzo's shirts, eating ice cream from the carton. Blue light from an infomercial had downgraded crisp linen to a ghost of its former brightness. Bile rose in my throat. Though we weren't holding hands, I was relieved Samantha was in reaching distance as I stepped inside, calling out in a booming façade of cheerful optimism, "What say you, Kemosabe?"

"You didn't tell me you were bringing a friend," said Melody, eyes glued to the television. "I would've cooked."

"Thank God you didn't," I said, kissing her cheek.

"Have a seat. I'll make some sandwiches on the commercial."

"I can make them," said Samantha, brightly. "Where do you keep the bread?"

The three of us sat at the card table in the kitchen, eating peanut butter on white toast and drinking warm red wine from a box. "I grew up here," said Samantha, shyly, "and I never knew this was here."

"White people don't bother with us," grunted Melody, who was three-quarters Cherokee and had met Chief at a Grateful Dead concert in Atlanta. He brought her to Lillington and told everyone she was his mail-order Russian bride. "We're lower than pissants," she said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I was telling Samantha here a story on the way out about the time Enzo tried to get that pregnant dog in the car," I said, ignoring Samantha, who must've been stewing in her seat. I felt an overwhelming urge to change the story—not as I'd told it in the truck, because it was the truth, but as it would now be heard, because it was also how I'd lived it. "Poor Enzo," I said, shaking my head. "I'd never seen him so disheveled in all my life."

"Oh, I had," said Melody. "I'd seen Enzo disheveled once or twice."

"So did Chief—unfortunately for Enzo."

"The man who walks around in a pair of fins?" asked Samantha.

Melody and I laughed and laughed. Melody so hard tears glittered in the corners of her eyes. She struck the table with her palm, "Poor Lorenzo!"

"Poor Lo!" I cried, slapping the table, too. So did Samantha, which at first made Melody laugh harder, but soon the tears arrived. "I miss him," she said, wiping her eyes with a paper napkin. A smear of grape jelly dotted her mouth, above her lip. "I miss the old bastard."

"I miss him, too," I said.

"I'm sorry," said Samantha, "did something happen to your friend?"

Melody stared at her hands in her lap while I revealed a few

details of the accident, those Melody knew or had surmised. I left out the part about witnessing Enzo's death, how even though I'd been an EMT for years his accident obliterated anything I'd learned, such as how to react when all that's left of your best friend is a crumpled jumpsuit.

At the scene I searched for clues to let me know an accident had killed him, all the while haunted by memories of our most recent outing, a night at the bar that started with Enzo uncharacteristically agitated. He swiveled his stool in full-circle orbits, giddily toasted complete strangers, and slammed two whiskey sours to my every one. Once we were both sufficiently lit, he confessed the reason for his nervous state: his father had died of a heart attack.

"How fucked up is this?" he'd said, shaking his head. "I didn't learn the old man had kicked it until the deed showed up on my doorstep."

"Deed to what?"

"His business."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

I asked Enzo what he planned to do. "What else?" he said, shrugging. "Move back to the shithole town I grew up in, marry a can of hairspray, and play touch football with the choirboys on Sunday. All a man needs to be happy in this world, right?"

All that kinetic energy—whether he was pissing away his father's money at the bar or barely holding his feet still as he recounted his latest jump—was no longer there as I sat on the field next to Enzo, drinking in the last of his dust. We later learned his heart had exploded upon impact. I didn't know that then, but one thing was evident: Enzo had transformed into someone as unfamiliar to me as he was familiar, as if the sinkhole created in his death had cleared the way for a more expansive, generous spirit. I loved this new Enzo as much, if not more, than the old. I wasn't sure why this was and carried my shame tucked deep in my chest so that every breath had become part of the struggle to stay alive in his absence.

"I saw that in the paper, the accident," Samantha was saying.

"Is it true they weren't sure it was . . . that he may have—"

"No *way.* It was an accident," I said, shaking my head. "A faulty release cord or backup or both. They're still investigating."

"Accident, my ass!" cried Melody. "Enzo was like a flea flashing a freight train! If it hadn't happened then, it would've been a car crash or a toaster oven dropped in a kiddie pool. He was as good as gone long before he left. And *that's* what I hate—" she paused, tears stinging. "How much of Enzo did we actually get? We'll never know."

Melody blew her nose. I fiddled with the bread crumbs on my plate. Outside it had grown dark; moths threw themselves at the screen door. Samantha rose from the table and began cleaning up. She returned the remaining bread to the cupboard, the wine. She wiped down the lids to the peanut butter jar and jelly and put them inside the refrigerator door. I sensed her movements, her desire to disappear and yet stay and appease. The moths slammed the door in droves, and I suddenly remembered I'd left Enzo's watch in the truck. I'd brought it for Melody, and so excused myself to go get it.

"I'm so sorry," I heard Samantha say, as I closed the front door.

The power lines dividing Hattadare in two crackled and hummed as I made my way down to the truck. The air smelled like tobacco, roasted peanuts, and burning trash. I kicked at a plastic doll lying face down in the sand, ants marching up its legs in angry waves like a monsoon. From inside one of the trailers, a baby wailed for its mother.

When I'd first started accompanying him to the trailer park, Enzo had wanted me to date Courtney Breedlove, a friend of Melody. Courtney and Melody were so much the opposite of one another that Enzo referred to them as "dark-souled sister twins." Unlike Melody, Courtney was thin and muscular, light-skinned and always sunny—hardly my type. I took Courtney to a local bar where we danced awkwardly to George Strait, chased shots of whiskey with lukewarm Cokes. On the dance floor I struck up a conversation about mutual friends and felt her shoulders stiffen under my palms like sun-hardened wax. *Sometimes I wish Enzo*

would leave Mel alone, she said, when I asked what was wrong. *It's like he doesn't care about anyone but himself.*

Come on, now! Enzo cares about a lot of people! I was hot now, trying not to let it show. An elderly couple spun a two-step around us, smiling hard as if willing their ease and grace into our counterfeit little hearts. *He's been a good friend of mine for years,* I said. *I think of him as a brother.*

Like a brother, huh? That's not what Melody says.

I left her swaying in the sawdust, realizing only after I was in the truck that I'd forgotten my keys at the bar. I hiked the ten miles back to base and the next afternoon called Enzo to give me a lift to the bar to pick up my truck. That's when I learned Melody had made him retrieve Courtney from the bar not long after I'd left. According to Enzo, he and Courtney had sex in the parking lot. When Melody asked why it took him so long to get home, he told her Courtney had gotten sick on the side of the road.

But goddamn, Wade, you need a cattle prod on your ass sometimes! I ain't never seen a man so slow to get it going with the ladies. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were queer.

I stepped from the truck, Enzo's watch in hand, and pitched it high into a wall of pines. A dark cloud of crows flew off with a clatter. I dropped to my knees. Some time later Samantha found me in the same position. She lassoed my neck with her arms, pressed her cheek to my back.

"I don't even know your name!" she cried.

Samantha tapped ash out the window as the basket of green beans bounced between us like a bag of rocks. We'd left Melody's and were headed toward the same spot on 401 where I'd picked her up a few hours ago. I was hoping a clue as to why she'd been out here would show up on our way to town—a busted-down car or angry husband hoofing it up the shoulder with a pair of women's shoes set to mold Cinderella-perfect to her feet even if the wedding band no longer fit.

Night air rushed in with a *wooosh,* blowing Samantha's skirt past her knees. Scores of red scratches cross-hatched her thighs.

I hadn't noticed these before, and offered her use of the Vaseline clunking around my glove box.

"No thanks," said Samantha, drawing her knees to her chest. "I'm okay."

"So this is where you grew up? Out here in the sticks?"

"Something like that."

"Where do you live now?"

"Fayetteville."

"Your husband always let you stay out so late?"

"My husband doesn't *let* me do anything."

I knew the questions were losing me points but no longer cared. There were too many things I needed to know. For instance: why had she come with me? It was as if she were a butterfly, carried along by the wind. I'd known women like that, women who made a habit of relinquishing control, only to later revise the narrative to convince themselves they'd been in charge the whole time. I wondered what part I would play in the version of this particular story— both the one that was real and the one Samantha was mentally composing, even now.

Soon we came to the spot in the road where Enzo had found the dog. "I hope you don't mind," I said, pulling off the road. "I'd like to sit here a second."

Samantha shrugged.

I left the headlights on. We sat in silence, watching as a halo of moths skittered this way and that in the twin beams, diving past each other in narrow, perfectly timed missiles. I could still see it: Enzo, gunning the engine. The look of surprise on the dog's face as the car bore down. I squeezed my eyes shut as Enzo let out a warrior whoop. I felt the swerve of the MG, the telltale *thump* as we hit the dog.

Moments later as we surveyed the scene, I managed to convince myself Enzo had hit the dog on accident, but when it came to assessing the damage we'd done, it hardly mattered. The dog stared the length of the road with glazed eyes. Her belly had ruptured, and inside the folds of matted hair and deflated skin wriggled five blind pups, waxy and white, slippery as grease.

"Now what?" I asked, stupidly.

Enzo didn't answer. He picked up a pup, whispering in its ear. Then, moving with so much speed and certainty that I failed to grasp his intent, he snapped the animal's neck.

"What the *fuck* was that?"

"What good is surviving if you don't know what you survived?" said Enzo, calmly, reaching for the next one.

"That's bullshit and you know it."

In all our years of friendship I'd never called Enzo's bluff, not even when he denied taking part in the Cherry Blast—the Airborne's version of fraternal hazing—that cracked the skull of a trainee who was dangled then dropped out a second story window. Enzo swore it was an accident but his eyes hardly blinked as he proclaimed his innocence. I never fully believed his account, but shoved my doubt aside like always, defending him against others in the company who wanted him punished.

"Leave them here with me," I pleaded.

Enzo stroked the ears of the pup he held in his hand. "They'll never make it without their mother," he said, wrapping his fingers around the animal's neck. I turned away only to be beckoned in the next second by a tap on my shoulder: Enzo, offering me the last orphaned pup with a sweet, expectant smile. I took it, relieved to feel the small warm body pressed against my chest.

I planned on carrying the puppy back to base, making it a mascot for the platoon. If not, there was the pound. Or any old stretch of road with houses on it, a father and son tossing a football in the front yard. Once it was old enough, of course. I could see the dog's life: the family I would find for it in the country, the boy who would take him fishing; lying on a hearth while a fire crackled, nose on its paws.

"It's okay," I said, as the puppy whimpered, pricking my wrist with its slippery dewclaws. "I'm right here."

Only I wasn't. I had left the here-and-now years ago and was swimming in the depths of Enzo's madness, which had snared my lungs like barbed wire. Thinking only about this, about my desire to breathe freely again, to have my friend return to me, whole and

intact, I pretended to twist the animal's neck and then left it on the side of the road, curled up with its dead siblings.

Later that night when Enzo dropped me off at the barracks, I got in my truck and headed down the same ground we'd just covered. But I was much too late; the puppy I'd abandoned was dead.

Maybe Enzo was right after all, I thought, wildly. *Maybe there really is no use surviving if we don't know what we've survived.*

Over and over I repeated this, until I made it home.

The moths danced like a tribe under a harvest moon, wings translucent in the artificial light. Samantha lit a fresh match, cupping the flame to block the wind. She threw her head back, inhaling smoke with closed eyes as if deep in prayer. I started the engine.

"Ready to take off?"

"Not yet," she said, blowing out the match.

We sat in the darkness, watching as the moths beat their wings with an unpredictability as sure-footed as I'd ever seen, drawn to a blinding source of light for no other reason than it was there, and they were here.

I cut the engine.

For now, we would wait.

D. Salner

THE SHOOTING LESSON

OKLAHOMA TERRITORY
April, 1892

"Who was the fellow who told on Jesus?" Colonel Reinhart asked Frank, who leaned against the porch railing. Slanting away from the cabin on the west side, beyond the hog lot and small barn, the light blond grass covering the gray earth of the Oklahoma territory rose up to meet the spring sky.

"Judas Iscariot," the fourteen-year old answered. He had grown like a weed in the last year, large hands, strong from farm work and his job in a stable.

"And what do you call someone like that?"

"A traitor."

"And who killed Jesus?"

"The Jews." Frank cocked his head and sniffed the breeze coming over the pasture on the next farm. He couldn't remember how he knew this answer. Maybe from some of the older boys at the stable. It wasn't from church, for his mother had never taken him to the church that most of the other Cherokee attended.

"Was it Jewish soldiers who laid their hands on him and fastened him to the cross? Did Jews drive the nails?" The Colonel's blue eyes stared intently at the boy. The old man had been a school teacher, as well as a Union Army officer, and now the boy did chores for him in exchange for these lessons.

"No, it was Romans."

"That's right," Colonel Reinhart pronounced. "Judas and a few other Jews *were* traitors. They turned Jesus over to the Romans. But the Romans were the ones who did the killing. They were the enemies of the Jews. The Romans nailed hundreds of Jews to crosses. Jews lined the road to Jerusalem like great birds with their wings spread out against the sky. Some cried before they died. Some begged forgiveness from the empire. Others suffered for days in silence . . .But that's enough about suffering . . ."

The Colonel stroked the stubble on his chin as his voice faded off.

Frank had been taking it all in, the long road lined by crosses, the sounds of the dying men.

"Colonel Reinhart," he spoke up, "Are most men brave when they die?"

"Death is natural, Frank. Men come to accept it. Killing is what comes as a shock."

"Did you ever meet a traitor?"

The old man stood up before he answered, rising to his full height, his bald head reaching almost to the joists of the porch, so that he had to bend his neck to put on a rumpled Stetson.

"Yes, I did."

Frank knew these words deserved a pause. He fingered one of the hides drying on the railing. Muskrat. There were plenty of muskrats in the banks of Gypsum Run. During the past winter, he'd checked the Colonel's traps. When he found one caught in the steel jaws, he beat it with a pipe. Once, he'd come upon one that had almost gnawed through its leg. When he started to beat it, the creature yanked hard and tore itself free, hurtling into the water, leaving the paw behind.

The hides gave off a smell of meat going bad.

"I bet a nice buck will come out of the woods by the hogback," the old man finally said. "Let's do some spring hunting."

"I'll go ask Ma."

"She already knows." The old man's grin revealed a good set of teeth, bright in the shadows of the porch. He disappeared into his cabin as the boy remained there, staring over the yard and garden with a proprietary eye. He'd planted tomatoes for the old man and repaired the fences.

Some people said Colonel Reinhart had money stashed away, left over from Civil War service. Unlike many of the farmers in the area around Gypsum Run, the Colonel still had hogs. That was a rarity during these hard times on the plains. When he slaughtered, he always provided his neighbors with bacon.

The Colonel retrieved his Winchester from the cabin. As he came back to the porch, Frank saw something else in his right hand.

"I'll show you how to handle this Colt while we're at it," the old man said. "But first, we have to clean off the table."

During the spring, the Colonel read on his porch, leaving a clutter of books and notebooks on the table. He lifted a stack and handed them to Frank, who placed them beside the cabin door. When they worked together, the boy often did the jobs that required bending, to save the Colonel's back. The boy knew how it hurt the old man to bend over.

The Colonel took a rag from his back pocket, swept the table clear of dried mud. "You can't learn how to handle a firearm unless you take it apart and put it back together."

Under the Colonel's watchful eye, the boy bent over the table, taking out the cylinder, removing the barrel, the trigger, and the hammer.

"It's like an onion. Not much left of one of these Colts after you take it apart," the old man said as he moved to Frank's left to get a better view of the boy's work. "It's an 1861 Navy model. They issued these to officers. It came with a walnut grip, but some years ago I put that bone grip on."

Frank couldn't see anything else to detach, so he waited for the Colonel to give him a hint about what came next. When it became clear the old man would say nothing, the boy began carefully putting the Colt back together. It was not a difficult task—but wasn't it an accomplishment nonetheless, to take apart and reassemble the Colonel's Civil War pistol?

"After we hunt we'll take target practice—unless we get that buck." The old man winked at Frank.

They set off east toward Gypsum Run. Frank led the way along the muddy path until they crossed the footbridge over the Run, the water coursing beneath them. The winter and early spring had been good for ice and rain. The stream was still high, just beginning to go down. Frank could see where it had cut away at the clay banks.

After crossing the bridge, they walked side by side through a field of yellow and blue blanket flowers. Late April, before the plains were ablaze with the heat, was the best time of year, Frank

thought. As they walked up the grade away from the Run, the earth was drier. The boy felt the sun on his face, pleased at the thought that he was hunting—and with a Civil War hero, no less.

"Colonel, do you think I'll ever meet someone famous like General Grant?" he asked.

"Isn't Mr. Lighthorse famous—and your mother?"

"Well," the boy stammered, "with the Cherokee . . ."

"That should be good enough, young man."

Frank knew not to pursue this topic. He put his head down. Now he had to hurry to keep up. Despite a stiff hip, the Colonel walked at a brisk pace. They took a path through the hogback where the steep earth had been broken down and leveled by hunters—and by riders who often took this route east. Both of them were sweating when they arrived at the woods.

They crept around a scrubby canopy of hawthorns to a field of brush that leveled off above the hogback. In the fall, they'd seen deer in these fields and, earlier in the year, coming out to eat the red berries off the low trees. There were none today, but Frank spotted a rabbit on the path in front of them, aimed the Winchester, and brought it down with a single shot. As he was about to pick it up, another hopped away into the field, and Frank squared and shot. The rabbit flopped down on the ground, its gray fur partly hidden by the straw-yellow weeds.

The boy carried the Winchester and the rabbits as they walked through the field to the downgrade west of the woods. The old man marched over to a hollow with an outcropping that formed a ledge about waist high. As he stood in the shadows, he cradled the Colt in his left hand.

"Most of good shooting is preparation," he called back to Frank. "Your weapon is always clean, always ready."

With his right hand, he placed fist-sized rocks on the ledge. Then he walked thirty paces away, into the sunlight, near where Frank was standing, and shifted the pistol to his right hand. He waved his left hand in the direction of the ledge and stared hard at it as if something might be hiding there in its shadows, an unknown danger.

"You've been paying attention to all the possible points of

interference, like people, especially children, who might dart about, or farm animals."

Now he lifted the revolver until the barrel pointed straight up in the air. The sky was a deep blue behind the shine of the pistol. Frank's eyes were fixed on the gun. He followed the barrel as the old man lowered it and fired without seeming to aim. His shot knocked the first rock off the ledge.

"Thirty paces. Pretty good for an old man." He grinned boyishly at Frank through the white stubble covering his face. He held the Colt by the barrel and handed it over to the boy. Then he waved for him to walk forward.

"Stop there!" he called when Frank was within ten paces of the ledge.

The boy brushed a fly off his cheek. At first all he could see was a film of shadows, but after a few seconds, the ledge came into focus. He squeezed the trigger, then grinned at the old man as the rock jumped.

"Don't just stand there," the old man said, "step back and see if you can hit another one."

Frank moved back several paces, hitting another rock. He moved back five times until he was almost as far back as the Colonel had been. This time his shot zinged off the side of the stone, not moving it.

The sound of bullet scraping rock died out, leaving only the silence of weeds and wildflowers and the great blue sky. A moment passed and the Colonel's face relaxed into a grin. "I was afraid you'd shoot off all the rocks and we'd have to go scouring for more."

Then he motioned Frank to come nearer the ledge and raise and shoot, raise and shoot, like he was drawing. The rocks hopped off the ledge with each shot.

"The use of a firearm in war and hunting is simple," the old man said. "Self-defense is trickier. But the most important thing is this—a firearm is your weapon of last resort—and not a very good one. Your knowledge of people is a much better weapon. The best way not to get hurt is not to fight. . . But I guess you haven't learned about that yet."

"Colonel, I couldn't let them say what they did." Frank was remembering his last fight, just two days ago, at the Orlen Stables.

"I'm not saying don't fight, just don't fight all the time—and make sure you win when you fight."

The boy hadn't realized his fighting—or the fact that he'd been beaten—had become that obvious. He'd gotten into three fights in the last two weeks. At the stables, he worked with older boys and men, cowhands, hunters, soldiers, and traders. He said he was Cherokee, a claim that was mocked by some of the white men. "You're awful light-skinned—maybe you need to rub more of that Indian dirt into your skin."

For emphasis, the Colonel tapped the boy on the breastbone with a knuckle, a dull thud in the cavity of the chest, and leaned down until their two faces were almost touching. "A bully likes to pick a fight. He tries to get you to square off and challenge him because he has some trick up his sleeve. Square off and you've fallen into his trap."

Frank realized that was exactly what had happened, more than once.

"Try not to fight him, but if he traps you, pick up a two-by-four or a shovel. If there's nothing like that lying around, attack him hard and fast." He held up a large hand, clenched it, jabbed hard at the phantom bully. Frank was glad he was standing just beyond the reach of the fist as it rocketed through the air.

"Fighting is serious business. Make damn sure you win."

The Colonel's face relaxed into a grin. He took the six-gun, hefted it for a moment in his right hand, then handed it back. "It's still hot. Carry it in your bandana."

They climbed west through the hogback and descended the grade on the other side, the sun out in front and a little to the left, now just a short distance above the horizon. They could see the town of Gypsum Run, a cluster of buildings dwarfed by the Army's new fort. As they descended the hill, the boy carried the Colt in his red bandana. In his left hand, he held the rabbits by their rear legs so the long ears brushed the ground.

The Colonel still had a soldier's bearing, marching along, the Winchester in the crook of his arm. Frank could imagine him

leading an attack on Confederate lines.

"Colonel Reinhart, you were proud to be a soldier in the war, but now . . . ?" Frank's voice trailed off as he thought about the new fort and the bullying way the soldiers acted in town. The Cherokee tried to avoid them but didn't always succeed.

The old man stopped in his tracks and looked hard at the boy. "An army is as good as what it's fighting for. We freed the slaves—" Then he added in a hiss— "I don't see this army freeing anybody."

They walked side-by-side again and the Colonel seemed to relax. "Back in my time, the young men who joined the Army didn't shoot near as good as you. All kinds of boys joined. They were good boys, but some were smart and some were dumb. Some of the smart ones got killed. All the dumb ones did—no matter how good of a shot they were."

They crossed the bridge and headed for Frank's house, within sight of the Colonel's cabin. "You're staying for dinner?" the boy asked, as he stepped up on the porch.

"Isn't that a question for your mother?"

The boy started to hand over the Colt, but Colonel Reinhart put his hand up. "I don't need two six-guns anymore. One plus a rifle is more than enough for an old man."

The Colonel sat down on the top step of the porch and motioned for Frank to sit beside him. Together, they stared at the hillside rising behind the Run against the metallic light slowly dimming in the sky.

"It's bad luck to use a gun when you don't have to. Do you understand that, Frank?"

Although the day's warmth had been draining away into the late afternoon shadows, a spring softness was still in the air. Frank could feel the planks cool and damp through his denim overalls

"Yes sir," he said softly.

Thomas Fox Averill

DIGGING WITH DARWIN

I—Origins

Her life was dug deep, and started with the simplest forms. The hawk, wheeling in the sky, descending, pouncing, then rising with a talon-pierced rabbit, mouse, snake. The trees, stunted and leaning away from the prevailing winds, their leaves dusty. The undulant tracks of snakes in the dusty road, one of them the bull snake who kept the barn free of mice, moles and, once, half a litter of mewling, just-born kittens.

Chalk outcrops lined every rise and hill, creating a story of another time, not the era Gillean Schensen had been born into, but an era before hawk, tree, and serpent. From the time she could walk, her father took her hand and they scoured the chalk for what he called "evidence" of the great Kansas ocean.

In Gillean's first sure memory, she is barely three years old. Walking the bluffs with her father after a thunderstorm that shook her sleep, she bends for a triangle in the chalk and pulls out a shark tooth. "You have an eye," her father declares. He carries her all the way home on his shoulders, where she presents the tooth to her mother, who fixes her pancakes cooked in the shapes of clam shells, fishes, and shark teeth.

"You were named for a fish," her father tells her. "One that swam in the Kansas Ocean." The gillicus lived during the Cretaceous period, and was as native to Ogallah as Gillean was now.

After the shark tooth, her father dubs her "Thunderwalker." Not for the great dinosaurs that fascinate him, but because erosion created by thunderstorms reveals new discoveries. A night of lightning and thunder will always be followed by a scouring of the bluffs.

At five, she takes the bus to school, two full hours a day when she cannot be outdoors, her sharp eyes to the earth. She memorizes the landscape to and from, determines someday to hunt for fossils

in every bluff she sees. Over the next two years she scours that ground with her father, when they can spare the time.

Her second grade teacher is a man. He wants to get to know them, he says, as though he were their own father. He has come to Ogallah to do *more* than teach, to make a difference in their lives. One day, he announces Show and Tell. Gillean runs from the bus up the long drive to her house eager to pick and label her best thunder-walking specimens.

II—Show and Tell

"What about the turtle you found?" asks her mother. "Claw-Toes might require less explanation. Everybody loves animals."

"Some of my fossils are animals," Gillean says.

"*Were* animals."

"Of course she'll take her fossils," says her father when he comes in from baling the last of the fall hay.

"And say what about them?" asks her mother.

"What they are. Where she found them. Their age. She knows these things," insists her father. "Gillean, when was the Cretaceous Period?"

"Sixty-five to one-hundred-million years ago."

"Turtles can live to be over one hundred years old," says her mother.

"What's wrong with my fossils?" asks Gillean.

"I love every one of your bones and every bone you've ever collected," says her mother, and hugs her. "I just wonder about the other kids."

"I wonder about them, too," says her father.

He helps her choose her best specimens. They create small placards. *Gastropod,* they write. *Brachiopod. Fern. Ammonite. Clam. Shark tooth. Laurel leaf. Fish vertebrae.* They wrap each hard-won fossil in thick wads of toilet tissue and pack them in a shoebox for a safe ride on the bus.

Gillean has trouble sleeping the night before, dreams she is swimming among the chalky bluffs of her farm when something tears at her foot. Before she can turn to see what has bitten her,

she wakes. Her feet are cold. She puts them under her blanket. Outside, an owl complains about the wind, a barn window slaps open and shut, trying to loosen its hinges.

The other children bring turtles, snakes, Lego creations, barbed wire, postcards from summer trips, embroidery just-stitched, cross stitches of alphabets done by their grandmothers when they were in second grade. When Mr. Luke calls Gillean to the front, she carefully unwraps her specimens from the tissue and places them on a table. She sets each placard beside what it names. Hands behind her back, she begins the short speech she practiced the night before while waiting for sleep. "All around here, in the rocks, I find fossils. These specimens are all that's left of the plants and animals that lived here a long time ago. Back then Kansas was covered by an ocean." She holds each fossil up and pronounces its name.

"I can't see them," says a boy from the back of the class.

"They're just stupid rocks," says another.

Gillean wants everyone to see, but she can't pass them around. The chalk is porous, breakable. She has ruined fossils when she forced the rocks too quickly from where they rested in a bluff. She hands out the shark teeth.

"I've seen millions of those." Billy sometimes pulls Gillean's hair on the bus.

"Me, too," says someone.

Mr. Luke comes forward. "Children. We need to show Gillean the same respect she showed for what you brought to share. Gillean, did you find these yourself?"

"With my father mostly," Gillean says.

"Who created these?" asks Mr. Luke.

"My father says they were created by time." Gillean explains, her seven-year-old voice quavering, about Kansas being an ocean, and sea creatures in the sea, ones that are now extinct, and the earth shifting, and Kansas drying up and all of it taking millions of years. "Maybe even billions, my father told me," she says excitedly.

"Who is your father?" asks Mr. Luke.

"Charles Schensen," says Gillean.

"And what does he do?"

"He's a farmer."

Mr. Luke goes to the blackboard. With a piece of chalk he scratches, *We have fathers and our fathers have fathers, but all of us have one Father, a Heavenly Father.* "The Heavenly Father created the heavens and the earth," says Mr. Luke. "And in six days. And though He rested on the seventh day, those of us who believe in Him never rest in our work to glorify His name. Do you go to church, young lady?" His voice has grown loud as thunder.

"No." Gillean picks up her fossils and begins to wrap them in the toilet tissue. "They're poop," shouts Billy.

"Quiet, class," says Mr. Luke. He helps Gillean wrap the remainder of her specimens, his fingers already chalky from the dust of the blackboard. He is careful with her treasures, his voice now gentle. "Maybe you should go to church," he whispers. "Learn even more about creation." He puts the shoebox on the shelf for safe-keeping. "For the long ride home," he says, as though he knows what will happen.

The boys taunt her, trying to snatch her box. A fourth-grade girl has heard about Show and Tell and knows Gillean is going to hell. Others chant, "Gillean's going to hell. Gillean's going to hell." The driver stops the bus and quiets them, but the hour home moves with the deliberate speed of geologic time. Her parents ask about the Show and Tell.

"Fine," she says.

The next spring, on a morning after a thunderstorm, she and her father hunt fossils. She unearths her terrible day of Show and Tell, the chastisement and taunting.

"Don't worry about it," says her father. "If you live right, it won't be your last *Show and Hell.*"

III—Class Trip

Gillean's fifth grade class is greeted by an old woman, a volunteer at the Fick Fossil Museum. Margie points out the portrait of Vi Fick and brags about how she made her "painted sculpture paintings" using "fossilized fossils."

"Mrs. Fick made arrangements from the shark teeth she and her husband found on their land, over 11,000 of them," explains Margie. "She was an artist. Of course, she didn't have children. She would love seeing all of you who come to visit her art work."

Gillean tours the large room. Everywhere, she sees fossils, but sometimes she has to look close. The sharks' teeth are arranged on a painting of the American flag, tooth points marching right on the red stripes, left on the white, and diagonally as stars against the blue. Other shark teeth are arranged in kaleidoscopic patterns inside oval frames. Tiny clams become the bark of trees, or berries, or rock formations, depending on the color of the paint and their placement on the picture. Fossils are shaped as animals being named by Adam in the Garden of Eden in Vi Fick's fossilized Creation. Gillean thinks the fossils might be more interesting if they were unpainted, close enough to study. She has seen pictures like this Creation in her grandmother's illustrated Bible.

An American eagle is fashioned entirely of unpainted rattlesnake rattles. Mrs. Fick has also created a wax painting, over five feet tall, of her husband, only he is naked and hairy. "A replica," Margie says, "of a Cro-Magnon man, carrying a piece of wood."

All of the art, like the Cro-Magnon man, is a caricature of art. "Pay attention to the display cases," her father told her the night before. "To anything unadorned. They *did* make some good finds."

Among these is Margie's pride and joy. "Come," she says, after Gillean tells her the story of how she got her name. "We have our own specimen of the fish that's inside the fish." In Hays, Gillean knows, at the Sternberg Museum, is the xiphactinus that swallowed the gillicus, the larger killed by something, and the two of them fossilized together in a diorama of the fish-eat-fish world of the Great Inland Sea.

The gillicus is an almost perfect specimen, and Gillean likes to see the fossil she was named for displayed outside the stomach of the huge xiphactinus that Charles Sternberg found. "He lived around here for a time, Sternberg did," says Margie, "and the best

things here are the things he found." She stands closer to Gillean, and whispers, "Don't tell that to the Ficks."

"I like to collect fossils," says Gillean.

"They are a complete mystery to me. The tip of an iceberg I can't imagine."

"Don't you believe in evolution?" Gillean thinks of the glass cases full of fossilized plant and animal specimens.

"Not really." Margie moves away to tell her stories to other children.

Fossil fish heads peer at her from the walls. They have ravaging teeth, vicious, and their expressions are grumpy. Maybe because they are out of their element, Gillean thinks. On display, the tip of the iceberg of fossils, they are curiosities instead of real examples of lives lived in a time nobody tries hard enough to understand.

"Tip of the iceberg?" her father says when Gillean recounts the class trip over the dinner table. "More like the tip of the Sternberg around here."

IV—Ogallah Walking

As she grows into adolescence, Gillean intensifies her search for fossils. When she is fourteen, her parents encourage her to attend a university fossil camp. She is too old to call herself Thunderwalker, but she no longer has to think of herself as different, for all the kids at the camp are enthusiasts. They've read their Darwin, they've visited museums, they've been on digs. They think her name is cool. "I wish my folks had named me Rex," says a boy who befriends her in their two weeks in Scott County.

In high school, she takes as many science courses as she can. Some teachers stick to the facts, while others ask questions like, "At what rotational angle did God tilt the earth?" When she's run through all that Ogallah High has to offer, her mother drives her to Fort Hays State. Gillean knows— "As you've known all along," her father tells her—what she wants to be when she grows up.

She enrolls at the University of Kansas, becomes familiar with the fossil collections there. She gives herself over to science, to field work, to the discoveries of small fragments that, together,

might tell a larger, more coherent story. She feels part of an evolution: the evolution of Evolution as a theory, as evidenced in the fossil record, as better and better understood. Like a fossil, she is a tiny part of something larger. She is no missing link, but she might discover some link. Her own life is linked to the earth, she who was born into a land that her classmates always called, "The Middle of Nowhere." In this nowhere Gillean has found the exact and specific world of science, a world at the center of an evolution of billions of years in which her life is one second, but as important as every other second in the time that has led up to her life and will also lead away from it. She will not be a missing link.

Whenever she is home, she goes thunder-walking after the rain—for who else will? She finds fossils—for who else has eyes better trained for the curve of bone, the hint of brown, the crumbling fissure under which the past will expose itself? She knows these fossils will not likely be remarkable, but walking is a meditation. Eyes on the ground, she names geologic time like a mantra. Graneros with its ashy shale, 92 million years old; Greenhorn with its yellowing limestone, 89 million years old; and so on, through the Cretaceous that is her home.

Walking is seeing. Walking is purpose. Walking is the cultivation of attention.

V—Fossil Stations

Each summer, Gillean travels Kansas, each place fossils are found, searching for the remnants of evolution, those signs that sustain the theory of natural selection. She thinks of these places as her true homes. She travels from the University of Kansas to Echo Cliffs, those 300-million-year-old sandstone bluffs that echo *time, time, time.* She knows Moline and Ottawa, Kansas, where sea shells and coral have permanent fossil homes. In western Kansas, Cretaceous layers spit out petrified fish into air and sun.

Some of Kansas is named for fossils. Miocene, which geologically means recent, was a town in Leavenworth County. Sponges and sea shells are commonly exposed in Greenwood

County rock, called shell-rock, also the name of a Township and Shell Rock Falls. Large lizards from Phillips County still rear their heads, teeth bared. When Professor Benjamin Franklin Mudge collected fossils there, he suggested the stream where he found these riches be named Silurian Creek. Only Silurian Creek exists there today. A stream in Russell is known as Fossil Creek. An early stage line stop was named Fossil Creek Station, and kept its name when it serviced the new railroad. But local residents dropped the *station,* and then the *creek,* and simplified the name to Fossil, then changed it to Russell, leaving only Fossil Street—which is also US Highway 81—as the fossilized, nearly forgotten, namesake of early Kansas fossil enthusiasm.

Oh, and Fossil Lake, and the oil fields formed by the compression of ancient organic materials from the lush environment that once existed during the time of the inland sea. *All* of Kansas, oil rich, gas rich, fossil rich, Gillean knows, *is* Fossil Station, for she has made herself at home at each site, has dug and learned, has experienced Fossil Station, Kansas, for herself.

VI—Digging at the Keystone Gallery

Gillean is certain she can find a mosasaur, has found fragments near her Ogallah home. The summer before she starts graduate school at KU, she apprentices herself to Charles Grant at the Keystone Gallery near Scott City. He and previous generations of his family have made significant finds. He leads tours and welcomes her help. The Keystone Gallery is made from native rock that contains fossils. Once a schoolhouse, it is filled with fossils.

After a month of leading people on digs, she is discouraged. "I used to have a sharp eye," she complains.

"You've made some nice finds," he tells her.

"Not the one I want to make," she says.

"We are not in control," he says. "Just like what we discover was not in control."

The summer is dry, the land dusty. Their jeep tracks disappear immediately— after all, the Kansa tribe are the People of the

South Wind. Each day, Gillean feels as though it is the day before, the land exactly the same, as it will be the next day. She longs for rain, for change, just as in her life she longs to make a difference.

She has graduated at the top of her class, but wants to *prove* she is at the top. She hunts every day, whether or not Keystone has a tour. Grant tells her to rest, but she needs to find a mosasaur, and maybe a slightly different mosasaur than has been discovered before. She will study it, perhaps as her graduate thesis. Like all humans, she needs to discover, to explain, to understand. "We have to look," she tells Grant, "for no other creature will. We are the only ones who can understand."

"Do you understand the world you search for?" asks Grant. "Do you believe the universe can only be understood by human beings?" He wonders how she is any different from those who deny evolution, saying it can only be understood by God. "You're just substituting human beings for God. You're not giving up the idea of a superior being, you just think the superior being is you. I don't like that brand of evolution."

"What's your brand?" asks Gillean.

"We're complex, but we're only one of thousands of species. We're having our day. Mosasaurs had theirs. Do you expect anything different for Homo sapiens?"

"While I'm here," says Gillean, "While Homo sapiens are, I'll do what we do— understand and explain what got us where we are."

"We can agree on that," says Grant.

Grant has not been able to secure permission to hunt fossils on the Johnson place. "The sign says no hunting, and that goes for fossils as much as antelope," old Matthew says. Gillean is certain that is where her discovery lies. Two months pass as she rationalizes what will be her trespass: Why should one man be able to stop the progress of all humankind? Can someone really own a fossil, a section of land, the minerals below it, the air above it? If eminent domain can take someone's property for the public good, shouldn't the same concept hold for the public good of finding something that will increase human understanding of the past?

Gillean tells Grant she needs a week away. Family business, she explains. She has scouted a promising washout on Johnson's land, so secluded that her tent site will be within ten feet of an abandoned coyote den, and coyotes always know where human eyes are least likely to venture. She has what she can carry on her back, and when her friend Will drops her that night, holding the barbed wire strands apart for her to slip through, and hops back in his car to drive away, she is exhilarated. She does not feel alone, she feels surrounded by the presence of her next discovery.

She spends her first night in the open, the shimmering stars pressing her to the earth. They move in waves when she squints her eyes. She sleeps, finally. A rumble of thunder makes her wish she'd tried to pitch her tent in the dark. Rumble turns to clap, turns to the artillery of summer storms in western Kansas. Soon, the wind lashes rain in nearly horizontal sheets. Gillean rolls out her tent and crawls inside, her head the only pole. Pea-size hail invades the small opening she has left for air. The wind lifts her tent, and she wonders if she'll go flying across the plains, never to be seen again.

The storm finally walks past her on its giant legs, brushing her a couple of times with its awkward tail before swooshing into silence. Dawn presents itself as a grey sheet.

Her backpack is a sponge, barely afloat in the opening of the washout. She drags it to higher ground, a crotch of exposed rock still below the horizon of buffalo grass and swelling hills. She is too tired to search her backpack for granola bars and water. She lies down, waiting for the sun. Usually, she is patient, enjoying the gradation of light, the rock, roots, and soil coming into focus like a Polaroid photograph, but today she is as trapped as a fossil in rock—she can't walk out, across the Johnson place, back to the Keystone Gallery, without giving away her deception.

The sun nudges her awake. Her cheeks glow. The water has washed away, and though her tent is a sopping deflated balloon, she can imagine it as home. She shifts to level ground. She opens her pack for food and sits in the sun warming herself like a lizard on a rock, like *the* lizard on *the* rock across the small cutaway. The

thin creature runs under a shelf of rock. Where it has vanished a small brown half-moon appears, perhaps a fossil. *Her* fossil. She fills her small bucket with water, grabs a brush, and begins her day.

The shelf runs deep. Gillean wets the chalk rock and brushes it from fossilized bone. That bone is connected to another, and that to another, until Gillean cannot reach farther. She squeezes herself into the gap and works quickly. As bone follows bone she knows she has found a sizeable creature, longer than she is tall. She crawls from the small space.

The declivity in the rock is narrowing to nothing, so she spends the rest of the afternoon and evening throwing water into the space below the fossil and scraping out chalk rock—not to expose fossil, but to create a bed for her to lie in as she works the next day. She will burrow, work until she exposes the entire fossil, then get help when she knows what she suspects is true: she has found a huge mosasaur, perhaps the biggest ever for western Kansas.

Days pass slowly. Gillean has not brought enough water, and though she trusts the water Johnson's windmill pumps into a nearby livestock tank, the brackish water is threaded with algae and is almost too thick to swallow. After three days, her food supply is low. She eats granola, an apple, and some nuts in the morning, nothing at night. She can sleep hungry better than she can work hungry. And work she does, both exhausted and excited. The fossil above her is taking the shape she expected. The real work is in scraping out the work bed she lies on, deeper and deeper each day, until she works by feel alone, it is so dark. She is skin and bones, but is nearing the mosasaur's head—the creature's ribs have narrowed to the size of fingers, then disappeared. She is eager for the appearance of that powerful jaw bone. She scrunches against the rock for power, scraping forward, wetting rock, brushing and troweling with redoubled effort. Until she can hardly breathe.

She pushes herself backward, toward the entrance to her small burrow. She must rest. Her backside brushes against the ceiling that holds her fossil. The mosasaur pushes back, pinning her from foot to pelvis. She is trapped, pressed in a rubble of fossil and rock as though she is the specimen.

She tries to kick away the debris, but her legs will not move. The pressure intensifies, begins to hurt. From her stomach up, she is free in the small space she dug for herself. She gulps air in her panic. How will she survive the two days before Will's car sails down the road to wait for her at the fence line of the Johnson place? She is certain that she will die.

Gillean tries to calm herself, breathes slowly. She must conserve her air, her energy. She is a scientist. She must think logically. But she cannot. She sleeps and wakes in darkness, slowly suffocating as the oxygen in her air is replaced by the carbon dioxide she herself exhales. She can move her arms, and she reaches up to gently feel the vertebrae of the mosasaur, her mosasaur. She *must* have a head. If anyone should find her, says her morbid reasoning, let them at least find a complete fossil.

She sleeps, wakes, sleeps with no consciousness of the passage of time. An hour might be a millennium, for death is a joke that continues long past the punch line.

She wakes to blue sky, air. Cool water trickles down her throat. She tries to move but dizziness forces her to hug the earth. Grant is there. Will, too. And a man who says, "She ain't the first to trespass. But I thought, she's cute and I'll give her a chance. She's a tough one, too. Survived a gully washer. Worked like a dog." He spits. "You folks worked cattle like you hunt for fossils, you'd have something to show for it."

Gillean sits up, dizzy and nauseous. She retches. The burrow where she was trapped is now clear of the rubble, fossilized bone mixed with chunks of chalk rock. Her mosasaur, ruined. Will squeezes her hand. Tears squeeze from her eyes. She sits up again, then stands.

"Do you need to go to the hospital in Scott City?" asks Grant.

"How long . . . ?" She looks at Johnson.

"I saw you in there around noon. Come by at four and saw the rubble."

"I must have passed out," she says. She breathes deep, blesses the miracle of air. "I was almost to the head, I'm sure of it, and now . . ." She points to the crumbling rock, to the fragments of

fossil, destroyed beyond sightly repair. "Damn it," she says.

"Your life is more important than your discoveries," says Grant.

"I'm a fisherman, honey," says Johnson. "The stories I love best, well, they're about the ones that got away. That's always your best one, the one you dream about."

She begins to cry, tears with the same saline concentration as ocean water. As she has the thought, she feels both elation and despair. "I'm starving," she says. After more water, then food, after she watches the others break her camp, after she stares at the bluff, the cutaway of the creek, the distant windmill, the blue sky, after she memorizes her fixed position, she leans on Will and they walk toward his car. Her dig is done.

Later, she writes to Mr. Johnson: "*Dear Fisherman: Thanks for catching me.*" She remembers her Darwin, one passage in Chapter Ten speaking to her summer with Grant: "There has been much discussion whether recent forms are more highly developed than ancient. I will not here enter on this subject, for naturalists have not as yet defined to each other's satisfaction what is meant by high and low forms." She no longer has the satisfaction she once felt in being the higher form.

She receives a holiday greeting from Grant, a picture of a fossilized mosasaur nearly covered in snow. *Because of you, we now hunt on the Johnson place. Glad we are not finding you—the human within the fish. See our latest find, two weeks ago. Thanks. Paleontologically yours, C.G.*

VII—Hearing

Gillean attends the State Board of Education science standard hearings on the teaching of evolution, but, like all the scientists, only as an observer. The Creationists and the Intelligent Designers will have their say, make their attempts to question and refute the 140 years of science corroborating Darwin's theory. Ah, *theory*, Gillean thinks, what a misunderstood word. So many people have mistaken scientific theory for mere speculation, even ignorant guessing.

She has been ridiculed and misunderstood before: *Show and Hell*, when she was chastised by her teacher. In ninth-grade science class, when they learned natural facts like "How tall did God make the sequoia tree?" Still, she is unprepared for what she hears in the Memorial Building in Topeka, in 2005. She writes down the words, hoping someday to read them like fossil evidence. The ID witnesses and the conservative panel of the Kansas State Board of Education leave their record. Gillean attends to these words, to her "hearings".

Evolution is, she transcribes, "Atheistic, Godless, Naturalistic, Materialistic, Brainwashing, Immoral, Dogmatic, Blind Chance, a Ridiculous Notion, a Bizarre Fantasy Tale, something that Could Not Have Happened This Way, Not True, Basically a Theory, Rigged, Utterly Preposterous, Profane, Vulgar, Obnoxious, Alienating, Takes Away the Idea We Were Born for a Purpose, Purposeless, Counter to Most People's Mindset and Beliefs; it Takes Away Hope, Undercuts Belief with Blind-Chance Natural Law, Berates Students, has a Negative Impact, is Lacking in Data, Imposed on People, Cannot Create Complexity of Life, reflects a Nation Under Materialism, is Bad for Relations with the Islamic World, is Godless, Evil, Cannot be Proven, is All Just Theory, is Science as Religion, is Inadequate Exploration, is Misspelling—as though Typographical Errors Followed Blindly Could Eventually Create Something as Complex as Human Beings, is Religious Discrimination, Theistic Belief, Completely Materialistic, Poisonous Ideology as Undisputed Fact, Hedonism, says Nature is all There Is, is a Secular Humanist World View with No Scientific Justification."

Evolutionists are "Related to Monkeys and Come From Apes, Conspiring, Secular Humanistic, Microphone Hogs With Unopposed Access Through Teaching and PBS, Fussy, Boycotters, Gutless Wonders, Avoiders of the Bright Light of Modern Science, Selectively Suppressing Information, Childish, Embarrassing, Entrenched with Bias Called Naturalism—Theological Naturalism."

Someone insists that Darwin became a Christian, confessing

that, "I just meant it as a theory, I didn't intend for people to believe it. God is the creator of the Universe."

Gillean agrees with the Darwin who wrote that when a species goes extinct, a few remnants survive: "A few of the sufferers may often long be preserved, from being fitted to some peculiar line of life, or from inhabiting some distant and isolated station, where they have escaped severe competition." What better description of the State Board of Education hearings, this island of isolated fear on which true scientists have refused to set foot and thus compete with the suffering Intelligent Designers and the Creationists. Darwin himself wrote: "It is so easy to hide our ignorance under such expressions as the 'plan of creation,' 'unity of design,' etc. . . . Anyone whose disposition leads him to attach more weight to unexplained difficulties than to the explanation of a certain number of facts will certainly reject my theory." And Kansas, focused on fear of the inexplicable, rejects evolution. The hearings turn out not to be hearings, but a tongue-lashing of evolution.

Gillean is the fish within a fish, but not the gillicus swallowed by xiphactinus. She is Gillean swallowed by the dinosauric Kansas State Board. She cannot know that within a few years those who called the hearings will be voted from office and the science standards restored.

VIII—Listening

After the hearings, Gillean needs air, needs space. She drives to one of her fossil stations, the country roads around Monument Rocks. She loads a CD, her favorite chapters of *Origin of Species,* eager to hear the voice read Darwin's words about gratuitous mysteries, about his vain endeavor to grapple with eternity, about wonder and impressions and marvels.

The night sky is gorgeous above her and the ocean floor holds her up. Soon, in the light of a slender moon, the Kansas pyramids rise before her. They are monuments, but not built to honor a king, nor built to house the dead. In these formations, the mighty and the dead rise toward the night sky, where the stars are made up of the same elements, the same stuff as the air, the earth, even her own

body, and the voice reading Darwin tells her, "*The consideration of these facts impresses my mind almost in the same manner as does the vain endeavour to grapple with the idea of eternity.*"

How she admires Darwin. Most people, she thinks, are so humbled by what they do not understand, cannot understand, that they turn it to miracle. In doing so, they do not worship miracles, they worship their own ignorance. She will be like Darwin, content with mystery, humbled by ignorance, but humbled even more by what she *does* understand. Darwin's words float in her mind as fossil creatures once floated in the ocean of Kansas: *When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled.* With such words, such thoughts lifting to the heavens, Gillean walks under brilliant stars. She stands beneath the towering rocks. They are both remnant of, and monument to, the fossil sea of Kansas.

Stephanie Coyne DeGhett

THE BLACKBIRD SINGING

It was a small cemetery, longer than wide, on the corner of a county road and a side road. Along the short stretch of main road frontage, there was a ditch of cattails and, on one of the tall and tattered remnant stalks, a red-winged blackbird perched. Hallie drove the length of the cemetery down the ribbon of back road twice to find the sagging iron gates that would let her in. The lane inside the cemetery was narrow, and tires had rutted it until the center crowned up and threatened the undercarriage of the little rental car as it waddled over the uneven ground. It hadn't occurred to her that she would have to search the grave out.

Just look for disturbed earth, she thought, scanning the two dozen or so acres. Be systematic. Walk a grid.

She began under a story-high cast zinc marker that could be seen from anywhere in the cemetery. This would be her reference point. The forward sections on the narrow main road frontage were treeless and the terrain ran downhill, easier to scan. As the cemetery rolled uphill, though, terraces began and there were trees, spruce mostly, and brushy mounds that in summer could have been anything from spirea to potentilla. Right now, they were simply cemetery scrub.

In the twiggy branches of a bush next to her was a weathered gray bird's nest with a cluster of tiny curled brown leaves caught in its woven cup. Genevra wouldn't be listening for the birds to start their spring calls this season. When Hallie and her sister talked, back when they still occasionally spoke, Genevra's conversation always sounded like an update of her life list as a birder. For her, bird talk was the default conversation, the substitute for other folks' weather gambit. Cloudy with a chance of robins.

Hallie began to work methodically along the lower reaches of the cemetery. All that had been buried was an urn, there would be no great mounds of earth. Terrence, Terrell, Livesay. Livesay was a recent grave, last spring.

Why was she even here, she thought, though the answer to that came easily. "Go now," Lyddie had said when the phone call came. The sacks of cheese Danish were left unopened, empty plates beside them. The kitchen had smelled of fresh coffee. Saturday was the only day they had breakfast together.

Her sister was dead. Her estranged sister. Her only sister. Lyddie had wanted her to go north to say goodbye.

"There's no funeral, no services," Hallie had answered. "I'd be going up to do what? Everything has been taken care of. We'll drive up together in the summer. She'll still be dead then."

"Go now," Lyddie reiterated. "And go on your own. Genevra didn't like me. This needs to be a good bye, just the two of you. Go be the pair of you again, this last time. I'll be here when you get back."

And so here she was, alone, trying to find her sister's grave. Had Genevra even had a headstone put up? Of course she did, thought Hallie, remembering how meticulous her sister had been with her notes and labels, even when she was young, remembering all the school binders labeled with her birding notes, ball point pen inked on their blue fabric spines. *Bird notes: Summer 1959-1964*, *Bird Notes: Summer 1965*, *Bird Notes from the Shore.* That last volume was full of Genevra's notes from the times they spent at the ocean with their parents.

There was little traffic on the county road, but whatever sounds there were from cars disappeared as Hallie worked her way up the rising slope of granite headstones and bronze veterans' markers.

Along the far edge of the graveyard ran an old fence line, rusted barbed wire and leaning cedar posts that no longer tried to keep cows in or out. Along the fence line, there was still snow in place, snow the granular consistency of snow cones. She had left spring behind on her train ride north. Here winter still hung on at the edges. Emerging from the remnant snow at the periphery of the cemetery were a few old plastic planters and a bright purple spray of sweet peas, plastic and shocking in this sepia landscape.

A row of ancient maples stood just beyond the fence, leafless. Each bore a sap bucket on all four points of the compass, their

peaked metal lids designed to keep out leaves and rain and chipmunks. A little sugaring operation. The buckets were the color of the stones in the cemetery's cobbled terracing, the color of the old bird nest and the overcast sky. The patches of rust on their sides were the color of the bricks in the houses nearby, the color of the brambles that grew in the fence line, the color of the granite of the newer headstones. The quiet had become nearly enveloping and it was so early in this northern edition of spring that bird sound was rare enough to be singular. The plaintive whistle of a blackbird somewhere close by startled her. Disoriented for a moment, she looked for the zinc spire where the car was parked. And then she was aware of another sound, the rumble of a tractor.

The tractor was small and had once been red and it was hauling a wagon full of old milk cans whose new use was their annual outing to collect sap. Hallie stepped over the stone wall and found a spot where a fence post had sagged nearly to ground level and picked her way across a swath of gravelly snow and walked to meet the tractor and its driver.

"Sugaring?" she asked, feeling stupid, for clearly he was.

The driver didn't seem to take the remark as awkward and answered yes with a nod. He idled the tractor and climbed off the battered seat and pried the tops off the buckets on a maple big enough that it would have taken the two of them to wrap their arms around its girth. The blackbird whistled again and then chattered, staccato.

"Sounds like spring," Hallie said.

"Tastes like it, too," he said. "This has been a good season for syrup so far." He splashed a bucket full of sap into the tall milk can and introduced himself. "Jay," he said.

"Hallie," she answered and picked up the empty bucket he had set down and put the bucket back on the hook underneath the galvanized metal tap that had continued to drip sap. She caught the clear drop on her finger and tasted it, its sweetness faint and cold and clear. Then she settled the top back on the empty bucket and reached down and picked up the next one. The plink of the next drop hitting the bottom of the empty bucket was so audible

and so musical that she nearly laughed aloud. Jay had moved to the next tree. As she reached down the third time, she noticed something, and from the russet leaf litter, she picked up a rusty iron spout small enough to fold her hand around. "Look," she said, and held it up.

"An old tap," he said, coming back and reading the patent date in raised letters on its side: 1898. "We've been sugaring around here for awhile," he laughed and handed it back to her. "It's amazing we don't find more of those. I bet it's lucky," he said.

"Are you here visiting?" he asked motioning toward the cemetery.

"Here to see my sister," she answered. "I haven't found her stone yet."

"Gen?" he asked.

"How did you know?"

"Only because she's the only one they buried this spring," he said. "Sorry for your loss." He sounded formal. "You'll find the stone just a few rows up from where we are."

Hallie put the fourth bucket back up and stepped back toward the place she could cross the fence without too much scrambling.

"Ever seen a sugaring operation in full boil?" he asked.

"Not since a field trip when I was a kid," she said.

"Well," he said, "tomorrow is our annual pancake breakfast and open house. Come by, I'll give you the full tour."

"Maybe I will," she said, thinking that it would be hard to do and catch the train back.

"We start early," he said. "By seven. We're down the road that runs alongside the cemetery about a mile. Come hungry."

Jay was right, Genevra's stone was just paces from where she had left off working her grid before she stepped through the fence. WALLACE was carved on the polished face of the small stone and under it her name, Genevra. Leave it to her, thought Hallie, to set it up like a birder's notebook, genus first, species next. It was the last grave in the row, or the first, depending on how you looked at it. It was under the branches of one of Jay's maples, its roots extending under the old fence and into the cemetery. It, too, had buckets hung from taps.

The last time she had seen Genevra was in a cemetery, an enormous nearly treeless one that spread not for acres but for miles. They had buried their mother next to their father. Hallie had brought roses, Genevra had brought bird seed to scatter. Hallie wished she had bird seed now, if only for something to do at this moment.

Stepping over to the maple, she reached around it until she could unseat a bucket. There was very little sap in the bottom, but she took it over to the gravesite and let the clear drops slide out on its small mound of disturbed earth. "It's been a good season for syrup so far, Genevra," she said. And, resituating the bucket, she headed toward the spire at the center of the cemetery and her car. Just as she pulled out, a white Jeep with a young man at the wheel was waiting to pull in.

At the bed and breakfast, she signed in and took stock of the morning accommodations. They were clean and homey and there was a big basket of fresh fruit and little boxes of cereal and stacks of small bowls and big pitchers that probably held juice in the morning. She was unlikely to be hungry, even for this fare, much less for pancakes.

"Have you ever been to the pancake breakfast up the road that runs by the cemetery?" Hallie asked the woman who owned the place.

The woman looked up. "Once," she said. "Were you invited?" Hallie nodded and the woman spun the guestbook around, looking at the roster of sign-ins for Hallie's name. "Wallace? Are you Gen's sister?"

When Hallie nodded, the woman said, "She was lovely, in her own way. She cooked for the local birders who went out for the winter bird count on their big weekend. Cranberry pancakes were her specialty."

Genevra was Gen to these folks. And she had somehow found the courage to cook for a crowd. Both sounded so different from the Genevra she remembered. Her sister's life was distant from her, in its big events and its small details.

"She did keep to herself mostly," continued the woman. There

was apology in her tone. "I don't think anyone even knew she was sick."

"She was quiet about things like that," Hallie said in an attempt to ease the flicker of discomfort she saw in the woman's face. The truth was, almost anything she said about Genevra was speculation based on the little girl she had known decades and decades ago.

"Can't you girls make it up," their mother had pleaded.

"Not really," Hallie had said. "Not when she dislikes Lyddie so. Not when she won't even come to our house, not after all this time. Not even when you are there."

A disapproving and awkward little sister. It hadn't felt like much of a loss, really, for a long while.

In the morning, Hallie was packed by first light. No pancakes. White fog, nearly as white as snow, had settled around the edges of town. The air had chilled overnight and felt as cold as the quartz-like snow at the cemetery's edge. It touched her face and her bare hands and it felt delicious in its way, like the sap on her fingertip. She felt the raised patent numbers on the rusty iron spout in her pocket. Maybe she would go just to see the sap being boiled.

The cemetery as she went by had white fog streaking and hazing its landscape, and she was worried that she could miss Jay's, but there was a sign out front and several cars already parked outside, including the white Jeep she had seen entering the cemetery as she left the afternoon before. Jay motioned her in from the doorway.

The long boiling pans were rolling with amber liquid. It was the color of rusty barbed wire and russet brambles and tiny leaves caught in old nests. Clouds of steam billowed off the boil and the air was sweet.

"Set out five hundred buckets this year," he said, and it's kept us busy morning and night. Bet this is the last week of it, though. As soon as the trees start to swell buds, the syrup changes. You came at the best time." He moved toward a door and pushed it open. "Breakfast is served," he smiled.

Hallie didn't know what she had expected, something more like a church supper with rows and rows of tables and people sitting in family groups and church elders serving a hundred at a

time. And then she remembered how few cars were out front. She had just thought that she was early. But now, she realized, that wasn't the case. There was one big table with half a dozen people sitting around it, eating already or being served, and places for half a dozen more. The woman closest to her was eating a stack of Belgian waffles asea in new maple syrup. Across from her was a serving of French toast, in a great stack. The room smelled of coffee. Jay sat her a seat away from someone eating a stack of pancakes and a side of bacon.

"Gen's sister," Jay said to him. And to her he said, "And we thought you'd like cranberry pancakes, just because those were her specialty."

"I never heard of a made-to-order pancake breakfast," laughed Hallie and then recognized, across from her, the young man who had been in the white Jeep.

"My father," he said, raising a forkful of pancake. "When I was a kid, he liked to take me out to breakfast on the weekends he had me. Always pancakes. And I always wanted strawberries on the side."

And there were the strawberries, mounded on his plate.

"Who did you lose?" Hallie asked the woman on her other side.

"A sister, like you. Last fall."

"This breakfast is just for the first year after," said Jay. "The year someone is lost. In a way, this is their maple syrup, too."

Hallie looked across the table at the elderly man intent on his breakfast. "Mr. Livesay?" she said and he nodded. "That French toast looks good." He just smiled.

When Hallie drove back to the train station, the fog was still cold but it seemed then like everything was caught in the steam rising off the boil. The cattails in the ditch by the road at the corner of the cemetery were spilling their stuffing, their old velvet coats the color of pancakes just done and their fluff the color of a pancake broken open by a fork's edge. The stubble in the fields was pancake-colored and the deer in the fields were pancake-colored and somewhere the red-winged blackbird was whistling. The grief she could taste for her sister was sweet on her tongue.

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