KRISTEN J. TSETSI

CAROL'S AQUARIUM

"Tsetsi is very observant with her writing."
— Dan Wickett

CAROL'S AQUARIUM

Penxhere Press/September 2009

All rights reserved.
Copyright © 2009 Kristen J. Tsetsi.

Cover Photo by Kristen J. Tsetsi.

Cover composition by MCM.

This book may not be reproduced in whole
or in part without permission.

Published in the United States.

CAROL'S AQUARIUM is a Backword Book.
www.BackwordBooks.com

Author information:
www.KristenTsetsi.com

Other books by Kristen J. Tsetsi:

HOMEFRONT
HOW TO (NOT) HAVE CHILDREN

CAROL'S AQUARIUM

A Collection

Kristen J. Tsetsi

PRAISE FOR KRISTEN J. TSETSI'S FICTION

"Tsetsi knows how to write gripping paragraphs." –Levi Asher, *Literary Kicks*

"Resisting the urge to explain, to instead just put the experience on the page for readers to settle into and interpret, seems one of the more difficult styles for writers to accept as valid. Certainly it is a difficult style to master, and Tsetsi deserves props for such an excellent example of the aesthetic." –Steven McDermott, *Storyglossia*

"Tsetsi is very observant with her writing, and these little touches go a long way into creating the scenarios." –Dan Wickett, the Emerging Writers Network

"[Tsetsi's] solid, seamless and detailed writing has the power to bring us into each scene." –Sonia Reppe, *Book Pleasures*

"Kristen Tsetsi seems far too young to already know that the greatest story of all is about our endless search to look outside ourselves for fulfillment and meaning in love. Tsetsi writes with the power of an old soul." –James C. Moore

"Tsetsi gets it. She understands structure. She understands drama." –Steven Reynolds

CAROL'S AQUARIUM

CONTENTS

NOVEL EXCERPTS

FOREWORD

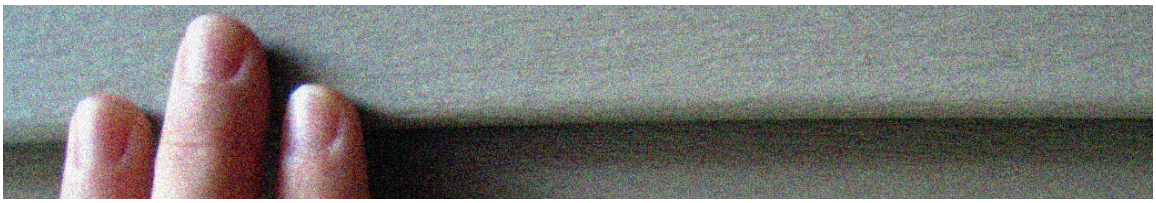
Most of the following stories were written and published in 2006, some in print journals and some online. Two stories—those published in *Edifice Wrecked*—are no longer available anywhere but here, as the website has since closed. Two are previously unpublished.

The assortment is intentionally lacking an overall theme or thread. I view a collection of shorter works as one that allows for fun and creative freedom, and that may display a variety of voices, styles, and moods.

I hope you enjoy it.

—Kristen

EATING ETERNITY



The dust on the lamp base in Kevin's home office tasted the way it smelled: like tired air. And that was what Sylvia wanted, to taste the air, to feel it on her and as a thin coating on her teeth. The line made in the dust layer—she'd used the nail of her middle finger—was in the shape of an "s." She added a segment to turn it into infinite and then rubbed that bit on her teeth, too, and looked at her finger. Tried to follow the paths curving over the tip, but one ran into another into another, and the branches they made, the splitting-off, hurt her eyes when she tried to track them.

"You have to come out sooner or later," he said.

"You have a key. It's on top of the door frame." On the floor, neatly stacked, were five boxes. Was that all? "Come in, if you want."

She heard him sigh and slide down to the floor. "You told me not to," he said from out there. "You hungry?"

"No."

Sylvia sat, too. The carpet was soft beneath her. She ran her palm over the fuzzy tufts, plucked a fiber clump and slid it under her tongue. Rough. She maneuvered it between her teeth and chewed it. "The carpet tastes like coat fur," she said. "Or pubic hair."

"Mm?" he said. "Ah."

"Kevin."

"Yes?"

"I'm serious."

"I know."

Sylvia scooted to the edge of the room and rested her back against the wood-paneled wall and looked out the window. Long, thin icicles slid down from the rain gutter, and fat snowflakes drifted lazily, weightlessly, up and down between them.

She had witnessed only thirty winters. As many as there were days in a month. It had felt like more, didn't seem possible that as long as she'd been alive there had been only *thirty* winters.

Someday, snowflakes and icicles and bare, brown tree branches would be a memory. If that. *If that.*

The snowflakes continued to dip and flutter, gay in spite of everything, and Sylvia reached up and felt in her hand the rock she'd taken from a pile at the edge of some lake she'd visited one year. She tossed it at the window and a tube of cold air came in through the pointed hole and the rock tumbled down the shingles on the roof. Sylvia cupped her hands to draw the air to her face and heard strange, wordless noises, like someone grunting, moaning.

Rapid knocks sounded on the door followed by, "Are you okay?" and, "Sylvia! Are you choking? What's going on? What broke? Say something or I'll come in."

"Don't!" She wiped her face and took the breaths she needed—four, five, six—and punched her chest until the rolling stopped. "Kevin," she said.

"I'm here."

"We're going to die," she said.

"I know."

"No. I mean *die*. Forever."

"I know. But, Syl—you're only thirty. Come on."

It was hard to see, hard to breathe, so she wiped her eyes and wiped them again and rubbed her hands on her sweatshirt, crusted with sage-green paint. His present to her on her thirtieth: her own office in the second spare bedroom, which they'd been using for storage. Kevin had gone through the boxes the night before while she slept and had divided the contents into three piles: trash, goodwill, and keep. There hadn't been much to keep…just the five boxes. Goodwill waited in his car trunk, and he'd lugged the "trash" boxes to the end of their driveway.

"What about all the things?" she'd said, looking in from the hall.

"What things?"

"I don't know. That's the point. What if I wanted to look through the stuff and make sure there wasn't something I needed to keep?"

"If it's been in a box that long and you didn't miss it before, how could it be anything you need?" He'd curled his hand around her hip. "Let's go. Let's get some paint. All right? Fun. This is supposed to be fun."

She'd chosen sage and had finished two walls before stepping back to appraise them.

The color was perfect. Perfectly her, perfectly calming, perfectly…

…but *so what*?

What about a year from now? Would she still like it?

When she was eighty and dying, it wouldn't matter, that perfect room. And when she died, it would become some other kind of room. Possibly for someone who hated sage, who would kill what was left of her with a pink-soaked brush.

She'd tossed down the roller, then, before running into Kevin's office. And there she'd been for the past two hours.

Sylvia pulled, from the smallest box, a Turkish mechanical pencil a friend had given her in second grade. Her friend's father had always liked to travel and would return with all kinds of ordinary things which, when brought from other countries, suddenly seemed exotic.

Sylvia clicked out a wedge of lead and broke it off and chewed it.

"Kevin?"

"Yeah, babe."

"Lead tastes a lot like chalk."

"M-hm."

She heard scraping on the other side of the door and knew he was rubbing the wood, stroking the grain the way he often did her cheek or her hair. *Scrape, scrape, scrape*, until, suddenly, it stopped. Sylvia crawled to the door and put her ear against it and listened, but heard nothing.

She whispered, "Kevin?"

Nothing.

She pressed her cheek into the rug and used one eye to peer under the door, where no shadow blocked the light.

“Kevin!” she screamed.

“I’m here, Sylvia.”

She closed her eyes and let out her breath. She asked him to bite his fingernail. He kept them well; not too short, not too long. But long enough.

“What?”

“Just do it.”

He did. And when she asked him to push it under the door, he did that, too. He didn’t ask why.

BECOMING AN OATES GIRL

Edifice Wrecked short fiction competition winner. Guest judge: Ellen Meister

Lunelle had spent her life a buttercup, slender and bright and cheerful and light, her happiness smudging the men who held her. They reveled in her gaiety, smiled "I've-found-her!" sighs at her movie-girl mood that never changed and ever pleased, at her baby lotion soft (and deceptively youthful) skin. They, the men, licked her buttercup dust from their fingers until even their nails were clean.

She, Lunelle, was the kind of girl (before *him*) who—in the meat-freezer cold of Fargo winters—refused to ride in a car or a bus from the college where she taught compassion for Oates's broken *Beasts* and *Solstice* women. She walked, thighs flaming fire-cold, without complaining or grumbling or cursing the goddamn Midwestern winters the way the others did. She, Lunelle, ran ahead—skipped, even—and giggled, swinging her hair around to smile and rub-rub-rub her silly-cold thighs and say, "Brrr!" She, Lunelle, picked up snow and tossed it high, raised her face, closed her eyes, and collected soft powder on her lashes. She laughed, then, and skipped back to him (more specifically, to *him*) and took his hands and led him forward and onward, saying, "Oh, grumpy-grump!" when he complained he couldn't feel his toes. Once inside her cozy and well-lit apartment (sunlight hit her hair just so in the afternoons), she offered hot chocolate and peeled off their clothes and sat naked atop of him while water heated on the stove.

He was the dashing dapper-doll she'd spotted one fall crossing the street with a parrot on his shoulder, its feathers boasting vibrant rainbow shades. He—*he*—wore a sleeveless t-shirt and handed sunflower seeds to the beak hovering cheekside. Lunelle had waved from her side of the street and said, "Hi, there!" Giggling, she'd asked the parrot's name, and from then and on they were together. For their one-year—her first

long-term—he'd planted a patch of sunflowers in the soil under her kitchen window and she'd clapped her hands and kissed the air.

Today, *now*, the sunflowers peak, now in full autumn, *Gillian's* season since three years before when, parrot shouldered and one uprooted sunflower dragging, he—*he*—left under a ghost sheet. "Getting candy corn," he lied.

He left, he later sighed, because she was too perfect. (She didn't argue the impossibility of being "too" perfect.) He flipped her hair, said, "Thick and bouncy!" He spat in her eyes. "They sparkle, for Christ's sake!" But also, she was too optimistic, too chipper about "goddamn everything." To prove him wrong she, Lunelle, had said, "No, it's not true, baby blue. Listen to this, to what I was thinking, and you'll see I, too, am some days sinking into the depths of sadness and gloom, and that I am—hardly!—like a…flower…in…in…bloom! Listen," she said. "Sometimes? Sometimes I think my heart could just break from autumnal beauty that's too much to take, the rusts on brown trees—I could fall to my knees!" But she knew. That was too beautiful, too. "You make me fucking crazy," he said.

So she, once Lunelle, became an Oates woman, because they—damaged, *im*perfect—are loveable, sickly adored the translated world over.

She, *Gillian*, breasts shaved to *Beasts* nubs and hair permed curly, buys lipsticks called *Tangerine Tango* and *Mazetlan.* Her students snicker at the bold smears coloring her teeth and at her pronunciation of "Rastafarian" (Ra-sti-*fay*-rien), roll their eyes when she uses words like "stichomythia" and "brackish" for their ugliness.

She is Lunelle only on Halloween nights when, gold-lit under the porchlight, she drops dried buttercup buds in children's cheap plastic pumpkin buckets.

THEY THREE AT ONCE WERE ONE

Storyglossia Fiction Prize winner, Pushcart Prize nominee, Story South's Million Writer's Award notable story.

The news recycled again on the small TV, rabbit-ear antennae half alert, half asleep : A downed helicopter outside of Mosul. A roadside IED. A flipped-over tank in the Euphrates.

Nan checked her phone again for signal bars, then set it beside the plastic plate of Chinese food, uneaten and cold, and lit another cigarette.

A flipped-over tank in the Euphrates.

Just some string of words crossing the Teleprompter, and the anchor even smiled before commercial. "Coming up," she said, "America's obesity crisis." Nan looked past the lobby windows at drifting storm clouds, their depths and flowering expansions revealed in teasing, random lightning flashes. She willed a strike to wipe Marc from her memory…*flash!*…and render him foreign, the way her own language had once sounded foreign when overheard at the fringes of her attention. She had thought it Greek, maybe Italian, until the words came into focus in a wash of air and sound.

Headlights lit the dark lobby, then faded. A new car—a Mustang, yellow, with tinted windows—pulled up under the awning and sat there with the engine running. Nan put out her cigarette, wiped her face with her sleeves, and turned down the TV.

She took her spot behind the counter and noticed mascara on the cuffs of her sleeves. The bunched them in her palms.

The first out of the car was a girl.

Dressed.

Lips red-red. Professionally-styled blonde waves touched her shoulders and Nan *knew*. They only dressed up like that, got their hair done, for prom, military balls, or for the other. The girl was too old for prom, and not enough military were around for there to

be a ball, but Nan still hoped, anyway, that it wouldn't happen today, that it was something else, something—

But it wasn't. Nan saw the hair first—a high-and-tight—before he put on his cap, and then she saw his arms, green-and-brown and gesturing over the car roof.

Nan watched him come around the car, watched the girl step through her held-open glass door. A pressure breeze blew back the girl's hair and she smiled, her lips a narrow red line. He—name patch reading "Tanner"—followed just behind her. He pulled off his cap and held it at his waist.

"Hi," Nan said, and her throat caught. "Help you?" she said, louder.

The girl rested her forearms on the raised counter. Her nails matched her lips, and she wore a tiny round diamond on her left ring finger.

Tanner stuffed his cap in a pocket and put an arm around the girl's lower back. "Babe? It's under your name, isn't it?"

Nan noticed slight movement in his upper arm and imagined his thumb touching the girl's spine.

The girl looked up at Tanner. "Oh. Yes."

He was as tall as Marc. His chin would brush the top of Nan's head, tickle her hair.

"Mackelroy," the girl said. "Jennie." She smiled again.

Nan didn't smile back, but down-arrowed until she found their room. Fifty dollars had been added to the regular rate and the manager's memo read, SOLDIER LEAVE BEGINS.

"Computer error," Nan said. "If you'll wait a moment?" She looked up for an answer.

The girl—Jennie—said, "Sure," and shifted on her feet. Tanner squeezed her close and looked around the lobby, then out at the car. He leaned to whisper something to the girl, and she squeezed his side. "Yeah, but it was your money," she said, nudging him. "All that hazard pay."

"Almost worth it," he said.

Nan smelled—coming from his ACUs—dirt. Dust. The same desert odor that lifted off the pages she'd pulled from sweat-smudged envelopes, fine sand-grain coating

her fingertips like chalk powder. She imagined his uniform against her cheek, his breath falling cool on the top of her head. His eyes were shaped like Marc's. The corners, or maybe the—

"Is that a no?" he said.

"Sorry?"

"I said, any good news?" He pointed at the TV.

Nan's face heated. "I—I don't—no. No." She looked at Jennie, who couldn't be much older than nineteen. Too young to not take him for granted. Too naïve to appreciate his standing beside her, his touching and holding and speaking to her. She was picking at her nails, and Nan imagined those nails would later rake silly teenage lines on Tanner's skin. She would write, "I love you" on his back, making love take the shape of a heart.

Before Marc left, Nan had closed her eyes and tried to memorize his body, the lines and bends and moles and wrinkles, with her fingertips.

"Is it not there?" Jennie said.

"Yes. It's just—one moment, please." Nan turned her attention back to the computer and found another room, nicer than their original.

"We're not in any hurry," Tanner said, and Jennie looked at him. "Take your time."

Jennie asked Nan if there was a bathroom and, before leaving, slid her credit card onto the counter. Tanner wandered into Nan's dark lobby and stood with his arms folded on his chest and watched the TV. "Chinese?" he said. He kicked a tan-booted foot in the direction of Nan's table.

She nodded.

"I haven't had Chinese in…damn. Too long. Hey, you got the number?"

Nan pointed at the brochure bin. While he looked through fliers, she moved Jennie Mackelroy from room 129 to room 212.

Jennie came out of the bathroom, lipstick refreshed, hair brushed, skin delicately perfumed. Tanner opened his arms and Jennie went into them. He stroked her hair and caught Nan staring.

Nan busied herself with a cup of pens.

Tanner guided Jennie to the counter and picked up the key card and credit card. He said, "Thanks for the delivery stuff," and led Jennie through the door, an arm around her narrow shoulders, pamphlets poking out of a cargo pocket.

———

Nan pressed her pin-pricked thumb into one of room 129's pillowcases until the blood soaked through. Three days ago, it had been cornflakes softened in milk and splattered in a dark corner. The memo had read, GUEST FEARED SUBSTANCE A HEALTH HAZARD; MOVED TO SIMILAR ROOM AT REDUCED RATE TO APPEASE. The cleaning women were yelled at and the manager didn't believe them when they swore it wasn't there before, that they'd have seen it.

Nan turned off the light and took the stairs to the second floor balcony. She pressed herself against the wall between rooms 211 and 212 and listened hard over the increasing winds, mentally rehearsing what she would say if they caught her: *I forgot to give you a second keycard. Here you are. Have a nice evening.* A shadow passed back and forth across a narrow line of light spearing through the curtains and onto the walkway.

"Go…dinner?"

"…order in."

"But…to go out…got dressed up."

A pause.

"Okay," he said. "I'll just get dressed. Hey—did I leave my cigarettes in the car?"

His voice sounded loud. Close. Nan inched away from the door and ran through breezeway to the stairs on the opposite side.

———

She watched the parking lot through the window and counted money while Diana, night-shift auditor, catalogued check-in receipts.

"Any problems?" Diana said.

Nan shook her head.

"What happened here?" Diana held up the Mackelroy receipt.

"Doesn't it say?" Nan was trying to hear the TV. They were saying something…broadcasting images of various banks of the Euphrates…but it was nothing. Nothing new. She stroked the lump the phone made in her pocket.

"Did you go look for yourself?"

"Yeah," Nan said. "Blood. Like it says."

"That's disgusting."

"M-hm."

She saw them, then, looking up at the sky on the way to their car. The girl had changed into a small dress, and Tanner wore a button-down. She wondered if he wore cologne and what it smelled like.

She wondered where they were going and didn't want him to leave.

"I wonder why I never get this many complaints when I'm working," Diana said. "You've had to move five people in two weeks."

Nan shoved the drawer into the register and took off her name tag. "It's busiest between two and ten," she said.

"Oh, hey." Diana held up a credit card. "This was on the floor when I came in. Mackelroy."

Nan said she would be happy to deliver it on her way out.

———

Light from the walkway dusted room 212 in orange. On the bed, an open suitcase and a stuffed green duffel bag. Between them, a plastic men's-store sack.

They hadn't mussed the covers.

That was usually the first thing people did.

Nan sniffed the air and smelled man. And hairspray. She found the hairspray and spritzed it, stuck her nose into the mist. Grape-y.

His folded ACUs made a neat stack on the chair. Nan traced the seam of a breast pocket with her thumb, slipped in the credit card, then picked up the top and pressed it to her face, but it was too much, *toomuchtoomuch,* so she put it down and went to the

dresser and smoothed her fingers along the surface, grabbed a beaded necklace and touched loose change, earrings, a box of green tic-tacs.

Such privacy they'd created in just minutes with their clothing, their little things, their scents. The air was heavy with their presence and Nan thought of Christmas lights strung under snow, or of the soft melody made by a body moving under bathwater in a still room, and she was there, right in the middle of it, drowning in it, but not really, because even with her eyes closed and her fingers clutched around the girl's necklace and her breathing deep to take it all in and make it hers, it wouldn't take, and trying to be a part of it was like trying to throw a lasso around a ghost. It wasn't hers for the having, not for a long time, not until Marc came back, and he wouldn't be back. Not for a long time. She let go of the necklace and picked up the hairspray and sprayed it in her mouth because it was the only thing in the room she could ingest, but it didn't taste like grape, not at all. It tasted the way bug spray smelled, and it burned.

"Fuck." She spit on the floor and felt her tongue and lips swelling. "Fuck." She started for the bathroom to rinse out her mouth when she heard movement, talking, outside.

"…just so tired. I'm really sorry, babe."

Nan hurried to the space between wall and bed. There was just enough room for her to crawl underneath.

The carpet dug into her elbows and smelled like dust.

Their feet came in, a set of heels and a pair of black leather shoes. The heels stopped near a chair, crossed one over the other, and then slid off. The black leather shoes stopped at the end of the bed, and it bowed when he sat.

They were quiet. Nan imagined them smiling. Looking at one another without knowing what it meant that they could. So quiet, so quiet, and Nan had to swallow but was afraid they would hear. She opened her mouth and a pool of saliva dripped down.

The leather shoes shifted, toes pointing outward. "Sorry about dinner. You got all dressed up, and…" He trailed off.

The girl's toes curled. "Well, I *wanted*…" She sighed. "Anyway. We don't have to do everything tonight."

He moved on the bed. Turning toward the girl, Nan guessed. He said, "Everything?"

"You know. All these things that—just stuff I thought would be fun, you know, and—"

"Do you have a lot planned? Something every day?"

"No…" She sounded beaten. "Well, yes, actually, but don't you want—"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah."

Nan heard him take, and then release, a deep breath.

"Listen," he said. "Would you mind if we just kind of hung out and watched TV?"

"TV?"

"It's just…" He used the toe of one shoe to push off the other. "It's been eight months, you know, since I could do that."

Nan watched the girl's feet, which had become still.

"I—if you want to."

He took off his other shoe. "Cool."

The girl climbed on the bed. Nan heard her sniffing, and then the TV powering on.

The bed squeaked. "Sorry," said the girl.

"It's all right. Hey, you like this show?"

Nothing.

"Hey?"

"Hm?"

"I said, you like this show?"

"It's all right, I guess."

One television character said something to another and the other made a noise—Nan couldn't see what was done from underneath the bed—and she heard Tanner laugh loud with the laugh track.

"Tanner?" said the girl, so low Nan barely heard her. She wondered if she might have imagined it. But, there again: "Tanner?"

He laughed, said, "Ahhhh, shit."

Nan tried to stay under, tried to keep herself from clawing out and standing over them screaming, her mouth numb from wanting, wanting what they had if only they knew it but they didn't and she hated them.

Tanner scrambled toward the phone, Jennie toward the door, but soon, shamed for not doing not saying not being, they were back on the bed, fingers—her right hand, his left—pretzel-locked and white. They guarded their faces when Nan threw their shoes, Tanner rising just a little to say, as if to a private, “That’s enough, now.”

Nan slumped to the floor to check her phone for a signal. She moved it this way, that way, never getting more than two bars, and her lips felt sticky and thick when she said, “Can you turn on the news?”

Jennie found the channel and she and Tanner went to Nan. Each held one of her arms, stroked her shoulders, her back, her hair, until she calmed.

There was no news.

Some minutes after midnight they helped her up and walked her to her car in the rain.

MISS NEUROSIS

I step out of the shower and press "play" on the answering machine—its red light blinks—and when I do I hear Dan say exactly this: "I hate to tell you something like this, especially on an answering machine—" I slam the "play/stop" button and the rest of his sentence stays trapped in the box. I stare at it, the box, and pick up our new kitten playing on the floor with some fuzzy thing. It hangs from one of his razor-claws as I hold him, and he ignores me, curling his little body around the fuzzy thing while twisting into a ball of head and feet and fur.

We bought him together. I had a cat before we met, and Nermal was, I think, bought for the same reason people who create step-families decide to have yet another baby: to have one of our own. Nermal symbolized our commitment to one another: "See? We'll be together at least a good fifteen to twenty years."

We've had him four days, now.

I set Nermal down and he bounces across the floor. In the spare room, where my vanity is, I blow dry my hair and run through the many things Dan could possibly hate to tell me on a machine. But there aren't many, really. There's only one.

This morning, lying half-asleep in bed and willing myself not to wake up because I'm trying to get over two weeks of a cold, I dreamed Dan sat on the couch while I kneeled in front of our DVDs, pulling one after another from the shelf and reading off titles.

"*Thelma and Louise?*"

"No."

"*Heat*?"

"Nah."

And so on, until the dream ended with his saying no to *Serpico.* I used to dream about us tangled up in sex, laughing on a sidewalk, or riding a shining boat wing.

I've been in those relationships, the ones that progressed to that stage—when laughter had to be prompted by laugh tracks, when the only knowing looks were the kind that passed during some idiot sitcom's moment of dramatic irony, and when sex came when there were no good—or even mediocre—shows left to watch. Afterward, it was never good. When all the breathing was done and there was nothing but quiet.

I turn off the blow dryer and run my hands through my hair. Too long, and the color is growing out and this cold has changed my face. Wan. That's the best way to describe it. Pale, pasty. And my right eye is red.

I tried to look good for Dan when he called to say he was coming home for lunch, yesterday, and when he touched my arm and said I looked pretty, I thought, "We've lost something." He couldn't have thought I looked pretty—he just couldn't—and we've never lied to each other before. Our conversations have been stilted, too, even forced. In my defense, I've been drugged-up and droopy, and there's not much in your head when you're sick and sleeping most of the day, and it's hard to pay attention to the things people tell you. Interest is genuine, but enthusiasm takes too much work.

Sometimes I'm afraid this cold might be a terminal disease, and then I think it must be very easy for people to find someone new after their mate dies from a long illness. The dying one gets increasingly boring, and the healthy one is patient, patient, doing all they can, trying to understand, but by the time it's over they've forgotten any of the original interest they once had, and the ultimate loss really isn't so great. They've had months, maybe even a year, to reminisce about the past, about what the sick one used to be like, and during that time the past has become some vague memory that might come around once a year with the tulips.

I put my hair in a sloppy ponytail because it hides the roots.

Surely Dan wouldn't break up with me because of a cold.

Unless. Unless these two weeks were less a symptom of an illness than a symptom of what happens to people, to couples, over time. He sees the future and doesn't like it. I have to admit, he's not the only one to think such things, what with this distance

that's been growing between us for days. I used to think Dan and I had that special *something*. We both thought it. We were smugly certain we had the stuff of movies, that we were a modern-day Goldie and Kurt. I even told him that he, my roommate lover, felt more like my husband than my ex-husband had.

Once or twice he asked what went wrong with the rest of them. I told him I honestly didn't know. Maybe, after this, he'll be able to tell me.

I head for the machine, then decide it would be better to get dressed, first. There's something about getting bad news naked.

Dan likes it when I wear my red pants, so I put them on for when he comes home to get his things. As I'm buttoning them I notice the sheets, twisted and rumpled from our sleep. Yesterday morning, I told Dan over coffee that he seemed to touch me less, and that he'd started turning his back to me in his sleep.

"I do? I turn my back to you?" he said.

"Well, I don't know. A little."

"Did I used to not? I used to face you?"

"Well," I said, trying to laugh it off, "I guess if you were to face me lately you'd get a lot of cough spray up your nose."

"Oh, no," he said, and stroked my hair. "I don't mean to."

Later, when we smoked on the front stoop, he told me he didn't want to have to be conscious of every move and worry that each one would be falsely interpreted. Or interpreted, period.

Looking at the sheets, now, I remember that every time I woke up last night, he was either on his back, or was on his side facing me. He would even throw one of his legs over mine, or cross my chest with his arm and curl his fingers around my shoulder. Once, when I woke up to cough, he was on his side in one of those his-leg-over-mine positions, and I had to stay awake for a while just to look at him. The covers were shoved to my side, not on him at all, and the gold light from the street lamps outside fell on him so perfectly.

Last night makes me that much sadder to have to listen to the tape. It was a last-time thing, I know now. A softness to make today easier. An "I still love you, as you could tell by last night, but this just isn't going to work."

Nermal is sitting on the machine when I get to the living room. When I shoo him off with a flick of my hand, he accidentally steps on the "stop/play" button and Dan's voice goes on.

"—but, I had an engine failure and had to land in a field. I'm okay – I promise, I'm fine – but I'm at this house with these very nice people who are willing to let me stay until I can get picked up." He gives me a phone number where I can reach him, and an address where I can pick him up, but I don't hear any of it until I play the message a second time because I'm so excited. At the end, he says, "I love you."

I pick up Nermal and dance him around the living room. "Daddy loves me. He still loves me. Yes, he does!" When Nermal starts squeaking, I drop him on the couch and call the number Dan left.

A woman answers and says, when I ask for Dan, that he's out at the crash site. She gives me directions to her house, telling me to take a left at the big cow on Elkton's only corner. It's about an hour's drive, she says, and adds that she'll tell Dan I'm on my way.

After we hang up, I think about how pleasant she sounded. And how nice it is that Dan has someone so nice to let him stay in her house while he waits for me to get there.

I listen to his message again. This time, he sounds a little far off, and his "I love you" sounds suspiciously like one of those end-of-the-phone-call perfunctory I love you's. But when he talks about the "nice people" letting him stay in their house, his voice is the one I recognize as the drip-sweet pitch of affection. When I listen again, I swear I hear an echo over the "I love you," like his hand is cupped around his mouth so no one hears.

Of course, there's no reason he would do that. It's not like we live in a novel with Fabio glistening on the cover. It's not like he happened to crash-land on some farmstead owned by an old farmer and his beautiful, single, young daughter with long, blond hair and trim thighs and a lilting laugh that delights Dan to his core, the way the romance novels say it happens. It's not like she has heaving breasts.

I grab my keys and the directions and head out to the farm.

It's a beautiful day for a drive. Spring settles early in the south, and trees already blossom white and pink and grasses burst in brilliant green patches. Unfortunately, with new plant life there also seems to be new animal life, and after only a few miles I pass a dead cat, a dead dog, a dead deer, what looks like a possum, and a skunk. I make a note to tell Dan about the roadkill, and can already hear his response.

"Did you come across anything positive?"

He thinks I talk about death a lot, but really, what it is, is that when I talk about death, I'm reaffirming my appreciation for life. The animals—the skunk, the poor cat—had life whacked right out of them before they had a chance to look dead, and seeing them just reminds me to embrace what I have now, to not take it for granted. Talking about positive things, like spotted baby cows I saw sleeping in tree shade, or the pink magnolia blossoms scattered in the grass, reminds me death will wipe out the tree, the cow, Nermal…and that's far more negative, but he doesn't see it.

I pass a lot of farmsteads on the way to get Dan, and I wonder what the Jacobey place looks like. Will it be right on the side of the road? Far off, down a long, gravel drive? The girl on the phone did say the sign marking the road to her property has a big red bow tied around it, so the house itself must be a ways off. Just like in a book. A big green pasture, Dan walking—tall and masculine and fresh from the wreckage of his plane, a sexy scratch marking his cheek—to a solitary house on a rolling hill. He knocks on the door (using a knocker) and it opens to that young blond. Her daddy's out getting feed for the chickens and she's home all alone, and of course he can use her phone.

I don't blame him for being interested, really. I'm sure it's just a passing thing, like it was with that girl in supply where he works. I never saw her, but Dan mentioned her once or twice. Called her the girl with the big eyes. Left out, I sensed, was the word "beautiful." He told me, when I asked, that she had a boyfriend, so at least that was that.

This girl, the farm girl, lives too far away for it to be anything substantial.

She's probably very smart, because Dan doesn't have much tolerance for women who aren't. That he flies will probably impress her. I've known Dan forever, since he first had a thought about flying, so it doesn't get me excited the way it used to. Everyone wants to think of themselves as exciting, though, so this woman will do a lot more for

him than I do. And I'm sure she's much more interesting than I've been, because of the sickness, so he'll find her wide-eyed, gaspingly inquisitive conversation refreshing.

My breathing gets shaky and I can't help picturing Dan and the blond girl, who's probably about twenty, walking together through the field to look at his plane. Her wit and her dazzle—so unlikely in a girl living on a farm's relative seclusion—enamor Dan, as does her healthy flush that comes from all the good milk and fresh meat and vegetables growing out in her back yard.

I find the road sign with the red bow and turn left onto a gravel path. Rocks crunch under my tires and I wish they were quiet so I could sneak up. When I park, I brace myself for the intimate look that will pass between Dan and his newfound love, the sad look she'll give me. I use an old piece of paper from the bag hanging off the gear shift to blow my nose, and the edge slices my nostril, damn it, so I check the mirror, but there's not much blood. My eyes look better, today. Maybe it was good to get out of the house.

I open the door and try not to play back his message in my head, because every time I do it sounds less and less like him. I try not to remember how he's stopped really looking at me, how much shorter his hugs are getting, and that kisses just don't feel the same.

The Jacobey front door is glass, and before I knock I see a tinted version of Dan at the far end of the room. He smiles when he sees me, and says, "There she is." He walks to the door and opens it, invites me in. The first thing I notice is that there's a lot of oak, and many duck paintings, some framed by cut-out hearts, hang on the wall.

She sits on the couch, only she's not twenty. Maybe thirty. And not Dan's type. She's a little heavy—not in a bad way, just not like I pictured; not that it means anything, because sometimes I think I'm too skinny for Dan, and that he might like being with someone whose bones he can't feel—and her hair, dull brown, falls in short waves to her earlobes. A baby gurgles on her lap and the man sitting beside her looks like he could be her father, but she introduces him almost immediately as her father in-law. Her husband took the truck into town to run errands.

"You want to come see the plane?" Dan says.

The woman and the old man smile, then start talking about what to fix for dinner.

Dan and I walk out together. A big dog yaps behind a wire fence and, beyond that, fields alive with crops spread for acres and end in trees. I imagine him walking with the girl. Maybe she brought her baby to look at the plane. Dan's always been so friendly, and how nice of him to show her the wreckage—which I now see off in the distance at the treeline, the Cessna's nose tucked in branches—and there' no way, no way he fell for her. I take a breath and the air smells like hay.

"You must have been worried," he says, looking down at me. "It's okay. I'm not hurt, or anything. You can hug me."

So I do. I hug him so tight I hear him wheezing.

CAROL'S AQUARIUM

I found the fish on the top shelf at a school supply store. There were several, the tops of their boxes sticky with dust. "Create-a-Fish!" the box read in letters orange and bright. The side of the box listed its contents: one fish, one glass bowl, one bag gravel rocks. The instructions: 1. Pour gravel into bowl. 2. Fill bowl with lukewarm water. 3. Insert fish and watch it grow!

At home, I tore open the box and took out the bowl, the rocks, the fish, and set them side by side near the faucet. The bowl was the size of a Magic Eight Ball, and the gravel could have come from any unpaved driveway. The fish itself was light as a coin and gritty-smooth, like slate. I turned it over in my hand and thought of the fish crackers I used to get in my Star Wars lunchbox with a PB&J sandwich. That was how small it was. But it would probably puff up when I wet it, which made me uneasy about giving it so little room to roam, in that Magic Eight Ball bowl. I remembered seeing fish at a bank, recently, as desk decorations. I'd complained to the clerk helping me that the fish needed to be able to swim around, and he'd said that they had plenty of space, for the type of fish. Too much room wasn't good for them.

I turned on the faucet and held the fish in one hand and used the other to test the temperature. Lukewarm, I needed, but no matter how far I turned the hot water handle, the goddamn water stayed cold. Could it really matter so much, if the temperature was a little off? I could just wet the fish thing, a little, and watch it turn into something while I waited. It wouldn't hurt. It would only be for a minute. Fish didn't really come in boxes, fter all. Nothing was likely to happen, and I'd have to take the whole thing back, anyway. I could use the ten dollars. Ten dollars for a goddamn fish that didn't work. I shoved it under the water.

It didn't take long. It swelled like a sponge, not growing much bigger, but just…filling out. And the color changed, from brownish-gray to an opalescent white. Scales popped out of its sides, eyes emerged from the head, and the texture became that of the rubber wads sold in grocery store toy machines, the ones that slap onto windows and walls and then creep down with sticky arms.

The lips, plump like a flounder's, opened and closed like my kid sister's when she was a baby and hungry, and its small black pupils shifted back and forth until they rested on me.

I tested the water. Still cold. Its lips moved more insistently, its eyes pleaded. I flicked some water on the fish and closed my hand around it, hoping to keep it alive. In my rush to grab the bowl I knocked it on its side, and it rolled to the edge of the counter.

I lunged for the bowl and the fish moved—pulsated, shifted—in my palm, and I giggled, a little, because it tickled.

The fish wouldn't wait anymore. I filled the bowl. Dumped in the rocks. But the box said to dump in the rocks, then fill the bowl. Didn't matter. The fish was jumping, getting bigger, trying to get out. It felt dryer, stiffer. I set the bowl down and tested the water again and hoped it wasn't too cold. It felt too cold. But the fish had grown well enough with the water I'd splashed on it. It would be okay. Was there enough water in there? What if there wasn't enough? Didn't matter. I had to get it in the water.

I opened my hand and stared.

I knew then I'd done it all wrong, had been too impatient. I picked up the box and studied all sides. Nothing about what would happen if instructions weren't followed exactly. There had to be something. I looked inside the box – maybe there was a folded page, a step-by-step list with a warning asterisk. But there was nothing. I threw the box into the sink.

The fish was naked. Arms and legs lay against my palm, relaxed, breasts spread and fell to its sides. Dark brown hair fell to its shoulders. It looked just like a Barbie Doll my sister used to use for hair-cutting practice. Only, it moved.

I looked at the bowl, then at the fish. There was no way it would fit. The fish-to-bowl size ratio was wrong, all wrong. I couldn't take it back, now. They would know I hadn't followed the instructions. *Simple*, they would say. *All you had to do was what it*

said on the box, they would tell me before making me leave without my ten dollars. They wouldn't even give me another goddamn fish to try, I knew.

The fish would have to fit in the bowl. I would make it.

I tilted it so its head pointed down and tried to shove it in the bowl.

"I won't fit," it said, its voice bubbling on the surface of the water.

"But this is the bowl you came with. You have to fit." I thought of other ways it might work. Maybe if I folded it knees to head and put it in butt first. It was flexible, bent with no problem, but when I tried again, arms and legs dangled over the sides and its head rested on the rim of the bowl, like it was getting a shampoo at the barber shop.

"You can't keep me in here," it said. "I told you, I won't fit. I need a bigger bowl."

"And I'm telling you, this is the bowl you came with. There has to be a way."

It sighed and raised its hands, then let them fall against the glass.

"I don't know what you expect," I said. "I mean, this is your bowl. I don't have anything else to stick you in."

"And the water is too cold," it said. "My butt is getting numb. Can you take me out? We'll think of something together."

"I don't see how," I said, but took it out, anyway. It didn't seem to need water the way it had before, so I let it sit on the counter. "What if I fill an empty ice-cream bucket with water? Will that work?"

"Is it clear glass?"

"No. It's white. Plastic."

"I won't be able to see out of it, then."

"Well, no. But fish don't have very good memories, so every time you remember you can't see anything, you'll forget."

"But I'll be reminded, don't you see? Every few seconds of my life will be a fresh disappointment. No, it has to be clear glass."

"I have a clear glass coffee mug."

The fish touched its temple with a finger. "Hmm. Is the mug bigger than the bowl?"

"No. Smaller."

"My, my."

I was starting to not like my fish. "Look, if I want to, I can let you swim in the toilet. How would you like that?"

"Fine." It held its hands out. "But speaking of water…"

I hadn't turned it off, yet, and when I tested it, it was lukewarm.

"Is it cold?" it asked.

"No. It's okay." I picked it up and held it under the water. "Okay?"

"Yes. That's enough. Thanks."

I put it back on the counter. It sat with its legs hanging over the edge.

"So, what now?" it asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"You could ask my name."

"I'm sorry?"

"My name," it said.

When I was five, I had a black goldfish named Blackie. I had to come up with something more creative.

"Opal," I said.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your name."

My fish stood weakly and climbed into the sink. "My name is Carol," it said. It tested the water with a foot, first, then submerged its entire body. "Oh, this is great. Standing under water is like taking a breath of fresh, crisp, mountain air, isn't it?"

"I've never been to the mountains."

I plucked the box out of the sink and looked again for a manual, then looked for small print under the directions on the side. No directions, but there was a phone number.

"Stay here."

My fish crossed its ankles. The water was still running. My utility bills were already outrageous. I reached out to turn off the faucet.

The fish puckered its lips. "No, please" it said. "I'll need that."

"Fine. But stay where I can see you." All I needed was to lose the goddamned thing. As it was, I might be able to salvage my ten dollars. The people at the number on the box probably knew something.

It rang ten times before a woman named Lucy picked up and identified herself as a box-fish representative.

"Lucy, hello. I bought one of your fish today, and something happened."

"Didn't work?"

"Yes. Well, not exactly. You see, it's too big for the bowl."

"Oh, that's impossible," she said. "Maybe we gave you too many rocks. Did you take some of the rocks out?"

"No, that's not it. It's just – it's too big. I tried to bend it, but—"

"I'm sorry. You bent it?"

"Well, with the legs and everything, it just got to be too lo—"

She hung up.

I called my friend Rick. He had an aquarium in his living room, and knew all there was to know about fish. He said he'd come over tomorrow and to keep my fish in the sink until then.

"Are you going to be okay in there?" I asked. It was treading water over the drain plug.

"Well, your sink is aluminum, and studies have found a correlation between aluminum and Alzheimer's."

"So don't drink the water."

It raised an eyebrow at me and clucked its tongue.

"You already have a bad memory," I said.

It turned away. "You're right. When it's bad, what's a little worse?"

I think it might have cried, but I was tired, and I'd done all I could do. "Good night," I said.

From my bed, I heard tiny bubbles popping in the sink. It was soothing, like a fountain, and I would have been happy to have it live in there for good. It was a double-sided sink, and I only needed half of it for dishes.

I fell asleep quickly and dreamed of guppies and clown loaches.

I woke up to voices in the living room.

"It would fit right there." That was Rick's voice.

"Oh yes," said my fish. "And I'd have a view of the whole room. You're so brilliant."

It said it in a way that meant I wasn't brilliant. I put on my pants and went out to the living room. I stopped.

There had to be some manner of recourse in this whole fish incident, someone I could sue. If not for big-time compensation, then at least for my goddamned ten dollars. Not only could I not let it live in the sink, now, but it would take more water than I wanted to think about to keep it satisfied. Overnight, it had grown. Four, five feet, maybe. And it was right there on the couch with Rick. Rick sat on the cushion, and the fish sat on the arm of the couch, one foot on the ground, the other on the unclaimed cushion next to Rick.

"Hi, Brian," said Rick. "I was just talking to Carol, here, and I think we've come up with a plan."

"Your name is Brian," the fish said, looking at me. "Hm."

"What? What's wrong with Brian?" Goddamned fish.

"Oh. Well, nothing."

"And your name is Opal." This was getting out of hand.

"Hey, hey. Calm down, man." Rick turned to goddamned Opal. "He's never in a good mood in the morning. Brian, man, there's some coffee in the kitchen." To the fish again: "I knew I'd better make some. Did I call it, or what?"

The fish smiled at him. It might have winked. I took a breath so I couldn't talk and got some coffee. The fish passed by on its way through the kitchen and said something about wetting itself in the bathroom.

"Whatever," I said. I sat with Rick and we waited for the fish.

"It's a beaut," he said. "I don't have any like that."

"No?"

"Never even seen one."

But that had to be good. To have a fish no one has ever seen, right here in my apartment. It might fit in a baby pool. I said as much to Rick.

"Nah, man. It'd be right in the middle of your floor."

The fish came back and sat right back where it was, before. It was soaking wet, dripping all over my couch.

"We were thinking," it said, "about putting an aquarium right there." It pointed at the big wall by the window.

"Like a ten gallon?" I asked. I could handle that. Get a nice stand, teak, maybe, and put some plants in it. Plastic ones, because fish always eat the real ones, and I'd have to go buy more every month, or so.

Rick and the fish both laughed. But the fish, when it laughed, turned its head so its hair would fall on its shoulder. Rick eyed it in a way I wasn't sure I liked. He already had enough goddamned fish.

"Okay," I said, "What, then?"

"Brian, man, a tank for this one would have to take up the whole wall."

I looked at the fish. He was right. It would need the whole wall. Rick could afford the whole wall. Me, I sold credit card insurance. I could afford to knock out a windowsill. Maybe.

"I don't know," I said.

"Oh," the fish pouted. "Brian, sometimes, the money isn't what's important. Quality of life is something you just can't put a price on."

The fish got up, then, and went to the middle of the living room. It did this watery dance, everything moving like waves, graceful as an eel. I'd never seen anything quite so beautiful, and I knew that if I had this fish in my living room I could sit on the couch and watch it for hours. I could run an ad and charge people who wanted to see it, and that would pay for the aquarium, over time. I was sure of it.

It kept dancing, and when I looked over at Rick, I was convinced I was onto something. His face was slack, like he'd just come out of anesthesia, and – not that I looked, but – well, I'll just say I knew I could get some good money out of this. It would cost at first, it would cost a lot. I'd have to take out a loan. But I could do it. My ten dollars would end up being the best investment I'd ever made.

"Okay," I said.

The fish stopped and looked at me. "Really?"

Rick licked his lips and turned to me. "Cool, man."

The fish sat back on the couch and it and Rick started talking about the wall.

"It could start there," the fish said, pointing at the corner where the wall started, "and end there." It was pointing at where the wall ended. What was that, twenty, thirty thousand? I'd never made any home improvements. I had to check with the landlord. Had to think about whether or not I wanted to end my lease and buy.

I would have to.

Rick got up and went over to the wall. "So, it would be the whole wall. You'd have room to swim, and you could even add stuff."

"Oh!" the fish said.

I didn't like that.

But the fish went on. "We could put pretty, shiny stones at the bottom – gemstones, quartz, agate."

"Maybe a unit for you to swim into and out of, like in my aquarium at home," said Rick. Goddamn Rick.

"Let's just stick with the water, okay?" I said. "It'll have room to swim, water to live."

The fish looked at me. "Room to swim? Water to live?" It and Rick exchanged a look. "Brian," it said, "a fish needs more than water to swim in. It needs plants, mirrors, colorful rocks to please the eye and enhance the swimming experience. Simply living is not enough. Don't you understand?"

"Hey, man," Rick said, "if you can't do it, I can probably handle it."

I didn't know much about the needs of fish, but I knew Rick didn't have mirrors in his tank, or colorful rocks and things at the bottom. He had plain brown rocks, and a plain brown big rock thing in the middle. It had holes in it, and his fish would pop their heads in and out, and chase each other through crevasses.

"I need more, Brian," said my fish.

That night I took it for a drive through town, past the pet and fish stores and out onto the main highway. I took it to where I knew it would have all the room it needed, all the color it could stand. I took it out to Coco beach. Threw the goddamned thing in the ocean.

AN AGATE IN COOL RIVER

She was watching from the rock by the river when she heard the engine putt-putt six hundred feet up. *Putt-putt, clank*, she heard, and she stuck her toes in the water, sure he'd get it going, again. River fish, little brown blurs, shot past her feet in narrow schools and sun-rippled water lines wavered on the rock bed.

The engine was silent, now, and she shielded her eyes from the sun and looked up at the sky where the small white single-engine floated slowly downward. There wasn't much around the river but a small field, too short for a landing strip, and then a bunch of trees and the interstate. He'd talked once or twice about landing on the interstate.

Something nibbled at her toe, and she pulled her feet onto the grass.

When she looked up again, he'd somehow gotten himself into a diving spiral. A tight one. It was his first solo, and she somewhat doubted he could handle something like a diving spiral. She watched with her mouth open as he came down and then closed her eyes and spoke to his mind.

I'll visit you in the hospital and bring you chicken and green beans in a bowl.

If you die, I'll make sure I use your money for your funeral. Most of it, anyway. Half, at least.

It really is a beautiful day, and there was so much left of it before this. How come things always end up being about you, somehow?

Everyone will comfort me and tell me how bad they feel, and they'll all be mine, for once.

She opened her eyes to nothing but a flat cloud or two that had floated into frame. Hot summer wind blew through thick trees.

Her stomach flipped, then steadied—bad things like that don't really happen—and she plucked a rock from the edge of the water. Orange with narrow white stripes and foggy clusters in between. An agate. Most certainly an agate, though she'd thought they only grew in lakes. She put it in her pocket and looked out over the tall grass for his plane, almost expecting to see fire, smoke, or a broken wing bent unnaturally over the nose.

Instead, she saw its tail-end hidden in the field and Gerald's head bobbing toward her. She waved. "Hi, there!"

"Hey," he called back. He started to run and she put on her sandals. She would have gone toward him, but he was on the other side of the river. When he reached the right bank, he stood there and looked at her.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you," she said.

"Didn't you see what happened?"

"Of course I did! You almost crashed."

"Yeah." He kicked at the water and a spray of drops fanned over the surface. "You don't look very scared."

"I was excited for you," she said. "I thought you might land on the interstate like you always wanted."

"It was too far. Did you see me spin?"

"Yeah," she said. "I saw that."

"What did you think?"

"I thought it would kill you." Something was in her flip-flop. She took it off and shook it, then put it back on.

"Naw," he said. "I practiced those before. They're easy. I was just having some fun."

"I'm glad," she said. "I'm glad you had fun."

They looked at each other from each side of the river. "What now?" she said.

"Come on over," he said. "It's not so deep."

"You come over. The car is on this side."

"Oh," he said. "I guess you're right."

He stepped in with one foot, then the other. "It's nice," he said. "You should come in, too."

"I don't think so."

He moved toward the middle, the water reaching up to his knee-length shorts. "Why not? Come on." He flicked water toward her and she stood where she was, far enough away. "A year ago, we would have had more fun."

"The fish bite," she said.

He looked down at the water. "What, piranhas?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. But one of them got my toes." The way he stood there with his arms hanging down and the ripples bouncing over his knees, he could have been a little boy. For just a moment, she thought she might cry.

He ran across, splashing, and she stepped away, back toward the path. "Why the hell didn't you say something?" he said.

———

He drove them home, and she sat with an elbow hanging out of the open window.

"Jan," he said.

"Yeah?"

"What would you have done if I died?"

She leaned her head back on the seat and doubled-checked the air conditioning. Broken. "I don't know," she said. "Do you think we could stop for a fountain-pop?" The heat was making her finger swell around the ring, and the stone, having slipped sideways, poked the tender inside of her pinkie. She spun it back to the center.

"When we see a place," he said. "Tell me if you see one." The engine made a funny noise, the noise of neutral, and Gerald played with the clutch and the gearshift until it caught again. "What would you have done?" he said.

She looked at him and at the side of his light brown eye and the way he studied the horizon. "I would have eaten your favorite dinner," she said, "and I would have used half of your money for the funeral, and the other half for whatever I wanted. And I would have had everyone all to myself. Sort of, I mean."

"I know all that," he said, "but would you have missed me at all?"

"I would have missed you," she said. She pulled the rock from her pocket. "But I would have carried you with me everywhere. See?" She held it up for him so he could see it while he drove.

He grabbed her hand and kissed the rock.

"Now," he said.

THE THING IS IN THE FORGETTING

She was one of those girls, but Craig supposed he didn't care. Or he didn't care to care, didn't concern himself with it, really. He could recognize a thing without seeing it, without giving it attention.

He stopped at the red light and watched her put on mascara using that small visor mirror. She didn't open her mouth the way Debra did, and she brushed on the black in rapid flicks, eyebrows raised high. She had freckles under her eyebrows, a strange place for them. They were unruly—freckles and eyebrows both—and the body, bent forward in the passenger seat, was nice enough. Not plump, not rail-thin, but a healthy one-twenty. One-twenty was a good number, a good weight for someone her height. He wasn't picky, but he didn't like extremes.

She was one of those girls, though. One of those girls who knew what power she had. She taunted, tested limits. And she liked to shock, but having same-sex lovers wasn't shocking, these days. Craig thought he was pretty open sexually, too, so her ways were just another thing to have in common. The night she'd told him—"I've had my share of women," she'd said—he'd thrown back a shocker of his own, told her about standing in the square with gunfire all around, him straight up and yelling and watching for muzzle-fire, not ducking like the others behind hummers or low walls. "Better than anything," he'd said. He didn't tell her about what he saw down the road while all that was going on. A little smashed girl would have changed the mood.

"Weren't you the least bit scared?" she'd said, and he hadn't thought much about it before, being scared. Then he supposed he could see why people thought it wasn't the smartest thing to do, opening himself up for bullets like that. "Nah." He'd shrugged. "I knew I wasn't going to get it." He'd been excited, invincible, that day. And at night, the

battle over, he'd slept with the rest of them on sun-warmed car hoods, air still and dry and the day close to coming up. Had there ever been a better time? He couldn't remember one.

"I don't know if you're brave or if you're crazy." She'd slid closer and run her fingers over his leg. Smiling like that.

Craig went left when the light turned green, and she flipped the visor against the car ceiling and dropped her eye makeup in a little bag she carried. She looked over at him and smiled the way she did, winked with those shining eyes of hers and licked her lips. He liked the way she played. If they were walking somewhere, she'd skip ahead, bounce back cute and young-like, so *alive*, and then reach out her hand with fingers spread and tug him along to follow. With those freckles, she was like a child-woman.

Craig parked in front of her apartment building and she checked the lot before getting out. "Hardly anyone's home this time of day," she said, "so I don't think we have to worry. Just—you know—walk in like it's nothing." Her husband and daughter were gone for the evening on a father-daughter camping trip with the Brownies.

They ate dinner at her dining room table—steaks, because the weather was nice and Craig wanted to grill—and then, after, opened a bottle of wine on the living room floor and played Go Fish by candlelight. He watched her bow her cards, slow bends, not creasing, her soft fingers moving shadows, and all he wanted was to be under those hands. It wasn't about sex, but touching. It felt good to be touched by her.

"Have an eight?" he said. He tickled her foot with his under the table and she smiled, looking a lot like her daughter. She was the same age, he guessed, as that other one, so he still thought about her—that other one—now and then. The hands were the same, mostly. Fat fingers, dough-soft and fragile. They'd shot up, grasping for the water bottle pitched from a convoy, though regulations had been set about things like that. Dashing out for free stuff was a good way to get run over. The dirty kid with the small hands and dark hair might be called case-in-point.

His girl's daughter might actually be a little older than that one. Old enough to complicate things.

Further complicating things were Craig's wife and the baby.

"It's been a week, now," the girl said, cards in a fan behind her thumb. "When're you going to tell her?"

"Soon as you tell your husband." Craig winked. "I'll get to it. Now, do you have an eight, or not?"

"Go fish," she said, and she rubbed her lips with the edge of a card. Craig picked up a nine.

Debra was his wife.

He told her about the girl three weeks later while she sugared apples for a pie. Because his class on explosive ordinance devices would be starting soon, and he'd be leaving for the Guard post in Florida, he thought the time was right for telling.

The baby sat in the corner in a padded bouncing chair, a soggy, sucked banana on its tray.

Debra cried on the flour and pushed up the sleeves of her sweater and said, "You'll just have to forget her." She wiped her eyes with her wrist.

Craig didn't understand the crying. Didn't know why she was tossing coated pieces of apple at the sink. She used to be the kind of girl who'd lick the apple, or rub the sugar on her lips and order him to kiss it off. The night he met her she'd been dancing on a bar like a Coyote Ugly girl. After the pregnancy, she'd turned something un-fun, talking about babies and bills and why he stayed up to watch TV when she wanted to go to bed.

Once he'd left the Army, three months after coming back from overseas, he'd spent most of his time at home—with Debra—looking for work. Debra told him plenty of companies, like Target, would love a man with Army experience for management positions, so she didn't know why he was having so much trouble. But he'd told her, already, about the applications he'd put in with the FBI, the CIA, the Secret Service, and the serious thought he was giving to joining the Special Forces. He hadn't been through all that training for Target.

"We have a baby, now," she'd said. She wanted his work to have him home every night for dinner and dishes and an hour and a half on the couch before bedtime.

"It can't put our lives on indefinite hold," Craig said.

"The goddamn baby is a he, not an *it*. And things always change after a baby."

As a compromise, he'd joined the Guard.

She tossed another apple at the sink. *Swish* into the disposal.

He could see she was upset, so he told her she'd be all right. They were still young—thirty-six and thirty-eight—and she would find someone new. She was still beautiful and only had one wrinkle that he could see. That had to be good.

"No," she said. "We'll work it out."

"What do you mean, 'no'? I'm saying it. If I say it's over—"

"I don't even make pies," she said. She dumped all the apple pieces from the bowl and they thudded in the aluminum sink. When she threw the bowl on the floor, it didn't break. Just bounced and spun. They watched until it stopped and she cried more, and harder, and she screamed and wailed. So he told her they would try and he told her that he loved her. Suddenly, the room stilled, softened, and his lungs opened for air.

Debra looked at him with red eyes and sniffed, said, "Oh, Craig. We'll get back there. You'll see." She smiled at him with wet lips and cleaned up the smashed banana and giggled while telling Craig about some funny face the baby had made that morning during a diaper change.

At her giggling, his insides stretched to snapping but stayed trapped inside his ribs. He loved her even less, now, if loving could be less than none, because now he was stuck, and he loved the girl, the freckles, even more. She laughed all the time and looked at him that way and played with the rivets on his jeans. She met him behind the Seven-Eleven in the middle of Thursday nights and gave herself to him beside the wire fence.

Debra took the baby to its crib and said she'd make chicken for dinner.

Craig only called the girl once or twice in the days that followed, and then it was time to pack up his gear and leave for Florida.

He told Debra he would not be home on weekends because it would be good healing time for them both, and he meant it.

He told the girl his move was a stepping-stone to getting a divorce and that he would see her on weekends. He meant that, too. She lived in Montgomery, which wasn't

far.

While by day he challenged explosives, and while by night he made his barracks quarters resemble home—arranged his furniture in much the same way he thought Debra might, picking hollow stalks from sand dunes and dropping them in a giant vase in imitation of pastel motel-room paintings—Debra was calling the girl. Craig's calls from Florida were listed on the cell phone bill, and Debra always took care of the bills. Debra told the girl to make sure she left Craig alone, to stop being available.

The girl told Debra she didn't love Craig. Lord, she didn't even like Craig. Craig had this thing for her, she told Debra, and he wouldn't let go no matter what she said. "I don't know what happened," she said. "I have lots of guys, you know? Usually, they come and go. With Craig, I don't know. It's the craziest thing."

Debra called Craig. "She says you like her more than she likes you. She says she only likes you in a friendly way, and you're one of many. Don't you get it?" Craig heard something slam, like a shoe being kicked at a wall. "Don't you get how little you mean to her? You can come home on weekends, now. It's over. You have a family here. You want someone who loves you, Craig? *I* love you. All you have to do is get over her. This is a passing—this is just some *thing* people go through, and so we just—we just have to get through it. You can't see her anymore, and that's all there is. If you do," Debra said, "if you insist on seeing her, I'll just have to tell your commander."

Craig squeezed the phone. "If you do, I'll take the baby in the middle of the night."

She laughed. "And then what?"

He hung up. Something...he was doing something wrong, somehow.

He had to see her. Had to see the girl. Debra was lying, saying those things to trick him. Of course she loved him. She said so.

He called the girl and her husband answered. "Sorry," Craig said. "Wrong number." He slammed down the phone and looked at his watch, then remembered she said he came home at six-thirty, and it was ten after seven.

Friday had him stripping down to nothing but his underwear in a dry meadow to disarm an explosive ultra-sensitive to vibrations. He called the girl when he got home, adrenaline still buzzing through him. It was four o'clock.

"I'm coming to see you," he said, and she said, "We'll meet at the Super 8. I'm bringing Peggy, though."

"I know."

Peggy was the daughter.

Craig and the girl arrived at the same time, parked together around back by the dumpster and kissed while Peggy dug around in her bag of neon gummi worms. They had about an hour, the girl said, before she would have to go home, so they ate at McDonald's, and while Peggy played in the vat of plastic balls, Craig and the girl touched feet under the table and made plans for someday. She smiled, and he breathed, relaxed, now, that someone, at least, was happy.

It was him. He was happy.

Half the weight was gone, his wife so far away she was a dream, a memory, and the baby too young to count as a real person, yet, with feelings.

Peggy played in the balls, hair brown and straight with feather-thin ends. Her cheeks were red, and delicate white socks bunched around her ankles.

The other one hadn't been wearing socks. She hadn't even been very cute, he remembered thinking at the time.

Peggy pitched ball after ball as hard as she could at the net. *There*, she screamed in her small voice. *And there.*

This...this was now, and now was all there was.

He asked the girl between bites of his cheeseburger why she said the things she said to Debra, why she told her she didn't care about him. "It's not nice," he said. "It hurts my feelings."

"What the hell am I supposed to say?" she said. She tapped her plastic coffee cup with short, straight nails. "She's your wife. I don't want to be in the middle of this. I don't want to be the cause. If you want to leave her, leave her. But if your wife calls me, I'm sorry. I can't—I can't tell her how I feel about you. I have to pretend, for my own preservation, that I don't care. Do you understand?"

He didn't answer, because he didn't understand. He always told the truth as much as he could.

The girl looked at her watch at five-forty and said she had to go. She scooped Peggy out of the balls and they all went together to the lot.

"I love you," she said. Craig helped put Peggy in the car and almost cried. He grabbed the girl and kissed her just under her eyebrows. "I love you so much," he said. "I love you so much, no matter what."

On the Alabama/Florida border, his cell phone rang and the window read "home."

"I just talked to her," Debra said. "You just met her, didn't you? You ate at McDonald's. I know everything. She doesn't love you, Craig. Don't you get it? How can you tell me you want to work things out and then go meet her at McDonald's? With her daughter? You already have a family, Craig. You don't need a new one."

"I love her," he said. And then he said, "I don't want to be with you anymore."

But she didn't stop.

"You only think you love her. Grow up, will you? Life isn't a fantasy. She doesn't give a shit about you, Craig. Not one shit."

She was crying again, so he said, "Just give me the time we talked about. If I can learn to forget her, if I can…Nothing can work until then. Okay? Damn it."

She hung up, then, and Craig felt his skin getting cold and his eyes getting hot. The sun was hot, too, and his air wasn't working, so he opened his windows and the wind was so wet and hot he couldn't breathe, coming at his face so fast, so hard on the interstate, that he stopped the car and sat there in his lane with the green grass blowing outside his window. Trucks and cars sped by on the right, all of them honking, blaring, the horns coming in and out of sound-focus like the wail of a crying stick.

He stepped on the gas, drove again. Maybe he shouldn't have stopped on the road like that.

He'd never been one to think about impulses, ignoring or following.

He turned off at the next exit and thought about Debra and the girl—not the baby, though, barely even a person, yet—and how Debra was constant and the girl was...the girl made him want to scream.

Craig picked up his cell phone to call Debra, but his hand was sweaty and it slipped through his fingers and bounced off his seat and fell to the floor. He reached down for it and groped around the gas pedal until he found the antenna nub. When he came up, a big, sparkling grill slammed him against the steering wheel and he held tight to the phone.

On his way to the emergency room, Craig called her. "I was in an accident," he said. "I'm okay. I mean, something hurts, but I...it was a sideswipe, mostly. Listen. I just wanted to tell you. You were the only one I wanted to call. Will you and Peggy come?"

When he woke up ten hours later, Debra was there with the baby, sitting beside the bed and bouncing her knee up and down.

"Where is she?" he said.

"I'm right here," Debra said.

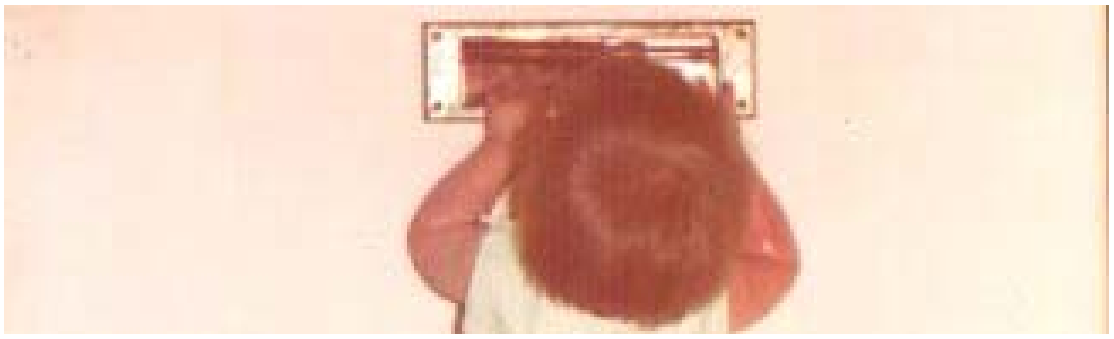
"Who called you?"

"She did."

"Is she coming? Where is she?"

"She's not here. She's not coming. I don't know why you won't see." The baby smiled, or burped, and Debra stroked its hair. "Look how happy he is," she said.

TO MY DAUGHTER



Women of your day will have the luxury of thinking about children. We, women of my generation, don't put too much thought into it. We get married, get houses, get pregnant. A funny thing not to have an opinion about kids. You. I have no opinion of you. Even now, as you pull yourself up from the hallway tile, soft, cool fingers with paper-thin nails gripping the mail slot in the middle of the front door, knees bouncing to balance, I don't know what to think of you. Are you smart for having figured out how to lift the brass flap to see outside, or would other babies have figured it out much earlier? Are you clever for having thought of it at all, or are you devious? You're already trying to find your way, assert your independence. I can only imagine the full life that awaits you, and I try not to.

Neighborhood children are fascinated by you, even if I'm not. They bring you to the mail slot almost daily by opening it from the outside, sticking in their fingers and waggling them at you, calling out, "Leigh! Little Leigh!" I told them your name one day, thinking it would satisfy them well enough, but now they just come back and come back. They like to touch your hands when you raise them to theirs and blow on the thick patch of brown hair you were born with. Your father was born with a lot of hair, too. He called you a little monkey, and a week later, still smiling, he was gone, on a mission to Guam. I waved your hand goodbye for you because you didn't know goodbye, yet. These days, you wave on your own.

The cat can't get enough of you. She hovers nearby when you play on the floor, her heavy belly slow. Sometimes, you crawl to circle arms around her and keep her close, so close to you. I try to tell you that Midgit is pregnant and fragile, but of course you

don't know, though sometimes I wonder—how much *do* you know? You were like one of those kittens not so long ago…unborn, protected by fluid. Could you have already forgotten?

Tired of the mailbox, you crawl to me, your hands disappearing in the shag. You pull yourself up to stand, using the couch for leverage, and slap at the magazine in my lap. It's been some time since I've read, and I won't have you spoiling this time of mine, so I move the magazine close and lean back into the couch. The author writes that she is barren. A strange word for a womb. Barren. Desert-like. Dry and lifeless…but surely that isn't what the uterus looks like. I wonder how she feels as a *barren* woman, what images she conjures at the sound of the word. I wonder if she would want to be more lush, like a prairie or a rainforest, with seeds embedded and ready to sprout from underneath layers of soil. I'm sure she wants babies. People who don't want babies don't refer to themselves as barren. She wants them because she can't have them, but if she were lush, like me, she would probably still be in Oklahoma where she grew up, raising a family and dreaming of another life. Being barren affords her the opportunity to travel. She's my age, twenty-two, and already she's been to Libya, Japan, and forty-nine of fifty states.

You tug at the cuff of my pants, at the cast on my foot, and I wish I were Miss Graham from Oklahoma. Your eyes are large—they're mine—and they look up from under the slivers that will one day become eyebrows. I pick you up, let you sit next to me, because maybe this will keep you still. I read to you about Miss Graham's adventures, and I imagine you at twenty, what you'll do, where you'll be. You and this woman, this woman neither of us knows, already have so much in common. She, with her deserted womb, and you, with your beautiful brown eyes and limitless opportunities.

I wonder why you chose me. I know that, in your brand new mind stuffed full of fresh memories of a time I can't imagine, that connection to your soul-life, you have an answer. And I know that, by the time you're old enough to speak, you'll forget what it is. Instead, your head will be near-bursting with thoughts of soft, cuddly things and choking hazards.

"Why did you choose me?"

My voice cuts into the quiet living room and sounds strange to both of us. Your head bobs in a quick, unsophisticated swivel, and you clutch my leg. For an instant, I catch a glimpse of someone else in you, in your forehead, maybe. It's not Dean, and it's not me. Neither of us makes too many expressions above our eyes. But you - you're asking me a question with that forehead; that much, I know. If only we were telepathic, like animals. Whose face are you making? Whose spirit is in you? Are you my dead grandfather, or my own mother from a past life? Things work that way; we reconnect with old souls. None of us is a stranger to the other. If only I could place you.

"Why? Why me?" I ask again, as I do every day so that the temptation to answer, to fight the physical limitations you'll spend the next two years working to overcome, will encourage your first words to be the ones that tell me why. It will come, first, in some unintelligible sound. But over time you'll add one word to the next until you speak a sentence, and I'll have an answer. I just have to remember. I can't forget to ask you, and ask again, and again. Of course, by the time you answer, it won't matter. It doesn't matter now.

Your hand tugs at the corner of my magazine and your toes curl. I put a finger under your chin and raise your face. Your eyes look tired, so I bring you to your room and put you to bed, then go back to the couch where I can travel with Miss Graham of Oklahoma to Peru, Mexico and Belize while, down the hall, you cry yourself to sleep.

———

It's late, now, but the party across the street won't end for hours. I try to see past the reflection in the window: my face in the foreground in the center of the frame, and in the background, harvest-gold refrigerator, wallpaper with bluebell scatters, and beads that Dean found in Greece hanging in the doorway, their bright purples and blues glinting in the overhead light. They clink musically together when Midgit walks through, her tail catching a bottom tassel and tugging it along with her until it sways back and falls in with the rest. I lean into the window and cup my hands over the glass. Patsy and Jim Lahey's white curtains are closed, but silhouettes glide back and forth behind them. The front door opens—Simon and Garfunkel sing to the neighborhood about a bridge over troubled

water—and two women step outside to smoke on the stairs. Jenny and Marie, women from my art class. They stopped coming by the house as soon as classes ended.

———

The final assignment had been to draw a naked man with charcoal pencil. He stood in the center of our circle, his hair hanging long and loose past his shoulders, two well-toned arms holding a pineapple in front of his penis. His eyes were the easiest; narrow and brown—not chestnut, not almond, just plain brown—with not much behind them. Tougher to do were the models with substance, with secrets. So much goes into a face, so much more than lips, eyes, cheekbones and nose. Stories are told in laugh lines, pasts come through in the slight upturn of a lip, and secrets…secrets lie behind the eyes. He had no secrets, no past to speak of, no mystery. He might as well have been a paper doll.

His eyes scanned the drawing circle and stopped on me. He tried; I won't deny it. And I won't deny that I was tempted. His lips were full, but not round. Two points raised sharply under his nose that led in straight lines to the corners of his mouth. Where his closed lips met, the slightest pucker, the smallest hole, as if someone had recently removed a martini straw and his lips hadn't yet re-shaped. His lids narrowed more when he looked at me, a not-so-subtle question. I held eye contact with him until he looked away. I didn't smile. I didn't blush. I finally let myself breathe when he gave up and looked away. It would have been too easy to slip him my address and leave my back door unlocked. It was not a new practice for models, particularly males, to go home with female students. It may even have been expected. I might have given him my number, might have put it on the back of the drawing I did of him. But I already had plans to see Michael that night.

So we turned our drawings around for inspection at the end of class, and our instructor praised mine as "the most accomplished." I wasn't surprised, nor was I embarrassed, though I was sure to look modestly at my feet. From the first class my shading was most consistent with the light source, my human shapes the most true to form, my foreground and background dimensions most representative of real perception. So, no. I wasn't surprised. And Jenny and Marie once again praised my work with flat smiles.

The three of us had lunch downtown the following day, our last lunch together, and over a chicken and vegetable plate, Jenny winked at Marie.

"You don't have everything, after all," she said to me. She tossed her teased blond hair over her shoulder. "So your husband's the pilot," she said, "and you're the best artist in the class, and the prettiest wife." She shrugged. "But for once, the model didn't want to go home with you."

"That's not true," I said. "I'm not the prettiest." Her husband was the navigator, and Marie's the gunner. I never really paid much attention. Neither did Dean. But Jenny and Marie were two of the many wives who took on their husbands' rank along with their last names.

I ate my salad and remembered the way the model waited for me to stop when we passed him on our way out, and how, when he was approached by Jenny, he gave in to her hand clutched around his arm. But only after a last look at me.

———

On the sidewalk outside the Laheys', Jenny and Marie laugh at something, and Jenny flicks her ash onto the lawn. The light in my window must catch her attention, because she nods in my direction. Marie looks over and they both wave, hands down by their hips. I wave back and make sure to smile. Slowly, they turn away from me, to each other, and drop their half-smoked cigarettes before going inside.

I get up and stand at the easel by the window, favoring the foot with the bunion that won't be operated on until the first one heals, and choose a pencil. I don't draw the curtains.

I draw a vertical line, then a horizontal. Often, I don't know what I'm drawing until it's finished. A straight line once turned into an exercise in light and shadow, spheres, squares, cones and pyramids bunched together in front of a black backdrop. Another day, my lines tackled the smile of the Mona Lisa. (It wasn't difficult; the familiar is easy to recreate, and the Mona smile was one I knew well.) All lines have their destinies, one by one bending and arching, meeting, until they become something they must have known they would be, whether or not I do. But somehow, I must, mustn't I? All my choices, all my lines, have created this woman in the kitchen behind the

window, cat at her feet, pencil in hand, husband asleep in the bedroom after a dinner of boxed macaroni and cheese and a pre-patted lamb patty because it was easy and she hates to cook. But she can learn to like to cook, if she so chooses.

I put the pencil down and pick up the cat.

"Sweet little pregnant Midgit. Did you choose this?" I rub her belly. We sit at the kitchen table and look out the window. She's far along and I feel a kick from one of her babies. What must it be like to have six, seven of them, all kicking at once? I wonder if she knew when it was happening that she could get pregnant, how she feels about motherhood, if she feels anything at all. If, as nature seems to dictate, Midgit's pregnancy is nothing more than thoughtless instinct, having children might be just as eventful as going to the bathroom. But, what do people really know about cats? I don't know that she's not dying inside, pleading for mercy, screaming that she's not prepared for this.

She squirms in my lap and climbs down to lick her stomach. A light goes on down the hall; Dean's using the bathroom. When he finishes, he stops in the hallway on his way to the bedroom.

"Still up?"

I tell him yes, but that I'll be in, in a bit.

"Were you on the phone?"

"No."

"I heard talking," he says.

"Just me and the cat."

He closes the door hard and I know he won't come out again until morning.

———

After lunch with Jenny and Marie, I drove to Michael's. He pulled up behind me outside his apartment and honked. I waved at him from my little green convertible, the one I bought and drove from Duluth to Colorado at nineteen. My drawing still sat rolled up in the backseat, and I considered bringing it upstairs to show him.

"You coming?" He planted his hands on the door and waited.

"Yes, yes," I laughed. "Just a second." I grabbed my Moore's from the glovebox and stroked the steering wheel before getting out and linking my arm with his. We

walked that way up the full three flights of stairs to his place. He was like that. Liked touching and being touched. Unless we were at work, where he was strictly the dentist, and I was strictly the dental assistant. Part time.

We reached his hallway and he pointed at a folded piece of paper stuck to his door.

"Wonder what that is," he said. "I'm all paid up."

"Have any loud parties, lately?" I pinched him and remembered the one the previous Friday. Dean had been gone, and I'd stayed out all night.

He tore the paper free and opened it. He read it and handed it to me.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

"Read it," he said.

"It's none of my business," I said. What was his was his, what was mine was mine. Things were simpler that way.

"Read it," he said. "Wednesday—when you came over—where did you tell Dean you were?"

He unlocked the door and I followed him in, reading the note Dean had taped over the peephole.

It has to end now, Iris.

———

I imagine glasses clinking and bouquets of laughter, hors d'oeuvres and candlelight. New friendships being made behind the curtains across the street, flirtations building from passing glances, bonds among the people I used to talk to growing stronger. Michael is there. He works with Kyle Urgaard, whose wife is friends with Patsy Lahey. I might have divorced Dean and lived with Michael, if I'd had the choice, if it hadn't been too late, if I hadn't found out days after the note that I was more than a month pregnant. And then, after a few months, I might have left Michael and traveled to Bali and then met up with Miss Graham from Oklahoma in Tahiti, where we would sit on the beach and watch the pelicans fly over our heads. A little drunk from margaritas, I would accidentally call them penguins and we would laugh together and plan a trip to the North Pole.

The beads in the reflection look like rain, and I wonder if Tahiti even has pelicans.

_____

Midgit's kittens tumble in the shag, and you're better at crawling than you were just a few weeks ago. You can follow a kitten several feet before it outruns you, but you don't mind because another invariably stumbles into your reach and you grab its tail and squeal and pull it to you. I've had to rescue each kitten from you at least once since they were born. Dean had to take one to vet because you held it so tight, your tiny arms owning it so fiercely, that you hurt its leg.

You don't pay Midgit much attention, anymore. She sits on the ottoman when she has a moment to herself; otherwise, she's feeding and cleaning, dutifully licking heads and behinds until a floating hair or imaginary dust ball claims the attention of whichever member of her brood she's grooming.

We sit together often, Midgit and I, while you and the kittens play. She rests her head in my lap and licks easily at her paws, extending her cleaning to my own hand. Sometimes, when you see this, you crawl over and slap the couch to send her away if the kittens are sleeping. But they're awake, now, and no bigger than my hand, which makes them the perfect size for you. You reach out to grab the smallest one, the one Dean has named Tessie for Infinitesimal, but it escapes you and claws its way up the couch. Midgit sniffs her, jumps down, and retreats into the closet. I think about bringing a pillow in there to sit with her.

"Don't you feel her?" Dean stands in the doorway, on his way out. He unconsciously swipes his hand over the peace patch on the shoulder of his flight suit, still there though his time in Vietnam ended months ago.

"Who?"

I look down and you're pulling at my pants, trying to climb my leg. Dean picks you up and plops you in my lap.

"What do you mean, 'who'?" He fixes his sleeve, which has pushed up and left his wrist bare.

"I knew she was there. I was going to pick her up."

"When?"

"In a minute."

"I have to go," he says, looking at me in that way I've grown so used to.

You wave goodbye to him, and after his car disappears I set you down. I don't ask you, anymore, what brought you to me. I don't know that I care, because here you are. What I think about now is where choice lies. It scares me to think that it belongs to you, to Midgit's kittens, to those in a realm I'm not familiar with. That I didn't take pains to keep you away doesn't comfort me; I did nothing to beckon you. No, there was no choice on my part. Of that I'm certain. Still, I try to believe I really can have choices. I have to.

I give you a kitten and wonder where Dean will fly, today. Monday he spent a few hours in Spokane after his plane had engine trouble. He came home with presents from the B.X. - a plastic snow-globe for you, and a brass and cherry wood jewelry box for me. I would have liked to see Spokane, but there isn't any room for passengers in his B-52.

I saw Spokane once, in a dream. It was winter, but there was no snow. The trees were bare and cars were black and white with bud vases between front and back windows. I sat in the back seat of one of those cars with a valise on my lap. Back then, they were valises, not bags or suitcases. Beside me, the seat was empty, but I couldn't seem to let go of the valise. My hands were clutched around the handle and my cheeks hurt. Outside the window, a plain white house with a crooked porch. The dream flipped, the way they do, and then I was alone on a platform, bouncing while I waited for the train to pull in. It was just about to stop, and an arm—just an arm, genderless, but wearing a watch, I remember—waved to me from an open window. Then, I woke up. There was no sign in my dream, but I knew. I knew it was Spokane because Dean brought home a postcard of the train station that he taped to the refrigerator. So, you see, don't you? You see. My spirit traveled without me.

Midgit sticks her head out of the closet, then slips it back in when one of her kittens walks near. It stops, looks at the open door, then turns around and pounces on the closest sibling. There are six, in all. Too many to keep, and I don't know enough people I trust who would take them. I limp to the closet and bend down to pet Midgit.

We keep the garbage bags under the kitchen sink. I pull one out of the box and bring it to the living room.

The kittens aren't hard to pull together. I trail my finger on the carpet, and they come running quickly enough, trying to catch and tackle my hand. Their small bodies cling to my palm, pink mouths biting and licking, as I set them one by one in the bag, closing it after each one so they don't get out. When I have them all, I wring the opening and secure it with a twist-tie.

Taking them out to the curb is difficult. I use only one of my crutches; I can limp from one room to the next without them, but the walk to the curb is longer. The kittens squirm in the bag, throwing off my balance, and the reflexive step onto my plastered foot makes me cry out. When I get to the sidewalk I set the bag down and go back into the house.

You sit in the middle of the floor, looking for the kitties. I call Midgit. She comes out of the closet and walks over to me, rubs her body along my good ankle. Your head bobs to look at me, and I pick you up and bring you to the window. I don't want to look at the bag; paws push at the plastic and I'm reminded of cartoons you watch, Elmer Fudd and Daffy Duck in a scuffle after Bugs has locked them in a laundry sack.

I am surprised to see Dean's car pull up to the curb in front of the house. His wallet. I saw it on the kitchen counter. He gets out of the car and passes the bag, stops, and walks back to it. He unties the top and peers inside. I move away from the window, bring you to the couch and sit down. When he opens the door, sack in hand, and stares at me, I kiss your forehead.

"What the hell is this?" he says. He sets the bag down gently and begins pulling the kittens out, one by one. The first two are already dead, their fur bloodied, but just a little.

"There were too many," I say. "It was better for them. Midgit wasn't paying attention."

"So you killed them? You stuck them in a plastic bag and killed them?"

He pulls out the fourth, the fifth. The fourth is fine. The fifth looks drowsy. Dean pets it gently on the head, strokes its back and tail.

He tells me he doesn't even know who I am.

"Iris!" I shout, because sometimes that's the only way to make him hear me. "I'm goddamned Iris! Why couldn't you just leave them out there? Why couldn't you just leave them?"

He ignores me. He makes sure the sack is empty, then sets the dead kittens inside. He gets the food out from under the sink and fills their bowls, gives them fresh water, and takes the most sluggish of them and places them close to the food. I play with your fists and you smile, but I'm not in the mood for smiles. Dean stuffs his wallet in his back pocket.

"Are they still going to be alive when I get home?" He stands near the door, staring at me.

I don't answer.

"Iris. Are they going to—"

"Yes! Yes, they'll be alive. They'll be fine, Dean. We'll all be just fine."

He slams the door behind him, and I bring you to the window to watch him leave. You wave goodbye.

When his car is gone, I smooth your hair and kiss your cheek. Your hand reaches up to tug my hair and I don't tell you no, but let you pull it until my nose is brought down to your face. I place one of my palms against yours. So small, you are, and that is a good thing. You won't remember me well enough to miss me.

BURN EVERYTHING BUT THE HEART

Deanna did not agree with Jim's decision to have his ashes shuttled to the moon and scattered in the Maurolycus crater.

"You can't decide where they throw them," she said. "They'll probably not scatter them at all. They'll probably take a big canister of everyone's ashes together and toss them out the window."

"You can't just open a window to the moon," he said. "Besides. I paid a thousand dollars, so they'll do what I say."

"I doubt it. Some people paid five or more. They're the ones who'll get Maurolycus."

"Can I borrow four thousand dollars?"

"No."

Jim ate his mashed potatoes and Deanna speared her corn kernels. This was not her favorite Thanksgiving. The last anything couldn't be the favorite. They were trying, though. This turkey-with-all-the-fixin's dinner was their hoorah, their at-least-we-got-the-chance-at-life-at-all celebration. They were the only ones in grief counseling who thought that way, and that was what had brought them together in the first place. While Jenny had cried, while Kevin had raged, while Adolf had bargained, Deanna and Jim had passed glances across the circle. After one of their sessions just over a year ago, she'd stopped him outside.

"You *are* dying, aren't you?"

"Sure. You?"

"Yep."

"You want to get some coffee, or something?"

"Love to," she had said. "I know this great place on Davenport."

It had been a sunny spring afternoon, so they'd sat at one of the iron tables outside to watch the people walking back and forth with years, at least, to keep walking back and forth. They talked about that, a little.

"We're aliens in masquerade," Deanna had said. "Do you feel it? If they knew, we'd be pariahs."

"Popcorn! Bags overflowing, one dollar!"

Across the street under the theater awning, a man with a popcorn stand and an apron stitched in white to read BUD nodded at potential, then passing, customers, *no popcorn today, thank you*, until, finally, he snatched a boy dripping a half-eaten ice cream cone. Bud scooped and salted and buttered a bag.

"We're dying!" Jim had suddenly screamed. "Cancer! Both of us! You hear me? Dying!" and Bud dropped the bag. Fluffy white corn kernels flutter-bounced on the sidewalk and snuggled into pavement grooves. And as predicted, passers-by ceased to pass by, instead crossing the street to Bud's stand. Popcorn kernels flew in the exchange of more bags than he'd likely sold in a month.

"Doesn't bother me," Jim had said and motioned to their server for another coffee.

"Me, neither," Deanna had agreed. "You know, though, Jim — maybe they crossed the street because you were screaming."

"Indeed."

"Jim."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Jim chewed his cranberry sauce and Deanna said, "How far apart do you think we'll be?"

He shrugged. "Two weeks?"

Deanna poured corn into a mashed potato crater. "That's too long. I say ten minutes. Not that it matters, since you're already in outer space."

"Just my flesh and bone. I'll have my heart burned separately. Save it for you."

"Would you really?"

"Consider it done. I don't know why you won't go with me. Haven't you ever wanted to know about the moon?"

"Sure. But, Jim, you do know that—"

"I'm not an idiot, Deanna."

She was still thinking about his heart. Neither she nor Jim was particularly romantic. She knew the heart pumped blood and that was all it did. Still.

"Why the Maurolycus crater, anyway?"

He looked up and blinked at her. "Why not?"

"It just seems," she said, "that there are other places. Mountains. Bigger craters. Maybe some nice valley."

"I guess I just like the sound of it," he said.

"And it's too late to change anything?"

"No. But I won't."

She thought of her spot in the woods by the water that pooled under the drainage pipe's big mouth. When the sun hit it just right, she could see the little bubbles pop and sparkle.

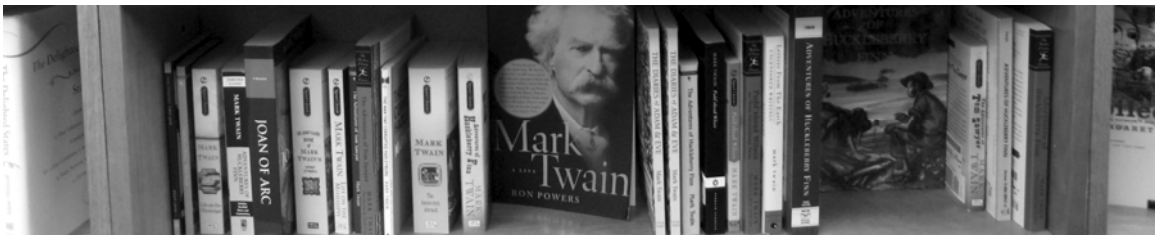
As a kid, she'd sat there for hours.

"I think your crater will suck."

"No worse than your sewage pit."

Jim smiled and ate a piece of turkey and Deanna laughed into her milk glass.

SERIAL BEHAVIOR



You are ridiculously large in my small apartment. It's not meant for two, but you find a way to squeeze in. You like the kitchen best, because it's open, and because the red walls sponge up all the brightness. Some mornings, when you're pretending to your family to be out of town, you use my stove to make me breakfast. I like eggs, but you think I should eat new foods, so you make lamb with oatmeal, which is actually pretty good, but I won't tell you that. I don't want you teaching me things.

You wear your gray shirt today because you think I'm mad, and you know I can't resist it. You'd like to think that, that your short visits make me angry, jealous. And if they did, but I still came to you, as I did, you would think you were irresistible in your damn gray shirt. And though you might be, don't you wonder if maybe it's not you, but the shirt alone? I wonder if it matters to you, but I don't want to know. If it doesn't, that means I don't, either. And I am someone. Someone whose back rests against your soft chest covered in gray, whose head itches when you exhale into my hair, whose hands are closed in yours, whose body was under those hands last night when the air was sticky and the fan cooled our sweat and blew my hair in your mouth and made you laugh. You laughed without laughing at me, at my youth, and those are the moments that make me keep you.

Your socks, white against the blue rug, are clean and new. Hidden by fresh cotton, the veins on your feet, I know, rise purple beneath loose skin and sparse, curly hairs, and your ankles are small and pale. My own toe shows through a worn-away patch in my sock, so I hide it under my other foot. The socks you bought me last week sit in their unopened package in my bottom dresser drawer with the books you thought I should read. And I did read them. But I won't tell you that.

You tell me you can't stay much longer, you tell me for the second time this morning, lamb still on your breath, and I tug at a thread coming loose from a small hole in the knee of your faded jeans. Could I pull that thread and unravel you? It breaks off in my hand and I let it fall.

I pull myself up, away from you, and look out the window, where the narrow street below teems with narrow, sporty cars. On the other side, the bank of the Rhine – grass and a playground, and a shallow arc of shore stuffed with ducks and swans. You come up beside me and look, too. Young women sunbathe topless on terrycloth towels and bamboo mats. But I know it's not their breasts you notice, though I do, because they're there. No, if you notice them at all, it is because they – we, I should say – are young, and you're not interested in the nubile body, but the nubile mind. Old enough for marriage, but as yet unharmed by time. It is our minds you leer at, a different kind of dirty old man.

You put your hand on my back and whisper in my ear that you'd like to walk the river with your trousers rolled. I laugh, because I've read the poem, and touch the top of your head, still full of hair. I give you this, this one admission of having similar knowledge, because my laughter comes before I can think, because it was not you who, at this window on a colder day, introduced me to Eliot.

And you are not the first to say such a thing and then decline to do it because you think it's childish.

When you bring up DeVoto's collection of uncensored Twain, I remember to tell you I haven't read it. I don't tell you that my favorite of Satan's letters is the third, because experience has taught me that, whether you agree or disagree, you will be one step closer to finishing with me.

At the playground across the street, young boys swing high on a swing set, not in unison, but one up, two up, three up, one down, two down, three down. Of course, they must jump from the highest point or they'd not be boys. I wonder if you held the chains tight when you were young, your small fists white, and tried to swing so high you'd circle the pole. Watching them makes me smile, because I still like a good swing now and then, and because one of the boys is you, long ago. I look up at you and you say you have to

go, your eyes on them, and I know that while I see them as they are now, you see them as you are now, the men they will become, with lives and pasts and wives of their own.

You take your hand from my back and walk to the door, telling me you might come over again next week, depending. You stand in my doorway and wait for me to beg you to come as soon as possible. We do this every week, and I refuse to give you what you want. That is, after all, what keeps you coming back.

SEASONAL TOURISTS

They came in from the cold shaking snow from heavy winter jackets, most of them thick, bright, and down-filled. The tourists to the ski town wore their colors like peacock feathers, lures drawing mates to the café at the bottom of the slopes for a cup of coffee, hot chocolate, or a promise to return, together, for breakfast.

The hotel was tucked in a cluster of evergreens at the end of a narrow, well-plowed road, the road itself a hidden turnoff from the main highway and marked only by a wooden sign knocked aslant one dead, hot summer by restless teenage locals.

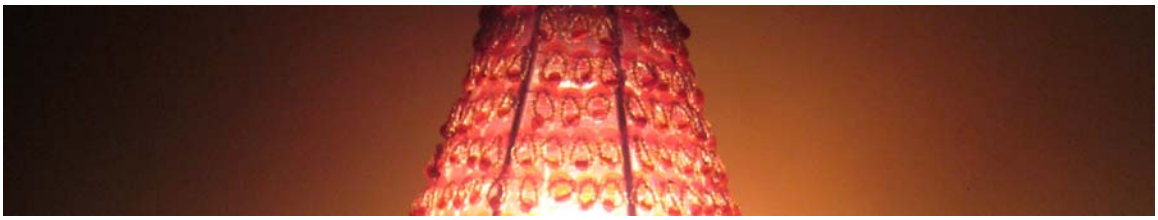
The first person they saw when they came to town was the girl behind the counter. Dying neon bulbs flicked and buzzed over her counter. Her hair hung dark and straight down her back. The men found her attractive and smiled at her and invited her to ski with them.

She handed them their keys and told them checkout was at noon. Now and then, her fingertips would brush theirs.

One or two a day would ask about the yellow ribbon stapled to the counter's front panel and she would tell them it was for her manager's son.

His name was Kyle, and this was the name she would call out at night when her shift was long over and curtains hid wide windows and another bright coat draped over a chair dripped a day's worth of melted snow onto her carpet.

MEXICAN BLANKET



Tim and Nan sweated in rumpled sheets, a striped Mexican blanket nailed aslant to the wall behind the bed and dim-lit by an antique lamp.

Nan had bought the lamp from a young woman holding a sunny Sunday morning garage sale. She'd paid the two hundred dollars from under her umbrella—her pale skin, freckled and thin, burned so easily, most times—and had carried it home in the shade of sidewalk maples. When she'd stepped through the door, Tim had kissed her quick on the mouth and said, "It's a nice lamp. Why don't we use it in the bedroom? It'll look fine with the curtains." She had thought it a wonderful idea and had immediately set it on her nightstand doily and turned it just so.

Their hair still wet from the mist-bottle spray, beads on their skin a combination of tap and perspiration, Nan sighed, "Pippo," and Tim kissed her neck, said, "I know, my lovely." Under the blanket and in low light they were poor and passionate and living in the barrio, though neither really had any idea what a barrio was. The mist they sprayed on one another was heat sweat from the outdoor sun—too far from the ocean for any of the cooling effects of an ocean breeze—and their damp hair was dark, dark brown, thick and wavy, dripping, wild. Shadows widened their lips and darkened their skin and they were Pippo and woman, creatures of love, lust exploded.

SUBURBAN WARFARE

She sat high in the backyard tree and stared over black rooftops, followed the earth-curve sloping into dust flowers and missile fire. Sitting in the tree was the only way she knew to see him. She used to watch the news but learned fast that it was nothing more than a variety show hosted by bright-tied anchors safe behind desk shields. Not real, the news, not anything to them but another sensationalist sound-bite tragedy. Lt. Paul Jackson, 31—*Paul*—would only be one of their breaking news flashes if he died in an interesting way. If they sawed off his head at the Adam's apple. If they stuffed something in his mouth and then set it on fire. But not if he died normally, like the rest of them. From a roadside bomb or a gun shot. That wasn't interesting, anymore.

She sat up there—cell phone in her back pocket in case he called, the neighbor's dog watching her through the fence—because she'd already written a letter. She fingered a leaf cluster, just budding, green shoots blasting from round, red casings that dropped to the grass in a dizzy spiral. She squeezed it in her fingers until juices sprayed her palm, then licked off the juices. Buds only lasted until the leaves spread, and the leaves only held onto their new-green color until their veins ran full with chlorophyll and spring birdsongs died at nightfall and the reds and the yellows of autumn, when they finally came, would last only a week before browning under oil-stained slush. Fleeting, everything, fleeting, like a lace scarf in the wind, so she held onto it, tasted it on her tongue, rubbed the tree-blood over the insides of her cheeks.

The dog stared up at her from its spot in the neighbor's lawn. Once, in the earlier days of Paul's absence, it had run over to the fence and barked and growled at her legs dangling from a spread of branches shaped like an open palm. She'd shooed it, screamed,

"Go away, doggie!" It was a big dog, probably able to jump the fence with a running start, but it never did. It just barked, growled. She'd started carrying treats, two in each pocket, and tossed them down when it—he, she later learned—came. The dog gnawed the crumble-bones sideways, molars grinding round edges, and at dusk when she went indoors and stood behind her window to watch her neighbors—actors in a sun-flushed, cotton-soft all-American movie—play in their yards and have tiki-torch barbecues and smoke on stained porches, she would see the dog waiting at the fence.

She sat up there with the phone in her pocket and thought she might have to rewrite her letter, because it was sad, unlike the rest. The others were cheerful, perky and upbeat, as advised. A list of the many things she did on any given day, as advised. An outpouring of only happy thoughts and worry-free sentiments, as advised.

Yes, she would have to rewrite her letter.

She rested her head on the tree trunk.

She would do it later.

Down below, the dog pawed a treat at the base of the fence, not looking up at her, and sun glinted off a line of saliva dripping from pink lip flesh. Her phone rang and the dog looked up, growled. It was a popular song, though old, and one she'd programmed to play with every call. "Eleanor Rigby," Paul's favorite. She shifted in the tree, holding tight to an overhead branch, and pulled the phone from her pocket. She flipped it open with one hand and stared over the rooftops, the chimneys, where he was doing something. She imagined it was something dangerous, whatever it was.

"Hello?"

Nothing but static.

"Hello? Hello? Paul? Is that you?"

Static static static.

"Paul! I can't hear you! Are you okay?"

"…with a Ms…uh…iams, please?"

"Hello?"

"Hello. Yes, I'm calling on behalf of Primer Advantage to speak with Ms. Williams, please."

She closed the phone so hard and fast and tight that it shot out of her hand and bounced off a branch and cleared the fence and landed on the dog.

It barked and swiveled and sniffed the phone.

She clutched strong, narrow branches and used the footholds she'd grown used to—the climb was quick and steady—saying, "Nice doggie," and, "Don't eat the phone, doggie." When she reached the ground the phone rang again the dog jumped back some feet and barked, barked at the phone.

"Nice doggie," she said, climbing the wire fence, and the dog growled. "My phone," she said. "Mine!" The ringing went on, three, four times, and she was swinging one leg over the bar when the dog charged the fence and bit at the wire, getting hold of the loose cuff of her jeans. She screamed—a sound she didn't recognize, from somewhere inside—and threw herself on the dog.

Its jaws were quick, the teeth sharp. The pain was good, and she was feeling strong.

It wasn't that she didn't like dogs.

That night—or rather, very, very early the next morning, the cell phone left in some room or other—she would write slowly, bandaged, "I have blood on my hands. Do you? I know what it's like, now. Fear and fighting. To hear that last breath. A half-breath, more like, and a little anticlimactic, if you ask me."

THE DEPARTURE

Sweat bled through Elaine's stockings and cooled her thighs under the layered wedding dress, and the heads in the seats in front of them bounced up and down with every roll over a bump in the road. One or two twisted to look at them, smiled with some assumed knowledge or understanding, then turned back to stare at the back of the bus driver's head or to watch the passing street signs. Delancy. Forrester. Madison. Wishbone.

They'd let each others' hands go slowly, as if each hoped the other wouldn't notice, a few streets back. She couldn't remember if it was on Pike or Lafeyette, but she knew with absolute certainty that the church was thirteen blocks behind them, now.

Hickam.

Fourteen.

Benjamin tugged the "stop" string after twenty blocks and looked at her. Past his head and through the window a dull blue motel sign advertised rooms at fifteen dollars.

"Just for now," he said. "Why are you looking at me like that? It's just a place to rest. … And to think. We should think, some, don't you agree? A lot's happened, and stopping here and resting, maybe getting some sleep, will clear us up." He held his hand out to her. When she took it, she found that it was as dry as hers was damp.

Benjamin searched through his pockets while the front desk clerk waited.

"We have numbers for delivery, if you're hungry," the clerk said.

"No, thank you. We don't want to eat. We just want a room."

Elaine picked up a handful of dress to study the bottom seam. It had caught on the door to the lobby and she'd yanked it until it tore free, leaving a patch of white satin tucked in a crack of splintered wood.

"And there's a refrigerator by the bed, in case you're thirsty," the clerk said, taking a wad of bills from Benjamin.

"No, no. That won't be necessary. We don't need anything to drink, or anything to eat. We just want a place to rest. Isn't that right?" He glanced at Elaine. "Just a place to rest."

"Whatever you say." The clerk evened the edges of the ones and the fives and then slid them under the plastic spring-loaded arms in the cash drawer. He hooked his finger in each change bowl, counting out forty-two cents. Between the dime and the nickel, he smiled at Elaine.

Elaine smiled back, then studied her hands when Benjamin turned to look at her.

"What—say, what are those delivery numbers, again?" he said. "We might get hungry, I suppose. Do you feel hungry, Elaine? Because I'm hungry. I could eat. Are you—are you hungry, Elaine?"

She shook her head.

"Do you feel all right?" he asked her.

"Of course I do. Don't I look all right?"

"Well, sure."

"Don't worry about me, Benjamin. Let's just get the key."

The clerk handed them the key and told them the room number and pointed them down the red-and-blue zagged carpet.

Elaine's dress swish-swished against her legs and Benjamin's pants zip-zipped between his thighs and there was a whistle in Benjamin's nose.

"Benjamin," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you might blow your nose?"

"You want me to blow my nose?"

"Yes. I hear a whistle in your nose and I think you should blow it."

"Well, if you think I should blow it." He stopped and she stopped a few steps later. "Now, or when we get to the room?"

"Do you have a tissue in your pocket?"

He checked his loose pants pockets and keys and change jingled, and then he checked the one over his heart. "No. I don't have a tissue."

"Then, when we get to the room." Elaine spun around and swung her dark hair and her big dress and continued down the hallway to their room, room number twenty-three.

Benjamin caught up with the key ready and held it just short of the keyhole. "I don't like odd numbers at all," he said. "Not one bit. There's something about them, don't you think? Something untrustworthy. No, this is wrong. I think—yes, I think I'm going to—"

"Benjamin, it's just a silly number!"

"No," he said. "No, a twenty-three is odd, and odd numbers have rough edges, if you think about it. Even numbers are smooth and round and they work, don't you see, together. Two and two. Two and four, and four is two twos. Two and six, and six is—"

"Benjamin! They're even because they're all twos. Two, four, six, eight, ten. You know that."

"I know, but—"

"No, now—look. Put your finger here." She pointed at the door and his finger reached up to join hers. She took it and rubbed it along the numbers, along the edges of the three. "You see? It's smooth. No rough edges. Not like a four or a one."

He grasped her hand and laughed, then slapped his haunches. "You're right. Elaine, you're the most brilliant, beautiful, clever—"

"Oh, Benjamin. That's sweet, but can't we just go inside? I think I'd like to lie down."

"Are you sleepy? Are you going to sleep?"

"Well, that's why we're here, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. To sleep. And to think things over, I—and to talk, you know, but we don't have to. No, you're right. A nap. I know I need one, after all that—"

"Benjamin, please. The door?"

He slid the key in and opened the door. "Well. What do you think of that?" He held out his arm and swept her in, then closed the door. He tugged the 'Do Not Disturb' sign from the inside knob and opened the door and hung it on the outside knob, then closed the door again.

"What was that?" she said.

"What was—what was what?"

"What did you just do?"

"Well, you said you wanted to sleep—oh, and I do, too—and I thought you wouldn't want to be disturbed, so I hung the sign out there."

"Well, take it back in."

"Why?"

"Because. What if—what if someone calls?"

"Well," he said and sat on the bed and gestured to the phone, "it'll ring in here. They just patch it right through, you know."

"But, what if there's a problem with the phone and it doesn't ring, for some reason?"

"Well, Elaine, no one even knows we're here."

"Oh. Well, you're right about that." She folded her arms over her chest. "But we should tell someone sometime, don't you think?"

"I do. I do think we should, but now you take a nap, and I'll…I'll just, I'll sit right here and keep watch."

"Over what?"

"Over you. You—you'll be sleeping, there on the bed, and I'll be here. Watching."

"I don't think I want you to watch me sleep, Benjamin."

"Don't you?"

"No."

"You don't think it's romantic that I want to watch you sleep?"

"I don't. Not at all. In fact, I think it's sort of strange, if you ask me."

"Well, if you think it's strange."

"I do. I think it's sort of strange."

"Well, if you think it's strange, I won't watch."

"Good."

"I'll—" He looked around the room from where he sat in the chair until he found the remote control, and then he stood up and walked across the room and picked it up. "I'll just watch some television."

"Thank you, Benjamin."

She got under the blankets, dress and all, and pulled them to her neck.

"Benjamin?"

"Yeah?"

"I can still hear the whistle in your nose."

Benjamin went to the bathroom and blew his nose, and then sat in his chair and turned on the television. He kept the volume low so he could hear her breathing.

The next morning, she wanted to call her mother.

"No. No, no, no, Elaine. That's—that's just a bad idea."

"Why?"

Benjamin opened and closed the refrigerator. "Do you know there's nothing in there?"

"No?"

"I thought they were supposed to have juice in them."

"Not all of them, Benjamin. Some are just for putting your own things in to keep cold." Careful not to lift her dress too high, she yanked her stockings to smooth the wrinkles that had formed at her ankles.

"What do I have that I'm going to keep cold? Who brings food with them to a hotel?"

"Maybe some juice or an apple."

"Anyway, you can't call your mother."

Elaine pushed up the long sleeves of her dress. A strand of brown hair with a loose curl at the end fell past her neck and onto the white lace bodice and he so wanted to feel that hair between his fingers.

"Why not, Benjamin?"

"You just — because. You know how she is, Elaine. She'll tell you all kinds of things, things that aren't true, and she'll talk you into going home and going through with it all over again."

"I'm a grown woman, Benjamin."

"I know. I know you are." Benjamin reached out to turn a knob on one of the lights. The bulb lit. He turned it again and the bulb went dark.

"I'm a grown woman, and if I want to call my mother, I can call my mother."

"But, don't you see, Elaine?" He opened the refrigerator again, closed it again. "It's really just—how can they put an empty refrigerator in a hotel room? It's really very bad for business. If they want us back here, I say, they'd better put in some of those small bottles of vodka and gin. The little ones, you know, that they give you on the airplanes for three dollars. I never bought them, myself, but a friend did."

"What friend?"

"Brian, this kid—well, not a kid, really—from school, he flew to France last spring to study the birds in the conservatory and said he bought little bottles of vodka for three dollars."

Elaine stood and Benjamin stepped between her and the nightstand, where the phone sat atop a phone book.

"Anyway, Benjamin, let me to the phone. I'm going to call my mother."

"Don't do it, Elaine. Do it—do it next week. Hm? Give it a week and we'll call her together."

"Not you. You won't be talking to her."

"Don't be silly, Elaine. If we're going to be together for the rest of our lives—"

"The rest of our lives?"

"Well — yes. That's what this is about, isn't it? That's why you came with me. We're to be together for the rest of our lives, and I'm sorry, Elaine, but I just don't see how I can avoid talking to your mother—"

"You will not speak to my mother. If you do, I'll stop talking to you now and forever."

Benjamin put his hands in his pockets. "Do you—really? You will? You'll stop talking to me?"

"Now and forever."

"Well, I don't want that." He sat again, near the pillows, and handed her the phone from the nightstand. She took it from him and dragged the cord to the bathroom and closed the door behind her. When she came out, she was not smiling or crying and she did not appear angry at all. She pulled up her dress and sat cross-legged on the bed.

"Well?" Benjamin said.

"She wasn't home."

"It seems silly, to me," he said, "that I should never talk to her. You can't carry it around with you forever, you know. I already forgot."

"Benjamin, stop it."

He went to the window and opened the curtain and looked outside with his hands in his pockets. "It's a really beautiful day," he said. "We should go out and do something."

"In this?" she said. She picked up the outer layer of her dress and let go. It floated down.

"Well, we'll stop by your house and get you some clothes. That's what we'll do."

"Benjamin."

"You'll need clothes, Elaine, and if you have a better idea about how to get them, besides going to your house, I mean, well then."

"I'll go alone."

"What'll I do?"

"You'll wait here."

"And do what?"

She sighed. "I don't know, Benjamin. Maybe you can go to the gas station across the street and buy something to put in the refrigerator."

"That wasn't very nice."

"Oh, Benjamin."

"That wasn't very nice at all."

"I really do need something else to wear."

The room was bright from the sun. Some of the light seemed to reflect off her dress.

"I know," he said. "Why don't you go home and get something. I'll come with you and wait on the corner."

"Benjamin." She laughed. "You don't have to wait on the corner. I'll be fine."

"I know I don't have to wait on the corner, but I'd like to. I—well, I certainly don't want to sit alone in a dark hotel room for hours while you're running around in a wedding dress just waiting for someone to marry you." He scratched his nose.

"This hotel room isn't dark at all, Benjamin. What are you talking about?"

"It is dark. It's dark and dirty and the walls have these—well, smudges on them, of some kind or other."

"Where?"

"Well, they're…" He moved away from the window and walked around the room looking at the walls. "They were right here," he said, not pointing.

"Where, Benjamin?"

"You can't see them, not right now. The light isn't any good for it. But I saw them last night, all over the place. Smudges of I don't know what, and I've heard stories, Elaine. My friend who went to France told me some stories."

"What stories?"

"Oh, they were bad ones. Very bad. Now isn't the time, and they're really — they're not good stories at all, Elaine, but I can't stay here, is what I'm trying to say. Not one more minute."

"Benjamin, I'm going alone and that's that."

"Elaine, I really want—"

"That's that, I said!"

"Why don't you call your mother again?" he said. "Don't you want to know if she's home before you go all the way out there?"

"But, Benjamin, it's my house, too. Why should she have to be there? I can let myself in."

"What if she's changed the locks? Should I go with you in case she's changed the locks?"

"Between yesterday and today?"

"Oh, you don't know locksmiths, Elaine. Why, they work faster than anybody. Faster than the police, I'll bet. They probably came out last night right after and changed all the locks."

She shook her head. "She wouldn't do that."

"Oh," he said and laughed. "Oh, well."

"Why are you laughing?"

"I, well, I saw their faces, and, let me just say, they weren't too happy with you." Benjamin inspected the curtains, both the cheap fabric on the room-side, and the plastic drape on the window-side. "Dust mites," he said.

"So what if they weren't happy with me? Parents are often unhappy with things their children do."

"I don't know about you, Elaine, but if I had a daughter that did what you did, I would change the locks." He wiped his hands on his pants, then looked at them.

"Would you, Benjamin? You would change the locks?"

"I would."

"I don't think I know you at all." She sat down in the chair by the table and the sunlight fell across her mouth.

"Of course you know me. What do you mean, you don't know me?"

"Well, here you are, and here I am, and we're both here because of you—"

He stood behind her and almost put his hands on her shoulders, almost touched her hair. "No, no. Not because of me."

"—and now you say you would change the locks if someone else did the very same thing. Why, you don't understand at all, do you?"

"Understand?"

"You think what I did was wrong."

"Wrong? No! It was the only—the only right thing to do."

"Well, then, why would you change the locks?"

"I wouldn't," he said. "But if I were your mother, I would."

"Benjamin. Please don't mention my mother."

"I'm just saying, they spent a lot of money. How much do you think your parents put into all that?" He moved around her to stand where she could see him. "Father of the

bride, they say, and that was no small church. Everyone sure looked good, though, didn't they? Your parents sure looked good. I'd never seen that blouse before, and—it was rather nice, don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?"

"People are always buying new clothes for weddings and things like that, and if you think about how much they probably spent on the church and the reception you never went to and the blouse, why, that's got to be over fifteen thousand dollars."

"If you talk about my mother one more time, Benjamin."

"I didn't. I'm not. What did I say about your mother?"

She looked out the window and he watched her lips.

"Anyway," she said, "I don't think they changed the locks, but I just remembered I don't have my key."

"Where is it?"

"I don't have it."

"I didn't ask if you have it, Elaine. I know you don't have it. You just said you don't have it. What I asked was, where is it?"

"Well, it's—it's not here." Elaine fiddled with a nub of knotted lace on the outer layer of her dress.

"I know it's not here. If it were here, you would have it. But since you don't, it isn't, is it? Where is it? Is it with him?"

"Don't be silly. Why would it be with him?"

"It is with him, isn't it? He has the key to your house. Where did you leave it? On his nightstand? By the bed? Is that where?"

"Benjamin!"

"He took your key, probably wrapped in—in one of your bras, or—and put it in his pocket. He's like that, you know. You can't trust him."

"He's actually very nice."

"He's probably there right now with your parents and everyone, and they're all probably eating our cake."

She looked up at him. "Whose cake?"

"Your cake. Your cake from the wedding, I mean, and that's just not polite, for him to be sitting there with all of them and eating your cake."

"Benjamin, do you really think he's there?"

"Why, probably. He probably is right now."

"No. No, he couldn't be." She played with her dress again, fingers picking rhythmically at something real or imagined.

"I'll bet he—" Benjamin saw it. Her mouth changed, and if not for the bright sunlight falling on her lips, he'd not have noticed. But there it was, the smallest smile. "H-he, I mean, if he's there at all it's probably to go through all the boxes and take out what he wants and leave you with things like blenders and tea sets."

"He isn't, but if he did do that, would it be so bad?"

"We could use the blender, I suppose."

"I like blended drinks now and then, and I've never had tea, but mother always said it was refined."

"Your mother, yes, she was refined, all right."

"Do you really think he's there?"

"Who? Didn't you hear what I said?"

"I'll just go home, and if no one is there to let me in, I'll go over to Mr. Penningdale's house."

"Now, who's mister Penningdale?"

"He's a very nice man who lives across the street and who babysat me every Thursday while my parents had dinner at The Barton. They gave him a key, and I don't remember them ever taking it back." She stood and smoothed her dress and held her arms straight at her sides. "I'm going, now."

"I'm going with you."

"Benjamin."

"If no one is home at Mister Penningston's—"

"Penningdale's."

"If no one is home there, you'll wish I were there. I'm telling you, Elaine. You'll wish I'd come." He walked around the room, looking for things. "We'll have to make sure we don't leave anything here."

"Benjamin, we didn't come with anything."

"Are you sure?"

"And anyway, I don't see why you should go with me. I mean, I don't want to waste your time. Why would I wish you'd come when all I'm doing is running in to get some clothes?"

"But what if you can't get in? You would need me there." He lifted the blanket and checked underneath, then opened the nightstand drawer and closed it again. "I found the church, didn't I? Of all the churches in the whole city, I found the one you were in, and I found you. If I could do that, don't you think I could find a way into your house? Don't you?"

"It's really very well protected."

"I, uh, well," he said, going toward the door, "I insist, Elaine, that—"

"What do you insist?" She placed her back against the door and folded an arm behind her, fingers wrapped around the doorknob.

"I insist that I don't want to stay here alone in this dark room," he said.

"It's not dark, and I won't be long."

"If he's there, I mean, they might find a way—"

"Oh, Benjamin, I really have to go. I just have to get out of this dress. I'll come right back."

"You swear?"

"I'll be back before it gets dark and you can see the smudges on the wall."

"I won't change rooms," he said. "I didn't like twenty-three, but you made me see it wasn't bad, after all."

"I'm leaving now, Benjamin."

She turned the doorknob and he reached for her free wrist. "Elaine, will you—"

"Will I what?"

"Will you kiss me before you go?"

She touched his cheek. "Benjamin."

"Just—just one kiss, and I'll wait here on the bed until you come back."

"I'll be right back, Benjamin, okay? All right?"

She opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. The ice machine down the hall chugged and she swish-swished toward it.

“When you come back,” he said, “I’ll have juice and an apple in the — here in the little refrigerator, okay?”

“Yes, Benjamin,” she said, and she turned the corner into the lobby where he couldn’t see her, anymore.

He put his hands in his pockets and went to the window and looked outside, then turned off the television and made the bed.

VISITING HOUR

The first thing I notice is she's wearing those goddamn suspenders. She looks like a hotdog bun.

"Hey," she says. And then she comes toward me, fast and bouncy the way she does—like we're meeting in some park or coffee shop—and touches my arm. "How are you?"

I don't know what she wants for an answer, and I don't know how to answer, anyway, so I shrug. "Okay, I guess." I ask her if she wants to sit down, or if she wants to stand in the middle of the room the whole time she's here. Kelvin's watching us from the table by the vending machine and he's looking at her like I don't know what. Like he wants her to sit with him. His wife smacks him across the face and then kisses his hand.

My friends used to ask if they had a chance with her, and I'd tell them to back the fuck off, she's my sister. When they found out she was my step-sister, they asked why I wasn't fucking her, myself.

"Let's sit here," she says, and she pulls out a chair. The linoleum is old and cracked and the chair scrapes on it so loud people turn to look at us. I sit down, stretched out as much as I can, and she sits with her elbows on the table and her face in her hands.

I say, "So," because I don't know why she came. It's just a freak chance I'm so close to where she lives and it's been years since I saw her. "What'd you come for?"

"To see you in your natural habitat," she says. And then she laughs. "Just kidding. I thought maybe you'd want a visitor."

Kelvin nods at me from over there and I look away. "I guess. I don't get too many."

"What about your mom?"

"What? Naw."

She tucks her hair behind her ears and looks around. There are seven tables in all, half of them being used. I only know Kelvin. The rest I don't talk to and they don't talk to me. "You scared, in here?"

"No way. This is fascinating. I've never been to a prison before." She leans across the table. "Is it like it is in the movies?" Her eyes are all big. She wants me to say yes.

"Naw, man."

"Oh."

"What, you want that?"

"I just wondered. There's this show."

"Naw, it ain't like TV."

She rubs her hands like they're cold and the sun comes through the high window and lights her hair.

I ask her what she's been up to, because I don't know what the hell else I'm supposed to say.

"School," she says. "I'm almost done. One month." She moves her fists like they hold pom-poms. "I never thought I would go to college." She kicks me under the table, then, and she says, "I guess you won't be going, huh?" And then she laughs.

"I guess not." Hal, one of the guards, puts some change in the machine and gets a bag of chips. "Hey, you got any change?"

"Sorry." She slides her chair out to stand up, and Kelvin jerks air under the table while he checks out her ass. She pulls the insides of her pockets out straight. A piece of white fuzz falls on the floor. She says, "I had an apple in the car that I was going to give you, but I started eating it on the way, and now it's just sitting half-eaten on the passenger seat. Probably brown, now." She sits back down.

I tell her it's okay, that even if she could bring the apple in I don't want it. I want a double chocolate cake and a box of mac and cheese.

"Sorry," she says. She smiles at me. "Why don't you ever smile?"

"You think I should smile?"

"You're like one of those guys in a video. It's like smiling will get you shot."

"Whatever." And something comes off her, some smell comes from her hair when she plays with it like that, fresh air or snow. Something.

"It probably wouldn't be as 'cool' if you admitted it."

I tell her she's nuts.

She shrugs and makes her fingers into a grid. "How much longer do you have?"

"I don't know. Years."

"Good." She makes the grid loose, then tightens it again, then makes it loose again and makes her middle finger stick out the longest, but in a way that I can't say for sure if she means it. She says, "It's funny, don't you think, that I get to sit here, and whenever I want, I get to walk out? I don't know. I find it kind of funny."

"You can find it however you want to find it."

I have a picture of her that I keep for when I want to get out. It's not like I love her, not that way, but she was my sister and she's sweet, under all her hatred for me. It's not too many times you meet someone with real sweetness.

"Thanks for coming," I say.

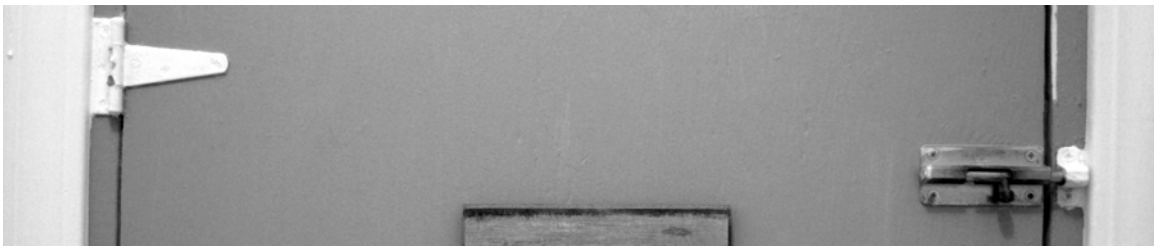
"Don't thank me."

Mom always got mad, permanent mad, at everything. The stealing. Drugs, guns. Not Lonni. Not the time I stole the vacation money she kept in that box. Not the time I slipped my hand under her blanket when we were kids. Not the time I stole from her again. Forgave me every time, and she was the only one. Until I ran over that fireman's wife. That was her final straw, she said, and when they put me in here for it she said I was dead to her, as dead as the lady is to her four kids.

This right here, I see now, is Lonni visiting a grave.

"What are you laughing at?" she says, and when I shake my head, she says, "Well, it's nice to see you smiling."

FOR RENT



He would be coming in ten minutes, the way he did every other Wednesday. Willa sat on the couch with the dusty sheers between her nose and the window and watched for him. When his car pulled up, she would run to her room, or to the closet in her room, or to the little storage nook inside the closet inside her room.

But, she would find her the way she always did. There were only so many places to go.

"Ready, hon?" Her mother stood behind her with a backpack stuffed with things. A book. A shirt. Two pairs of underwear and some socks.

"M-hm."

"I'll leave this by the door, okay? Don't forget it on your way out."

Her mother didn't like to meet him at the door. He left his envelopes in the mailbox on the porch before walking Willa down the stairs. It was always a light blue envelope, and he kept track on the outside with a light-leaded pencil.

She heard his car before she saw it. The exhaust was worn, torn, old. It used to chug, but now it chugged and rattled and sounded like it might fall off. Clangity clangity clang! Willa inched away from the curtain and watched him park against the curb, his whitewall tires cleaned bright, the chrome on his grill old and rust-spotted, but glimmering. The back passenger door was black and didn't match the rest of the car (gray), but he'd told her the Wednesday before last that he planned to paint it soon. When he got the money.

Willa told him one way he could save money, but he just laughed and patted her behind, his fingers warm through the thin cotton she would wear until he told her to take

that off, too.

"Willa!" Her mother was somewhere. Backed into the kitchen, probably, eating a diet-sized bag of cookies. One hundred calorie packs were strewn all over. They were cheap, her mother said, and they kept you going. "Willa, you make sure you answer the door when he rings, you hear me?"

"Yeah, Mom."

He opened the door and got out of the car and ran his thumbs over the waist of his khakis. He wore a hat today, the hat Willa had once told him she liked. Sometimes he would let her watch her cartoons. On those days, she had almost full freedom and could go through his closets and drawers, put on funny clothes. That hat.

He crossed the street and came up the walkway and must have seen Willa through the sheers because he waved with the hand holding the envelope. She wondered where he got them, if he had an endless supply, why he didn't use regular old white ones.

Willa was on the stairs when the doorbell rang, tucked away in the back of the storage unit by the time her mother called her name.

NOVEL EXCERPTS

HOMEFRONT

Available in online bookstores, Kindle, and Scribd.com.

"*One of the most powerful and brilliant books I have read in a long time. Make this the next book you read." –Pop Culture Zoo*

FEBRUARY 28, FRIDAY

Outside, cool air blows sharp and hard and the snow is sun-bright under flat clouds.

People brush past, arm in arm, sniffing, blowing, consoling.

I squint, but it doesn't help. My eyes ache. Shapeless white-gray clouds go on and on and the sun and the snow and the clouds together are all too white and I don't remember where we left the car. Jake and I had leaned against the trunk after dropping his duffel in a pile, and we'd talked about *something*, surely, standing out in the lot. Maybe fast food, maybe the weather, while waiting for the call to go inside, for his mother to catch up from where we'd lost her at a red light. I remember running my finger over the raised letters on his breast pocket and reading the name.

This must be what it's like when someone dies. They're here, and then they're not.

"Hon, why didn't you wait for me?"

"I'm sorry, Olivia. I didn't see you." Her hand grips my arm. I tug free and her long nails zip on nylon.

"I called your name."

"I'm sorry," I say, "I didn't hear you," and when a salt-stained minivan pulls out of its spot I see our car, overdue for a wash, a radio station sticker in the corner of the rear window.

"Where's your ribbon, hon?" she says, squinting at our bumper. "I thought you'd have one by now."

We—Jake and I—have one bumper sticker: MARRIAGE = LOVE + LOVE. The message was crossed out by a vandal, the streak extending to the bumper, the ink a permanent, ugly smear on white paint. I tell her, "They were out." Too many—Olivia included—slap on the yellow ribbons in perfect alignment on trunks and bumpers, the more the better. Her SUV boasts six, three on either side of the license plate. She fits right in, in this military town, where a bumper without ribbon magnets is a rarity. Jake and I call the people magnet-junkies and even found, online, a bumper sticker reading, I SUPPORT OUR TROOPS MORE THAN **YOU** DO.

We didn't buy it.

His mother nudges me, pushing me to walk with her across the lot. "There's your car," she says. "I parked just a few spots away." She links her arm in mine and says, "I can come over."

"Oh, no. That's—I'm not going directly home. I have to…" and then I mumble something. I have nothing. Nowhere to go, nothing to do, until Monday.

"What was that, hon?"

"I have to pick up cat food."

"That won't take but a minute. Let me go with you."

We reach our car—mine and Jake's—and she stands in front of me, keys dangling from her fist. Dried tears stripe her cheeks.

"I have so many other things to do." I wipe my own cheek even though there is nothing there and tell her, "You have something…" and point until she scrubs at her skin.

"Gone?" she says.

"Gone."

She pulls me to her and clutches me tight—so tight my nose is stuffed into the fake fur lining of her hood and the perfume collected there makes me sneeze—and then

releases me. "Well. Call me, hon." I watch her go, wait for her to close the heavy door of her SUV and disappear behind tinted glass. She honks when she passes.

Cold wind cuts through my sweater.

I zip my coat.

My head hurts. All that brightness.

I check my coat pocket for the keys, hoping Jake has them. Maybe he held on to them and they're in his—

—but I find them in my jeans.

Denise—I'd looked for her in the hangar after Jake and William and the rest of them were marched away—now pulls out onto the street and rolls down her window. I see her light a cigarette.

———

I drop my keys on the floor and stand in the middle of the living room. We left the tree lights on. It wouldn't matter if the tree were fake, but it's real, and I don't remember the last time we watered it.

The last time I watered it. Jake didn't water the tree because he wanted it gone. "Even New Year's was almost two months ago," he said, but it was doing well, staying green. "Not yet," I said.

Chancey rubs against my ankle. I didn't feed him this morning, I remember. Breakfast was rushed. Jake had wanted eggs and pancakes and bacon and grapes, anything he wasn't likely to have for a while, and we'd forgotten about the cat.

He leads me to his bowl in the kitchen. Jake's coffee cup sits near the window on his side of the table, his cream and sugar spoon ready on the edge of the sink for the second cup there wasn't time to drink. I pull the cat food from the cupboard and pour some into the bowl on the floor.

Chancey's crunching sounds loud.

I leave the bag on the counter and go to the bedroom. Jake's towel from his shower half-covers a torn condom wrapper on the unmade bed, sheets and comforter flung to the

center. I pull up the blankets so Chancey doesn't drag litter where I sleep and throw the towel in the closet.

Jake's blue flannel pants lie on the floor, knees bent, running, his dirty socks on top. I pick them up and fold them, then drop them back on the floor and, sweating in my coat, kick and drag the legs and waist, slide them around on the floor until they look the way he left them.

I sit on the bed and pull out the letter he handed me before walking away.

Don't let it ruin us, M. You know I love you. You know it. Take care of yourself and know that even if you don't write me, I'll be writing you. -J

I read it, then read it again.

Some time later, still wearing my coat, I fall asleep.

FEBRUARY 29, SATURDAY — MARCH 19, WEDNESDAY

The news is on, the anchors' dramatic and rolling inflection reduced to gibberish while I wait for something to happen.

The news is always on, at home and in stores and in bars and everywhere, while everyone—guessing and second-guessing— waits for something, for anything, to happen.

Talks go on and deadlines leapfrog, and I expect Jake to be home before the end of March. I expect he'll call any time, now. "Aren't you glad we didn't do it?" he'll joke. "Now we're stuck."

Shellie tells me I don't have to come back to work until I'm ready, and that my cab is out for a new fuel pump, anyway. She says she and her dog, Puddin', are thinking of me.

———

I wash one plate and one glass and either watch television or stare out the window at the snow and then the rain and sometimes the sun. Rarely the sun. I vacuum the throw rugs and wash the gray ring around the bathtub and drag the sponge behind counter appliances. Microwave. Coffeepot. A pile of dried and burned crumbs have collected under the toaster, enough to make a mound the size of a small anthill. I sprinkle them over Chancey's hard cat food, and he sniffs them, then eats them.

———

A helicopter *whomp, whomp, whomps* over the apartment and my chest thuds. I go to the window to watch the Chinook's dark, flat underside pass over the trees. "Apaches have to fly in the back forty clear on the other side of post," Jake said when I asked why I never see his helicopter—only Chinooks and Blackhawks—pass over the apartment. "I'd fly over, if I could. Drop a message in a bottle, or something. A hamburger, maybe. No one's done that before."

———

Denise and I sit—breathing, waiting—on the phone while we watch the first bow of white light streak across our screens and land somewhere in the center of the city. Beautiful, if there's no real thinking about it.

"That's it," she says. Something goes *clink* on her end, reminding me to refill my glass. "We just watched the beginning from our living rooms. Hey—what do you think they were doing in their living rooms?"

I stay up long after we get off the phone, until the bottle's empty, and check the line every now and then for a dial tone.

———

March 19

Jake,

Howe area yhou righkt now;?

Don't type trunk. Drunk/

Howareyouhowareyouhowareyou

Alive,righat? Alive, I hope. I'ma sure you war.

Are!

What the hellk.

Lksdoihoagfnlkaglkd

THE YEAR OF DAN PALACE

In progress…

Jenny had left a note on the counter next to the sink that read, "I want to go with you. I don't care where you're going." She'd left her number beneath her name. Dan ran the water and drank some from his hands, rubbed some on his face, and then looked for the cat. He found it asleep in the driver's seat, curled and upside down, feet everywhere. Two bowls on the kitchen floor were empty. He filled one with water, one with food, but the cat stayed asleep at the sound.

Dan opened the curtains over the couch and looked out at the gray parking lot and the gray sky, the yellow light shining out of the hotel. It would have to look like this at the end, gray and cold, the yellow lights the first to go because that was where life was, that was where people had no fear, and those with fear, with awareness, would be left just long enough to see it happen, spared nothing but the mercy of surprise. The cat would know no better, wouldn't feel a thing. If it did, it would be curious, maybe, alarmed, but Dan would be conscious of the end

the end

like a passenger watching the trees getting closer instead of more distant after a failed takeoff. To be Andy, to be Jenny, to be the person drunk or self-drugged in the aisle seat, asleep until the end, the last memory that of some half-sleep dream of paper sharks or popcorn flames.

It was cold by the window. Dan got his blanket from the bed and went back to the couch and stuffed it around his stomach and legs and dialed April's number. She answered after one ring.

"It's me," he said.

"And?"

"Did the kid get paid for my dinner, too?"

She hung up, and so did Dan.

He checked the thermostat. The temperature read high, but he was cold. He started the engine and turned up the setting and saw that he was running on a quarter tank of gas. He would fill it in the morning.

He called Jenny. She squealed when he said who he was and told him she could be packed in half an hour, that she would bring more food from her mother's cabinet and borrow her father's GPS and mail it home once they got to where they were going. When she paused, Dan told her he was sorry, but that he was only calling to thank her for her company, and to tell her again that he was sorry, but she couldn't go along.

"Maybe in five years," he said. "When it won't be kidnapping."

She told him she would be the walking dead by then, her soul trapped in the factory, in the valleys, or in individual pine needles scattered on a shadowy sidewalk.

He told her that was where they would all be.

———

He called April again. She was home sick, she said.

On his way to her house, he found a gas station he could easily pull the RV into and out of and spent more than he expected to spend on gas.

———

Dan sat on the floor in her living room. It was red. Drapes, walls, ceiling, Oriental rug, throw pillows—everything. She had let him in by calling "It's open!" from her bedroom, and then she'd told him to pour himself a cup of tea and wait for her. Her kitchen walls were decorated with kitchen utensils, small plates, measuring spoons, a soup ladle, a potted plant. Dan had tugged at one of the spoons on the wall and it had come loose in his hand. He'd rinsed it off and used it for his tea.

"April," he said.

"Two minutes."

He bounced the spoon *pat pat* on the rug. He closed his eyes and breathed her air.

"*Dan." Her hair fell in waves and smelled like poppies and mint.*

"April. Come here." He didn't have to open his eyes to know her face was there. He kissed her. "April, I just—I miss you."

"Dan."

"April. Come here."

"Open your eyes, Dan. Sit up."

He opened his eyes. She squatted in front of him in a pair of blue jeans, her hair in a tight ponytail, her nose red and shining.

She took the spoon from him and carried it to her kitchen, pulled a tube of cement glue from a drawer, and stuck it to the wall where Dan had found it. She stepped back to look at it, then moved inside where he couldn't see her.

He heard pouring.

"April," he said. "When we were together, our walls were white. Weren't they all white?"

She came to the doorway. "I guess they were alwight."

"Don't laugh." He grabbed two pillows and held them over his ears and closed his eyes again. "Please don't laugh."

After a minute, she said, "Okay, Dan. Come on. Put down the pillows."

She sat cross-legged on the floor and drank her tea with a tissue crumpled in one hand. He moved a foot toward her, tried to put it in her lap, but she slid away.

"No." She flung her tea at him. It landed, hot, on his stomach.

"Jesus fucking Christ, April!" He pulled his shirt away from his stomach and fanned his skin. "I mean, Jesus!"

"Well?"

"I love you. Don't you get it?"

April coughed and sipped her tea.

Dan filled their wine glasses from the second bottle until it emptied. The sky was dark and cold air snaked through April's windows. Her red walls at night turned deep

burgundy. One lamp in the corner with a red shade lit the room and made it look warmer than it was, and drinking made him feel warmer than he was. April had brought out two sweatshirts—one for each of them. Both had once been Dan's. Her hands were pulled inside the cuffs of the long sleeves and she pushed them up only when she needed her fingers to blow her nose or pour more wine. When Dan recommended turning up the heat, April said she didn't have a lot of money and that it was warm enough inside her sweatshirt.

"If you're cold, put your shoes back on, go home, and turn up your own heat."

Dan did put on his shoes, but sat back down and leaned into his chair and crossed his legs. "I like your apartment."

"I don't care."

"I could live here."

"You're one of the least perceptive people I've ever known." April stuck her finger in her wine glass and stirred, then sucked the wine from her fingernail. She looked at Dan, and then away. "You're getting a hard-on over a woman with a sinus cold licking her finger."

"You're not just any woman."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen J. Tsetsi is a former reporter, a former English professor, a former screenwriting instructor, and a former cab driver. Currently, she is the *American Fiction* editor and an award-winning fiction writer whose work won the Storyglossia Fiction Prize and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

She lives near Nashville with her husband.