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WHO CYCLES INTO OUR VALLEY

STORIES

by

BENJAMIN SOLOMON

Under the direction of Sheri Joseph

ABSTRACT

The twelve stories in this collection chart a course between the United States and India. Some are set wholly in one country, while others form a bridge between the two. Uniting them is a shared attention to memory, isolation, and loss. In their own idiosyncratic ways, each of the characters in these small fictions is struggling for human connection in a hostile and lonely world.

INDEX WORDS: Fiction, India, Isolation, Loss, Short stories

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BENJAMIN SOLOMON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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2012

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BENJAMIN SOLOMON

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1

Who Cycles Into Our Valley

The countryside in this part of Spain is one of undulating hills, deep amber with stubbled and unruly grass. There's a single asphalt road, weathered to pale gray, that wanders here as if lost or uncertain, dropping into narrow valleys crowded with adolescent winter corn and climbing to vistas of scattered oak trees, and from a distance these trees look like heads of bulbous broccoli, though up close they grow gnarly and formidable, and their tangled branches enclose a darkness uncanny in the full light of afternoon. Visitors here are few, mostly itinerant storks who pass through in pairs, stopping briefly at brooks to drink, then moving along to towns where they will roost atop steeples to guard the citizens of this Catholic country against malevolent winds. And though the nights this time of year often dip below freezing, the days if sunny are warm. Today the sky is a glassy blue, whitening at the horizon so it looks like wispy clouds cover the road ahead, and yet these clouds seem to dissolve as the father and son pedal their tandem bicycle along the meandering road, leaving the sky infallibly blank above them. The faces of the cyclists at this moment are splotchy and red. Their garish cycling clothes are ringed with sweat. The chain on their tandem squeaks as they strain to push themselves over the gentle crest of another hilltop, where, for just a moment as they stop pedaling and begin to coast, they lift their heads and take in the countryside around them.

The father is a retired American teacher, recently divorced, newly expatriated to the country whose language he has taught for thirty years, and looking at the hills he notes with pleasure how the oak trees gradually thicken in the valley before them, then become an unbroken cover of scrub, and finally thin out again at the top of the hill exposing a round meadow. On one

distant hilltop little brown clusters shuffle across the clearing and the father knows that these are pigs. Earlier they passed a slaughterhouse and its cloud of stench clung to them for what felt like miles as they struggled to pedal away from it. Revolting, thinks the father, and yet the ham in this region is so good.

The father writes about the ham and the countryside, the sunsets and the even the smell of the slaughterhouses in the letters he sends to friends, and always he worries about sounding too picturesque, lest he expose his loneliness, for who but the very alone, he thinks, makes the landscape the center of his correspondence? And still sometimes he can't help it, because the sunsets *are* incredible here, the sandstone cathedral does burn a brilliant ochre-brown in the early morning light, the shadows really are so stark and black they look like voids, and so at the end of his messages he adds a balancing detail of the mundane, the annoyance of uninterrupted jack-hammering on the street below his apartment by day, or the sounds of shouting and breaking beer bottles at the downstairs bar by night.

The son, who is visiting his father for week before flying to the States, is an English teacher in India. He chose India because it was the farthest place from home that he could imagine, although having been there now for two years and settled into a life with a woman, he understands that actually he is closer to home in India than he was ever in the States, and that in fact home becomes inevitable when you arrive in a place lonely and decide to stay there. He tries now to construct his girlfriend's face in his memory but it refuses to assemble, and he can only think that she was unhealthily skinny when he left, and that she was angry at his leaving, and her anger made her look wasted and ill. Tonight he knows he will examine again the digital pictures of her body on his laptop, the image of her breast that continues to transfix him, and that in the week of absence has become her stand-in, a reduction that makes him sad when he realizes that

while her face eludes him, the precise contours of her left nipple are mapped indelibly in his mind's eye.

As the road begins a gentle descent and our cyclists relax for the coast down into a long ravine, each now finds himself paused in his private thoughts, and for the first time since they left this morning, both feel disposed to conversation. So momentarily connected are father and son that both instinctively know the other is just about to speak, and yet neither produces an utterance, patiently awaiting the words of the other, and then like strangers on a sidewalk attempting to pass one another but veering in the same direction, both the father and son find themselves a little jarred by the unexpected silence, and each thereafter feels suddenly bereft of what he was planning to say, though just now it had been on the tip of his tongue. And like that the moment passes, the road inclines, and they begin to pedal hard against the steepness.

Had he spoken, the son would have shared a memory about something that happened years ago when he was a child, on his first visit to Spain with his father while they were driving across the countryside. They had stopped somewhere for gas, and when the father went inside to pay, an old man came out to wash the windshield, and after they drove away the father said, *Oh I forgot to clean the windshield*, and when the son told him about the old man the father said that was impossible because there wasn't any old man at the gas station, just an old woman who said her husband had recently died, and then the father had said, *Look how dirty the windshield is*, and it was dirty, and the son, when he was older, would swear that he had seen a ghost that day, and that the ghost had tried to give him a message, but he would stop telling that story after his father once laughed and asked *What was the message?* and then in a spooky voice said, *Kee-eep yo-or winnnndows cleeeeeen!*

The father too, it so happens, has been thinking of that same trip long ago, of the hostel they stayed at in Madrid where the son got nosebleeds on the pillowcases both nights, and how worried and attentive the proprietress was, bringing cold washcloths and suggesting herbal remedies the father didn't trust. The hostel doubled as a hospice for the very old, and at dinner the father and son would listen to the sound of an ancient woman at the table next to them breathing as if repeatedly answering in the affirmative—*mm-hmm!, mm-hmm!*—and later, in the room, the father joked about asking the woman if she had a booger hanging from her nose. *Mm-hmm!* said the son. Did she like to drink pee? *Mm-hmm!* And did she like to eat poop? *Mm-hmm!* and the son would squeal with laughter at every new question, and the questions went on for days. His son at that age had hair so blond it was nearly white, and once in the marketplace the father heard a woman's shrill whisper to her friend—*albino!*—as they passed, and somehow the word made him look at his son in an entirely new way, and for a second the boy was a stranger to him.

Before his son was born the father had never held a baby. He hadn't especially liked children, and yet he'd imagined that once he became a father this would change, and that having a child of his own would cause him to love other children, but this did not happen, and instead he realized that loving his son could no more make him love all children than loving his wife could make him love all women, and that really it wasn't an issue of love at all, but of being comfortable in the presence of others. When his son was a child he was comfortable around children, but only children his son's age or younger, never older children, who seemed to him like corrupted and half-formed mini-adults, and he felt suspicious of them.

It was on that same trip, the son remembers, that his father bought him the yellow balloon, which then popped in a bar filled with old men, and everyone stopped talking and

stared, and then an old man walked over and seemed to shout at the boy, grabbing his shoulder, and the son started to cry while the father tried to explain to the old man that his son didn't speak Spanish, and then to his son that the old man wasn't angry at all, but trying to comfort him, saying *It's ok, we'll get you another balloon* in a voice so harsh and worn and guttural with age that it could only seem ferocious to a child.

Pedaling now, pressing the muscles of his legs into the bicycle and feeling the giddiness of exertion, the son is struck by the vividness of this memory, and how he can see every single moment clearly in his own head, even the old man's immensely wrinkled face, even the faded brown vinyl of the bar-seats, but then suddenly he realizes that actually this isn't his own memory at all, but a reconstruction of his father's telling of the story years later at a family reunion, surrounded by laughing aunts and cousins at a Chinese buffet in Utah, where the father is from, and in recalling it now the son has filled the memory with images gathered just recently on this trip, which accounts for how completely vivid is the smoky low-ceilinged bar, and how distinct the petrified old men, and now the son is troubled by the thought that a memory you think is your own might not be, and how may other memories has he believed were his but were in fact just re-creations of other people's stories?

But of course, the father thinks, he didn't necessarily remain comfortable with children his son's age or younger, because as his son grew older very young children started to make him uneasy again—they were so removed from his experience—and he decides that there was probably a five year bubble of comfort with children on either side of his own son's age, and that now of course that bubble is entirely gone so that once again the father is uncomfortable around children, and now that he is retired and divorced and alone he wonders if he will ever hold a baby again, and if he will, whose baby would it be? His son's? The father knows that he would

rather hold anybody else's baby, even a complete stranger's baby, before he held the baby of his son, because it would be too painful, entirely too complex to hold his own son's baby, not withstanding the uncomfortable moniker of "grandfather," notwithstanding the surging love the father knows would wash over him in such a moment, holding his son's baby when once he had held his own son as a baby and wept because he was so afraid his son would suffer in life. He was twenty-two years old when his son was born, still in college, and nights he worked as an orderly in the burn ward at the hospital, and one night he had to wheel a little burned boy his son's age down the hall. The boy's face was covered in bandages, his arms, his legs, all burned under circumstances the father would never know, and yet as he wheeled the little burned body down the hallway and stared at the perfectly unmarred fingertips protruding from the bandages, the father imagined scenario after scenario of his own son getting burned, and with each one he felt it heavier and more intense, the utter pain of loving a child, and how that pain would only grow and multiply were he to have more children as he and his wife had planned, and suddenly he was surrounded by burned children, all of them his own, little boys and girls bandaged and festering and crying in pain, and at that moment he knew he couldn't bear to have any more children, and that doing so would be like striking matches beneath a cradle and hoping everything would be okay.

And besides memories that might not be your own, the son thinks, you also have to be afraid of things that happened but simply can't be remembered, and, he thinks, you have to be afraid of India too, not the country itself but your own life there, none of which he can picture now, and none of which comes to him as he stares at his father's broad back and hunched shoulders and steadily pedaling calves. He tells himself that he has an apartment there, a girlfriend, a motorcycle, a bed to sleep on, a dog his girlfriend picked up off the street, and yet all

he sees are the fragments of those things and even the fragments are suspect. He sees the dark form of his girlfriend's body sleeping next to him, slight and nearly two dimensional in the half light, but immediately the image is supplanted by one of the photographs he has taken of her while she sleeps, then another and another. He's taken hundreds of photos of her sleeping and she doesn't know, she falls asleep on his couch in the evenings and he takes photos of her body parts, and then he sits across the room and examines the photos enlarged on his laptop, and he doesn't know why he needs to do this, except that he wants to see her in a way that he can't name. They have been living together for a year, and in the last month he has become increasingly afraid that she wants to get pregnant, that she may in fact be pregnant now, and this terrifies him, because he knows he doesn't love her anymore, or not, he thinks, in the way he thought he loved her at first, with a love that made him want to kiss her feet and cry. He still loves her, he thinks, but with a love that wouldn't stop him from leaving her and thinking back on her with fondness and lust, not with the ache that makes you need someone, and nor with the force that causes you to stay with a person even when you are terrified and restless, and now he is pretty sure she only pretended to swallow the morning-after pill they agreed she would take three weeks ago, because she walked away from him to do it, into the bathroom and closed the door, and didn't he hear the toilet flush? And didn't she come out of the bathroom with her empty palm outstretched saying, *See, I swallowed it*, smiling just so?

Now the father is humming, and he reaches into the back pocket of his jersey and extracts an apple, bites into it, then replaces it, still humming as he chews, breathing so loudly through his nose that the son can hear it over the rushing of the wind. The cyclists have reached the end of the mesa, and the road has begun to descend into a shallow valley.

The father's wife left him by not coming to Spain, though their plan had been to move here together, him first to handle the arrangements, and her tying up the loose ends at home, but then she called to say she couldn't move to Spain that Christmas as planned, and that she would come, but only for a visit, and then she would return to the States. Then in Madrid she told him that she was actually pretty sure she could never move to Spain, that Spain was his place, not hers, and that her place was in Utah where they had both been born, and where she hadn't lived for thirty years, and when he demanded to know how it was that she knew Spain wasn't her place too, she told him that she knew it wasn't her place precisely because it was *his*, and that was when the father understood that she was leaving him—except that she had arranged it so that, physically at least, he had been the one to leave her.

Years ago, he remembers, she had purchased their son a book called *Practical Candle Burning Rituals,* and along with the book a small altar, a special cloth, and packages of small slender candles in different colors. Somehow their son at age eleven had become a mystic and he wanted to perform rituals that involved chanting and lighting candles, and for the rituals to be successful the son insisted they had to be done in private, in his bedroom with the door closed, and he wanted to lock the door but the father wouldn't allow it. The son said he needed to let the candles burn out on their own or the rituals wouldn't have an effect, and this meant that he wanted to let them burn at night, after everyone was sleep, with the door to his room closed and when the father forbid his son to burn candles at night the mother said they needed to trust their son to be responsible, to which the father responded that he trusted his son just fine, thank you very much, but he didn't trust fire, and the mother said they would put a smoke detector in the son's room, and the father, feeling himself begin to panic, gave up and said fine, whatever, do

whatever you want, and walked outside into the back yard and wept for the little burned boy in the hospital years ago, and for all the burned children he would never have.

When the mother told the son that she was divorcing his father, the son asked her "What took you so long?" not because he had seen it coming, but because he had wanted it to seem that way, when in fact it had shocked him that his mother would leave his father, foregoing a chance to live in Spain and instead returning to Utah where all her strange Mormon relatives lived, and he wondered if she would become a Mormon again too, and when she asked him how he had known this was coming he lied and said he could tell she had been unhappy and needed something his father couldn't give her, though in fact these were just some phrases about divorce that he had picked up somewhere, and it struck him as he said them that they were absolutely universal, that everyone was unhappy and needed something someone else couldn't give them, and realizing this, he felt sad and wise and older than his years.

He had felt the exact same way when the dog his girlfriend rescued from the street had died—*dear God yes, that dog was dead*! Earlier he had thought about the dog and completely forgotten it was dead, as if it were waiting for him now in the apartment with his girlfriend, not buried in a field by the river and covered in salt. The dog had become sick so quickly one night they were certain it would die, and then a miracle happened in the early hours and by late morning it was fine, but then the next day it died unexpectedly while he was at work, and his girlfriend called him from the vet's office crying, saying that the vet said the dog had eaten poison, and its toxicity levels were so high it would have killed a human. Listen, said the vet when the son came to the clinic, It was a street dog, it may have had rabies too, and the only way to know for sure is to take a sample from its brain, but I cannot perform this operation here, you have to go to this place, and he gave them a card that said *Friends of Animals.* They drove in the

son's motorcycle to the address with the dog in a plastic bag in a backpack on his girlfriend's back, and when they got to *Friends of Animals*, he told the woman there that the dog might have rabies. The woman asked what they wanted her to do about it, and his girlfriend said, Take her brain, but the woman refused. You have to go to the government hospital, she said, we have no operation theater here. But please, his girlfriend said, crying, oh please take her brain, but the woman refused, and when they left they decided not to go to the government hospital but to bury the dog instead. They bought a shovel and they drove to the flood plain of a nearby river and walked across the flat deserted land until they were far from everything and all alone and the son began to dig a hole, but the Indian shovel was different and hard for him to use. Then some farmers saw them and came to stare and when they saw the son was bad at shoveling one of them took the shovel and dug the hole for him, finishing in seven easy strokes and heaving the sandy dirt into a neat pile. Then his girlfriend poured a bag of salt over the dog and when he asked her why she told him it was to make the dog's body last and not go away, and he was horrified by the thought of the dog's body preserved at the bottom of the hole forever. This is a bad shovel, said the farmer. You can have it, said the son, I don't have a use for it now. The farmer looked at the shovel critically and said he might be able to use it, and then he scooped the dirt down over the dog and handed the son the shovel and they all walked back to the son's motorcycle together. Take the shovel, said the son, but the farmer wouldn't take it, and for a month the shovel sat in the corner of his apartment, reminding him that when his girlfriend had called to say that the dog was dead, his very first feeling, before sadness, had been relief because now there was one less thing that tied him to her.

As the road inclines and quickly becomes a steep ascent, the father and the son strain to pedal uphill, pushing towards a massive sun that sits on the hilltop like a boulder poised to

tumble. *Magnificent*, thinks the father, and invigorated he picks up the pace, while behind him, the son watches his father's silhouette become encased in a full-body halo, a pedaling angel pulling them into the light, and then he too puts his whole body into the climbing, giving himself over to the bicycle and the road and the hill.

This is so easy, thinks the father as they climb towards the sun, so much easier this physical effort than the other kind, the work of life, loving people, getting left by people, trying to reach people who are far away. We should live like this, he thinks, somehow this should be the normal way of life. It's so easy, thinks the son, to love someone at first, then every day it gets harder and harder until something breaks, the dog dies, the body turns ugly and thin and you're terrified of the distance between what she wants and what you want, even when you don't even know what you want.

And then at the top of the hill beside a massive oak they stop, dismount, and drink water.

I think we're lost, says the father.

Should we turn around? says the son.

Maybe. Or we could just keep going this way, see what we come to.

Yeah, says the son. I'll take the front seat.

Swinging his leg over the bar and grabbing the front handlebars, the son experiences a brief moment of vertigo, because unlike the tandem's rear handlebars which are fixed in place, the front handlebars swivel, and the change makes him feel unsteady, like stepping onto a tightrope. The view of the road is different too, and when he sits it's as if he has to hold himself from tumbling forward, so oddly inclined is the angle of the seat and so low are the shaky handlebars. Okay? says the father as they start forward wobbling, but the son doesn't answer, he is rigid with concentration, realizing that all along the father's job was harder than his own, and

they begin coasting down into a long low valley, and gaining speed the bicycle steadies itself, and the son feels a new exhilaration at riding in front, the wind rushes faster, the road streaks beneath him, and though it's darker now that the sun has dipped below the horizon, there's still enough twilight to see the way. He begins to pedal faster, shifting gears, straining against the pedals, thinking that yes, they're lost, but now he's going to power them out of it, push them tirelessly on to the next town, rushing down the hill so fast their momentum will carry them to the top of the next hill, and they'll repeat the technique again and again, finessing their way over the great waves of land until they reach civilization. Faster and faster they bolt into the dark valley, and the father, tentative at first, has joined the son in pushing the tandem bicycle to its limit. The chain whines, the frame rattles, the roar of the wind becomes so loud that our cyclists enter a tunnel of unbroken sound, almost silent in its consuming totality of noise, and here in the quasi-silence everything suspends, and for the second time today our cyclists arrive in a place of remarkable unity, an alignment so close that for the briefest moment neither man remains himself, but seeps free from his skull into a thoughtless will that hovers just above their bodies as they hurtle down the hill. Both feel it, the single-minded disembodied stillness in the relentless rushing, a sensation so delicate it vanishes at the moment of perception, and when it leaves both experience the same unsettling feeling of having somehow returned to the wrong body, our son within the father and our father in the son. Precise and irrefutable, it is a feeling that will trouble them for years to come, surfacing in the midst of births and funeral services, emerging late at night when they wake from bizarre dreams of feral hogs and dirty street cows, reaching up to grab them by the ankles when they step cautiously into in murky water, pinning them to their chairs unexpectedly at social gatherings so that their hosts, concerned, will try to draw them out, joking that they look as if they've seen a ghost, and they will laugh and snap out of it, and later

in the night when they are alone they will lay in bed and wonder whose body they are really living inside of, and who is keeping the bicycle upright, and who is in charge of steering, and when will they know for certain that they have arrived?

2

This is Called Prowess

Suddenly I want to stand closer to Bianca, the girl who has a crush on my friend. My friend is the friend that girls always have a crush on. He creeps up behind Bianca at the party and straightens her posture. Later he does it again, and I can tell she relishes his attention. I get sad for Bianca because I know what my friend means: "You slump, Bianca, and this is why I am never going to fall in love with you." But Bianca is delighted when his big hands grab her shoulders and his thumbs anchor for leverage on either side of her spine and he pops her whole body upright. He's touching her and that's all that matters.

Bianca was in jail last week. I examine her outfit while she tells me the story of getting pulled over in her sister's car with the expired tag, and forgetting her license at home, and the cop not finding her license in the system, even though she does have one, and the cop asking her why she lied and then putting her in handcuffs and taking her to jail.

She's dressed in plaid. The plaid of her shirt almost matches the plaid of her headband, but not quite. The squares of the headband are bigger than the ones on the shirt, and the colors are slightly different, but if you don't look closely they seem to match. Bianca's also wearing a wide tie, which has diagonal stripes, almost a similar color to the plaid of her shirt, but not quite. The guy she's with is a stylish nerd with thick rimmed glasses and very little chin. He was in jail last week too.

"Why were you in jail?" I ask him, and Bianca watches me as the nerd talks about his brother being unstable when he drinks, and his brother trying to punch him, and him hitting his brother with a lamp in self defense, and someone calling the cops and both of them going to jail because his brother's arm was bleeding. I can tell Bianca has heard this story before by how she

doesn't look at the nerd when he talks. She's looking at me because I'm a friend of the guy she has a crush on, and this makes me worthy of observation.

When I leave the party I grin at them and say, "You kids stay out of jail now, y'hear?" My authority-figure voice is more exaggerated than it needs to be.

This is because I am feeling shitty tonight.

I walk home alone through the Park Buttress Subdivision. I have my Casio with me but the batteries are getting low, so I only turn it on when I get to Kirby Road where there's no streetlamps and there isn't a sidewalk, just a path in the grass by the dark trees. I hit the button for DISCO BEAT and try to make up a song about Bianca. At first the beat is too slow, so I speed it up, but then I get out of breath trying to rap and walk at the same time, and really I don't want my song about Bianca to be a rap. There should be some slow parts, some romantic parts, so I slow the beat until it's on the lowest setting which is about one beat per second, and now it sounds strange and bad-ass and less like a beat than maybe swamp noises, or how a swamp would sound in a cartoon where the animals look like furry splashes of color with quivering stick-legs and they go: *Ribbutt—Tick-tick—Wap.*

This could very possibly be a really great song because I have that feeling in my chest: *What's next!* which is a feeling of total possibility expressed in the form of a question, but without the question mark.

Here's what I come up with before the batteries die:

Plaid hair band, doing headstands, went to jail on a Monday!

Got a mug shot, and a court date, do you need a ride?

Oh do you need a ride?

That's my hook I realize—the *Do you need a ride?* part—so I sing it in falsetto and tap the keys with CHIMES EFFECT, but in the middle of my hook the Casio dies.

It's very dark on Kirby road.

And cold.

But there is the moon, hanging like a cracker and tonight it has a bite out of the top. I hol the Casio up to my eye like a telescope and now I can see the moon in exquisite detail. My telescope is so powerful I can see the surface of the moon like it was right beneath my feet. I'm about to step onto the gray moondust, which will plume and swirl around my space boots. The horizon is black, and all around me are the craters and pock marks.

But then I stop seeing the moon because I am sad.

Thinking about pock marks reminds me that I have a new pimple on my cheek, and on my other cheek I have a red spot where there was a pimple last week and I can already feel another pimple sprouting up next to it. I remember Bianca watching me while the nerd was talking, and I know she was looking at my pimples and thinking—or not even thinking, just knowing—that she could never be with someone whose skin was so vastly inferior to hers, which is very smooth and pale and totally blemish-free.

Clouds move over the moon and cover it up, and the white fuzzy area that's left is like a ball of feathers, or maybe a fluffy gray bird rolled up into a ball. What if you could go bowling with a bird that was your pet and it would hang out at the bowling alley with you, sticking its long neck into your beer for a swallow sometimes? When it was your turn to bowl, the bird

would roll itself into a ball, leaving three gaps just big enough for your fingers to fit snuggly inside. Then you would bowl with it, and if it was a good bird, like really well trained, it would know how to adjust itself mid-roll so you would always bowl strikes.

I'm laughing in my chest now, which is a feeling like pulling a worm out of me, and even though maybe I've stolen the bowling idea from the Flintstones, I still think I could make it into a cartoon and sell it to Cartoon Network, because people don't watch the Flintstones these days, and in the Flintstones the bowling *pins* were animals, not the balls.

By the time I get home I have the whole cartoon worked out in my head. I need to go to my room and write it all down in my notebook, but when I open the front door I see my mom sitting on the couch with a book and a glass of wine and I know right away what this means.

"Hi there," she says, putting down her book and reaching for her wine.

"I need to put new batteries in my Casio," I say.

"How was the party?" My mom uncrosses her legs and then crosses them again.

"Pretty okay," I say. I'm never sure what I should tell my mom because later she might use it against me.

My mom is a psychologist.

She pats the couch beside her and I sit down. I don't want to sit down. But I do.

"Well, sounds like you had *fun.* It's good to get out and have a little *fun* on the weekends."

I look at my mom's wine glass and the lipstick marks across its rim.

"I wrote a new song but my Casio died," I say.

"*Did* it?"

"Yes."

"What was your song about?"

I get nervous because I don't like lying to my mom, but I really don't want to tell her about Bianca either, because as soon as you tell my mom anything, it's destroyed.

"Don't you have any crackers?" I say. I look around the room as if there might be a cracker, and then I notice that in fact there are some crackers and cheese on the table.

"Help yourself," she says, "then you can sing me your new song."

"My Casio is dead," I say as I reach for a cracker. "And I really have to go to bed now. Actually." I chew my cracker and look my mom in the eyes to let her know I'm serious about bed.

"Is it about a girl?" she says.

I don't want to smile but I do. But as soon as I smile I think about my new pimple and how it probably has a whitehead and suddenly I have to go look at it. I can't just sit here chatting with my mom and eating a cracker while I have a pimple on my cheek.

"I need to see a man about a horse," I say in my funny-deep-cowboy voice. My mom frowns. She doesn't like my voices. She calls them "avoidance mechanisms" and tonight I know she is right. I am going to avoid my mom. This is okay because tomorrow I will be her friend maybe.

"Oh *you!*" I say to her, reaching out to grab her shoulder like she was a pal, but my mom drops her shoulder an inch, just her shoulder, without moving the rest of her body, so my hand misses and looks like it's reaching for her breast.

"Oh *you!*" I say again without knowing why I say it, but it fills the empty space of my getting up. It sinks into the depression of the couch cushion where I was sitting and holds my place like a ghost of Lucas sitting next to my mom while I leave the room.

I go into my private bathroom and look at my new pimple. It doesn't have a whitehead but I squeeze it anyway. Nothing comes out. I squeeze harder and it starts to look like something might pop out, but then instead of white stuff I get the clear fluid, and this is very bad. It means there won't be pimple for me to pop tonight, which is very bad because the pressure will build up in my face while I sleep and it will invade my dreams, only I won't know what's causing it and I will have nightmares.

Don't, I tell myself. *Don't get sad*.

But once it starts I can't control it and now I know I'm more than sad tonight. I'm devastated, and all I can think about is Bianca.

At the party she showed me her mug shot.

"How did you get this?" I said.

"Because I'm a girl and I get what I ask for," she said.

In the photo, which was just a black and white photocopy on a torn piece of paper, she was frowning. Her hair was down, long and dark and slightly curly around her thin shoulders, and she was wearing a shirt with little flowers on it that reminded me of the countryside.

She looked very different.

"Oh God!" said my friend, peering over her shoulder. "Bad hair day?"

"Nobody looks good in their mug shot!" said Bianca, wincing with pleasure as my friend straightened her posture.

I took the mug shot and looked at it closely. There was a hardness in her eyes. Or a sharpness. Or a quickness. This was not the Bianca in front of me. This Bianca was the most beautiful and dangerous woman I had ever seen. She was a woman who would fight you if you even hinted at insulting her. She was a woman who would say "Hey mutherfucker!" to a guy's

back, and when he turned around she would meet his face with a shattering fist in the nose. She stared back at me from the mug shot like a hardened criminal, and suddenly I knew that she was lying about why she went to jail last week.

My friend was massaging Bianca's back, and I watched her face go slack and her eyelashes flutter. My friend is good at massages, which is another thing that makes him very different from me, along with his mostly unblemished skin, his facial hair, his large hands, his car, and his many conquests of women.

I gave a massage once. To my mom.

"Stop!" she said after a minute. "I am not your Casio!"

The stylish nerd was staring at my friend. I saw hate in his eyes, but then he got out his cell phone and pushed some buttons like he was looking for someone to call or checking his text messages.

I lie in bed picturing Bianca at the party, surrounded by men who might be in love with her. The one touching her is definitely not in love with her, but she will probably leave the party with him, and this is what I fall asleep thinking about, which causes me to have the terrible dream.

In the dream Bianca is telling me she had sex with my friend. She holds up the clear plastic baggie with aloe-vera gel inside. "I woke up with this against my crotch," she says. "The gel was infused with LSD. It was amazing." I sit there listening and nod my head slowly, the way my mom does. "Write down everything I say," says Bianca.

The next day is Sunday and I stay in bed late. I've got new batteries in my Casio and I'm thinking of working on the Bianca song again. My pimple grew a whitehead last night and this

morning I popped it, and nothing was ever better than the seasick pleasure crawling up from my belly after I exploded the white stuff out of my face and dabbed my bloody cheek with toilet paper.

Around noon my friend calls.

"I slept with Christina last night," he says.

My heart lurches.

"Not with Bianca?" I say, very calmly.

"Are you kidding?" he laughs. "That girl is *trouble.* I'm steering clear of that road block."

"Watch out," I say, "she might come after you."

"Actually, I think she likes you," says my friend. But this is bullshit. Girls don't like me. My friend is saying this to be nice. He is always very nice to me the day after he gets laid.

But after we hang up I keep thinking about it, because when someone says something like that, even when you know it's a lie, it stays there. It's like a cherry-flavored coughdrop you keep sucking on even though you hate the taste of cherry-flavored coughdrops, and you don't know why you accepted it because you don't have a cough, but now that you've popped it into your mouth you don't want to waste it, and you know you shouldn't bite into it because the rush of cherry-flavor will be disgusting and intense, and even after you've sucked it down to nothing the taste will still be there. You come up with all kinds of excuses for why you accepted the coughdrop in the first place, going so far as to wonder if maybe you *did* have a cough, or at least a little tickle in your throat, or maybe you had a dim feeling that today you were going to get a cough, and this very coughdrop is going to prevent it, and so without even meaning to you've avoided a pretty bad cough and you go on thinking like this until you're absolutely sure Bianca likes you.

Which totally changes the song.

The *What's next!* feeling is back and I'm sure I can write a song so good it will make Bianca curl into a ball on the floor and cry when she hears it, because of how glad and relieved she will be that finally someone appreciates her and doesn't care if she has bad posture or a funny laugh.

I cue my Casio to the DISCO BEAT again, but this time I speed it up a little so instead of cartoon swamp animals it's more like cartoon cars in a city made of slanty buildings and the cars are knocking bumpers in rhythm like: *Tonk—Lic-lic—Boing.* And here is what I sing:

Plaid hair band, doing headstands, went to jail on Monday!

Got a mug shot, and a court date, do you need a ride? Oh do you need a ride?

Pop goes the weasel, looking like a teaser, met you last night at a party.

Gave you a massage, wrapped you up in gauze, everybody says you love me!

So do you need a ride? (Yo, I got your ride.)

I sing the *Do you need a ride?* part in a high voice and then I answer in a low voice with the *Yo*, *I got your ride* part, so it's like two different people. When I record it, I'll have a real ghetto rapper do the low-voice part to hold down the bass, and it will be like he's got my back, which is what makes a song really good—the people in the background who are part of your crew and show the world that you are not alone.

Suddenly I have a very wonderful plan.

I'm going to walk to Portland Coffee with my Casio and practice my song. When I get there I'm going to play it for Bianca, because Portland Coffee is where Bianca works.

I put my ear to the door to find out what my mom is doing. At first it sounds like she is in the kitchen, but then I hear her walking through the hallway into her bathroom, and then the low sound of water filling up the tub. I'm tip-toeing past the bathroom door when my mom comes out of the kitchen in her robe.

"*Lucas*!" she says like she hasn't seen me in eleven years. "Are you going somewhere?" My mom has a book and I can see part of the title. *Developm*— it says but her hand covers the rest.

"So," I say, "you gonna take a nice-hot-lavish-steaming-warm-relaxing bath?"

My mom frowns. She doesn't like it when I do that, and pretty much I only do it to my mom. She calls it "over-describing." I do it in order to take something away from her, and since I'm angry at my mom for surprising me by not being in the bathroom, I want to take away her bath. The thing about this kind of taking is that you don't keep what you take. You just throw it away. First there's the bath, and my mom who is going to take it, and then there's just my mom, alone in the house with no bath, yelling after me as I go out the door to take an umbrella because it's supposed to rain today.

It takes about an hour to walk to Portland Coffee, which gives me plenty of time to practice my song. Lot's of people are outside raking leaves or getting pulled down the sidewalk by their dogs. Normally this would make me very nervous but today I don't care. All I have to do is think about Bianca's face in her mug shot. I take Bianca's hard little eyes and firm-set jaw and piercing gaze and make them into my own face, and now I know I'm so much more than just beautiful.

I sing my song. On the hook I switch from CHIMES EFFECT to BANJO EFFECT and sing, D*o you need a ride? Oh do you need a Ri-hide! (Yo, I got your ride)* and right there on the ghetto rap part I hit the BASS PAD to make it deep and booming and powerful.

This is called "prowess," and it's something women love.

It's a hot day, and my face is sweating by the time I reach Donleavy Street, where Portland Coffee is. I have a queasy feeling in my chest like I need to throw up. Very soon I am going to walk into Portland Coffee and play my song for Bianca, and this makes me feel horrible.

Even though Portland Coffee is a few blocks away, I've already imagined myself walking in the door with my Casio and my smile. There's Bianca behind the counter wiping down the espresso machine, or foaming milk, and one or two customers are waiting for their drinks, which annoys me because it would be better if the coffee shop were empty except for me and Bianca. But that's exactly why I'm thinking it over now, before I get to Portland Coffee, and how I've got a couple of options when it comes to the people who will be there when I sing Bianca my song.

Option 1 is that I can ask them to leave. I wouldn't have to be rude about it. Once at the mall I was at one of those cellphone kiosks that isn't a real store but just sits there in the middle of everything, and the woman was very nice to me and kept saying things like "This is a *totally painless* four year contract," or "Learning how to use the Eighty-Eight-Fifteen is *totally painless*." And then a man came up to the kiosk and he was very tall. He was dressed like someone who shopped at Mervyns and he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Excuse me young man but I need a word alone with the lady."

“Bruce!” said the woman, but he was already guiding me away from the kiosk, and then I was standing in the middle of the mall with my back to them. The guy gave me a gentle push and I found myself walking away. The thing was, I didn’t even really care because I couldn’t afford the cellphone anyway, and there was something about how polite the man was, polite-but-firm, and this is how I will ask the other customers in Portland Coffee to leave. “Excuse me,” I’ll say, “the lady and I need to have a quiet word together, do you mind . . .” and my voice will trail off while I very-gently-but-firmly guide the people, whoever they are, towards the door, and before they know it they’ll be standing outside with their coffee in hand wondering why they felt so utterly compelled to obey, but not doubting it, in fact appreciating that they have the chance to step outside and get some fresh air.

Option 2 is that I can sing the song in front of everyone at Portland Coffee.

Option 2 is not an option.

I grip my Casio very tight as I walk through the parking lot of Portland Coffee. Then I stop because I have to make sure it still works okay.

DISCO BEAT—check.

CHIMES EFFECT—check.

BANJO EFFECT—check.

BASS PAD—check.

I start the Bianca song one more time for practice, but a car drives up behind me and I have to run out of the way. Now I’m standing at the Portland Coffee entrance but I’m not ready. The DISCO BEAT is still going but for some reason it doesn’t really thump anymore. It’s just a regular Casio beat, quiet and high-pitched and kind of cheap sounding.

I switch off the Casio so I can be still for a second, just to catch my breath, but then the double doors open up and there's a lunging feeling in my chest because it's Bianca pushing backwards through the doorway with a big, clear trash bag in her arms. She's wearing a bright yellow Portland Coffee apron. Her hair is tied back into a bun but some strands have come loose, and when she turns around her eyes look half-closed and I can tell she is tired, and maybe sad.

Why is Bianca sad?

Because nobody understands her.

"Hey there . . . *You*!" says Bianca. She walks past me, between some cars, and over to the blue dumpster where she puts the trash bag down.

"Could you give me a hand?" she says, and I almost trip jumping off the curb as I run to help her.

"Open the lid," she says, and I set my Casio on the ground and push back the dumpster lid. I have to walk around the side of the dumpster to open the long plastic lid all the way.

"Nice Casio," says Bianca as she heaves the trash bag into the dumpster. "You can leave it open. I have two more bags to toss."

She walks back to Portland Coffee and I stand by the dumpster. She turns to look at me before going inside.

I pick up my Casio and start the DISCO BEAT. I'm ready. I'm going to sing Bianca her song right here by the dumpster after helping her dump the trash. This is perfect because now I don't have to ask everyone in Portland Coffee to leave.

But when Bianca comes back out she's not alone. Behind her in a yellow apron and hugging a trash bag is the stylish nerd. He has different glasses on, and he's wearing a yellow

Portland Coffee hat so he doesn't look stylish or nerdy anymore, just normal and boring and intrusive.

"What's up?" he says to me. "Wicked beat you got there, man."

"Yeah," I say.

"Totally badass," he says.

"Yeah," I say.

They throw their trash bags in the dumpster and I'm thinking now is my chance. I have to act. If I can do this, make the nerd go away and play Bianca my song, then definitely I have prowess. Plus, I realize, Bianca is sad, and it's important to cheer her up.

Bianca and the nerd are standing in front of me looking at my Casio, and now I get the feeling I don't *want* them looking at my Casio, like they're hurting it.

"Umm . . ." I say to the nerd, "the lady and I need a moment . . ."

"Huh?" he says, but I'm already taking his shoulder, gently guiding him away from Bianca, tenderly-but-firmly sending him in the direction of the entrance. "If you could just . . ." I say, pulling him past me, using my authority-figure voice because I think he will recognize it from last night, and remember how funny and good-natured it was, and know I don't mean any offense.

But the nerd is not moving.

"What the fuck?" he says, stepping back.

"Just . . ." I say, "the lady and me would . . . the lady and I . . ." But I'm confusing my words now, which makes me angry because it was never my plan to need to explain myself, which is difficult and stupid. Instead I wanted polite-but-firm, and I wanted results, and I wanted Bianca alone so I could show her how I feel and make her know that it's ok she has a crush on

me, that I respect her very deeply, and so I reach for the nerd's shoulder again and he slaps my arm away and jumps back.

"Hey stop!" says Bianca, but she's looking at me, which is confusing because the nerd is the one who needs to stop pushing my arm away while I'm trying to make this happen. I reach for his shoulder again but he pushes my chest and knocks my arm and I drop my Casio.

When it hits the pavement the batteries go rolling out across the parking lot in slow motion. Everything turns quiet without the DISCO BEAT and I'm looking at the oily black ground. Little shards of broken green glass are stuck in the cracks of the asphalt. They look like planets in space—beautiful, shimmering, jewel-like planets in space—where nobody lives except a single lonely gnome on each little green planet and every night before he goes to bed he cries sparkling green tears into a cut-glass goblet. The dripping tears make a repetitive beat that sounds like *Plink—Tink—Plink* and then the gnome sings his one and only song, the same song every night, which is the longest and most deeply layered song ever, because on this planet everything is made of thin green glass, even the little gnome himself, even his tears, even the soundwaves, even the echoes which are endless, even the air, which makes it very difficult to breathe.

3

Grief Station

I have never taken an interest in my family line. Nor do I think family members necessarily belong together, or that just because you come from the same gene pool as someone, you should have a relationship with them. But when I was twenty-two my mother died, leaving me alone in the world, and certain things she'd said just before she passed away made me think she wanted me to contact her parents, whom I had never met. I found them—they were still in Utah—wrote a letter, and a couple weeks later I got their reply. They wanted to come to Atlanta and pay their respects at my mother's grave. It was a reasonable request, one my mother might have expected, but I found myself hesitant. My mother had left Utah just before I was born, cutting off all contact with her parents, and it felt like a small betrayal, not of my mother exactly but of the years of silence and distance themselves, to just invite them here, to her home, after she had died. But I was lonely at the time—I guess I'm lonely still—and I was thinking about my mother's past a lot, mostly wondering what she was like at my age and why she'd left Utah, so a few months after she died I suggested that I visit my new grandparents for a weekend instead.

I had a photograph they'd sent, but when I walked off the ramp at the airport I passed right by them, somehow missing the pink and blue sign they'd made: *Welcome Home, Anne.* When I felt a tap on the shoulder and turned towards a sad-faced little old man, I realized the photograph must have been at least fifteen years old. My grandfather had the lightest blue eyes I had ever seen. Beside him was my grandmother, short and plump with artificially rosy cheeks and a helmet of dyed amber hair.

"We *thought* it was you when you come through the door," she said, reaching for my hand. She squeezed it and passed it to my grandfather, who held it and looked around like there might be someone else to pass it to.

They took me home. It was late, so we agreed it would be best to get some sleep now and talk in the morning. My grandmother showed me to the guestroom where everything was floral. The bed was piled high with overstuffed flower-print pillows on a matching comforter, and the walls were covered in purple and white lilies.

"That was your mother's," she said, pointing to a ragdoll slumped on a chair in the corner. "She made it herself."

"Oh?" I said.

"Do you like to make things?" she asked me.

"I paint," I said.

"That's neat," she said. "We always have been a crafty family. I stenciled those flowers." She pointed to the wall.

"Neat," I said, forcing a smile, which she returned immediately, and I was surprised to find it nearly as disingenuous as my own.

That night I lay in bed and felt my mother watching me through the eyes of her old ragdoll. Her yellow yarn-hair was tied into pigtails and her red gingham shirt and blue denim pants were crisp and new. I imagined my grandmother ironing them once a year on my mother's birthday, keeping her neat and prim like a good Mormon daughter. Something told me my mother had left the ragdoll on purpose as a stand-in, holding her place until she could make it back.

Or perhaps just holding her place. My mother never said she wanted to return to Utah or restore her relationship with her parents. But in the months before she died she'd started to talk about them, offering small details about family vacations or pets she'd had as a kid. I'd sat beside her bed listening to her talk, not saying a word for fear it would cause her to clam up. Towards the end, when she was on a ventilator, she would write notes for me on yellow mini post-it tabs, things like

"Dad was a foreman at a flour mill," or "Mom made the best cinnamon buns." I asked her repeatedly if she wanted me to find them, call them, bring them to Atlanta to say goodbye, but she always put me off, never saying "no" exactly, just stalling. After she died I kept telling myself, "she would have wanted you to get in touch with them," but the phrase itself began to confuse me. The "would" implied an "if", as in, "*if* she was alive and capable of wanting something," only I was certain that if she were still alive she wouldn't want me to find them at all. On the contrary, she wanted to be dead first. She wanted me to contact them only after she had died, for what purpose I was still unsure. Maybe she thought it was my right to know my grandparents. Maybe she did it for their sake—a granddaughter in exchange for the daughter they'd lost. But that night as I lay stiff and sleepless, my mother's deathbed prompting struck me as selfish. It was her attempt to not disappear from the world, to somehow live on in her daughter and parents' reunion while bearing none of its burden. That night I fell asleep angry.

I woke early the next morning, still on Eastern time. My grandfather was sitting in the kitchen, and he invited me to go canoeing with him on the artificial lake behind their house. It was just after sunrise and the air was dry and crisp. There were little birds flying everywhere, diving, skimming the lake surface and swooping back into the air. I sat behind my grandfather, watching his leathery arms pull his paddle through unnaturally blue lake water. Stroke by stroke he propelled us forward, guiding us towards the far end of the lake where the houses of the subdivision ended and the scrubby yellow mountains rose above the plain like two-dimensional props on a set. He kept a steady rhythm until we'd crossed most of the lake, and then he turned to look at me.

"Anne," he said, "did your mother ever tell you about her Young Woman's Fainting Syndrome?"

I shook my head.

“Well, in college she would up and faint sometimes,” he said. “The doctors couldn’t figure it out. But they thought it had something to do with her blood pressure or heart rate. Our family always had a very low heart rate.”

I nodded and he went back to paddling, speaking in his slow, deep voice as he stroked.

“It would happen during class at the university. We’d get a call saying ‘Tracy’s at the medical center, you better come down here.’ Of course we lived in Granger at the time so it wasn’t far to the campus, but I tell you those drives always felt like they took forever.”

I glanced across the lake at the new stucco houses and green lawns sloping down to the water. We were in a planned community just over the mountains from Salt Lake City. Its centerpiece was the artificial lake with hundreds of little inlets like the tines of a comb, each containing two rows of houses on cul-de-sac peninsulas.

“Then the fainting spells just stopped. Must have been a year went by and she didn’t have one. So after she graduated from college we decided it would probably be okay for her to go to Europe with her friends. It was in Luxemburg when she started fainting again.”

The canoe had drifted to a portion of the subdivision where new construction was underway, a thin strip of land between the lake and the highway. My grandfather looked over the bulldozed lots and shook his head.

“I don’t know how anyone could stand to live with a highway in front of them,” he said.

“Me neither,” I said.

I waited for him to continue his story as we paddled along the shoreline, but he had grown silent, as if he was either lost in thought or waiting for me to ask him what had happened.

So I asked. And it turned out the story was less about my mother than the Mormon church, how its vast network of missionaries and disciples throughout Europe helped get my mother home safely

when she was in danger. Mormons in Geneva, Mormons in London, kindly Mormon stewardesses in Houston rearranging their schedules to fly home with my mother who was liable to faint at any time, but never did.

"That is pretty nice how they helped her home," I said when he'd finished.

My grandfather nodded. "That's why I just can't imagine what could've made Tracy stop going to church. I just *can't* imagine."

He put his paddle in the water and started to stroke. He was still a limber man. When we paddled together the canoe seemed almost weightless.

"Let's steer us back to the house for breakfast," he said, and I pulled my paddle through the water to turn the canoe around.

"Maybe she stopped believing in God," I said as we crossed the lake.

He stopped paddling and looked back at me. There was hurt in his old blue eyes.

"Your mother said her prayers every night before bed. She never missed a night. You don't just stop believing."

I looked away. "Are we getting close to home?" I said.

"That's it right there." He pointed with the paddle.

I recognized it now, four houses away. My grandparents had the highest flagpole in the neighborhood, and its flag was hanging limp in the sky. Sunlight glinted off the brass ball, blinding me, and then I saw my grandmother waving on the porch. She was holding a Diet Coke and chewing on a baby carrot.

I stepped out of the canoe and watched my grandfather clip the yellow rope to the metal eyelet on the dock. There was a life-size plastic heron bolted to the far corner. At breakfast my grandmother told me that when they first got the heron their neighbor Clive Owens had spied it

from his paddle boat across the lake. Herons were rare in the valley, so he had approached with caution, slowly creeping up from behind, marveling at how it stood so still and didn't see him. He had been ten feet away before he realized it wasn't real.

After breakfast I sat with my grandmother in the plush leather easy chairs to watch her game shows.

"She was in a car accident once," my grandmother said during a commercial. "Marty Thomas was the driver. A group of them were up to Deseret Peak and skid off the road. She had cuts all down her legs from the shattered windshield. I remember her saying how Marty Thomas got down on bended knee and picked glass out of her legs. She said with all the attention she got from Marty Thomas, she should get in car accidents more often."

I gave a quick laugh and stared at the television. So far, everything my grandparents had told me about my mother was tied to accidents or mishaps, and in every story she managed to escape only slightly scathed.

"Bid one dollar," said my grandmother to the television.

"Do you think Marty Thomas was my father?" I asked, and my grandmother winced at the question.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Marty Thomas was a good boy. He wouldn't have done something like that to your mother."

"But how can you be sure?" I said.

"I suppose we can't be," she said. "But Marty Thomas is a bishop. He has two sons and a daughter. We don't know who your father is, Anne. We really don't have any idea."

"I was hoping you might," I said.

She sighed and turned back to the television. On TV a blond woman was straining to spin a giant blinking wheel. She needed to land on the number 7 to win. The wheel spun, clicking closer and closer to the magic number while the host's voice became urgent and the studio audience murmured. They all began to shout, the woman leaned sideways as if to will the wheel further with the angle of her body, and then the audience groaned as the clicker came to a stop on 6. The sad sound of a losing spin played out. The woman smiled, disappointed and shrugging, and the host, sharing in her loss, apologized and sent her on her way.

That afternoon we drove the half hour into Salt Lake City. I'd asked them to show me around, specifically Trolley Square Mall, where the week before an 18 year-old had opened fire on a crowd in the food court, killing five people before the police finally shot him down. It had made the national news. My grandparents seemed a little uncomfortable with my request, but they were uncomfortable with me in general, and at least now we were doing something besides sitting around the house making each other squirm.

The mall was nearly empty when we arrived, but as we made our way towards the food court there was a buzz in the air like crowds of people whispering. The whole place was flooded with sunlight from the glass ceiling, and in the far corner by some potted trees was a memorial to the victims. Six televisions pointed inwards at a giant mound of wreaths and candles and teddy bears. Every television was mounted on a podium and displayed a slideshow of photographs. Different songs came from each one. Flowers and cards were piled up around the televisions and I realized that each was dedicated to a single victim.

I bent down to read one of the cards. *We will never forget you Andrea.* It was signed by children, their little names scrawled in colored markers all around the message. I moved from one grief

station to the next, stopping to watch the cycle of photos at each. Some of the victims, like Andrea, were represented by photographs of their whole lives. I saw kids at the beach, teenagers at prom, wedding shots, photos of families. The sixth television played the news. It took me a moment to understand that someone, whoever was in charge of the memorial, had compiled different segments of news footage from the tragedy and edited them together for display. There was only one photo of the killer, a kid with acne and a young mustache. I searched his eyes for anger or brutality but all I found was awkwardness. The news reports said he'd had a pistol, a sawed-off shotgun and a bowie knife. Both his guns had been loaded when he died.

My grandparents said they want to see something at Sears. Would I like to come with them? I thanked them and said no, I'd rather stay here and meet them later. When they left I felt bad, watching them walk stiffly away like two survivors from a head-on collision with their past. I knew I wasn't being quite fair to them, that I should have opened up more. But I needed the time to myself, and the memorial with its air of hushed and quiet memory was the first place I'd felt comfortable in since I'd arrived.

There were no cards or flowers piled around the young killer's grief station, the one playing the news, and this bothered me. Someone so young couldn't do a thing like this and not be a victim too, however brutal. So I checked to see if anyone was watching, then grabbed a wreath of white flowers from the station next door and quickly placed it against the pedestal. Nobody had to know. But when I stepped back to examine it, just that one single wreath seemed alone and out of place. I grabbed another. Some teenagers walked by, gawking, and I waited for them to leave before I took one more bouquet and a purple stuffed animal and placed them around the television as well. I knew it was wrong, deeply inconsiderate, but it felt good to rearrange other people's grief to spread more evenly in the world.

Something was still missing and I realized it was a personal message, so I went to Woolworths and searched the Hallmark section for a card, but of course there's no section for fallen murderers. All the cards dealing with death were for the families of the deceased, not the dead themselves, so finally I settled on a consolation card for a hunter who has come home empty handed. There was a rifle and a woolen hunting hat on the front, and the message inside said "You'll get'em next time, pardner."

It was a horribly inappropriate choice and walking back to the memorial I lost my nerve and threw it in the trashcan.

When I returned there was man in a gray suit putting everything I'd moved back in its proper place. I watched him pick up each item separately, look it over, then replace it in the exact spot I had taken it from. I strolled closer, pretending to examine the photos of Earl P. Winder, father of four, grandfather of nine. When he passed me I read the badge on his lapel. *Sach's Mortuary.* He placed the purple stuffed animal back where it had been, looked around, spied a card that had fallen over and set it upright again. Then he left.

I stood next to Earl P. Winder's grief station and felt the heavy gaze of everything—the sun through the atrium's glass ceiling, the intrusive dwarf palms, and the constant hum of conflicting music (Earl P. Winder liked country). It was all too much, and I had to sit down on the marble floor and stare at my hands to calm myself. Down there it was like I had entered another layer of the atmosphere, cooler and thick with floral smells. I realized I could sit here forever and no time would pass. There was no possibility of movement or change, only the perfume of dying flowers and low moan of static noise. This was where the dead must live, I thought, obsessively reading messages left by grieving friends and relatives. *We will never forget you. We love you forever. In memoriam.* I could almost hear them chanting back and forth at one another in competition to show

who had received the most sympathy, the greedy dead, thinking only of themselves. They were all around me, stepping on me, bustling around the grief stations making sure no card or bouquet had been misplaced. If so, they would summon the man from Sach's Mortuary, and like a faithful servant he'd come and set things right again.

When I stood up my vision fuzzed and my head went numb. Translucent tadpoles swam away and I felt like I was going to pass out. For a moment I thought maybe I had Young Woman's Fainting Syndrome, my mother's spiteful parting gift to a daughter she probably never wanted, but then I leaned forward and the dizzy spell cleared.

The food court was beginning to get crowded. Some of the people ambled around the grief stations, reading the messages, pointing at things. An old man walked up to me.

"Did you know Earl?" he said.

"Earl?"

"Earl Winder," he said. His tiny eyes were wet.

"No," I said, and watched him shuffle bow-legged on to the next station.

Halfway through the long drive home, just as we were skirting the edge of the mountains that divide their valley from Salt Lake City, my grandmother turned to look at me in the back seat. "It's a shame you can't stay until Wednesday."

"Why?" I was staring out the window. The air smelled fishy, and my grandfather had informed me that it came from the huge schools of brine shrimp that died on the beaches of the Great Salt Lake. We were passing the lake now, vast and glistening in the late reddish light with no buildings or houses along its shore.

"Wednesday is our day to volunteer in the Family History Center," said my grandfather.

“We help people do their genealogy,” said my grandmother.

“What’s that?” I asked dutifully, and my grandmother said she’d very much like to show me.

At home she took me into her sewing room where they kept the computer. She opened a program and printed a page and handed it to me. It was a half-circle divided into hundreds of small boxes that fanned out from the bottom center like spokes on a wheel. All the boxes on one side were filled in with names. The other half was blank.

“This is your family in relation to you,” she said, pointing her finger at the bottom where my name sat at the fulcrum. “The other side would be your father’s family.” She drew her finger across the blank squares.

The filled-in side of the chart was packed with names on top of names, each in their own little box like plots in a cemetery. My mother had once told me that Mormons do their genealogy so they can go back and convert all their dead, non-Mormon ancestors to the one true religion. They have special ceremonies for it.

“I guess I’ll never fill in the other side,” I said.

“Oh we believe you will,” she said. “We’re praying for it.” She patted my hand. I stifled a groan and stared at the half-empty pie-chart of my life. I was annoyed by her prayers, annoyed by the tearful reunion she must have fantasized about—some vicarious version of what she never got with my mother. I didn’t want my name or my image in my grandparents’ heads when they knelt by their bed at night, imagining the happy symmetry of the father-daughter reunion, the teary embraces, the “catching up,” and the neat completion of my grandmother’s chart.

“Thanks,” I said, “but it’s not going to happen.”

My grandmother’s face went from round and hopeful to puffy and sad. I realized that she and my mother looked nothing alike—that all my mother’s resemblance had been with my grandfather. Still

there was something eerily familiar about my grandmother's small nose and mouth. They were like mine I guess, and supposing I lived that long, this little woman's face was probably what mine would look like when I got old.

The next morning my grandfather invited me out on the canoe again. The sun hovered low behind us, and the whole valley was pink and bronze. I sat in the front of the canoe and let my grandfather steer. I waited for the story I knew was coming.

"Did you know your mother collected dolls?" he said.

"I know," I said. "Like the ragdoll in the guest room."

"Porcelain Dolls, I mean. She had a big collection. She gave piano lessons to earn money for them. She had five big glass cases full of dolls."

"What happened to them?"

"We have them. They're in boxes in the basement. We wanted you to have them."

"I'm not sure what I would do with them."

"Oh these are beautiful dolls. You would love them. She had all kinds of outfits for them. Old fashion dresses she sewed herself."

My grandfather guided the canoe past the new houses along the highway to a section of the lake I hadn't seen before.

"Where are we going?" I said, wondering if he was going to show me something special, something secret.

"Emersons put in a new lawn," he said. "I want to see if the sod is taking."

We paddled in silence. I wondered if I had upset him by not wanting the dolls. The truth was my mother had never stopped collecting dolls. Her apartment had been full of them when she died. It

had been the worst thing about cleaning out her place, all those eerie, glass-eyed dolls, and I had ended up selling them to cover the cost of her casket.

"Why did she collect all those dolls?" I asked, hoping my curiosity would be enough for him.

"To have a hobby," he said. "To be dedicated to something."

"What else did she do?"

"Well, like I said, she taught piano lessons. She was a good piano player. And she kept a journal. She wrote in her journal nearly every day."

"Do you have any of her old journals?"

"No. She took those when she left."

"What else did she take?"

"Let's see, she took her car, a little Dodge. She took some clothes, but as a matter of fact not too many clothes. I don't really know what else."

"What did you do when she left? Did you search for her?"

"Well, she left a letter. It said she was going on a road trip and would be back in a couple weeks. She called a couple nights later and told us she was with her friend Cheryl Hutchins and they were going to Chicago. We weren't happy about it, but she was twenty-three and she could do what she wanted. We found out later Cheryl Hutchins wasn't even with her. She was up to Bear Lake water-skiing that weekend."

"But didn't you search for her? Afterwards? Didn't you try to find her?"

"We called the mission in Chicago. They searched for her but they couldn't find her."

"You didn't go yourself?"

"We wanted to…"

"But you didn't."

My grandfather sighed. He stopped paddling and dropped his fingers into the water. We were adrift in the middle of the lake, far from the house, far from the shore, and I had the sudden urge to flip the canoe over and send us crashing into the water.

"She didn't want us to find her," he said. His voice had hardened now. He clutched his paddle and began to stroke. "She didn't write, she didn't call, she didn't want us to."

"But why?" I said.

"We thought you could tell us," he said. There was something so pitiful and meek in his words that I wanted to cry. We should have been crying together, my grandfather and I. We should have been hugging and weeping like family members are supposed to do when someone dies, but if I had moved any closer to him the boat would have capsized. Canoes on the water are just too unsteady.

That night I couldn't sleep. Sometime after midnight I walked barefoot down the soft hallway carpet towards the bathroom. Passing their bedroom, I caught a glimpse of my sleeping grandparents illuminated by the blue light of the television. The volume was turned low and the room flickered and hummed gently. My grandparents' faces were rigid and perfect as China dolls.

At the mall my grandmother had stopped a stranger and asked him to take our photograph, and in the pictures I'd towered over them like a celebrity athlete posing for a photo-op with two tiny fans. I was the lumbering stranger they'd asked into their lives to stand beside them and smile while the camera did its work and the moment was memorialized. Tomorrow I would fly back East, but the photographs would prove that I had been here, their granddaughter, in the flesh.

I pushed the door open and slipped inside their bedroom. The air was musty with sleep-breath and one of them was quietly snoring. I walked to the edge of their bed and stood over them. My grandmother's face twitched slightly, then settled back into its mask of sleep. My grandfather lay

still as stone. I wanted a true feeling to wash over me, something definite and sure. My grandfather began to snore loudly, his mouth gaping like a baby bird. My grandmother, eyes still closed, turned on her side and pressed his shoulder with her hand. He shifted and stopped snoring. She put her arm over him and nudged closer until they were tightly spooned.

I walked into the guest bedroom and picked up the ragdoll. When my mother was dying I had asked her to tell me who my grandparents were so I could contact them. “I’ll tell you,” she’d said, “but not yet.” Cleaning out her sock drawer after she died I found the card with its image of two immaculate China dolls dressed in period costumes of the old West, and inside two names and an address. It was their current address at the house by the lake. All along she had known where they were.

I wanted to tie the ragdoll to a rock and throw it in the lake where all the blue-gills would nibble it away—a daughter’s spiteful parting gift to the mother she never really knew. Instead I put it in my suitcase beneath my clothes. My mother had left Utah and never returned. Nobody would ever know exactly why. I decided to put the ragdoll on her grave back East.

I needed air. Outside there was a chunk of moon above the dark mountains and the sky was full of stars. The air was marshy and sweet, and I could hear the sputtering of a sprinkler next door. I was walking across the back lawn when I saw the heron, its neck rolling forward and retracting as it stepped cautiously towards the decoy bolted to the corner of the dock. I watched it lift one hinged leg at a time, moving closer, pushing its beak like a needle through the darkness until it was almost touching the plastic bird. It stood completely still for a moment, a mirror image of the decoy turned slightly askew against the moon-bright lake. Then its beak divided and loosed a terrible rasping cry.

I flew home the next morning. At the airport my grandmother asked if they could come visit me in Atlanta someday. “I’d like that,” I said, but I think we all knew it wouldn’t happen. They still send me greeting cards, every Christmas and Easter without fail. Once in a while they call, and sometimes during the awkward silences I imagine I can hear my mother on the line, her ventilator-breath laborious and distant beneath the static. She’s listening in, waiting for us to say something new about her, but the truth is we never do.

4

The Wife

A few days after Ella dumped him, Elif grew a small, milky wart in the center of his left palm. He had already been feeling repellent and ugly in general, and now he had something specific and undeniable on his body to reinforce that feeling. At some point the timing of the wart's arrival had become perfectly clear to him and he began calling it Ella. He wouldn't look at it, but he argued with it silently, accused it, threatened it, and in his weaker moments pleaded with it to love him again. He grew accustomed to touching it when he was nervous, methodically tapping it with his thumb in airports and train stations, pressing it lightly into his palm and relishing the spongy give and the small point of pain it produced in complaint.

Now he was a thousand miles away from the old Ella, but the new one had grown into a pink-ringed irritation that itched at night and throbbed when he was uneasy. It pulsed steadily on the morning he left the guesthouse and made his way through the village's narrow back alleys, dodging an surly cow, stepping in manure in the process, and taking a cautious circle around a growling street dog dotted in small red sores. Every few blocks he stopped to asked directions.

"Fort?" he said, pointing in the direction he was going.

"Fort!" the villagers answered, waving him along and wagging their heads with a lilt that would have been meaningless and confounding in America, but clearly meant *Yes* or at least *Yes maybe* in India.

It came into sight as he rounded a corner and started up a rough cobblestone path—a monolithic façade of red sandstone perched atop a mesa that rose dramatically from the flats of the crowded town. It was the biggest constructed thing he had ever seen, and it stretched from

one end of the horizon to the other, intimidating as he stood in its shadow. He was gazing at its ramparts and tapping the wart when a voice called out to him.

"Hello! I making you henna?"

In the doorway of a small blue cement house sat a young woman. She had a broad oval face, large mouth, and big teeth flashing beneath a solicitous smile. Before her was a brass tray full of grain. Her feet were bare and her sari was hiked up so he could see one leg, which was covered in coarse black hair. There was something ruddy and intriguing about her hairy leg, and Elif had to pull his eyes away as she held up her palm for him to see the design there—reddish brown markings that looked like vines and flowers wrapped around a circle of small checkered squares.

"I making you henna?" she repeated.

He was about to decline and walk away, but his eyes flashed again on her hairy calf and he paused, just long enough to commit himself, and then he knew she had caught him.

"You come inside," she said, standing and motioning to the door. "Shoes," she said, pointing at his feet, and as he bent down to untie his laces he was conscious of the smell wafting up from them.

"Goo," she said, pointing at his shoes.

"What?"

"Goo!" she said again and wrinkled her nose. "Smile."

"Goo?" he repeated, pointing at his dirty shoes.

"Yes," she said, satisfied that he understood. "Too much smile."

"Yes," he said with uncertainty.

"Come," she said, leading him into the dark little house.

Sitting on the floor was an old man chewing on a piece of gray bread. He was shirtless and his sinewy chest was covered in white hair. He did not look up.

"You are names?" said the young woman as Elif followed her past the old man into a small room where a black and white television was flashing without sound and an old woman slept on the floor.

"My name is Ned." he said, lying. She would mispronounce Elif.

"I am Baby," she said. "Please sit."

He sat on the floor and watched her walk to a shelf and rummage through a cardboard box. Her back towards him, she stood on her toes to reach a higher shelf. He tried to examine her calves, but the dark indoor light made them difficult to see. He felt a little shy now, a little silly and lecherous. The only men who got henna designs on their hands were the hippie tourists, the ones with dreadlocks and bright orange pajama pants. No Indian man would have such a feminine thing done to him. But he supposed he was a tourist after all, though certainly not a hippie, and when she came back to him with a foil cone full of henna, ready to work, he offered her his right hand saying "Simple design, please do something very small and simple."

"Left hand first," she said, reaching for it, but he was immediately embarrassed of the wart on his palm, and so he clenched his left hand into a fist and insisted, "Right hand please, only right hand."

"Ok," she said smiling. "Only right hand."

As she began to squeeze the henna onto his hand she told him about her family. Her mother was the old woman asleep on the floor beside them. Her father was the old man. She had younger brothers and sisters who were at school.

Then she wanted to know about America. Was everybody rich? Did people get divorced all the time? What was the food like?

“India and America are the same,” he said.

“Same same?” she said.

“Yes,” he said with uncertainty. “Pretty much.”

What work did his father do? She wanted to know. What about his mother? Did he have brothers and sisters? Was he traveling alone in India? And was he married? This last question pricked him, and he suppressed a small, weltering panic in the bottom of his chest.

“Yes,” he lied, “I am married.”

“Marriage!” she repeated, as if astonished.

“Yes,” he said. He told her his wife was a doctor, and for this reason she couldn’t leave America to travel in India with him.

She nodded. “I also marriage,” then added quickly “—now divorce.” As she said the word she looked him in the eyes as if to gauge his reaction.

“Divorce is very…difficult,” he said, not knowing what else to say.

She was finished with the design on his hand. It was too busy, the lines thick and ungraceful, and he decided that he would wash it off as soon as he returned to the guesthouse.

But she invited him to stay for lunch. He felt he shouldn’t, and yet there was still the memory of her legs, which he wanted to see again. Her mother had woken up and inspected the henna designs, declaring them, according to her daughter’s translation, “too beautiful.” Lunch might be nice, he considered. This was something a tourist did, wasn't it? Eating lunch with a kind family who have taken them in, getting to know the locals. And perhaps it was even more than what a tourist did—to spend time with people, learning about their lives. Perhaps he was

doing something that made him different, a *visitor*, a friend from America who has come to eat lunch with an Indian family. He imagined himself writing letters from the States. He would tell them about his life. He would make up colorful anecdotes about his marriage.

He stayed for lunch. The spicy food burned his mouth. It was difficult to manipulate a spoon with his left hand. The old man ate along with him, not speaking a word, sitting cross legged on the floor and using his fingers to shovel vegetables stained red with chili into his mouth. The old woman sat in the corner fingering a rosary of shriveled red beans. From time to time she spoke out loud to no one in particular, and nobody answered. Baby brought bread to eat the vegetables with. Elif used his fingertips to tear the bread and place it cautiously in his mouth. The henna was hardening now on his palm, but when he touched it, it smeared. The skin had become stiff, but inside it was still soft.

After eating, his mouth burning, his right hand held awkwardly in the air, he leaned back against the wall. He was tired. Baby took the dishes away and squatted in the corner near a spigot to wash them. Water gushed from the spigot over the dishes and onto the smooth cement floor. There was a drain in the corner and water seeped out of the room through the drain. He watched her washing the dishes. Her legs were showing again, their thick hair visible to him now that his eyes had become used to the dark. It was a strange pleasure he took from her legs—how unfeminine they seemed to him, how incongruous with her bright sari and her long black hair. She was not at all beautiful, but she was Indian, and this somehow made up for her plainness. He noticed her arms were hairy too, but not as hairy as her legs, those thick masculine legs now bulged with the tension of her squatting.

She did the dishes quickly, scooping a fingertip's worth of sand from a cup for each dish and scowering the plate before rinsing it off and laying the clean metal pieces in a pile opposite the dirty ones.

The old man had fallen asleep on floor beside him. Baby came to him and said, “You sleeping?”

“Oh no,” he said, “I have to go now—to the Fort.” He pointed his henna-covered finger up in the air.

She smiled. “Fort closed! Afternoon means the Fort is closed. You sleep.”

He doubted the Fort was closed. It was the town’s only tourist attraction. Perhaps Baby was lying to him, but he was suddenly too tired to be suspicious. Should he be alarmed? Has she put something in the food? But no, he thought. This is something that is done. One visits a house, gets fed, sleeps, and then one leaves, and after a long time one writes people a nice letter from America. It was always done, probably.

“Ok,” said Elif, “I’ll sleep.”

She brought a small rug and a hard pillow. He stood and watched her spread the rug on the floor and place the pillow near the wall. When she wasn’t looking he took his wallet from his back pocket and placed it in his front. Then he felt ashamed and overcome by her kindness.

“India and America are very different,” he told her as he lay down.

“Why?” she asked.

“Very different,” he said, and knew he couldn’t explain to her how in America a woman would never invite a stranger into her home, decorate his hands, feed him lunch and offer him a place to sleep. He couldn’t explain how in America things were so much more complicated and inexplicable, so much more tenuous and undefined. You could spend years with someone in

America, living together, planning a future, until one day she tells you it's wrong, the relationship is wrong and she needs independence, and just like that it's over and you travel to India alone.

"America is very beautiful country," said Baby. "I am going America." She sat beside him and spoke of her plans. She would marry an American man. Divorce was a problem for remarrying an Indian man, but not for an American man. She would marry and leave India forever.

"You'll never come back home?" he asked.

"Coming back," she said slowly, "after very long time."

Elif had not meant to fall asleep. Only to lie there and listen to her talk, perhaps close his eyes and think about her legs. When he woke the light from the doorway was soft and orange. Baby was gone. The old man and woman were gone. He was alone in the house. He felt a twinge of panic and reached instinctively for his wallet. It was still there. He touched the henna on his hand and found it hardened now and crumbling off his skin.

He sat up, achy from lying on the ground. His mouth was sticky and dry. Holding his left hand rigid, he pressed his thumb hard into his wart and shuddered as a wave of illicit pleasure washed over him.

He had been traveling between tourist towns for a month now, visiting all the requisite palaces and ruins and temples. These were the sites he and Ella had marked in the guidebook, dog-earing the pages, putting small exclamation points next to the spots that intrigued them most. The trip had been her idea, but then Ella had balked—she couldn't do it, and not just the trip either. Everything. "Let's both decide to end it," she'd said. "But why?" Elif had asked her, over

and over again. She couldn't answer him except to say she needed to be alone, and Elif suspected that somehow, suddenly, she had become aware of something repulsive in him, something he didn't even know about himself, and she had turned against him. It was only two weeks before they were supposed to leave, and Elif had decided to go by himself, not because he really wanted to see India, but so that he could be the one leaving, not her. Now the guidebook was a record of their failure, and he had traveled from one exclamation point to the next, as if each stop on their itinerary might show him why he'd become so intolerable to her, and yet they showed him nothing.

Occasionally he would wander through the marketplaces gazing at beggar children. They were swarthy and rough with each other until they spied him, then they would transform into broken, pitiful things with their palms outstretched and their grimaces so exaggerated he sometimes laughed. He gave them bananas. He gave them samosas and bottles of soda and candy. They became jolly, took everything he gave and then asked for money. He loved the attention, loved walking down the street surrounded by a phalanx of ragged and chattering children. They tugged at his cargo pants, grabbed his arm, did little dance moves to make him laugh. Sometimes he would try to give them the slip and dash down an alley, laughing as they shouted and chased after him. He loved to be chased, loved the giddy feeling of someone close behind him, and at times he felt this was all he needed, to be surrounded by the verifiable and insistent desires of beggar children. They asked no questions. They wanted only the simplest things.

The front doorway of the little house darkened and he saw Baby. Her hair was wet, her skirt pulled up over her knees. She had been bathing. With the thick afternoon light spilling in

from behind her she looked radiant. She was smiling at him. He could make out the individual hairs on her silhouetted legs.

“You have a very nice smile,” he told her.

“Shampoo,” she said, and held out a bottle of Head and Shoulders. “One man gave me when he is leaving India. Very good smile,” she said, wafting it under her nose.

His foot itched. He reached down to scratch and found a mosquito bite. It was time to leave. Standing up, he felt again for his wallet. What would be the appropriate amount of money for henna and food? Would she ask some outrageous price?

“I have to go now,” he said.

“Going?” she replied, as if she had expected him to stay the night.

“Yes.”

“Guesthouse?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, you coming tomorrow.” It was not a request or a demand. She seemed to state a fact.

“I will,” he said, though he didn't mean it. He had pulled out his wallet. She watched him closely now.

“Um, how much for the henna?” he asked.

“For you only 50 rupees” she said.

“Food?” he asked.

“No money for food,” she said quickly. “Only henna.”

He handed her a 100 rupee note.

“Change no?” she said.

“No change,” he said, “no problem, I don't need change. It's fine.”

“Ok thank you,” she said, folding the bill into a tight square and tucking it in a fold of her sari.

“You wife very beautiful?” she asked as he was putting on his shoes.

“Beautiful?” he said.

“You wife?”

“Oh yes,” he said. “Very, very beautiful. Like a model.”

“You American,” she said. “American is lucky.”

“Americans are sad,” he said, without quite knowing what he meant.

“Tomorrow is coming back, yes?” she asked, with less certainty now. He had started to walk down the steep pathway back into town.

“Tomorrow . . .” he said, “Tomorrow I am leaving on the train.”

“Going?” she said, alarmed.

“Yes, I have to. My wife . . . she’s coming to India actually. She’s on the airplane now.” He didn't know what he was saying. He touched his wart and felt it throb in response. He looked back at her where she was standing in the doorway. Her hair was wet, her skirt was just high enough to give him a final glance at her legs.

“All the best!” she shouted. “Goodbye, Ned!”

“Thank you, Babeeee!” he yelled in a nasal voice that unconsciously mimicked her own. He turned back down the path, stumbled over a loose stone and fell to the ground.

“Oh!” she cried, and ran to him. She grabbed his arm and tugged him upright.

"Oh Ned!" she said, pointing to a tear in his pants at the knee. "You coming." She pulled him back towards the house. He followed, mute and docile, stunned from his fall. Inside she gave him a long swath of rectangular fabric.

"You know *lungi*?" she said, pointing to the fabric and then miming the act of wrapping it around her waist. He nodded.

She laughed and said, "Bathroom?"

"Yes," he said, and she led him back outside to a tiny adjacent bathroom with a latrine on the floor and nozzle for water. Inside he took off his pants and examined his knee, which was trickling blood. There was nothing to wipe it with so he patted it with the inside of his pants and then wrapped the *lungi* around his waist like a towel. On the wall was a broken shard of mirror, just large enough to show him his face. He tried to smile, but his face made a lopsided grimace. "Thank you, Babeeee!" he whispered and was disturbed at how false he sounded, how breezy and American and insincere.

She was waiting for him when he unlatched the bathroom door.

"Leg," she said, pointing at his wound, and she made him sit in the room with the silent television while she used her finger to dab his knee with iodine. "Pants," she said when she was finished. She took them from him with a grateful bow of her head, as if they were a special gift.

"Where's your mother and father?" he said.

"Temple," she said. She sat down beside him with a needle and thread. Outside he heard clanging bells, some near and some distant. The sound was lulling. If he were an Indian man, if he were Baby's Indian husband and this was their life together, they would sit like this on the floor in the evenings while she mended his pants.

He leaned towards her, smelling the shampoo in her hair. He was close enough to count the single downy black hairs on her upper lip. He leaned closer. And then, because it was right there in front of him, he reached for her calf and held it firmly in his hand. The hair beneath his hand was softer than he had expected, and he could feel the bump of his wart pressing into her skin. She stopped sewing and looked at his hand, and they sat there together staring at it until Elif began to grow uncomfortable.

"Don't you go to the temple?" he whispered.

She made a sour face. "Temple is bad," she said. "Priest is bad man. God is here," she said, and she put her hand on her left breast.

He breathed. "May I touch God?" he said.

She looked at him and shrugged.

"God," she said.

"Yes," he said meekly, removing his hand from her calf and sitting back. He tried to hold her gaze but his eyes began to burn and he looked away.

"You wife is names?" she said.

"Barbara," he said quickly. "Barbara Walters."

"Bar-ba-wa-ters," she said.

"Why did you get divorced?" he asked.

"Man is bad," she said. She went a shelf and brought him a cassette tape case. On the cover was a middle-aged man with a handlebar mustache holding a long cylindrical drum. She put her finger on his face.

"This my husband," she said. "Bad man."

He opened the case but there was no cassette inside.

"Tape broken," she said, smiling.

He smiled back. "You broke it?"

She nodded and took the case and put it away again.

"He dirty," she said, fixing her eyes on him. "Like dog."

He leaned back against the wall and picked at his henna. She brought him a bowl of water and he washed the residue from his hand. The lines beneath were dark orange, and he was struck by how graceful they now appeared. Where before they had seemed clumsy, now the vines and leaves were wholly natural and delicate climbing over his palm and fingers. She held up her own hand and showed him the design there, identical to his own.

"Same same," she said.

"Same same," he replied. He wanted them to put their palms together now in a sort of rudimentary embrace, and afterwards they would be promised to one another for life. He would leave and get an imaginary divorce. Then he would come back and ask for her hand in marriage. The wedding would be enormous, with garish music and endless food and curious villagers. Then they would leave for America where they would settle in a new city, some place Midwestern and anonymous that he'd never considered before, any place where people didn't know his name, and secretly he would have his name officially changed to Ned, and when they had a baby boy he would name it Elif, and in this way he would remain true to both his old self and his new one.

After a while she said, "Finish," and held the pants up for him to see. She had mended them skillfully, pulling the two sides of the rip together in a taught line. He went to the bathroom and put them on. When he handed her the *lungi* he was sad to give it back. Again she took it from him like it was a precious gift.

"I making you henna?" she said, pointing to his left hand.

Instinctively he closed his hand to hide the wart, but then he found himself nodding and sitting down while she prepared the foil cone. She sat beside him and took his wrist, holding it tightly.

"Open," she said.

Elif's heart was pounding as he relaxed his fingers and slowly opened his fist.

"Oh." she said, staring for a moment. Then she made a long hissing sound and pushed his arm away. "Dirty man," she said, and rose to her feet. "Bad man."

"Baby—" he said, but she was pressing her foot hard into his side, pushing him away with her toes while she hissed through her teeth.

"*Going!*" she said, and then spat a curse at him that sounded like "*mustard*" or "*mustache."* He stumbled to the door and struggled to put on his shoes without falling over. Behind him she was muttering angrily. When he glanced back, she was clutching a short broom.

"Baby—" he said again, but she was coming at him, swinging the broom, furious now and—he thought—beautiful in her rage. He rushed from her doorway down the cobblestone path, scattering a host of sparrows into the dim evening sky.

He slowed to a walk as he rounded the corner. It was nearly dark and the street was empty. He was breathing hard and the soles of his feet hurt from running, but he felt strangely good—somehow relieved of a weight he hadn't known he was carrying. He was a dirty man, then. Ok. He pressed the wart hard into his palm and shivered as the wave of familiar pain and relief passed through him. He was *mustard* or *mustache* or whatever it was she'd called him, and it was good to finally know this for certain. Maybe now he could leave.

From behind him came a sudden clapping, and for an absurd moment he imagined it was Ella, heartily applauding him for a realization long overdue. Then the sound grew louder and he knew it was sandals slapping against stone. He looked back to see that Baby was still chasing him, her broom held aloft like an ax and her white eyes wild and terrifying in the darkness.

5

Slippage

Sigrid loved the American boy and he loved pot. She had left Sweden in May to be with him, and now the Atlanta summer crawled by like a wounded animal. His parents had gone to Europe on extended vacation, but before leaving his mother had taken her out to breakfast, just the two of them, and asked her directly, "What are your intentions with my Eli?"

"He is my best friend," she had replied, to which his mother, skeptical, had smiled blandly and sipped her coffee.

The young couple's job was to mind his parents' house and walk the big yellow dog that lay panting on the screen porch and only barked at black men. Eli smoked openly at first, but Sigrid criticized him for smoking too much and he became secretive. He took the dog for long walks in the woods. His showers behind the locked bathroom door seemed endless. Sigrid knew he was stoned because his eyes hid behind a frosted sheen of glass, and he was distant even when he nuzzled her neck and whispered that he loved her. This new, blunted intimacy left her unsettled, because she could still sense his true self, the one she remembered from last summer in Sweden, buried as if beneath a pile of mildewed blankets.

Eli wanted her to get stoned. He made her try pipes and joints and three different kinds of bongs. It only gave her a headache, and she grew to hate it like she had hated her father's drinking—the milky-eyed, sub-aquatic distance, the ever-present secrecy, the selfish other-life of the addict's hidden love.

But when he was not stoned his face opened up, his eyes cleared, and everything she had fallen in love with last summer was there again. He was a sprightly fish of a boy and she loved his high-pitched laugh. She taught him Swedish words, which he mangled endearingly. They

would chase each other through the house, shrieking, and the big dog would bark and herd them down. When she caught him she would wrap her fingers around his throat and say in a zombie's voice, "Maaaaarriage!" and this would fill him with hilarious panic.

Meanwhile Sigrid's father was slowly dying in Sweden and she refused to go home to him. Not her mother's pleading nor the odd-hour phone calls from her parents' friends could convince her to return to her father at his death bed. Even Eli in his lucid moments was baffled that she stayed. She tried to explain to him that her father had been drunk for so long that he already seemed dead, that his choice to die now, just as she was escaping him, was ultimate proof of his selfishness. Nights she lay awake and felt like she was chewing on this old American house but couldn't swallow. She drifted to sleep and ate tuna fish candy and pulled slippery pink worms from her vagina. She saw her father, tall and slender as a pine tree, stepping through the forest with a hunting rifle. He disappeared into the shadows and she realized she was wearing his black rubber hunting boots, so big on her feet that she stumbled when she tried to walk.

"The camping trip is coming up," Eli announced one afternoon in July.

"Camping trip?"

"Me and the guys," he said. "The guy-trip. We've been planning it forever."

"*Guy*-trip?" said Sigrid.

"The one I told you about in my letter."

"Which letter?"

"The one where I told you I was thinking of going camping this summer."

"You said *we* might go camping."

"But then you said you hated camping, so I . . ." He trailed off and turned to look out the window. "Look, I promised I would go. You can come, but you'd be the only girl. It's supposed to be a guy-trip."

"So you say that I can't come."

"I'm saying it might be weird. It would be weird, you being the only girl there."

"So I am not invited?"

"You're invited, it's just that—"

"And I will take care of your parents' house alone?"

"Just for a couple of days. Sam is here."

"With the dog?"

"We've been planning this forever."

"But you forgot to tell me?"

"Look, Sam needs a walk," he said. "We'll talk about it when I get back." Eli went to his bedroom to rummage through a drawer before leaving. Sigrid listened to the gate open and close outside, and then she was alone in the house.

Occasionally, all on their own, the wooden floors would creak. Eli's father had told Sigrid it was called slippage—an old house sinking into its foundations. Later, Eli had told her it was a homeless woman who slept in the basement, sneaking in at night and making a bed for herself in the boxes. She had half-believed him, just as she had half-believed him when he had written that in America the kitchen faucets poured Coca-Cola.

When he came back she could smell the smoke on his clothes. He stood in the kitchen drinking a glass of water and staring at her. He tried to meet her eyes but she wouldn't allow it. She saw the bulge of his pipe in his pants pocket.

"We should eat dinner," he said. "I'll make some Ramen."

"Except I'm not one bit hungry for noodles."

He laughed. "You sound like my mom. Where did you get 'not one bit hungry'?"

"The Rickie Lake Show."

"You've been watching television?"

"The woman wasn't one bit ashamed."

"What wasn't she one bit ashamed of?"

"She wasn't one bit ashamed of being a lesbian who was married to a man."

"Was her husband on the show?"

"Yes. He also wasn't one bit ashamed, but his mother was angry. She was many bits ashamed."

He laughed again. "There's no such thing as many bits."

"Yes," she said, smiling thinly because the language was becoming hers now. "There is."

The kitchen grew immense. Sigrid was on one side and Eli was on the other. He leaned against the counter like a drinker at a pub; she sat stiff as a student in her chair at the kitchen table. Every so often his eyes would drift closed and he would jerk awake as if he had been poked. It was dark outside and the darkness throbbed through the windows. Far away a siren wailed, and on the front porch the yellow dog howled in response.

"You smoked again," she said, staring out the window.

"So?"

"Listen, I am not going to stay here while you go camping with the guys. I can't do it."

"Hey," he said, his eyes widening, "I want to tell you something. While I was out I saw a daddy-long-legs. It had six legs, but used the two front legs like feelers. They didn't have feet on

the bottom, they just tapered off. I couldn't find any eyes either, unless the black dot on its forehead was an eye. It was awesome."

She stared at him.

"I want to tell *you* something," she said. "I love you, Eli, but you are slippaging."

He peered back at her with cloudy eyes. "What do you mean? What's 'slippaging?'"

"You are slippaging."

"Slipping?" He smiled. "You mean slipping. How am I slipping? What did I do?"

"I will leave you before you become my father."

"But I don't get it. How am I 'slippaging?'" He gave a short laugh "And how am I like your father?"

"He drank too much. You smoke too much. His drinking killed him."

"But he isn't dead."

"He is almost dead," she said, and it was quiet in the kitchen after she said this.

"Did your mom call?" he asked, studying the tile floor.

"No," she said, "But Sven did. And then Carl, and then Sylvia. They are all calling now, telling me that I am hurting my father and I will regret this for the rest of my life."

"Well, will you?"

"I don't know," she said, closing her eyes.

Then he looked puzzled. "Wait, who's Sven?"

He walked across the kitchen and stood behind her. Sigrid did not turn in the chair, and watching their reflection in the dark window she noticed his long blond hair falling in front of his shoulders. The blurry image made him look like a woman—a stockier, thick-set version of herself standing above her—peering down at her with a washed out face and two blank holes for

eyes. She watched his hands rub her shoulders and reach beneath her shirt to cup her breasts. A firmness pressed into her shoulder blade through the chair's backrest. It was his pipe.

Eli woke early the next morning to clean the house. They had been sleeping in his parents' king-sized bed, and Sigrid lay on the immense white slab listening to the vacuum knock about the furniture. Occasionally the dog barked angrily, and she imagined the boy was taunting him. He came into the bedroom after cleaning and told her he was going camping. She stared at the ceiling fan while he packed.

"Don't go," she whispered when he bent to kiss her.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I promised." Then he added, "Maybe you should come."

"Stop," she said. "How can I come on the *guy*-trip?"

He didn't answer her, and when he kissed her again she closed her eyes and turned away, listening to the rustling sounds of his leaving, the bag zipping closed, the receding footsteps, the brief rush of the kitchen faucet and the quiet latching of the front door.

Sigrid got up and went to the living room. She hated him for cleaning the house because now there was nothing for her to do. On the leather couch, beneath his parents' reproduction of Flaming June, she lay on her belly and tried to weep. The dog came and stood just inches from her face, watching.

The old house creaked and shifted through the day. Spots on the wooden floor moaned when Sigrid walked over them. The rooms were large and airy with high ceilings, but the walls shrank, casket-close, and she threw open all the windows. At times she swore she could feel the slippage, a subtly increasing tilt that made it impossible to lean back in her chair, as if the house wanted to tip her over and send her crashing to the floor. Walking through the long central

hallway, she felt as if she was hiking uphill, the bathroom a distant rise at the far end of the house. At night came the moths and beetles to perform a pointless dance around the light bulbs.

In the morning her mother called. Her father was definitely dying. There was blood in his brain and he was slowly losing his memory. He spoke rarely now, mixing up his syllables when he did. When a friend had asked him if he wanted to see Sigrid he had said, "*Ney, yen, ney*." After her mother hung up Sigrid continued to hold the phone to her ear, drifting on the quiet hum of the broken line until the signal became shrill and she could no longer bear the sound.

In the afternoon she took the dog for his walk and when she came home clusters of ladybugs were crawling from gaps in the living room windows and covering the inside walls. The house had cracked open, and there were hundreds of them, fat and lethargic as if emerging from hibernation, ladybugs in piles on the window sills, ladybugs belly up and trying to right themselves, dead ladybugs, ladybugs attempting to fly and falling on the floor where they scrambled around aimlessly like bumper cars. A ladybug flew past her head and she realized they had filled the living room, they were all over the couch, the coffee table, drowning in the half-empty cup of her morning tea. The dog was jumping around the room, snapping at ladybugs in the air while she gaped, horrified at the idea of a house that spit insects from its walls.

She took hold of the dog's collar and pulled him to the bedroom and shut him inside. He raked his claws against the door. From the hall closet she lugged the awkward vacuum into the living room and plugged it in. Afterwards, she sat slumped and dazed on the coffee table, her ears ringing. A single ladybug crawled out of the vacuum's wand, one wing poking upwards, and she shuddered at the thought of them packed inside the dark vacuum bag. She pulled the vacuum open and removed the bulging bag. It seemed to tremble in her hands as she walked through the kitchen and opened the door into the back yard.

In the far corner of the yard was a grove of thin bamboo that the dog used to go to the bathroom. Sigrid squeezed herself inside, careful to avoid the calcified piles of shit. She thought about Eli, sitting in a tent somewhere with his lips puckered, sucking on a pipe, laughing at something his friends had said. His laugh, she knew, would be different around them, a deeper laugh, a shorter laugh, a little bit cruel. He was laughing his head off, she thought, he was having the last laugh. He was laughing in her face and the laugh was on her. She nearly laughed, and then she choked, and then she sobbed just once and grew silent. The vacuum bag writhed in her palms and she turned it over and shook it, dumping ladybugs and lint and dog hair all over the ground. The red-speckled pile moved grotesquely in the leaves. If only it would snow, she thought, desperately wishing it was winter and the world was blotted out beneath a clean white carpet of death.

She looked back at the house. It was dark with the shadows of afternoon. In the bedroom window was the yellow dog, standing with his front paws on the sill and watching her. She had always loved dogs, but she felt nothing for this big American animal. If she slipped and fell, if the house raised a treacherous tile to trip her in the kitchen, if she hit her head on the floor and bled to death, the yellow dog would not be sad. He would whine at the back door, eat the food in his bowl, shit in the corner, and when he was hungry enough, he would lap at her blood with his long pink tongue.

Sigrid went back inside. The dog scraped at the bedroom door. Above the windows in the living room a few drowsy ladybugs still clung to the wall.

She called her mother.

“How is he?” she said

"Very bad," said her mother. "But he's awake, and he said he forgives you for not coming home."

"But I'm coming home," said Sigrid. "I've decided."

There was a silence on the other end of the line, thick with static from the overseas connection.

Her mother sighed. "Hurry then."

An hour later she sat on her duffel in the hallway outside the bedroom. All around her the house was shifting and groaning, anxious for her to leave. It seemed to lean forward now, as if to dump her out, and she had to grip the bedroom door frame to keep herself in place. The central hallway had become a long narrow tunnel, slick and steep. At the end was the open front door, a tiny dot of sunlight. At any moment the taxi would arrive. She would take a deep breath. The yellow dog would bark once like the crack of a pistol. Then she would let go, sliding down the hallway on her duffle bag, eyes closed, praying for safe passage as she slipped like a breech baby, feet first out of the American house.

6

This Is Why I Live

Yamuna always insisted on *ShriDevi Chalk Works Pure White Chalk*. The box featured a grinning white elephant with a broad shaft of chalk clenched in its trunk. Yamuna bought her sticks separately, twice a day, because she liked the ritual of stopping at the stationers and requesting the chalk in her most polite voice. She liked watching the stationer reach behind him for the elephant box, lift open its dusty flap and slide out a gleaming fresh stick. She liked the sound of it scraping gently against the other pieces; a muted tinkle with the faintest hint of magical ring.

Yamuna ate the chalk, secretly.

This is how Yamuna ate chalk at school without anyone knowing: she kept her stick in the front pocket of her school frock, covered with a soiled white hanky—always crumpled. During class Yamuna would massage the thin cylinder of chalk. It never got sweaty or wet because of its absorbency. She would work her thumbnail against it, steadily sawing through near the edge, so that after a few minutes she could break off a small chunk. Then, Yamuna would yawn, cough, or laugh if it was appropriate, and while covering her mouth, flick out her tongue and lap up the tiny chunk with practiced ease. This method regulated her intake throughout the day.

Yamuna liked to vary her ways of eating chalk. In school she never chewed it outright unless she was alone in the bathroom. Walking home she liked to crunch the first few bites of a brand new stick. In bed at night after her father was asleep, she would take out her chalk, by now half gone, and lick it slowly from bottom to top with the tip of her tongue. It was life's greatest pleasure. Nothing rivaled the silent rapture, the pure intimacy she felt when she was

alone with her chalk in the dark safety of her bedroom, softly licking until it dissolved into a wet stain against her palm.

And then one day Yamuna went home with her classmate Manoj after school and met his brother Pradeep, who had a bottle of glue.

"You kids better not try this," said Pradeep who was twelve to Manoj and Yamuna who were ten.

"We don't want to try it," said Manoj.

But Yamuna caught a whiff of the glue's thick chemical odor and watched transfixed while Pradeep smeared some on the inside of a plastic bag and held it over his face. Breathing in and out, expanding and deflating the foggy plastic bag, beginning to swoon, Pradeep roped his arms around himself and lay back on the floor, slack eyed and dreamy.

"Can we try it, Manoj?" said Yamuna.

Manoj had a crush on Yamuna, and he wanted Yamuna to fancy him, so he took the plastic bag from his brother's limp hand. He smeared the inside with a little more glue, while Yamuna read the bottle label out loud in her classroom recital voice:

Daytone Synthetic Gum, Adhepex 10, 50 mL. Made in India by the Daylight Industries, A-2 Indira Square, Scheme 31, Calcutta – four five tripple zero one

"I'll go first to make sure it's ok," said brave Manoj.

Yamuna screwed the lid off the plastic bottle while Manoj's breath rumpled and tightened the little plastic bag. She brought the bottle to her nose and sniffed gingerly. A sharp

line of pleasure quickened down the back of her neck, and she inhaled deep into her lungs. The smell was like plastic but heavy, sweet, and wet. She felt the fumes coat her nostrils and creep down her throat. It was so chemical, so unnatural, yet so elemental and pure. Yamuna felt she had known it all her life.

Yamuna sniffed glue, leaving the chalk habit behind.

The stationary man didn't mind because glue was more expensive, and more addictive too. Yamuna was smart. She told Manoj after a week of sniffing glue that she was quitting. She never wanted to do it again and that he better stop too or she would tell the teacher. Manoj stopped. Yamuna quickly moved into a steady habit of two bottles a week.

Glue sniffing at school she confined to the bathroom. Yamuna would prepare three bags in the morning before leaving home, seal each with tight single knots, and stuff them in her front pocket beneath the soiled white hanky. Her chalk habit had prepared her for the glue. She refined her techniques. She knew not to be impatient or rush off to the bathroom conspicuously. She varied the timing of her breaks throughout the week. To save precious minutes she taught herself to sniff and pee at the same time, and soon it became difficult to pass water without the glue.

Each bag was good for two sessions. Yamuna liked to take herself just to the edge of dizziness at school. She didn't want to pass out in the bathroom or appear too groggy when she came back to class. Though it was difficult to control her heavy eyes and waning attention, Yamuna managed to stay somewhat focused in class for the simple reason that a better student was less watched. Despite her mellow giddiness, and the urge to drift away into the soft palpitations of the teacher's drone, Yamuna raised her hands to answer questions, made small

talk with her classmates, giggled when everyone else did so she never stood out, and the glue remained a secret.

Yamuna also liked to binge. She lay in bed at night, preparing her bag beneath the covers, and suddenly wanted to inhale all the glue in the bottle. She knew another bottle wouldn't be possible until the end of the week when she got her allowance, but she couldn't resist the craving that pulsed through her body, from her toe-tips to the crown of her head.

Giving in to the most decadent pleasure, she squeezed the entire contents into the bag, slipped it silkily over her face and breathed until the darkness around her lit up with tiny swirling stars and bright shoots of yellow-orange light flickered out from her peripheries, fast and dazzling at first, then slower and throbbing like a heartbeat, then fainter, fainter, until she slipped into a furry-mouthed, dreamless sleep.

Yamuna turned fourteen. About a month after her birthday, she had a bad day at school. Somehow one of her glue bags had gone missing and she had nothing to sustain herself for the last 3 hours of class. She sat for a nervous hour tapping her fingers against her thighs, rubbing her arms, biting her fingernails until she discovered herself quietly moaning. Feigning sickness, she begged the teacher to give her leave.

Yamuna reached home in a flurry of nerves and quickly prepared herself a bag of glue. It was just past one in the afternoon. Her father would be home at two. Before inhaling, Yamuna sat for a quiet moment, relishing her freedom, the sensation of the bag in her hand, the thick rising scent of the Daytone wafting beneath her nose.

"This is why I live," she thought.

She inhaled deeply and felt the world begin to sway. The room throbbed in front of her, slowly like a reflection in water. The walls glowed from within themselves. A deep bluish light washed down from the windows. She was in a tunnel with streaking lights on all sides. Now there was a flickering flame, minuscule at the end of the tunnel, and as Yamuna reached for it, she felt her body lifted up and pulled beyond itself.

She jerked awake. Her body was bolted to the bed beneath heavy blankets. Above her the fluorescent light was buzzing. She groaned and pulled the blankets off. A headache had spread through her skull. Yamuna blinked in the piercing brightness.

"Glue . . ." said a voice in the back of her head. She reached beneath her pillow and found no glue bottle.

A silent wail began inside of her. "Gluuu . . ." No glue bottle. Something was wrong. Her day came back to her. Leaving school early, sitting on the floor of the room with her bottle, thinking about her father . . .

"Gluuuuuuuuuu . . ." said a sick, hollow voice in her head. She scanned the floor for her glue bottle and saw only her book satchel and lunch pail. Her bedroom door creaked, and her father appeared in the doorway. His shoulders were rigid and he was frowning.

After the beating, Yamuna's father kept her home for a month. He swore she would never leave the house again, not for school, not for shopping, not for anything until she was married.

"If you ever touch that glue again," he growled, "I will kill you myself and blame it on an overdose. You decide, Yamuna. If you want to join your mother in the afterlife that is your decision, but don't make me go to hell for sending you there."

Yamuna's first week without glue was only pain. Her head throbbed, her mouth dried out, her lips cracked and bled.

"Put some oil on your lips for god's sake," said her father, but Yamuna could hardly bring herself to move. Everything reminded her of glue. She tried sniffing markers but it was a pitiful substitute. Gas from the kitchen stove didn't appeal to her. Only one thing eased the pain ever so slightly, and that was the odor of her father's prized *National Geographics*—the old editions. Her father had long been a subscriber. His letter of membership to the National Geography Society was in a gold frame on the wall, and had issues dating back to the mid 70's. Yamuna sat for hours with her nose pressed deep into the creases of editions from '73 to '76, where for some reason, the adhesive was different, more pungent and memorable than the years before or after. When her father found his daughter engrossed in reading it assuaged his anger.

At least she's doing something worthwhile now, he thought, and finally allowed her to return to school.

School without glue felt impossible to Yamuna, like eating a plateful of unboiled rice, or sitting still while mosquitoes bit her flesh. She attempted to eat chalk again but found the taste no longer appealing. The powdery texture and bitter tinge made her stomach heave and her throat gag.

Every morning her father drove her to school on the back of his scooter and every afternoon he drove her home. When they passed the stationers Yamuna would emit a short,

inaudible moan. She couldn't control it, and the desperate pleading voice in the back of her head grew louder and more demanding.

"Gluuuuuuuuuu . . ." it wailed like a sick peacock.

"Glue!" it barked like a wounded street dog.

But there was no glue for Yamuna. She knew her father would kill her if she touched it again.

When Yamuna turned 16 her father decided she should marry. It was premature, he knew, but for the past 2 years his daughter's life had become a sloppy mess. Her grades were awful. Her lips were constantly chapped and pealing. She didn't wash her hair enough and it was full of dandruff. She often stayed home sick, complaining of migraine headaches. Arriving from work in the afternoons he would find her deeply engrossed in an old *National Geographic*, but when he tried to question her about her reading, she could give only a pitiful summary.

"Sharks in the Caribbean Sea," she would say, or "The People of Germany," and he realized she was just reciting the headings on the covers. My daughter has completely ruined her own mind, he thought, but it must be God's will. Best to pass her off as soon as possible.

"The priest has found a boy whose horoscope matches your own," he said one day. Yamuna was leafing through a National Geographic. On the cover was an ape holding a camera. Yamuna stared at a photo of a beautiful blond woman holding an ape like it was a human baby. She wished her father would leave the room so she could drop her nose into the binding and breathe, forget, disappear. The news did not seem to affect her.

"His name is Pradeep," her father said, "I think you went to school with his brother Manoj. His parents are eager to get him married and we have made all the arrangements."

Yamuna looked up from her magazine. Her face was expressionless as a piece of plywood, but then the mask broke as she involuntarily twitched her nose

Yamuna married Pradeep at the temple by the muddy lake. Her family was small, and Pradeep's was large, so the ceremony was dominated by people she didn't know. As required, she cried throughout the proceedings, frowned for the photos, and said nothing unless questioned.

"Such a good and docile bride," said Pradeep's family, "and see how pale she is! Her children will certainly be fair skinned."

Once she caught Manoj staring at her, but he looked away.

The wedding bed was strewn with orange flowers when they arrived at his family's home late that night after the ceremonies. In silence they sat side by side on the bed, garlands still draped around their stiff silk clothes. Both knew what was expected of them.

After some time, Pradeep spoke.

"I am also a virgin," he said.

Yamuna averted her eyes.

"We can turn off the lights," he said softly. "It will not be so bad."

Yamuna said nothing.

"Of course I know exactly how to do it . . ." he trailed off, embarrassed. Yamuna wished only that morning would come, and night with its painful intimacy would be over.

They were silent for some time until Pradeep spoke again, softly.

"Yamuna, do you remember the day Manoj brought you home, and we all had that . . . glue?"

Yamuna stared at the floor.

"Yamuna . . ." he struggled, "I sometimes . . . still do that."

"Oh?" said Yamuna, so faintly Pradeep was unsure she had spoken.

"You don't mind, Yamuna? I would like to have some now. It will calm me."

Pradeep opened a drawer by the bed, pulled out a bottle with a label Yamuna had never seen, and smeared the inside of a plastic bag, just as he had done 6 years before.

"After this I will fall asleep, Yamuna. We can do that other thing tomorrow. Nobody has to know." He raised the bag to face, prepared to inhale, then noticed his young wife staring. A rush of unexpected tenderness poured into him.

"Do you . . . want to try some, Yamuna?"

Yamuna didn't speak.

"You can," he said softly. "It's ok, Yamuna. You can."

Pradeep placed the plastic bag over Yamuna's nose and mouth. Her body tensed but she did not turn away.

"Breathe it, Yamuna." His voice was a whisper, thick with muffled passion. "Breathe it."

Yamuna breathed, and it was like she had never breathed before. The smell was new, potent, stronger than Daytone. It entered her like a solid shaft of light, pulsing deeper with every breath. It stung her throat and she welcomed the sting. Her nostrils burned. She wrinkled her nose to open them wider. Her back arched and her throat quivered in a slow and building moan.

"Breathe it, Yamuna . . ." said the disembodied beat of the Pradeep's voice, until Yamuna's ears heard nothing but a deep reverberating hum. Her heartbeats solidified into a continuous loop of sound, and all she saw everywhere were bright, popping, somnambulant orange flowers.

7

The Swallow

The father's problem is that he cannot look away. Every morning for a week now he has come to the garage to stare at the ruined bicycles, the pancaked wheels and jutting spokes, front forks twisted like crossed fingers, seat posts snapped clean in half, and a chunk of a car's plastic bumper still stuck between a wheel and a chain stay. He wants to understand, but nothing in his body of knowledge has prepared him for this mangled geometry, this sum of pure wreckage. What the father understands are problems of uniform motion, the relationship between distance, speed, and time. If two cyclists leave town at 9 am going 15 mph, and a car leaves town at 10 am going 50 mph on the same road, the father can tell you exactly what time they will meet. He teaches these kinds of problems to children at the high school, and every once in a while a smartass in the back row will raise his hand and asks why it matters. *This* is why it matters, the father will say next time, and he will pull from his wallet a photograph of the ruined bicycles and tell them the story of how his children almost died.

He comes here to the garage in the mornings to escape the damaged bodies in the house. His son-in-law has a broken arm, eighty five stitches in his head, gashes and road burn down his legs. His daughter's spine is damaged, she has multiple fractures in her legs, and her face is a purple scab that glows and pulsates when she talks of suing the girl. The girl, no more than twenty, who begged to see them in the hospital and wept on the phone, who said if she could only trade places with them she would.

"Oh no," said the father.

But she would, she insisted, she would give anything to take back what happened. And still the daughter has refused to see her; only the son-in-law agreed, letting her hold his hand while she cried and dug her fingers into bleary eyes.

"It's okay," the son-in-law said to her so she would leave the room before the daughter was back from her CAT scan.

The girl wanted to stay, take care of them, and the father had to tell her there wasn't any need. He and the mother could take care of the children. "Thank you for your concern," he said.

And then she wanted to tell him the story again, even though she had told it to him once on the phone and once again in the lobby outside of the ICU.

"I was coming around a bend. There was a hawk in a pine tree and I was watching it when I hit them. I saw them fly off their bikes and land in the road. I wanted to hold them both but I couldn't drag them close enough together so I wrapped his head in my shirt and held her until a car came."

Every time she tells him this story the father shakes his head, cracks his knuckles, and says *I understand,* and yet lately he has begun constructing more and more impossible problems: if a car traveling 50 mph collides with 2 bicycles traveling 15 mph in the same direction, how far do the cyclists fly through the air? At what velocity? How many seconds pass before their bodies crash into the ground?

The father has tried to convince the daughter to see the girl, but each time she stiffens, whispering in her raspy voice that she never wants see *that woman* again as long as she lives.

"Can we tell her you forgive her?" says the mother.

No, she does not forgive her.

"Can we just tell her you accept her apology?"

No, she does not accept her apology or anything else that woman has to offer. And she will never accept the new bicycles waiting on their doorstep when they arrived at home, with a note from the girl explaining it was the least she could do, bicycles the exact make and model of the ones destroyed.

The father has hung the new bikes on hooks in the far back corner of the garage, upsetting a family of swallows nested in the crook of a rafter there, but it's the ruined bikes he can't stop staring at, these pieces of garbage so useless and priceless at the same time. To throw them away? Like dumping a dead body in the trashcan. To bury them? In the back yard? He imagines himself in the dry grass with a shovel, digging two holes side by side, covering them with dirt, making mounds not long and narrow like human graves, but rounded patches of earth like huge zeros on the land, two dead brown eyes looking up at the sky.

The daughter is so exquisitely angry she can barely speak of the accident. Her anger seems more precious than her life, and it is the anger itself that the father knows she is convalescing now instead of her body. She spends most of the day in bed, fuming, occasionally dragging herself into her wheelchair and cursing under her breath. The father winces at the words she whispers in her anger and pain, words he'd kick a kid out of his classroom for, so natural in her mouth it's like she's practiced them for years. She is a brittle stack of rage rolling around the house, tightlipped and trembling when the mother helps her use the bathroom, sullen and narrow-eyed at the dinner table as the father serves the scalloped potatoes and ham.

And the house is crowded now, with son-in-law, daughter, and the mother's mother who has been living with them for the last six months. The grandmother has dementia, and daily asks, "Who are these people in my house?"

She looks offended when the father says, "It's our house. We all live here."

The grandmother says, “Who is that woman? The lame ugly one.”

“That’s your granddaughter,” says the father. “Your *granddaughter*.”

And the grandmother hisses, “I don’t have a *daughter*.”

The father knows he needs to calm her down, because if she gets upset she is unpredictable and prone to incidents like the one three days ago when the mother came home and found her alone in the kitchen.

“How was your day, Mom?”

“Oh, it was a great day. We’ve decided. It’s settled.”

“What’s settled, Mom?”

“Why, me and him,” meaning the father, “we’re getting married. Didn’t he tell you? We’re in love.”

And that night the mother cried in bed, weeping softly so only the father could hear. *Shh*, he said, rubbing her back. *Shh, shh, shh*, because he simply has no solution to this problem, no formula for sorting out the concentrated anguish that has swallowed his family whole.

In school his students strike him as astounding fools. They sit grinning behind their desks like smug clowns, eat Cheetos and chew open-mouthed, flashing their orange-stained teeth at each other. They whisper and nudge and fidget in their chairs while he tries to teach. Last week one boy, a good student, filled the momentary silence after a question with an explosive fart, and the whole class erupted into bawdy cheers and an extended chanting of the boy’s name. For the first time in nearly twenty years of teaching the father did nothing to quell a class disturbance. He walked to his desk and sat down, put his head in his hands and covered his eyes until the chanting stopped and the students began a nervous shushing. They whispered and coughed as the

father sat at his desk, and finally they grew completely silent until the bell rang and the father listened to them shuffle out of the room.

The father was still slumped over his desk when he heard the boy cough.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ray."

He lifted his head and blinked at the boy. The classroom was empty but for the two of them.

"It was rude of me."

The boy's freckled face was flushed and he was holding out a piece of paper. "I did the problem," he said.

The father looked at the paper with its neat rows of penciled numbers and the solution circled at the bottom in a wide elliptical ring.

"No," he said.

"It's not right?"

"Apology not accepted," he said, and put his head back in his hands.

* * *

Forgiveness, thinks he father. He bends to run his finger across a twisted portion of a bicycle's down tube where the paint has cracked and risen like parched earth. A thing designed *for giving* away. It was twenty-one years ago that his car struck and killed a retarded girl at a bus stop early one winter morning. The roads were icy, and she had stepped off the curb, people said afterwards, to check for the bus. He had not been speeding. It was not his fault, the witnesses all agreed, and yet the father had gone to her funeral desperate for forgiveness. His daughter was two, and he had held her in his arms though both the service and the burial, refusing his wife's offers to take her even when he went to pay his respects to the girl's parents.

"I am so sorry," he said to them, taking care to look the father in the eye as he said it.

They thanked him and shook his hand as if he were just another sympathetic acquaintance. Afterwards he realized he had kept his daughter in his arms as shield and security in case they attacked him, and for years afterwards it was not the retarded girl's death that scalded him anew every time he recalled that winter, not the terrifying moment of impact when his car stuck her legs and she turned a sickening flip and landed on the hood, but the fact that he had hidden behind his child to avoid the threat of their anger and to bolster his chances of grace.

Two days ago, the last time the girl called, the father lied and said that even though his daughter was too upset to say it in person, she had accepted the girl's apology. The girl wept and thanked him and the next day there was a small apple tree sapling on their doorstep, its root ball wrapped in burlap and a card tied to one of the branches with red string. *Thank you for your kindness to me*, it said. Carefully the father untied the card and slipped it into his pocket. At dinner that night he announced that he had decided to bury the ruined bicycles in the back yard and plant a tree on the spot.

"Why?" said the son-in-law.

"So we can move on," he said.

"Those bikes are *evidence*," said the daughter, her voice already taught and trembling.

"We need to move on," said the father, fixing his eyes on the daughter, and for the briefest moment he wanted desperately to be holding her again—the tiny two year-old her—as he faced off against this scabbed and wounded woman at his table.

Then the grandmother in her dry voice said, "Somebody has been stealing from me," and the table fell suddenly silent.

"Nobody is stealing, Mom," said the mother, reaching for the grandmother's hand. The old woman was clutching her fork like a weapon.

"Those bikes are evidence for the trial!" shouted the daughter, banging her fist on the table.

"Somebody in this house is *taking* what doesn't *belong* to them," said the grandmother.

The mother was trying to pry the fork from the grandmother's hand. The daughter pushed away from the table, but the corner of her wheelchair was hung up on the leg of the grandmother's chair.

"Move!" she yelled at the old woman.

"You're a dirty thief," said the grandmother to the daughter.

"And you're crazy," spat the daughter, and the father leapt up to pull her away. The mother had begun to cry.

"Don't you *touch* those bicycles," said the daughter as the father wheeled her back to her bedroom. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes," said the father, who later that night sat at the uncleared kitchen table in grim wonder after everyone else had gone to bed. Perhaps, he thought, what I need is a much simpler arithmetic: What is the sum of two severely wounded children, a demented grandmother, a shell-shocked father and a mother worn to threads trying to care for them all? What do you get when you divide five adults by crippling injury, untenable rage, incurable madness, and no clear idea how to cope?

He has no answer. He stands here bewildered as ever this fifth morning in a row before the tangled metal, this Sunday morning when the mother and grandmother are gone to church and the children should be waking up, climbing out of bed, hungry and in pain, with nobody to

help them to the bathroom or make them breakfast. He leaves the garage and walks past the sapling lying discarded on its side in the graying grass of the lawn. It is already beginning to wilt. Inside the house he steps across the kitchen linoleum to the hallway that leads to his daughter's old bedroom. Approaching the doorway he hears again his daughter's muffled voice, again the frustrated grunting sounds of moving her stiff body from bed to wheelchair. *Fuck*, whispered between labored breaths. *Fucking fuck*, she says as he reaches for the handle.

He opens the door. The room is a soft brown. Light streams through the far window onto the dark wood paneling. They are on the bed, uncovered, a square patch of sunlight illuminating their naked middles. The daughter is on top, her casted legs stacked on the son-in-law's like a haphazard pile of logs. Their bruised and swollen faces are flushed pinkish, their scabby arms are clutching at each other as their comingled bodies jerk back and forth like a damaged machine. The son-in-law moans softly, his eyes clenched while the daughter hisses in his ear, and gaining speed the casts knock together and creak with friction, the mattress crunches and dust motes are frantic in the sunlight above their bodies.

The father stands in the doorway and watches. He cannot look away. Not now and not tomorrow, not in the classroom when the glare of the projector catches one eye and blinds him momentarily, not as the grandmother's body is lowered into the earth, not as his baby grandson settles into the crook of his arm and falls asleep, and not eleven years later in the corner of his empty garage when the father spies a bright ray of sunlight illuminating the weathered skeleton of a tiny swallow, a brittle ball of twig-bones latticed around a tapered skull. Picking it up, cupping it in his hand and holding its near-absent weight, he feels a stirring so alive and vital that he shudders and drops the thing, certain it is about unfold its puzzle of bones and fly.

8

Friends of Babies

Midway through winter they found the baby on the street, a thin, dirty baby with legs so long it looked like someone had stretched them. The woman knelt on the ground, extended her hand, and when the baby cried she grabbed it and told the man she was never letting this baby go. She squeezed the baby against her chest and carried it to a cart where a boy was selling boiled eggs.

You are mine, she said to the baby. She put it on the ground and held it in place by the shoulders, then peeled eggs with one hand and crumbled them into a steaming pile for the baby to eat. The baby touched the pile with its finger and jerked back. It tried to crawl away but the woman hovered over it, blocking its path. When the baby had smeared the eggs into the dust she picked it up and held it close, saying You are mine, little baby.

That night the baby cried and thrashed in its long rag-lined box. When they turned on the light they saw tiny bugs on the baby's skin.

We'll have to give it a serious bath, said the man.

I want her to sleep with us tonight, said the woman.

You will not bring that baby into this bed, he said.

I will, she said. This baby is mine. Her name is Thakur and she can do whatever she wants.

What kind of name is Thakur? said the man.

Thakur is a name for big strong men, she said.

Big strong men?

Yes.

You mean like Biff?

What is Biff?

A name, he said. Biff is like, a tough guy kind of name.

Yes, she said. A tough guy name. That is Thakur. She is a tough guy.

The baby stiffened, then vomited a few pieces of egg.

The next day the man and woman went shopping for baby clothes. They left the baby on the terrace so it could look at the street and not feel alone. When they came home the baby was gone. The woman ran to the neighbors but nobody answered their doors. Finally an old woman knocked on her window and pointed across the street. The baby was lying in a basket of clothes at the washerman's stand. The woman ran down to the stand and clutched the baby and twisted back and forth. The baby's long legs swung from side to side like ropes of dough.

Thakur Thakur Thakur! she said to the baby. The washerman said the baby had jumped off the terrace after they'd left. It was a ten foot drop but the baby had landed in a soft patch of mud and was ok.

The woman carried the baby into the house saying, Stoopid, stoopid, stoopid.

Don't call it stupid, said the man. It was just scared.

Stoopid is a good thing to call a baby, she said. My first baby was named Stoopid, and I want Thakur to be a naughty, naughty baby like Stoopid.

Why? he said.

Those are the best kinds of babies, she said.

Soon the baby got sick. The doctor told them the baby was sick from lying on the cold floor all day. He said he couldn't help them. They cursed him and left his office and went to another

doctor. The second doctor was more expensive and he did a test and told them the baby had been poisoned.

This baby's toxicity levels are double the safe amount! he said.

Can you save it Doctor? said the man.

Save Thakur! said the woman.

The doctor tried to save the baby with an I.V. drip but it was too late, and the baby died.

Thakur! cried the woman, sitting over the dead baby in the living room where they had brought it, wrapped in a new shirt.

Little thing, said the man, stroking the baby's dirty back.

The man and woman stopped seeing one another. Then they started up again, even though the man said he was planning to leave the country soon, and when he left it would definitely be over. The woman banged her head against a window. Then she went out and came home with two new babies, one light skinned and one dark.

This baby is Mu and this baby is Daa, said the woman.

Fine, said the man. I'm going to Saudi Arabia, like tomorrow.

After the man was gone the woman moved to a new neighborhood. During the days when she was at work, she left the babies with an old woman who sold tobacco on the corner.

A baby is gone, said the old woman when the woman came home after work one day.

Daa! said the woman. Where is Mu?

The baby named Daa was eating a cigarette butt and didn't look at her.

She'll come back, said the old woman. Can you pay me now?

The baby named Daa grew into an adult-sized baby, and spent its days crawling on the floor and putting lint in its mouth. It was bow-legged. Sometimes in the evenings the woman sat on her new terrace and appeared happy. She was making lots of money at work and she could afford excellent floor pillows. The man called to say he was back in the country, but when he came to the woman's new apartment and saw the adult-baby he wouldn't come inside.

We should go eat pizza and then to my hotel room, he said.

Daa likes thin-crust pizza! said the woman. Let's bring thin-crust pizza home for Daa!

It will get cold, said the man.

You can heat thin-crust pizza with the space heater, said the woman. I do it all the time actually.

The man said it was either pizza and his hotel room or he was leaving. He had a meeting tomorrow and he couldn't let the adult-baby get his good pants dirty.

Be a good baby, Daa, said the woman as she left.

At the man's hotel room the woman was too sad to have sex. The man went to the bathroom and stayed inside for a long time. When he came out the woman said she was finished crying and they could have sex now, but the man said No, he had taken care of things inside the bathroom.

But I want to make a baby, said the woman.

You already have a baby, said the man.

I want to make your baby, said the woman. So you will love it.

Ok, said the man, and they tried to have sex.

I keep thinking about Thakur, said the woman.

Little thing, said the man.

Thakur's body buried underground in a bag of salt, said the woman.

Little thing, said the man.

When the woman got home the next morning the adult-baby had destroyed all of the floor pillows. Cotton batting covered everything like television snow. The adult-baby was eating the batting. It started coughing and wouldn't stop, and then it was coughing up blood and the woman chewed her one long fingernail.

Daa! she said.

The expensive doctor examined the adult-baby and said, This baby has a ruptured stomach!

Save Daa! said the woman.

I'll try, said the doctor, but a few minutes later the adult-baby died. A fly buzzed around its head, and the woman swung at it. She punched the air and cried. The doctor looked embarrassed and small.

The woman took the dead adult-baby to a bad part of town. Workmen with handlebar mustaches looked up from their metal lathes and pointed at the baby as she dragged it into an office.

Address? said the man behind the desk. He took a pencil from behind his ear and held it to a clipboard.

My baby, she said. It died.

Address! said the man.

The woman told him her address.

Ok. Yes? said the man.

My baby died. I don't know why it died.

The man looked at her. But what do you want? he said.

She lay the baby on the floor and made a smile for the man. A tuft of hair was sticking out from the V of his shirt collar.

After a moment the man said, Ok wait here, and he walked into another room.

A few minutes later a middle-aged woman came through the door.

What can we do for you?

Are you that man's mother? said the woman.

Usually, said the kind middle-aged woman. What can we do for you.

My baby is dead, said the woman. I need you to cut out its brain and test it. By law you have to do this. I have brought her here. Please take her brain.

We can't do that here, said the kind middle-age woman. This is not a place for brains.

But aren't you Friends of Babies?

We are. But we are not authorized to remove the brains of babies, and besides we have no facility for testing here. We have no operation theater. Or sterile knives.

The woman wept.

Oh, please don't cry. The middle-age woman stepped around the desk and took her hand. Please. Listen to me. You have to go to the City Hospital and give the peon some money. Then they will take the baby and remove its brain. From the brain they will take a small sample. Then they will give you back the body of your baby, and they will also give you the rest of the brain in a plastic bag. After two days you must go back to collect the results. They will tell you everything about your baby.

The woman nodded her head.

Did you find your baby on the street? said the kind middle-age woman.

Yes.

How did it die?

Slowly, said the woman. Spit was dripping from its mouth. And blood.

Babies are hard to keep alive, said the middle-age woman.

The woman called the man and told him the baby was dead.

I'm in Shanghai! said the man.

The woman said she'd had her period so he didn't have to worry about her having his baby.

Phew! said the man. I was worried.

Not me, said the woman. Thakur was my only real baby and she died.

What about Stupid? said the man.

Oh yeah, said the woman. Stoopid was a *really* good baby.

Listen, said the man. I'm a pretty multi-national person. I've seen thousands of babies and none of them had a name like Thakur.

Thank you, said the woman.

Thakur was kind of *our* baby, said the man.

In a sense, said the woman, Thakur was two babies.

I know, said the man…Wait, what?

I know, said the woman. She was kicking the cotton batting around her apartment. I just don't know what to do with this other adult-baby's body.

You should burn it, said the man. Like in a ceremony.

The woman took the adult-baby to the cremation grounds by the river, but when the wood-seller told her how much it would cost for enough wood to burn the adult-baby, the woman tried to bargain with him.

It's a sacrilege to bargain over cremation wood, said the wood-seller.

How convenient for you, said the woman. I need to burn this dead adult-baby and you've got the wood.

The wood-seller went away and the woman stood by the river alone with the adult-baby's body. It was very cold and the sky was full of smoke. Sad bits of happy-colored plastic floated in the river. A little ways away there was another woman who was also alone. She was standing in front of a small fire praying.

Excuse me, are you burning your baby too? said the first woman.

No, said the second woman. I'm burning my little puppy that died.

That is so sad, said the first woman.

Then she went home with her dead adult-baby and tried to stuff it into the man's hard plastic suitcase. The dead adult-baby wouldn't fit, so the woman stood on top of the suitcase and made it close with a squishing sound. She put the suitcase in her closet and called the man.

I have your old suitcase, she said.

I'm in Switzerland! he said. Just kidding. I'm here. I'll come over.

The woman put on a mini-skirt and made her hair look puffy and disheveled. She put on very red lipstick and smacked her lips in the mirror. Then she scowled and wiped her lips against the back of her hand.

I want you, said the man when he came inside the woman's apartment.

You can have me, said the woman, but first I want to give you back your suitcase.

I don't care about it, said the man, loosening his belt. But the woman was already dragging the suitcase out of the closet.

Here, she said. Open it.

What's inside?

It's a big surprise, said the woman.

It's not a dead baby is it? said the man. Ha Ha, just kidding.

The man bent down to unlatch the suitcase. His belt buckle clinked against the suitcase's edge.

Ugh! said the man when he saw the dead adult-baby inside. You bitch!

The woman slapped the man's head and dug her fingernail into the back of his neck.

Ow! said the man.

He turned around and she clawed at his face until he grabbed her wrists and squeezed them together.

You need to see a serious professional, he said.

The woman tried to bite his face.

Don't, he said.

I will! said the woman, and she bit the air between them with lipstick-stained teeth.

I'll spit in your mouth, he said.

This made the woman pause. Then she began to laugh, and she went limp and slumped to the ground. The man let go of her wrists and stood above her touching the cuts on his face with his fingers.

You fucked up my face, said the man.

Yes, but I'm sorry now, said the woman, still laughing.

I've got a meeting on Monday, he said. In Seattle, I think.

Shh, said the woman. She stood up and took the man's hand and led him into the bedroom where there was a large canopy bed and a crude rag-lined box.

I remember that rag-lined box, said the man wistfully.

No, said the woman. That is a different rag-lined box.

It looks the same, said the man.

It is a different one.

Listen, said the man.

A gurgling sound came from the living room.

Daa! said the woman, and she sprinted through the doorway.

Well? said the man when the women came back into the bedroom.

It was just gas, said the woman. Daa is dead.

But listen! said the man.

There was a faint scraping sound coming from the apartment's front door.

Thakur! said the woman, and ran to the door. She flung it open. In the doorway was a fat and dirty adult-baby with a pocked face. He handed her a crinkled laminated letter.

I am a baaby from the poor side of the Sity and I have come to your adbode today in search of Alms and the mirical of your Geniosity! Please show GOD that you are truly a ***FRIENDS*** ***of*** ***BABYS***.

Ugh! said the woman. Get out of here! And she slammed the door so hard that the walls of her apartment shook.

I want you! cried the man from the bedroom. He was naked except for his socks on her canopy bed and his arms were folded behind his neck.

I want that you should leave now! shouted the woman. But then the man whimpered, and her face softened, and she went to him and lay his head on her lap.

That night as the man slept the woman stroked his hair.

Stoopid, she said tenderly, and she used her fingernail to scrape a fine dust from the scab on the back of his neck.

Outside it was the beginning of spring. Millions of babies were falling from the rooftops. Some babies were missing limbs and some had three eyes. Small groups of babies clustered in parks and make mewing sounds at passersby. Top-heavy babies stumbled into the road and caused traffic accidents. Some babies wandered into temples and churches and were attacked by angry worshippers. People complained about the government's lax approach to the baby problem. Politicians made speeches about handling the surplus of indigent babies. Activists organized protests, and babies sat mute and staring from the curbsides as activists marched. Babies snuck into people's homes and lived secret lives in closets and pantries, their only companions mice and cockroaches, also their only food. Other babies slept, and in their dreams they grazed in emerald fields with docile cows and swam in the ocean with dolphins and sank into pillows impossibly thick with foam. Some babies wished to god they had never been born and some babies died laughing at the joke of being born, and some babies refused to believe they had ever

been born. But by the end of the winter there were so few babies left that everyone wondered if there had ever been a country-wide surplus of babies at all.

9

It's Bobby DuPont, From *Ohio*

The day after my daughter Mickie fails her beef challenge, I get a call from Joyce, my ex. She says she had a nightmare about me, says I chased her through the house with a wet towel, cracking it at her heels like a whip. Then she asks if I've been dreaming about her. No, I tell her, even though I'm not entirely sure it *wasn't* Joyce I dripped raspberry compote over in my dream last night. It could have been her, but it also could have been Millie or Crystal. There was a time in my life when I only went for waifish blonds with long Rappunzel-style hair that I could bury my face in, but I'm pretty sure that time is over now.

Back when Joyce and I were together, sometimes I'd wake up at night not knowing who was lying beside me. I'd have to reach my mind back through the last few years and follow the chain of events forward to the present moment, past Millie, past Crystal, to finally land on Joyce. The thing that always helped me figure out whose body I was spooning was to think about my daughter Mickie, which is short for Michele, which was kind of a nod to Joyce's father whose name was Michael. Mickie always brought me back to Joyce because the two of them were practically inseparable. This was just after Mickie was born, when Joyce and I still spoke about the kind of furniture we wanted to buy and what cooler city we should move to, and I would refer to Joyce and Mickie together as MiJicky, or the Mababy Unit, or Jomookie, because everywhere Joyce went, Mickie went too.

You hear about mothers and babies being incredibly attached in the first few months of the baby's life, and you hear about new fathers feeling a little sidelined by this intimate alliance that suddenly appears on the scene, almost like your wife's got another lover only this lover is so legitimate she's more legitimate than you. And when you think about mothers and babies staying

attached to one another, you probably envision the mom staying home a lot, sleeping in with the baby, nursing the baby on the couch, going on little discovery strolls around the neighborhood—domestic stuff. But Joyce never liked staying home. She got cabin fever and started going on forays around town when Mickie was only a month old. She'd go to Target, or to yard sales on the weekends, or some new farmer's market she'd heard about, but mostly she'd go to people's houses who were giving away free shit on Craigslist.

She brought home all kinds of shit from Craigslist. Some of it was stuff we could use, but most of it was exactly what you'd imagine people would be giving away for free—stuff just good enough to make you think twice about putting it on the side of the road, but hardly nice enough to want in your life unless you're the fixer-upper packrat type, which I'm not. To me, someone giving something away for free makes it seem almost worthless, but I think for Joyce it was the opposite. The fact that someone took the time to make a posting, take a picture of it—that made it a thing of value. She'd bring home busted wooden lamps that needed new wiring, cords of uncured firewood, half-rotten railroad ties, broken lawn furniture, or fill dirt for the garden we planned on growing. Once she brought home two five gallon buckets full of those huge ornamental goldfish, green ones, speckled ones, yellow and red ones. We had nowhere to put them and eventually I had to let them loose in the creek behind our house. The water was shallow and they just kind of lay there on their sides, breathing.

For me the last straw was when Joyce brought home a 28 year old Arabian horse named Gutso, who turned out to be chronically ill and needed, according to the vet we had to pay to come to our house, medication that would cost 200 a month. I ended up giving Gutso to a horse trader from Cedar City who griped about having to travel all the way into town to get the horse, saying he'd been twenty minutes behind us on the Craigslist ad.

A couple times Joyce tried leaving Mickie at home with me when she went on her Free Forays, but Mickie wouldn't take the bottle no matter how gently and persistently I coaxed her, wouldn't go to sleep for me either, and wouldn't stop wailing in general until Joyce came home and whipped out the only thing Mickie seemed to care about, her sustenance, her entertainment, her pillow, her one true love. So eventually Joyce started taking Mickie with her all the time.

Of course, I insisted that Mickie sit in the car seat, facing the rear, just like you're supposed to do, but Joyce said Mickie just cried and cried if she had to sit back there all alone. I told her I didn't care, she needed to be in the car seat when Joyce was driving, it wasn't up for negotiation. Our daughter's safety came before her comfort. Joyce gave in and agreed, but one day I watched her put Mickie in the car seat, drive a little ways down the street, not even that far, then stop the car and get Mickie out of the back and into her lap in the front seat, to nurse I guess, and then drive off like that, with the baby at her breast, her little head three inches from the steering column that would crush it like a grapefruit if Joyce rear-ended somebody at a stoplight.

That was when I started calling Crystal on the phone and venting, which turns out was a bad idea because Crystal has a big mouth, and happens to work with a friend of Joyce's sister, and of course it got back to Joyce that I'd been calling Crystal again, a big no-no we'd established pretty early on in our relationship due to my tendency to never let go of old girlfriends, keeping them as confidants, and basically letting them manipulate my current relationships. Joyce had said I needed to break that pattern if we were going to work, and for the better part of a year I'd stuck to it.

Then I didn't, and Joyce and I started fighting, and by the time Mickie was five months old we were done, just like that, with full custody to Joyce, who said Mickie was still exclusively

a breast feeder and couldn't be away from her for more than an hour. And when the judge had asked me how I felt about it, I thought about the times I'd been alone with Mickie, who was hungry and sobbing so you could see the veins in her forehead popping through her skin, and I said that Joyce was right, Mickie needed her, and that for the time being, at least until Mickie started eating solid food, this was the best solution.

Now I visit on weekends, sit in my old living room drinking a glass of water with those refrigerator-smelling automatic ice cubes, and try to play with Mickie. She's six months old, so she doesn't really play yet, but she grabs my finger when I hold it out to her, for a second anyway. Mickie sits in Joyce's lap most of the time, otherwise she cries. On this particular visit I'm trying to get Mickie to make eye contact with me, trying all my high pitch voices and kind of hating the sounds coming out of my mouth, cringing while I do it but at the same time honestly trying to do this thing—you know?—make my baby really *see* me.

And all the while Joyce is going on about how Mickie has failed her beef challenge, and at first I'm able to tune her out and focus on Mickie's little hand clenching my thumb, but Joyce won't stop talking and eventually it starts to sink in that I don't have a goddamn clue what this whole beef challenge thing is, and nothing Joyce is saying is making it at all clear. What it sounds like is that Joyce has entered Mickie into some kind of free baby food promotional contest on Craigslist, and that Mickie didn't win, and the more I think about it, the more it disturbs me that a baby food company would set up a competition among babies in which one or more of the babies would be designated as having "*failed*," while presumably the others, the winning babies, the babies with parents who are still married no doubt, have been said to "*succeed*," not just as babies in general—though that also—but specifically in the area of beef,

which is absurd! And that's when I ask Joyce to please pause for a minute and tell me what the hell she hoped to gain from this whole thing.

To gain? she says.

What did you hope to gain by entering a six month old baby into some kind of bullshit corporate baby food contest?

She looks at me like I just grew a second nose and says, What the ba-jesus are *you* talking about, Jon?

That's when I start to think maybe I've missed something crucial, and then Mickie starts to cry, and before I can say another word Joyce is whipping out the tit and Mickie's head is—*thwup!*—latched onto her chest, and Joyce is pursing her lips and shushing me even though I haven't made a peep. Which is basically how I would sum up Joyce and my whole relationship nowadays—her shushing me before I even get to make a peep.

I sit there watching Mickie nurse and think about how two years ago I was the only person sucking on Joyce's tits, and how at the time it was a pretty frequent occurrence—once every few days at least. Then a weird thing happens, which is that I get this kind of possessive feeling—not a jealousy feeling—more like a Lord-of-my-Own-Dominion kind of feeling, the way a nobleman might feel when he climbs to the highest hill of his estate and looks out over his fruited plains—a kind of pride in something that I've acquired. Weird because of course I no longer have privileges with Joyce's tits at all—her breasts and all the rest of her body are not something I could touch without incurring deep and angry repercussions, perhaps physically violent ones, but I still feel like they're mine somehow, like maybe I'm the ghost of that nobleman, doomed to haunt Joyce's tits forever, even though I was divested of that particular parcel of territory long ago. Or maybe it has something to do with Mickie being my kid, and now

that she's in charge of the breast that used to be mine, in a sense I've passed on a legacy that yes, totally liquidates me of those tits, but still kind of honorarily refers back to me. I'm like the old patriarch in the rocking chair by the fire. I've given all that I once amassed unto my sole heir, who now draws from it her own life-giving sustenance.

I stare at Joyce's tit and my daughter's face pressed into it, my daughter's unblinking blue eye staring vacantly at the ceiling, and it suddenly feels kind of good—in a sad and honorable way—to be sitting here with my ex and my daughter, none of us making a sound except for Mickie's soft rhythmic sucking and Joyce's deep breathing. Joyce's eyes are closed and her head is tilted back and the way's she's holding Mickie she looks kind of like a classical guitarist frozen in a moment of reverie, or maybe a ukulele player because Mickie's small, she's petite for a six-month old.

I get up and walk into the kitchen and open the fridge. There's half a double bottle of red wine on the bottom door shelf. I get it out, bite the cork with my teeth and yank it, spit the cork into my hand and take a long swig. The wine is cold and sour. I set the bottle on the table and walk to the window facing our next door neighbor's house. A plank of siding has fallen off, and there's a long rectangular hole in their wall. Inside it's hollow, there's no insulation, and I wonder if they end up spending a lot of money on heat in the winter, or if maybe there actually is insulation, only it's behind the layer I'm looking at, deeper in the house, past the bare wood slats and the siding.

Joyce comes into the kitchen and pours herself a glass of wine.

She asleep?

Joyce nods.

Sometimes, especially just after Mickie was born, Joyce wouldn't immediately cover up after Mickie nursed. She'd leave it out, the nipple red and swollen, and put lanolin—which is a cream made of sheep or something—on it to sooth the irritation. She'd walk into the room with her tit glistening and this totally sated and enlightened look on her face and I would seriously want to *be* her in that moment, or, as a lesser option—a consolation really—be inside of her immediately.

Now she's covered. We sit across from one another at the table and drink the sour wine, Joyce from a glass and me from the bottle.

I think I did dream about you last night, I say.

I've started dating, says Joyce. Nothing serious, but I thought you should know.

Blueberry compote, I say. I was dripping it all over your body.

Just one date so far. Nothing happened, but it could, is what I'm saying.

We look at each other. I'm about to tell her she shouldn't be drinking wine while she's nursing a baby, and I'm about to say she should be more careful, take less chances, make Mickie stay in her car seat at all times while the motor vehicle is in motion. I'm about to get up and leave because it's been an hour and a half and Mickie won't wake up until my two hours are done with, so I might as well go.

Joyce says, Do you ever feel like maybe we were just meant to be together long enough to create Mickie? Like that was the one thing we needed to accomplish together, cosmically?

No, I say. Even though it's possible I might feel that way.

I do, she says, blowing a strand of a hair out of her face. It falls right back down in front of her eye. I reach for it, to push it aside and tuck it behind her ear for her, but right then she sits back in her chair, out of my reach, and it isn't really clear if she's dodging me or just sitting back

naturally, but I'm left holding my finger between us, kind of swiping it in her direction and getting nothing but air in my little half-hearted attempt at intimacy. Joyce sort of snorts then takes another sip of wine and looks out the window.

The beef challenge isn't a contest, she says. It's an allergy thing. It means she can't eat beef right now because she'll break out in a rash. She's got her chicken challenge next week and her pork challenge after that.

Wait a minute, I say, I mean, just slow down. Isn't it kind of soon for all that solid food? Where's the book?

I scan the kitchen for the *Healthy Baby Reference Book* we used to stay up late at night putting multi-color place markers in. It's a fifty dollar book new, but Joyce got it for fifteen on Craigslist.

It's time, says Joyce. She's sucking me dry.

Yeah, but—

It's time, trust me.

I make a mental note to stop at the Barnes and Nobel on my way home and see what the book has to say about all this.

So, says Joyce, that means it's time to talk to the Judge about changing over to joint custody. Now that Mickie's eating solid food.

Really?

Yessiree Bob, says Joyce, who's kind of smiling and examining me now in this amused and clinical way.

Ok, I say. Sure.

Then I take a chug of wine and say, But Mickie failed her beef challenge, right? That's kind of a bad sign. She probably isn't ready for solid food. You can't just push these things on a little baby.

Carrots, says Joyce flatly. And squash and peas and green beans and bananas and avocado, and rice—she's eating all that now. I'll give you a list. She likes bananas best in the morning and squash is her second favorite but you have to make sure she gets her—

I stand up. Where's the goddamn book at, Joyce? In the living room?

I go in there but it's not beneath the coffee table or on the yellow bookshelf where we used to keep it. Joyce is leaning in the doorway watching me with that stupid fucking smile on her face, which right about now I'd very much like to reach out and put my hand over and hold it there till her eyes go buggy.

I gave it away on Craigslist, she says.

In the car driving home I start to hyperventilate at a stoplight. It gets worse and eventually I have to pull over into someone's driveway to catch my breath. I'm sitting there seriously struggling to not pass out when this woman comes out of the house saying, Can she help me? in that rude way that means exactly the opposite, i.e. There's absolutely nothing for you here, strange hyperventilating man in my driveway.

I look at her and can't say anything because I'm too short of breath. Then she says she's going to have her husband call the cops, but she doesn't move, just stands there ten feet from the car watching my chest heave. She's dressed in a blue one piece pantsuit, ugly but expensive looking, and her makeup looks like she put it on three days ago and hasn't washed her face since. She's got this one yellow curler in her hair, right over her ear.

Staaaaaaan! she yells without taking her eyes off me. There's a man in the driveway breathing funny.

A guy comes to the door in just his boxer shorts. He's holding a glass with ice cubes in it. He stays there for a second scratching his thigh, then goes back inside.

The very last time I took care of Mickie alone she was two months old. Joyce had a doctor's appointment in Alpharetta, which is practically like driving to another city just to see a doctor, and Mickie'd been asleep when she left. I was in the basement sorting through all the junk we'd accumulated over the last year, trying to decide if the broken dollhouse Joyce had brought home was worth trying to fix up, when I heard crying from upstairs. I go running up to her room and pick Mickie up and hold her, doing all the things the book says to, singing Old Man River, holding her skin to skin, trying to warm up a bottle of Joyce's breast milk with just one hand, holding Mickie in the other arm while her screams go from quick and desperate to kind of choked and feeble, then all of a sudden she's silent—but not because she's stopped crying—it's like she can't catch her breath to cry and her little mouth is frozen open in this hideous suffocating way and no air is going in, no sound is coming out, and I'm standing there pushing the bottle into her little frozen mouth saying C'mon Mickie, c'mon Mickie, c'mon, but she's not taking it, she's just this miniature purple statue, gaping at me for seriously minutes until finally she breaks through and goes back to screaming again, which I have never in my life felt so relieved to hear a baby scream, sitting there pinned to the kitchen chair thanking Jesus and everyone else my baby was back to screaming again because anything is better than that god-awful frozen silent, possibly SIDS, not-breathing baby thing.

The woman in the pantsuit comes closer to the car and leans over squinting at me. Bobby? she says. That you?

I'm not Bobby, but I kind of wish I was, so I nod. I'm starting to breathe normal now, and I give the woman a weak smile and she smiles back at me, gentle as an aunt.

Staaaaaan! It's Bobby DuPont. From *Ohio*.

I sit there nodding my head and smiling like an idiot, like a seriously happy and relieved Bobby DuPont who's driven all this way, after all these years, and found out he's still got reliable friends in these parts.

What have you been *doing* all this time? How's your mother? The woman puts her hand on my arm and it gives me goose bumps.

Well, I say, measuring my words between breaths, I've got a six-month old daughter. And I just got divorced.

The woman squints at me again, long enough to make me think I've given myself away. Then she beams, You should bring her down, Bobby! I just *love* babies. How's fatherhood treating you?

Most of the time when people ask me about "fatherhood" I end up shaking my head and saying something about how hard it is, or how exhausting it is, then afterwards I always feel like a jerk for not talking about the good parts, the totally wonderful parts—which do exist—only they tend to come late at night after beer when I'm lying in bed alone, thinking about just the amazing *fact* of it, you know?

It's pretty hard, I say.

It better be! She beams at me. It sure as heck better be, Mister!

Later that night I call Crystal and tell her everything. She's thrilled for me, she says. This is where it all starts happening. This is where you get to really start being a *Dad*, Jon.

Yeah, I say. Hey Crystal, do you want to want to come over tonight? Help me get the apartment set up for Mickie and stuff?

Crystal says sure, she'll come over later when American Idol is over. I call Joyce but nobody answers. I call my friend Rick to see if he wants to get a beer or something but Rick's not home. I call Joyce back and leave a message making it clear that I am *not* on board with this whole solid food at the age of six months thing. I've checked the book, I tell her, and it says you should wait until at least eight months.

I haven't checked the book, but I'd be willing to bet that's what it says. Joyce is rushing things, and I know exactly why too—so she can go out on dates with guys who like scouring yard sales on Saturdays, guys who watch Antique Road Show, and who show up at your house after you've put something on Craigslist and start asking you about everything in your living room. That for sale? How 'bout that? Then they try to talk you down five bucks on the twelve dollar lamp you're selling, which you clearly posted as "price non-negotiable." They're always half-bald and paunchy-stomached and drive ten year-old minivans with the rear seats removed so they can haul loads of junk. I got to know their species back when Joyce used to drag me to those auctions they hold at unclaimed storage units. There we'd be, me and Joyce standing in a horde of those creatures, getting bumped around by their stomachs as everyone strained to see inside the storage unit before the bidding started. I'd start to feel like a ball being bounced around in some terrible auction-themed pinball game, and I'd have to push my way out of the horde and stand to the side, catching my breath. But the thing about Joyce was, she *liked* it in there, surrounded by all those weird loners, standing on her tippy toes with her hand on someone's shoulder to steady herself and get a better glimpse of some poor asshole's abandoned junk. If Joyce'd been into punk rock she would have been one of those chicks who dive fearlessly into

the middle of the mosh pit throwing elbows with the best of them, and I guess in that scenario I would've been the boyfriend jumping up and down on the edge of the pit, kind of making a show like I was inside but mostly just sticking to the outskirts. And it wouldn't be that I was afraid of the mosh pit or anything, because I definitely ventured inside some gnarly mosh pits back when I was like sixteen, it's just that I didn't really care for them.

I open a bottle of wine and think things over. The absolutely first thing that came to my mind this afternoon when Joyce said I'd be taking Mickie was how I didn't have a crib for her, and how the hell was I going to afford a crib, and probably Mickie would have to sleep on the ground in my apartment until I found a cheap one on Craigslist. I got this image of Mickie fast asleep on a stack of folded towels and pillows and whatnot and it just made me feel incredibly sad and pathetic, some lonely thirty-two year old dude living in a shit apartment with a baby who sleeps the floor.

Who'd want to be that?

Crystal comes over and we kill the wine. We're supposed to talk about getting the place set up for Mickie but we get as far as the bedroom and then we're in bed together and Crystal's giggling and calling me Big Daddy in a way that would make me seriously uncomfortable if I wasn't drunk. Sometime in the middle of the night I wake up, and for a minute I've got that same amnesia. I can't figure who I'm in bed with. I start to do the chain of events thing, going way back so I'm working my way forwards from elementary school, but the further along I get—past high school, past college, past five different girlfriends, past Joyce and Mickie and the fucking beef challenge, past the drunk woman in the pantsuit yelling at me as I gun it out of her driveway—the more I start to get this suffocated feeling, a kind of claustrophobia where it feels like I'm on this dark tubular waterslide that's getting narrower and narrower as it spirals me

around. All I really want is for the spiraling to stop for second, or at least slow down and let me just *be* inside my amnesia, because the truth is I don't want to know where the waterslide lets out, I don't want to feel that moment when suddenly the bottom drops and your heart lunges out of your chest and you go crashing into the bright and awful water knowing you have to swim and not really sure if you ever learned how.

10

Men Who Pause

I met Shilpa's friend Imran when I was living in New Delhi, working as a grant-writer for an upstart NGO called *Lakshmi Satyam*. We focused on connecting disenfranchised village women with international micro-lenders and funding small, rural businesses—all of which sounds pretty decent, but in reality the organization was mostly a conduit for big lending corporations that allowed American investors feel like they were making a difference while they actually made a tidy profit. Microcredit was hot in the late 90s, and *Lakshmi Satyam* was a cash cow for grants, which in turn made it a good way for NGO people like me and Shilpa to earn a living.

Shilpa was our village aide liaison. She'd never been out of India, but she spoke perfect English in a charmingly stuffy British accent, and she also knew five or six different north Indian dialects, which made her really useful out in the field. I was fairly certain I was falling in love with her, because I found myself keeping a running list of all the things that made her perfect, like the sharp and annunciated way she said "actually,"—*ac*-tually—and how she knew how to cover her head and play the modest Indian woman when we did village trips, but also because she knew how to make a good alfredo sauce and dance the tango, two things that were hard to come by in Delhi at the time.

A lot of stuff was hard to come by in Delhi then. Good tortilla chips, unspoiled mayonnaise, and quality aged cheese were some of those things. But what was really hard about living there—what working with Shilpa kind of soothed but also weirdly aggravated for me—was how foreign I felt, basically all the time. I'd been there for two years, in the same neighborhood, and kids still ran up to me on the street screaming "*Angrez! Angrez!"* which, I'd learned from Shilpa early on, is a Hindi bastardization of "*English*!" but has come to mean just

foreigner in general. Every day teenage guys smirked at me and swerved into my path on their scooters when I was walking home from the market. "HALLO MAN! WHICH COUNTRY?" they'd yell, not two feet from my nose, and I would want to punch them. Instead I'd force a grin and yell "HEY DUDE! SLAP ME SOME FORESKIN BRO-*HAM!*" or something like that, which was my little way of mocking them without them knowing for sure whether I was mocking them or not. Then I'd walk away and feel shitty for a while.

None of this happened when I traveled to villages with Shilpa. People still stared, but they'd only whisper furtively to their friends or snicker behind their hands and watch us go by. It was like her presence was magic, it validated me, which was really nice, but as soon as I'd go out alone I was back to being a casual tourist again in the eyes of the city, and I hated that feeling, because I felt like I had actually invested something in India, which should have set me apart, and I wanted it show on my face when I walked down the street.

Shilpa and I talked about this at work occasionally, and her opinion on the matter was that what I really needed was a good Indian "guy-friend" in Delhi, some native urbanite to call me *yar*, which meant "buddy," drape an arm around my shoulder in public and show me the real India, the one I missed out on because I was an *Angrez.* She said she knew someone who would be the perfect Indian friend for me, a guy named Imran. He was playwright, she said, and a poet, and a film director. He did a little of everything, actually.

"Sounds like a real jack of all trades," I remember saying. I was unenthusiastic.

"He works in an accounting office," she said. "Why don't I invite him to my place on Saturday so the two of you can meet up? He'll bring ganja. He always does."

I wasn't exactly thrilled about being set up on a blind date with a potential Indian "guy-friend," but it was a chance to see Shilpa away from work, and I hadn't smoked grass since I'd

been ripped off by a junkie in Connaught Place a few months earlier, so on Saturday afternoon I took a rickshaw across town to Shilpa's apartment and waited for Imran to show up. He was an hour late. When he finally arrived he sat down without talking and rolled a joint. He was wearing a starched white *kurta* and faded blue jeans, and he was pretty good looking. I decided I didn't like him, but at least he had grass.

Shilpa didn't smoke, so Imran and I sat on the floor at Shilpa's coffee table and passed the joint back and forth. Imran didn't say very much, and Shilpa went off somewhere, and I found myself becoming more and more uncomfortable as the grass started to take effect. We were smoking the way Europeans tend to, each of us holding the joint for as long as we wanted it and then passing it on, so I remarked to Imran that in the States we did a kind of puff-puff-pass thing, like a give and take, so you were always passing the joint back and forth.

"That sounds rather tedious," was all he said, and we sat smoking in silence until his mobile phone rang, making the sound of real chirping birds.

"That's a pretty cool ringtone," I said.

"It's a new polyphonic ringtone!" said Shilpa, who had skipped into the living room at the sound. "Imran has the new Samsung 8920!"

Imran flipped his phone shut and told us that someone called I.P. was coming over.

Shilpa scowled. "That bastard I.P.," she said to Imran. "When he gets here, I want you to punch him in the chest for me."

"I'm for peace," said Imran. "You punch him."

Then Imran turned to me and explained, in a kind of bored and listless way, that I.P. was their old friend who had betrayed them.

"He used to be the nicest guy in Delhi," Shilpa added. "Then it all went to his head."

"What did?" I said.

"Being the lead singer of his stupid band," said Shilpa.

"All the girls chasing after him," said Imran.

"What's the name of his band?" I said.

"Men Who Pause," said Shilpa and Imran together.

"Get it?" said Shilpa. "Men-who-pause. Menopause."

"No," I said. "I don't get it."

Shilpa looked at me blankly and then turned to Imran. "He doesn't get it," she said.

"He gets it," said Imran, and he busied himself with rolling another joint.

A few minutes later I.P. came in looking drunk and sleepy eyed. He had long black hair in a pony tail and a beard. He wanted to know if we were coming to the Canadian party with him. Shilpa walked up to I.P. with her hand extended, but when he tried to shake it she punched him hard in the chest.

"Ow!" said I.P. rubbing his chest. "That hurt! Why did you do that?"

"*You* know why I did that," said Shilpa.

I.P. stood by the door for the next ten minutes smiling sheepishly and rubbing his chest. He asked again if we were coming to the Canadian party but Shilpa just scoffed at him and said that nobody wanted to go to some stupid *Angrezi* party, and soon after he left.

We spent the next few hours smoking more joints and drinking Coke and gin, except for Shilpa who never drank and after a while fell asleep on the couch.

"Look at that," said Imran. He got up and stood over her. "She's just like a little man. That's who she was in her last life, you know. A little wiry man. It's so obvious. And we knew each other too. We were lovers."

"You were a woman in your last life?" I said.

"No, also a man," said Imran. He got down on his knees and peered at Shilpa's face. "Look at those delicate jaw bones," he said tenderly, running his finger along the lines of her face. "A perfect…little…man." He was whispering, and with each word he moved his face closer and closer to Shilpa's until his lips grazed her cheek and he kissed her softly.

I thought to myself that I should probably be feeling something strongly in that moment, some ping of jealousy or territorial inclination, but all I felt was a low and humming anxiety that was stuck in the lower third of my body. Imran got up and poured himself another glass of Coke and gin. I was on a floor pillow holding the remnants of a joint, and for just a moment I felt completely paralyzed. I had forgotten how to move my limbs.

Imran cleared his throat. "Shilpa has the idea that you and I are supposed to become friends," he said, reaching for the joint, which had gone out. He toked it anyway, and then looked at it like it had insulted him.

"I know," I said. "Shilpa gets these ideas sometimes…"

"But I think you know that's not why I'm here tonight," said Imran.

I nodded.

"And I think I know why you're here tonight too," he said, grinning and glancing at Shilpa. "But tell me," he continued, "have *you* ever had any visions of your past life?"

"Not really," I said. "Well, once maybe. But I think it was just a—"

"Shilpa and I should be together," he interrupted. "But she's decided I'm a hopeless case. And she's right. All my girlfriends leave me for the same reason. I can't write unless I am drunk. I can't act unless I am drunk. Shilpa says I am determined to kill myself."

"That's pretty sad," I said, "for you."

"It's my life," said Imran. "Now please, help me. I need an idea for a play and I have no idea what it should be. Tonight is the night. I have to have the idea tonight."

"How about past lives?" I said. "How about a play about all your past lives and how you and Shilpa are meant for each other but tragically unable to make it work because of your incurable addiction to alcohol and ganja?"

"That's it!" said Imran sarcastically. "You are one brilliant bastard."

He went in to the kitchen and filled his glass again. When he came back he kept talking about himself and his past lives and a friend of his who was a psychic, and I tried to listen to him but I kept drifting away until he suggested we go out on the terrace and play an acting improvisation game. I was beginning to feel kind of horrible inside my chest but I wasn't sure if it was merely a pedestrian horror brought on by the ganja or something more serious.

Outside on the terrace it was quiet and dark. Imran was breathing deeply and pacing around the small area, huffing and swinging his arms back and forth, rotating his shoulders.

"Let's get started," he said. "I'll begin and you follow my lead, ok?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "Who's my character?"

"Just follow my lead." Imran turned away and when he looked back his face was squinted and pained.

"What in the hell do you think you are doing?" he said in a high, nagging feminine voice. He looked me up and down and sneered as if I repulsed him.

"Huh?" I said.

Imran scoffed. "I *said*, what the *fuck* do you think you are *doing* back here after what you *did* to me yesterday?"

"Oh," I said. "I mean . . . who are you to ask me that…man?" I tried to make my voice strong and angry like Imran's.

"You think you can just walk right in here as if nothing has happened and expect me to behave accordingly?" Imran's falsetto echoed out into the empty street. A dog barked. Then another.

"How do you expect me to behave?" I said, trying to add some anger in there. Be angry, I was thinking. Be angry at Imran.

"You are just too much," said Imran. "This is unbelievable. You are such a bastard. I have been waiting for you to call me all day long and apologize for last night. But did you call? Did you even bother to fucking *call*?"

"Did you even bother to call me?" I said. "Why do I always have to be the one to call?"

"You're a sick bastard, you know that?" said Imran. He stuck his finger in my face. "A *sick* fucking bastard."

I didn't know what to say.

"You're right," I said. "I am a sick bastard. You're completely right and I'm fucking sorry."

I bent my head as if to cry, which I was relatively sure I wouldn't actually do, but Imran was a pretty good actor.

"Stop," said Imran in his normal voice. "Wait a minute. Cut, cut. Why did you do that?"

"Do what?" I said.

"Why did you just give up like that? I really felt like we had something there until you gave up. Let's try again. I want you to fight with me, ok? Fight!"

Imran looked at the ground, took a deep breath, and then raised his head and said,

"You're a *sick* fucking bastard, you know that?"

"Actually," I said, "I think I have to go to home now. I have a really awful headache."

"Oh," said Imran. He turned away and stared out at the empty night.

Back inside the apartment the lights were bright and oppressive so I switched them off. I could see Shilpa's dark form curled up on the couch, and I could hear the sound of her breathing. I walked over to her and squinted to make out the features of her face in the darkness, and at first I thought maybe she had woken up, so I leaned in closer to see if her eyes were open. Her features kind of coalesced and I saw that her eyes were closed, but she was grinning this hideous clown's grin, and I was suddenly terrified of her and the darkness of her apartment. It was very late and all of Delhi was utterly dark and menacing and I wanted nothing to do with any of it.

I went back out on the terrace. Imran was standing in the corner, leaning over the railing and looking down at the street three stories below. He was weeping softly.

"Hey," I said, but he didn't reply.

"Hey. Dude." I said softly. "It's gonna be ok."

Imran whispered something I couldn't quite hear.

"What?" I said.

"Go. Fuck. Yourself." He said. "Fucking stoned *Angrezi* bastard."

I stood there stunned for a second trying to think of something to say, but nothing came to me. So I went back inside and made my way to the bathroom, where I stood over the latrine and tried to piss. My body was clenched so tight that only a trickle came out. I opened the bathroom door, letting the fluorescent light cut an oblong rectangle across the room, and I followed it to the front door. When I made it to the street I looked up at the terrace, thinking I might flip Imran off, but he wasn't there anymore.

A couple months later Shilpa took a higher paid position at a rival microcredit NGO a few hours north in Chandigarh, and moved there permanently. Occasionally I'd hear bits of news or gossip about her from another NGO person, but after the night with Imran my attractions to her had cooled, and once she was gone I thought about her less and less. When she did come to mind, I found myself making inverted versions of my original running list—how fake and snooty her British accent had sounded, how embarrassingly giddy she always got about new cell phone models and smart little compact cars, and how she never did her trip reports on time.

But while Shilpa gradually drifted from my mind, I thought about Imran a lot, in particular those moments on the terrace and how completely stunned and shitty and useless he had made me feel, and how he'd basically slapped me in the face when I tried to comfort him. I wanted to see him again, if only to show him that I didn't care what he thought of me. I found myself looking out for him at the government-sponsored cultural events I attended regularly for work, but evidently Imran didn't run in those circles. Once I even called Shilpa for his number, using ganja as my excuse, but when I called I got a woman who didn't speak any English, and she hung up on me after a minute or two of incomprehensible exchange.

It wasn't until about a year later that I saw him one night sitting alone at the bar in a cheesy Tex-Mex restaurant that catered mostly to tourists. It was the only place in town where you could get tacos. His hair was neatly trimmed and he was wearing a smart black suit. He was holding his cell phone in one hand and a whiskey and Coke in the other, and when I sat down beside him he looked at me for a moment, as if trying to dig the memory of my face out from some deep and forgotten burial plot. Then his mouth flattened and he said, "Oh yeah, the stoned *Angrez.* Hasn't your visa expired yet?"

He was clearly drunk, and I was in a good mood that night, so I laughed and said that yes, it had, but my dedication to the poor and downtrodden kept me in his country illegally, and at great personal risk.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"I'm waiting for someone."

"Who?"

"A friend," said Imran.

"An *Angrez*?"

Imran looked at me with a heavy sigh. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Eating tacos, what else?" I said. "Where's this *Angrezi* friend of yours?"

"She's coming," he said.

"Are you sure? Maybe she's standing you up. You want to join us at our table?"

"She's on her way just now," he grumbled.

"Ok," I said, cuffing him on the shoulder. "Have fun!" And I left him alone at the bar. I had come to the restaurant with some recently arrived Australians, and I needed to get back to the table and warn them not to order anything with lettuce unless they wanted Delhi-belly for the next few days. Throughout the meal I'd look up and see Imran, still sitting alone, growing more and more hunched as the night wore on. When we were leaving I went over to him again and put my hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sure she's on her way, *yar*," I said. I actually meant it charitably, but I knew it sounded cloying and fake. Imran turned his head slightly and grunted, too drunk now to speak clearly, and I was suddenly embarrassed to be standing beside him with the Australians waiting

for me at the door. I was being cavalier, showing off, chatting with a native so they could see what an old hand I was. But my native was about to fall off his barstool.

In the last year I had made some friends, none of them Indian. I had also begun hiring a car and a driver to take me to Sarojni Nagar Market where I'd pay one of the shoeshine boys to follow me around from stall to stall and carry my groceries. Walking with them had nearly the same effect as being with Shilpa—I was spoken for, and so people left me alone. Sometimes at night before bed I'd look at my face in the bathroom mirror and see something there, something that seemed to speak for itself about my experience in that country, but what I really saw was a pinched and hardened expression—the look of someone who has grown good at shutting things out.

A year later, when I was just about ready to leave India for good, I ran into Shilpa at a Trends in Microcredit Conference in Dehradun. She was pregnant, and when I asked about her husband she surprised me by saying he was someone I knew.

"Not Imran?" I said.

"Imran?" she said. "Are you crazy? He died. It's I.P! Only he goes by his full name now—Inder Prakash."

"Imran died?" I said.

"Imran took his own life, actually," she said.

"How?" I said. "—I mean why?"

"He was in love with a Spanish girl. Some hippie who left him for an Israeli yoga instructor."

"That's terrible," I said.

"Too terrible," said Shilpa. "He sent all kinds of texts saying he was going to do it, but we didn't believe him because he was always talking about killing himself. It was I.P. who found him. He did it with pills and whiskey. Classic Imran."

It was a three day conference, but by the second day I found myself unable to concentrate. I had no appetite and I couldn't sit still during the extended panel discussions on rural penetration strategies and encouraging alternative sources of collateral. Shilpa hadn't said exactly when Imran had done it, but I felt certain it must have happened not long after our meeting in the Tex-Mex restaurant. I'd gone after him that night with belligerent jocularity, a small revenge for how he'd made me feel on the terrace, and it had felt genuinely good to rub his nose in my new comfort and happiness, and in his own obvious solitude and humiliation. I kept imagining him alone at the bar after I left, sending angry text messages and downing whiskeys until the bartender finally cut him off. I imagined him cursing under his breath, calling the bartender a fucking clown, and eventually stumbling out of the restaurant by himself, still clutching his mobile phone, waiting for that sound of real chirping birds.

And I kept thinking about that night at Shilpa's house. Just before we'd gone out on the terrace to play the acting improvisation game, Imran had told me a story that I didn't think much of at the time. He said he had a friend who was a psychic, and who once took him to a patch of forest on the outskirts of the city, and in the forest they came to an ancient stone altar in a small clearing. Imran had panicked and taken off running through the forest, scratching his face and arms as he tore through the undergrowth until he came to a desolate road. He said he recognized the place. It was a stretch of road that he'd come to on his birthday for three years in a row when he was younger, for no reason. Then his psychic friend came up behind him and told him that

this was the spot where Imran had died five hundred years ago, and that he had killed himself there as a sacrifice to a god.

"So you see," Imran said to me that night, "I'm only following in my own bloody footsteps over and over again."

Stoned, I'd been momentarily confounded by the idea, and then Imran had wanted to go out on the terrace and play his game. Afterward, wounded, I'd forgotten the story. Now I wanted to find Shilpa and tell her what Imran had said, ask her if she believed it, and if she did, whether she thought Imran was already born and headed down the same path all over again. But by that time the conference was over, all the NGO people had gone home, and in my distraction I'd missed my train back to Delhi by an hour.

11

Physiognomy of a Quilt

The quilt does not become alive immediately. First the coarse-cotton fabric must be woven, the intricate patches cut and sewn, the white cotton batting pressed between the patchwork top and the solid whole-cloth backing. Then the bundling in burlap, the jostling truck ride from the sewing unit to the quilting center, and the long wait in a pile of doppelgangers. And still it takes blood to bring a manufactured thing to life. This time, it happens when a quilter pricks her fingertip and gasps aloud. The women nearby shoot worried glances, because if the foreman finds even a freckle-sized stain he'll dock twenty rupees each from their weekly wages. The quilter continues to stitch, plunging her finger deep into the guts of the quilt and staunching the wound in the batting, hoping no blood will seep through to the top or bottom layer and ruin her last hour of work. But as she completes one line of stitches and prepares to start another she feels a faint disturbance stirring inside the quilt, a hidden well of life springing to shape from the blotch of her blood and coursing through the quilt from hem to hem. Later she feels distinctly guilty as she lifts the quilt onto the pile of finished pieces and moves on to the next, knowing that rough hands will soon sew its borders, fling it through a gauntlet of sewing machines, washing machines, magnetic needle checkers, and jerk it over a wire line strung across the flat roof of the warehouse to dry and pucker in the pre-monsoon sun.

Without knowing how, the woman recognizes the quilt the next morning amid a sea of identical others hanging on the lines. It's not hers to touch, but she touches it secretly as she walks by, and the touch is more like a mother's than a lover's, though it has a hint of both. It makes the woman want to whisper and coo just as she would have to the baby girl she gave birth to a year ago had it not been born lifeless, how she'd murmur to her husband at night were he not

so oblivious and strange after three years of marriage, and how she would whisper herself to sleep if not for the sound of her father-in-law's hacking in the room next door, his lungs ruined after thirty years attending power looms. She would steal the quilt if it were possible. She imagines stuffing it under her sari and pretending to be pregnant again, all the while knowing it would never work. She would buy it if it wasn't worth slightly more than four months' salary, though in fact she doesn't care for the design—its brown patchwork stars and muted colors strike her as dull and a little crude, like something made from scraps of left-over trouser material. If she brought it home her mother-in-law would laugh at her, or cluck her tongue and mutter about the fecklessness of daughter-in-laws and the burden of housing a woman who has failed to bring a son into the world. And yet still she wants to hold it, fold it into a bundle and press it against her skin, to wrap herself around it and feel it grow warm and pulse with sleeping life inside the shelter of her body. She gazes at the quilt through the day, and grazes it when she passes with armloads of wet quilts. *You are mine*, she whispers as she passes, over and over again.

That afternoon when the quilting women stand on break in the dusty courtyard sipping from plastic cups of tea, she goes alone up to the roof and unclips the quilt from its wire line. She folds it five times into its smallest possible reduction and sits with crossed legs on the roof's concrete floor with her body a curved hump over the bundle, gently bouncing. After a while she begins to softly weep with her face buried deep in the dry cotton and her hands linked around it. Once as a girl she held an ashen-color baby chick and listened to it cheep and wrestle inside the hollow of her palms. She'd felt a dizzy mix of love and power, wanting so deeply to squeeze her hands around the chick's delicate body and knowing for certain she'd kill it if she did. Ever since the still-birth she has woken in the night shivering, the memory of her womb wrapped around that fragile skein of bones, certain it was somehow her fault the baby was born dead.

When the foreman discovers her, alone amid a sea of undulating quilt-shadows on the floor, at first he doesn't know what to make of this rocking and faceless bundle of fabric and black braided hair, so clearly a crying woman and at the same time such an curious bulky mass. When he touches her shoulder she quivers but does not look up, and it is only after he mistakes her for another woman and calls her by an incorrect name that she lifts her face from out of her huddle and impassively watches him as he begins to fire his questions and threats at her, ripping the quilt from her arms and banishing her down the stairs and back to work. He is too bewildered by the strangeness of what he has seen to do more than replace the quilt on its line and shake his head at the vulgarity of these rude village women who would use an export-quality textile item as a rag to absorb their tears.

Hours later the quilt is gone.

It leaves on a lori after midnight, packaged in plastic and cardboard, traveling northeast across 490 kilometers of vacant fields and settlements, past Tiruppur and Erode, past reservoirs dotted with dust-colored flamingos barely visible in the moonlight, past Salem and Villupuram, to the sea port of Chennai. Here, in the morning, men in checkered sarongs unload the boxes and resettle them inside a battered steel container. Giant pincers lift the container into the sky and place it on a cargo ship, and the next day it departs, sailing south down the coast, stopping briefly in Colombo before crossing the Indian ocean to Madagascar, and finally passing around Cape Horn and across a choppy Atlantic to Norfolk, Virginia, where it docks in the early hours of a morning storm. From here it goes north in a tractor-trailer, past Newport News and Fredericksburg and Trenton and Poughkeepsie, to the small town of Pittsfield at the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains. Here, a scowling man with a forklift stacks its box onto industrial metal shelves. A week later the box travels first by van, then by semi, then again by van, 720

miles south to a Highlands, North Carolina, where the savvy proprietress of a country boutique carefully snips from the quilt's corner the small taffeta tag declaring "Made in India" before arranging it on a shelf among other assorted linens of sympathetic design. Her neat cursive label announces: "Traditional Appalachian Patchwork Quilt, Queen Size $350."

In time the quilt is purchased by a woman, a divorcée, who sees in it the perfect addition, the focal piece even, to her new condo's country-themed master bedroom. Handing her credit card to the clerk, the divorcée feels a particular glow, the warmth of a newly acquired treasure—a guiltless, proud, tradition-bearing token of small-town craftsmanship, and in the moments before the clerk returns her card, the woman places her palm on the quilt's folded mass, feeling the easy give of its thick batting, the simple softness of its fine, clean cotton and the curt rumples of raised fabric between the color-matched, barely visible quilting threads. But instead of comfort she feels a surprising tide of loneliness and longing, a nameless ache as small and alone as a single body adrift in the sea.

It is a feeling that mostly fades when she brings the quilt home. Draped over her queen-size bed, the quilt presents the room with a grid work of multi-colored stars, each framed by a border of earthen brown, each star unique in its pattern of hues but identical in shape and design. The quilt is nearly perfect. Its color-scheme compliments the décor of the country-themed bedroom so precisely that it could have been sold as part of a set. In the morning when the sunlight diffuses through gingham curtains, casting a glow over the neatly made bed, the quilt is radiant and awake, yet by evening in the soft light of the bedside lamp its tones are subdued and elegant, understated accents and calming hints, and this changeability is what pleases the divorcée so much.

Her ex-husband would have hated it, and this too is pleasing. More than once she has indulged in a particular fantasy of him visiting her on some pretext, wandering around the condo with his appraising eye, picking up objects and hefting them as if to gauge something about her. In her fantasy he strolls nonchalantly towards the bedroom door and pushes it open. He wrinkles his nose and starts to comment but she is right behind him, reaching past him to close the door in his face and present him with the wall of her smile. "No-no," she says. "Off limits, Bob." And she saunters back to the condo's living room, leaving him there mystified and repulsed. The fantasy ends there, always, so that for her he remains perpetually mystified and repulsed, uneasy with the new woman revealed in a glimpse of strange new bedroom furnishings.

But despite the quilt's success here, sometimes at night, lying in her perfect new bed alone, the divorcée feels the quilt swelling with a liquid grief that penetrates its neat rows of cotton batting, coursing through its patterned threads, welling in the corners and weighing her down. The weight is oppressive, almost suffocating, and the woman in her half-sleep tosses this way and that. Airless dreams, cornered dreams harass her as the quilt hangs heavier and heavier, its fringes limp, its batting soggy, so that the following morning, even now that the spell has passed, the woman wakes up tired and vaguely anxious. She is harried by something she can't put her finger on, except that this is how she felt that afternoon after shopping in the mountain town, a gnawing loneliness that even four glasses of wine could not alleviate.

She brings home a man, a date, thinking maybe the answer is the simple physical comfort she's been without for so long, and in the bedroom she lets him lay her down on top of the quilt, her head coming to rest just between two patchwork stars, so that she gazes at him from within a cotton halo as he pulls off his shirt. They grapple awkwardly with the rest of their clothing, smiling at one another in quick, nervous glances, but then very quickly the man is pushing

himself inside, and his weight on top of her is oppressive and uncomfortable. The divorcée emits a small startled yell that reverberates and dies against the condo's thin walls. The man mistakes this sound for an indication of pleasure, and he begins to rock and pump with a vigor that soon has him wheezing—he's nearly sixty and not frequently active—but he's determined to prove that age is no restrictor to passion, and that even this room with its overabundance of gingham and country crafts, reminding him of a certain sexless aunt, long dead, will not mute his drive to please and be pleased. Meanwhile the divorcée is shutting herself off. She knows she wanted this, but not *this*, and it's the difference between the wanting and the having that she can't quite grasp. The last time she made love was four years ago with her ex-husband. They were already separated with no hope of reconciliation and, perhaps because of this, she remembers it as the most tender and lovely moment they ever shared. It was also maybe the saddest, and this precise mixture of great pleasure tinged with sadness, she realizes now, is what she needs if she wants to feel alive again. And yet where on earth will she find it? Far above her the man is lurching onwards. Her own body is sinking deep into the rumpled folds of the quilt. *Not here*, a voice is whispering. *Anywhere but here*, and she manages to croak a feeble "*up*!" into the man's flushed ear. He grunts*,* trying to rise while lifting her with him, tensing his thighs and straightening his back, then gasping aloud at the outpouring of pleasure and release, followed by a clearly audible *pop,* and devastating pain in his lower back. He falls on her. She squirms away, producing a second, smaller, heartbreaking *pop* as he slips from her body and two globules of yellow-white sperm land unnoticed on the earthy border of the quilt, two milky sequins that spend the next twenty-four hours seeping into the fabric and drying in the condo's dehumidified air, until what's left are a pair of glazed-over circles, a set of bleary cartoon eyes, staring at the ceiling with a disquieting sentience that the divorcée cannot ignore.

In the days that follow what she begins to feel for the quilt is an intimate loathing, the kind normally reserved for close family members or spouses, the kind she felt for her ex-husband during the last five years of their marriage, and the kind she cannot help but feel for the man who left her apartment that night on a stretcher. It's the kind of loathing she's learned by experience is best dealt with decisively, which is why she hasn't returned the man's calls and doesn't plan to, and why she's decided, after much consideration, to redecorate her bedroom. The country theme was a mistake, a botched attempt to recover a long buried desire of living on a farm somewhere and baking bread. What she really needs is to create a bedroom that reflects the woman she has become: firm, mature, independent, cool on the surface but capable of great giving and warmth if she desires. Muted yellows and pale greens, blonde wood, sparseness and Scandinavian simplicity—this is what she must create for herself, and so one afternoon she walks into her bedroom, avoiding the quilt's blank and spooky stains, and deftly folds it into a rough cube. She stuffs it inside its zippered plastic bag and drives directly to the red metal clothing bin by the closest gas station, where she feeds the bundle to the high hinged jaws and feels an instant and unburdening relief as it thuds to the bottom of the receptacle, out of her life for good.

A week later when the quilt arrives at the Second Chance Thrift store, a sorter hangs it by a large metal specialty hanger on a rack against the far back wall, pressed between a stained blue comforter and a yellow afghan with fraying edges and a fist-sized hole in the center. It hangs undisturbed but for the occasional brush of a child's hand, moving down the aisle and touching everything on the rack. A faint and stale odor combination of sweat, dust, and mothballs soon coats its surface, and by night it glows weakly in the red-orange light from the rear EXIT sign twenty paces away.

For five weeks nothing happens, but then a sentimental movie premieres in theaters across the country. The protagonist is pursuing her Ph.D. in Women's Studies, writing a thesis about the women who gather in her mother's house to make quilts for their daughters' weddings and childbirths. It happens that one of these quilts, a gift to the daughter in celebration of her degree, almost perfectly resembles the quilt on the thrift store rack, and it is in the second week of this semi-successful movie's run that a woman, a mother, clutches her hands together in excitement when she finds the quilt on the rack and buys it for twenty-seven dollars and seventeen cents.

On the following Sunday she invites her daughter and boyfriend to dinner and watches from the window as they pull into the driveway in their small and battered car. It is after dinner, sitting on the living room couch, that the daughter reveals she is pregnant, and the mother is so surprised that she breaks into tears. Soon the daughter is crying too, while the boyfriend, long-haired and narrow-boned, sits hunched on the couch and tries to contain the shivers he keeps feeling by crossing and uncrossing his legs and compulsively rolling his neck.

Sometime later, after much discussion about practical details, and in the conversational lull that follows, the mother suddenly remembers the quilt and jumps up from the couch to retrieve it from the adjacent room. While she is gone the daughter and boyfriend exchange a wide-eyed glance and take a simultaneous deep breath. For her is a gesture of relief. For him it is a expression of awe at the intensity of the moment, though both imagine the other's meaning is their own. As the mother returns she is caught off-guard by a small twinge of embarrassment, accompanied by a mental image of the thrift store, a clear memory of the place's smell, the sound of the cashier saying "Twenty-seven, seventeen please," juxtaposed with the scene in the movie when the mother gives her teary daughter the quilt she has labored over for months, and

so with barely a flash of deliberation she steps into the room and says “I finally finished this a month ago and I can’t think of a better occasion to give it to you.” She unfurls the quilt right there on the living room floor, and they all stand above the quilt with faces both expectant and tired—much as they will stand above a small wooden crib in a little more than seven and a half months, looking down at the new child curling and uncurling tiny fists in sleep.

“You made this, Mom?” says the daughter, a hole of sadness opening inside her, because one thing she has never understood is her mother’s tendency to tell inconsequential lies, as if the simple truths of their lives were never good enough.

It is at this moment that the boyfriend notices the two dime-sized milky-white spots on the quilt’s brown border. He’s seen this kind of stain before and he smiles briefly, thinking to himself that there could really be no better gift than a semen-stained quilt on this occasion which owes itself entirely to the unpredictable power of sperm. Right then he decides to keep the spots a secret, and in the months that follow he’ll often crane his neck in bed to find the them, offer a short nod in their direction, saluting them, and feeling somehow confident that they are returning the gesture.

But for the daughter, the quilt is a problem. The stars on the quilt remind her of a bad tattoo, like the one she almost got at the base of her spine when she was nineteen, but thank-god didn’t have enough money for, the kind of tattoo that certain women wear half-showing and half-concealed by the waist of their jeans, and that men sometimes call tramp-stamps. She doesn’t tell her boyfriend this. She’d prefer not to talk about this quilt her mother so obviously didn’t make for her, and there’s so much else to worry about as her body swells and her boyfriend works double shifts so they can save money in the months before the baby arrives.

The quilt drapes across their bed like a windless sail. It is the correct size for their mattress but somehow never seems to fit, always too long on one side, too short on the other. In her mind she names it the slut-quilt, then hates the name but can't stop repeating it silently every time she looks at it, realizing that it's not her own voice but her mother's that keeps pronouncing the words in her head. She remembers that once when she was sixteen her mother, in the flurry of an argument, used that word—"slut"—in reference to her, not calling her one exactly, but warning her not to become one, as if she were on the dire verge of it if she kept up her current behavior, and this memory is painfully present now when the woman and her boyfriend make love, so that not only are the words *slut* and *tramp-stamp* recurrent in her mind, but they are also immediately answered by the sight of the quilt's stars. Afterwards she feels helpless and dirty, furious at herself for feeling dirty, and furious at her mother for planting the seeds of this feeling when she was sixteen.

And it's all compounded by her boyfriend's evident appreciation of the quilt. She's seen him stroke it at night before they fall asleep, and he's taken to making the bed every morning, though he never used to before, each time dramatically shaking the quilt into the air and letting it float down onto the bed. Sometimes he does it three or four times until it falls to his liking. Then he smoothes each of the rumples and folds back the top so a foot of its pinkish underbelly cuts a straight line beneath the pillows. And still the quilt is awkward there, slumped and drooping like a wilted flower.

Her mother has begun showing up unannounced at the apartment, her arms laden with supplies from the thrift store: receiving blankets, bottle warmers, dog-eared baby manuals ten years old, and piles of bright clothing, nearly all of it pink or lavender or printed with red cupcakes and hearts. They have no idea what the sex of the baby will be, and the mother's

certainty of a girl makes her daughter uneasy. Even as she holds each delicate outfit and senses with growing pleasure the small body that will fill it, her tenderness is muted by resentment, a sense of being crowded and pushed aside. In all the mother's visits she has never once brought the daughter a piece of maternity clothing. And when they discuss vitamins or stretching exercises the mother's glance always drops to the daughter's belly. The very last thing the mother does before leaving, even after their hug, is to place her palm on the rounded belly and close her eyes, as if waiting for a direct communication that might circumvent her daughter entirely.

At night the daughter can feel the quilt tighten around her belly, piling itself into a heap on top of her, sucking at her, desperately clutching at the unborn life inside her. Occasionally her boyfriend starts awake, shivering on the far end of the bed, petulant and resentful in his grogginess. He jerks the quilt back over top of himself and turns away, burying his face into the fisted cloth while the daughter in her dreams becomes suddenly gloriously free and unburdened. Sometimes she remembers she can fly, or that she can breathe underwater, or that she has the ability to make wonderful objects appear at will. But as the night continues the quilt seems to bunch on top of her again like a slug, her dreams turn sour and abused, and in the mornings she wakes up certain something is wrong with the baby. The baby is dead. The baby has wrapped itself around the umbilical chord. The baby isn't kicking enough and this is not normal and she needs to go to the doctor immediately.

One morning she calls the mother on the phone.

"Mom?"

"How's my baby doing today?" says the mother.

"Why did you lie about the quilt?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you made it. Why did you lie?"

The mother is silent on the other end of the line. Finally she replies, "But I never said that."

For the first time in her life the daughter understands that her mother is not entirely sane. The understanding comes with relief, because now it is clear that the mother is less a threatening force, but a part of life that the daughter must learn to manage and control. "I love you," she says before hanging up the phone, conscious that it has been years since she spoke these words to her mother.

Meanwhile her clothes don't fit. She has no money, and she spends hours every day trying to alter her favorite pieces just to give them a few more weeks of use. She's never sewn and doesn't know what she's doing, laying everything across the bed and making long, reckless cuts down the seams, sliding through the fabric with a smooth ripping sound that is music to her ears. She is astounded at the waves of pleasure this simple act of cutting provides. It's a kind of rushing pleasure, too, that she feels on the morning when she not-quite-accidentally cuts a two-foot slash into the quilt's patchwork top as she slices a pair of jeans, and she stands above the bed looking down on the quilt almost as an unrepentant killer stands above a corpse, admiring the particular quality of ruin she has brought to this object that she has never really wanted nor loved.

Her boyfriend, that night, is furious. They fight for the first time since she told him she was pregnant, and both are shocked at the hidden stores of hurt and rage suddenly available within them, how accessible is their bitterness and well-stocked are their mental catalogues of slights and injustices. All the while the quilt lays slashed and forgotten, crumpled at the foot of

the bed. In the midst of their fighting she attempts to gather it in her arms and storm out to the trashcan before the boyfriend stops her, blocks her way, ripping the quilt from her arms and throwing it back down on the bed so that the two-foot slash pulls apart to reveal the deep brown walnut of blood-spotted batting, like the flash of a dark tongue in a grimacing mouth. It is this stain that the boyfriend finds himself staring at late that night, extremely drunk, after the daughter has run crying from the apartment and driven away in the car, presumably to her mother's house, though perhaps to roar off a cliff somewhere or smash into a telephone pole. "I couldn't care less," he says out loud to the empty room. Then he jerks in shock when the rip in the quilt flutters slightly and an unearthly voice whispers in his ear: *Yes, you could.*

Tomorrow he will tell himself that he was only drunk and delirious, but tonight he trembles and feels the need to retch or moan or cry—something to expulse the truth that is welling within him. It is not just the fact that a quilt has spoken to him. It is the puzzle of its words—for did it mean simply that in fact he *does* care, despite his anger? Or does it know what he hasn't been able to admit to himself? That he *is* capable of caring less, that with a little effort he could forget about the woman and the unborn baby entirely. That if he is honest he should admit he wants nothing more than to run away. He gazes at the quilt, his body beginning to shake, then snatches it at the corner and drags it outside to the apartment building's communal dumpster, swinging it inside and shuddering one last time before he stumbles back to the apartment for cold and restless sleep. The quilt spends the night gathering dew, absorbing the odors of trash and rot that rise steadily from the dumpster's contents and make a permanent home in the damp and spongy batting.

The next day a gaunt man pulls it from the dumpster and holds it aloft with his arms extended. He presses it into his face and smells it, then bunches it into a ball and stuffs it into his

large plastic bag. Later he tosses it onto the bare mattress in his apartment's cluttered living room and falls asleep with it under his head like a pillow. The mattress is in the center of the living room, surrounded by piles of weathered and dirty toys, all sorted into groups of similar objects: here a pile of small metal cars, there a pile of bigger plastic dump trucks and tractors, and there a pile of stuffed animals so high it looms over the mattress like a mountain of damp and matted fur. Polyester batting pours from the open eye-holes of puppies, monkeys and bears. Nearby is a pile of naked plastic baby dolls. Their hair is cropped close or tufted into spikes or missing in clumps, and in some cases their hair is missing entirely. Some of the dolls have been dipped in fuchsia paint, some in a thick black tar as if they washed up on a beach after an oil spill. A number of doll bodies don't have heads, and many of the heads are loose from bodies, and quite a few of the heads are staved in and flattened or depressed in various places. All of the eyeballs have been removed.

The man who lives here is constantly cold, even when he wraps the quilt around his body on the bare mattress at night. His extremities are stiff, and in sleep he shivers and mumbles and jerks awake yelling, tearing at the quilt as if it were attacking him. Then just as quickly he falls back into restless slumber, every hour repeating himself until the morning when he finally sleeps in the gray light. He wakes up coughing and continues to cough for hours after waking. Sometimes the quilt serves as a handkerchief, absorbing sprays of saliva and blood. Sometimes it is his robe, wrapped around him as he steps carefully from living room to bathroom, or into the empty kitchen for a drink of water from the tap. When he walks, it drags behind him, its long rip open wide like a yawning mouth.

During the day the quilt rests on the mattress while the man steps like a nervous heron amid the various piles of the living room, picking up an object and examining it, talking to it,

asking it what color it wants to be or if it would like to be glued to The Car. Through a side window in the living room The Car is visible, an old wood-paneled station wagon parked in the alley and entirely covered in a chaotic jumble of pasted-on plastic toys. The roof, the hood, the doors, even the wheels and the airless tires are studded with plastic dinosaurs, action figures, stray doll limbs pointing out like spikes, concentric circles of mosaicked eyeballs and swirls of paint in between. In place of a hood ornament is a golden Barbie doll, naked, her arms held up as if ready to dive. Baby doll heads cover the headlights and the front bumper. Rubber snakes are woven in and out of their eyes, and tiny plastic lizards perch on their faces.

Sometimes the man kneels down beside the car and whispers, grumbling or squinting his eyes, then shaking his head as he stands again, moves to another area and repeats. All the while his hands are constantly caressing the surfaces of things, his fingers fluttering over the ridges of glued objects and down into the gaps between them to the painted metal, always moving, even when he stops to whisper to a single baby's empty-eyed head or to kiss the Barbie's paint-congealed and wild golden hair.

Every few days the man is gone for many hours, and when he returns he brings a garbage bag full of objects, more stuffed animals and plastic toys, and he spends hours sorting through them while he sits on the mattress in the center of the room, the quilt wrapped tightly around his always-icy feet. Months pass this way, and slowly the man begins to understand that the quilt loves to be shaken out and displayed, unfurled into the air and lowered over the mattress like a beautiful gown. *You…You like to be…elegant?* asks the man, and the quilt responds to him with a gentle sigh and a nearly breathless, *Yes.* The man sometimes turns to the quilt as he is picking his way through the piles in the room, holds up an object for the quilt's perusal and listens as the quilt says, *Oh yes,* or *Maybe not*, or *Why that color?* and the man either nods slowly and puts the

object down, or scowls and shakes his head and turns away, still clutching the thing in jealous and fumbling hands, turning it over and over as if to feel every last millimeter of its surface and somehow know it more completely. At night he sometimes does this to the quilt, his fingers walking like spiders over each patch of the quilt's faded top, tracing the quilting lines, plucking at the threads with his fingernails, pressing his hands against small sections of the quilt and occasionally thrusting his whole arm into the gashed opening, where most of the batting in that wounded spot has long since fallen out. The little walnut-core of blood is nothing more than a speck now in the stray threads of gray cotton that remain, and the two cloudy semen stains are nearly invisible in the overwhelming dirt and grime that covers the quilt entirely.

The neighbors call this man Mr. Too-Tall, though nobody knows where he got the name since he rarely speaks to his neighbors and never speaks to strangers. People have stopped by the apartment building and asked about The Car, knocked on the man's door even after being told he won't answer, left him notes asking if he would consider selling it or presenting it at an art show in a local gallery. When they knock on the door, the man huddles on the mattress, wrapped in the quilt, humming to himself, his eyes closed, his breathing heavy and slow. He tries to stifle his incessant cough. He hums commercial jingles from decades ago, current pop songs from the radio, or variations of Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. Sometimes he peeks through the window after they stop knocking and watches them photograph his car. When this happens, he balls the quilt in his hands and snaps it taught as if to rip it apart. The next day he will tear half the ornaments from the car's hood and roof and replace them with new objects culled from his piles on the apartment's floor.

One night, shivering beneath the quilt and hugging his knees to his chest, he feels a terrible warmth swelling inside his gut and burning through his insides until he is covered in

sweat. He flings the quilt off his body and lays on his back, gazing at an imagined sky full of brilliant, sparkling stars. When he was nine, his mother gave him a telescope and a book illustrating the constellations. The telescope was little more than a toy and barely magnified even the full moon, but eventually he found a use for it, propping it on its rickety tripod at the living room window and pointing it at the distant end of the street in the afternoons so that he would be able to see his mother's bus at very the moment it turned the corner and started coming his way. He began arranging stuffed animals, action figures, an old bowling trophy he'd found in someone's trash—anything with eyes that he could find in the house—before the window so that it was never the boy alone who would greet his mother when she came in the door, but a whole committee of welcoming faces, all smiling and clapping and reaching out their hands to usher the mother inside. "Put down your bag," he would say to her as she stepped inside. "Take off your jacket," because he knew she would not leave the house without those things, and as long as she was free of them there was no risk she would slip out the door. The moments of her homecoming were so tenuous and fragile they made him nervous every afternoon, and he began to take greater and greater care in arranging the crowd of waiting animals and figurines, certain that their placement and positioning would determined not only how soon his mother would come home but also the quality of her mood when she arrived. If he arranged them all poorly she would come in the door exhausted, bitter, and she would give him only the briefest hug before brushing him aside and making her way to the kitchen, where she would sort through the mail with her coat still on, and when she was finished she would have decided on someplace she had to go, alone, promising him half-heartedly that she'd be back soon. But if he arranged everything perfectly, the animals snuggled into the arm chair, the bowling trophy on the near corner of the coffee table, the super-heroes on the window sill peaking out from behind the curtains with

brave, expectant faces, his mother might just walk into the living room and light up with a smile that made him tremble with joy and relief. Then she would kneel before him, the smell of outside wind still clinging to her overcoat, and open her arms wide, wrapping the coat around his whole body so that she was everywhere, and he would close his eyes and press his face into her clothes and beating warmth and just breathe.

In the morning the man is dead. The quilt, flung aside in the night, has gradually inched back over his body, pulsing, kneading the dead skin and cooing softly, shrinking itself gradually tighter and tighter around him until it envelopes him like a cocoon. A week passes, and when the two uniformed men come, their faces covered with white masks against the smell and their eyes are wide and uneasy in the apparent madness of the apartment, they try but cannot manage to separate the fabric of the quilt from the flesh of the man. Fabric and flesh seem to have merged into a solid and shared mass, a rigid patchwork mummy that they lift uneasily into their narrow black bag. One of the men so hastily pulls the zipper on the bag closed that his partner looks at him and raises his eyebrows.

"What?" says the man, abashed, unable to explain that when he first touched the quilt he felt a distinct quiver, the tremor of a muscle tightening to unwelcome touch, and a voice so airy and distant it could only have been whispered inside his own head, saying, *mine, mine, mine.*

12

His Last Endless Sentence

He was sentenced to a sentence without end or significant pause, a sentence to serve as punishment for all the sentences he had previously left un-ended, sentences he had left as run-ons, sentences he had let run off his body like water, sentences he had constructed with only subordinate clauses and forgotten about, leaving them without objects, un-objectified, abject, solemn and depressed, these sentences without a sense of closure that stood in lines in the bureaucratic buildings of his mind, chewing their lips and wondering if he would ever deign to see them again, admit them to his bookshelf-lined office, sit them before his mahogany desk and ask them the question they longed to be asked, which concerned their earnest hopes for completion, for detail, for something to act upon, something to affect, because a sentence desires change, however paltry and insignificant, however predictable, however bland, and if change could have happened to at least one of these sentences, perhaps his own sentence would not have been so harsh and long, perhaps those in charge would have taken pity on him and levied him with a minor sentence, a lenient sentence, a sentence that had strict and definite pauses, verifiable breaks, or maybe even multiple sentences to be served in consecutive order, each one filling in a new portion of the story he would have to compose now that he had been officially sentenced, a story of repentance, expressing sorrow and guilt and the desire to change, always to change, and to allow any sentences he composed in the future to also change, even end if they so chose, because choice was at the core of his sentence, the choices he had made to deny choices to sentences, the choices he had made to abandon them in fields, in cities, in deserts with only participles in their little unstructured stomachs, without syntax or with silly syntax, or taxed with overly simple noun and verb agreement, sentences who deserved a chance but never got it

because he was too busy thinking of new, more interesting sentences that eclipsed the old ones but did not destroy them, for a sentence once composed, even partially, will never decompose, because sentences are not like bodies, not like vegetables, sentences are not organic matter, rather they are more like stones piled on top of sand, and they sink into the sand when left alone, but never disappear, and that was the aspect of his sentence that he feared most, the fact that his sentence would never end, not properly anyway, not in the manner that every sentence dreams of ending, with the orgasmic finality of the period, the punctuation kind of period, not the span of time, which was the only period he would be getting, an endless period of uninterrupted time in which his endless sentence would run on and on forever inside the cold concrete walls of his jail-cell, scribbled in pencil until the pencil ran out, and thereafter in blood from the tips of his fingers, and always under strict observation by closed circuit camera to make sure he never attempted to punctuate his sentence and bring it to an end, shocking him with the electric collar around his neck if it ever appeared that he was trying to end his sentence, or if his language indicated that he was beginning to sum up, or if the words as they appeared in the Computer Generated Sentence Graph in the surveillance office showed signs of nearing some sort of finality, or if the English majors employed to monitor his endless sentence felt that he was trying to reach a conclusion or even a hint of a point that could be construed as a bridge towards finishing, which happened often because the English majors were interested in alternate careers in criminology and behavioral sciences and wanted to see the effects of electric shock upon the man who had received the endless sentence in punishment for his inconsiderate sentencing of the past, and each secretly delighted in the bulging eyes, dripping spittle, and apoplectic seizures of his body which itself was an incomplete sentence, a hopelessly dependent clause, he having been born with only one functioning limb