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To receive my services you must be dying and alone

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TO RECEIVE MY SERVICES YOU MUST BE DYING AND ALONE

by

Kathryn Kruse

Bachelor of Arts
University of Wisconsin-Madison
2000

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

To Receive My Services You Must Be Dying and Alone

by

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Following is a collection of short fiction. The work comes out of the tradition of realism with influences from surrealism and the gothic grotesque.

While most of the work of creation centered around character and voice, several themes emerge in the final product. Death and its perception in American society play central roles in many pieces. Also, the collection explores the experience of intimacy in many types of interpersonal relationships. Several of the pieces focus on the effects environment and location have on individuals and how change of location impacts a character. In conjunction with these many themes, obsession as an attempt to attain fulfillment also runs through the works.

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To Receive My Services You Must Be Dying and Alone

Lots of people ask to be held. When it comes right down to it they are about to go tits up and it doesn't matter who the hell I am, that we've never met before. They cling to my warm and living body and I am comfort. I am their sister and brother, teacher, first girlfriend and their last lover. Fifteen year old girls turn and say, *Please make love to me. I don't want to die without knowing.* Seventy-year old men loose their gruff and say, *My wife, she didn't touch me for the past five years. Let's close our eyes and hold hands.*

Sometimes I sit in a chair. Sometimes I lay in the bed. I put cool hands on cheeks, on collar bones. I twine my fingers with theirs. I ease the dying. I calm. Others say I love.

My name is Sally. It's a crap sort of name. Most people forget it the moment it's out of my mouth, while I'm still introducing myself. A lot of old people have the best names. Bertrum and Eudaleia. I'd probably name my kids something wonderful like that, call them Bertie and Lea if they liked, but I don't suppose I'll have kids. It's funny, I talk to nurses who say every time they see someone cash in, the first thing they want is to

head home and reproduce, dig their fingers deep into the physical beauty of life. Not me. Think about those nuns out on battlefields. Sure they probably had a profound connection with their God, married to the cross or whatever, but I bet if you pushed hard enough a few would admit that the real flesh and fragile bones of children weren't in the cards after seeing what happens to all that flesh, how easily bone shatters. Me too. But I'm not joining any convents.

I'm not quite sure how Frank got in, how, after days, I still found his voice messages waiting each time I left ICUs and hospice cares.

Frank, he missed his wife's death. It was a blood clot. Rachel was young, 34, no family history, no medical problems and the thing went fast while Frank was out of town at a conference. He deals in Tupperware.

I was finishing up with a car accident when a nurse I'd worked with a few times tapped my shoulder and asked if I'd come. *Just got a feeling on this one*, she said. *She could throw another clot.*

Frank arrived ten minutes after Rachel's death. A while later he found me in the cafeteria drinking coffee. His complexion seemed waxy and he'd lost his sports jacket somewhere, exposing a rumpled shirt. He ran his hands down the sides of his pudgy midriff searching for pockets that were not there, but otherwise he didn't seem too bad. I didn't think he'd be a wailer or throw anything.

"I've done it. All the paperwork," he said.

"Yes. There is lots of that," I said.

Then we were silent. Frank gave up on finding the pockets and fidgeted with a scrap of paper he picked up from the table. His hair seemed longer, shaggier than I'd

expected for a salesman. I sighed. I started to ask if he wanted a coffee and he said, “We’re new to the city. Only a few days. No family or anything.” He felt embarrassed, I think.

“Plenty of people die when no one can be with them. It’s a part of our lifestyle.” I have found this statement calms people.

“How...?” he asked.

“Peaceful. She held my hand. She said your name. She had no pain.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“Thanks,” he said again. He looked back and forth from ceiling to the paper shreds in his fingers. I thought he’d ask for details about his wife’s death. I hoped he wouldn’t. I felt tired, two cases in a row, and Rachel had been a confessor and I didn’t want to have to make decisions about true and honest.

“Do you know good places to deal with. To preserve her?” he asked

“Oh. Like a funeral parlor?”

“Well, I suppose. Or. Anything else?” He gave me a sideways glance that I couldn’t read. Frank had a wide face and large, thick glasses that often caught reflections and made his eyes look lopsided and stretched, his expressions difficult to read.

“Sorry,” I said. “I don’t do much with arrangements after the death.”

“I just thought, because of, you know, your job, you might know.” He held his breath, trapping the rest of what he wanted to say in his lungs.

We sat for a bit longer and then Frank left to go home.

I have several form letters that I send to people after the checks have cleared. They start with something like, *To the bereaved of _____, I wish to express my deepest*

condolences at your loss. Having spent a small amount of time with your _____ I can understand any sorrow you feel at his/her departure from your life/lives. As I had the honor of being with _____ during his/her final moments I thought it might relieve your mind/minds to know that he/she died and then there are several options: peacefully./with your name on his/her lips./ with great bravery. /after a certain amount of distress that made the quiet and calm of final rest a great relief, and so on. Of course, if people ask for details I'll tell them how their loved ones were so doped they couldn't have felt pain if the nurses took a cattle prod to them, or that there was screaming and fecal matter, or that we sang songs, that their eyelids flickered a few times but they never gained any real consciousness, that their bodies shook, that they held my hand hard, so I still have the bruises, and, as their grip loosened, I thought of paper boats floating out to sea.

Interestingly, most people don't ask. I'm always shocked by that, but generally the form letter, a sketch of the last moments, a picture that they can fill in on their own or leave blank, is all they want.

A few days later I got my first call from Frank. I was with Marjorie, an old woman who had decided to die and called me every time she thought the moment might be upon her. She and her husband, George, lived in a nursing home. A few weeks before, he'd suffered a hemorrhagic stroke that pushed him into a coma. The day he moved from the ICU into the hospice section of the nursing home Marjorie began to refuse food. She still lived down in their old suite, but the staff put a small cot in George's room and she spent most of her days there with him. I had been called in a few times, each visit her fingers more frail when she gripped my hands. I sat at her bedside and we talked about

books. I played Puccini. I don't know what the correlation is, but lots of people who die alone want to listen to opera in their final hours. Maybe people like to think the full orchestra plays for them, crescendos at their last breath, audience in tears. During pauses in the music and the conversation we heard George's shallow breath rustle over on his side of the room.

Eventually, each time I came, Marjorie started fidgeting with the sheets drawn up around her and looked over at husband's slack face, sat up and said, "Well, honey, I think I was wrong. Soon I'll be moving along to the next place with George. But I guess it's not my time quite yet."

When my phone rang I started to apologize for forgetting to turn it off. Marjorie said, "No, no. Go ahead and answer it. Is it a gentleman?" She winked at me. I expected Frank to be calling with a funeral invite, but he asked if I wouldn't stop by for coffee.

"I hope you can come. You see, like I said, we just moved here. I hardly know anyone. It's hard to start conversations. 'Hi. My wife just died. I'd like to be friends.'"

I could see Marjorie looking at George and her chest rose and fell with his breath while Calaf sang *Nessun dorma*.

I agreed and cursed myself when I hung up the phone.

Marjorie did not die that day.

On my business card it says *Consultant* and to receive my services you must be dying and alone.

I do not do the still-living. What I mean is I don't get mixed up in the friends and the relatives of those that I've helped to pass on. I know plenty of cultures have mourners, paid professionals, who come to the sides of graves and pyres and tear their

hair and rend their clothing. That's not me. You show up for a terminal illness, for bleeds into the brain and stage IV cancer and you know that a light, so to speak, gleams at the end. A conclusion to the relationship. Get taken in by the family, let the wife smudge her mascara all over you, drink scotch with the son and that's it, *Uncle Leroy move on down a spot. Put the extra leaf in the table. I'll be seeing you at Christmas and all the birthdays.*

The families of those who die with me, they couldn't imagine forking over cash to strangers performing sorrow. *Insincere*, they'd think. *Asking an outsider to wash our dirtiest undies.* But when they finally get to the hospital, people who rushed but didn't make it in time, most are unsure what to do next. If their knees want to give out and if they'd like to slam their hands on the ground till the grey linoleum shines bloody with their grief, they hold themselves back, their family members tisk and whisper *Roger, Beth, let's keep it together, now.* If they can't quite cry at that moment, they worry they have done something wrong. I see these people, unprepared for death, look at me out of the corners of their eyes, like someone at a dinner party trying to figure out what fork to use with the salad, begging me, a little, to teach them to demonstrate grief. All the time they ask me to *just say a few words at the funeral.* Anything I could say would be inauthentic, a representation, a remolding of the truth, and I don't do inauthentic. I don't do funerals because funerals are for the still-living.

Frank lived in a small, rented one-flat. The front door opened into a living room that had poor lighting and dark carpeting covered in stacks of still unopened moving boxes.

"Come into the kitchen," he said.

The coffee maker sat on top of a column of boxes, the cardboard under the machine stained from water he spilled filling the back chamber. Two chairs hovered in the middle of the linoleum and the table leaned in several unassembled pieces against a wall. Amid the disorder, besides a few cooking utensils sprouting from a ceramic vase, the counters gleamed bare.

“Rachel, you know, she was looking for a job. Floral design. I sell reusable plastic food storage devices.”

“Oh,” I said. “Tupperware?”

“I can’t call it that. Here.” He pulled a box up off the ground. As he handed it to me the ceiling lights reflected off his glasses.

“Sit. Sit,” he said.

Inside the box was a large set of rectangular food storage devices, laid one inside the other like simple Russian dolls.

“An extra thank you, because.” he waved his hand in the air and let it come to rest, for a moment, on the hairline above his temple.

I said, “You don’t have to.”

“Well.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes,” he said, clapping his hands. He sloshed coffee into two cups, handed one to me and then sat down in the other chair. They were arranged so that we both faced the stove.

We took sips of coffee.

“Come on,” Frank said. “I want to show you something.”

He led me back to the living room. Our feet stirred a musty smell into the air.

“Maybe sit,” he pointed to an overstuffed couch, the brown upholstery pilling and rough, piled with clothes and books. Even in the darkness I could tell that the clothes were Rachel’s.

Frank said, “No, no. That’s ok. Just stand.”

He flipped a switch and a row of cheap track lights screwed in over the opposite corner came on.

In the shadow of an empty bookcase stood Rachel. Frank grabbed my wrist and pulled me towards her. “Sally, here is Rachel.”

“Frank,” I said, weaker than I’d have liked.

“I’ve had her stuffed,” he said. “Nicely done, isn’t it? Died on Thursday and got her back this morning. Monday. Exactly how I asked. Left hand on hip, the other hand balling up her skirt like that. I toyed with the idea of having her posed with her arms up, her fingers clawed, like roaring, like with her mouth like this, you know. I’d say, ‘That’s how she died!’ But I figured the joke would get old. And, well, like you said, that’s not how she died.”

I got out of there fast. *Thanks for the coffee and I’ve got a client out at St. Ruth’s.* On the street I took great gulps of air and sunshine.

Let me be clear, it wasn’t the taxidermy bit that got me out of Frank’s place. Whatever. No skin off my elbows if you want to stuff your wife. That’s certainly not the strangest thing I’ve ever heard. People want to be plastered into the walls of houses, shot out of cannons. There are entire cultures that eat their dead, or dismember them to scatter limbs to different winds and deities. Anyone who wants can have their loved one

pressurized into the gem of their choice. *Is that a ruby? No. It's Carl.* Once I had this woman ask me to film her brother's feet after he died. She wanted to capture the final growth, the last push, that millimeter of collagen that rises up after death. So there I was, running up the damn hallway after his gurney, sheet over his face, little piggies exposed, trying to hold the camcorder straight. She wept when I handed over the tape and told me she had set up a screen in her living room and would keep his toes projected there on a looped track. You think I'm joking? Go out in the street. People are weird. Doesn't mean they get any less weird when confronted with the inevitability of a dead body. The house of the soul, if you will.

So if Frank didn't care about possible legal ramifications, I didn't care that Frank had found someone willing to gut his wife and saturate her skin with chemicals. Not so far from what your average mortician does, as I understand it. No. It was all her clothes sitting on the couch. The way he hadn't unpacked any of his own things. How he said, "Here is Rachel," as if she might hear him. Frank asked me over to help him pretend that Rachel was undead, that that last breath, the stopping of her kidneys and heart, the relaxing and then stiffening of her fingers, hadn't really happened. I had those fingers curled in mine when it started, that last breath, so I was the only one who could reverse the event for Frank. Break the evil spell and say it ain't so.

That might be a bit much. Frank wanted one other person to pretend that the soul was still in the body. It didn't matter who that person was. As I said, I don't do the stuff after death. I don't do the living. And when it is time for the living to be dead, I won't help bring them back, so I got out of there.

Before she went into her brief coma, after she seemed to accept that if anything happened suddenly Frank might not be there, after she made sure I knew she didn't want to linger if her condition was incurable or irreversible, Rachel asked me to climb into the hospital bed. She held my hand and talked. She fell quiet for a moment and then kissed me. Usually I'm good at diverting kisses to the cheek or keeping it to a gentle brushing of the lips, but Rachel held my hip and kissed me hard, the rubber oxygen tube in her nose making noises that reminded me of the wheels on plastic toy trucks.

Frank started to call and every time I promised myself to delete the voice mails without listening.

Like a moth to a flame, I said each time I pressed "1" to listen. *Like a damn saint to a leper colony*.

"Sally. Hi. Frank. Um. Rachel's husband. You forgot your tupperware. I mean your food storage units. When you came for coffee. I've got them here. Just. Whenever you want to come for them. Ok. Well."

"Sally. Frank. Rachel's husband. I'm here. I wanted to make sure the message went through. So. Yes. Ok."

"Hi. Yes. This is Frank. Rachel's husband. I'm here with Rachel. Well. You know. I'm just calling to see how you are. Frank. With the food storage. You know. Listen. Come by whenever. For them. Yes. And there is something. I thought maybe you could help. I think. I was thinking. I kept all of her clothes. Rachel. Rachel's. You know.

And change her. Sometimes. That sounds weird. Like a baby. Change her. I think her clothes should change sometimes. I guess you.”

I deleted the rest of the message.

“Yes. Hi. Hi. Frank. Hi. There is something I didn’t tell you when you were here. About Rachel. The guy who did it, who, um, what’s it, preserved. Yes. Well. In the hospital, after you left. Well. And after they’d taken Rachel. It’s so hard, Sally. I got on the plane, when I left to the conference, and I thought about her going back home to unpack. She was going to the flower store and the paper store first. On the way home. Did I tell you that, besides the flower arranging, she does this origami stuff, these folded paper flowers in her bouquets? She did this wreath, once, and wove it with tiny white and pink paper flowers. The first time I saw it was at night. I got home late and there, with only the light coming in from the kitchen, it was lying on the couch. At our old house. Back in. Anyway, the way the light caught it was like, like a little galaxy on the couch, all the white flowers catching the light. But just bent pieces of paper. I still have it. Like a crown. For a goddess. I’d like to believe in goddesses. What was I talking about....” He breathed quietly a while. I put my finger on the phone to erase the message but his voice began again. “Right. It’s hard, Sally. She was alive. And then gone. Not just dead. Not her dead body. But they took it away and then she was gone. So I wanted to see it. The clot. I told the man, the guy, that I wanted the clot in a jar. That, when he opened her up, I’d make it worth his while to find it, to drop it in some formaldehyde. He couldn’t find

it. He said that. Couldn't be sure. He didn't want to sell me anything inauthentic. Anyway. I thought you might like to know that."

"Sally. Yes. Just checking in about the bill. This is Frank. Rachel's. You know. I dropped it. The address on your card. I thought. I've been thinking. Maybe something happened to it. The check I didn't hand it to you. Directly. So. Sally. You know how I told you about the blood clot. Well, I've been thinking. A lot. About her organs. You don't, so much, when someone is alive, think about their organs. They said, the doctors, what good health she was in. To comfort me, maybe. So I can't help but look at her. So there she is in that top. Is that a blouse? I don't even know the right words. I guess she looks comfortable. And I think about her organs. Her perfect health organs. Her intestine. Her spleen. Spleen. They would be plump. And slick. Well. I should go."

"Hi. This was part of it. When I got home, after the hospital, there weren't any flowers or paper. I guess she hadn't gone to the flower store or anything. Ok."

Rachel had affairs while Frank left to sell things, she told me. One of the things, maybe the only thing, she and Frank had in common was that they'd both lost their parents and were only children. They'd been adrift and then bumped against one another. Of late she had been thinking of divorcing him. She said that it was time for their boats to stop bouncing against each other. Since they'd met, Frank had wanted her to climb aboard his boat, let hers bob away. She floated her hands with needles taped into the back sides up above her body, toward the tiled ceiling. The soft inner edges tapped against

each other in time with the heart monitor and then one hand fluttered up and away, stretched as far as she could reach and Rachel folded her hands over her chest and closed her eyes for a while. I don't lie, though. I didn't lie to her husband. Before the brief coma, her eyes went flat and she said, *Frank*.

Marjorie had been ten days without food when she called again. George had not died. When the hospice volunteer showed me into his room, both lay under handmade quilts. Red and yellow stars triangled across their chests and a copy of *La Traviata* I'd lent Marjorie played. George had sunk deeper into his bed and I knew he wouldn't last long. Some people can read the stocks. I can read death. Just takes some practice. Before she told me to go home that day, Marjorie beat me at checkers three times. Then she reached up her thin, thin hand and tugged gently at the front of my hair. She said, "Well, I don't know how long I'll have to wait, but I guess I didn't get the call today. I'll kiss George on the cheek and go downstairs for a bit."

The next time he called I answered. "Frank."

"Sally."

"Frank, you have got to stop calling me."

"Yes. I suppose."

"Frank, I provided a service for your wife and now our relationship is over."

"Yes. But you. Your storage containers."

"Thank you. But I'd like you to keep those."

"Sally."

"Frank. You need to get out and do things. You need to call other people."

"Sally."

I knew that I should end the conversation, that I should not engage any further, but there was something so hurt in how he'd said my name, *Sally*, that kept me talking. Most people say my name with very little thought. After a small bit of effort to get the *Sa* out, *lly* sort of dribbles along behind. But Frank had said the whole name, *Sally*, with a sort of music. It reminded me of the death scene in *La Boheme* when Rodolfo wails *Mimi*. I told myself, *Get off the phone. Get off the phone*. But I was still on the phone.

"When was the last time you were out of the house?"

"I don't know. Your check. Taking your check."

"When was the last time you saw anyone?"

"Coffee."

"Your family? Rachel's family?"

"They won't be coming."

I already knew the answer. Rachel had told me. I wanted to make him say it. Ha. I'll Carmen your Mimi.

But then I said, "I'm going to play racketball tomorrow. You can come if you like."

I did not expect him to have sports goggles. He didn't seem the athletic type. It made me feel better, like when Cerano kicks those guys' butts at the beginning of the play.

I'll tell my secret. I'll tell why I'm good at what I do, at easing people out of life. Ready? I don't pity them. Tenderness, yes. Pity, no. Pity is something we feel for the poor. The weak. Pity implies that we are stronger, more able, that we can afford this remorse at someone else's suffering because of the safety of our superiority. Very few

people want to be pitied for long. A person who deserves pity can do nothing but ask for the mercy, the help, of those that pity. No one wants to have sex or do a business merger with someone they pity. You're not going to name your baby after such a person. And believe me, to the very end, that's what we want, we humans. Sex and power and money and to be remembered as sexy and powerful and someone to be emulated.

Compassion, sure. But you won't get pity out of me. It was a life. You did what you did with it. Now you are on the way out. We have a focus, a bit of time to celebrate or to mourn and then: over. Sucks, but there you go.

I can do it with the dying, no pity. No problem. But the living, those still wandering around after the death, cut loose, they are lost in the woods and I don't know what will happen in their story before the end and so I fall into pity. That's why I don't do the living. No funerals. Frank. My God. The man was living in a dark, half-unpacked apartment with his stuffed wife. It was pity that made me ask him to racquetball. I could tell because I didn't want to go. Some people like the heady power of pity. Not me.

So the sports goggles helped.

Frank played decently.

"Play a lot of racquetball in the Tupperware world?" I asked.

"Reusable food storage," he started. Then he said, "Yes. A little."

Standing in the service area, he said, "I laid her down this morning. I eased the skirt out of her fingers and I looked to see, well, how anatomically correct she was. Everything was stiff. It bulged too much." Then he smashed the ball against the front wall.

We played in silence for the next half-hour. Only the sound of our shoes squeaking and the puckered noise of the rubber ball against our rackets and the walls. Occasionally Frank hit the ball at a funny angle so it made a sound like a water droplet falling into a pool. Each time it happened he smiled.

I don't think the dead experience purgatory. Only the living.

Marjorie called. I almost refused to go because what the hell was I doing sharing hobbies with people who hung out with the corporeal remains of their spouses. But George wasn't really dead yet and I didn't think Marjorie could make it much longer on the no food routine.

I got to the nursing home early and when I walked into George's room, Marjorie had her humped back to him, a pop-tart in her hands. What do you do? It's like catching some guy looking at porn in a library. I coughed.

"Oh. Hello honey." She looked at the shiny foil. "Yes. This. Someone left it here." She brushed at her lips nervously.

We said nothing as she circled the room, pushing herself off the edges of furniture, trying to find a place to put the food. I thought of squirrels hopping this way and that with nuts in their paws, looking for good hiding spots.

Finally she stopped shuffling around and turned to me. "I feel like I'm not supposed to be able to go on," she said. "We married when I was seventeen. Seventeen. You know, sometimes I think about my body growing old but it is his body, the changes in his body, that I see."

Leaned into the bend in my elbow, Marjorie made her way back to the bed. We sat together on the pieced quilt. After a moment she turned toward me and I could see her paper cheeks were wet from tears.

“The thing is, I think I can live without him.”

I could have left. I was off the clock. There would be no dying. But I stayed for her to slaughter me a few times at checkers. On the way out she handed *La Traviata* back. I put my palm on George’s forehead to say good-bye.

I didn’t hear from Frank for a week and then I got a voicemail.

“Sally. Frank. We played racquetball. Well. Here’s the thing. Rachel. I believe I had spoken to you about how I started to think, really, about her internal organs? Yes. Well. I’ve cut her open, you see. I guess I wanted to know. I pulled everything out and, well.” There was a long pause. “Sally. I don’t know what to do next.”

You can’t help but look over in the dead wife corner when you go into someone’s house where you know they just pulled all the stuffing out of their dead wife. A sheet lay over the ground, lumping up in places. In the print pattern occasional red berries accented a blue floral spray.

Frank had his glasses back on. The light reflected off of them.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

Here’s something I’ve learned from the dying: most people, turns out, have saved a life. And most people have been saved. Some want to tell you about saving another human and some want to tell you about getting pushed out of the way of a bus by Mr.

Greger when they were ten. Turns out some people think it amazing that they saved someone and the others are still in wonder that anyone would save them.

We sat on the couch, the sheet across from us. Rachel's clothing had been moved away. Frank's body, heavier than mine, depressed the cushions and I braced my feet and legs to not slide into the gulf.

"It's funny," he said. "When I pulled everything out, the foam, whatever, when I was holding it, I thought, 'Heart.' 'Kidney.' 'Gallbladder.' I felt each part in my hand. Perfect. And when I dug in again, each time, I felt the warmth of her blood, the softness of tissue swelling up around my fingers. Perfect. I loved her. You know. It made me crazy, sometimes, that I could not crawl all the way inside her. That I could not know her entire body."

In the hospital Rachel had told me how Frank's love, when they met, was complete and safe. How it had become stifling. Then she kissed me.

I make a job of not saving lives, of letting the story unfold while I watch. There, sitting next to Frank, I saw that the wonder of all that saving and being saved is not that I or someone else would climb into the burning car, but that we could pull each other from under the bus wheels, step forward and change the story without pity, but enticed by a sense of care and responsibility.

"Now I feel like I've known her totally, her flesh," Frank said. He began to cry. He set his coffee cup on the ground. "I'd taken another woman out for drinks. At the conference. Just before I got the call about," he started to gesture at the sheet and then swung his hand around over his head, indicating no specific space.

On the way to the forest preserve I stopped at a hardware store for a shovel. The whole drive Frank cried.

I sliced into the ground with the blade. After a few minutes watching me dig in silence, Frank began to sing. Frank had a lovely voice. Tenor. He sang while I dug. *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.* In the end, the hole was not clean and squared but lopsided and rounded at the bottom where I got tired. We put the sheet and Rachel in the grave. Frank lay origami paper down the length of her body, a rainbow of diamonds, each piece kissing the corner of the last, and took the shovel from me and began to pile the dirt back on the remains of his wife.

Holy Palmer

Edwina pressed the button next to the back door of the church. The harsh buzz, like metal drug around the edge of a rusty cog, reverberated inside. After a while the thick oak door swung open and a man in a sweater and tie stood before Edwina. She guessed he was maybe twenty years older, maybe fifty, though she often found it hard to know the age of Americans.

He looked at Edwina and then down at the baskets next to her feet.

“The palms,” she said.

“Oh good,” he said. Their words stumbled over each other.

Then he said, “You’ve arrived.” He held out his hand. “Russ. I’m a lay minister.”

Edwina put her hand in his and left it there while he shook them both.

“Edwina,” she said.

Russ bent down, grunting a little, for the baskets.

She knew she should get on the bus, go home, collect the stacked baskets of palm fronds looped into crosses, take them and sit outside of her train station, sell them for a nickel a piece. This would be her best sales day of the year, the crosses laid out next to her everyday products, palm frond kittens and bears. People heading in and out of the train station, guilty for not being at a church, would be compelled by the weight of Jesus's impending suffering to purchase her crosses, handfuls of them to take home or to put in their pockets during work.

"I can help," she said.

"Oh. Thank you." He picked up three baskets overflowing with thin palm fronds arching lazily over the sides and she picked up the other two filled with crosses made of woven fronds, the baskets light and large. They made their way through the church and Russ chatted at her and she responded as best she could in her new English.

"You are a long way from home?" he asked.

"No," she said. "This is home now."

Life had prodded her northward as if she were a ball floating on the ocean's surface, the tides and waves lapping her farther and farther out to sea. She and her husband eventually bumped against the U.S. border and then, after bobbing there for a while, walked days and nights through the desert and continued north.

Later he asked, "Are you married?"

"No," she said. Her husband, more than a decade older than her, had died in an emergency clinic a year before, a year after their trip through the desert, his heart unable to perform its duties.

"Me neither," he said. "Or, not anymore."

They arranged the baskets of palms next to the entranceways to the sanctuary. Edwina enjoyed the rustle of leaves in the velvet-and-marble silence.

“Stay for the service,” he said.

Russ had hazel eyes the color of the late summer hills around the city, when the grasses started to dry and crackle and lie down flat against the earth.

“Ok,” she said.

When the service ended, everyone out lining the sidewalk where the choir had walked, palms in their hands, Russ invited her to the church parlor and they ate small sugar cookies from tangles of plastic grass and drank cups of coffee. Russ introduced her to parishioners, people chatting, circled in to knots. He broke apart the tight groups to say, “This is Edwina. She joined us for the first time today.”

“Welcome,” the people said.

Edwina nodded her head.

Once, when he brought her cream for the coffee, she touched his wrist. Twice he put his hand on the small of her back to guide her through the room. She watched children sit on the floor, tired of their pretty lace dresses and starched slacks, unweaving her crosses, stripping the fronds down into leathery ribbons.

He offered her a ride home.

“Thank you,” she said. Normally she would have said no, taken the bus, but when he asked, “I’m driving home. Can I give you a ride?” an enormous exhaustion flooded her body and she could hardly stand and after she said yes she could hardly move her legs, so heavy, stone and iron.

The air in his car was chilly.

“Here,” he said. “Heated seats.”

They made comments about the weather. They talked about birds and described to each other the people they saw through the windows.

“I’m going home to eat lunch. Would you join me?” he asked.

Edwina closed her eyes into the exhaustion that had become delicious. She felt how far she had sunk into the warm, smooth seat.

“Yes,” she said.

They ate tuna salad with pickles on large pieces of toasted bread. He spooned the tuna salad from an opaque plastic container he pulled out of the refrigerator.

“I made this yesterday,” he said. “I’m always hungry when I get home from church.”

After they ate they stood next to one another at the sink, circling water over their plates, handing the dish cloth back and forth, the cups, the spoon. She ran her finger wrapped in the soapy cloth around the ridge in the plastic container where it snapped onto the cupped lip of the bottom section. She watched water drip off the plates, out of the dish rack while she dried her hands. He touched her shoulder and then, when she looked up, he touched her wrist. In his hazel eyes she saw square flecks of gold and scalloped-edged circles of deep brown ringed his pupils like a child’s drawing of the sun. A fan of deep cut lines ran back from each of his eyes and she thought how much hard work he must have put into smiling throughout his life.

They took off one another’s clothes and fell asleep together in his bed. When it was dark they woke and Edwina felt refreshed and sluggish. They caressed each other’s bodies slowly and he ran his lips over her shoulders and breasts and licked her nipples

and belly and down between her legs. She put her hands on his head and rocked her hips and then pulled him up and kissed him and they made love quietly, with passion but without urgency, as if they had been sharing a bed for years.

Russ invited her to stay and Edwina thought about the stack of baskets filled with palm crosses waiting by the door to her room, about the palm fronds waiting to be shaped into rabbits, boxes, puppy dogs, about her daughters who did not want come north, wanted to stay with relatives and husbands and boyfriends who lived back along the trail that had brought her to America and asked to be taken home.

She said, "I will see you at the church."

When she entered her room it felt more spacious. There was more room for air. Through the week she took breaks from weaving, stood in the middle of her room and closed her eyes, stretched her fingers into the vast expanses around her. She allowed herself to feel giddy.

"Russ," she said and rolled the first letter along her tongue like a purr and the last letter seeped out in a long sigh.

The next Sunday she returned to his church, arrived just before the ceremony started, and took a seat in the back pew, a palm-frond frog she had made while thinking of Russ in her pocket. She stood and sat and stood and kneeled with the congregation, the rhythm of the ceremony, if not the words, familiar from childhood. She did not see him. When it came time to pray for the souls of the sick and the dead, she heard the cantor say, *Russ*, one sharp sound. In the parlor after the recessional, everyone smiled, for Christ had risen. Edwina found the priest.

"Russ?" she asked.

“You were here last week, weren’t you?” said the priest.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry. Russ passed away on Monday.”

“Passed away.”

“Died. A stroke.”

“Stroke”

“Yes. His brain.”

The priest did not put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her and she was relieved she not to have to endure the weight from his body.

“Thank you,” she said.

“The funeral is tomorrow.”

She did not understand most of what they said at the funeral. In the pew in front of her a teenage couple whispered through the ceremony. When the congregation processed forward to see Russ for the last time, the boy said, “I’ve never seen a body before.”

“Me neither,” said the girl.

Edwina wondered how they knew Russ and who could be so old and never have seen someone dead.

There was a program printed on vanilla paper. On the front it said Russ’s name and, *To deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine, and I go to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*

She went home and did what she had done her whole life whenever anyone died, cousins, brothers, her father, grandparents, aunts, friends, neighbors. She took everything that reminded her of Russ and burned it.

When her husband had died she filled up two suit cases and a several plastic grocery bags with his clothing, sprigs of purple flowers he gave her, dried and pressed between sheaves of tissue paper, photos, the dollar crime stories he liked to read, his pillow, and hauled them, her back aching and fingers turning plump and red where the handles wrapped around them, to a thin strip of sand next to the ocean. She dumped the remnants of her husband's life out and turned her back to the wind, cradling matches to her belly, shoulders humped. After she sheltered the fire long enough for it to spread, after watching it curl back pages and delicately magiced expanding holes into work shirts and jeans and the plastic bags, Edwina took the suitcases to the water and filled them with waves. She dug up handfuls of sand and scrubbed the insides of the cases, rinsing and scrubbing and rinsing and scrubbing until the fabric lining them began to tear and her hands burned in the salt water. She propped the luggage open to the fire and lay down as close to the flames as possible. When the last embers turned gray and the wind scattered the ash out over the sand, Edwina closed up the suit cases and carried them home, their empty bodies rattling against her legs.

For Russ, she sat on the floor of her small rented room and burned the palm crosses left from the week before. She lit each one over a steel cooking bowl, held it until her fingers started to burn and then touched a match to the next one. Each time she felt tears break through the soot on her face and clean a track down to the skin beneath she reached into the bowl and dammed the tears with a smear of ash. After the last cross

burned she was weary from the smoke and the sorrow. She placed the frog she had woven for him on top of the ash and then lay down, cradling the full bowl to her stomach, and cried till she slept.

When Edwina woke she burned the frog.

“Done,” she said.

If she kept things from her husband, the cousins and brothers and all the dead her room would be full, with no place for her to live.

She went to a bustling hospital after a few months to make sure she was pregnant. She waited in the exam room for the tired doctor, her lab coat saggy with books and pens, to come back.

“You are pregnant,” the doctor said.

Edwina thought about a time, before they crossed the border, when she had gone to a clinic set up in an empty school house and run by foreigners who came south to work for a few weeks at a time. Edwina was twenty and had had two children and two miscarriages. She did not want to be pregnant again, did not want another child, did not want to worry about her husband, who would love the child, bounce it on his knee and let it ride on his shoulders, but also complain about the expense and that breast feeding made her so skinny. She went to that clinic pretending to need confirmation of her pregnancy, answered questions about menstruation and peed in cups. The young doctor, in a t-shirt and jeans, smiled so happily, “Congratulations,” she said in faltering Spanish, “You are pregnant.” She continued to smile, full of joy and Edwina tried to stop but broke down

crying. The doctor looked confused and slightly panicked. Edwina wondered if that were the first time she had ever told anyone they were pregnant.

Edwina tried to explain that she didn't want it. Wasn't there something they could do? Something safe?

"No, no," the foreigner said.

Here in this bright American hospital the tired doctor with the slumped shoulders said, "You are thirty-nine with a history of miscarriages. Do you want to keep the baby?"

"Yes," said Edwina. She rubbed her belly and thought, "My little frog."

Until the end of the pregnancy Edwina still climbed up a palm tree once a week at 3 A.M. She had started weaving palms just after they settled in the city, when she and her husband spent each day looking for work. Once she helped a woman up the hall weave Palm Sunday crosses for two cents a cross. That night she took some of the fronds home and taught herself how to work them into boxes and then little tables and stick figure humans and then bears and doll houses and tulips. She set up a blanket outside the nearest train station and sold her figurines for as much as she could get. She took requests from the police and made their wives and husbands and children delicate models and no one said anything about a vendor license. With other odd jobs here and there she got by, enough to rent her room and eat. In heavy winds she had to pick up the corners of the blanket, all the figures clattering together, to keep her work from blowing away. Sometimes a man selling CDs laid a blanket next to hers, sometimes a woman who sold wool hats.

To get the fronds she climbed up a tree once a week, hugged her body to the lower leaves, dry and sloughing off, and cut tufts of the limber green fronds that grew above. Generally she climbed the low, squat palms with long combs of branches, the ones that dotted wealthier neighborhoods. She carried her palms home and kept them in buckets of water along one wall of her room. Throughout the week she selected fronds, testing their thickness and elasticity, and wove the figures from her imagination.

After he was born, she and Walter lived together in the room she rented. In the evenings she sang and wove palm fronds while he played on the floor with scraps of the leaves. During the day he came with her while she sold the figures or stayed with a neighbor. He had hazel eyes and she called him Frog. He started to talk and they played a game where he asked her to make things, “Mama, can you make a dog?” “Mama, can you make a truck?” “Mamma, can you make a dragon?” “Mama, can you make a triceratops?” and then Edwina spent some time thinking about how to bend and tie the fronds and, eventually presented him with a dog, a dragon, a bulldozer, a dinosaur. Frog played with the figures, staging battles and building empires, until they became frayed and started to crack in on themselves and he returned to his mother to ask, again, “Mama, can you...”

He went to Even Start and Head Start and Kindergarten. She took English classes. She thought of going back south but then thought about his citizenship and education. A woman who wore jewelry made of large stones and who owned a boutique started selling Edwina’s figures. The sign next to them said they were made of organic fibers and every time someone purchased a tulip or a picture frame, Edwina made ten times as much as

she did when she sold from the blanket. She thought of moving them into their own apartment.

Sometimes Edwina woke the Frog in the early morning to come and watch her cut palm branches. It was his favorite thing she could give him. He watched, always in silence, while she attached a rope to one ankle, passed it around the side of the tree opposite her body, and tied it to her other ankle. He watched her use the rope to brace herself as she accordioned her way up the smooth trunk, arms clinging, knees bending and stretching out again and again. He ran to catch the strips of palm she cut down and giggled when she said hello from the high branches.

One night just before second grade started he begged her to let him climb a tree.

“Just a little way,” she said. Edwina tied the rope to his ankles and was surprised how quickly he inchwormed up the tree. In only a few seconds he started to move away from where her arms could reach, and she said, “Come on down my little Frog.” When he whined, she said, “Now,” and he went limp and let her slide him down the tree. She helped him untie the rope from one skinny ankle. “Take off the other one, Son,” she said and turned to collect the palms. After she had them piled on the ground she would tie them together with the rope.

He screamed for just a second as he fell. When she got to him there was no blood. His fractured skull and his arm and leg bones twisted into dizzy shapes had not sliced through him, as if his thin, soft child skin had been far stronger, more resilient than the fragile bones it encased. The end of the rope she had tied to him still bound his ankle and the other side remained palsied in the rings of the loose knot he had tied. His eyes looked up at her, dull green.

For days she worked to weave a figure of her son out of fronds. When she finished it was the size of a boy, perfect with each finger and toe. Frog, she called it and it hardly weighed anything. Edwina laid it in her bed each night, slept next to it until early one morning, after it had dried pale and brittle, she rolled against the boy, crushed it and woke to the fronds slicing into her arms and face. The next day she took the pieces and scattered them near his school and began to weave a new boy.

If Love Be the Mother of Invention

Our great-great to so many powers was a man who wished to hold a woman. He had no land he could call his own or ask a wife to and so he wandered, as a minstrel, through gnarled forests and along roads that deceived his ankles to twist down holes and his toes to catch on stones. He hoped for the trees, the lanes, to open into the next village so that he could have a warm bed and feel the press of welcoming handshakes. His joy was the accepting ears of people who rarely heard news and songs.

Like explorers who looked up and saw great mountains pillowing toward the sky, he fantasized these hills to be the voluminous breasts of a sleeping woman, trod across her wet-leaved hips, rough feet pausing, seeking the gentle rise of her breath, this lonely minstrel, our great-great, found, in a sleepless midnight shadow, a hollowed tree stump. It was light enough to lift up and cuddle, curved so that he nestled his hand into its waist and it had a hole in the belly around which he longed to run his fingers. Like sailors who saw long, flowing hair in knots of kelp, the flash of milky skin and tapered waists when dolphins leapt beside their ships, the minstrel imagined onto his stump the face of a woman. He stroked the wood, soft with age,

down where he felt muscles stretching out to grip hip bones. He gently patted the round of her backside and the log answered him with quiet notes thrummed out from the hole in the center. The lonely, wandering minstrel began to sing a song to the log. He trilled high and wavering, pushing his sweet voice to the edge of its range and, then, pressing the log against his chest, one hand at her waist, the other cupped to her breast, plunged down into base notes. He gasped when the log trembled in response. Along the smooth of her stomach he lightly tapped a finger, keeping time, and then used the flat of his hand and struck her with his knuckles and heard her sing along, heard her hum, click her tongue, beat a foot in rhythm with his song. Ah, he thought, what a pair we will make, our sweet voices wrapped around each other all day and our bodies all night. They sang till dawn lit the sky and then he fell asleep, bound around her.

When he awoke there was, next to him, a log, hollowed by ants. It had vague curves and a hole at its center where, long ago, a branch had fallen away. He took it with him and for days carted it around, singing and tapping against it. The music pleased the people. He came to think of the log, always, as *her*.

He discovered that, if he plucked the rope tied to keep her on his back, she sang out. So he tied more ropes. At night he unbound her and ran his hands over the smooth grain of her skin. He peeled away bark to expose fresh, moist wood. He heard, in the whisper of his fingers upon her surface, moans that answered his own. During long days on the roads, her smell, like earth and baking bread, remained on his hands.

Eventually, though, her waist and hips seemed to lose some of their youthful firm and her breasts were not as appealing. He dreamed of other logs.

To bury such thoughts, the minstrel held her hard all night and pulled fiercely at the ropes, sang desperately. But while he walked the broken country roads the log weighed heavy on his

back. Eventually he told himself that she sang flat, that her skin had become dry and bleached and reminded him of a dying thing, that he could do better. His caresses became half-hearted.

He searched the woods, leaving the old log waiting at crossroads, going deep into dales and following faint deer paths until they ended in thicket, but could find no better log. The only thing to do, he felt, was to make his own. The minstrel paid carpenters to thin wood he delivered from the forests, soaked the boards in rivers until they became pliable and worked them into crests and valleys. He put a neck and a head on his engineered log, so he could feel her solid form when he brushed his fingers against her lips and eyelids as she slept.

He pegged ropes into his new log, like the cords of a throat. Then she was done and he ran his hands all over her, dipping his fingers into the hole in the center to feel the close air in the darkness inside, lingering his thumb along the ridges of her pelvis. That night, he took his old log and, for the last time, eased her down from his back, laying her next to a stream. He untied the ropes around her and, though she had come to disgust him, kissed her shoulders. Placing his hands flat on the small of her back, our great-great murmured a thank you and a goodbye. He murmured them again in a song.

For three nights the minstrel slept, touching his new-built log with only the outer edge of his hand, and on the fourth he gathered his courage and he gathered the wood and sang. He tapped against her and plucked on the ropes, touching his fingertips to the arteries contracting on her neck. His song, of men who find love in clouds and in the laughter of rivers, was sweet and true.

Everything We Learn We Learn Again

After Shasta left I had a room all to myself but when I woke up each morning, her bed against the far wall, still made, I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut and pull the covers up over my head. The first day Jimmy could limp around a little I got him a can of chicken chowder to celebrate. Store brand, but still. I dumped it into his scratched pot and heard Jimmy up, his leg dragging, and the scrape of furniture on the floor. I didn't go help him. When I went to sleep that night the two beds were pushed together, a blanket over them so that they looked like one regular adult sized bed. At night I lie and silently thank him for how relieved I feel to not sleep with Shasta's empty bed in the room. Then I whisper apologies to Shasta. I squash my hand and foot down into the crack between the two beds. Sometimes I wake up on my belly, angled across both mattresses, and smell her, dish soap and peanut butter cups. Other times I wake up with them separating to drop me down to the floor because I'd wormed down so far between them.

This guy sells corn and tamales out of a shopping cart. He comes through The Rancho Lago Apartment Living every day, clattering up the sidewalk and into the parking lot, turning small circles on the blacktop, pumping on a bicycle horn and a bell. This is a western city, apartment complexes stretching out over the desert and no one walks, so you'd notice the guy even without his shopping cart. He's short, shorter than me, Spanish, Mexican, I guess, and with one of those big furry mustaches. His sales are real good.

Jimmy says as long as he's lived here he's been buying tamales and stuff off the guy. That's most of the three years since high school. This past week, if I'm home when the guy rolls through, Jimmy won't stop till I go get some corn. He'll moan about suffering and his only pleasure and feeding the soul.

"Take money from my wallet," Jimmy says.

Jimmy is half paralyzed from the snake bite, so I go out to the man.

Money is a thing with us. Jimmy and me. We don't talk about it. Just after graduation and my wedding I lent him some, a few thousand. A whole lot. He's never paid me back. Sometimes when he gets on asking to spend money for the corn, a dollar-fifty, I what he owes me. He does too. Still, he can have the corn because he's suffering a little and has the gift of smooth talking and I have the gift of wanting to please people. That's what Shasta says. She has the gift of wanting to take care of people, including herself, which is very different from wanting to please them. We are triplets. When you have been one way your whole life it is hard to be another way.

I go out, clenching the bills from my purse. I tell the corn man, "Completo," like Jimmy instructed me.

It does not matter where the money comes from at this point. Jimmy's wallet. My purse. We are broke. Real broke. All cash is our cash.

The man, each time, holds up a pointed wooden stick and a styrofoam cup.

"Estick? Cup?" he asks.

"Cup."

I am unprepared for the efficiency with which he tongs an ear of corn from a cooler, lays it on a square of parchment paper on top of another cooler, skewers the cob, slices the kernels off in thick, even sheets, funnels the corn into a cup, squeezes in mayo, butter and cheese. He tilts his head toward a shaker of hot pepper, "Yes?"

"Yes," I say.

He pops in a plastic fork.

I like that he asks every time about the cup and the pepper. I like not being defined.

I won't eat any of it myself. I don't want food out of some cooler, but I help Jimmy wipe the stray kernels off his lips and feed him if he's tired.

I take all the cups and draw smiling faces on them, like pumpkins, with the triangle eyes and nose and the mouth a moon on its back and I have a line of them in the window, on the other side of the blinds. They are for Shasta. All those smiles if she decides to come home.

Sometimes when I go out to the man, it's just me and I feel the large, blinded windows of the apartment complex looking down. Sometimes there is a group of people gathered around the cart talking Spanish and I smile at no one specifically until he points

at me and I say, “Completo,” but halfway through the word I get embarrassed and mumble.

I bought Jimmy some corn two days ago, when he and I started up our ice cream truck business. It hasn’t gone well, the business. We transitioned out of the exotic insects and cactuses because of his injury and the economy. And after Shasta left. We hadn’t done anything, really, since then, but the other night Jimmy was plastered and decided he wanted ice cream, like he was a pregnant lady or something. I wouldn’t go get any, because of the money. No cash. No ice cream.

“That’s it, Lon,” he shouted. “Ice cream. We are going to sell ice cream. I’ve got the truck.” He had his one good arm waving around so I thought he might knock himself silly with it. Jimmy’s van is white with the windows painted over, except the driver’s and passenger’s and the front windshield.

“We can’t.” I knew I tried to sound like Shasta, level and flat like a rock wall. But if Shasta had been there she would have turned around and walked out of the room without even saying anything. “Don’t engage him,” she always told me.

“Good! Good!” said Jimmy.

“Don’t you need a license or something?”

He snorted and raised his eyebrows at me.

We hadn’t had a license for the exotics but I’d felt good about that idea. Everyone over-waters cactus. The scorpions, too, don’t last long. We thought people would always need replacements and they would want the next designer species. It turned out we were a small-time operation and when the economy went Jimmy’s connections petered out. He

said it was for the environment that we gave up the spiders. He says it over the phone to whatever bastard he's trying to press.

"You need the song," he said. "The ice cream truck song. Get the speakers up on the roof. And that tape player that takes the double Ds. You are good at that stuff, Lon. I couldn't do it, but you can, Sunshine."

I have yellow hair and they have brown hair, Jimmy and Shasta, and it makes me angry when they call me that. Sunshine.

"Jimmy, who's our market?"

"It's the desert. Everyone wants ice cream. I sure as hell want some right now. If I heard some truck going by playing that song I'd drag myself out there, fingers, knees bleeding. When was the last time you saw one? A truck? Everyone's the market and the market needs us."

The next morning I had the speakers up on the top of the van. The city wanted our ice cream.

Jimmy called around and it turns out that the patents on the ice cream truck song are real strict but he knew some people and when I came back from buying the tubs of ice cream I found him grinning and shaking a cassette with his good hand. On a white label sticker smashed onto side B someone had written "Ice" in pencil.

I used paper towels to wipe out an old, blue Coleman cooler and filled it with ice cubes and the ice cream and set it up in the back of the van and dropped some boxes of cones and a plastic scoop I found at the 99-cent store between the seats. I pulled out into the street and popped the tape in the player that lay down amongst all the cones and stuff. Wires led up through the passenger window to the speakers tied to the van top. Leaning

over but keeping an eye on the road I hit play and some eerie, strange song vibrated down through the roof. It took a second but then I recognized it. *Oh Little Town of Bethlehem*.

I pulled over to the edge of the empty street, put my head down on the steering wheel and listened to forty-five minutes of Christmas carols. By the end the batteries started to fade and *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* came out slow and gurgling.

I get this with Jimmy, how the let down is so hard because I believe him. When it didn't happen, I found out that I'd expected kids to come flooding out of every door when the music started.

I called.

"What we have here is an opportunity," Jimmy said. "You just have to exploit it." Jimmy liked to say this. He said it when we were fifteen and found the cart where they'd been collecting for the Homecoming Canned Food Drive unguarded and convinced me to roll it to the school's loading dock and stack everything in his trunk.

"Yeah, Jimmy, an opportunity. Why don't you just tell me the name of those bastards and how much you spent."

"Let's not limit. Can't you be creative for a second?"

"You bought some tape off some bastard. You told me it would be ice cream truck music. How would you like to be driving around blasting *What Child Is This?* Who's gonna come buy anything? Some shitty Casio recording." I started singing at him through the phone, slow and nasal. I was feeling the same kind of righteous anger I'd had when we were five and he told me that if I cut the hair off Ms. Oinks it would grow back thicker and more healthy. Nothing feels as good as that kind of anger, so I really got into it around, "This, this is Christ our Lord."

“Shut up,” Jimmy said, and I began *O Holy Night*.

He raised his voice, “What’s the problem? Everyone hates that “Do your tits hang low” bullshit. Here we got something new. Christmas with your ice cream. Christmas Cream. Good. Christmas Cream. I’ll paint it on the van tomorrow.”

He joined my singing. Even over the phone, with his warbling and taking his voice high up into a falsetto and then down deep, I knew he was doing an imitation of our elementary school sports and music teacher. I tried not to but I smiled. I made a gesture of throwing something through the windshield and then we gave it our all for “Fall on your knees. ’O hear the angels’ voices.”

“Now get out there and sell some ice cream, Champ,” he said and hung up.

Even if Jimmy hadn’t been paralyzed he would never have painted anything on the van. When we were kids he designed a whole lot of couch-cushion forts and I was the only one who ever built anything. Shasta stood by to make sure Jimmy didn’t convince me to do something that might get me killed. “Don’t climb on that entertainment center.” Now she’s not here.

Christmas Cream. It’s a terrible idea. Then again. Crackling fires. Comfortable socks. Presents. And ice cream. By the time the ice in the coolers melted I thought *O Come All Ye Faithful* might just work. But we had no cash to buy paint.

That first day I drove up and down the streets and no one bought anything but it wasn’t so bad. It was new and I kept thinking, maybe, that I had seen Shasta turn the corner in front of me. I’d gun it and find no one on the sidewalk. For that second, though, when it might have been her, I felt good.

One guy did flag me down and came up to the driver's side window. He was skinny and wore a suit.

"Where's Jimmy?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Jimmy. It's his van, right?"

"Ice cream?"

"Tell him Miffer says, 'Hey.'"

"Want some ice cream?"

"What?" he seemed to noticed me for the first time.

"I'm selling ice cream."

"Where?"

"Here. Now."

"Out of the van?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. What kind?"

"Vanilla and chocolate."

"Vanilla, I guess."

I climbed in back and opened the cooler and the tub. Around the back of the driver's seat I could see the man leaning his forearms on the open window and thought how easily he could get in and drive the van and me away. The ice cream scooped out more in slabs and chunks than the smooth ball I'd hoped for. I watched his hands, lolling into the van and listened to the engine chug and smashed the pieces down into the cone. I

clambered back to the front, into my seat, scooting my legs under the steering wheel, cone held aloft, making sure his hands retreated as I moved forward.

“Two dollars,” I said.

“What. It’s not packaged?”

“Freshly scooped.”

“Is that even healthy? Do you have papers? Tell him Miffer says, ‘Hey.’” The guy walked away.

When the gas gauge flipped over to empty I drove home. I got the front door open and started dragging the cooler in. Jimmy yelled out of his bedroom.

“Yes?” I said.

“I called a bunch.”

“Yeah. I was driving.” I’d let his calls go to voicemail and then listened to make sure he was all right. I felt strange and powerful not answering his calls, not dialing him.

I looked in the doorway of his room. Jimmy bit the cuff of his shirt, something he’s done since I can remember.

“I thought we should use the minutes,” he said.

This is the last week we’ll have cell phones. We can’t pay after that.

“We still have a few more days,” I said.

“We’ll sell enough ice cream to keep one of them,” said Jimmy.

“We should probably hang on to this one.” I held up my phone.

“That one?”

I looked at the ground. “It’s newer.” I wanted to keep that line going because I thought that Shasta would call me before she called Jimmy.

“We’ll see,” he said.

“The ice cream can’t sit out,” I said and went to the kitchen.

When I returned to Jimmy’s room I brought him a bowl. Vanilla.

“Thanks,” he said.

Then we didn’t say anything.

In the morning I found him in the kitchen with another bowl of ice cream.

“Jimmy. You can’t eat all the ice cream.”

“There’s tons of it,” he said.

I started to load up the coolers.

“Miffer says, ‘Hey.’”

“Fuck.”

“He almost bought a cone.”

“Just give it to him free.”

“Christ.”

“You can take my gun. I said it before.”

“I’m selling ice cream.”

“Sure. It’s fine. Anyway, what else are we going to do?”

“God. It’s like Ms. Oinks.”

“Not Ms. Oinks again.”

“You laughed.”

“I was five. Jesus, Lon. Maybe I was scared. Maybe I felt bad. Maybe it was funny. I can’t remember.”

“Can’t remember.”

I squashed the tubs of ice cream into the cooler, and slammed the lid and stomped on it, forcing the tubs down into the ice. I grabbed the cooler handles, grunting a lot while I lifted and banged it against the kitchen door frame and a table in the living room and the wall by the front door. Then I set it down and thought that maybe I couldn’t remember everything exactly either.

I went back into the kitchen.

“She’s fine,” said Jimmy.

“Yeah. She might just be fine.”

“I saw someone yesterday, but it wasn’t her,” I said.

We don’t talk about it, but we’ve got that thing, like you hear about with twins and stuff. We know when one of us is in trouble. That’s how I came back. Shasta called me to find out what was wrong the same day I was calling Jimmy to find out what was wrong with Shasta. My husband was divorcing me after a two-year marriage. Jimmy said Shasta was being funny. Funny is what we sad about Uncle Al and the lady next door and our mom when we were kids.

Jimmy and me had started with the cactuses because by the time I got back Shasta wasn’t working any more and I couldn’t find a job.

Jimmy said, “There’s three-hundred-dollar cactuses here. In the desert.”

Jimmy had the van with the painted-over windows and some connections, bastards who knew high-end clientele, but I was better at setting the traps for the insects and finding the barrel cactus hiding under rock shelves.

I also handled the forest rangers. I didn't think they would cave so easily. I guess their hats had impressed me. But I have a good smile and dated one for a few weeks and he never knew or never said anything about the bugs and the pots I took out. When I broke up with him, Jimmy, as my business partner was furious. Jimmy, as my brother, was delighted. "Not good enough for you, the bastard. Smug. Law enforcement."

We never told Shasta what we were doing. She didn't ask and she didn't click her tongue at me like she used to.

"How's work?" she'd say to me.

"Fine. Waitressing's hard. How did you do it so long?"

Her smile had become kind of vague. She worked really hard to get smiling and then stared off at nothing, forgetting to stop.

Jimmy finished his ice cream and I said again, "She might just be fine."

I could hear the corn man rattling towards us.

"Don't ask, Jimmy," I said and carried the cooler down.

The corn man did some business as I rummaged around in the back of the van.

"Completo?" he asked when I came out and started back to the apartment.

"No thanks."

On an electricity bill I wrote *Christmas Cream* in bubble letters with a blue pen. I drew some snow flakes falling into an ice cream cone, but I think it looked more like some kind of stretched pyramid. I took Jimmy's gun and put it in the glove compartment and taped the paper to the passenger's side window.

The cassette binged and I tooled along side streets and circled parks. By the second time through the tape I thought I might go funny. No one came to buy any ice

cream. I pulled into a tot lot and watched a mom push her kid in one of those baby swings with the leg holes and the back and waist high up like a giant diaper.

Shasta walked into the park, holding the hand of a little girl. I saw her from the back, that dark brown hair, wavy to the shoulder, and the walk, how she lifted her feet and kicked them out at every step. Jimmy walks that way, too, or he did before being paralyzed, and I guess I do too.

“Shasta,” I shouted. Then I slid down in the seat so she wouldn’t see me trying to sell ice cream out of Jimmy’s truck.

In the small space between the steering wheel and the dashboard I could see her. The little girl ran to the metal merry-go-round and Shasta grabbed one of the bars looping up out of the center, and swung the merry-go-round in a circle. I didn’t expect her to use her shoulders, to push so hard, and for the merry-go-round to spin fast, the child screaming happy as she came toward and away and toward and away from Shasta.

“Shasta, over here,” I whispered.

The child turned in her seat and, before Shasta could stop her, jumped off the spinning toy, arms up for a moment, and then she hit the ground and rolled and came up laughing.

Still slumped down in the seat I leaned on the horn. Shasta turned. I did not recognize the face I saw. For a moment the image I had been expecting fought against the eyes and nose and mouth before me until my sister transformed into a woman, the mother of some little girl, who I did not know.

“It was wrong, Shasta, leaving like that,” I said. “Leaving me here.” I leaned on the horn some more. Then I turned up the Christmas tape as loud as it could go.

“Hey,” said a voice. I looked out the window but didn’t see anyone.

“Hey.”

Down next to the van a man in full clown makeup, wig and red nose sat in an automated wheelchair.

“Isn’t this Jimmy’s van?” he said.

“It’s an ice cream truck.”

“Where’s Jimmy?”

I shifted a little to get my hand closer to the glove compartment.

“You his sister, blondie? What? Did you die your hair?”

The white face paint and circles of red on his cheeks and big-lipped frown obscured his expression.

“You seen the other sister?” I asked. “With dark hair? Where?”

“Pretty like a peach,” he said and the engine of his wheelchair ground as he inched towards the van. “Didn’t you tell him Miffer said, ‘Hey?’”

He plunged one hand down the sleeve of the other arm. I jerked open the glove compartment and pointed the gun at him before I saw the fake daisy he held aloft.

“Bang,” he said.

“We can’t find my sister,” I said.

“Put that away, honey,”

I gave him a scoop of vanilla and one of chocolate and he let me keep the flower. The woman who looked like Shasta was not in the park anymore. I sat listening to *We Three Kings* and petting the musty petals of the flower over my face.

“It’s not going to work,” I told Jimmy that night. He lay in his bed and I stood in the door

“It’s been two days.”

“We’ve made no dollars. And a rose. Some clown says Miffer says hey.”

“I think we are out of beer.”

“We are about to be out of everything.”

“There’s hardly any Jamesons.”

Jimmy’s favorite drink was Jamesons. The night he got injured a buddy of his, one of the bastards, had come over. The two had put away most of a bottle.

“Check it out,” said Jimmy to the bastard and reached into a cage with a rattlesnake. It was the first snake I’d caught.

I said, “Jimmy, don’t.”

But he did and then half his body was paralyzed.

Shasta stayed in the kitchen with that vague smile on her face while I kicked the bastard out and drove Jimmy to the hospital.

Before we left I went into the kitchen to tell her we needed to go out. She stood looking at the cabinet doors. In a dreamy voice she said, “Keep his hand below his heart,” and smiled a little more. When we got back she was gone. No note or anything. The blinds were half open and the night on the other side of the window pressed against it like water outside a boat.

Shasta had released the snake. The cage was empty but the lid was on.

From his bed Jimmy said, “Get me a glass of the Jamesons? There’s a few fingers left. It takes me forever to get to the kitchen.”

“The ice cream truck is over.”

“It’ll be fine. Did you do the Christmas Cream thing? I could really use a drink.”

“No.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“It’s what the doctor said.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“They said no alcohol.”

“I’m getting better. I’ve been drinking.”

He sat up, using his good arm to shift his body to the edge of the bed.

“No,” I said and yanked his arm and pushed, hard, on his shoulders. He crumpled.

I could feel him try to fight back and I was stronger.

“You fuck,” I shouted. “I don’t want you dead.” I had my palms against his shoulders and one knee up on his chest. “You get ice cream. Nothing to drink. Ice cream. And it’s a luxury. We can’t afford to eat it.”

Jimmy had stopped struggling. We looked at each other for a few moments and some tears came down my cheeks. I stood up so that they would not fall on him and went to the kitchen. When he was first real sick and his body didn’t work I thought a lot about how he was heavy to roll around when I changed his sheets and when he leaned on me to get to the bathroom. I liked something about being able to support his weight. But this was new, that I could put my hands on him and push him down if I wanted. Jimmy has always been stronger than me. I dug a spoon into the ice cream and stopped being able to blame him so much for the Christmas Cream disaster.

Jimmy leaned up against the pillow on his bed to eat the ice cream.

“How much did you weigh when you were born?” I asked him.

“Three pounds six ounces,” he said.

“That’s almost a pound more than me,” I said. “How’d you find out?”

He shrugged, “I just know it.”

“Yeah me too. Shasta ate the most in the womb,” I told him. “I got a copy of her birth certificate when I filled out the missing person’s report. We all have separate birth certificates. That surprised me. I know our lives are, you know, different. But I think like we all had one single birth.”

Jimmy did the annoying thing where he put the spoon in and out of his mouth, the ice cream melting smaller each time he ran it between his lips.

I said, “We should all be on that missing person’s report. We should have the same death certificate. Our lives are a single event. Anything large, anything official is about all of us. We should all have married Ron.”

When I found that out, about the birthweights, I thought how Shasta had spent her life making sure Jimmy and I had enough to eat. Then, for the first time, I thought that maybe she had not wandered out the door, had not left because she was funny or because she wanted to protect us from her. I thought that maybe she left because she didn’t want to be there with us any more. My stomach turned sour and I leaned on the counter hard while I signed the papers.

“Strange,” I said, “that we never compared weights growing up. Our birth weights. Like we all just assumed we came out the same, three even pieces.”

I reached forward and grabbed his spoon. We are not the kind of family to eat from each other's plates, but Jimmy let me dig into his ice cream. My throat felt so hot against the milk and sugar melting down that I thought it must be inflamed.

"Maybe we wanted to have a little bit of our thing," said Jimmy.

"One more day," I said.

"Ok," he said.

"Is she going to come back?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said.

In the bottom kitchen drawer, under a mess of paper plates, I found a bag of short white candles. They had squished into imperfect shapes in the summer heat. With a dull knife I ripped out the triangle eyes and noses and the moon mouths from the row of styrofoam cups in the window. Then I dropped a candle into each and lit them and went outside to wait for Shasta to see the smiles and the twinkling. She always went last to the doors at Halloween, herding Jimmy and I before her. After we got home I'd give her handfuls of the best chocolate and she would take them.

The empty spaces in the cups reflected onto the window so that each eye and nose and mouth stretched in stacks of blurred shapes. Slowly and then quickly the cups melted, the faces folding in. Inside, the apartment smelled of chemicals. I left the crumpled cups there between the blinds and the plexiglass window.

This morning I heard the corn man's shopping cart coming up the sidewalk and got the tubs out of the freezer.

"No corn," I told Jimmy.

The night before I'd left the boxes of cones set up on the cooler in the van and when I opened the side door something disturbed them and they scattered up and out all over the van. I shouted and dropped the ice cream on my toes and shouted some more and hit my shin against the metal at the bottom of the van and sat down on the ground.

"No, no," the corn man said. "Is dirty." He leaned over, pulled on my elbow and got me sitting up on the floor of the van. A cone crunched under my ass. I started to cry. The man picked up the tubs of ice cream and put them in my lap. Then he picked up a cone that had rolled out of the van.

"Esquirrel," he said.

"Ghost," I said.

"Esquirrel." He pointed to small bite marks in the pale flesh of the cone.

"Ghost. My sister," I said. "My sister," I shouted, leaning my chest down on the tubs in my lap and squeezing them with my arms.

"Yes," he said. "Your sister."

I bought a cup of corn from him with change from under the seats and the bottom of the glove compartment.

I climbed the stairs back up to our apartment.

"Here." I gave the cup to Jimmy. He didn't say anything and wedged it between his torso and weak arm after he had taken a few bites.

"Shasta's dead," I said.

"Lon?"

"She's dead."

"Um."

“Shut up. And her ghost is in the van.”

He ran the plastic fork around the inside of the styrofoam cup and the scraping noise made my spine hurt.

“So. That’s that.”

“I think, you know, I would have felt it.”

“Maybe we have been waiting too hard, wanting to feel. But she was down messing with the cones.” I was crying a lot by then.

Jimmy stretched out and put his hand on my wrist but I shook it off and went over to cling to the doorframe.

“Stop,” I said and scratched the cheap paint with my nails.

The bed creaked and Jimmy heaved himself up, spilling the corn into his sheets. He stood tottering and then limped toward me and I thought he might smack me but instead he curled his fingers and rubbed the knuckles against my cheek.

“Maybe she’s dead,” he said.

“I can’t stay here.”

“Ok.”

“I can’t leave.”

“No.”

“Come with me to the truck. Come sell the ice cream.”

It took us a long time to get to the van, Jimmy leaning on me. The corn man still circled and honked his horn. I hauled my brother up into the passenger seat and then went to see if any cones were left. I whispered to Shasta. He pressed play on the tape deck and

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear started. I backed out of the van to close the side doors.

Two women, each holding the hand of a child, stood looking at me. I looked at them.

“Ice cream,” said one of the kids.

“Oh,” I said. “Sure.”

I leaned my head against the frame of the van and then opened the cooler and imagined perfect scoops of ice cream.

Downlands

Chalk Walker's favorite time is endless summer evenings where the sun creeps slowly to the horizon, not dipping under until all the kids know they have gotten away with something, staying up so late, and, even after, the sky won't let go the light, the afterglow gone rose to burnt to blood blue waves up in the islands and peninsulas of clouds, all so quiet that the stars have come while he is still running the streets, unsure of why it is a little harder, then a little harder to see the grooves and ridges of the sidewalks. Chalk Walker's legs are long. Long so that it takes two attempts, look, look away, and then look back again, to see their entire span. His arms reach down to the ground with only a little stooping. He moves as if on stilts and canes, locked kneed and elbowed, like a four-legged insect, and is not willowy, for he does not bend, but is thin and straight and ridged. He worries he is brittle.

There was another one. That one favored fish and blue panthers, living things that seemed about to move, made Chalk Walker think of jumping and skipping. That other

one worked in solid colors, reds and dark purples that show so well during the day, entice pedestrians to stop and admire. Chalk Walker drew still things, tea pots and pickles. He had light blue, white, pink at the top of his pocket. They are the colors that, on full moon nights and in the first moments of street lamp, shine out from the cement. They are the colors the sun mutes and hides.

He thought of this other one as Hopscotch. Sometimes as Dawn or The Zookeeper.

When Chalk Walker paused to admire a drawing by this other one, a mermaid basking in the middle of an intersection, a pig, he wondered if that other one, The Zookeeper, knelt to the sidewalk and closed their eyes, like he did, and let the dry sticks, the calcium and sulfate clenched between fingers, move without intention, lines and shading, stories and portraits surfacing miraculous and free. He wondered if Zookeeper, Dawn, also woke with the vibration of chalk against cement scratching on in their fingertips and thought to just stay in today, the sheets so fresh and light, like being wrapped in meringue, but then, when Dawn lay back to dream, imagined strips of clean pavement stretched out and calling. He wondered if when they, that other one, Hopscotch, The Zookeeper, fell down to sleep, if they, that other one, also heard tender explosions of soft chalk breaking on rough cement peaks like a lullaby, like a train scream.

Every day he meant to get up, to see the morning and find this other one, The Zookeeper, Hopscotch. Every day, exhausted by the long evenings, the long strides and squinting into the darkening cement, he did not wake up. He opened his eyes and saw the light already going soft. He rubbed his ever-desiccated palms rough against his face.

It began to happen that, eyes closed, guided by the chalk, he drew a cut finger or gleaming switch blade among the soda bottles and cityscapes. Once a giraffe with a bloodied leg. He shrugged and turned the corner but did not return to that area until several good rains had passed.

Once it happened in front of his door, a guillotine and a basket of heads. When he came out the next evening, thinking to look away from the mess, it was transformed into a toy box and an Easter basket overflowing with bouncing rubber balls and painted eggs.

That evening he took out his chalk and slowly, intentionally, drew a body quartered and still connected to galloping horses. In the morning he found a dancing, laughing, complete giant in the midst of four happy, wild stallions.

Chalk Walker pushed himself to tie women to burning stakes and to machine gun villages. He strode fast along the sidewalk, moving until he could force his fingers to draw another horror. He stopped sleeping, his mind full of blood and death, sewage canals floated with severed elbows. Virgin blood dripped from goblets over the chins of flat-eyed men and he shook at the thought of a thousand cats, eviscerated and still trembling, laid out on block after block of pavement.

The work of The Zookeeper, Dawn, it was good. Often it was great. The axes severing mice tails that Chalk Walker sketched became lollypops clutched in the joyful fingers of those mice, their tails restored to their bodies. The reshaping of his work relieved him.

In the day he did not get up, though he was awake, to find The Zookeeper. He did not go see the retooling of his horrors. He lay and waited the next summer evening. When the chalk wanted to draw a rubber duck wearing sunglasses he forces streaks of blood

down from behind the dark lenses and if he found he had drawn bananas he made them into Viking ships, lost at sea, the men aboard mad and wielding heavy swords against each other. Yes, he thought. Seal up the banana skin over them or convert them embrace each other, if you can.

It did not happen slowly. On a night when the clouds promised royalty in the sunset and the air hung sleepy with humidity and barbeque smoke, when everyone had forgotten that the day could close with anything but a long summer evening, Chalk Walker went out and, on the cement at the corner, there was no dark-blue fairy with wings a paper-thin hint of gypsum. On the pavement there was no fix to his chainsaw. The brains and bits of skull still clung to the edges. The piked heads had not become smile-faced daisies. The day after, also, nothing had been changed, nothing added. Nor the next.

Chalk Walker lay in his bed. The killing and the death hummed in his mind and he knew it had been left to him to transform the sidewalks into flowers and to resurrect the dead. He tried to stay in, tried to ignore fresh-poured pavement a few blocks away, tried to deny the familiar alleyways, the sections of path that he had covered in horror. The call of chalk running jagged over cement was too strong. He went out and dug to the bottom of his pockets for dark shades that could overwhelm the iridescence of his own work.

He could not renovate the horror, so he drew new images on top, carefully plotting and coloring so none of the old terror showed through. Often he chalked over entire squares of pavement, made blocks of bright yellow, blue, when he couldn't think of anything to draw. Sometimes he did not plan and found deep-green goats with severed

heads amongst the chocolate chips and spoons. These accidents made his arms and legs feel unsupple, ready to crack from each impact against the cement.

Every day he could not stay in bed. Out on the sidewalks, he whispered his apologies, his promises, like a prayer, in time with the swinging of his limbs. If you come back I won't any more. I won't. Come back. If you come back I won't any more. I won't. Come back. But Dawn, The Zookeeper, did not, and the drawings of that other one, Dawn, The Zookeeper scattered away into the everyday dust of the pavement.

Each evening Chalk Walker traveled out farther and farther, watched beneath his prolonged and shifting shadow for fresh drawings, a sign of The Zookeeper, stopped at smooth pieces of pavement to set down surf boards and Chinese jugs, and never found anything from the other one, Hopscotch, Dawn.

Once, though, on a night when dark came fast on the edges of a rain storm, the first rain since The Zookeeper had left, Chalk Walker found a parking lot transformed into miles of hopscotch. Though the work was fading, his breath caught at the elaborate mastery, at the grace of line and complexity of rule.

He found himself content and reverent in a game, following the rose-petaled formation as it wound with ocean-lapped islands and burning candles and plump easy chairs to bound over and leap to. The wind blew through his thin legs and thunder rumbled the chalk sticks in his pocket. Chalk Walker circled, tossed a piece of gravel to guide his movements, his limbs pliant like young trees, in and in, an entire parking lot of nautilused hopscotch embracing him.

Boy Meets Girl

They met on a boat that soared and plummeted in large, gray waves.

Devin felt taller and more awkward than usual. Whispering, he began to derive an equation to calculate the distance increase caused by summing the whitecaps.

In a calm between waves he watched a woman, angular and with high cheekbones, come across the deck toward him.

“It’s marvelous, isn’t it?” Her accent was American. She gripped the railing as the boat rolled into the hollow of another wave. “Just marvelous.”

After so long in Honduras he found her English foreign-sounding, though he knew it must be like his own. The thought, “New England,” came into his mind and surprised him.

“I was raised around boats. I always miss them,” she said.

“Are you talking to me?” he asked.

“Yes, of course. Does the sea make you sick?” She looked at him inquisitively but without concern.

“No.” He looked down the rail where several passengers clung.

“Good.” Her eyes were grey and she wore the sort of gypsy shirt he knew was common among travelers. It should have been billowy but, wet from the waves, the fabric looked thin and hugged tight against her bony body. She shivered, though her face did not acknowledge the cold. He wanted to wrap his arms around her.

A wave came over the boat and a man beside them moaned, “I be vomiting. Oh, I be vomiting.”

She shook her head and turned back to Devin.

“At sunset iguanas and crabs take over the roads, someone told me.”

“In the back of the island. Where people don’t live.”

The ferry tossed sideways, dipping their feet into the seawater.

“It’s on my list.”

He let the next roll of the boat shift his body so that his arm touched hers, just at the elbow. She did not move way.

The island had only two hotels and they stayed at the same one. He asked her to dinner. Her name was Octavia Baren. Over fish and rice and refried beans he told her how he had gotten to Tegucigalpa, “I liked the name, I guess,” and how it was awful. The city smelled of sewage and pollution. The wife at his hostel didn’t want him to go out. “Very dangerous,” she kept telling him. The semiautomatic rifle that the hostel’s security guard carried was both cartoonish and terrifying in how it stretched almost as tall as the guard. When Devin did go out, the dozens of men who passed by, shaking and muttering from years of huffing, depressed him as much as sitting on the thin mattress in his windowless hostel.

Octavia took a ziplock bag from her pocket and inside was a piece of graph paper with rows of lists up and down it, a check mark box lined next to each item.

“I have so many things to see,” she said.

He told Octavia how he’d gotten on a bus to San Pedro Sula and gotten off before he made it there in order to walk into a jungle, past waterfalls, up a mountain.

“You fell in love,” she said.

“I fell. I’m working on a PhD. MIT. Physics. I was...I am interested in flight.” He lifted his beer towards his lips but put it back down. “Every semester I defer.”

“Marvelous,” she breathed. “A woman?”

“Not any more. But my life got full here.”

After a few rounds of Puerto Royal he brought up high school, awkwardly working to find out when she graduated.

“Thirty-nine,” she said. “I’m thirty-nine, Devin.”

“Twenty-nine.”

Ok,” she said. “Ok?”

He scratched a line down through the life preserver printed on his beer label. “Yeah.”

The next day they snorkeled. Devin calculated her approximate speed in the water. He calculated his own. They ate shrimp.

They went back to the bar and drank Puerto Royals and shots of tequila and she whined with the owner to a string of Caribbean songs. Devin wouldn’t dance. He calculated the average gyrations per hour of her ass. 9076.

When she sat down again she leaned against him.

“You should know this,” she told him, “I am careless with people’s hearts, mine included. Sometimes I misplace them. Or take them where they shouldn’t go.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Let’s have another shot,” she said.

They walked back to their hostel, stopped to wade at a white sand beach and kissed under the waxing moon.

“It’s a little ridiculous,” she said, pinching his ear.

“Why?”

“I mean, white sand beach? I’m waiting for the orchestra to start up in the banyan trees.”

“Can’t it just be nice?”

“Nice,” she said.

He kissed her again.

On the second afternoon they walked miles and waited for iguanas and crabs to come out and cover the road. Going back in the dark, hundreds of moon-made shadows skittered off the road and rustled into the underbrush.

She fished the baggie out of her pocket.

“Crabs in moonlight. Check.”

It seemed obvious that he should love her. He stayed on the island three days longer than planned and two of those days they spent in bed, making love on the lumpy, thin hotel mattress, listening to the ocean. He taught her Spanish words for parts of the body. She drew his leg, his hand, his eye and chest and labeled them la pierna, la mano, el pecho and, quizzing herself, kissed each one when she guessed the right name.

“What’s your favorite word?” he asked.

“Start,” she said. “Maybe begin.” Octavia dragged her finger down the center of his chest until it came to rest in the hollow of his navel. “Your belly button looks like a pouting child.” She stuck out her lower lip. “What’s yours?”

“Fly,”

She buried her head between his arm and chest.

“I had these dreams when I was very young,” said Devin, “where I flew. I stopped having the dreams and I tried swimming and diving. I learned how to swing off uneven bars. My first job I spent all the money going to Space World. Nothing feels the same. Effortless. It’s about aerodynamics...” He stopped himself.

“How wonderful to have something, one thing, to be passionate about. I’ve always wanted that.”

“In Massachusetts I had these parakeets. One day I let them out to fly around the apartment. After a bit they went back in their cage and waited for me to shut the gate. God. Then I came here.”

When he left the island she came back home to La Cieba with him.

In his bed, comfortable and quiet, her head against his chest, he ran the heel of his hand along the fine wrinkles spreading out from the tapered point of her eye.

“I want to show you something,” he said.

“Ok.”

He pulled her up out of bed and wrapped her sarong around her body and put his boxers on. At the back door he said, “Close your eyes,” and was amazed when she did and when she let him lead her, arm around her thin waist, pulling gently on her hand, through the back patio paved in concrete and into his butterfly house.

Walled in netting and furnished with plants growing out of the earth, the Butterfly House, La Casa de las Mariposas, was both cooler and more humid than the rest of La Cieba. Brick paths guided tourists and affluent Hondurans through the house to visit hundreds of butterflies that ate and mated and died among the leaves and the blooms. Devin had collected and fostered over thirty species. A year and a half before the place had been a concrete slab extension of the patio. Now, because of the wings of butterflies, the air was full of iridescent green, red, orange and purple, as if a pillow stuffed with the feathers of jungle birds had been ripped open in a breeze.

Devin inhaled and smiled. His joy. La Casa de las Mariposas. The constant flit and float of the butterflies brought him closer to the sensation of flight than all the hang-gliding or skydiving he had done. He lifted one arm, taking a stance he imagined to be proud and welcoming and confident. A Brassolide landed on his finger as if he were a falconer who had whistled his bird back. The palm-sized butterfly had gray and white under-wings with a huge owl eye printed on each. In flight it teased, flashing blue-green wing tops. The insect on Devin's finger sat with its wings spread open, a rare thing, showing the bright fibers like an unwrapped gift.

He looked down at Octavia, her eyes closed, gathering the orange sarong at her chest. Perfect, he thought. "Perfect," he whispered.

"Ok. Open your eyes."

For a moment her face was blank. Then it seemed to harden and pull into itself. The butterfly on Devin's finger lifted off, fluttered towards her and Octavia began to yell and rake at the delicate wings of the Brassolide.

"No." said Devin.

She screamed and swung at the air and fell to the ground, curled up, hands covering her head, sarong unraveling to expose her thighs and breasts.

She could not be calmed and eventually he had to drag her, sobbing, from La Casa de las Mariposas.

Later, slouched on the couch with a cool bottle of Aguazul pressed against her left temple, she said, "I'm phobic."

"Yes," he said.

"I just. Oh. It's awful.

"Always?"

"Well, usually, just one, one flying...thing, it's ok. I can control it. The fear, I mean."

"Anything that flies? Birds?"

"Birds are better. Bigger. But I don't do so well in parks. With the pigeons." She closed her eyes.

"I didn't know."

"Yes, of course. I didn't tell you."

"A surprise," he explained.

She shuddered.

"So that it would be a surprise," he said.

"Yes. And your parakeets. And the moon. It's so easy to ruin things like this so I didn't say anything."

Devin was quiet and then he said, "You will stay for a while?"

She ran her toes across the white tile floor.

"Octavia." He touched her hand.

She shrugged. “For a bit.”

Every night for a week he woke up to her screaming, flailing at the air around her head so that he had to hold her wrists to keep from being punched. After she was conscious she shook and sometimes cried as he rocked her and listened to the occasional night traffic. She knotted her hair up into a bun and tied scarves over it everyday. She looked at photos of butterflies and moths and giant bumble bees but she did not get better. Constantly agitated, a breeze on her face or catching a curtain shift out of the corner of her eye made her cringe, jerk her hand up to protect her head.

“Devin, I think I can’t stay. I’m sorry. I just. Just that place, it is right there.” She gestured towards the back of his house.

“No. Please. Not yet. Give me a week.”

He ripped up the jungle plants. He had solid walls of cinder block and plaster built. The bricks from the pathways were stacked in the patio and flooring laid in their place. Before that he opened the doors and shooed the butterflies out. Before that he captured two males and two females of each species and ushered them into kill jars. Onto tiny cards he typed species names, M or F, dorsal or ventral, and the locations where he had captured their ancestors butterfly-generations ago. He tacked each insect and its correct card to a corkboard. When the walls were finished he nailed up each rectangular board.

He wept and wept and then dried his eyes and went to Octavia who wrapped her arms around him.

“Maybe you’ll get your dreams back,” she said.

“This is enough,” he said.

After twenty years in one of the best butterfly collecting countries in the world, the walls of La Casa de las Mariposas hung heavy with shallow, glassed mounting boxes. Devin had his Sphingidae with the longest proboscis in the world, uncurling to the very top of its box and the Libytheidae with its anteater snout. His *Thysania Agrippina* had the largest recorded wing span in the Americas. Aisles of display walls had grown up across the floor, two of them dedicated to the butterflies of the Philippines, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea and Portugal, trades from his “world wide bug buddies” as Octavia called them. Looking like boxes of buttons, several cases of tiny, winged beetles, each a different metallic shade, covered one wall.

Glancing up from his desk in La Casa, Devin was often surprised to see all the butterflies paused in their exodus to the sky. The sense of motion arrested gave him the same nauseous feeling as being in the passenger seat when the breaks are suddenly slammed.

If Octavia was well rested she could stand coming into La Casa. She stood very close to the cases, watching a single insect at a time. Once when she was drunk and trying to be kind she said the room was filled with the souls of dancers and the stilled, solidified notes of children’s laughter. Then she shuddered and went for another beer.

They lived well by Honduran standards. Octavia taught art lessons and grant money dribbled in from various science and education foundations. Tourists and groups of school children came to La Casa.

Tourists said, “Oh, I went to that butterfly place in Copan. Amazing. With the larva. And so many butterflies flying around. Oh. And they had this one. With the owl-eye wings.”

“Yes,” he said.

“But I guess you just like to collect them like this. To keep them.”

“Yes,” he said and imagined smashing all the glass panes, the butterflies and beetles flapping their wings, rising up, the strength of the hundreds of them lifting the roof from the building.

Octavia made Butterfly Alphabet and Butterfly Number posters. She took close up-photos of butterfly wings that had letters or digits patterned in their markings. She made postcards. For a while she glazed the unblemished wings plucked from butterflies that had torn themselves going into the kill jar and fashioned earrings and necklaces, but they were not as popular as the feather jewelry sold in tourist trinket shops. When Devin went to the jungle to hunt butterflies she came and set up her easel, eating leachy fruit and using thick oil paints to cover canvases with monkeys and lizards and Birds of Paradise and tried not to see anything flying.

Every day she put on grayed frocks and, on the rare occasion that the evenings got chilly, baggy oversized sweaters. She wore a bright orange hat, floppy brimmed and rounded over her head. On one of their rare visits to his family in Ohio she had bought it at a hunting and fishing store.

He said, “A hunting hat?”

She said, “It makes me feel safe,” and pulled the brim down around her ears as if it were a bonnet. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m an artist.”

“Yes,” he said. “I know.” But he liked the way it highlighted the paleness of her skin that seemed unaffected by the Honduran sun and her large grey eyes. He also knew it didn’t matter, like most of what they did, because they were foreigners still and, even after twenty years, they lived in La Cieba unquestioned and excused, except to each other.

She was known as La Artista and he was known for his butterflies. Their life was quiet. When she couldn't stand the quiet she threw parties with cases of Puerto Royal and lines of coke. She did charcoal sketches of the guests as party favors and Devin locked himself in La Casa until it was over. As the sudden dawn came up over the ocean he slid into bed, nuzzling against her neck and she wrapped her legs around him, caressing charcoal smudges from her fingers onto his cheeks and lips. He did not dream of flying but he helped secure money for national parks, trained guides in the specifics of Honduran entomology and translated tourist materials whenever anyone asked him to. In general both Devin and Octavia thought that they were as happy and lonely as they would have been in any life.

“Honey, what are those?” Octavia had come into La Casa unexpectedly.

In a plastic dish on his desk were two beetles. One sucked on the wide, flat side of a mango pit, covering the entire disk with its body. The other ran again and again against the rounded side of the dish. Pinchers, curved and the diameter of a thumb, protruded from their black heads.

“Scarabaeidae Lucanidae,” he said.

“Honey.”

“They don't fly.”

“Are you going to kill them?”

“No. I already have them.”

“Devin.”

“I think they are going to mate. Then they will die.”

She rubbed her eyebrow.

“I thought it would be good for the casa. Everyone comes in and...” he gestured at the walls. “For the kids. To see something alive.”

“We are having a party tonight.”

“Why?”

“For,” she glanced around and dropped her voice low, “the photo.”

“Octavia.” Several weeks before she had taken a series of photos of a cloud bank. In one image the clouds appeared to spell *Díos*, God, and streams of light poured out of them at the viewer. Pulling out her small savings, she made prints and started rumors with the local churches about a divine image. She had done it without telling Devin.

“You would have disapproved,” she said when he found out.

“You are right,” he said.

“It’s going to be big,” she said.

“It’s something new,” she said.

Devin sighed.

Octavia walked out of La Casa into the court yard.

“It’s done. They are coming. It is staring with a prayer service. Maybe you can come to at least that part.”

Devin followed her. “Prayer service?”

“The padre from Luz del Cristo’s coming. Maybe with some singers. A tambourine. I might get out the guitar.”

“Coming from where?”

She waved her hand in front of her face to dismiss the conversation and looked away.

“This picture,” he said.

“I’m not arguing about it again. The number-chart photos, the butterfly pictures, a huge success. Aren’t they?”

“I’m not sure about huge. And this isn’t butterflies.”

“It’s clouds. It’s a better market. Just not your market.”

“You are putting so much money into it.”

“You know what the prints look like. Do we have to do this again? Díos. Up over mountains. It has the accent. Why do I keep having to say this? Can’t you believe in it?”

“A prayer service?”

“Well, it does seem a little, what? Disingenuous? To kick off the sales without one. This is the night. When I show it.”

“Are you being serious?”

“You know, I’ve thought lately, been thinking, maybe God sent us this and we should be appreciative. To him. It. Her. Díos.”

“God? Oh my God.” He pulled the collar of his shirt. “You’ve never... We don’t do that.”

She sniffed and glanced at the casa.

“We don’t do alive either,” she said and went into the house.

For the next two weeks until they died, he watched the beetles for hours each day. Then he nursed their larva towards gestation and brought home two praying mantis.

Octavia visited all the evangelical churches. She began to hum hymns and, occasionally, while brushing her teeth, clapped her hand against her thigh as if she were holding a tambourine.

In their final stage of development the *Tropidacris Violaceus*, stickish, red and purple grasshoppers the length of a child’s forearm, developed wings. Devin was hiding them under

his desk. Sometimes when tourists came in he'd say, "Wanna see something?" and pull the insects out, glancing at the door. "They call them saltamontes. Mountain leapers."

One day, while he and a British couple hovered over the plastic cage, Octavia came in carrying a print of the Días clouds.

"Hi, I thought that you had some people back here. They might be interested in looking at this print."

Devin and the couple turned to look at Octavia. Someone's arm knocked the lid off the cage and the saltamontes rose up, leaping impossible distances, wings fluttering to keep them aloft.

After the screaming stopped and the couple left and the print was rerolled, Devin said, "Maybe one of us shouldn't be here."

"I thought that our lives, so small, just us doing what we want, would make everything stable. So little to imbalance. But it is fragile."

"I am not doing what I want."

"Yes. There are limits to compromise."

"Our lives are too small."

"I'll be the one. I'll go."

The first postcard came one month later. It was of a church in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. She wrote to him:

I have painted this church. In watercolor.

Every time they had traveled over the past twenty years, to other cities, to tiny tourist sights and art galleries, Octavia bought postcards, intending to send them to the states, to her family and friends. Only occasionally did she actually write them. Whenever she was anxious she would say out of the blue, “Shoot, I need to send those postcards.” When Octavia left their home to stay with her sister Rachel in the States she took all the cards. He had no recollection of visiting the Nicaraguan church, though knew he must have and the postcard created the odd sensation of someone telling a very intimate story about him that he could not remember.

The next card he received said:

*The ocean here is always grey. How could
I have forgotten that?*

The image was of parrots on a Mayan ruin. The name “Copan” scrawled across the bottom in white letters gilt blue.

He could not help but picture her at the ocean, hair wind-tangling beneath the orange hat, clothes wrapping tight around her, as if wet, and flapping out behind her like flags. Long ago, he remembered, how long ago she said, “I am careless with hearts.”

The next five cards, all from different Mayan ruins, he did not read for two weeks. Then he did, sitting in La Casa, the bodies of the saltamontes lying dead in front of him.

*I have an apartment now. AARP won't
stop sending me magazines. People who
are not having sex at 60 are not very likely
to knock boots ever again, they say.*

He imagined her shock every time an AARP magazine arrived in the mailbox. The magazine covers, the happily mature faces smiling at her with earnest health, words like “Making the Most of your 401K” or “Unraveling Medicare Part D” or “Vacationing with Mobility Scooters,” so strange and foreign. Whenever they were back in the States the magazines at the grocery store were filled with foreign events and concerns and made him unsure of himself. He knew she could not feel anything like those the glossy people in the pictures and he thought how out of place, even her own apartment, they must make her, sitting on the coffee table, smiling expectantly until she opened the cover.

*I have taken up with a Little Sister.
What an upsettingly hopeful thing
to call a program. Big Sister. Big
Brother. Her name is Precious.*

*Rachel's dog lost a leg, did you
know? Yet it balances so well.*

*Precious has lived here always,
seven years. Today she saw the
ocean for the first time. She wants
to surf.*

He paused to calculate, collectively, the number of miles the post cards had traveled since Octavia bought them.

I have taken a lover.

A week later came the image of a piece of Costa Rican art.

*Please know that it is out of fear,
not a lack of love for you.*

Devin continued his life as normal, except he told Emma, their empleada, she did not need to come, though he would pay her, and he scheduled no butterfly catching trips. If people asked, he said Octavia had gone to visit family and when they arrived he never pretended he would not read the postcards.

Two days later on the house of Ruben Díario:

*Rachel has a head cold. She is
not friendly. I asked him to dress
as a butterfly, tonight, to come to
me that way. How strange. The
things we want.*

Then:

*There is a lion in my house. It
lives on the sofa.*

A week later:

*The thing is, the lion is so much
more comfortable there than me.
So I've let it stay. Buying a
quarter of a cow is not cheap.
I'm going to look into swine.*

He placed an international call to Rachel. Yes, she said, a lion. He had walked up the stairwell, perhaps lost from some person's private collection, you know how this town is, and flopped down on the couch. Precious was fascinated. Octavia wouldn't hear of calling animal control but had moved back in with Rachel and went every day to feed the thing. "You know how Octavia is. You were right to not call her." This was not time to argue.

*I killed the lion today. With the
machete that Rodolfo gave me
at the despedida. It was time.*

The next day:

*I painted him. The lion. Not
the lover. With butterfly wings,
flying over the canopy at
Montana de Yoro. Té extraño.
But not in English.*

Devin went out. He sat in the Parque Central until dark came. He reread all of the cards. They had traveled 89,753 miles to get to him. A Garafuna woman sold him bread and a man named Frankie, homeless the twenty years that Devin had been in La Cieba, came up and asked, "Where you be from?"

"Here, Frankie."

"No man. New York. The Big Apple." He spread his arm wide. "King of the Hill. A-number-one. The Big Apple."

"Yeah, Frankie."

“Ain’t from here.”

Devin walked to the central market. A carnival was set up with shooting games and loterieas and stalls of fried food. A Ferris wheel clanked around. On the far edge was a ride that had eight cars, each a different shape, attached to the central mechanism by arms octopussing out. In the dark, a row of lights filed up the arms like suckers. He paid for a ticket, pretending to not understand the Spanish when the ride owner explained it was for children. Devon walked around the machine and found a car in the shape of an airplane, a smiling face painted on its nose. His legs hardly fit and he sat with his knees tucked up against his chest. When it started, the ride made a loud clunk and then whirred as it worked to get off the ground. Devin and seven children floated up into the sky, their hair whipping back, cresting again and again as the cars rode thru the air as if hopping waves. He held the postcards up into the night sky and, when he let them go, the colors in the photographs glimmered, flitting, reflecting the lights of the flying machine.

History

The gods lived here when the land spread smooth as far as a man can walk in his life. The gods played. They fought. They burrowed and dug and wrestled and warred and erected hopscotch paths for Coyote, lines of stone islands across the desert to test the distance of his leap. The thrashing of their bodies made the swirl of canyons running to empty into each other. Their blood and bone turned the walls red and white. They made the stone flats and crumbling sand hills and raised up the pock-marked columns of rock. Most of the gods are massive horned sheep with four human arms and hands instead of legs and hooves. There are a few red snakes the size of spring rivers and the Coyote has the back legs and ears of a jack rabbit. The earth churned and the gods grew weary of the peaks and valleys, scored with the sheep's fingers, pounded with Coyote's back legs. We are here, now. The People. But at any moment the gods return and what we touch they touch and so all must be as it is, unchanged, or the gods bring retribution.

Springtime

The moth remakes the desert.

In spring the yucca bushes and the yucca trees that stand like immobile, hairy people reach cones and spears of flowers toward the sky. Then they wait, blooms open to the quiet desert. The moth emerges from the ground and cleans the pollen from the trees and bushes. She rolls it into a great, golden ball. She gathers up the globe and flies into the white cloth of petals and lays her eggs in the most hidden cavity of a flower and then lowers the sticky ball down. The blooms wilt and all summer seeds and the new moths grow. In fall the yucca crack open and the seeds and the moths drop and burrow into the sandy earth and the desert is made again.

Winter

This winter Shel comes to sleep with me in the night. Just sleep. The first time he lies facing away from me, the smallest strip of his back touching mine, and does not move and does not move and does not move, and I can feel how tight he holds himself and when I wake he is gone. I know it is him on the blanket next to me because he smells of that great, giant dog that tries to sit in his lap. He lets the dog get its one haunch up on him and then the animal wiggles back and Shel groans and laughs and then they give up and the dog stays, as big as Shel, just one leg cuddled on him. In our group Shel is the only doggy smelling man who has no woman to keep him asleep in one place.

The next time Shel comes he circles three times, shuffling stones with his feet and kicking up bits of dust so that I have to hold my breath, contract the muscles in my throat,

to not cough. He lies on my blanket and it's cold enough that I've wrapped another one around me and he puts one hand against that blanket against my shoulder. The next time he touches his ankle to mine and the next he lies down in front of me. I do not reach out to him, but I think that maybe I do when I fall asleep. Perhaps he sleepwalks and doesn't know. Perhaps his is tired of lying next to his dog.

A man has touched me. In the day he acts the same as always, calls me Moth, gives me the spoonful of his food, no more, no less. I act the same, too. What happens if people know? Certainly I won't have another chance to touch a person. It is my seventeenth winter. I have slept alone for seven of those winters. Only the very young may touch the Moth. The very young rest with their parents.

Moth

I am called Moth because I keep the desert. I eat and I clean everything into its right place. I do not work for the lizard and the bird and the termites. I keep the desert for the gods.

Today

I wake with a shadow over my face and catch my breath. Perhaps Shel still lies before me in the daybreak. I ask the tips of my fingers but feel only my blanket against them, no human warmth, no rise and fall of breath.

I open my eyes and see Asias crouched over me.

"My son has rock drawn," she says.

"Hello. Good morning."

“Shut up,” she says. “Do you hear me?”

Then she says, “Pur.”

Asias is my sister. She has not called me Pur since I became Moth. Like everyone else she calls me Moth.

“Pur,” she says again.

Tears come into my eyes. I feel giddy with how she says “Pur” like a question. She needs me. I roll over and give her my back.

“Pur.”

I try to think what it is to be a sister.

“He is safe?” I ask. Her breath comes out loud, like wind in canyons.

“Yes,” she says.

“He is safe.”

“The same wall,” she says.

I want to say, “What do you mean?” so that she will have to answer things that could hurt. I want to laugh. But I think that that a sister would not act that way and I enjoy being good sister for a moment. I know that she means it is the same wall where, so many winters ago, before we were men and women, our brother was rock drawing and fell into a water hole and died.

Also the Moth went to eat the wall and fell and the bodies stayed down, down in the water hole, and the people found me to be the Moth.

It is funny, then, that perfect Asias’s perfect son crawled up and drew and I will clean his drawings alone.

I am the good sister and turn back towards her. She picks up some small stones from the ground and rolls them between her palms. It is a gesture she does not know she makes until she sees me staring at her hands and puts the rocks back, one by one, on the earth and says, “Coyote, Sheep and Snake, forgive the error.”

I tilt my head toward her in a way that looks kind and understanding, and say, “In the life we err.”

I’m sure it is an error to feel so happy to have seen Asias’s mistake and shame, but in the moment I don’t care much about things like errors.

I lay both my hands on the ground.

“Later I eat this earth to make it clean for the gods.” Then I am the good Moth and the good sister.

“Moth,” she says, “will you clean away the drawings and make the rock pure for the gods?” Her son, Hesser, should come and ask me. The one that errs asks the Moth.

I tell her, “I am the Moth and I make clean the rock.”

All day boys and girls come to me and say, “Moth, in the night I scarred the rocks. The hands of Sheep and the legs of Coyote and the smooth belly of Snake touched there and now I marked them. Moth, will you clean away the drawings and make the rock pure for the gods?” They all have headaches from the hot juice and look spindly on their thin, young legs.

‘Yes.’ I say it seven times. There is a howling tonight, of course. Every year it is like this, my busy day. One day Winter End and dancing and cactus cutting and rock stacks and the young get into the juniper juice after everyone goes to sleep and draw on the rock walls and the next day is shame and howling and then we flee from the summer

sun to the mountains where the snows have melted. I love it. On this day everyone remembers me and they think that if I am not here for them summer would be dry and hungry with the gods' anger.

I go to the Winter End grounds and spend the day smashing the carved cactus and kicking the rocks around to unstack them. I remember what I can of yesterday's dances and dance them backwards, my feet scraping the dirt back to the place it is. I am alone and none watch me for my work is sacred and foul. There can only be one Moth.

Rules of the Moth

There can only be one Moth and the Moth works alone. The work of the Moth is sacred and foul and none but the gods may see.

The Moth remakes the earth and lives in the rage and contempt of the gods.

When the Moth dies the people know the Moth that lives.

The errors of the people pass through the Moth and the earth returns to its pure form, waiting the movements of the gods.

The people must feed the Moth.

Only the very young may touch the Moth.

Tonight

Tonight the moon is full and shadows from the choya and creosote break the cold light on the ground. I am not supposed to be at howlings. I eat the errors while the others howl and I am too foul and too close to the gods for the circle. Often, though, I sneak and watch. The howlings are wonderful. At the mouth of a canyon I climb up and lie hidden in a shallow cave.

The whole group stands in a circle around the eight who rock drew. The Chief says, "Shame on your error." And it is like a tight string tearing. With one breath all shout at the eight. "How dare?" and "The error," and everyone screams and points. Asias stands very still and does not point. Her mouth moves for she must shout those in the middle down, all must howl the error, but she does not take great breaths. She whispers her condemnations.

The eight fall on the ground and wail their sorrow. Babies cry. Someone lifts a rock up and Asias shakes as if it struck her. The Chief shouts, "Enough." Silences comes. Mothers comfort their babies. In the center Asias's son rocks back and forth. "Please," he says, "please forgive us." The other youth follow, yowling and rolling on the ground and soon the people in the circle, all the people, cry to the gods for forgiveness. Asias's face skews, the mouth stretching empty in the moonlight. She kneels and then I see her chest heave as she begs. "Pity us. Pity us." And the error has become the error of all.

Sometimes I have my own howlings, out when I've finished eating, because rolling in the earth and screaming feels good. I do not howl for forgiveness. I do not know if the Moth, so close to the gods and so foul, can error. Sometimes I think that perhaps the gods don't care to forgive or punish the People for specific actions. The gods bring drought and rain because they do.

If I can err, this thought is an error. It may also be a rule.

I am delighted with Asias's pain, this, the first time she or her children have been howled. I feel too full, stuffed and breathless, with pleasure at that pain. Later I will howl to empty myself.

I walk up the canyon, rough rock touching my hands on both sides. The path spreads wider and the water hole, chiseled many humans deep, lies before me. The opening is small so the hot sun cannot sap away the water. The gods come to the Chiefs' dreams and say, "Make tunnels of water." For now the People can drink. When the gods return they will empty the water into their own bellies. The People dig and dig the holes condoned by the gods. The People gouge out this earth in honor of a time to come. When it rains children dump tortoise shells filled with water into the holes.

Thick black streaks burned by the sun run on the rock walls. In strips of moonlight the fresh drawings show high up, etched into the blots of darkness.

Sometimes, when there are only a few drawings to eat, I doodle my face or my body, lightly, onto the wall and then smooth it away, just because I like to. Sometimes when I do that little rain falls. Sometimes the rains fall hard. What would the people do to me if I stopped eating the rock?

I climb the wall, searching out crevices for my toes and fingers, jamming my hands into cracks. I imagine the youth, giggling on the hot juniper juice, taunting each other to climb higher. It is easy to slip and tumble into the water hole below. I imagine my brother falling.

Finally I am up with the rock scratches. The eight have etched them in deep and it will take me a long time to eat them. It's the usual stuff. Someone drew himself spearing a sheep. Two people holding hands. A few stars. Lines that never became more than shallow columns before the dawn lit and the juniper stopped helping the young feel so hot.

I begin with the two holding hands. I grope for good foot holds and a hollow for my fingers and take a hard stone from my waist cloth. Humming, I scrub the rock until the figures blur. The black burn powders off and coats my lips and chest and I breath the dust and see it flutter out on small breezes. The rock is clean, the red of thin blood, smooth. The people will think it is safe.

I wipe away the star and my feet numb a little so I climb down, sliding toes against rock to find hollows, hoping that the holes do not house spiders or scorpions, and come down, finally, on the thin strip of rock between the wall and the water hole. The winter rains fell plentifully this year so the tunnel is filled almost to the top. My hand breaks the silver surface, ripples lap out and I pour the water in cool streams down my face, washing away the dust. I plunge my hands back in and find that I am drinking, sucking from my cupped palms. When my hands are empty I return them to the water and drink again.

I hear the sound of feet on the pebbled ground and look up, like a hunted sheep.

Asias stands close by.

“You drank the water,” she says.

“It is sweet,” I say.

“This is the water hole,” she says.

“Yes. Of course. And this is the first wall I ever cleaned.”

“I know.” She raises her chin a little.

Neither of us says anything. I dip my hand into the hole and sip from the pool in my palm. I look her in the eye while I do it. I think of Rama, our brother. I think of the Moth before me, the one who fell into this water hole and floated down below the earth

for hours before anyone thought to wonder where she was. She had not finished her job and so I did.

Asias coughs in disgust.

“Shouldn’t you be at the howling?” I ask.

“Aren’t you supposed to eat the rock?” she says.

“How do you know I don’t and that the Gods aren’t giving you a vision? To keep you from seeing what you should not. The Moth works alone.”

“The Moth cleans for the people.”

“Go away,” I tell her.

She sits down. “It was so easy to come here. Just walk up the canyon.”

“Go away,” I say again.

“I’ve feared being at the center of a howling.”

I feel again the joy at watching her son howled.

She picks up a stone and throws it into the water hole and giggles.

“You cannot eat that, can you? Cannot drink the whole thing dry and put the pebble back on the earth,” she says, giggling.

In the moon I see her brows come together.

“Pur, will they punish us for that? That rock I threw in?” she asks me.

I start to answer but she says, “I feel that they will not.”

“Go.” And this time I am the good sister, telling her so that she will not say things she will regret.

“I was with him,” she says.

“What?”

“I was with Rama.”

The moonlight leaves deep gouges under her eyes.

“When he fell.” She looks up at the rock wall. “We were both up. Scratching. Maybe something bit him. He tumbled down. His head on the rock. Down into the hole. He didn’t answer when I yelled.”

“I became Moth.”

She shrugged. “When the Moth dies the people will know the Moth that lives.”

“Coward.”

Every night Asias sleeps cuddled with her man and her children and I lay alone hoping for a dog to visit and, of late, for a dog smelling man to lay out where the tips of my fingers could brush against him if I dared.

“Throw another pebble.” I point to the water.

She picks up a rock and throws it in.

“Again,” I say.

She throws in handfuls. In the morning she will feel lonely, having doubted the gods.

“How do you do it?” she points to the wall.

“I am the Moth. It is my duty. You cannot do anything.”

I climb up the wall away from her and begin filling.

“That’s it? You scrape it with a rock?”

Soon I hear her close to me grating a stone against the wall. I see her smiling.

I dig my stone in harder. The years and years that I live only to clean the messes, to ask and ask for forgiveness for our childish desire to mark and change, to imagine

ourselves, even in a moment, equal to the gods, worthy to use the earth. These years and years because Asias said nothing. She had not been howled for her error but I became Moth. The people said they saw the mark of the gods on me. They also saw the years and years of water fouled with my brother's body, and I do not believe that only the gods are capable of retribution.

The sound of Asias's stone stops. She hangs in the moonlight and leans forward into the wall and licks the figure in front of her. A boy with a spear. She licks it until I see shadows come over the rock and I cannot tell if they are made of her spit or of her blood.

"I eat the rock," she says.

"Clean the rock," she tells me.

I touch my tongue to the wall and grains of sand come away into my mouth and the hard rock tastes musty.

"Beautiful," she says and the moon illuminates the tears on her face. "Beautiful forgiveness," she says.

I am big. Big as Sheep and Snake and Coyote. I am Moth. I am nothing. I reach my hand out to her shoulder, feel the wonder, the warmth, of a human body. I pull her from the wall.

Customary Wear and Tear

Prompt #1: In your diary write about one thing you let make you feel anxiety or FEAR?

Hello.

I guess Hello. I have not done this since I was twelve. I don't really know what to do. A woman in her 50s keeping a diary.

Hi. How are you?

I'm fine. Well. No. I'm not fine. I mean, I'm fine, but there could be improvements. Today I got this book from the library, *Full Emersion Anxiety Response (FEAR): Embracing the Emotions Within*. It said that keeping a diary "could be a good way to learn about your anxiety and overcome its debilitating effects."

So, Hi. So. Sooooo. Something that made me feel anxious. I can tell you right now the fact that the book is named FEAR, all in big letters and in red, helps me lose control. I can't look at the cover without my breathing going a little. They have it at the top of every page, FEAR, so you won't forget what you are reading

It is August 5th. I guess I should say that.

I've been staring at the page for a while.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do next.

August 6

I don't start many things, so I'd like to follow through.

I picked up FEAR again, to find out how long I have to do this diary thing. "As long as the practitioner finds the practice helpful."

I'd hoped for something more specific.

Thinking about endless pages gave me nearly debilitating chest pains. Ah.

August 7

Prompt #2: Remember a time when you had a conflict that caused you anxiety or FEAR. How did you respond? Remember to embrace your FEAR.

During breakfast I got a text from Ray, the young man who's my boss. He's the Mid-Illinois Regional Baggage Manager and he's the only other staff member in the Regional Baggage Redirection Division. It said, "One bag at Bloomington."

And then Mom said, "I think Chantilly could use an outing, don't you?"

Chantilly is an ancient mini-poodle. Her fur is always greasy and matted and she emits various bad smells. The past few months Mom has started to say things like, "Chantilly wants to go with you today." She has had teeth removed from the left side of her mouth. She pants and her tongue falls out the gaps and she pulls her tongue back in and pants and pulls her tongue back in. Her snout is long and thin and so is her tongue.

When I got to Bloomington the manila folder for the account, a duffle bag, was thick with a paper-clipped stack of printed e-mails. The first one had FYI scrawled across it in red.

Out in the van, with Chantilly panting at me, looking pointedly forward so I knew she thought we should get going, I read the pages.

Dear Customer Service Personnel,
I appreciate the rapid rate of your response to the dilemma of my misplaced luggage. The contents of the bag are imperative. Adequate actions are critical.

The e-mail was from Ms. Shelby Bilgue. I hate names you don't know for sure how to pronounce. I hate knowing I'll be at the door with the bags and, 3-to-1, I'll be corrected when I ask if Mrs. So and So is available.

Should I embrace these little fears? I don't know. There isn't any information in the book.

The next was an e-mail from Ray to Ms. Shelby Bilgue. They went back and forth for a while. Shelby informed Ray that she would not be available but one Mrs. Elva Stiffton would await the bag.

Ray reminded her of our policy that prohibits giving baggage to anyone but the ticked passenger displaying both ID and proof of travel.

They used words like crucial and non-negotiable. Early on Ray put forth the peace offering of "Willing to deliver to any location convenient to the customer." She said his thoughts were a "nonsensical impossibility."

I took county highways to Effingham. They scare me less. Less merging. Less traffic. Less people to die.

Everything is green except the soybeans and the summer wheat on their way to golden.

No one answered the doorbell on the two story, sided craftsman.

The second time I rang, a voice behind me said, “I’m Mrs. Stiffton. I’ll take the baggage.”

She was my age, shorter, with her graying hair haloed up around her head in one of those impenetrable perms.

I told her, “I’m sorry. I am not authorized to return the bag to anyone but Ms. Bilgue.”

Mrs. Stiffton narrowed her eyes. Maybe I pronounced the name wrong

“No. No. Shelby said you could leave it with me.”

“I’m sorry.”

The whole thing escalated fast.

I said, “I’m sorry,” and then I was wrestling with this woman, each of us trying to yank the bag from the other. We were pretty evenly matched until she looked me in the face and bared her teeth. That made me pause and she grabbed the bag, put the strap over her shoulder and trotted off the porch.

In the van I forged Mrs. Shelby Bilgue’s signature.

The breath would not go all the way into my lungs.

When it’s like this, with the breathing, it’s hard to get the car up the entrance ramp. That spiraling, so close to no control. How it is possible for the front of a car to crumple in and sever the shin bone from the thigh.

Embrace. I don’t want to embrace that.

Here's something else to think about. Mom still offers me a plate of apple slices and peanut butter when I get home. Here is something. The ten years of my life that I didn't live with her I never bought a jar of the stuff, but I craved it everyday.

We sat in our assigned front-room seats, a pair of straight backed chairs stuffed until they are hard.

Mom said, "That neighbor boy came over and planted the zinnias. Good looking kid. Bit liberal with the fertilizer, though, I'll tell you what. And imagine, he wanted the whole three dollars."

"You didn't pay him?"

"I gave him a fair wage. I kept back a dollar for the fertilizer."

There are no more neighborhood kids who will shovel our snow or rake the leaves.

I said, "I went to Effingham."

"Oh, yes. Wooden Shoes." Mom specializes in the high school mascots of Central Illinois.

"A duffle bag to a two story craftsman."

"Siding?"

"Siding."

"Such a shame. Aluminum at least?"

"Vinyl."

"Vinyl. Oh."

"Yes. But a good job."

"It's what killed you father."

My father smoked two packs a day. He was also an armature architectural historian. He let the siding get to him. According to some books I've read I think maybe he used the siding as an outlet for other frustrations. What do you think FEAR? Is that possible?

When I'm feeling like the best daughter I lie about any siding I saw that day.

I said, "I went by Fisher's on the way home for some milk." I held up the half gallon.

I do the grocery shopping and I tell Mom stories from a safe world beyond the front yard

"Just the one duffle bag?" asked Mom.

"Yes."

"Slow day."

I shrugged. Mom squinted at the ceiling as if she could see the location of the sun.

"Five o'clock," she said.

"Yes."

"Yes." She looked at the ceiling again. This was a conversation about how I'd left that morning at eight am, driven to Bloomington and then Effingham and home, a total drive time of four hours with stops to pick up the duffle, drop of the duffle and then buy some milk.

"Chantilly must have had lots of free time. Were you bored, honey?" she asked the dog.

"I'll start some dinner," I said.

"No. It's alright. I already put some chicken in to bake. It was getting so late."

Mom sniffed.

I'll write. I'll write and tell about those other hours, FEAR.

Fred, the manager and butcher at Fisher's, and I went into his office, locked the door, moved the coffee maker and security monitors off the table and had sex. We kept our clothes on and knocked over a bottle of powdered creamer. Before that I stopped at The Hills and had some drinks.

I am not someone who exercises or knits when I think I'm going to die, when I get panicked. I wish I was. But I'm not.

Mom doesn't really want to know what happened with those extra five hours, but she wants to make sure I know she's aware I have been up to something.

She did ask me, "What's on your shoulders?"

Powdered coffee creamer had fallen from my hair and clung to my blue airline blazer.

"I must have dandruff," I said.

She did her sniff again.

Mom has always had little dogs, but I think Chantilly is the last one.

August 11

I'm back! What do we do today, FEAR?

Prompt #3: Write about your job. Use a highlighter to identify things you let make you feel anxious.

I don't have a highlighter. I have to buy one. That makes me anxious.

I stay because of the health insurance and the stock options. They've been eating away at the pension, so I will have to linger.

I was a stewardess. Back when our skirts were made out of paper and business men liked to burn holes in them with cigarettes, snickering like third graders in their polyester blends and comb-overs. Smacking on peanuts. It happened quickly. One minute I was stone cold, ready to bring you coffee-two-creams or guide you through a cabin fire. The next minute. (Highlight.)

On a Chicago-Louisville flight I picked up the hard plastic intercom phone and asked people to return to their seats because the pilot expected it to get bumpy. That telephone was the same model as the one on the wall in my kitchen. Vanilla colored, humped, like a hard-boiled egg sliced in half. I have no kids, but when I told everyone to "sit down now, please" I was speaking to my children. I heard my voice echo in their ears. I said the word, "bumpy" and imagined mangled bodies and heads shattered against the overhead luggage bins like watermelons struck with sledge hammers. (Highlight that.)

During my meeting with the supervisor I wore a blouse that I unbuttoned, "Oh, it's so hot in here," farther and farther, "Isn't there some other way I can serve the company?"

Did I tell you about my mom's dog, Chantilly?

I spend a lot of time on the bank of the interstate with the hazards on so she can piddle. I imagine our bodies swept away by a semi. (Highlight)

August 12

Prompt #4: Imagine your diary is a letter. Who are you writing to?

The last time I did this, when I was twelve, Mom picked the lock on the diary and found out I thought she looked fat in her new dress and that I'd burned my lungs smoking leaves from the cigar tree in the front yard and that Billy Roden had put his hands all over my chest and said he was glad I didn't wear a bra. She didn't tell me that she'd read it, but just kept asking if I thought she looked fat. She also would ask after my breathing, say it sounded a little raspy. Using concern to make you feel small. This is something she excels at.

Hello, Mom. How long did it take you to find this diary?

August 13

Prompt #5: What is on your life resume?

I feel I should say that after the Bumpy Day I got divorced and I live, again, with my mother. She won't leave the front yard.

(Highlight)

August 15

Prompt #6: Trust yourself. What helps you overcome FEAR?

A long time ago I got a cassette tape with a man talking about how to relax in low, calming tones and an accent that made me think of Alabama. Plastered all over the case and the tape it said, "Do not listen while driving." That seemed unnecessary. The very first thing the man on the tape told you to do was close your eyes. But after a while, after it got so that I felt hungry for the rattling of the spools inside the plastic casing, only

the panicked thought of crashing the car stopped me from inserting it into the radio on the dash. But I did learn some breathing. In. Hold. Out. In. Hold. Out. In.

And the drinking.

August 19

I can't find you, FEAR. What is the prompt? I am upset. I cannot find you. I am not embracing the anxiety. But I guess I want to write even though you are gone.

There were four bags waiting. The file bulged full of printed e-mails with FYI scrawled over the front. It got a little harder to breathe.

I called Ray.

"Yes. Are you ok?" he said. I never call.

I took some deep breaths that didn't make it into my body very deep.

"Yeah. What's going on with this lady? We misplace her bags every week?"

"Who? I don't know."

In the background I could hear several people talking and things falling on the ground.

Ray said, "Put it over there," to someone. Then he said, "Yes? Anything else? You ok?"

"Everything's fine," I said.

I carried the bags out, one by one. Two duffels, two rollies. Maybe I'll ask Ray to install a ramp in the van. I am feeling saggy.

Chantilly whined, bored and wanting to poop, each time the back doors opened.

This time Mrs. Bilgue asked that the bags be dropped at a residence in Kewanee.

I am a woman of little leisure. If you insist on such disregard to my personal belongings, I insist that you accommodate to my geography.

There was an address.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s do this thing.”

I turned the ignition and worried about a heart attack. It was very vivid, the way I would slump forward, the steering wheel wagging uncontrolled.

The front door of the house, a brick, two story neo-classical, had an ornate steel-work screen door. A note wove its way through the steel bars. It said,

At Hog Days. Please discover me in the Pig Kissing Booth or near the Tilting Tea Cup operator.

The script flowed in graceful letters across the page like a love letter or a declaration of war.

I left the van in the middle of the elementary school playing fields that doubled as Hog Festival parking and walked to the downtown blocks cordoned off for the main activities. I know Chantilly watched me leave.

Just before I crossed through the police barriers a convertible passed slowly. Sitting up on the back seat was a solid, freckled girl in what looked like a refitted bridesmaid dress and a sash. A banner ran the length of the car. The first line said “Kewanee Pork Princess” Underneath, in italics, the banner said, “*The Other White Meat.*” These titles of princess and queen and king are how we honor our best and brightest, the valedictorians and future leaders of our communities.

FEAR, if I had a highlighter I’d highlight that I never wore a ribbon across my chest that said corn or dairy or any of the other proud products. I might make a bandage to go around my chest to keep my heart safe.

The blocks inside the festival grounds swayed with people and smelled of roasting pork and sticky sweet garbage.

Mrs. Stiffton stood in front of the skeeball tent. The crowd did not buffet her, though she was short. Her hair maintained its helmet form. She opened her thin and pale lips to take a bite of cotton candy but when she saw me she closed her mouth and slitted her eyes. We took off, racing each other up the blacktop street, weaving around people and booths.

I don't sprint very often. My lungs burned and I could not quite catch Mrs. Stiffton.

In the field my white van covered in the airline logo stood out. Mrs. Stiffton headed for it.

"Ha. It's locked," I thought.

She got to the back of the van, reached for the handle and popped the door open. I was still slaloming through rows of cars and she had the bags out, one duffel stacked on each roly bag, and did her trot away across the grass. Before she disappeared behind the school, Mrs. Stiffton turned and smiled the cotton candy stick and a roly bag handle wrapped neat in her right fist.

I don't remember turning back, but I was back on the main street buying Mom a funnel cake. My pulse did not get slower and my heart squeezed and pinched. I watched people shoot a water gun at the mouth of a cardboard pig face, trying to fill and burst a balloon that grew out of the top of its head. A group of kids swarmed around me, screaming and laughing, all of them short enough to ignore me, as if I was a tree planted

in the middle of the street. I couldn't breathe and stumbled out of the river of Hog Days back to the van.

At the driver's side I put my hand along the inside of the door frame and rested one foot on the running board. After a long pause I heaved myself up. My leg felt weak, trying to lift my body up.

I always lock the van doors. I swear. In my mind I say, "Cross Check complete."

I've been enough times to the hospital. This is panic. Not a heart attack.

Maybe this is what an aneurism is.

The chest pains.

It doesn't help, mom and her pills. A few years ago she went to the doctor and got these pills for her heart and she ran out and won't go back. They called for a while, to remind her of appointments.

Also. Driving home with my heart so loud the road that will be icy soon and Chantilly was panting and panting and her tongue wouldn't stay in her mouth. I told her to shut up, yelled, and, shoved her little grey tongue in with my finger so I felt all her rotting gums and the back of her throat and she yelped and shrunk towards the door on her old, old legs.

August 20

Manito. Whip-Purs. Rolly bag. Bungalow. Nice garden.

Cobden. Appleknockers. Suit case. Sunshore Hotel.

Tuetopolis. Flaming Hearts. Double wide. Back pack.

Sesquicentennial fair.

Fred is well.

Chantilly didn't poop all day.

She tried many times.

I'm dying.

August 21

There is an AM radio station that broadcasts out of Havana. On a clear day you can get it from Lafayette to Bethany. Eight hours a day a man, he must be retired, broadcasts a quiz show. If someone calls in, they can answer questions and find out if they are right or wrong. If not, he just reads question after question and there is no theme. He does not read the answers but sometimes he chuckles in a private sort of way after the question. I listen and shout out the answers if I know them. Sometimes I listen and feel comforted by the lists and lists of things I don't know.

I did not go to work today. My heart is a little better.

Maybe the man on the radio knows where the book is. Maybe if I listen long enough someone will call in with the answer. Maybe it happened today while I stayed home.

Mom opened a notice from the library.

She said, "Honey?"

I said, "It's fine. Don't worry."

I mean it. I don't want her worry.

August 22

Hopeson. Cornjerkers. Suitcase and well-taped office supply box. Spanish revival.

The suitcase light, the box heavy.

It was for Shelby but she wasn't there. Neither was Mrs. Stiffon. Another note.

Often I have discussed the imperative nature of the objects of delivery. Strenuously, beyond all needs, I implore their arrival. I am not able to be at the pre-stated location and am aware of your policy regarding individuals to whom baggage will be returned. Thus I ask you to allow my property to find its safe path to the following address.

The address was in Florida.

The score: I was losing. FEAR, remember that Life Resume? The only thing I can be proud of is the baggage.

I got back in the car and the dog panted at me and her tongue fell out of her mouth. I drove to a pet store and purchased a soft-sided dog carrier.

At the ticket counter I showed them my badge and employee ID and was very aware of the uneven distribution of my blood. Too much in my palms and chest and hardly any in my toes or head. I nodded that I understood I would fly stand-by. I whispered my destination. I gave them my credit card.

Every year that I worked as a stewardess we had to spend two days getting recertified in first aid and safety procedures. We practiced. "Annie, Annie, are you okay?" We took tests on what to do if the airplane landed on the ocean. Every year we watched the same film strip. For an hour the projector clicked along and displayed reenactments of various bad things. Passengers rioted when the plane depressurized unexpectedly. A man choked on peanuts. We watched the stewardess remain calm and proceed with specific actions based in a firm understanding of protocol. I no longer

believe anyone would behave like they did in the movie, calmly returning to their seats. Living. Mostly people might just go ahead and die.

I didn't get a training video for this job, returning bags, but I read the xeroxed pages, printed and clipped into a three ring binder. I tell people, "It is protocol," and they listen. "Customers are responsible for initiation of all communication." "You can't handle the bag until you sign for it." "The airline does not assume liability for customary wear and tear." For every question or problem I have the answer. I can limit and direct every interaction.

I didn't want to let the suitcase and cardboard box out of my sight, but at the gate they made me check them.

I didn't call Mom. I wouldn't have to until I was in Florida because she has agreed to not calling the police until eight. It's a cruel thing I demand, to not have to check in until eight.

When the flight attendant said, "Hello," at the mouth of the airplane I said, "I am a trained stewardess. Let me know if you need any help." Then I asked for seven little bottles of gin.

I stuffed Chantilly under the seat in front of me. My mind kept repeating bumpy, bumpy, bumpy and I'd tell it to shut up and I'd breathe and swig some gin. Then the bumpy, bumpy, bumpy would start up again. Finally I just let it in.

I really tried to let it in, FEAR. Embrace. Bumpy, bumpy, bumpy. I breathed the words and re-directed my thoughts away from the burning carpet and heads smashed open. The boy next to me spread his arms across both armrests so I was left to grip the seat cushion and edge my toes forward to touch Chantilly's soft cage. He fell asleep and I

hated him for his calm. But his arm shifted as he slept and brushed against mine and quieted me.

By the time we took off I was drunk.

Here is something.

The plane did not crash. The young man woke up when we bounced on the landing strip. He tilted his head and said, "Home."

The baggage arrived. Imagine. It plopped first off the incoming ramp, down to circle around on the metal conveyor. I let it drift away from me a few times, recede on the bowed slabs of metal that fold into each other at the corners, and then reappear, chugging towards me from the opposite end. Eventually I picked them up, the brown fabric suitcase, the office supply box.

The air in the car they gave me tasted of cigarettes and air freshener and made my head spin more. I thought about keeping Chantilly in her carrier, but it was worse to just listen to her panting coming from inside.

Mom often sniffs at me when I get back from The Hills.

She comes out of the kitchen with her plate of apples and peanut butter. She says, "You are no daughter of mine when they haul you in drunk."

"I don't want your apples, anyway."

I said that to Mom, at home on her chair.

The dog struggled out of the carrier, lowered her back end and looked at me while she shat on the seat.

I put the car in gear and drove for a while, ignoring how she stared at me. It smelled real bad and eventually I had to pull over and scrape the poo out with the car rental receipt.

I dragged Chantilly into the rear car seat. She was too old to try and crawl forward

Swamp spilled out on both sides of the highway and we turned and turned until the road was a single-lane strip of blacktop with green shoots growing up through cracks and only the occasional clapboard shack off in the distance, paint peeling, grey clothing heavy on the lines.

Chantilly whined.

“Why don’t you go ahead and piddle on the seat?” I said. “Won’t bother me.”

After a bit she stopped whining loudly but I heard the hiss of a soft cry each under each pant.

Before I saw the address I was sure we had arrived. A mile away a square walled fence rose up out of the swamp grasses. Hot pink stucco.

I parked on the gravel driveway and walked to the gate. Smooth steel. Nine feet tall. Heat reflected off it and when I tipped my head back I could see a shingled roof with multiple peaks beyond the wall. To the side of the gate was a white doorbell button imbedded into the stucco. I pushed it a few times. After a while I noticed a piece of paper on the ground. A line of plastic tape, no longer sticky, fluttered at the top.

I will apologize for the inconvenience. However, nothing can change the truth that the doorbell will not signal your arrival. Please find your way inside and be announced at the entrance door.

Signed Ms. Bilgue.

I pushed on the gate and it did not move, but I burned the palm of my hand on the sun heated metal.

I set off to circle the fence. When I looked back, Chantilly had cowered against the seat back, trying to get out of the sun magnified through the windshield. I opened the door and she whined in joy. I picked her up and she peed down the front of my shirt. I said mean things and then felt her small body covered in the matted fur shaking in my arms.

“Stupid dog,” I said and locked the doors. I checked the trunk. Cross check complete.

I stumbled, clutching Chantilly, through the coarse grass that cut my legs. My shoes got soggy and the wall was three feet taller than my head the whole way around and no trees grew on the outside or branches reached out from the inside.

Here is something.

When the luggage arrived in Florida with no problem, plopping first off the belt, I stopped feeling very much. All the spaces that worry normally fills became filled with a sense of something unavoidable. And exhaustion. It was like I had melted down onto a soft mattress and all I needed to do was lay there blinking and whatever would happen would happen. I have always suspected, hoped, that my choices didn't matter and I felt that I knew that to be true now.

I used to root through the bags, when I first started. I'd peel back the layers of underwear, dirty or clean, the toiletries, the shoes, looking for something interesting, a clue. But all I found was underwear and shoes. I try to remember that.

I got in the car, Chantilly on my lap, and turned it on. I pressed the gas and considered ramming the vehicle into the hot pink stucco, in the middle where the wall would be weakest. The idea of Chantilly out there by herself if I died from the impact made my stomach feel empty.

With the car pulled up alongside the wall I got out and popped the trunk. Mrs. Stiffton did not appear. Standing on the roof of the car I could look over the fence. The house was uneven and ramshackle, covered in long rows of faded blue shingles, round-bottomed, like teeth. A porch ran low to the ground along the front and circular windows that did not reflect the sun looked out from underneath the many eaves. The brown suitcase landed lightly, right side up, on the other side of the wall, but the office supply box rocked up and flipped over. I pulled with my arms and scrabbled my feet along the bumpy wall trying to find traction and I pictured my rear end up in the air and I fell over the fence. My hands scraped the stucco, trying to slow my body. I lay in the grass for a while, next to the suitcase and the box, looking at my palms that had turned pink from the paint.

“Bumpy,” I said. “Bumpy, bumpy, bumpy.” I did not start to panic and I did not know what to do with the absence of fear so I did some breathing anyway. In. Hold. Out. In.

Nothing happened when I knocked. I reached for the knob and pushed open the front door.

I yelled, “Hello,” and shoved the box and the suitcase over the doorstep. I walked beyond the entryway and the house opened into a parlor with dusty pink and orange

chairs lining the walls. Behind me a floorboard squeaked and Mrs. Stiffton darted around the corner, shuffling towards the box and suitcase.

She said, "Thank you for the delivery. Ms. Bilgue regrets..."

I punched her. Hard.

She sat down on the ground and said, "Oh."

I said, "No. You can't have it. Mrs. Bilgue must present her ID and proof of flight and sign for the baggage. This is protocol."

"Well." Mrs. Stiffton stood up. "That will not be possible."

I punched her again. She sat down.

"I cannot accept anything else."

Mrs. Stiffton started to cry. She did not weep or really even have tears come down out of her eyes, but when she spoke again her voice came out rough and choked.

"Please," she said. "Please give me the bags. I have to get them. Please."

Down on the floor she was a small woman, her pants and shirt ballooning out from her belt, her stiff grey hair thin enough to expose the pale of her scalp. She looked up at me and her face seemed fragile and caught in shadow. Incomplete.

"No. Where is Ms. Bilgue and her identification?"

"You smell of urine." She did not say this cruelly, but sounded sad. "Wait." She stood up off the floor and went to the parlor. I began to scoot the baggage back to the front door.

"Here," she said. "I'll give it back." She held up *FEAR: Embracing the Emotions Within*.

I said, "Jesus. You have to let me out of the gate."

“I can’t,” she said.

“How did you get in?”

She watched her finger as it touched the edge of a strip of wall paper that had begun to lift away from the house. I hoped she did not know I saw the humiliation in the hunching of her shoulders.

“Yeah, have the bags. Did it help? The book?” I asked.

“I don’t know yet. You?”

“I haven’t finished it.”

I came over the fence awkwardly, boosted on Mrs. Stiffton’s knee and then cupped hands and then shoulder. On the top of the wall I lay flat for a moment, the stucco poking up into my stomach and cheek and my arms where I hugged both sides. I slipped down onto the top of my car.

In the driver’s seat I took several breaths. They felt good, not necessary.

“Bumpy,” I said. Chantilly’s tongue fell out of her mouth.

“Yes,” I told her. “I still don’t like that either.”

I leaned down and smelled her sour fur.

I said, “Home.”

August

My fines have exceeded the cost of FEAR. Now I own it, *Full Emersion Anxiety Response (FEAR): Embracing the Anxiety Within*.

I’ll give it to that lady if I see her again.

The Development Cage

“Such a curious place...So strange a place. So unmagical. And with such great effort to achieve the unmagical. Bless them.”

---*Leonard Cohen, Live at Cesar's Palace, Las Vegas*

Tari Ann Merrin loved Las Vegas. She did not love Las Vegas the way most people do, as a weekend spectator, a passive member of the desperate, debauched carnival. She loved all of Las Vegas, end to expanding end, desert to shrinking desert, mountain to mountain, and she loved it from the time it was a gasping train depot, a stop at a spring house along the road to California, till its modern suburban sprawl and fourth-generation high-rise casinos. But mostly she loved it into the future. Because that is where Las Vegas really lives, in the dream of what it will be.

From the age of seven she knew that her life path lay in development and she often came to her parents and demanded trips out to see the bulldozers and cranes chewing at the land, erecting desert-colored houses. Through high school she worked for a grounds-keeping company that serviced several home owners' associations. Sometimes

she filed paperwork and billed clients. Sometimes she spent after-school hours and long, hot summer days scattering gravel in yards and plucking thorns out of the fat pads of decorative walkway cactus. She found these actions felt like devotional practice, prayer and the kneeling and standing that comes with prayer.

She met Brad in the *Purple Salamander*. His skin was evenly tanned and his features well arranged.

He said he worked at a country club and trained to be a professional golfer. He also toyed lackadaisically in high stakes-poker and day trading.

She said she worked at Caspian Lakes.

“Oh, Sweetie. I’m looking at a place out there. Maybe you can talk to your boss and get me a deal?”

Tari Ann watched the dance floor and guessed which women were working and which were just trying to have fun.

“Or maybe I can by you a drink,” said Brad.

“Yes,” she said. She drank it and left.

Tari had come of age at the crescendo of the housing boom when Las Vegas transitioned from a few houses surrounding entertainment strips to the national epicenter of the house-flipping game, 1.5 million people purchasing and selling, the entire city buzzing like the floor of a stock exchange.

Tourism and traditional gambling, while integral to Las Vegas, were not, she knew, the center of the future, but rather an aspect of it. Real estate, the purchase and sale of land and structure, that was the heart.

“Even here, people want to be able to touch the things they have.”

Soon after she finished her MBA, Caspian Lakes Marketing and Construction, LLC, hired her as their CEO.

She lived up near Celine, at the western edge of Las Vegas’s zoned land. She chose to not weigh in on the debate about building into the protected national park just west of her doorstep, not the right moment in her career to take on either the Bureau of Land Management or its citizenry. She could not, though, drive past the flat desert rising up into the tremendous red boulder mountains without imagining multi-million dollar homes speckling the land, a few cresting over the top of the bare hills. She would show these fresh, new houses at dusk, the rocks glowing pink and orange, the city emerging behind as an island of dazzling lights.

Besides the four-bedroom near Cher, Tari Ann owned a condo far south on Las Vegas Boulevard, above the H&M in the Town Center outdoor mall. She spent the weekend there when tourists did not rent it off Craig’s List. She went out to the mall bars, rose in the morning to jog the labyrinth of shops, touching the steps of the IMAX Cinema before turning to make her way back through the quiet, squinting against the harsh morning sun reflected out of plate-glass shop windows.

Under the direction of Tari and her board, the planned community of Caspian Lakes inflated up out of the desert miles east of the city, on the border of the Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

Caspian Lakes' high-end, pre-fab houses clotted the cul-du-sacs that trickled from a central ring road. The central ring road circled the Caspian Lake, a backhoed pit filled with water borrowed from Lake Mead, itself the artificial result of taming the Colorado River with the Hoover Dam.

In an average week she and her team sold six to ten Caspian Lakes residencies. Most people bought them as a second, third, fourth or fifth home. To this majority clientele Tari referred to the cluster of houses as an oasis, conjuring ideas of travel and rest. To young people looking for the Caspian Lakes to be their permanent residency, she spoke of fresh starts, a school that they could be instrumental in designing, safety and the natural environment, the lake, the mountains. For retirees, Tari Ann described fall concerts, the band floating out on the lake, cool breezes. "We have a water show here every week. The lake is equipped with fountains and we use the same designer as the Bellagio. Dancing Waters right here in your front yard." She also said, "multi-generational," and, "exclusive." The floor managers at Caspian Lakes Casino told her which slots were loose and Tari Ann took interested buyers into the faux-hardwood and velvet casino, sat them down and made sure they had enough free plays to come out ahead of the nothing they put in.

Tari Ann's team sold so well not just because they used the right words, offered their clients champagne and free money, but because Tari loved Caspian Lakes and instilled this love in her employees. She loved the satellite of Las Vegas erected out on

the martian desert, Vegas extended as far as the BLM would allow. She was happy to gaze out at the lake, a dream realized, a lake made of a lake made of a river through the ingenuity of humans. She loved the carefully designed downtown street lined in dimly lit, cast-iron lamps and the two parks where families and lovers lay on manicured Astroturf and children played under industrial-sized sunshades angled against each other like sails. Sometimes when summer windstorms came out of the desert she imagined the buildings and the awnings catching that wind, lifting up and floating away, the Nina or the Pinta or the Santa Maria, off to find new lands to claim in the name of Las Vegas.

“CEO. Wow,” said Brad.

He and Tari sat in her office, a model home at the entrance to Caspian Lakes. The construction of his house would begin the next week.

“Six-bedroom with the recessed front. Very popular,” she said, handing him a copy of the paperwork. “The street has yet to be named. Any suggestions?” She often asked buyers this.

“Tari Ann. That’s what I’ll vote for,” he smiled, his teeth bleached and the tilt of his head practiced. “But you deserve an avenue.”

They had drinks and dinner.

He called again. They golfed. He was very good.

Brad said, “Have you considered New York?”

Tari looked out over the green. *Transplant*, she thought. Transplanted citizens populated most of the city. Hopefuls from across the country flooded in, thousands every month, and hundreds and hundreds left on the receding tide. Where they would move

next, where to go when their bank accounts bulged, remained a key topic of conversation for these transplants. Tari knew that, in her native city, home ownership did not indicate stability.

“New York lacks possibility,” She said.

He continued to call. She continued to answer but she did not think about him when he wasn't there. They golfed. They laughed. They had lunch and saw a movie but she didn't sleep with him until he showed her the bill of sale demonstrating that he'd sold for a 50 percent markup. “In only three weeks,” she said. Her voice had gone husky. “Lots still available.” She took off all her clothes and opened her legs.

“Tell me about it. Who bought?” she said in his ear while they thrust together.

“A lonely, loaded, elderly couple from Lincoln, Nebraska. I want another one.”

“A few left. You can have one if you can afford it.” She bit his shoulder. He smacked her ass.

He arrived in a polo and kakis. Tari Ann did not kiss him and sent him out to the golf cart with another agent.

“I thought you would show me,” he said.

“That is not really appropriate, is it?” she said. “We can have lunch after your tour if you like.”

In the Bistro Barn, one of Caspian Lakes' premiere dining experiences, they ate tapas from a steel table.

“I should play it cool, but I love the lot,” said Brad.

“You'll have great parties,” said Tari Ann.

“I thought it might be a nice place for a family.” He tilted his head and tapped his fork on the edge of his plate. “All the neighbors look married with kids.”

She pursed her lips and looked away. “Parties.”

“Parties,” he said.

She said nothing. He tapped his plate again.

“Why is it called Caspian Lakes? Will there be another lake?”

“Sounds better. Between you and me, it’s the last lot. I’d jump on it.”

“Isn’t it a sea, anyway?”

“Fresh water.”

Vegas, while known for its easy divorces, married young. Most of the people she knew from high school lived with their kids and construction worker husbands and had paid for weddings with tips from cocktail and dealing lingerie blackjack. Tari Ann had too much to do to get married. She did not need to get married. She had Las Vegas.

The next time Brad called she intended not to answer. But he didn’t call for a while and in the meantime the bubble she had been standing on had burst. The housing market tumbled and tumbled. For months she went to work smiling and talked about how there was nowhere to go but up. A hiccup, that’s all. Can’t keep Vegas down.

When he did call, her cell phone sat on her bedside table, up on a stack of books, *Lead! Or Someone Else Will, Igniting the Fire of Future* and *This Isn’t Going to Work Out: Ending Employee/Employer Relationships*.

“My house is finished. I guess you know. Can I give you a tour?”

She felt a little giddy as she drove from the management office to his house. A celebration. A home finished, not a house abandoned.

He had a bottle of gin waiting. She brought a box of condoms.

“The economy,” he said.

“It will be fine,” she said.

“Gas prices.”

“Can’t keep Vegas down.”

“My buddies are thinking about selling.”

“And look at that view. The Vegas Valley.”

In the mornings she read the short-sale notices as if they were obituaries and sometimes she moaned and sometimes she screamed and everyday she felt her body smashing down a long mountain, ledge after ledge. Every morning she went to work in fresh suits and perfect make-up.

Just before the foreclosures began in earnest, Caspian Lakes had enjoyed a happy epoch where the sound of building quieted and families came and went to work and school. On the weekends people came to the Wine Shoppe and the chocolaterie and purchased humidors at the cigar and antique store. Concerts played. Tari Ann felt the community digging hooks into the desert.

Then Caspian Lakes emptied. In her upstairs office, what would have been the master bedroom with en-suite bath, a Styrofoam-backed real estate map of Caspian Lakes spread out on a table. The map had once been a mosaic of green, yellow and blue flags,

lots sold, lots with homes under construction, lots complete with full or part-time residence. Now swaths of orange, homes abandoned to banks, waved up from the table.

The Casino shut. SUV loads of elderly arrived and circled the building, knocking on doors and peering in the darkened windows until they found the small “closed” sign and went away in confusion. Most of the boutiques pulled out, but Amber at the wine Shoppe stayed afloat. She remained as the single employee, twelve hours a day, selling cheap cabernet and several-hundred-dollar Malbec while calculating the cost of keeping her stock at a healthy temperature. Friday night concerts persisted but hardly anyone drove around Caspian Lakes Rd. the rest of the week.

Brad continued to call and she continued to see him on Sunday for drinks or golf and sex.

“We could just have sex,” she told him.

He looked around the bar for a waitress in the murky room, lighted mostly by covered candles, the tables and stools grown abnormally high. The waitresses wore black and Tari could only see them when the exposed skin of their arms or thighs reflected a small flame, like a mirror catching moonlight.

He hooked his finger in the air and thrust his chin up to catch the attention of a waitress. Then he took out an envelope and slid it across the table.

“It’s a spa pass.”

“Brad.”

“A woman I give lessons to is friends with the owners.” The waitress arrived and he ordered another drink, flirting in a way that Tari recognized as unconscious, the smile, the wink, but it still annoyed her.

“I could get another pass, if you want, for a girlfriend. Or they have this couple’s thing,” he told her.

“Oh.”

When she didn’t say anything else he said, “Well, anyway, she’s a sweet heart, this woman, but her stroke is terrible.”

“Excuse me,” said Tari. She stepped down off the high stool and walked away from the tall table. In the bathroom she locked a stall door and cried a little. Then she took a pen out of her clutch and wrote *the housing market made me consider him* on the plastic coating the metal stall. The ink from the ballpoint pen came out in uneven lines so the message was legible only to Tari. She read it again and then scratched it out. *He loves me and the housing market makes me have a headache*. Her pen gave out so the message read *H l v me d h*. She kicked the wall and threw the pen in the toilet. The force of the flush water was not strong enough to wash the pen away. She kicked the toilet.

At the table a fresh drink waited for her.

Amber from the Wine Shoppe stopped by the office.

“I’m cutting my hours. Can’t do it. Closing at six.”

“Six,” said Tari.

“It’s just not worth it.”

Tari Ann drove to Lake Mead, to what had been Overton Beach and walked to the lake’s edge down the long strip of gravel, past a few scrub trees, where the water had drained away into people’s showers and lawns. She squatted down and looked across the

lake at the thick ring of mineral deposit marking the original water levels, now so far above the waves. Tari Ann felt thirsty. She felt alone.

“The war is lost,” Tari said. “No, the war has moved on.” She swept the Caspian Lakes Residencies map off the table. “Would you like to get naked?”

Brad unbuttoned his shirt and pulled off her dress. She kissed his shaved chest and then pushed against it to make him lie on the table.

“Jacket,” he said. She went to where it hung over a chair and dug in the inner pocket, retrieving a condom, while Brad got out of his pants. She put her knee on the tabletop and hoisted herself up, his hands lifting and steadying her hips. He lay down again and she put his penis in her mouth, inattentively sucking and licking, until he was hard. She opened the condom.

“Are you ready?” he said.

She rolled it on and straddled him, sinking down, guiding him inside.

When they finished she sat astride him for a moment, contracting the muscles in her pelvis until he shrank and slipped out of her. She rose up, still on her knees and then climbed off the table. The tiny wooden pins that had held the orange flags aloft on the map sunk into the carpet and the flesh of her feet. Tari bent one knee, looked over her shoulder and brushed the wood and plastic from the flat of her foot and then did the same with her other leg.

“I’m going to Mexico,” she said. “I’ve done some research,”

She went to take a shower. Brad knocked on the sliding glass door. She leaned back, the water pouring through her hair, sounding like wind as it hissed out of the fixture

and hit the tile. Brad knocked again and she grabbed the thin metal bar affixed to the door, gliding it open a little.

They showered in silence, moving around each other, in and out of the water and then toweled off and redressed.

He stood behind her while she applied mascara.

“But, Las Vegas,” he said.

“Moving on.” She slid the brush back into its tube and screwed it shut with two quick twists.

The Costa Maya was almost full. Selling everything, her house, her condo, shares, cashing in her retirement and talking to investors she knew, Tari financed a smallish piece of land with an eighth of a mile of beach and got ready to build. The humidity gave her a rash. Her skin broke out as if she were thirteen. The hired men pulled out the trees, bared the earth and founded the first buildings. She fought the wet air, striding around the property, over the winding pathways demarcated by slivers of wood hammered into the ground and ribbons of pink and yellow and orange plastic supported on those slivers of wood. Visions of stucco walls, palm trees and sod, buffets and swim-up bars appeared before her. She drew in sharp breaths when she reached to touch a sharp palm frond or single-pained window and the mirage dissolved, leaving her in an expanse of lumpy dirt, cement foundations still cradled in wooden frames occasionally speckling the brown soil.

“Faster,” she said. “Let’s do this thing. Vamos. We need some parrots.”

The marketing team kicked around the name *Lil' Vegas* but decided that the name would not endear the place to their target clientele: Non-Americans. Americans were out of money. They presented Tari Ann with a logo for *Little Vegas* instead.

“Little,” she said. “Who ever wanted Vegas to be little? Why am I paying you?”

She fired them and informed the board of her actions in the same e-mail as she proposed a new name: *Mayan Vegas*.

She wrote, “Here’s a tag: *Why choose?* The economy is tough. Why should people choose? We offer individuals and families all the vacations they want, Las Vegas and the Mayan Riviera. I’ve had it translated into about six languages, just in case people like the idea.”

People loved the idea.

Tari rented a trailer home and parked it near the beach. In the front she had a computer, filing cabinets and a table where she held meetings with the foreman and phone conversations with investors and architects. A small bed that folded out of the wall, butting up against the stove, refrigerator and sink, crammed the back. She tried to take on the habit of siesta and in the afternoon lay on the bed listening to the grind of the generator and air conditioner. Inevitably, she remembered a phone call or e-mail she needed to make or send and sat up, stretched past the entrance to the toilet, through the small doorway between the front and back of the trailer, got her phone or leaned her elbows on the table to type and, after a few minutes, abandoned the siesta. Outside she could see the workers sitting in the shade of their trucks, eating huge meals out of coolers and playing cards. She wanted to scream at them to get going. Stop looking so comfortable. I’ve only got a few months to build Vegas.

In the evenings construction stopped with the sun and, as the swollen clouds on the horizon fell dark, the men drove off in trucks or walked to the road to catch the bus.

She found it difficult to remember the names of the workers, Marco, Mario, Michael, Manuel. Las Vegas, they said, the s's trickling out in slow, lazy rivers and the v settling somewhere close to *b*. Nevada they said with both a's soft, low hills instead of pronouncing the first *a* as a sharp fall from a cliff, the way true Nevadans knew how. They said Mexico with an *h* in the middle that made the word a laugh, familiar.

She spent the night in her trailer, an armed guard walking the premises, the scream of the parrots terrifying. Occasionally she drove her rented SUV up to the Ocean Mar Yucatan Resort and had a drink with the managers. They wanted to discuss home and the differences between home and Mexico. As soon as she brought up overhead or client preferences they clammed up.

Mostly she worked through the evenings, e-mails, budgets, Mayan Vegas emerging from the pressure of her fingers on the keyboard. Sometimes she became aware of other things, the constant crash of waves, the almost imperceptible grit of sand rolling between the sheets and her legs. She picked up a few wristbanded tourists from the herds in the Ocean Mar's Mayan Market Bar and Gift Shop.

She wore her makeup thick to cover the rash on her neck and the zits on her face. Streams of sweat streaked it down onto her suit collars.

She could not go to her parents house for dinner every two weeks. She could not say she remembered when the Mayan Riviera had been a few palapas shading hitchhiking hippies.

The night the men finished the first building, twenty rooms, five with a pool view, she sat cross-legged in her rumpled sheets and mashed headphones into her ears.

Conversacion veinte y ocho: Pedro pregunta direcciones a la tienda de ropa started and, as instructed, Tari said, “cuadra,” “isquierda,” “norte,” “camiso,” and then yanked on the headphone cord. The tiny speakers pulled out of her ears and she heard silence, her windows shut, the air conditioner paused. She listened for the sound of the armed guard walking by. She thought his name was Eduardo and she felt how small and flimsy the trailer was. She took out a tube of cover-up and flopped the sponge across her face. She opened her screen door and yelled, “Hey.”

“Hey,” she yelled again.

Across the dark she saw the glowing end of the guard’s cigarette.

“Hey.”

She went out to him and knelt, brushed her hands against the ground, until she felt leaves brush against her palm.

“Here,” she said. “Here,” and pulled up the plant. “See,” she showed it to the man.

His body was thick and squat and he had a semi-automatic rifle held across his chest.

“Here,” she said. “Come down here. You don’t do anything all night.” Tari pulled up the delicate leaves of another small plant. “These are weeds. We must stop them.”

The man stepped back from her.

“Jesus Christ,” said Tari and went back to her trailer, shutting the door tight against the night and the plants creaking up out of the earth.

The doctor in Cozumel spoke some English. He had her defecate in a tiny petri-dish.

“You have parasites,” he said.

About the white flakey skin around the edges of her mouth he said, “Fungus. No make-up.”

Tari Ann e-mailed Brad.

“I was thinking about that golf-course idea. Would you be interested in coming down to teach?”

The board president visited three days before Mayan Vegas expected its first paying customers. Construction still raged and troops of maids walked across the pitted earth in their sturdy, low heeled slip-ons, learning, in half-finished rooms and on mattresses stacked in impermanent metal storage units, about bed making and vacuuming from their bilingual manager. The chef and his staff practiced the buffet, breakfast, lunch, dinner, feeding the workers. Tari Ann’s stomach bloated.

She powdered her splotchy face and went out to meet the car. She hustled the president through the still unpainted entrance building.

“The Mayan Strip,” she said, sweeping her arm out in front of her.

They walked up the quarter-mile path serpentineing through the shrunken Las Vegas attractions. A twenty-foot-tall Stratosphere doubled as a climbing wall. New New York New York had a few feet of roller coaster track laid in a ring around it. Farther up a

small gondola floated in a pool a few square feet larger than the boat. A man with a pole and in a Mariachi outfit stood at the helm.

“Get in. Get in,” said Tari.

“Well,”

She pushed the president up the two steps and he awkwardly lowered himself into the boat. Tari flipped a switch by the steps and motor started up, making a current that the Mariachi man used his pole to fight. As he had been instructed, the man sang *Guantanamera* over the sound of the motor, the gondola bumping the side of the pool.

“Oh. Yes,” said the president, unsure where to look. When the man started in on the ay ay ay ay’s of *Canta y No Llores*, the president said, “Well, that was nice,” and fled the boat.

They paused in front of the mini-MGM, what appeared to be an empty zoo exhibit.

“I’m glad you are here,” said Tari. “The lion has been a problem with customs. What about using a person? Kind of a Circe thing. Cheaper. Or some domestic cats. Maybe a tabby. Think about it. Anyway, let me show you your room.”

She took out her powder case.

Tari Ann believed in Mayan Vegas. She believed in the design, each small building a Vegas experience made intimate. A few go-go dancers in Caesar’s Casa, three black jack tables at the Mandalay Bahia, Pedro Susa Illusionista, family friendly from noon to eight, adult themed from eight to one, at Resort Center and ten video poker machines in each building. Labor was cheap enough to have someone at each door who

could say, “Sorry, we are full. You will enjoy el Grupo de Hombres Rojo at the Treasure Cay.”

Watching this American in his fresh suit she felt, for the first time, that the buildings might be small, not intimate, that a climb on the stratosphere could not compete with the huge walls at Club Med or a bungee jump off the real building.

Later that day Brad arrived. His tan was perfect and his shoulders broad. Tari Ann powdered her face. She took him to his room and shut the door, but the sound of hammering and electric saws still came in.

“Vegas cannot question itself,” she said.

He put his hands on her hips.

“I don’t think I can,” she said and tried to suck in her ballooned stomach.

Brad pulled out some papers covered in elaborate script.

“It’s a deed. For a piece of the moon,” he said.

“I don’t have a space ship.”

He walked to the window and touched the frame.

“Is this legally binding?” she asked. “Merrin. What’s that?”

“On the far side. A crater. It seemed more right than a sea. Look on the map. Next to Izcak.”

“Can we even build on the moon yet? I’ll show you the golf area.”

There was a putting green and a small corridor of driving range.

“No course,” said Brad.

“We’ve got a lot to do. Our funding. All those trees. They aren’t even mine. I’ve got a conference call. The chef will make you whatever you like but say it in Spanish.”

She smeared powder on her face.

She could feel Brad staring after her and did not breath until she heard his club swishing though the air, cracking against balls.

In the first week tourists trickled in. They came for the grand opening deals, Germans and Italians wading through the pools. They hunched over video poker machines and took meringue lessons on the beach. There were not many of them, not the drunken herds of wristbanded resorters Tari had expected and she sent staff to the airport, handing out coupons for free shows and drinks to passengers arriving to be put in vans and whisked to other resorts. *Our all-inclusive can include you.* Brad taught a few lessons. Private or couples. The area was not big enough for any more.

She had had her trailer pulled into the jungle skirting the resort and lay there at night, her stomach cramped, till she rose to hunt weeds.

By the end of that first week Tari had sold none of the rooms as vacation condos. The authorities had come three times and extracted huge cash bribes to keep quiet about the blackjack tables. The gondola leaked from smashing against the pool wall and the Stratosphere had a crack running down the middle of the poured cement.

“We’ll put some steel cable around. It’s fine.”

It was noon. Brad sat at a row of video poker machines in the dark of Caesar’s Casa. No tourists came in and the go-go dancers sat down on the stage, chatting. Tari Ann thought about how to say *stand up* in Spanish. At her hip a walkie-talkie crackled and she hoped someone would need her. She put a dollar in a machine.

“It accepts dollars,” said Brad.

“And Euros.”

“I’m not going to make it pro.”

She taped the computer screen.

“You know, I had thought that there would be a course here. And that you might be asking *me* to come here.”

“I did.”

“You asked a golf teacher to come here. The money is better in Vegas.”

“Vegas is dead,” she said. “Vegas lives here now.”

“Honey.”

“Honey my ass.”

“You’ve had a lot of setbacks,” he said.

“You don’t see it. You’ve never seen it. You talked about New York, about LA, on our first date. The oldest living things in the world grow in the desert and mountains of Vegas. The bristlecone pine. These creosote bushes. Creosote. Growing a centimeter a year. You know how the desert smells in the rain. Creosote. The creosote are colonial. They grow in rings, a single plant sending up branches farther and farther out. The center dies but that land, the water, the space for roots, the creosote claims it. There is a bush out there that’s twelve thousand years old. And it’s only so big. Nothing here grows like that. I go to sleep and in the morning a tree has grown outside my window. But those pyramids, all those Mayan pyramids, they got built and everyone was sacrificed on them and they were telling the calendar back when that bush started. How could anything like Vegas live long in a place where the earth moves so slowly? Here is the place, where every morning the land is new.”

She pulled out her powder case.

The walkie-talkie said, "Incoming."

She pulled it off her belt. "Roger," she said into the black speaker.

She walked from the casino and outside a van opened its doors and ten tourists, *ooing* and *ahing* the Mayan Strip stepped out.

"Thank you," she said to the driver whose name was Rudolfo or Mario. She bent to pull a weed and then turned to the visitors.

"Welcome," said Tari Ann. "Welcome to Mayan Vegas. If you have a dream we will make it come true."

Everything I Know

I regret the gums and teeth. The new heart valves. I loath my endlessly spry knees and firm muscle tone.

For a while I tried to get them to work on the problem. The rocks. Something must be done and we can't solve it so I outsourced to the rocks. Living here with them I've become sure they have brilliant ideas.

I have heard nothing from the boulders or the cliffs. The pebbles are mute and that brings up the point about what makes me think that they would help, even if they could. What have we ever done for a rock? Far as I know we let them alone or smash them up. Cement and such. So what's in it for them?

That's not really my point. My point is they are rocks.

It is an issue of communication.

I cannot argue that they don't have tons and tons of time to speculate on the situation, though maybe they have their own concerns to prioritize, but I cannot interpret their expressions.

However, we are too far gone to make such claims on logic or knowledge.

I have heard nothing from them. I grow frustrated.

Without any new ideas from the rocks, this is what I know:

One. I'm done. No more, thank you.

Two. We humans, we are meant to live only so far.

Three. This is because one human can take only a limited amount of surprise and resignation to consequences.

Four. We humans never end now, replacing the body piece by piece. The consequence surprises us. We struggle to be resigned.

Five. My body, every morning, tick, tick, tick, up and at 'em. My mind as sharp or as dull as ever. The hormones kick and the electrons fire. But, referring to the first thing I know, I'm done. The warranty on the engine all used up.

Six. How short-sighted, humans. It gets us in trouble. I'm in that kind of trouble. The consequence of desire without forethought. Surprise!

Everything else is elaboration on the things I know.

I wish I only knew five things because then I could keep everything in one hand.

I do not know my age. I stopped caring. I moved to the desert where the days turn on and turn off with the rise and set of the sun so that I would not have to watch time mock me with its notable daily shortening and then lengthening of shadow, with the everyday gentling of the evening light. I moved here where no seasons that suggest death

could taunt me. I imagine that I am, each day, living the day before again. I work towards the perfect execution of a day. Perfect exhaustion. I have a perfect tan.

All of us with our new bits and pieces, the liver, the elbow, cannot believe how we begged and begged to be allowed to stay. Now we want to sneak out before the party is over. Rude. Ungrateful. Shameful. Wasteful. All the plastic and technology. Our grudging existence, it's embarrassing and affects all of us poorly. The species. We, the remade and weary, are becoming rotten apples. That is a painful expression I wish I had not used. We cannot rot, the plastics and metals, of course. But we drag, pull on the rest. We are becoming dead weight.

That was not a good choice either.

I will speak in specifics to avoid the accidental pain of metaphor. We the remade scoff at desire to live, that verve the young have. We are jealous. We exude futility.

I know the caveman that burned up his family, sparks flying, as he piled and piled wood on the fire, desperate to see the largeness of its possibility. I empathize with the man who shot his son up in the rocket, strapped him in, attempting to achieve orbit with the lighter body, and did not raise his slow legs, encumbered with flesh and bone, to run toward the explosion on the horizon. I dream of rust.

I have become the keeper of this desert. I was alone. Now the remade come for renewal of their too old beings. They stumble around wanting to remember what anticipation feels like. A rumor started. Someone whispered that the sand had scoured away the exhaustion of age and that they bloomed with the cactus flowers, that they kicked off their shoes and wiggled their toes, elated to see their body still so supple. They

did knee bends and sang and walked on their hands, praising the smooth glide of their plasticed joints and the elastic strength of their diaphragm.

I am still alone. They do not talk to me, those who come seeking. They slip off over the rises of sand, they follow jack rabbit trails, remembering, or not remembering but making a memory, telling themselves of a childhood when a jack rabbit trail would have meant the greatest day. They wave to Joshua trees far in the distance, walk out to greet them. They imitate a human desire for quest.

I find their failure. Their parched lips, their wrists pricked a million times with agave thorns. I find them still clutching the earth and jealous, into the end, of the patience of rocks.

There is a sprinkler in front of my shack. I don't know why. One sprinkler. I don't know where the control is, what turns it on and off. A few times a day a perfect cone of water arcs up and drops down into the dirt, a tutu glittering, hovering. Once I thought about a lost nymph wandering in the desert. Then I remembered what a silly thing that would be to think. After the sprinkler stops everything feels mundane.

When I find the remade out in the desert they do not look relieved. They simply look finished. I have not had a perfect day yet. The day I am not surprised or regretful of my consequences, then, maybe then, I will go out and, I think, then I will sit amongst the jackrabbits and Joshua trees and wait, patient, for my body of plastics and metals to turn to rock. I will feel the exhaustion seep down, running to disappear, absorbed through the sand. I will know if the rocks regret, if they sigh shame in eons of breath and rage and fear. They might tell me answers.

These are the things I do not want the next groundskeeper to see on my face:
regret, shame, fear, anger. I am old enough to know better.

Yesterday evening someone came here and said he was my son.

I explained that we have gone beyond that. We no longer have child. Parent. The
process of caring for and being cared for has ended.

He walked out into the desert night, his tread heavy, and today when the sun
turned on I looked at the gouges his shoes made into the desert. I long to put my feet in
those depressions. Start out after him. But what if I find him dead? What if I find him
tending a bush, talking to it, caressing the air around its prickly leaves, spitting to moisten
the soil that encases the roots? What if I find him anything except turned to rock?

Rashad Sees the Future

She was about thirty-five. Her smile came easily. “Hi. How’s your night going?”

“Good,” said Rashad, looking at her in the rearview mirror. His customers did not usually smile or ask how he was doing.

“Do you know where the Siskel Theatre is? I’m going there.” She pushed her blond hair behind her ear and leaned in toward the glass that partitioned the front and back seats.

“Yeah. It’s...”

“It’s down by Randolph, I think. And State. You know? I don’t have the address.”

“Yeah. We’ll find it.” He continued to watch her in the mirror. She was thin and her hands flickered in constant motion, tucking her hair, wrapping her scarf tighter, touching her lips.

“Ok. Well. Let’s go find it.” Her hands came up in a gesture that waved the air forward through the break in the partition glass. He put his foot on the gas.

A respected neighbor read Rashad's palm when he was two. Loneliness, obesity and longing, proclaimed the seer, though no one ever told the boy. At sixteen, fair-skinned and surrounded by friends, his parents shipped him off to America to live with a cousin. They wanted to spare themselves the pain of watching his fate unravel, though at the time they said things that Rashad believed about opportunity and sound choices.

He did not have any conscious memories of the palm reading, but often dreamed he stood in the dark, arms stretched down, palms forward. Against the flat of his hands he felt gentle pressures that suggested feathers and warm pudding, the tongues of cats and women, tracing the edges, filling in and setting fire to the parallel and intertwining creases, stretching the palms open. He always woke from this dream in a sweat of fear or lust, pressing his hands against his thighs and chest and neck. In the cramped U.S. studio apartment, breathing in the faint smells of kitchen that wafted from the sleeping bodies of family members, the people ever changing but the scent remaining the same, he wondered if he had cried out or, perhaps, moaned into the city-lit room.

In the review mirror he could see the woman looking out at the lights of the cars passing on the inside lane. She rubbed her jaw with her thumb.

"My name is Rashad," he turned a little and put his arm through the hole in the partition glass, glancing back at her.

"Ah. Victoria."

Her hand lay against his and then retracted quickly.

Rashad pressed his palm against his thigh, his chest, his neck.

He let off the accelerator and then pumped it again. The taxi rocked gently. He imagined that the seat hugged the woman a little more deeply where she sank into the black vinyl.

After years working in his cousin's restaurant and a few business plans that fell through before they had a chance to get started, his would-be partners always fading away before they signed anything, he started driving a taxi.

Already, though, with no time to play soccer and much of his paycheck coming in the form of free meals, his body had grown thick. No matter what kind of pants he wore, jeans, slacks, high-wasted, low-wasted, loose-fitted, shirt out, his hips looked soft and rounded like a woman's. The cousin's family made fun, "Who will bear the children when you marry?" and he liked his job where he sat and no one looked at his hips.

"Are you a movie producer?" Rashad asked.

"Me?" The woman's laugh was light and breakable, like the crystals that swung against the window in his cousin's kitchen when too many people crowded the room and began to knock against things.

"Yes. The theater."

"Oh," she laughed again. "No. Just going to a movie."

"What is your job?"

There was a pause. "I'm a consultant."

At first he enjoyed the challenge of driving the taxi, learning the entire city. He thrilled with adventure and import the times people barked addresses and said, "It'll be worth your while to get me there in ten minutes," and the one time someone actually said,

“Follow that taxi.” Once he shepherded a woman in labor to the hospital and felt proud and terrified and hopeful, as if he were the father.

When it was his job to drive the city alone for sixteen-hour shifts, incidental relationships forming for a few minutes, everything felt a little less empty. He stopped reciting the causes of his loneliness.

Twelve years behind the wheel and things he did not like began to show through. He did not like how people said cruel and ignorant things about his accent. The good friends, the husbands and wives holding hands who told him to shut up and just drive, the standoffish women traveling alone, the men chatting on their cell phones, he ached to know them, to be them.

In the mirror he saw her run the flats of her fingers over the crescents of thin skin under her eyes.

“A consultant for helping businesses?” He thought about his vowels and consonants, kept them round or hard in all the right places. American.

“Yes. For businesses. For developers.”

“Real estate?”

“Green building.”

Every week Rashad called back home to his family. He usually called after a shift, in the dark of early, early morning when he was numb with too much coffee and left turn, right turn and could imagine the sleepy afternoon sun of home that pressed down and encouraged everyone to take a rest. He often wondered how the two suns could be the same, the one that shone cold and far away on this American city and the one back there

that pervaded everything, emanated back out of the dirt and rested on the edges and in the hollows of anything animate or inanimate. His mother usually answered the phone.

“You help people make their businesses better.”

“Yeah. I help them know the best way to do what they want to do.”

“Can you help me?”

“What?”

“Can you help me be better?”

“Oh. I, um, work with businesses. Not individuals.”

“We could talk. You could help me be better.”

One time he said to his mother, “It’s hard. I’m lonely.”

“This is life.” The connection was bad and she sounded very far away, tinny, lying in crumpled paper with snakes hissing around her head.

“If you help me make my life better, I’ll read your palm for you. That would be nice.”

“I’m not a counselor. I think you’re looking for a counselor. I think you should take a right up there.”

“Have you ever had your palm read?”

The woman sighed and tucked her hair behind her ear, though it already lay neat and smooth. “Yes.”

“Do you believe in that?”

“I don’t know. “ She touched her window. “Right here.”

“Yes,” said Rashad. He took the curve gently.

“I didn’t believe what the woman said. Or. Well. She said things that sounded good because I’d told her all about myself before she looked at my hand.”

“I read palms.”

“Oh. Do you.”

He thought of her thin, fragile hand in his own, where it had lain for just that moment. “Yes.”

They were only a few blocks away and the taxi was silent.

The crackling and hissing continued over the line even when no one said anything. It made the distance conceivable.

“Mother, not everyone is alone like me. I see it.”

She didn’t say anything.

“Maybe I should come home. I’ve been thinking,” he said.

“Son. Running away won’t change anything.”

The taxi pulled up across from the theater, the red and blue lights of the marquis competing for notice in the garish blinking and wavering of illuminated building fronts up and down the blocks.

“There it is. See the sign?” he said.

“What does your palm say? About you?”

Chubby and soft, he pushed his hand off the hard plastic wheel and looked at the palm, the lines craggy in the shadows of the street lights, stretching and yawning in the headlamps of each car that passed.

“My palms say. They say that everything will be ok. It’s got to be alright.”

“Here. I don’t have enough cash.” A credit card scissored between her fingers came through the hole in the separation. It took a long time for the machine to start grinding out the receipt.

“Mother, maybe you are right.”

“You’ve got a good job. You’ve got family. Stay.”

When he shifted his hand on the receiver, the plastic was cold where he had not been gripping it. Leaning his head down so that it almost touched the phone base, he finally took the telephone away from his ear and laid it down, feeling the gentle resistance of the transmitter buttons. The crackle and hiss continued in his ear for a long while.

“Ok,” the woman said, just as the credit card machine broke the silence. “Here, read my palm.”

Rashad turned his head towards her arm, laid on top of the front seat, bent down at the wrist, palm out. He reached up and touched the edge of it. He glanced at her. His thick fingers grasped the sides of the slim hand and he thought of the word “translucent.” The lines in the palm cut deep and he brushed his thumb across the base of each finger.

“Yours,” he said, “is going to be a good life.”

Slowly, so that he could almost believe he was not doing it, he leaned down until his lips touched the center of her palm. Her hand did not jerk away.

The machine stopped. She took her card and the receipt he handed back through the hole in the partition, signed, passed the slip of paper back to him and got out of the car. Before the door shut, she leaned back in, pushing her hair behind her ear.

“You have a good night, now.” Then the door slammed and she ran, weaving on her thin high heels, across the lanes of traffic.

My WalPharm Family

I was supposed to write these case notes everyday. Jewish Services Focused For This Community's Continuing Change wanted me to spend an hour after all the clients went home and today Martha made progress on her resume and Jeanine stocked the canned goods and forgot to go oldest to newest and Phil wrote obscenities on the table about his cock and someone's tits but at least he did it while wearing his WalPharm blue. But fuck that. Every day I smoked a few cigarettes and ate a tube of Oreos and it was time to get the hell out of this faux WalPharm and then when I had to submit end-of-training evals I locked the Supervisor Room door all day like fuck off, the door's locked, and made up shit about the last three months, scribbled in different colored pens so it looked legit, and when I busted out for a smoke they were all what should I do and I shouted inventory aisle seven or try and buy some Icy Hot No Mess Vapor Gel. I don't care that it's not a Shoppy Day. Always be prepared. Always. Remember our motto. Always be prepared.

It would be hard when the Oreos were gone.

Don't get me wrong. They could all fucking do the shit. They worked. We worked. They filled out applications and interviewed and did checkout. But these case notes just fucking killed me. Under such minute scrutiny anything real couldn't hold up. True things dissolved.

I unlocked the doors, dropped my stuff in the Supervisor Room and sat cross-legged up on one of the check outcounters reading a *People*. Over the past two years I'd read all the magazines, *Cosmo* and *The Enquirer* and *Ladies' Home Journal* and everything, three times and was on my fourth go-round and I didn't have to work hard to forget Monica Lewinsky's boring blowjobs and the spring fashion was fresh again and the *Newsweeks* had the Y2K cover that freaked me out because we were getting close. I left those *Newsweeks* alone and just relearned new sex positions and considered sending the info along to Monica and tried to figure out my season and how to shave chocolate. I'd grabbed a Be Mine aluminum foil balloon on a plastic stick and tapped it against my head while I read. There are candy hearts and a bin of red lace garters and specialty You Light Me Up cigars in the front. I guess it had been coming up on Valentine's Day when this WalPharm went under and the company left all the merchandise to the training program so it was Valentine's Day everyday with us and the balloons had only deflated a little.

DiAngelo was in first. He was always first or last, bright and showing off his blue or black ballpoint pen, ready to work, or with the rims of his eyes red and shit, man, why do we got to do this shit again?

“How you doing, DiAngelo?” I asked.

“Bianca, I’m looking sharp,” he said. That’s what he said every day, even on the days when he came all late and pissed off.

DiAngelo was about fifty. I had everyone’s data but I never remembered exactly. That day he swaggered in with a purple suit, green shirt and the tie orange. He always wore solid colors and a black fedora with a silver band that said DiAngelo in curvy metal letters around the front and he would not wear a cotton-polyester-blend WalPharm shirt and I wouldn’t have either if I looked so fucking sharp.

“How are you this morning, Miss Thing?” he said.

“Keeping on. Keeping on.” I took a pull from my travel mug.

“Gonna get nasty out there. That’s what the weatherman said and look at those clouds. You think I can get one of these cigars?”

I shrugged.

I got told all the time that the stuff in the store was for training purposes only but, I mean, it had been rotting on the shelves twenty-some months and we were supposed to be helping people and anyway the trainees didn’t usually ask and when they did they came up and said real quiet my kid’s coming to visit and I want something nice or I’m meeting my parole officer and I want my nails to look good. What’s our motto? Always be prepared. That is what I said to them because I couldn’t say your shame is so fucking unnecessary.

DiAngelo put the cigar in his pocket and grabbed a tiny chocolate heart. He looked at me to make sure that was okay.

“Got something special tonight?”

“Might do.” He leaned back on the heels of his shoes, black with white saddles.

“You treat the ladies right,” I said.

“Took me too long to learn. Well. Big day in here.”

“Shoppo Day.” Some days I divide the trainees into shoppers and workers and set them loose in our abandoned WalPharm. We call it Shoppo Day.

DiAngelo said, “This is the job, man. I’m gonna get this job. I could really use this job, Miss Thing.”

I think that DiAngelo had done some real bad shit.

The little bus pulled up and DiAngelo went back to the Teaching Room.

Good-morning, Good-morning Miss Bianca it’s Shoppo Day. Bianca there is going to be a storm. Shoppo Day.

The Our Village of Our Hoppers loved to shuffled through the sliding door one by one, everyone waiting for the door to shut behind the person in front of them. Swish ding. Swish ding. Swish ding. My turn. My turn. You’re supposed to go after me. Wait for the door. Swish ding.

Cathy stopped short.

“Fuck,” I said to myself.

“One is missing.” She pointed to the display box of tiny chocolate hearts. Cathy had rearranged the Valentine’s display the day before and she remembered details and it was amazing because if the entire Household Cleaners section disappeared it would have taken me weeks to notice but she saw this tiny heart out of place and it was so fucking annoying. I had to save all the Oreo tube containers and stuff them with Kleenex and put them back on the shelves. Cathy really liked rules.

“Cathy. Good job. You noticed,” I said.

“The heart.”

“I’ll put it back later. I was testing you.”

“That’s not nice, Miss Bianca,” said Les. Les had a crush on Cathy.

“Go on back. Les. Everyone. What’s our motto?”

“Always be prepared.”

“Right.”

Cathy somehow found out that Jewish Services Focused For This Community’s Continuing Change wanted me to keep the door locked all the time, I guess to keep people from wandering in, but I never locked the door because the WalPharm was in the middle of a bunch of vacant warehouses. In the beginning I worried that former customers might come but then I remembered that the WalPharm had shut down because they had no customers and on the first day of each training I taught rule one, when you are at work, stay at work. Anyway, it scared me, locking us in. Cathy hovered by the door all the time, um, I think this is supposed to be locked. Miss Bianca. Locked. I made the mistake of saying that I was afraid of fire that’s why it’s unlocked. So she started hovering in the sliding doorway when I smoked, ding, ding, ding, you are too close to the building. What if the wind comes and blows your cigarette out of your hand? I wanted to kill her so I was glad that, at least, it hadn’t been the fucking door that morning.

We straggled back to the Teaching Room. The Teaching Room still had the engraved Employee Lounge sign on the door and an Employee of the Month plaque adhered to the far wall and Todd Ramos, his name on a slip of paper and his WalPharm

printed photo slotted behind squares of plastic on the plaque, had reigned as Employee of the Month since WalPharm gave up the building. Todd Ramos with his curly blond hair.

Shoppo Day, so everyone looked good in case they pulled Shopper. Elvira sported her gold-lamé skirt and Keisha's hair was done and the red lettering stood out really fucking crisp against the black on Roy's Bulls jersey.

In each three-month training I only did four Shoppo Days, and all the clients got so pumped about what they were going to pull, customer or stock or whatever, that the morning-skills session was shot. I usually just ran a movie but to be honest I thought I might go at the Pain Relief shelves to see how fast one could incur fatal stomach bleeding from ibuprofen intake if I had to watch *The WalPharm Family: Employees, Employers and Customers together in the Circle that Sustains* one more time. That's a fucking triangle. Not a circle. And the whole *Keys to Your Future: Unlocking Success in the World of Jobs* series. Christ. On those days I made sure I brought an extra travel mug and I took a swig every time there was a firm handshake during the *Building Relationships with Your Co-Workers* installment and with the applications episode it was when the voiceover said with your blue or black ballpoint pen, and for all of them I drank a couple big swallows when ever I heard this is the key that fits.

There were eighteen in this group and half of them showed up together on a little bus from Our Village of Our Hope and the other half were from GED to Great Employee Development and came like I did on public transit. The GEDers had all got paroled early because, I guess, they promised to want to be great employees and, if they made it through, WalPharm might ignore their criminal backgrounds and give them a job. So we all worked together, the convicts and the retarded and me. They graduated and went on to

jobs and I stayed in the fake WalPharm. And this group fucking bickered all the time and so I had rolled through the movies to shut them up but we had a month left.

The Hopers were already buzzed about graduation so I just let them talk about it for the entire M-skills. Our Village of Our Hope insisted we run an actual graduation for their people each session, a few balloons in the Teaching Room and certificates and families came. It was a pain in my ass to have to be in on a Saturday but it was really fucking sweet because, every time, the graduates walked up and shook hands and we talked about what they had learned and when I was just about to fall over dead from boredom it all broke down into the friends the families and all the students hugging each other. And they gave me a card signed by everyone with a five dollar certificate to WalPharm. So real sweet and I had all those cards and certificates in my desk in the Supervisor Room because I could never go into a real WalPharm. The idea scared the shit out of me.

“What about graduation?” I said and the Hopers galloped away talking about decorations and certificates and other people got out a deck of cards and Roy drew on the table and Keisha opened her cellular telephone that she was so proud to be the only one of us to have a cell but she could never get reception so just flipped it open and closed and open and closed and I spaced out and nursed my travel mug and wondered if we should move the shoe polish over by Cosmetics.

In the middle of all the graduation chatter, to no one in particular, DiAngelo said, “I’m bringing my daughter.”

We all turned to look at him and he pulled his hat forward on his head. Usually a few days before we finished up and when the trainees from Our Village of Our Hope had

been talking and talking about it for the whole three months a staff person got off the little bus when it came for pick up and stood just in from the sliding door and said to the linoleum that there would be a graduation on Saturday and seats were limited and so to tell me now if you were coming and you could invite one person and the Hopers said yes, yes me and the staff person smiled at them. Usually the GEDers didn't come.

“You gonna come to their graduation?” said Keisha.

“Their graduation? It's our graduation,” said DiAngelo

“Are you kidding me? Get the fuck out of here and get a job, man.”

“We are doing something here. It's part of the journey. You gotta honor that kind of thing.”

“Fuck off,” said Keisha.

“Oh. That will be nice,” said Les. When we talked about savings goals Les said that he would save for a hat with his name written on a band. He called it a hat belt and he wanted the letters to be pink. He also wanted to buy a hat belt for Cathy, but he only told me that.

When we took a five minute break lots of the GED came out and smoked with me. The sky had turned black and the wind screamed so we hunched around our cigarettes.

“You got a daughter, Di?” I shouted over the wind.

“Got a bunch. I got one I think will talk to me.”

Early Shift/Cashier was the Shoppy Day big deal. A lot of places for people to fail, but if they pulled it off they were the hero here at our WalPharm and at the end of

Shoppy Day when I let everyone open one bottle of purple or red drink they toasted the Early Shift/Cashiers. Ready for the big time. Always be prepared they said.

We didn't ever touch the orange juice from concentrate or anything in the refrigerator because that shit had got to be rank after so long. But the red drink had seven years till the expiration date. Twist cap to open. Water. Corn syrup. Consider refrigeration after seal is broken.

I chose DiAngelo and Cathy because I thought Di was ready and Cathy drove me crazy on Shoppy Days telling the Early Shift/Cashiers what to do so I figured she could just be out on the floor. Everyone else cheered and whined about being a shopper or stock or whatever. Thunder rumbled.

"Let's do this for Todd Ramos, Employee of the Month," I said and headed to the pharmacy. The first week, when the program started, I'd found some muscle relaxants and some lithium and cumidin and everything else empty, but I still recombed the cabinets, hoping for something else. WalPharm had left a lab coat with B. S. Hert embroidered on the breast and I put that on for Shoppy Days.

"Hey, Miss Thing. What should we do?"

Cathy and DiAngelo stood at the pharmacy counter.

"Oh. Right. First shift. Move Family Planning from Feminine Hygiene to Candy."

"Transfer hanging sign indicator, merchandise and price cards. Inform second shift of store changes," said Cathy.

"Right. Thirty minutes."

"His shoes are not black," said Cathy.

"Yes they are," I said, shaking a bottle and sad to hear nothing rattle inside.

“They have white on them. It says in our manual.”

“This is your moment, Cathy. You are First Shift/Cashier. You must be there for the shoppers.”

“But it says.”

“This is what we will talk about at graduation. You must always be prepared.”

Her face closed up and she walked away.

I told DiAngelo. “Jewish Services is coming tomorrow. Black shoes and take your hat off. There’ll be ladies present. Some respect.”

“Respect my ass. I’m not taking this hat off for nobody.” He waked away and I shook some more bottles.

All the condoms had gotten stolen ages ago. At least people were using them. I took Tylenol boxes and wrote Durex and Life Styles on them. Sometimes those went.

For several months I’d been struggling with where Family Planning should go and I was tired of it in Feminine Hygiene because most guys are fucking repulsed by the bleeding and everything so then getting the condoms is up to the women and guys associate using them with bloody vaginas so I put Family Planning over with Pain Relief for a while, but who wants to think about safe sex when they’ve got a headache or just had minor surgery or whatever so I thought the Candy aisle made tons of sense.

I found myself all fucking caring about this stuff sometimes. This fake WalPharm and the pens should go by the greeting cards and let’s move the wrist braces over by the envelopes and then I put on the lab coat and yelled reshelve deodorant between the MoJo Teen-Girl Dolls and the checker boards and got pissed off that, if you thought about it, that made sense, too, and pulled some gum and eye shadow or whatever and locked

myself in the Supervisor Room with it and read the labels. I'd memorized the directions and warnings and any active ingredients for seven hundred and forty-six products and had a log going in one of the empty case files.

I'd gotten through most of the cabinets in the pharmacy when I heard screaming. It didn't stop. I drained my travel mug and came out into the store. Cathy and DiAngelo were there next to all the O.B. and Kotex Super Plus with Wings, DiAngelo up on the ladder holding the Family Planning sign and Cathy shook and shouted and clutched her arms around her body.

"What?" I said.

Her lips moved but I couldn't understand what she said, just gasping and sobs so I turned to DiAngelo.

"The chocolate fell out of my pocket."

"Christ. Where is it?"

He lifted his chin towards Cathy.

"Shit. Cathy. Come on. Calm down."

"Yeah," said DiAngelo.

"I gave it to him to put back he just forgot. Come on. You are First Shift."

Cathy did not calm down.

"Graduation, Cathy. Graduation. I want to tell your family how good you were."

"Stop it," she wailed. "Stop about graduation."

"Graduation is awesome, Cathy. You will love it. And your family..."

She stopped shouting, like she just turned off and her body, it was like it shrank and her face became the face of a child, and the change was really dramatic and I stepped toward her and DiAngelo stepped away, higher on the ladder.

“No,” said Cathy. “No. My family won’t come. I can’t live with them any more. They hurt me.”

“Shit,” said DiAngelo.

“I want to be a Shopper,” said Cathy.

“Yeah. Alright. Alright. Go in back and trade.”

After she left, DiAngelo descended and said, “You don’t get to see it. How what you did makes your own people hurt. But it’s all the same. I know it when I see it in someone else.”

I needed a fucking smoke but when I went to the door the rain came down in buckets.

I went back to the pharmacy that had no medicine.

The program had an excellent placement rate, said Jewish Services. WalPharm was making good on their promise to prioritize the hiring of our graduates but no one had any info on retention or recidivism or anything and it was part of my job to not mention this lack of data. They were with me for three months and then poof.

“Second Shift,” I yelled.

Because of the clattering with the rain and thunder everyone had to dribble in from the back instead of shoppers making a dramatic entrance from outside and the door ding ding ding. The day was up and running, shoppers weaving through the aisles, stockers inventorying, cashiers ready for cash or check and the shampoo next to the

humidifiers and the dishtowels with the crackers and me looking for Todd Ramos's phone number in the telephone book that had slumped against the sliding door when I arrived that morning. I was in love with Todd Ramos. Todd Ramos I want to put your curly blond head between my legs. But you are unlisted.

If it all fell apart when Y2K hit, if everything went under in January, we would be fine, there in WalPharm, us and a bunch of little villages in Zambia or whatever, but those little villages would be fine because they are real and we would be fine because we are fake. The label on a George Foreman Grill says do not touch when hot. Unplug before cleaning.

A few times the thunder made the store sound like it had exploded and the lights flickered.

Keisha came up to the counter with shaving cream, silly putty and a sponge rattling around in the red plastic basket hooked on her arm.

"Miss Bianca. There are people in the store."

I thought the first inactive ingredient in Barbasol brand shaving cream was some kind of acid but it could have been water.

"Can I see that canister?" I pointed to her basket.

For sure the contents were under pressure and the can should not be punctured or incinerated.

"There are people, man."

"Yep. Listen. Don't come stoned tomorrow, ok? Jewish Services will be here."

"No. People."

A man and a woman, both well dressed but soggy from the rain, emerged around the calendar display at the end of the center aisle. The woman leaned on the man and walked so it looked like she was in slow motion, her body working real hard but not getting anywhere. About ten trainees, some in their WalPharm shirts, some with baskets and DiAngelo in his purple suit followed along behind.

The man darted out in front of the woman when he saw me behind the counter, his eyes focused on the lab coat.

“Shit,” I said. “Do you come in peace?”

“My wife is in labor and we got lost and the car. The rain. Please.”

“Oh no. No.”

“What a godsend. A WalPharm out here.”

“No. No.”

The wife groaned a little and clenched her jaw.

“No. This isn’t true. They just left the sign up.”

“Call an ambulance,” said DiAngelo.

“Is there a chair?” said the woman.

All eighteen trainees had gathered.

“Better get that lady some dry clothes,” said Roy.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said.

There was a bunch of pandemonium with Keisha with her cellular phone, flip, flipping it, I just can’t get any signal and people tore around in the clothing aisle and Cathy shouted about how this is Shoppy Day and we only have an hour to finish all the lists and someone said that Roy knows about cars because Roy told us all the time about

the sweet ride he was going to buy when he started earning and Roy said I'm not going out in that mess to get electrocuted then we were all in the Teaching Room with the man and the woman except Keisha who yelled from the Supervisor Room that the phone was down.

Everyone sat in their chairs like we were going to watch a movie.

The man looked at me.

"Would you like some Tylenol or an antacid?" I asked.

"I guess I could use an antacid. Yeah."

I scooted out quick because they freaked me out with how pale he looked and her groaning and took a long time comparing labels on the generic and brand-name products, even though I knew everything they said and even though they were all expired.

On the way back into the room I shouted to Keisha.

"Nothing," she said.

All the trainees had not moved and the man ran his hand through his hair and swept his eyes over the crowd as if waiting for someone to make a sudden move he'd have to defend against. The woman gripped onto the sides of her seat.

"Oh good," he said. "Honey, the pharmacist is back."

"Get these people out of here," she said.

"Would you mind?" he said to me.

"I need to lie down," she said.

I really liked this woman. I liked how everything she said was straightforward and doable.

“Alright, guys. Go. Go finish your lists. Finish Shoppy Day,” I said. I looked at the woman and the hard floor. “Les and Cathy get those drop cloths out of storage.”

Cathy came back with a stack of cloths and she looked very worried.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. I was very worried.

She buried her head in the cloths and then handed them to me.

“Always be prepared,” she said.

“Right. Right.” I shut the door behind her.

The woman said, “This is happening. Squat. I want to squat.”

“Shit. No. Wait. We need an ambulance,” I said.

“Squat,” said the woman.

“What should I do?” the husband asked me.

“Shit. The pants,” I said.

I was shaking and had to pee and I was buzzed from the travel mug and I wrapped the softest drop cloth around the woman’s hips and tucked it up over her belly and her belly was so tight and touching this woman I didn’t know and she leaned on me and her husband and we sank down together. The woman breathed and stared at nothing but she was quiet, just her breath hissing and panting and a constant hum coming out of her that I couldn’t hear I could just feel it. She sort of fell back against her husband and he leaned against the wall so he cradled her in his arms and between his legs and I held onto her hips. I wasn’t sure why I had her hips but I did and I could feel all the muscles tightening and tightening. And this thing I had wanted came up in me kind of like a mist. I remembered how I’d wanted to be a veterinarian when I was little and I wrapped tape around this gerbil’s leg and I’d read all these books about a guy in England who worked

with cows and dogs and sheep. I remembered this guy out in the cold barns and he'd strip off and soap up and shove his arms deep in a cow to help it get the baby out.

I ran my hand over the embroidery on my lab coat. B. S. Hert.

I looked up at Todd Ramos. I wanted to make him proud, Employee of the Month, Todd Ramos.

I opened the door and everyone was standing out in the hall.

"Into the store, you guys. Someone go to First Aid and get all the alcohol and swabs and then those dish towels."

I got the man to put on a dry shirt and got her in a dry shirt and her pants off under the drop cloth and he held her and counted breaths. DiAngelo came in. He opened the door and came right in with shopping baskets full of stuff and knelt down by the woman.

"Hello Mama," he said, his voice real soft and gentle like it was all over and the kid was out and the woman wasn't panting and staring into the distance.

She glanced at him and grabbed his hand and her husband's and groaned into the next contraction. DiAngelo pet the back of her hand.

"Y'all doing real good."

He tried to stand up but the woman did not let go of him.

"Now," she said.

Keisha shouted, "I got through."

"It is happening," I yelled.

I dumped alcohol all over my hands and spread out the towels and the contractions didn't stop and everything happened fast and the backs of her thighs so

white and it smelled of blood and shit Keisha hollering directions through the wall, push down, guide the head and when the baby came out it was blue and red and covered in creamy stuff and it screamed and then a big answering yell came through the walls from everyone in the store.

DiAngelo held up the woman and the husband came around and the two of us wrapped the baby in a sweat shirt and the cord still coming out of his belly down into his mother's vagina and we tugged a little till the whole mess came out and handed their child up into her reaching arms.

She smiled this tiny smile that only made it as far as the baby, just for him, and he quieted. Then she turned so the smile made it to the man.

"It's a boy."

The man and the woman held the baby against her chest and I sat back on the ground and DiAngelo stood up.

"Well," he said. "That sure was nice."

The man looked up and searched in his face and said, "We're going to name him DiAngelo."

The ambulance arrived and the medics bundled the woman and the baby and hauled them up into the big square back of the vehicle.

"Now hang on a second," DiAngelo said and touched the man's arm before he went out the door. The man paused but glanced at his wife rolling out through the rain.

"Here. Here's something for your little man."

DiAngelo took off his black hat with the silver band and handed it, right side up, to the husband. The door whooshed shut and the man and the woman and the baby and

the ambulance all drove away and the clouds and the rain and the gray streets swallowed the whole deal.

DiAngelo's hair was permed out straight and combed back and creased where the hat had been. Splotches of pale and hairless skin shone out through the groomed strands.

He turned to us and ran his hand over his head a few times.

"Looking slick, DiAngelo," said Keisha. "You looking slick."

He flashed his teeth and rocked back on his heels, "Ah, well, you shoulda seen Miss Thing in there. Caught that baby right out of its mama."

Out of the blue Cathy shouted, "Elvira did it."

Cathy's face was all screwed up in panic and fear and she pointed to the checkout counter. There was a bag of pretzels and some red juice in Dixie Cups.

"Elvira did it."

"Oh, Cathy," I said. I looked down at my lab coat with blood on the sleeves.

"That's ok."

Her expression did not change.

"That was a good rule to break," said DiAngelo. "When I leave here and get a job, that's the kind of rule I'm going to break. I'm going to know when to celebrate."

I said, "Let's have a big old party and open up all the red drink and the purple drink. Let's have a big party, just us."

Les coaxed Cathy into drinking a cup of red drink and we all downed shots till our lips turned color and Cathy giggled at her reflection in the sunglasses display mirror and DiAngelo told about the woman grabbing his hand and Keisha told how the phone lines came up and I thought about that baby's head stuck out of its mother. Like an alien.

Crushed and blue. But I still felt, in spots in my neck and head and stomach, that this baby and this mother and father were true and then the cigar in DiAngelo's pocket peeked up and Cathy saw it and she raised up her arm and pointed.

"Cigar," she said.

"Shit," I said.

"Cigar," she said again.

She turned in a circle, arms out, smiling to the ceiling.

"Cigars for everyone," she said, "It's a baby. Baby DiAngelo."

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