

Elegies for Domestic Tranquility

by

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ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories analyzes relationships within the domestic sphere. These relationships range from the romantic to the biological, yet they always act as a barrier to the protagonist's search for identity. The narratives explore the way in which humans interact with their personal space and an outside world that inevitably encroaches on it. Through a variety of fiction subgenres—including fabulism, magical realism, speculative fiction, folk tale, and absurdist comedy—the question is posed: "How does one maintain an identity in the face of a constantly unstable world?"

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"Isaiahs at the Diner"

The police arrived at the diner, bearing news of my husband's death. I brewed coffee behind the counter while my husband checked his vitals. It turned out he was very much alive. He tried to explain this to the officers, but they didn't seem to believe him. One of the men removed his hat and tightened his fingers around it as he explained the situation. They found a body in the woods. It looked exactly like Isaiah. The man had no identification.

I recognized one of the officers—Bradley King. He frequented the diner on Saturday nights for dinner. If Isaiah wasn't working, we'd complain about our spouses; he'd brag about his kids. The subject of children always made me uncomfortable, but I'd smile and nod until the conversation changed.

"We'd like you to come down and take a look at the body," Officer King told Isaiah.

I pretended I wasn't listening. Went through the motions of prepping the kitchen. I turned on burners, chopped vegetables, thawed meat. I couldn't help thinking this news had come at the worst possible time. Suzanne had a custody hearing that day and there was no one to cover for her. I'd already be working a fifteen hour shift. As the only waitress. On the busiest day of the week. Now, we'd have to shut down for an unknown amount of time for Isaiah to visit the morgue.

After the officers left, I laid out breakfast at the corner booth. Through the front window, the rising sun splattered the horizon with neon. The bare white countertop glimmered in the light and I tilted the blinds to keep the sun from blinding us as we ate.

Isaiah sat across from me in the booth, his expression unfazed. I waited for him to say something, but he just shoveled eggs into his mouth, chewing loudly. I hadn't known

it possible to make such noise eating fried eggs, but my husband—ever the innovator—found a way. My jaw clenched. My own food grew cold. I stabbed at the yolk. Imagined the gooey center was his brain and speared it again and again with my fork.

"Your mouth," I said.

He took another bite of egg. Opened his jaw in cavernous exaggeration. Yolk ran down his face, turning his chin the color of a smudged dandelion.

"Better?"

That son of a bitch. I wished just once he'd tell me what he was thinking.

I stood up to clear the dishes. Grabbed his plate away mid-chomp. "I'm not staying here alone while you go to the station."

He touched my wrist and smiled. "I wouldn't dream of it, darling."

I set the plate back down and pinched his dimpled cheek. Jiggled the skin back and forth between my fingers. I couldn't stay mad when he smiled.

#

It was Isaiah alright. The ears, front teeth, and left eye had been removed, but the rest of his face was unmistakable. Lips that puffed like down pillows; hair the color of desert sand. Most telling was the small, brown birthmark above his right eyebrow that I always joked was an accent mark for the language of his eyes.

"It looks like whoever did this got squeamish before he could finish the job," the medical examiner said as he slowly peeled back the cloth covering the body. He halted at the shoulders. "I'll spare you from seeing the rest of him. It gets a lot messier from here on down. Someone cut off both his arms. Did a terrible job at it too. Probably needed an extra hand," he added, laughing at his own joke.

The morgue was a fluorescent hell. Like standing inside a giant light bulb. All around me was steel. Steel gurneys, steel storage spaces, steel desks, steel medical equipment. The light reflected off every surface and, no matter where I looked, I felt as if I was staring in the same direction. The air reeked of bleach, but underneath was the smell of decay. It was like an air freshener in the car of a heavy smoker—the lemon-scent only makes the stale tobacco more apparent.

My husband sat in an office chair. He placed his head in his hands. His face was paler than the corpse's. An officer gave him a glass of water and he clasped it between his knees. He hadn't spoken in several minutes.

I ran my fingers through the dead man's hair. The softness of it surprised me. It made my husband's hair feel like frayed rope in comparison. I always told Isaiah to stop buying cheap shampoo, but he never listened.

Even with the blood and missing parts, I found the man attractive. I wondered if it was creepy to think about sex when staring at a dead man who looked exactly like my husband. I decided it was. That's the power my husband had, though. After ten years of marriage, morning-after-morning of loud egg chewing, irresponsible spending, refusal to pick up slack at the diner, and general moodiness, I still found him sexually appealing.

Isaiah, for all his flaws, was a great husband. Infinitely better than my first spouse—a man who spoke at the volume of an air-raid siren. Toward the end of our marriage, we argued more than we breathed. The only clear memory I had of our three years of marriage was waking up each morning covered in hives and fighting off the desire to vomit.

"Please don't touch the corpse. We still have to do an autopsy," the medical examiner told me.

I ignored the examiner. Continued petting the man's long hair. I clenched my fist. My stomach growled. I readied myself to pounce on the medical examiner. To tear his face off. I wanted to take the body away from him, away from the world. Curl up with it in an open storage container. Hold my breath until I too was dead.

"Ma'am?" the examiner said.

Silence. The air vents hissed above us. The examiner grabbed my arm. I turned to strike him. My husband dropped his glass of water. The clatter pierced my brain, waking me from my momentary delirium.

The man on the table was not my husband. Isaiah was still alive, sitting in an office chair, frightened by the stranger I had just been trying to protect. How had I forgotten?

"I cannot identify this body," I told the examiner. "Sorry we couldn't be of more help."

I grabbed Isaiah's hand and squeezed. Traced my finger down his thumb.

"Let's go. This isn't you."

#

Isaiah didn't talk much for the next few days. Just flashed his dimples and gave a thumbs up every time I asked if he was alright. He remained in our apartment and watched reruns of old sitcoms, while I assumed sole responsibility for the diner. I worried about him a lot. He didn't communicate his emotions, but he was a sensitive person. Too sensitive for his own good. Isaiah was the guy who caught spiders in his palms, clasped

his hands so they couldn't escape. He'd take them outside barefooted, wearing only his underwear. He didn't come back inside until they were safely in the grass. "It's not our place to disrupt the balance of things," he once told me.

He stayed in my thoughts as I listened to the bacon sizzle and let the wafts of fresh-brewed coffee jolt me awake during the morning hours. He remained there as I blitzed between tables during the afternoon rush, running orders of BLTs and chicken salads through my head. I carried him with me during the late evening as teenage couples ordered milkshakes and hamburgers while playing footsie under the tables. Luckily our apartment was above the diner, so he was never far away if he ever needed to talk. There wasn't much downtime with only me in charge, but in the slower moments of the day I could still run upstairs to bring him salads and rolls.

The pattern continued for almost a week until I had a run-in with an unruly customer. He came in right after closing time. I was double-checking the kitchen and had apparently forgot to lock the door. The bell dinged. I walked out to find a man sitting in the far booth. I yelled from the kitchen that we were closed. No response, so I approached.

The man had a giant beard that hid a face horribly scarred and pocked. He wore a low-brimmed fedora and a long trench coat that made him suspicious and me nervous. I wondered if he was deaf, so I tapped him on the shoulder. He snapped his hand out and grabbed my wrist. Looked directly into my eyes and didn't turn away. His eyes glared from under the shadow of the fedora. Distant, yet familiar—like a cousin from my childhood I hadn't seen in decades.

"I want to speak to Isaiah Greene," he said with a three-pack-a-day growl.

I tried to pull my hand away from the man, but his grip tightened on my wrist.

"He's not in right now. Can I give him a message?"

I jerked hard to free myself from his hand. I could feel my wrist pop. Indents of his fingers remained on my skin. He never turned his eyes away from me.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave," I said.

I looked around the empty diner nervously. I should have called for help, but thought it might trigger the man to violence before Isaiah reached the stairwell. I repeated my request. The man made no effort to exit. He turned his head away and stared into the darkness outside the window.

I backed away from him slowly, pressed my back against the counter, and reached for the phone. "Last warning. I'm calling the police if you don't leave immediately."

The man finally stood up and departed the diner without saying another word.

I hurriedly locked the door. An overwhelming sense of panic stung my guts. Not for me, but for Isaiah. I ran up the stairs. The entire apartment was pitch black. I felt my way to a light switch. Called for my husband. My voice cracked. There was no response. I pictured the body with the missing eye, missing arms, missing ears. A light shone from a crack in the bathroom door. I kept calling his name and got no response. I pushed the door open.

Isaiah stood in front of the mirror, poking his skin, prodding his face, examining the lines in his forehead, the birthmark above his eye.

"Who is this man? How is he me?" he asked.

I didn't know if he was talking about himself or the dead body.

"Isaiah, what's wrong?"

"The police called earlier. DNA, fingerprint testing, and dental records confirmed the body belongs to Isaiah Greene." He placed his hands in the sink. Turned on the faucet. Splashed his face with water. "That body is mine. How is it possible?"

#

An obituary revealed Dead-Isaiah lived at the other end of the state. He had his own wife, two kids, a career in sales. Isaiah wanted to attend the wake. I told him it was a bad idea, but he insisted. We argued about it for an entire Saturday until I finally caved. He wrapped his arms around me and pinched my arm. Flashed his teeth and thanked me. It was the happiest I'd seen him since the morgue.

The wake took place the next day in a town called Samson. There was a line of consolors outside the funeral home when we arrived. Men and women stood single-file. Their expressions sullen. At the back of the line, an older woman in a green blazer wept loudly. She wore a red felt hat with a wide brim that wobbled uncontrollably as she sobbed. Reminded me of an oversized wind-catcher.

We joined the back of the receiving line, behind the woman in the hat. I locked my arm with my husband and refused to let go. Held him close to my side, as if he would take flight the moment I let go. We didn't talk. We stared straight ahead, listening to the old woman bawl.

"Jesus, a lot of people liked this Isaiah," my husband said.

"A lot of people like you too."

"Not really. I have a staff who thinks I'm a pushover and two assholes I go bowling with occasionally."

"You have me," I said, as the line moved forward.

A balding man with a pencil mustache tapped Isaiah on the shoulder. "Christ. You look just like him. Were you related?"

Isaiah turned pale. The look on his face transported me to the morgue. I could smell bleach and decay in the air.

"He gets that a lot," I said.

The balding man started to say something else, but I stopped him. "Please let us mourn in peace."

I said it a little too loudly. I might as well have yelled it through a megaphone. A handful of people looked back at me. The mourners noticed my husband. Their tongues clicked against the roofs of their mouths. Whispers were carried away in the mellow autumn breeze—their surprise traveling past the rows of empty cars in the crowded parking lot.

One woman shrieked.

The funeral home was deceptively small. The interior barely had room for the coffin and six rows of chairs. There were flowers and plants and balloons everywhere. They covered the walls, filled the hallway. I had to push the greenery out of my face before I took a new step.

The woman in the red hat stopped crying. My husband slid his arm out of my grasp. He tapped the woman on the shoulder. "Can I ask you something? What was he like? Isaiah, I mean."

The woman turned around. She had a wrinkled face and collagen-pumped lips that looked like overinflated balloons. "He was a darling man," she said, her mouth pursed. I held my breath while I waited for her lips to explode.

"Handsome, like you," said an elderly woman next to her.

The bald man with the pencil mustache spoke up. "Isaiah was the best friend you could ever have. We were only co-workers, but he treated me like a long-lost brother every time he saw me."

In the front row of chairs, near the coffin, a blonde woman was comforting two weeping children. She wore a black dress with red lace that stopped at her knees. Black lipstick, black mascara, and black eyeliner made her features pop against alabaster of her face. It gave her a blankness. An unreality. As if she were a photoshopped model on the cover of a fashion magazine.

"That must be his wife," I said.

"Wow. Isaiah was a lucky guy."

I pinched his cheek. "Pick your jaw off the floor. This is why everyone likes Dead-Isaiah better."

My-Isaiah didn't laugh. He just turned his attention to the closed coffin.

When we were close enough, Isaiah placed his hands on the sleek red box. I placed my hand on top of his. We stood still for a moment. I said a silent prayer. More for My-Isaiah than the one in the casket.

Dead-Isaiah's wife came from behind and ran her hand down my husband's arm.

"How did you know Isaiah?" she asked.

She stared hard at my husband. Kept caressing his arm. I wedged myself between her and Isaiah. Pressed my butt against her thigh.

"Hi, I'm Regan. My husband and yours were old friends from college. Used to play pranks on people because they looked so much alike," I said.

"I can imagine," the woman said, not moving away.

One of the weeping kids came over and tugged on Isaiah's suit. "Daddy?" he asked.

The mother snapped out of her daze and pushed her child away. Told the boy that it wasn't Daddy. Just a friend.

I told Isaiah we should leave. He seemed lost in his own head. We stood by the coffin as the following people in line did double-takes as they glanced from the dead body to my husband.

Dead-Isaiah's wife returned. "Sorry about that. Children. It's hard for them to understand sometimes."

"We wouldn't know," Isaiah said.

#

After the funeral Isaiah became even more despondent. Still refused to return to work. I trudged on with the diner the best I could, but it was difficult managing everything. I had never noticed the degree of laziness that permeated our kitchen until I absolutely had to. The waitresses consistently mixed up orders—brought burgers to vegetarians and bread to the gluten-freaks. The kitchen staff overcooked half the orders and subsisted on a steady diet of cigarettes that delayed almost every order. Their apathy served as a distraction to my concern for Isaiah, so I channeled my frustration through them—cut their smoke breaks, deducted botched orders from their paychecks, and gave them notices for being late. Used to Isaiah's laidback style of management, they either fought me at every turn or quit.

My anger reached an apex on the night the bearded stranger returned. He seated himself at the counter and flipped through a menu one of the waitresses gave him. As soon as I saw him, weeks of slow-boiling despair burst inside me. I dumped a tray of food I had been carrying onto the floor and shouted at the top of my lungs, "Get the fuck out. Get the fuck out now. I told you before I don't want you here."

Sweat poured down my face as I screamed. Tears brewed in my eyes. The other customers in the diner stopped eating. The kitchen staff rushed out to see what was wrong. The two waitresses ducked into booths.

The man calmly set his menu down, rose from his seat, and walked out.

Nobody could understand what was wrong. Suzanne put her hand on my shoulder and told me I might need to take a few days off. "Regan, everyone is worried about you," she said. The customers politely paid their bills and left their unfinished food on the tables. I told the staff to take the rest of the night off.

I had no desire to see Isaiah just then, so I locked up and headed to O'Dooley's Pub across the street. I drank a few vodka and cranberries, but they didn't take the edge off. Just made me drunk and even more angry.

I came back home to find Isaiah watching a talk show. Laughing to himself.

"I'm glad you're so fucking happy," I said. "Letterman must be a real fucking treat after working so fucking hard all day."

He flipped off the TV, stuck up his middle finger, and went to bed. I paced around the living room, fuming. I couldn't believe the man who once tried to protect spiders from my crumpled Kleenexes could grow so callous. I'd been doing everything I could to keep the diner going and help him through his grief. He simply didn't care.

I made myself a peanut butter sandwich—my first meal of the day. When I noticed it was almost midnight, fatigue struck me hard. I went to the bedroom, didn't bother changing out of my work clothes, and collapsed in bed. I couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour when the phone rang. It kept ringing and ringing. Piercing a hole in my head. I waited for Isaiah to answer it, but he made no move to do so.

"Would you fucking answer that?" I asked.

My husband whispered a few obscenities, but picked up the phone. He gasped.

A long pause in the conversation. I heard a man's muffled voice through the receiver.

"Tell me about yourself. I want to hear it all," Isaiah said.

My husband grew silent as the caller on the other end spoke, every once in a while Isaiah would laugh or sigh or groan as if he'd just be shot in the gut.

"That's totally amazing. I've always dreamed of a son like that," he said.

The conversation stretched longer and longer. I squeezed a pillow over my head. It didn't help. It couldn't block out Isaiah's schoolgirl giggle. "Please. Can you take this into another room? One of us has to be up in the morning," I said.

Isaiah grunted in reply and asked the caller for a return phone number. He shuffled out of the room and I finally drifted back to sleep.

In the morning, I found Isaiah sleeping on the couch. His long, sandy hair was matted against his forehead. A thin line of drool darkened the fabric of the armrest. I suddenly felt awful about losing my temper at him the night before and kissed him on the forehead. He swatted at imaginary flies and rolled over. I kissed him repeatedly on the

cheek. Tiny butterfly kisses until he opened his eyes and smiled. It was a game we always played on the mornings of anniversaries and birthdays.

"Who was on the phone last night?" I asked.

Isaiah sucked his lips into his mouth, his smile disappearing under his nose. He told me the caller claimed to be Isaiah Greene. The man had a whole other life. A son named Graham who recently won top place in a statewide wrestling championship. He had his own yacht that he sailed with to the Bermudas at least twice a year. His owned a line of golf clubs that catered to "the pacifist golfer with serious anger issues."

I laid on top of Isaiah. Placed my head against his chest. Listened to his heart to make sure it was still beating. "I don't understand this," I said.

#

As the weeks passed, Isaiah received an increased amount of phone calls. They came at all hours of the day. Always from himself, or at least different versions of himself. The disparate Isaiahs liked to call, swap life stories, imagine what it would be like to be each other.

While Isaiah was having fun imagining all the other lives he could lead. Our own life went to shit. He became completely disconnected from me and the diner. I struggled to maintain a semblance of control. Employees, fed up with my erratic moods, walked out left and right. I hung up a "Now Hiring" sign in the window and added anyone with the slightest degree of enthusiasm to the roster. Unfortunately, enthusiasm alone doesn't run a kitchen and the new staff botched even more orders than the previous staff did. The new-hires were a revolving roulette wheel, none of them a winning number.

Before long, I became known around the neighborhood as: Mt. Regan, the most active volcano in the world. Kitchen relations suffered and customers constantly complained until they stopped coming completely. I started closing the dinner shortly after the lunch hour. Eventually I whittled the crew down to Enrique, Suzanne, and two other new-hires who couldn't find their ass in a bathroom.

And even they eventually gave up on me. One night after closing Enrique and Suzanne handed me their nametags and aprons, wished Isaiah and I well, and jointly decided to depart for greener pastures.

"They're hiring over at O'Dooley's. It's only bar food, but the tips are nice," Suzanne said, adding, "I have to look out for my kid, you know?"

As soon as they left, I walked behind the counter and pushed over a stack of plates. They shattered to pieces on the floor. I waited for Isaiah to come down to check out the noise, but he never arrived. I sat next to the broken ceramic. Rested my head against my legs and bit down hard on my kneecap. It was the only way to stifle my screams.

The diner seemed like an alien planet: lonely, empty, and foreign. Even though the place was relatively small—fifteen booths lined along the walls and a counter that stretched across the kitchen area—it felt larger than Jupiter. The air conditioner hissed in the solitude. The fluorescent lighting was a flickering hell. The pungent odor of cleaning solution filled the air, reminded me of formaldehyde. I couldn't stand to be there any longer. I needed human contact. Needed Isaiah.

Upstairs, the apartment was quiet as well. Isaiah sat on the bed, whispering into the phone. When he heard me enter the room, he held his finger up to silence me. Told the caller on the other end to hold on.

"Another Isaiah died. A heart attack. He was a really good guy. We talked quite a bit over the past few days. Only thirty-nine. Can you believe it?" he said.

It took a moment to process the information. After the day I just had, I didn't want to hear any more of his fantasy life. I didn't want the distance to keep widening between us. Mt. Regan erupted. I walked over to his side of the bed and ripped the telephone cord from the wall.

Isaiah held the disconnected phone in his hand for a moment before throwing it to the floor. "I can't believe you did that."

I laid down on my side of the bed. Tapped the light on my nightstand. An orange beam illuminated my side of the bed. It cast Isaiah's body in a dull glow. He sat still, back to me, staring at the floor. There was a small, white spider crawling along the wall. I watched it move closer to my side of the bed.

A morgue-like silence. I tapped the lamp on my nightstand again. The room grew brighter. The spider disappeared behind the headboard of the bed.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Isaiah hunched over. I studied the curving of his spine. I hadn't noticed how skinny he'd gotten over the past few weeks. His ribs jutted out, like an animal bursting from his skin.

"He had three kids. Now they won't have a father. What happens to them?" Isaiah asked.

The spider appeared again. It crawled onto the nightstand.

"There's a spider," I said.

He didn't respond. I reached out to it. Cupped it in my palms. I could feel its tiny legs tickling the inside of my hands. Crawling around. I dropped it and the spider skittered down the bedspread.

Isaiah turned around, raised his hand, and smacked the bedspread hard. He crushed the spider against the fabric and flicked the carcass with his fingers.

"I'm going to the funeral," Isaiah said. "I don't want you to come."

#

Isaiah disappeared for over a month, but called to check on me every few days. His voice had become nearly indistinguishable from the other Isaiahs. When an Isaiah called, I would ask intimate questions about our relationship—our first kiss, our favorite vacation memory, the last time we had sex. If the Isaiah passed the test, I knew it was my husband and immediately begged him to return. I explained that we were about to lose the diner.

"That's not my world anymore," he told me.

There was always another funeral he needed to attend. "Necessary for closure," he said. He mentioned he'd been keeping in contact with Pauline Greene, the widow we met at Dead-Isaiah's wake. The mere suggestion of her name roiled in my chest. I imagined her arms wrapped around his neck and her head resting against his. I hadn't felt my husband's touch since he left. Things had gotten so bad that I had begun to linger on the small moments of contact in my day, such as a customer's hand grazing mine during the trade-off of the lunch bill.

Things got worse when the debtors arrived. With limited customers, I couldn't make enough money to sustain the diner. The food I prepped in the morning, remained there until close. I didn't want it to go to waste, so I spent the afternoons making dinners that no one would ever eat. I brought a different meal to every table in the diner, as if it were filled with customers. Moved from one booth to the next, taking a bite of each dish and telling the imaginary waitress to send it back to the kitchen.

One morning, my routine was broken by the crunching of gravel in front of the diner. Thinking it was a customer, I rushed to the door and spotted Isaiah's rusty Impala parked outside. He walked slowly to the apartment entrance, lugging an oversized suitcase. I beat him to the back entrance.

"I'm so glad you're back. It's been miserable without you," I said, blocking his way with my arm. I planned on being angry with him when he arrived, but seeing his face calmed Mt. Regan. Brought the lava to a slow boil and made me feel as if the world was in motion again.

Isaiah set down his suitcase and gave me a half-hearted hug. No smile. "I'm not staying."

"Wait. What?"

He tried to duck under my arm and shove past, but I pinned him with my hip.

"I'm moving in with Pauline and her kids," he said.

I tried to read his face, but it was as mysterious as ever. When he wasn't being silly, he was being stoic—his thoughts buried deep below the surface like a minimalist painting of a human being.

"Is this about her or is it about the kids? You said you weren't interested in adoption." I said.

Isaiah fake-cackled. The increase in his volume burst in my eardrum. "This isn't about the kids. I'm in love with her. We've grown together over the weeks. Attending funerals, learning about each other. She understands me in a way I didn't think possible."

He leaned in. Kissed me on the cheek. His lips were cold, corpse-like. His breath smelled of formaldehyde. There was no trace of the Isaiah I knew in that kiss. He was no more my husband than that earless, armless husk that was stretched out before us on the gurney.

"It's for the best I leave now. Maybe one day we can be friends again," he whispered in my ear.

As he pulled back from me, I pinched his cheek between my fingers. I stretched the flesh like taffy. I squeezed as hard as I could. I squeezed harder and harder. Held it tighter, until he yelped in pain and slapped my hand away.

#

The phone rang. I hadn't answered a call since Isaiah mailed me the divorce papers. No matter who it was, I knew it was someone I didn't want to talk to: an Isaiah, a consoler, a bill collector, my father.

That time I answered it. I can't say why. Most likely loneliness had rotted my brain. I hadn't left the apartment in days. The electricity had been shut off. I put the diner up for sale. The meat and other perishables started rotting in the unplugged freezers downstairs, and I couldn't afford a trash collector. In the heat of the summer, the building grew heavy with the stench of rancid meat. I tried spraying can after can of lemon Lysol

to cover the scent, but that just gave me migraines. The apartment felt weighted with death, of loss, of failure.

"Hello?" I said into the receiver.

"Is Isaiah Greene home?" It was an Isaiah's voice. His deep baritone tickled my ear.

"He doesn't live here anymore."

The man apologized.

I bit my tongue until it drew blood. "Wait. Don't go. Tell me about yourself."

He was reluctant at first, but after I encouraged him, he began his life story. He lived with his mother in Atlanta. Had studied genetics at UCLA, but got kicked out for selling pot in the dorms. He currently worked part-time in a meat packing plant and collected vintage comic books. He chuckled nervously throughout his monologue.

"You sound like a real entrepreneur," I said.

"Not really. I only work at the factory because they don't make me do much except sit around and poke at meat. It's pretty boring."

"Why don't you try something else?"

"What else? I have a bad back and bad shoulders and I'm bad with money and I get extremely nervous around people and I don't have any skills," he said.

As he spoke, my mind wandered. I thought about how unbearable it was going to be never seeing Isaiah again. To not have the diner to take care of. To be alone.

"You ever thought about working in a diner?" I asked.

#

A heavy rain fell on the day New-Isaiah was due to arrive. The sky was filled with clouds. It made the city look like it was drawn in charcoal. My heart thudded against my rib cage, shaking my entire body as if it were a whale crammed in a goldfish bowl. I prayed he wouldn't show up.

I spent the day in the dark. Closed the blinds. The odor of aged hamburger choked the air. Even with the windows open and Lysol sprayed, it was almost impossible to breathe. I laid in bed, pretending I was dead. Kept my body as still as possible. Kept my breathing shallow. I fell asleep wondering who I'd be when I woke up.

There was a soft tapping noise. Like a leaky faucet. Tap. Tap. Tap. I ignored it, too dead to move. It continued for several more minutes. It came from the door.

"Hold on," I said, adjusting my blouse.

The man at the door physically looked like my husband, but scrawnier. He had scraggly side burns and hair that looked as if he'd tried to cut it himself, realized how badly he was doing, and then gave up.

"Sorry. I didn't hear you. I hope you haven't been knocking for long," I said.

"Just a few hours. No big deal. I probably need to ice my wrist though."

"Come in and sit down," I said, motioning him inside. He hadn't brought any luggage with him. His whole body trembled.

"Is something the matter?"

"I don't meet many women as pretty as you," he said. "Do you want to have sex or something?"

"Let's have the something. How about dinner?"

To reduce the risk of bumping into an acquaintance, I ordered take-out. We sat cross-legged on the bed and used flashlights to illuminate our faces. New-Isaiah ate his lo-mein, loudly and recklessly. He punctuated it with snorts. His body was a one man percussion machine.

"Am I bad person for bringing you here?" I asked.

New-Isaiah was more concerned with his food. "Nah, babe, you're the best." Lo-mein noodles fell out of his mouth and onto the bedspread. "Oops."

I lost my appetite. Set my meal aside. Told him I was going to the bar.

"I'll come with you. Hold up a second."

"No, you won't. If you come with me, I'll have to murder you."

At O'Dooley's pub, I ordered vodka and cranberry. After three of them, my credit card was declined. It wasn't really a surprise. A broke, middle-aged woman sitting alone at an Irish-themed bar can't afford much in this life.

Twice divorced. Failed business. Unable to bear children.

I sat on my stool, chewing ice from the glass.

Who was this woman? What was she trying to accomplish? A few months ago, she was happy. She was sure of herself. She'd finally achieved her dream: a stable marriage and a private business. Now she was about to head back to her apartment and restart her life with a strange man who looked exactly like her husband.

I was about to leave and call the whole thing off with New-Isaiah when the aggressive, bearded man from the diner grabbed me by the shoulder.

"I saw the new man. The new Isaiah. I want to speak with him," he growled.

I breathed slowly through my nose. Took in sustained puffs. Tried not to scream. I calmly rotated my stool and stared directly into his eyes. I'm not sure how I hadn't notice it before. Behind the scars and beard and cold eyes, lay the indents of dimples, the puffed lips, the birthmark—an Isaiah. Creepy-Isaiah.

"What do you want from us?" I asked.

"My identity. You've all stolen it from me. I want it back."

I grabbed my empty glass and tossed the ice in Creepy-Isaiah's face. He was taken aback and stumbled into the stool next to me. I darted out of the bar.

New-Isaiah waited for me back at the apartment. I shined the flashlight around the room until I found him sitting cross-legged on the bed. His grey T-shirt was stained with sweat. "Where were you, babe? I was so worried."

"I was attacked at the bar," I said.

New-Isaiah ran toward me, knocking left over noodles all over the carpet. He wrapped his arms around me like My-Isaiah used to. Patted my back gently; caressed my spine. It felt nice to be comforted. Amazing to be touched. The sudden feeling of contact pushed the incident in the bar out of my mind. I planned to keep myself as far removed from myself as I could, for as long as I could.

"Take off your clothes," I demanded and clicked the flashlight off.

He had the smell of a man who hadn't showered in days. A sharp, tangy odor that, even over the festering hamburger meat, made me gag. His body was sticky. My fingers clicked when I touched his chest.

"Pretend you're dead," I instructed.

His body stiffened to corpse. I sat on his pelvis. Neither of us moved for a long time. I just kept him inside me. Felt him disappear. Occasionally he would mutter an exclamatory phrase, like "Oh, wow!"

"Shut up. Dead men don't say 'oh, wow!'"

When he softened, I rolled off him. He tried to put his arms around me. The feeling of comfort departed and I deeply missed My-Isaiah.

"Get the fuck off." I said.

In the morning, I woke to New-Isaiah smiling at me, his dimples the size of craters. My whole body became red and itchy. Broke out in hives. I scratched at my skin until I started to bleed.

"I can get you lotion if you want," he said.

In the shower, I vomited. Half digested lo-mein and bile ran down the white tile and down the drain.

After I dressed, I walked into the kitchen. He was frying eggs on the gas stove. Smiled again when he saw me and motioned for me to take a seat. He pushed the eggs on a dish and presented it to me with a *Voila!* motion. The eggs were a little overcooked, but they weren't bad. I chewed slowly. Thought about my next move. He might not have been the Isaiah I wanted, but he was the only Isaiah I had. That might be enough.

"Are you ready to talk business?" I asked.

#

New-Isaiah had enough money in the bank to pay off the bills and get the electricity back on. His credit was shit, but his mom co-signed a loan to replenish our stock and hire at least two more employees. With both phones back, the calls came in

more than ever—more Isaiahs looking for my husband. I was in the middle of contacting the phone company to have the number changed when New-Isaiah proposed a business idea.

"What if we hired some of these Isaiahs? I bet they'd work for cheap and, besides, it'd be kind of cool. Like a gimmick, ya know?"

I wasn't sold on its potential at first, but after each new Isaiah called, I got in the habit of asking if he needed work. For most the answer was, "no." They had careers and families. Lives they weren't about to abandon for the opportunity of working in a small-town diner for minimum wage. The success rate of these propositions might have been low, but a few of the more desperate Isaiahs eagerly accepted the prospect of steady work.

The first three Isaiahs we hired were not wildly different. They resembled New-Isaiah far more than they did my ex-husband—bony, uncoordinated, shallow faces, poor haircuts. Two of them talked a lot. One didn't talk at all, instead slouched around from station to station and grumbled as he washed dishes.

Integration did not go smoothly at first for these Isaiahs. None of them had restaurant background, so an extended period of training was required. New-Isaiah was the worst of the lot. He constantly dropped trays of food, forgot orders, picked food off customers' plates, and chattered nonstop to people while they ate. Everywhere I turned, he was right behind me, brandishing a goofy smile and cracking jokes about penguins and olives and any ridiculous thing that popped into his head.

The other Isaiahs grew on me because they weren't as awful as New-Isaiah. Quiet-Isaiah was particularly interesting, once I got to know him. He had a master's

degree in literature and squandered his early thirties on an ill-advised foray into stand-up comedy.

"I don't know why. I'm not even funny. I don't think anyone has ever laughed at a thing I've said," he told me in the kitchen one night.

New-Isaiah was out for the evening, picking up a new hire from the airport. So Quiet-Isaiah and I were alone in the diner closing up. I told him my favorite writer was Rimbaud. He said his was Nabokov, although he loved Rimbaud as well. I retrieved my vintage copy of *A Season in Hell* from the apartment and we took turns reading to each other as we scrubbed the appliances and counters.

Quiet-Isaiah held the book in the air, as if he were reading to an auditorium. He projected each line so that it echoed through the empty diner. He sat above me on the counter as I wiped down the bottom cabinets. Nudged me on the shoulder with the tip of his shoe. I stood up and leaned next to him.

"A thousand Dreams within me softly burn," Quiet-Isaiah recited.

I gave him a tender kiss. Did it again. He used his tongue this time. It felt perfect in my mouth, like a missing piece of a puzzle. Quiet-Isaiah kissed harder than New-Isaiah. Used his tongue more than the ex-husband. It still wasn't the same as My-Isaiah, but it closed the distance between he and I—at least for a moment.

"Please don't tell the others," I told Quiet-Isaiah. "I don't want them to feel left out."

#

As the diner grew in popularity, we changed the name from Glory Diner to Isaiahs'. Soon we had enough money to maintain a constant staff of seven Isaiahs per

shift—twenty-two Isaiahs staffed in total. More than we needed for such a small diner, but it added to the charm for the customers.

The work environment was harmonious. All of the Isaiahs became very close. They started doing everything together. Hung out at bars after work, took a vacation to Hawaii, rented a house together, started a Christian rock band. Seattle-Isaiah and Melancholic-Isaiah even entered a committed relationship with each other.

During this time, I started making love to the different Isaiahs. Searching for one who could replicate My-Isaiah. Even with twenty-two Isaiahs around, I only thought of my ex-husband. I pictured it was him as Convict-Isaiah pushed into me, smelling of Marlboros and whisky. Imagined My-Isaiah's caresses while Burn Victim-Isaiah ran his fingers through my hair, recounting the moment of his exploding Volvo.

I knew I needed to win him back somehow, but I didn't have his number. I did have his address, though. Received it through our last moment of communication—the divorce papers that I burned page by page in the stove. New-Isaiah had watched in horror, whimpering, "But, baby, do you still love him? Don't you want to be with me?"

I tried drafting My-Isaiah some letters, but I could never decide what to say. It took several attempts before I stumbled on an idea: an Isaiah reunion. We'd host it at the diner. Send out invitations to Isaiahs all over the country. Invite them to come meet their doppelgangers. They could spend the day conversing and getting served by other Isaiahs. My-Isaiah was sure to show, and he might see how well I was doing. Maybe he'd realize his mistake.

I recruited Art School-Isaiah for help drafting up invitations. He invited me to his room in Casa de Isaiah. Casa de Isaiah was a sprawling three-story Victorian-style home

on the edge of town. The Isaiahs bunked two-to-a-room, except for a few of them who made a blanket fortress in the middle of the common area.

I hadn't spent much time with Art School-Isaiah up to this point. I knew he was the most attractive of the bunch. Had spent time modeling in his teens. Art School-Isaiah and I shared the cushion of a computer chair, each had half of an ass resting comfortably. We worked late into the night manipulating the images of my invitation on his laptop screen. As we argued over font choices and images, I could smell the expensive cologne rising from his flesh. I kept taking quick whiffs, in case he got wary. He was everything I wanted, appearance-wise, from my husband—taut muscles, impeccably groomed, stylish.

When the invitations were finished, we ran them down to the local Kinko's. We made love in the bathroom as the printing machine whirred with fresh copies. He was gorgeous and passionate and made me orgasm in a way my ex-husband never could, but when it was all over, I still felt empty inside. Raw and sore. His expensive cologne smelled like embalming fluid I couldn't wait to wash off.

#

The day of the Isaiah reunion finally arrived. Isaiahs lined up promptly outside at a quarter before six. When I unlocked the door, they poured in. They yelled out orders for bacon and eggs and french toast. Prepared to bury themselves in introductions. Every time an Isaiah entered, I searched his face. Hoped he was mine. By 6:30 we were nearly filled to capacity. Isaiahs packed themselves eight to a booth. The ones without a seat milled about from table to table. It was difficult for the server Isaiahs to make their ways through to grab orders. They had to make beelines through the customers, carrying trays high above their heads.

As the food orders came out, I learned one terrifying fact about the Isaiahs—they all shared the capacity to eat their food with gusto. The diner thundered with smacking lips, clicking tongues, crunching of food, snorts of air. They vocalized their pleasure with loud "Mmm-mmm-mmm" declarations after each bite. It was like being in the world's largest pig sty at feeding time.

My head rang. The sun poured in through the glass windows, making the entire diner humid, despite the air conditioner. I had to keep running outside to catch my breath. The hours passed and night arrived. My-Isaiah still hadn't come. I tried to keep myself busy in the kitchen as much as I could. I needed to avoid the cacophony of Isaiahs at the trough. I popped my head out of the serving window from time to time, trying to catch a glimpse of my ex-husband.

The knobs on the oven started jamming and I was in the back jabbing them with a screwdriver when My-Isaiah finally entered the diner. He walked straight into the kitchen. Pauline was with him, hanging on his arm with porcelain hands. The other Isaiahs tried to stop him, but he pushed his way past.

"What in the hell is all this about?" he asked, waving his Isaiah reunion invitation in the air.

I tried to reason with him. Told him how the diner had collapsed after he left. "Since you didn't care, I had to find an Isaiah who did. Luckily there were plenty out there."

Pauline kept rubbing up on my ex-husband. She gave him a kiss on his chin. He gave a near-imperceptible smile, a smile only I would notice. A smile that betrayed his

stoicism, revealed his true feelings. A smile that showed he was happy with her, with Pauline.

Art School-Isaiah chopped carrots at the end of the counter. I called him over to me. With his model looks, I knew it was my best chance of making my ex-husband jealous.

"I'd like you to meet my new lover," I said, kissing Art School-Isaiah on the lips.

"What the hell is your problem?" My-Isaiah asked.

Someone broke a glass from the other side of the serving window and New-Isaiah popped his head through. "So, you've been seeing that asshole all along?"

"Isaiah, wait. Calm down," I yelled to him

New-Isaiah didn't listen and I could hear him smashing dish after dish through the window. Other Isaiahs yelled at him: "That's my dinner, asshole!" "I was eating that, fucker!" "Get your hands off me before I kick your ass!"

Quiet-Isaiah watched from the sink. He turned to me, called me a slut. Walked into the eating area and announced, "Regan is a fucking slut. She sleeps with everyone!"

My-Isaiah hadn't said anything during that time. He just tucked Pauline under the crook of his arm. When a shouting match erupted in the packed corner of the diner, My-Isaiah turned away from me and pushed his way toward the exit. "Jesus. You are fucked in the head."

I chased after them. In the dining area, a group of Isaiahs that I had slept with broke into a fistfight. Quiet-Isaiah had New-Isaiah in a headlock. Marine-Isaiah punched Burn Victim-Isaiah in the face. His body tumbled over the counter and into a booth of

Isaiahs still chomping down their meals. There wasn't enough room in the diner to move, let alone fight.

I grabbed My-Isaiah on the shoulder. "Please help me. You owe me that much."

Pauline wedged herself between us. "He's a father now. He can't afford to get in silly little fights anymore."

Isaiah, the father? The title fit him somehow. It's the thing he always wanted. The one thing I couldn't give him. And even though I still resented him for leaving me alone, I tried to convince myself that he should be happy. At least one of us should be.

"If you want to leave, I won't stop you. Just know that all of this was for you. I was happy with our old life. I thought maybe I could keep a little part of it for myself," I said.

My-Isaiah's eyes softened. He gave me his patented-dimple smile. He reached his arms out to give me a hug when New-Isaiah rammed into us, knocking us both against the counter and sending a cluster of Isaiahs toppling to the ground. New-Isaiah dashed through the kitchen door before I could yell at him.

"Let's go," Pauline said to My-Isaiah.

My-Isaiah shrugged to her and jumped on the counter. Stomped his foot against the granite, trying to get the other Isaiahs' attention. Pauline scowled at me. I propped my foot on an empty stool and was about to hoist myself onto the counter with him, but Art School-Isaiah called for me from the kitchen. "You have to come back here, he's going berserk."

In the kitchen New-Isaiah butted his head against the freezer door. His skull connected with a spine-cracking thud. He reeled back in a daze and then charged at it again.

I jumped in front of him. "What the fuck are you doing? You're going to give yourself a concussion."

"I don't care. I don't want to live in this world with such a whore."

"Get a hold of yourself, idiot."

I pushed him away from the freezer, but he grabbed a nearby soup ladle and started smacking himself in the head with it.

Pauline called from the serving window. "We're out of here, Regan. Good luck with all of this."

I motioned over to Art School-Isaiah. "Take care of him will you?"

I dashed out to say goodbye to My-Isaiah. To make one last effort. The brawl between the Isaiahs expanded. It encompassed every Isaiah in the bar. I couldn't tell who was fighting whom. Couldn't say who was winning. I just saw an ocean of similar, bloody faces bobbing around on the floor, rolling over each other.

I stepped in My-Isaiah's path, "You told me once, we shouldn't disrupt the balance of things. Do you still believe that?"

Pauline slapped me across the face. "Back off, you barren slut."

The calm facade of Mt. Regan gave way to its biggest explosion yet. I could feel the lava boiling in my stomach, in my heart, in my veins. I suddenly could not bear the thought of that Alabaster Princess walking out the door with my Prince Charming. And my insides poured out of me in a stream of obscenities.

I took a swing at her. Connected with the side of her head and she fell into a tornado of Isaiahs fumbling around on the ground. My-Isaiah shoved me. Up to that point, he'd never laid a finger on me in his life, but he physically shoved me away from him. Hard. Then he reached his hand down to rescue Pauline.

I wanted nothing more to do with either of them. I backed into the kitchen, wanting to cry. As the kitchen door swung open, I was greeted by the smell of charcoal and the crackling of flames.

Art School-Isaiah and New-Isaiah laid side-by-side on the kitchen floor. Blood pooled under their lifeless bodies. The entire oven was in flames. Near the exit toward my apartment, I saw Creepy-Isaiah edging toward the corner. His fedora still hung over his eyes; the bushy beard covered his face. He held the fire extinguisher in his arms. A large gun dangled at his waist. He stared at me for a moment and then slammed the backdoor.

The fire from the kitchen grew. The heat scalded my face, turning it red.

I stood there watching the flames curl around the kitchen I had birthed. In olden times, it would be honorable for a captain to go down with her ship, but this was the modern age and I was not an honorable captain. I peered through the kitchen door at the Isaiahs still fighting, unfazed by the black clouds of smoke that billowed through the serving window. My-Isaiah was pounding Quiet-Isaiah's head against the counter. Pauline was cheering him on. They deserve each other, I thought. They all deserve each other. None of this would have happened if the Isaiahs hadn't entered our lives. If My-Isaiah wouldn't have left.

I ran past the flames and through the backdoor. Took out my keys and locked it behind me. I walked to the front of the building. Locked that exit too. The flames spilled out into the dining area. The Isaiahs finally stopped fighting. Shouts of panic were muffled through the glass windows.

Across the street, a light shone from the window of O'Dooley's Pub. A woman with red hair and a thin frame drank a vodka and cranberry at a table near the window. Across from her was a dark-skinned man with a large coif of hair. The woman flirtingly touched the man's hand, tilted her head back in a pantomime of raucous laughter. The woman looked eerily familiar. Too familiar. It felt like I was looking in a mirror.

"Mermaids of the Tama"

Down a hidden stretch of the Tama River, a small wooden boat clacked against the shore. Hisao and his grandson sat inside, sorting through fishing poles and streams of white ribbon as the cherry trees above kept them shaded and cool. Along the river, the trees grew at all angles—crowded together and rising toward the sky. It was early spring and the branches were weighted with pink bounty. Their full bloom lined the banks like the brittle walls of a fairytale castle, granting sunlight only the most minimal of trespasses. In Hisao’s experience, it was the perfect spot to fish for mermaids.

The old man had taken his grandson to the shadow of Mt. Kasadori. To a place where they could watch the river ooze slow from the stomach of the mountain and wait in silence for the mermaids to approach. Hisao knew the mermaids swam there. They liked the quiet and the cherry blossoms. They liked the way the clear water sparkled in the tiny patches of sun. The mermaids appeared in April, alongside the cherry blossoms, and departed a few weeks later as the flowers, heavy with life, tumbled from the branches and drifted to the river. The mermaids would follow the dying blossoms procession-like downstream until they reached the city of Tokyo.

Hisao knew that once mermaids found Tokyo, they remained forever—turned human in the bright lights and flickering dreams.

#

High in the boughs, barely visible through the crowded throngs of healthy pink and white flowers, a black cherry blossom curled against a branch. Its petals were raisin-shaped and shriveled, starkly different from the teardrop figure of the other flowers.

“See that black flower way up in the tree?” Hisao asked his grandson. “It’s been there for years. Season after season it watches the other flowers fall and drift away, but is forced to remain on that branch.”

The boy looked up quickly. A heavy coughing fit struck him, dizzying his head to a whirl. He braced his body against his grandfather’s thin arm to regain composure.

Hisao fixed his attention on his grandson and thought about himself as a boy. They looked much alike. Dark hair that was too long for a parent’s liking. Tiny framed and scrawny. Only... his grandson had an anemic presence. Pale, weak, and perpetually sick. His father explained the boy had a weak constitution. It was a departure from the bruises and scrapes of Hisao’s own childhood.

Hisao’s grandson was named Yoshinori, but everyone called him Yoshi. His name was the only thing the boy’s father had ever done to appease Hisao. Matsu, Yoshi’s father, was a dreamer in youth who found himself ill-prepared for the death of his mother. He spent his time with delinquent friends, breaking into homes, and vandalizing local shops. Unable to deal with Matsu, Hisao was forced to remarry. He became stricter and meaner until the boy disappeared one night. The only acknowledgement of his flight was a letter of hatred pinned to a maple tree in the backyard. Hisao found the note a few hours before daybreak. He had come home drunk and read the words by starlight. The message was promptly crumpled up and thrown away.

A year after his departure, Matsu resumed regular communication with his stepmother via letters. He had gone to the city to escape his father’s oppression. He was

sorry. They wrote back and forth for several decades, but he never visited, and slowly his life progressed. He was employed in a factory. Got married. Had a son.

“I named him Yoshinori, the same name father wanted for me. Tell him that. Give the old bastard at least one moment of happiness,” he wrote.

Shortly after that letter, Hisao’s second wife died. At the funeral, Hisao and Matsu spoke for the first time since the boy ran away. Sober words, but nothing straining for the tongue. Words of consolation, sorrow, and regret.

Then Matsu walked out of his life once more. Hisao wanted to reach out to him, but found himself incapable. “Patience rewards and I must not rush. If he is destined to be my son, he will find his own path to me,” Hisao told himself

#

That’s why Yoshinori had never met his grandfather until two weeks prior, at the start of the cherry blossom season. Hisao called Matsu early one morning and asked permission to meet his grandson. Yoshi boarded a train shortly after.

“Your grandfather is getting old. He doesn’t get many visitors. He’d like to see you once before he passes away,” Matsu informed Yoshi.

Yoshi wasn’t happy about it. He hated to miss school. There was too much work to do. Fourth grade was hard enough to begin with. And he had missed a lot of classes recently. He had been getting sick a lot; his cough was getting worse. The doctors said he needed fresh air, but Yoshi hated the outdoors. Worse still, his father was making him take the trip alone.

“I can’t come. It’s difficult to explain. I’ll never forgive the way he treated me when I was a boy. He was rotten then. But not so rotten that he deserves to die lonely,” Matsu said, plucking his son’s shaggy, black bangs away from his eyes.

#

“Would you like me to show you how to catch a mermaid?” Hisao asked.

He pulled his fishing pole from the grass and unspooled the white ribbon. It was long, thin, tightly coiled, and made from the same durable nylon as fishing lines.

“You see, Yoshinori, you just have to write a single dream on the ribbon and tie it to the end of your pole. Make sure it’s one you remember well. Mermaids feed off our dreams. If your dream is special enough, they will be attracted to it.”

Hisao pushed up his sleeves and scribbled on his ribbon with a jittery hand: *Bed of pink. Down the river sits the lighted temple. The Great Buddha weeps. Sleep now. I tell him this. Sleep now.*

It was the only dream he could remember since his first wife, Shinju, died. More than a dream, it was a premonition that occurred twice before in his life. In the dream Hisao was floating on his back down a pink river. The river wound through a thick forest and, at the end, a giant temple signaled to him with brilliant shimmering lights. Upon arrival, he found a large golden Buddha seated on a throne. Hisao approached to pay his respects, but found the Buddha crying. His tears came down as cherry blossoms. Hisao tried to console him—he had never known Buddha to cry.

This dream had always preceded a death. The first time he encountered it was before his father’s plane crash. The second was the night before Shinju died. He wrote them on ribbons and kept them away from his other dreams. They were not ordinary.

Hisao knew this last occurrence signaled his own death. Adding the final ribbon to the others would make the cycle of his life complete. He would combine them all, give them to the mermaids, and wait for passage into his next life.

When Hisao finished writing the dream, he looked at his handiwork. The characters on the ribbon looked more like childish doodles than calligraphy. “What more can be asked of such an old man?”

The boat continued clacking against the shore and the rope tying them to a nearby cherry tree grew taut as a strong breeze passed through. A few blossoms were plucked from the outstretched branches and tossed into the river, specking the crystal waters with pink.

The shriveled, black flower continued to curl against the branch. Not moving. Not changing. Hisao shook his head and stared at the falling cherry blossoms, saddened that he would never see them bloom again.

Yoshinori coughed hard and spit phlegm at the ground.

“Do you understand what to do?” Hisao asked.

Yoshi looked at his great-grandfather with wide eyes and nodded. Hurriedly he scribbled on a piece of ribbon: *Lasers. Robots tear through buildings. I stand in my cape and punch their faces off.*

“Like this?” he asked.

Hisao nodded and smiled, “What does it mean?”

“A dream I had last night. They’re characters from a cartoon I like.”

Hisao reached his hand over to tie the ribbon on his grandson's fishing pole, but his arthritis had gotten too bad. He could merely rest Yoshinori's pole against the palm of his wrinkled hand and let the boy tie it himself.

Yoshi threw his ribbon into the water and, within seconds, it fell off. He leaped forward in an attempt to run down the shore after it, but Hisao held out his hand. "No, no. Once a dream is swallowed up in the river, it's lost forever. You'll have to use another."

The boy watched in silence as his ribbon headed downstream. The darkness of the forest masked its progress, except for a few glitters of sunlight that escaped the trees and sparkled on the slow-moving ribbon.

Yoshi thought hard and shyly raised his pen to write another phrase. The old man leaned over to read it, but Yoshi hid it from view. This time he secured the ribbon with three additional knots and cast it back into the water.

"Grandfather, would you like me to tie your ribbon for you?" Yoshinori asked.

Hisao passed him his three dream ribbons. "Be careful, though, those dreams are very important to me. I can't lose them."

#

As Yoshinori fastened the ribbons, Hisao watched a strangely familiar flower fall from the tree. It was the same shape and color as the dark pink cherry blossom painted on his father's fighter plane. He put it there to show he wasn't afraid of death. But that fearless blossom exploded, along with his father, somewhere in the South Pacific. Gunned down by an enemy plane during the war.

His death marked the first occurrence of Hisao's Buddha dream.

When the news arrived of his father passing, he took the ribbon with his dream and tied it to a stick. It was winter. Snow spread across the ground and stuck to Hisao's bare legs as he ran to a nearby river. The water was solid; he cracked the ice in frustration and sat freezing on the ground. He prayed a mermaid would take away the dream and ease his pain. He sat until his skin turned blue, but a mermaid never arrived. He tore the ribbon off the stick and walked home slowly, his whole body shaking.

Hisao's father was the one who told him of mermaids and the ritual for their capture. He would go out to the banks with the other fishermen, and return exchanging stories of men who caught mermaids with their dreams.

As a child, Hisao's father never allowed him to join their fishing trips. "A young man's dreams are too precious to squander on mermaids. Leave this business to old men. Our dreams mean less than the memories we store."

It wasn't until the war started that Hisao's father reconsidered. He led Hisao to a secret stream in the shadow of Mt. Kasadori. He grabbed Hisao by the shoulder and told him to spend his dreams while he could...before the war stole them away.

He told Hisao about the mermaids of the Tama River and how they swam in silence beneath the cherry blossoms. He talked about the legend of the cherry trees.

"They were planted by a young prince madly in love with a villager from Yamanashi. His father would never approve the affair, so the prince created a secret spot for their love. He told the girl when the blossoms budded, they would both return every spring to this spot and remain together until the fallen pink flowers displaced the passage home.

“So for many springs, they met. The rest of the year was spent in their boring, predetermined lives, eagerly awaiting their lover’s embrace beneath the cherry blossoms.

“One year, the prince arrived as scheduled, but his love was not there. He waited for days. On the fourth night of waiting, a storm passed overhead. Its power shook all the blossoms from the trees.

“The prince woke to find his lover gilded with cherry blossom petals and a spectral, white glow. She had drowned in the Tama. Her boat had sunk. She told him she would always love him, but their love was like the cherry blossoms. They would be born again and again. And in every new existence they would find each other and their eternal love would bloom and die and bloom once more.

“Instead of being consoled by his lover’s words, the prince was thrust into inconceivable despair. He couldn’t bear continuing this life without her. When he returned to his kingdom, he removed a blade from his room and made preparations to die. Before the blade could pierce his stomach, his lover’s spirit appeared once more. She told him that in every existence, their love would always be fleeting. It is the curse of true love: the happiness can’t last long. To rush the reunion would ruin the potency of their love in the next life. The prince set down the blade and promised her he’d wait as long as he needed to be back in her arms once more.”

As a teenager, the story had affected Hisao greatly. He knew all about waiting and uncertainty. His father was about to head off to war. How could he not be aware?

#

There was a tug on Hisao's fishing line. Fast and hard. He gripped with numb, weak fingers and almost lost his pole. Yoshi reached a small hand out and grabbed the stick. Together they pulled.

Instead of a mermaid, an oversized maruta was tangled in his ribbons. Typically, the maruta was a silver fish, but this one had a back stained tar-black with a bright orange streak above the silvery stomach. The fish squirmed and flapped until the ribbons loosened enough for the maruta to free itself.

Hisao sat still in the boat. His eyes fixed on the black water. He didn't move until Yoshi put a hand on his back. The points of his spine poked the boy's fingers.

“Grandfather, have you ever caught a mermaid before?”

“I was close once,” Hisao sighed, “I put a dream in this very river, the night before my first wedding. It was my most precious dream. I had kept it safe for years. I wish I could remember it now, but it's lost to the waters. A mermaid came up to grab it. It only took a moment of waiting. She was beautiful. Too beautiful. Shining blonde hair draped across her bare, honey-skinned body. Her fins glimmered like gold. I was too stunned by her beauty to hold onto the pole. I lost her and my prized dream forever. The next day Shinju and I were married.”

#

Shinju was from a distant region of Japan, far away from the places Hisao was familiar with as a child. She had moved to the area with her family after the flooding of her hometown. Hisao's father became good friends with her father and over the years their families grew very close.

Both fathers were in agreement that Hisao and Shinju would wed when the time was right. When Hisao's father died, Shinju's family moved in to take care of Hisao and his mother. Hisao and Shinju were married six years later.

Hisao was unsure how to comprehend Shinju at first. She was an odd, loud girl. Always making jokes. Always being silly. Yet it didn't take long for her charm to grow on him and, as children, they were inseparable. She was more like a boy than any female he knew. They'd adventure through the forests and streams around Yamanashi. They fought samurai warriors of the mind's fancy and laughed at the thought that'd they be married one day.

"That's silly. Adults are so stupid. They always want us to get jobs and make babies. Babies are gross. Have you ever seen one? They're all dunces," Shinju joked.

After Hisao's father died, Shinju was the one who gave him reason to laugh and kept him strong for his mother's sake. Romance seeded during their quiet talks in the dark. Whispers about mortality and existence. Dreams about the road ahead.

One night they stole away to the base of Mt. Kasadori. Her black hair glimmered in the moonlight. Her pale face blushed under his hard stare. She giggled as he leaned in to kiss her. It was a quick peck that barely connected with her lips, but it was enough to make his face numb and force the blood to rush toward his torso.

After their wedding, Hisao stopped fishing for mermaids. The encounter with the creature and his failure to capture it made him feel unworthy. He continued inscribing his dreams on strips of ribbon, but he no longer used them as mermaid bait. Instead, he would fold them carefully and lock them in a tiny music box gifted to him by his father.

It was oak paneled with a faded brass lid. When opened, the tiny gears inside would turn, chirping the melody of “Sado Okesa”, an old Japanese folk song.

Shinju died after fifteen years of marriage. She fell down a hill during one of her frequent hikes. A neighbor found her hours later with her arms tangled around her broken neck. At the cemetery, Hisao took his music box and buried it with his wife’s ashes.

From that moment on Hisao never had a dream again.

Until the dream of the Buddha—the night before he called his son.

#

“I saw grandmother last night,” Yoshinori stated matter-of-factly.

“Excuse me?”

“That is the dream on my pole. She was swimming down a river like a fish. She looked the same as in the photo at your house. She told me she was very happy to meet me and that I was very handsome. She told me things happen that you can’t control, but follow the current and there is always another season. So I did. I followed her down the river for a long, long time. When we reached Tokyo, she disappeared.”

Hisao looked at Yoshi and smiled. It was surprising how much he had grown to care for the boy over the past two weeks. It made him sad he had never tried to reconnect with his own son, Matsu.

He had been rough on Matsu. He could admit that now. As a boy, Matsu would talk for hours about his plans and intentions. Hisao wanted him to work in the fields, but Matsu would crawl away to read a book. It caused momentary rifts between him and Shinju. She always babied Matsu, sheltering him from the fields. Her defense of his

behavior would make Hisao bite down on his lip until his mouth filled with copper-tasting blood.

After his mother died, Matsu became wild. It made life tough for Hisao, who only wanted to mourn his wife in peace. Matsu would bully the kids in his school and steal useless trinkets from houses. The village was in an uproar over his lack of parenting skills.

The situation forced Hisao to take a second wife—a local woman from the town and far past her prime. He didn't want to, but Shinju's relatives argued his boy needed a mother. Hisao knew they were right: he wasn't sure how to parent, that was Shinju's job.

He got along well with his second wife. She was quiet and amiable. She pleased him and made a good companion in his loneliness. But while Matsu became wilder, Hisao's despair grew. He started drinking heavily. His punishments grew in intensity. Sometimes he would hit Matsu. Usually with fists, but sometimes with objects. Rods, books, sticks. Once, a shovel.

It was mainly to scare, but sometimes to hurt.

He regretted that. He always had. But he was too proud. And it wasn't until his phone call two weeks prior that he finally had the chance to apologize. By that time, it was too late. Still, even if he never fully made things right with Matsu, he could at least make amends with his lineage.

Yoshi...

#

Several loud splashes resounded in the water. Yoshinori scrambled to his feet. Gripped his pole tight. The splashes increased. Drops of water sprayed the air. The river

became a whirlpool of ripples. The renegade drops soaked Hisao's tunic as he ducked down.

Hundreds of maruta flopped at the surface of the water. Transformed the stream into a writhing mix of black, orange and silver. They flickered like the headlights of passing cars in the shadow of the cherry trees. The fish nibbled at Hisao's pole until the ribbons hit the water. More maruta grabbed at the ribbons with their mouths. They raced downstream.

"My dreams!" Hisao exclaimed. The old man jumped from the boat and clambered along the bank as he followed the fish.

The wind intensified. Roared in their ears. It ripped the blossoms from the branches and spread them across the forest. Cherry blossoms rained to the ground. As the flowers fell, sunlight spread across the river. Bathed the boat in light. In the confusion, Hisao lost sight of his dream ribbons.

"Grandfather, help!" Yoshi yelled as his ribbon tightened and stretched toward the center of the river.

The old man rushed to his grandson, tripping over a branch along the way. Hisao was exhausted by the time he climbed back into the boat. "Just keep hold of the pole. Don't worry, the ribbon won't tear. That material is special. I've never seen it break."

Yoshi had grown weak and dizzy from the battle. He could barely stand. His only recourse was to lay the weight of his body against the pole, trying to wedge himself between the pole and the water.

The boat boomed against the riverbank like an oversized bass drum. The wood splintered. Hisao grabbed the fishing pole from his grandson as Yoshi collapsed against

the bench, his whole body trembling from a vicious coughing fit. He opened his hands to find thick mucus mixed with blood.

Hisao used all his strength to yank the ribbon from the water. The boat continued thumping at the muddy soil. The man and boy slid from side to side as the vessel hit. The bones in Hisao's wrists cracked with each snap of his hand, but he held on tightly, refusing to give up. The rope tying their boat to the shore was slowly coming undone. Bundles of fiber snapped like the strings of a poorly tuned zither. With one final surge, Hisao pulled hard on the ribbon and caused the boat's rope to sever. Yoshi reached his tiny hand toward his grandfather and grabbed his kimono to prevent him from falling as the river snatched their boat.

Hisao was gasping for breath. His whole body ached. The pole was bending in his hands, almost to the point of snapping. Yoshi slid off the bench and grappled with a strand of ribbon. Quickly he tied it around his waist to take the pressure away from the fishing pole.

The creature attached to the ribbon swam in erratic circles around the drifting boat. It was struggling against the weight of Yoshi's body. The ribbon snaked across the water and tightened, rotating around the old man and the boy. Yoshi dove toward the back of the boat, grabbing the fishing pole from his grandfather's hands and propelling it along with him. And, finally, the long train of ribbon lurched from the water.

Attached to the ribbon was a mermaid. Her body smacked against the boat and she gripped the bow with her arms. The first image of the mermaid was her eyes: blank orbs painted with a melancholic blue. She gazed at them, curious, and pulled herself onto the boat. She had long, black hair that ran down her back like spools of silk. Her flesh

was the color of thick amber, glowing radiant in the fresh sunlight. Her upper body was slender and athletic. Her lower half was a glimmering sheet of golden fins.

Hisao was astonished. The mermaid had finally returned.

Yoshi was mesmerized. It was the first time he had ever seen a woman's breasts before.

The mermaid dove back into the water with a loud *clap*. The noise reverberated in the air. Seconds later she reappeared and stood straight on her fins. She supported herself on the surface of the water, as if she weighed little more than a feather, and glided across the river like a child skating in a frozen pond.

She spread her arms wide and raised them above her head. The wind whirled around her and the last few dozen of the cherry blossoms fell from the trees. In their descent, they clung to the mermaid's skin, adhering to every inch of her flesh and fins. They formed around her contours as if they were pieces long separated from her body. Within minutes she was entirely covered with the flowers. Her flesh became brittle, pink, and chalky. She looked briefly at Hisao with her tortured eyes and turned away. She plunged deep into the water.

It took Hisao a moment to notice Yoshi was still tied to the ribbon. Hisao tried to grab his grandson, but he was weakened from the previous battle.

"Help!" Yoshinori screamed as he splashed into the river. His tiny arms thrashed. His thin neck jerked back and forth, bobbing up and down as the mermaid pulled him away from the boat.

Hisao grabbed the long oar that was mounted at the rear of the boat. He tightened the muscles in his arms and pulled, synchronizing his body with the motion of the river,

leaning back and forth as the water ebbed. Yoshi's name filled his mouth as he shouted it over and over again. His body shook; he could feel his heartbeat against his teeth. But, with all his effort, he was no match for the speed of the mermaid. She continued along, dragging Yoshi behind her as he emitted bursts of high-pitched shrieks that were followed by terrible glugging noises that echoed through the trees.

Just as the old man was about to give up—his body unable to strain any further—the mermaid stopped her journey and turned around. She focused her cold eyes on Hisao and shook her head slowly, as if offering him an apology for her behavior.

Hisao used the delay to his advantage and doubled his speed with the oar. His back gave out on him and a terrible pain shot through his body, numbing his arms and searing his lungs with fire. As his consciousness flickered, Hisao launched himself from the boat and crashed into the mermaid's body.

The impact dragged them both under the water as their tangled bodies grappled for control. Hisao opened his eyes and found the mermaid staring directly at him. Her body went limp; she stopped struggling. Her blue eyes came to life, blooming like jars of African lilies below the darkness of her furrowed brows. She smiled, revealing deep dimples and bone-white teeth, and mouthed words Hisao couldn't understand.

The mermaid released the rope holding Yoshi and grabbed Hisao's arm instead. She whispered in his ear—words sounding remarkably like, "You're ready."

Warmth washed over the old man, a relief that started in his stomach and traveled quickly through his body, numbing the aches and pains of age and struggle. He caught a glimpse of his grandson dog-paddling toward the boat. The black, withered cherry blossom had finally fallen from its branch and floated down toward the boy. Hisao

reached one hand toward the flower in a feeble attempt to grab it. Pink flowers covered his body and clear water filled his lungs. “It was nice to meet you Yoshi,” Hisao said as he gave himself fully to the Tama.

#

Yoshi grabbed the edge of the boat and held his body there, tapping against the hull like a buoy. He looked back toward the river, but his grandfather and the mermaid were gone. All he could see were the bare trees and the fallen blossoms clotting the water. Yoshi hung against the side for several minutes before gathering the strength to climb aboard.

The withered cherry blossom floated close to the hull of the boat. As Yoshi attempted to grab it, a tiny maruta popped out of the water and caught it in its mouth. The fish was dragging a long, unspooled ribbon behind it. Before the fish could get away, Yoshi lunged toward the ribbon. He tugged hard and the attached maruta flopped around desperately before being pulled in the boat.

By the time Yoshi picked it up, the fish was already dead. It had either choked on the cherry blossom in its throat or was somehow injured in the struggle. As he held the fish in his hand, Yoshi noticed something large inside the fish’s stomach. He rummaged through the boat until he found a knife. He cut the fish open. Inside was an oak-paneled music box. He lifted the faded brass lid and the tiny gears turned. It softly cranked an old Japanese melody. “Sado Okesa”. Inside the box were white ribbons covered with dreams.

With the lid open, the wind stole the ribbons away. They spilled out of the box and floated to the sky until only one ribbon remained—the one the maruta had been

carrying in its mouth. Yoshi looked at it quizzically, sensing a meaning that escaped him in his youth.

It read: *Transformed to prince. Seated on gold. A cherry blossom in my hand. It grows and dies. Grows and dies. Shinju, dressed in rags, stands far from the throne, tapping her foot against the marble floor.*

"Project Aaru"

The Truth

I wouldn't wish the afterlife on my worst enemy, but that's a secret only a few of us know. Don't listen to the press releases. Don't listen to the news. Stay as far away from the afterlife as you can—you'll find only misery; you'll find only nightmares.

This was a truth Alastair Crane knew from the beginning and this was a truth most likely on his mind when he died.

On the night he committed suicide, his sister called me on the phone. Most of the words slid past me, like ideas on the precipice of sleep. *Lakeview Hospital. Bullet. Coma.* The disconnection of the nouns created a poetry of imminent peril.

It had been over a year since Alastair and I broke up; over a year since I abandoned Alastair in that hotel in Oslo, clutching his Nobel Prize as if it could protect him from himself. For a long time, I thought I hated him—and we hadn't spoken since—but our relationship wasn't ready for something as final as death.

I barged into the emergency room. My body was drenched in sweat and my teeth chattered like a wind-up toy. It was well past midnight and the emergency room was filled with several sow-faced drug addicts and one purple-mouthed young girl who wrapped herself around her mother's waist as she shivered and coughed. They all looked in my direction as I panted out the words lodged in my throat, "Alastair...Crane."

An attendant ushered me down a corridor and into a backroom but, by the time I arrived, Alastair's heart had stopped. His sister rushed to hug me as I entered. "He's told me so much about you, Terrence. I guess you really were his one true love."

Half of Alastair's face was curled in gore. His left eye hung loose from the socket.

"Surprisingly, the bullet missed his brain. They are still recording minor sparks of activity," his sister explained to me.

I ran the back of my hand across his chest as the nurse explained the predicament. "We want to attach him to the Mastaba; we just can't find a waiver on file. Are you aware that Alastair granted you power of attorney several years ago?"

I was not aware of this. In fact, the news came as a shock. Alastair spent the two decades we were together trying keep me at a distance. It was a big reason why I left him in the first place. Apparently in death, he finally realized the importance of communication.

The situation was a moral conundrum: *attach him to the Mastaba and bury him or let him die in peace and burn the body?*

I knew he wouldn't want to be buried. That would entail an afterlife and the afterlife was a place no one in their right mind wanted to be. But, if he was burned, he'd be gone from me forever—just when he had officially become mine. The moral choice should have been obvious but, gazing into the waning blue supernovas of his irises, it seemed a crime against nature to let him disappear.

I nodded to the nurse and scattered my signatures throughout the pages. It was then I made myself a promise: if I was going to send him to the afterlife, I'd find a way to fix him. I'd stop his subconscious from taking control. The torment of the afterlife would be no more and Alastair would be mine forever.

#

Project Aaru

In his life, Alastair Crane was a hero; a neuroscientist who spearheaded Project Aaru—a research proposal commissioned by the Calexico Corporation. The intention was to organically manufacture an afterlife. Alastair and his fellow scientists spent the previous twenty-five years developing a system in which the human mind could be kept functional, in vivo, long after cardiac arrest.

The system was derived from a nearly fifty-year-old German experiment, wherein an injection of: oxidized blood, a synthetic strain of monosaccharide, and a cocktail of proteins could be used to recover the brain of a stroke victim. Alastair modified this solution into a preservative—in the vein of formaldehyde—which could not only serve to prevent the deterioration of brain cells, but could keep them active with a constant low-voltage surge of electricity. Until I joined the project, they could only monitor the activity of the isolated brains through readouts detailing spikes in levels of relaxation and stress.

Their ultimate hypothesis: a deceased human could continue to lead an active lifestyle within the constructs of his or her own mind. Not only an active lifestyle, but a life where every fantasy came true.

I met Alastair Crane during the final semester of my PhD. We were both patronizing a local dive bar called the Night Owl—a grungy building with dirt covered floors, a collapsing ceiling, the permanent odor of spoiled milk, and walls yellowed from the nicotine of a bygone era. I drank rum and cokes, trying to get over a recent phone call from my father where he, once again, harped on my failures. He was a blue-collar autoworker and always resented the career path I took. He saw the whole college enterprise as a downward spiral into debt, as opposed to the practical life he led.

I chewed on an ice cube and scanned the room, but there was no one of interest—aside from a coterie of football players who flexed their muscles and spoke to each other as if communicating across the divide of the Grand Canyon.

The dearth of good company was discouraging and I had all but given up hope for the evening, when I noticed Alastair at the end of the bar flipping through a stack of folders. He had short, peppered hair and dark-rimmed glasses that were that stylish type of nerdy *oh-so-popular* with our generation of sensitive hipsters. I had seen his picture in several science magazines and recognized him from Project Aaru. His face stuck out in my mind because I had always found him irresistibly cute.

In person, he was even cuter.

After my fifth or sixth drink, my eyes wouldn't abandon Alastair's side of the bar. The way he was completely oblivious to his surroundings—the caterwauling of the jocks and the omnipresent stench of the bar— as he went about his work, evidenced a quiet, Zen-like intelligence that attracted me deeply. And, even though I was pretty sure he was straight, I thought it a sin not to at least talk to him, so I slid down the bar and took the adjacent seat.

He looked up from his papers and nodded. The outline of a smile cracked his stoic, Mount Olympus of a face and his blue eyes lit up like electric marbles as he turned toward me.

"You work on Project Aaru. Alastair Crane, correct?" I asked. "My name is Terrence Miles."

We shook hands and his eyes glazed over, as if he were calculating some impossible sum in the back of his mind. He paused and sifted through his folders until he found the one he was looking for.

"Yes, yes. Terrence Miles. You created the Exeter software. I've heard a lot about it from Mr. Greene. Very interesting work. May I ask why you never finished it?"

I wasn't exactly sure how to answer him. Exeter was a computer operating system that responded to the frequencies of a human brain. I had gotten a lot of the coding done, but in the end, it turned out to be just another in my long line of ambitious projects that started with a burst of ambition, quickly dissipated into a cloud of frustration, and then transformed into a drinking binge that took me from bedroom to bedroom across the city.

"Word around Stanford is you're an incredibly bright student and an innovative programmer, but you also have a reputation for being an..." Alastair rummaged through his file for a moment and then tapped his finger harshly on a pertinent line. "...An absolute prick." He smiled. "Not my words of course. Just what's written here."

We talked for a while that night. Drinks disappeared quicker than the protein molecules of decomposing matter. He maintained composure as he downed his whiskey and quipped cleverly through the night. I, on the other hand, started ranting about my struggles with classmates, the idiocy of Americans, the sex lives of panda bears, and the constant disapproval of my father.

When I mentioned my father, his ears perked up and he laughed. "I've spent my entire career trying to prove to my father I was worth something too. Don't let it break you."

I fell in love that night. And somehow I convinced myself that my feelings toward him were reciprocated. I mean, it was *obviously* a match made in heaven:

He went to Stanford; I went to Stanford.

His father was an unbearable asshole; my father was an unbearable asshole.

I was a computer programmer; he owned a computer.

He was a neurobiologist; I had a brain.

I was gay; he admitted that bisexuality was a latent aspect of every human being, but he wasn't sure if he could be aroused by a man.

Like I said...a match made in heaven.

We spent the evening stranded on our own private island of conversation. It wasn't until the lights came on and the surly bartender shouted out "last call" did we remember we weren't alone. Two of the football players stumbled to the front of the room punching each other in the arms and chanting the jingle to a tampon commercial.

Alastair looked at them and shook his head. He pulled me close to him and slurred, "Can I let you in on a secret? The afterlife isn't what you'd expect it to be. We're having some difficulty keeping the dead sane for much longer than a decade. Sometimes even less than that...depending on their level of guilt. They find ways to torture themselves."

He pointed to the jocks as they pushed each other, shouting loudly to impress a sad-eyed young girl who was tagging along. "We're naturally insecure creatures. All these things we do? It's for show. All of our confidence and bravado and cattiness is a comfort mechanism," Alastair said.

The football players and the sad-eyed girl looked over at us as they exited the bar. One of the men mumbled "queers" as he closed the door.

"The dead start off with these grand fantasies but, over time, they start thinking about all the mistakes they made in life and the people they hurt and the things they didn't do and so on and so on. It takes over. Every single time. Even science can't reprogram the mind," Alastair said, tapping his skull to emphasize his point.

He paused and swayed in his seat. "Jesus. I don't know how I'm going to find my way back to my hotel," he said through a belch.

We ended the night in my bedroom and polished off two jugs of cheap red wine. The room whirred around and, for some reason, I tried to catch imaginary fireflies with my hands. In between the spastic movements of my fists, I turned the conversation toward sex.

"Want to know another secret? It's been a while since I've gotten laid. Eight years, four months, a week, and two days to be exact," Alastair said as he sprawled out on my bedspread.

Encouraged by the booze, I challenged him to put his theories of bisexuality to the test. He conceded to give it a shot and together we proved the following thesis: Alcohol + Sexual Deprivation = *Hallelujah! Let there be penis!*

Afterward we lay in bed; my arm around his waist. He smelled of tangy body odor; I could taste the salt on my tongue. My fingers slid through his greasy hair and I curled a lock in between my fingers. He didn't say anything for a long period of time and I worried he regretted his decision.

Suddenly he lurched forward in bed. "Terrence, I have an idea for your Exeter software. If we can get it working, do you think we could use it to display the dreams of the dead? Think about it. It could entirely change the grieving process. Imagine if family members could actually watch their loved ones continue their lives? We'd change the world."

"But, what about the suffering part of the afterlife? Family members won't want to see that."

"We'll figure that out in time. For now...would you like a job?"

#

The Funeral of Alastair Crane

Alastair's funeral was a somber affair. I elected to keep it limited to family and close friends, despite the protests of the media and the science community."Alastair is a hero. The most important public figure in our age," the president of Calexico argued.

Alastair's sister and I remained said a prayer as the gravediggers shoveled dirt on his coffin and the technicians ran wires through the ground and into the grave. We held hands as the projection screen was inserted into the headstone and adjusted. I shivered as the feed turned on.

The very next day I began my study of the mind. The Calexico Corporation was very supportive and even allowed me to work from home. They provided me with test subjects, loaned me machinery, granted me assistants, and wished me good luck. I started by experimenting with the dream state, much like the work I once did with Alastair. I tried to isolate the moment in which a dream became a nightmare and then prevent it

from happening. Unfortunately, I was primarily a computer programmer and not a neuroscientist, so the results didn't provide me with much information I could use.

I took out my frustrations on the assistants. Tossed computers and equipment. Deemed them "sniveling twats." Told them they didn't deserve to call themselves scientists.

The result of all these temper tantrums was Calexico pulling the funding from my research.

#

Working on a Dream

Being part of Project Aaru was a big change for me. I was used to fucking around and performing the bare minimum. That attitude would never coalesce with the philosophies of Calexico. Working under Alastair only made matters worse.

As a boss, I quickly found Alastair to be an insufferable asshole who demanded a constant pace and frequently unleashed a barrage of insults about my intelligence and work ethic. As a lover, he was publicly cold, but very affectionate in the comfort of the bedroom. He'd apologize for his behavior during the day. Blame it on stress and shyly kiss me on the forehead.

There were days when I'd come into work hung over and unable to function. He'd scream at me until the rest of the laboratory cleared out in discomfort. In bed, on those nights, he'd grab my hand and pull me close to his chest. "I don't understand why you don't apply yourself," he would say. "You have so much talent, but squander it for little reason."

Despite the setbacks, we completed the Exeter software together. The next step in the project was to use the software to study the cognitions of a brain entering REM sleep. A live feed was connected from the brain tank to a computer screen. Images of dreams—flying horses, Lady Godivas the size of Godzilla, anacondas that spewed maggots out of their jaws like a canon—were painted on the screen like a real-world Dali painting.

As we worked, our affair blossomed. We would cast swift glances at each other as our test subjects dozed off and, as soon as sleep officially hit, he'd push me in the corner and kiss me violently. He'd tell me he felt like a knight who had just slain a sleepy dragon and rescued his princess.

Through our continued progress, we discovered brain images could be recorded and manipulated. We could splice together dreams or isolate them and put them on a loop. Entire sequences could be reprogrammed to create an unlimited amount of variations on the original source.

Alastair was ecstatic. "Do you know what this means? We might actually be able to reprogram the dead."

By reprogramming, though, Alastair did not mean we would alter a human's actual subconscious; we would just overwrite the feed. By monitoring the feeds of the deceased, we could pinpoint the moment when the dead began to feel tormented, splice into their mind, and alter the images on the screen. Visiting family members would no longer be troubled by darkening minds and would instead be greeted with computerized loops of generic fantasies and episodic memories extracted from the neocortex. In essence, the dead would still be tortured, but the surviving family wouldn't be aware of it.

It might not have been the most ethical solution but Alastair told me it was only temporary. "Unless we get this project out there now, Calexico is going to cut our funding. After we sell the product, we'll have enough time to solve this problem permanently."

#

The Humdrum Normalcy of the Afterlife

After Calexico cut the funding on my project to study the subconscious, I went back to drinking the time away. Bottles of liquor piled up on the floor of my makeshift laboratory and I pissed away month after month.

I visited Alastair's grave constantly. Most of my time was spent slurping whiskey from a tin can and napping in the dirt.

Alastair's afterlife was one of humdrum normalcy. Gone were the camera flashes of stardom. Through Alastair's own eyes, the screen showed him settling into a quiet life with me. We sipped wine and worked on pet projects. It was never clear what we were actually working on, but in the afterlife I was apparently an extremely talented scientist and mathematician and butler and chef and masseuse. I don't know where I learned all those skills, but his afterlife was pretty good to me.

Together we planned the private vacation to the Himalayas we had always discussed but never managed to find time to do together in the real world—Alastair was always too busy with work. It was extremely disconcerting that I found myself growing jealous of myself as I watched the Afterlife Terrence share a life with Alastair. The life he and I had always dreamed of.

That evening:

In the afterlife—Alastair and I boarded a plane and prepared for their vacation to the Himalayas.

In the real world—I finished off the whisky in my tin can as the sun fell from the sky and the graveyard took on an ethereal glow. The air frosted over and the wind began to blow.

In the afterlife—Alastair and I held hands. We sat side by side in plushy airplane seats; my head on his shoulder. Both of us had smiles like a widening eclipse.

In the real world—I was hunched over near the gravestone, clutching my side, trying to hold in the whiskey rising in my stomach.

#

The Afterlife is Complete

By the end of the decade, we completed Project Aaru. We signed confidentiality contracts about the "Reprogramming" as Calexico executives proudly unveiled the Mastaba to the media.

Things started off shaky. Every major religious leader condemned the idea of the Mastaba. Declared it "unnatural" and a "middle finger in God's face." The scientific community vocalized their concerns about Project Aaru, asking us to wait until a consensus among all had been reached. Crime increased, especially around the graveyards, as financially troubled citizens stole—and resold—the wiring and screens of the dreaming dead in order to pay for their own chance at an afterlife.

Still, this did not deter a large portion of the American public from investing their life savings into the machines. Our company guaranteed a qualifiable nirvana; an iron-clad contract with paradise. There was no guesswork, there were no moral clauses. If you

had enough money to pay for the afterlife, you were guaranteed to be invited. It was hard to argue against that.

The money piled in for all of us at Calexico. The liberty afforded to me by my new wealth provided a happiness I had never experienced before: multiple houses, a fleet of cars, two boats, a restaurant chain, a private island, a cadre of servants, and a chimpanzee named Puccini.

It was the life I never dreamed of as a struggling graduate student. I called everyone I knew to gloat: my father; colleagues from grad school; I would have called Jesus Christ, himself, if I had his number.

And, for the first time, even my father was proud of me. Well, not proud exactly—I was still "a bratty cocksucker" to him—but he loved asking me for money and gladly accepted the mansion I bought for him and my mother.

But the person who saw his life change the most through the Aaru phenomenon was Alastair. He became the poster child for the project. His face was on the cover of every magazine. His name pulsed on the tip of every tongue.

It caused a palpable rift between us. Don't get me wrong; I was happy for him and his success, but it was always *him* and never *us*. We had been together for ten years and he never thanked me in his interviews or took me with him to his banquets. I was nowhere in the picture. The press saw me as background noise to an aria of genius.

#

Cleansing with Fire

After Alastair died, I started seeing him everywhere. His was the face of every grieving family member who smiled at me because they thought their loved one was safe

and happy. He was in the computer feed of every man and woman entombed in dreams. I wanted more than anything to save him from the ever-encroaching hell, but the only plan I could come up with was: drink heavily, fuck any man who expressed a modicum of interest, and act erratically until the day I tried to kill myself through self-immolation.

The day of the fire, I spent hours drinking black vodka in my garage and smashing out the windows of each of my cars. After I was covered entirely in sweat from effort and blood from the shards of broken glass, an emptiness overwhelmed me. It was as if I had finally been drained of all desire to exist.

I grabbed a gasoline can, sat on the ground cross-legged, and emptied the contents over my body. I flicked a lighter at the puddle between my legs and ignited. My skin crackled like kindling wood and my T-shirt grafted into my skin. A burning surged through the very marrow of my bones. The air filled with the stench of charcoal and sulfur. I gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and, just as my life flashed before my eyes, I chickened out and started rolling around in the ground, screaming—for whatever reason—"hot potato, hot potato, hot potato" at the top of my lungs. As much as I rolled, the flames wouldn't extinguish and I blacked out.

#

Skydiving off the Moon

Throughout my life I've had a reoccurring dream of skydiving off the moon.

I plunge headfirst from a crater and freefall for hundreds of thousands of miles toward the earth. As I fall, the light of the moon shrinks quickly—like the headlight of a car driving in reverse—until its dimming glow suffocates in the black-gloved grip of the universe. Without the warmth of the moon and its watchful eye, I feel aimless and alone;

drifting around entirely in darkness. It scares me—freefalling in a place devoid of the moon's light. I never know when the ground is approaching. The uncertainty keeps me on perpetual edge.

Just as fear begins to ooze its black in my heart, I remember to open my eyes. And when my retinas finally capture the light, my eyes explode with sensation—as if they can see, taste, touch, hear, and smell entirely on their own.

With my eyes open, I find the moon still there—a relic of what it once was—but always there to guide me if the darkness becomes too much to handle. I breathe a sigh of relief.

With my eyes open, I finally see the stars. They surround me. Fill me with warmth. My freefall slows as I stay to admire their radiance, until I realize I might never be as bright as any of them.

And, as the tears stream down my face, the pace of my freefall picks up. I reach the earth's atmosphere and ignite in flames. For one second, I burn brighter than any star in the sky or any substance in the universe. I burn so bright the entire world can see it. Those flames flicker as the sky becomes a distant memory.

And then, right before I hit the ground, I wake up.

#

Waking Up From the Flames

I woke from my suicide attempt in the hospital. My eyelids smacked like a pair of thirsty lips as I blinked for the first time in a long while. I examined my body. My arms were a gnarled bark of black and red. My chest was the color of a dried cranberry. I was numb and scarred. My reflection in the mirror revealed the bald, cherried head of a

bloodworm. The stench of my charred flesh made me want to vomit each time I inhaled. Any visitor to my room wore a mask to fend off the toxic odor.

From that point forward, my vision took on a tangerine hue that never disappeared. Every person I met simmered against the smudged illustrations of sight, as if I were living in the sun-scorched remnants of an apocalyptic city.

The doctor filled me in on the story of my rescue. A neighbor had heard me shrilly screaming out "hot potato, hot potato." Thinking at first it was a demented children's game, he continued watching television until he smelled the smoke in the air and called the fire department. The emergency crew rushed in and found me curled in a ball on top a pile of broken glass. They promptly rushed me to the emergency room. Another few minutes and I would have been dead.

"We've put you on suicide watch for the time being," the doctor said, "so I'd start learning to eat my dinner with a spoon."

I spent several weeks in the burn ward. Underwent numerous psychological evaluations. No one visited me; no one cared. The only news from the outside world was from a representative from Calxico who let me know the company was letting me go. "We can't have our programmers running around and lighting themselves on fire, can we?" he asked with a smug look on his face.

The only positive thing about the stay in the hospital was it gave me a lot of time to think.

"I don't understand why you don't apply yourself more." Alastair used to say. "You have so much talent, but squander it trying to escape yourself."

The problem was Alastair had overestimated me. I had let him down and, in effect, damned him to a lifetime of torment. I let the entire world down. I would never be able to solve the riddle of the human mind.

#

A Playboy or an Alcoholic

My first experience with the afterlife came after my father died. Alastair was pissed at me for not even attempting to prevent the burial.

As they lowered his casket into the ground, Alastair pulled me to the side and we stood under the shade of a sagging willow tree.

"How could you let your father be hooked up to the Mastaba? Are you just going to let him suffer?" he yelled.

"What did you want me to do? If I let the truth out about Reprogramming, everything would be ruined. We'd be bankrupt. The only difference between a playboy and an alcoholic is the size of his bank account. Everyone knows that. And I'm not going to become a common alcoholic again. I'm a playboy." I pouted like a petulant child who was just denied an extra piece of birthday cake.

Alastair shook his head disapprovingly.

"Plus...fuck...they'll probably send us to jail. There has to be some kind of law against damning millions of people to an eternity of incomprehensible suffering. And if there's not, there will be." I moved away from him. "He was a mean son of a bitch anyway. He deserves what's coming to him."

#

A Long Sabbatical in the Himalayas

When I was finally released from the hospital, I started a daily vigil at Alastair's grave. In the afterlife, we decided to take a long sabbatical in the foothills of the Himalayas. We worked together on experiments and it was almost like the days when we worked on Project Aaru—except we were alone and he was free with his affection.

From Alastair's point of view, I watched him approach me as I worked at a computer. He kissed my neck slowly and worked his way around to my lips. He slapped my hands playfully as I typed at the keyboard and dragged me on an impromptu hike around the mountain range.

We slept in a tent and made love beneath the stars.

As I watched the screen, I touched my own burnt flesh and imagined his hands over me. Imagined the smell of my dead flesh was the odor of his body after a hard day at work. Savored the sourness. I ran my fingers over my bald, scabbed head and imagined his oily hair slicking my fingers as I rubbed his strands in my fingers.

It was a form of contact I would never know again. The fire had chiseled a golem from the clay of my body. I was Frankenstein, and I was his monster.

In the weeks that followed, it became harder to remain at the cemetery. Not only was it painful to watch Alastair and myself exist in a world I would never know, but I had grown more attentive to the rest of the graveyard and the masses of people who, just like me, clung to the detritus of their past lives.

The living had an unhealthy obsession with the ones they had long ago buried. Hoards of lovers, friends, and family spread across the graveyard like flotsam in a

desolate ocean. They clung to the gravestones; kept their eyes on the computer screens. They wept and laughed and gasped for breath.

Even though the technology existed to have the images of the dead streamed to our cellphones and home computers, most of us preferred the intimate contact of the cemetery. It became a ritual we could not shed and, looking around me in the graveyard, I knew more than the deceased were submerged beneath the dirt. And I was responsible for that.

One night, after I had my fill of sadness, I drove down to a local tavern and pounded drink after drink. A middle-aged woman sat across from me at the bar. She was a couple dozen pounds overweight and had a pair of crutches resting in her lap. Her eyes searched the room, desperate for attention, but the only people inside were the bartender and I. She tried to get the bartender's attention; he was engrossed in a conversation on his cell phone. When she caught sight of me and my burnt skin and scarred face, she noticeably shivered, but she forced a smile anyway and I forced one back.

Several drinks later, she grabbed her crutches and walked over to the seat next to me; her right leg was missing and she struggled to sit down. We talked for a bit. I told her my lover had recently died.

She sighed. "I recently lost a loved one myself. My husband. Couldn't afford that machine, so I just threw him in a grave the old fashioned way. Sad way to go."

I nodded.

"He killed himself after the accident. Drunk driving." She gestured, in a general fashion, toward the air. "He came out of the accident fine, but I didn't. Not so much. Guess he couldn't take the pain of seeing what he done to me. The coward."

She waited for me to respond. When I didn't, she took a gulp of her Budweiser. "Say, how'd you get all them burns? You born like that or your momma drop you in a pot of boiling water?" She laughed.

"I lit myself on fire," I said.

The woman shifted uncomfortably, directed her eyes to her crutches. "Sorry for my loud mouth. Look, I don't blame you. Sometimes I just wanna end it too. Join my husband in a coward's hell. But I just don't see the point."

"Your husband's lucky to have escaped your incessant blathering," I mumbled.

She slapped me across the face. "You fucking asshole."

I felt a tingle, but nothing more. The numbness of drink had dulled the slap, but it was still the first sensation I'd had since my accident. It was the first hint in a long time that I was, in fact, still a human being.

I turned to her and gritted my teeth. "Do that again, you bitch, harder this time."

She raised her arm back and slapped again. Really hard. Even through the alcohol, the pain jolted across my burned flesh and electrified my nervous system.

"You're a piece of shit. A coward like my husband, you burned up freak," she told me and turned to leave.

I grabbed her arm and told her to wait. I apologized and told her I was having a rough day. I offered to buy her a drink. She shrugged. "Guess I got nowhere else to go. You just better watch your yapper from here on out."

We maintained small talk for the next hour or so and drank faster and faster to escape the conversation. It was like a long run down a narrowing hallway, we kept speeding ahead, trying to escape and then, at some point, we just got stuck

We found ourselves back at her place. She made us drinks and led me to her couch. She sat close to me and rubbed my leg. "You know, you'd be a cute little thing, if you didn't have to go burn yourself up like you did."

I could still feel the buzzing in my flesh where she slapped me earlier. I had a desperate urge to feel it again.

"Hit me. Punch me this time. As hard as you can."

She looked at me puzzled. "Why the hell for?"

"I deserve it. I'm a piece of shit. Just like your husband. You said so yourself."

She was tentative, but complied with a soft punch in my chest.

"Harder. Pretend I'm him. Pretend I just crippled you and left."

Her eyes crossed over and her face got red. It was as if a demon took over her body. She punched me as hard as she could in the side of my face. The tip of her knuckle caught me in the nose. Blood jetted out my nostril and coated my shirt.

She smiled. "That felt good. That really felt good."

"Great. Now do it again. Harder this time. I barely felt it."

#

The Orchestra of the Working Class

In the afterlife, my father became a successful musician. He always had a passion for the violin, but he simply wasn't very skilled. It was a dirty secret of his that he dabbled with the instrument and thought the others in his blue-collar world of cheap beers and American cars would shun him for his strangely cultured proclivities. He tried to hide his hobby from even our family but, occasionally upon coming home early from school, he could be found locked in the basement. The screeching of his poorly-tuned violin was

the sound of a tortured cat. Those were the few occasions I felt anything for the old man. He seemed like a real person then, just as flawed and delusional as the rest of us.

In death, he turned himself into a regular Paganini. No longer fearing the scorn of his workmates, he toured the country. Filled auditoriums with adoring fans. It didn't take long for his success and newfound culture to get to his head. Soon after starting his European tour, my father began cheating on my mother. Orchestra floozy after orchestra floozy filled his bed, each sending my mother into fits of jealous rage.

"Why would he do this to me?"

"Mom, it's not real."

"He knows very well what he's doing." She snapped.

This discovery did not deter my mother from watching his. On the contrary, it egged her on. She sat down at our computer around dawn, cued up the stream of my father's feed, and she refused to turn it off until well into the night.

Eventually even Afterlife Mom caught my father cheating and confronted him. They talked it over and she agreed to stay with him after he promised not to do it again.

"What the hell is her problem? How can she be so blind?" my mother demanded of herself.

I tried to explain to her that she was doing the same thing. She was sticking with my father, even after he was dead and cheating on her with dream floozies.

She had begun to treat my father's afterlife feed as if it was a soap opera. She screamed obscenities at the projection—"*that son of a bitch! how dare he?*"—when he did something she didn't like. She cooed and cried joyfully—"*now that's what a man*

should be like!"—when he returned to Afterlife Mom with flowers and apologies, promising to take her on vacations around the world.

#

A Downward Spiral

The night after the woman beat me, I was back at a bar. I really didn't have anywhere else to go. I was covered in bruises that turned my red skin brown. Had a broken nose, a split lip, and a jaw that would barely close.

I followed that night at the bar with another night at the bar and another and another. The nights became stars in a dimming constellation where they didn't really seem like much, but if you squinted hard and used enough imagination you might find the shape of something in the darkness.

Every night I drank and sat. Most people at the bars tried to avoid eye contact with me. My appearance horrified them. The days were long gone when I could walk into a bar, find a cute guy, and convince him to come home with me. The days of affection had vanished. The most I could hope for was to sit and wait until I could convince someone drunk enough or pissed off enough at the world to take me home and beat the shit out of me. Sometimes I'd beg them to kill me, but no one ever succeeded.

I noticed that beating me to a pulp brought each of these lonely souls a momentary sense of joy. It provided a small amount of pleasure to bring anyone even the smallest amount of joy. It usually aroused us both enough that, at some point in the exchange, we'd fuck. After we fucked, I'd leave their house, limping, clutching my chest, and spitting blood.

If I made the mistake of waiting until morning, their jaws would drop in terror and their tongues would curl in a soundless scream of horror—both at what they allowed themselves to do and who they allowed themselves to do it with.

#

Searching for Answers at a Father's Grave

Watching my mother consumed with the soap opera of a false life forced me to realize that the dead weren't the only ones injured by Project Aaru. With the invention of the afterlife, we no longer had the closure we once did. When the gaps in our family tree widened, swallowing the ones we once held dear, we were dragged into the hole with them.

Alastair left me alone with these thoughts as he jetsetted around the continents with his new associates and friends. Meanwhile, I stayed home buying cars to fill the emptiness his absence made me feel.

After one particular night of heavy drinking, I reflected on the idea of visiting my father alone. I thought it might give me some answers. I thought maybe it was closure I needed.

Dizzy from alcohol, I arrived at the cemetery a little after midnight. I had never been to the cemetery so late and couldn't help but stumble from gravesite to gravesite.

All around me was the glow of thousands of tiny computer screens built into the tombstones. Hundreds of bereaved relations sat in the grass in front of the graves and watched the screens of their loved ones intently. They were glued to the images being fed to them by the deceased. Sobbing filled the air; was carried by the wind. It swept past me like a terrible storm.

I walked faster and tripped over a young boy lying on his back in the grass. I screamed. Kept screaming until I thought about how ridiculous it was to scream, so I started to laugh, loudly and maniacally. The faces of the living turned to me and glared. Their faces were illuminated by the screens—gaunt, stone-still representations of the living dead. Their faces were distorted by the flickering light and their shadowed eyes were mystery boxes filled with a powerful, but indecipherable emotion. The faces stared and stared and I didn't want to know what those stares meant, so I scrambled away.

When I reached my father's grave, I saw his torment had already begun. Earlier than anyone else I'd seen at that point. His mind cycled through images of nightmares and memories of regret. I watched for a while. Getting to know my dad as a kid—a child constantly mocked due to a slight stutter and effeminate mannerisms—and as an adult—a man who worried constantly that he wasn't good enough for his wife; that she would leave him when she realized he was nothing more than an autoworker who dropped out of school in the tenth grade.

Eventually his mind ended on a sequence I remembered well. It was a memory we both must have stored in our heads—a memory of the day when I realized I truly hated my father.

I was eighteen and about to head off to Berkeley. My mother was crying as I gave her a hug and I approached my father to do the same. That moment was the first and only time I told my father I loved him. I wasn't even sure if it was an honest emotion, but I'd wanted to do it for a long time—mainly to see how he'd react—and that seemed like the appropriate time to do it. He just grunted in response and told me, "don't come crying to me when you drop out."

The sequence on the computer screen was close to my memory of it. A few minor details were off, but it played out almost exactly as it did in the real world. Except for one major thing I never noticed—my father tossing \$200 in the backseat of my car and tapping his hand against the trunk proudly as I drove away.

#

A Mannequin in a Room Full of Fireflies

The beatings I incurred night after night at the bars were taking a toll on my body and my sanity. I grew reckless and desperate. All I really wanted was to die or redeem myself.

One night, I went home with a large muscular man with thinning blonde hair and tan skin. He was an insecure homosexual and he filled the walk to my apartment with outbursts of self-loathing for his sexual desires.

I knew instantly he was special and when we reached my apartment, I seized on his insecurities and antagonized him into strangling me.

I kept daring him to take it further. He looked at me confused and scared. I spit out insult after insult. I questioned his manhood. I told him was a silly little faggot and if he wanted to prove himself he needed to crush my throat.

"You won't do it," I said.

I swear my trachea broke as he tightened his fingers. I know I heard it snap. But, somehow when my cellphone rang, I could still wave the man away and answer.

It was Alastair's sister. "Alastair's acting strangely."

"What going on?" I rasped.

"I don't know. He keeps replaying these horrible images."

I hung up the phone. The muscled man placed his hands back around my neck.

"I'm not really sure how this works. Should we continue? I think my fingers were right... about... here." He fumbled awkwardly around my neck trying to recapture his last position. "No... wait... that's not right," he muttered, changing position, "maybe it was...here? No, shit. Did you want me to start over? I'm not really used to this kind of stuff."

"I'm sorry. I have to go." I told him.

The muscled man let out a sigh of relief. I noticed his lower lip was bleeding. He must have been biting it.

When I arrived at the grave, Alastair's sister stared blankly at the sky. Her arms hung at her sides; her body seemed like a coat rack from which her shawl dangled.

"How long do you think this universe has in it? What do you think will happen when it all disappears?" she asked me.

"Long enough to torment us, I suppose."

She approached me and wrapped her arms around me. "Can you fix him, Terrence? I think he's broken." She pointed toward his grave.

On Alastair's computer screen was a familiar image. The Radisson hotel in Oslo. The night he won the Nobel Prize; the night I walked away. Except...the visuals were strange..

Alastair stood amidst the paparazzi. Their cameras flashed in his eyes, bathing the viewing screen in white. Alastair looked at the medal around his neck—the Nobel prize. The paparazzi surrounding Alastair began to shake as if they were going into simultaneous seizures. They opened their mouths and swarms of lightning bugs flew out.

The bugs flew toward the ceiling of the hotel and twinkled like stars above the heads of the media.

The lights in the building went out, but the ceiling glowed from the flickers of the fireflies. The bugs flitted across the hotel like shooting stars; burning brighter and brighter, forming patterns in the air.

Suddenly, the paparazzi dropped their cameras to the ground and floated toward the fireflies. They crashed through the roof of the hotel and—carried by the swarm of fireflies—they rose higher and higher into the air, until they all disappeared amongst the stars.

Alastair tried his hardest to float toward the fireflies, but the medal around his neck weighed him down. He jumped, spun, lunged. Still he could not rise toward the sky with the fireflies, the paparazzi, and the stars. With each attempt he made, the chain of the medal tightened around its neck. No matter what, he refused to take it off. The medal looped around again and again until Alastair started to choke.

"He's punishing himself," I told Alastair's sister and turned away from the gravestone.

All around me the bereaved watched computer screens—their own lives slipping away; consumed by the fantasy that their loved ones were still an active part of their lives. I ached for the years I lost to the illusion. I could feel all the wasted hours churning in my guts; they bubbled inside me; rose in my chest; flooded through my brain.

I drew closer to Alastair's gravestone and smashed the computer screen with my elbow; glass cut my arm as I reached inside and tore out the wiring. I yanked out all the

bits my hands could grab, and the wires curled in the grass like snakes. Sparks flicked out of the busted screen.

From every direction, sirens erupted. Red security lights lit up the darkness.

Alastair's sister screamed.

I dashed to the next grave and smashed that screen, then the next and the next—until the faceless masses of the bereaved tackled me in a group huddle and pinned me to the ground. It wasn't more than two minutes before the police arrived.

#

The Nobel Prize and a Hotel in Oslo

I broke up with Alastair on the day he won the Nobel Prize. We were walking back to the hotel after I had to spend the entire ceremony in the back of the room, watching at a distance as he received his award and conversed with the elites of the science world.

An army of cameramen tailed behind us and I pulled him into a corner and threw him against a dumpster.

"Why the fuck are you treating me this way? You act like I don't even exist when other people are around." I yelled.

He told me to trust him. He said it was for my own good. To protect me.

"Be honest. You just want the spotlight. You don't want anyone to know I created the Exeter software. That I made this whole thing possible," I said.

"I love you, but you don't know shit." He said the words like they were a clump of dirt he was trying to spit from his tongue.

Later that night, we were standing in the lobby of a Radisson hotel in Oslo. He was beaming with pride as he held his medal in his hand. Cameramen circled around him and Alastair stood in the center of the paparazzi taking repeated bows and flashing his medal to the cameras.

I stood on the outskirts talking to a woman with a heavy German accent. As the woman spoke, I kept my eyes on Alastair and nodded politely. Ten minutes rolled by. Then twenty. Thirty. I tapped my dress shoe against the marble floor. *Click. Click. Click.* I counted the seconds with my foot, accurately at first, then progressively faster.

In all that time he never acknowledged me. Fed up, I pushed my way through the crowd and slapped the medal out of his hand. It clunked on the ground and the room ignited with camera flashes and loud chatter.

"We're done. I'm out," I said.

"Don't doubt my affections, Terrence. Please. I love you. We're playing with ethylene and fire here. I don't want you in the lab when everything combusts."

I told him to "eat a dick" or something equally mature and left him to his adoring public as he took his bows and flashed his medal in that brightly lit lobby of a Radisson in Oslo.

#

Sky Diving From the Moon (Revisited)

I received a life sentence for the murder of Jackson Marks, Mildred Peach, Rosaline Young, and Alastair Crane. The courts decided interrupting the feed of a brain was a punishable offense. They stripped me of all possessions, including my clothing.

At first, I passed the time by examining my body: counting the scars and bruises, trying to remember who gave me what. *Did that zigzag cut come from the gap-toothed barmaid or the timid young man who puked on my floor? Where did I get that infected scab?*

I traced each cut, felt each bruise, and prodded the scars that covered every inch of my flesh. For some reason, they felt warm to the touch—scalding almost. My whole body felt that way.

I started being able to keep track of the time by the changes in pain my body suffered. Every day the burning sensation oscillated. I learned that I could take my mind off the pain if I closed my eyes and imagined the ceiling of my jail cell covered in fireflies.

If I thought about fireflies too long, I would start thinking about flames. Nothing in this universe's brief history is as simultaneously purifying and destructive as flames. We were birthed through flames and we will die through them as well.

The flames of a gas container in a cold garage created that world for me. It was my old life that kept me there. And, by remembering those flames as they curled around my body, I finally knew where I wanted to be.

#

Even now, when I think about flames, the walls of my jail cell disappear.

I am back on the moon preparing for my next sky dive.

I take off.

I greet the freefall with open arms.

As the moon disappears, darkness surrounds me.

I am not scared for I know my eyes are only closed.

The stars shine bright in the blanket of the universe black.

This time around, I do not stop. There are better things to do with my time.

I rocket toward the earth, soaring at six thousand miles an hour.

My body ignites when I pass the earth's atmosphere.

The flames burn around me; brilliantly, beautifully.

I am a soaring phoenix.

Only a few witness it firsthand, but the whole damn world can feel it.

I continue to fall, the flames coiling around my body like a triple helix.

The flames continue to burn until I hit the ground. Then that fire goes out.

Honestly, what more could anyone ask for?

"Gaudi Through a Prism"

Ana woke to the sound of heavy breathing. It jostled the small, white hairs on the back of her neck. From somewhere near her on the hardwood floor, men whispered—a gentle lilt punctuated with the harsh barks of consonants, like a lullaby with serrated edges. She opened her eyes slowly, afraid of what she might find. Blinked twice; rolled over to find her art studio empty. Early morning sun poured through the oversized window, coating the loft in warm sienna. She lifted her head from the stack of botched sketches it had been resting on—six dozen variations on the theme of Antoni Gaudí , Catalan architect.

#

She had worked for weeks on the drawings, desperate to master the intricacies of his face. The unkempt beard that, in so many photos, splattered across his chest like an oil spill; thick nostrils reminiscent of black holes; hair perpetually parted in waves. The previous night she shaded until her fingers cramped. Could barely move her thumb and forefinger enough to remove the pencil. The noses always came out too fat; the eyes appeared jovial, unserious. Frustrated, she stacked her failures in a pile, curled up next to them on the floor, and cried herself to sleep.

#

The whispers grew louder. “She’s awake,” the voices said. Ana noticed the Gaudí drawing on top of the pile moving its charcoaled eyes from left to right. The eyes focused on her. His thin, misshapen mouth arced into a smile under his bushy, graying beard. The lines of his face vibrated.

“Don’t be afraid, darling Ana,” Gaudí said.

Ana jumped to her feet, kicking the stack of papers. They billowed in the air and spread across the bare room—under the workbench, on top her yellowed mattress, inside the cracks of the floorboard. Each page contained a drawing of Gaudí’s face. All of these faces moved their mouths, spoke in unison. Told her to calm down.

She wanted to scream, but couldn’t. Wanted to run, but had nowhere else to go. Unsure if she was crazy or haunted, Ana sat back on the ground, plugged her ears, and repeated a mantra of *I’m not listening I’m not listening*.

“Get a hold of yourself, woman,” the Gaudís said.

As Ana lowered her arms, her fingers began to swell. They felt weightless, almost imaginary. Her light, olive skin darkened to liquorice. Her flesh sparkled when the sun struck it at certain angles. She waved her hands in front of her face. Tapped them against the floor and listened to the hollow sound they made. “What is happening here?” she asked herself.

“Art,” the Gaudís answered.

#

Since the age of thirteen, art had been a dominating force in Ana’s life. The fascination began shortly after her father’s funeral. She was sitting by the fresh grave, using a splintered stick to draw his caricature in the fresh soil. She drew squiggles for his nose and ears; slanted patterns for the contours of his face and jaw-line. Displeased with each rendering, she would erase them with her hands, bringing the grimed fingers to her face where she could inhale the stale scent of the dirt and feel its grainy texture on her tongue. She longed to create art as visceral as that soil.

#

“I don’t understand,” Ana said.

“You’re a fine artist, Ana. Technically very proficient, we will attest to that,” said the Gaudí drawings, admiring each other from across the room. “But you’ve always kept yourself at a distance from your work.”

The lines in Ana’s palms pulsed with indigo. A sharp pain traveled through her spine. The swirls of her fingerprints radiated emerald when she moved her hands. She closed her eyes. Hoped everything would be normal when she opened them again. “I’m dreaming. That’s all,” Ana said.

The Gaudís barked with laughter. “This is what we’re talking about, Ana. Always keeping yourself at a distance.”

Ana shook her head. Pinched herself. “What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Inside the guts of every structure I’ve designed lies three things: the family I lost, the God I love, and the blood in my veins. My very skin has been stretched so taut around the ribs of these places that it might snap if I created anything more. This is what we expect from you. Draw us again.”

Ana wasn’t sure what to make of the statement, but as she listened to the Gaudís expound upon their artistic philosophy, she felt a strong stirring of the romantic. She conjured images of Gaudí’s work—the sloping, white-tiled façade of the Casa Mila that brought dreams of a Swiss mountain to Barcelona; the garden city of Park Güell, and its mosaics like clusters of wildflowers against the brown of dirt walls. The power of Gaudí’s vision was what drew Ana to him in the first place. The sound of his voice re-energized her. A divine force took control of her body; the same force Gaudí had known as God during his brief, troubled life. The need to create overwhelmed her.

She walked around the room, gathered up the loose Gaudís, and placed them in a stack on her drawing table. She took out a new sheet of Bristol paper, some wooden pencils, and a charcoal stick. She wedged a cigarette between her lips and sketched furiously, manically as the hours passed.

#

Ana was a specialist in holography. It started as a hobby in art school, in between the myriad of other ventures she undertook and excelled at—sketch artist, sculptor, painter, stripper. She took the class as a lark, a way to earn easy credit while working on projects more valuable to her. But, on the first day, her professor stood in front of the class—with black lace-up boots and crimson lipstick that popped off her mouth with every word—and transported Ana to a world of wavefronts and emulsion processes, diffraction and interference. Ana connected with the idea of giving movement and life to static art. Worked closely with her professor to learn the intricacies of lasers and the manipulation of light.

Her first hologram was a photograph of her professor whose eyes would follow a viewer as he moved around the room. She captured the image using a variety of cheap lasers borrowed from the department. Ana kept her patience with the faulty equipment and finished the project with a "C." Her next success came from capturing a tree frog as it hopped off-or-on a fake branch—depending on where you viewed the image.

Despite several more triumphs, Ana felt competent, but unfulfilled. She wanted to leave a mark on her craft; demonstrate her unique ideas. This drove her to develop her own methodology, which she spent graduate school perfecting. Utilizing the breadth of her talents, she started her holograms by first sketching a subject, then sculpting it out of

clay. It wasn't until she was completely satisfied with the sculptured bust that she recorded her art with lasers. It may have been unconventional, but witnessing the metamorphosis of thought—from page to object to fragmented light—made her feel like a god. She wanted to use that power to create a work that would transcend her own life and become immortal.

#

Ana finished the Gaudí sketch in less than twelve hours, a personal record. The Gaudís had talked throughout the process, telling stories of their childhood in Catalonia, of the aching in their bones that drove them to despair, the taunting of their peers that drove them deeper into their minds, their brushes with madness, and their ultimate salvation at the hands of Christ. The drawings spoke in harmony, until the final shading of the new face. As she brushed the charcoal away from his lips, the disparate speakers fell silent. Became unified in the mouth below her wrists.

Ana had been so hypnotized by her work and the sharp intonations of Gaudí's voice she hadn't noticed the changes in her own body. Her skin had shifted into ceramic patterns and her joints bulged in sacs like arachnid pregnancies. Circles and swirls imprinted themselves along the base of her fingers.

She shrieked—more out of surprise than fear. The sound echoed through the barren loft. She could hear her friend, Kloontz, call up to her through the floorboards. Shaking, she ran to the window and opened it a crack. Leaned her head out to yell an acknowledgment that she was alright.

She turned back to the drawing table. Shook her deformed hands at the Gaudí sketch.

“What have you done to me?” she asked.

“A trick of the mind, dear. Ignore it. Focus on the beauty of your own creation,” he said.

Ana stared deeply into the eyes she created. Became entranced by the solemnity of their gaze and the way they seemed to convey seventy-three years of righteous suffering. The face too was perfect, nuanced and aged. In the curves of his nose and the lines in his skin, she could feel the weariness that comes from the deathbed and a life’s work unfinished.

“You're beautiful,” she said.

The pride she felt in herself erased all thoughts of her changing body, replaced them instead with an insatiable urge to devour. In that moment she desired Antoni Gaudí more than she had ever wanted anything. She yearned for the warmth of the body he kept hidden under flea-ridden coats. To feel the bristles of his whiskers against her lips, tickling her nose. Became desperate to unlock the secrets of his architectures and erect a monument to lust.

She grabbed the Gaudí sketch in her sweaty hands, caressed it gently, and threw herself on the bed. She lay the drawing on the pillow next her.

“Talk dirty to me,” she said.

“I’m Catholic,” he said. “Dirty talk has been removed from my DNA.”

Instead he hummed “The Balanguera” in Spanish. Told her his only loves were God and country. “Com una aranya d'art subtil, buida que buida sa filosa,” he whispered in her ear.

#

As a twenty-something artist, Ana's romantic life was governed by an insatiable sexual appetite for architects. Living or dead, it didn't matter. The mere thought of an architect sitting at his planning table with scattered sheets of paper and a T-square would turn her body into a faulty electrical socket, spraying sparks and starting flames. The psychosis made it difficult to maintain any lasting relationship. Every time she'd meet an attractive young man or woman with a passion for her art and an appreciation of her mind, she'd sacrifice their future at the bedroom altar of an architect—usually with coffee breath and a receding hairline. Her psychiatrist affectionately termed her affliction “archiphilia” and once attempted it to relegate it to the same subconscious plane inhabited by Oedipus.

“Yes, my dad was an architect, but, no, I don't want to fuck him. Human beings are more complex than that,” Ana said, ending the session early.

And this was the truth. Her father designed low-rent apartment buildings in Barcelona—places designed to house transients as they moved from one station in life to the next. His job's lack of creativity and the infrequency of contracted work held little appeal to Ana. Although, whether she wanted to admit it or not, it was her father who exposed her to the dreams of an architect. Her earliest childhood memories were of holding her father's hand as they toured the city, marveling at the multi-storied cliffs of the Palazzo and the sloping gambrels of the Dutch Colonials. "One day I will create something beautiful for you," her father once said.

To Ana, it had always been astounding—the progress made in a few short centuries, as man moved from caves to high-rise apartments. Their accomplishments

drew out the primitive yearning in her. The architect: a god on earth, crafting castles out of grass seeds.

#

A pounding on the studio door interrupted Gaudí's song. Ana abandoned Gaudí on the pillow so she could answer it.

"Are you alright? I heard you scream." It was her downstairs neighbor, Kloontz—an avant-garde street performer who tried to challenge the audience's perception of reality by defecating in a laundry basket and yelling for it to "clean itself."

Ana opened the door wider, revealing the swirled patterns of color and bulging flesh that covered her body from head-to-toe. Kloontz gasped when he saw her and reached out to touch her arm.

"How transgressive," he said. "A combination of transdermal and ink? Girl, your body should be illegal. Did you get this done at XADKROXXT's? He's the only person I know who can get away with transdermal work like this."

Ana shook her head. "No, I have my own guy. It's a secret."

Kloontz smiled. "Naughty bitch. I'll figure out your secrets soon enough." He then double-checked that she was alright and bid her farewell.

With Kloontz gone, Ana laid back down next to Gaudí. "Now where were we?" she asked dreamily.

"You were about to finish your work," Gaudí said.

#

Ana's interest in architecture may have originated as a child, but her obsession with the architects could be traced back to the age of sixteen. She had traveled with her

mother to New York and begged to see the buildings she admired. The first stop on the list was the Guggenheim in Manhattan. On the way from the hotel, Ana sat in the back of her mother's rental car, devouring a book on Frank Lloyd Wright. Her pulse thudded in her fingertips as she flipped the pages listing his achievements and designs and the glossy black-and-white photos of Wright in elegant suits, fluffs of white hair receding down his scalp like passing clouds.

When they arrived at the museum, Ana couldn't believe the man with the elegant suits and small stature could generate something so extraterrestrial. A giant, evenly serrated cylinder rose from the boxy constructs of the architectural base. To Ana, it seemed as if the building could fly off into outer space at any given moment. She remembered breaking away from her mother after reaching the top of the spiral walkway—the pointed skylight illuminating the shadowed lust beneath her eyelashes—and locking herself in a bathroom on the top floor. She pleased herself for thirty minutes to the biography of Frank Lloyd Wright and the chimera he constructed out of titanium, glass, and limestone.

#

Under Gaudí's encouragement, Ana began the next step in her process: a sculptured bust. She removed a hunk of clay from the supply closet, lay it on her worktable, and pinned the Gaudí sketch to the corkboard next to it. "Watch it," Gaudí said as she pressed the tack through his forehead. She squeezed the clay; rolled it; pounded it with her fist. Hours passed and night arrived. As she worked her fingers hardened, became harder to move. She fought the urge to let the discomfort stop her.

Gritted her teeth and pushed through. She rolled out the shape of his head; smoothed the clay with chamois; carved his features with a potter's needle.

A ceramic mosaic of Saint Francis appeared on Ana's right hand; an image of sheep in a grassy field appeared on her left. Circular shapes grew out of her knuckles and spiraled up her fingers, morphing them into miniature steeples. The nails themselves became stained glass windows magnifying the bacteria in the nail bed.

Never before had she experienced such torture. Every transmutation of her body felt like a hundred simultaneous heart attacks, causing her to shriek with banshee-esque gusto. It reeled through the loft and through the apartment building. Kloontz called through the window, "I can't wait to see what you're doing up there, Ana."

She thought about quitting. Her body was changing in horrific ways. When the pain became too great, she would remember the anguish Gaudí suffered in his life: the rheumatism that left him perpetually homebound, the burning in his joints that estranged him from the world, the attacks of fellow architects who called him insane, and his own conflict over the blasphemous nature of his endeavors—creating shrines that would outlast God himself. He found his strength in religious fervor and drove himself through self-doubt. He needed to create monuments to his Lord, the best the world had ever seen. And he would stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

#

When she graduated high school, Ana relocated to New York to pursue an education in architecture. She felt she owed it to her father; to achieve what he could not. Her vision was brilliant, but the actuation of her ideas came through muddled. Geometry confused her, the logistics of design escaped her. The professors shunned her work and

her peers mocked it. After a few semesters she transferred to a small art college in Brooklyn. Found her aptitude lay there. She hadn't forgot about the architects, though. She wanted to prove her art could be just as substantial, as practical and inspiring.

Her sexual addiction to architects developed. She capitalized on her exotic roots—hair the color of a starless sky, eyes wide and bright as moons, and the vocal inflections of a youth spent in Barcelona—to bed promising architects. Sometimes in hotel rooms overlooking their most important projects, sometimes—when she felt daring—on the steps of the buildings she most admired. Many times, when she felt the architect's own work was lacking, she would bark out fantasies to the confused men as she held their soft hands to her breasts.

“Fuck me like you're Sir Christopher Wren,” she'd order.

One time in New York, she was making love to a female architect inside the gutless skeleton of her first commissioned building. The woman was a gentle lover and she talked to Ana about her anarchic theories of “geometry-free” architecture. Ana admired her pale skin and stumped nose that snorted like a pig when she was sexually excited. A thought popped into her head: *this young woman should be immortalized; she should be art.*

They walked the block and a half to Ana's Park Slope studio. Ana shared a low-rent apartment building with a collective of performance artists. Her living quarters was a spacious upstairs loft that divided it into three rooms: the sculpting room/bedroom, the darkroom, and the bathroom/kitchen. It was barren inside, aside from her tools and mattress, and she had to borrow a stool from a neighbor to prop her subject on. Ana spent hours sketching, trying to recreate the intensity of the woman's ideas. The architect sat

impatiently on the stool, jiggling her leg and snorting loudly. Before Ana had even finished charcoaling the shadows of the woman's face, an overwhelming sense of futility struck her—she did not understand the woman and did not know how to make her into art. After a few more scratches of the eraser, Ana kindly asked the woman to leave.

#

With Gaudí's head fully formed, Ana stood back to look upon her masterpiece. The details were so perfect she barely recognized her own work. She examined the contours of Gaudí's wide nostrils; ran her hand across hair messier than she remembered from the photos; nuzzled her cheek against the grooves replicating his long beard. All of it was pure Gaudí, but there was something else inside too. An ironic twinkle in his eye, a sensual curl in his lips, deep worry lines in his forehead that reminded Ana of her father—parts of herself she gave to Gaudí, giving him life beyond the static image she had only seen in books.

Ana leaned forward to give the figure a passionate kiss.

Gaudí's lips moved up and down as they came in contact with hers. She could feel his bottom lip push between hers and the snake of his tongue bulge beneath her teeth. The feeling of dry clay caressing her molars gave Ana pause. Not because she was engaging in foreplay with a statue, but because Gaudí was a terrible kisser.

“What do you expect? I dedicated my life to God and Architecture. Neither of those is the training ground for a lothario,” he said.

Ana laughed. It surprised her that a serious figure like Gaudí could make her laugh. It wasn't something they wrote about in the history books, and she knew it was her own personality shining through. Gaudí—seemingly encouraged by the response—

wiggled his ears and rolled his eyes. Giggled in a way that approached the demonic, coming from behind his wild beard.

The idea that Ana had somehow reshaped Gaudí in her own image drove her mad with desire. She pulled Gaudí to the mattress on her floor where they performed every sexual position a clay head was capable of—which to Ana’s surprise were quite plentiful.

Afterward they laid together, Ana cradled Gaudí’s bust against her armpit. They stayed up for hours discussing architecture, making each other laugh.

“We really should do something about that beard. You were such a handsome man in your youth. What happened?” Ana asked.

“I was a dandy destroyed by disillusionment,” he said.

“But I’ve repaired you now. Tomorrow we’ll trim you up.”

#

After the failure of her first attempt, Ana tried several more times to capture the essence of an architect through her art. An older man with a dark mole near his pencil mustache, a middle-aged woman who smelled like glue and cat litter, a muscular Persian who assured her that he co-designed the Khalifa skyscraper in Dubai—none of these subjects stuck. Ana would get halfway through a sketch of a nose or mole or lock of hair before crumpling up her paper and asking the model to leave.

Ana wanted this project to be her masterpiece and she needed the perfect subject. Someone deserving of worship, but accessible. Someone who understood her desire to create art that was alive; art that leapt from the crowded background of everyday images and became something fully dimensional.

#

Ana woke in the morning with an explosive burning in her stomach, as if all the love on earth had sunk into her guts and was boiling her from the inside out.

“What is happening inside me?” she asked Gaudí .

“While you were sleeping, I’ve stayed busy redecorating your interior. I’ve replaced your guts with a boiler made of seashells and sand crystals. I needed to give my father a place to work. He was a boilermaker, you know. My mother has taken up residence in your heart. I’ve made her a Spanish castle with ceramic stairs that wind in spirals toward your skull. I’ve lined the handrails with rare metals that will change the color of your veins as the blood passes through. My mother loved colors and I only want what’s best for her.”

Ana felt sick. She watched the blood in her veins change colors depending on the direction of her arm. The tips of her ceramic fingers glowed in the early morning sunlight.

“Why did you do this to me?” she asked Gaudí .

“I’m making you beautiful, like you made me beautiful. Now how about that haircut?”

Ana refused. She had made no such bargain. Appearances were one thing, but renovating a person from the inside out could change her very existence. He was her subject, not the other way around. She carried the sculpture to her work table and removed a fettling knife from the drawer. She raised it toward him. "Change me back or I'll destroy you."

Gaudí called for help. Kept yelling until Ana removed her sock and stuffed it in his mouth. She told him to behave or he'd never speak again. Gaudí nodded. As she

removed the sock from his mouth, she heard a knock at her door. She returned the sock to his clay aperture and answered.

Kloontz waved to her from the other side. His green mo-hawk wobbled with the gestures of his hand. "Electrifying," he said, studying the colored movement of Ana's blood as it traveled through her veins.

"What do you want, Kloontz? I'm busy," Ana said.

"Something's strange. I've talked to all the doctors and surgeons and tattoo artists and piercers and organ dealers and drug pushers I know, but no one has heard of the modifications I'm seeing on you. I demand to know who is doing this and I want it done to me," Kloontz said.

Ana tried to shut the door on him, but Kloontz jammed it with his foot. Both of them pushed as hard as they could. The opening/closing of the door reached a stalemate. Just as Ana felt herself weakening, the bust of Gaudí rolled across the floor and knocked against the door. The force threw Kloontz off-balance and he fell backward in the hall. The door slammed closed.

"I'll be back with the police. The law won't abide your black market surgeries, Ana. Especially when Kloontz isn't allowed to have them," Kloontz said through the door.

Ana slumped to the floor, picked up Gaudí, and removed the sock from his mouth. Thanked him for his help.

"If you want this all to end, just finish the job," Gaudí told her.

#

When Ana sorted through architects she wanted to capture, the list ran long—Frank Lloyd Wright, Sir Anthony Wren, Louis Sullivan. She loved and respected them all, but purely on an intellectual level. To make great art, she needed someone who reflected her own internal conflict between her love of the visceral and her struggle toward the sublime.

Her indecision lasted for months; her frustrations grew. All around her friends from art school were installing in galleries around New York, Paris, Berlin. Artists, ten years younger than her, were teaching on college campuses. Ana knew she needed to work fast if she ever wanted to make a name for herself.

One sleepless night, Ana laid flat in bed. She thought of Barcelona and touring the city with her father. She remembered the hours spent on the terrace of Gaudí's Park Güell, where her father pointed out the mosaic steeples that rose like surrealist oaks through the natural tree branches. Together they would run through the sloping pathways, feeling the breeze of the Mediterranean on their faces as they played tag amongst the gardens. Those were the only times she remembered her father happy—unafraid of where his next commission would come from, not using drink as an outlet of personal expression.

Ana's father always told her that Antoni Gaudí made him an architect. Gaudí elevated the normalcy of the modern world into the realm of the spiritual. Growing up as child in the shadow of the Spanish Civil War, Ana's father never knew what it meant to feel safe. The adults around him could still hear the shots fired at the top of La Rambla; could smell the blood of the anarchists in the streets. The modern world was a primal

place, a violent hell, but standing in the shadow of a Gaudi facade, her father could imagine he was at the gates of heaven.

After her father shot himself, Ana tried to forget about that place. She didn't want to think of the man. Didn't want to consider his potential as father. Hated to remember his promise to one day build her something as beautiful as the Barcelonan Palace, and the day the undertaker buried those dreams.

That sleepless night, Ana thought about that park and the power Gaudi held over her father. A power she both respected and feared. A power she wanted to capture.

#

Ana carried Gaudí's bust into the darkroom, set him on the holography table, used two bungee cords to keep him from escaping, and adjusted the pneumatic legs. She checked that her subject sat at a medium-height and moved the lenses to different sides of the room. The positions created a trapezoidal pathway for the laser to follow. Her stiff, ceramic fingers chipped one of the mirrors and nearly dropped the beam splitter on the ground as she adjusted the alignment of each piece.

She sold most of her professional equipment during the previous few months to cover rent and student loans, so Ana was forced to use a few off-brand HeNe lasers—colored red, green, and blue—and a refurbished Kodak CCD to capture the images. She set them up as quickly as her body would allow, careful to treat the last of her possessions with care.

Ready to start, Ana closed the door and flipped on the safelight. The room glowed red like the inside of a furnace. She pointed the three colored lasers. Their beams passed through the prisms of the splitter and made an overlapping "W" shape in the arrangement

of mirrors. She got behind the camera and tried to take a snapshot of Gaudí, but he refused to remain still. He jerked his head from side to side, pulled at the bungee cords, and vibrated the table. Ana tried to alter the position of her equipment to match Gaudí's movements; discovered moving the mirrors to the far corners of the room gave her a wider range to catch Gaudí. Despite the red of the safelight, Ana could still make out tiny motes of spectral colors floating in the room. They came toward her, swimming through the air like tadpoles, and entered through her mouth and nostrils.

"Ana, you never understood. We depend on each other to survive. You create me, I create you," Gaudi said.

Ana grew sluggish. Her responses slowed to a motion hardly perceptible to herself. She fought the desire to lay down and sleep; grabbed a mirror and tried to throw it at Gaudí, but after fifteen minutes it hadn't even left her hand. She tried to take another step forward, but she lost her balance and toppled to the ground.

She crawled toward the door of the darkroom. The journey lasted hours. Gaudi—bungeed to the table—could do nothing else but laugh. His face glowed in the red of the safelight. The spectral light of the lasers still focused on his eyes.

When Ana finally reached the door, she cracked it open slowly. Rested her heavy arms against the edge and let the hinges continue to swing. Sunlight inched into the room until the shape of Ana's new body had been illuminated. She saw herself reflected in the mirrors positioned around her. Instead of a scream, a church bell rang in her mouth.

Her body had become a sloping construct of angular grooves, lattices, and arabesque brick. Her skeleton was made almost entirely of ceramics and metal and wood.

Teal shingles lined the wooden temple in the center of her head. Her eyes had low-hanging balconies beneath them.

Slowly, carefully, she tried rising to her feet, but it was impossible for her to get around because she kept toppling over.

“You’ve turned me into a neo-Gothic nightmare,” she told Gaudí .

“Don’t be silly, pussycat. I abandoned that period long ago.”

Ana lay motionless on the floor and closed her eyes. She felt the world moving around her. A heavy pressure crushed her spine and she felt herself rising in the air. She was afraid to open her eyes to see what was happening to her.

“There. This will keep you from toppling over,” Gaudí said.

She opened her eyes and looked down at the mirrors below. Two long buttresses, made of diagonally carved and cured oak, jutted out of her shoulder blades.

“How are you doing all this? You don’t even have hands,” Ana said.

“I’m inside you now,” he said, pausing. “You should finish your work. I’m almost done here. Remember we depend on each other to survive.”

Reluctantly, Ana swung the long brick pillars that had once been her legs. She swung them back and forth, back and forth until she could push the buttresses backward. The oak screeched against the concrete floor as Ana came to an upright position. She jerked her body until the buttresses had propped her weight against the wall.

“I think the equipment is angled perfectly now. Close the door and record my image,” Gaudí said.

Ana bent her head low and slammed the door closed with the sloping chimney of her skull-steeple. She still didn't like the angle of the reference beam and tried to adjust it with her hands.

"Here, let me help you," Gaudí told her, "Lean close to me and look into one of the mirrors."

She did as he told her. The angle *was* perfect.

When she tapped the lasers with the edge of her temple, the particles of Gaudí dispersed into the air, entering her every orifice. Her vision grew cloudy. Her jaw no longer moved; her eyes no longer shut.

Ana knocked her buttress against the door of the darkroom, shattering the wood door to splinters. Sunlight spilled across the room, illuminating the mirrors in a dizzying display of reflections.

Ana dragged herself as close to a mirror as she could. Through the blurring, the brightness, and the newfound red that pooled in the bottom of her vision, Ana saw stained glass images of angels had covered her eyes. A large stained glass vision of the Virgin Mary appeared over her mouth. She thrust her tongue against the glass, trying to shatter it.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, you might choke on the pieces," Gaudí said.

The fog of Ana's breath and the streaks of her tongue gave the colored glass the appearance of a child's finger-painted illustration.

Confused and frightened, Ana rested against her buttresses and continued staring at herself in the mirror. The motes of spectral light that entered her body danced together in the stained glass windows of Ana's eyes. When she turned her head, the motes

mingled; formed into different shapes; moved in different ways. And as she angled her body toward the sky, she caught a glimpse of her father inside, pleased she finally built him a home.

"An Empty Womb at Night"

It might have been taboo for a mother to call her son an asshole, but I couldn't erase it from my mind as I waited for the press conference to begin. The hardwood bench made my back stiff and I kept my elbows pressed against the cement wall for support. Women from the Middle District ('Middies') crowded around, confronting me with a lot of "haven't seen-you-around-lately" and "glad-you've-finally-taken-interest-in-your-son" small talk. They only tolerated me because they thought my son was the Messiah, so I played the part of the Virgin Alicia. Smiled, nodded, and shook their cold hands until I just couldn't take it anymore.

"Let's focus less on my parenting skills and focus more on the wandering band of convicts calling for our blood," I said.

The convicts escaped earlier that day. A new rotation of guards arrived in the morning to find the night crew with slashed throats, the prison arsenal cleared out, and the twenty murderers missing. I wasn't sure why the women were shocked—death row inmates aren't the most trustworthy of prisoners.

The president of Zone Eighteen called a press conference to address the concerns of the people. Basically it was just some PR bullshit that tried to turn a "we're totally fucked" situation into a "relax, chill out, this all part of a plan" picnic. Reporters and camerawomen barricaded the door to the guard office where a few high-ranking officials of the government prepared. My son, Axel, was among them. Civilians were asked to find an open jail cell and watch the conference via a small monitor on the wall. There we sat, shoulder to shoulder, with each other's breath humming against our cheeks. Some women had even taken to sitting on their friends' laps to find a seat.

The speech hadn't started yet, so the monitor flickered through a series of Ad-Prop—the industry term for advertisement propaganda—commercials.

Ad-Prop #1: *A traditional American family. The mother arrived home from a long day at work. The father (played by a convict) had dinner ready on the table. The mother gave the father a tongued kiss on the mouth. Announcer: "Don't let the virus steal away the American Dream."*

Ad-Prop #2: *My son, Axel, mugged for the screen with exaggerated muscleman poses. He proudly sported a mesh shirt, accentuating the grooves of his chest and a pair of cropped denim shorts that revealed the dark undercarriage of his ball sack. He took a bite of a burger as the camera zoomed in on his "package."*

The women in the cell kept their eyes on the monitor. Occasionally they discussed apocalyptic sermons (God is punishing us for daring to think we were equal to men!) and praised God's forgiveness (We will be redeemed!). They repeated the word HOPE like a long lost mantra. HOPEHOPEHOPE. *Dear God, I don't believe in you, but if you're real, please make them shut the fuck up.* The concept of HOPE sounded foreign. I took out a pen and scribbled the word over and over again on the back of my hand, waiting for significance to appear.

Initially I wasn't going to attend. Taking off work was a luxury I couldn't afford, not if I wanted a serious career in the future. Then, before he left, my son rested his prickly, shaved head against my neck, and whispered, "please come to the prison" in my ear.

It was an embrace Axel hadn't initiated since he was a ten-year-old boy, too proud to vocalize his fear of the girls at school—unaccustomed to males, they picked on him

relentlessly. I found a lot of satisfaction in holding him at the crook of my arm, running my fingers through his then-curly hair, and telling him, "Wait until they hit puberty, then they'll be sorry." That was when I was still a mother and thought my son could be protected. Yet, feeling his sixteen-year-old body warm against mine brought back that long-lost surge of maternal electricity, so I talked Ms. Marcy into giving me the night shift.

The Ad-Prop eventually flipped to a blank screen signaling the start of the press conference. On the monitor, President Avila stood at the podium behind the window of the guard office that overlooked the cells crowded with Middies. To her left a few high-level officials leaned against the wall. Axel stood to the right, rubbing his palms on his khakis; streaks of dark sweat stained the fabric. Camera bulbs flashed with white blinding light.

President Avila: "As all of you are aware, the convicts escaped early this morning. There is no need to panic. We are on their trail and they will be subdued, unharmed. This will not affect the lifting of the quarantine. This has been confirmed by the Nation."

The president expounded on the need to not harm the convicts, even if we feel our life was threatened. After she left the stage, the other officials answered reporter questions and emphasized the need to "remain calm." They spoke in a monotone that sent my brain into a fuzzy drift until Axel took the stage. When I saw him, I leapt from my seat with an exaggerated "Woo-Hoo!" The others gave me this look that said "too far" and I sank back down to the bench. "Thought I sat on a bumblebee," I told the woman next to me. She didn't respond.

Axel: "Yeah. Remain calm. Or what-the-fuck-ever I'm supposed to tell you. Although, I hope you all get your heads blown off and your bodies devoured by a bag of dicks."

The Middies in the room hissed. They glared at me as if I told Axel to say that. I glued my eyes to the screen trying to ignore them. He'd been acting out a lot recently. Weekly calls from the principal saying she was leading the school in a prayer for my son. I wasn't aware they were allowed to pray in public schools, but there they were, Hail-Mary-Full-of-Gracing over my shitty kid who just broke a classmate's legs with a baseball bat autographed by the 1998 American League All-Star team. Women, who once proclaimed Axel as the Messiah, suddenly despised me for breeding him.

President Avila: "Axel, I'm sure you don't mean that. After all, it is your responsibility to teach the convicts. To make them human beings."

Axel got itchy in the face, kept scraping his fingers at his jaw-line. The question was a crowbar that seemingly pried open his masculine exterior, leaving a helpless young boy on stage. His eyes went on a desperate scavenger hunt through the glass window and the mother in me realized: "Oh, he does need me!" It was the same darty-eyed searching that Axel adopted as a child when he would tug at my shirt in grocery store after we passed the rack of magazines—covers filled with these shirtless, broad-chested men holding footballs and shotguns, talking about their sexual stamina and lack of emotion. He'd cower behind me, eyes shifting from the magazines, to my face, to the strange women who fantasized about my child from behind the soda and junk food displays.

Axel: "Well...umm—"

A loud barking from outside the prison walls interrupted Axel's response. Rabid, vicious, and unrelenting. A deep, angry "Woof! Woof! Woof!" New barks joined old barks until it became this circling chorus of guttural noises that held no intellectual meaning, but gut-wise it made me nauseous.

The women in the cell grew silent. The monitor cut out. Prison guards rushed past us and toward the front gate. I could hear them shouting, but their high, feminine voices faded against the deep, horrible barking.

The women pressed tightly against each other for safety and warmth. None dared to move.

Every woman asked herself the question: do I want to see how this plays out?

The answer to that query came in the form of a gunshot from the guard office. Followed by a second and a third and a whole lot of shrieking. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it was not going to kill these savvy ladies. Nails dug into my arm and back and scalp. Clumps of hair filled my mouth. It became impossible to see anything aside from flying hair and blurs of faces as the women pushed over other women, rushing toward the exit. Bodies slammed against the concrete, clanged against the prison bars.

The PA system crackled to life. A loud squeal of feedback gave the room momentary pause. "Evacuate the premises immediately. This is not a drill, but it is not a threat. President Avila may or may not be dead. Worry, but not enough to injure your brain. Go home. Go to work. Take a stroll in the park. Just don't let it get you down."

I struggled past the women. For too long, I'd felt my motherly duties slipping away from me, but the sound of the gunshots birthed something in my womb. I tried to fight my way to the guard office. Couldn't think of anything but saving Axel. The women

formed a barrier against me and the doorway. The room whirled around me until Axel's face crystallized in the madness. His lips curled and he stared directly at me. His face was specked with blood. He shoved the women out of the way and grabbed my hand. When I felt his fingers entwine with mine, I thought everything would be alright.

#

Emergency sirens wailed as I escorted Axel away from the prison. I was torn between leaving Axel by himself and my desperate need to be on time for work. With the president assassinated, TV18 would need me more than ever. A night filled with constant crowd control lay on the horizon.

I tried dialing any woman who still tolerated Axel and I. No one answered. Not even Kylee. It took several passes through my contact list, but I finally got a hold of Emily Malkvovich, Axel's high school teacher. She used to watch Axel quite a bit when he was younger, but two years ago he got strange about it so I stopped insisting. Tonight was an emergency, though.

It was a two mile walk to her house. The February wind pierced the holes in my decades-old parka. I tucked my hands under my armpits and set off through the busted up tenements of our section of Zone Eighteen. The Lower District was a slog down death row: collapsed apartment buildings, the rubble of condemned houses covered with muddy snow, graffitied tunnels that sheltered a dozen women who conversed around blazing trash barrels—shoeless apostles for the great big Nada in the sky. Their homes had likely fallen too far into neglect to stand up to the winter storms, so they were waiting on the pity of neighbors who were barely a month's pay from homelessness themselves. Those women heard the sirens, but didn't seem to care.

I recognized one of them from the neighborhood and gave her a wave. She lost her house after being laid off from the Omega-18 refinery, all of those women had. She gave me a nod of acknowledgment, nothing more. Despite the fact that I was barely hanging on myself, those women envied and resented me. I still had a job. I still had a home. I had a son that would survive even if I couldn't.

A billboard towered over the Lower District: *A picture of a fairy-tale castle in the middle of a verdant field—an image of the Upper District. Two smiling women were drinking lemonade in beach chairs as shirtless convicts rubbed their feet. Slogan: "Work hard, spend cash, and one day you'll be elite."*

In the quiet streets, I heard the barking again and a loud crackling of gravel. My legs locked in a running position, preparing to dart. Axel fell behind, kicking at a snowdrift and cursing me under his breath. I thought about leaving him, but knew that would look bad on my motherly resume.

I grabbed him by the arm and yanked him along. "Do you want to get us killed?"

He tightened the strings of his hoodie around his head, only his nose and lips were sticking out. He stepped on the back of my heels, trying to trip me. When it didn't work, he tore his arm away and shoved me to the ground. "I don't need a fucking babysitter."

The pounding of feet and the barking of convicts grew louder, closer.

I would have slapped him if my hands weren't frostbitten. Instead I just laid on the pavement and pressed my fingers against the ice, trying to stop the burning that climbed up my chest until I just couldn't dam it any longer. Being a mother just wasn't in my genetic code.

Axel gave me a gentle cock-headed glance and I could see that he'd been sorta-kinda crying too. He wiped some mucus from his face and reached out his snotty hand to help me to my feet. I pulled myself into his chest and could smell blood on the fabric.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to do that," he said.

#

The women of the Middle District lived in tidy little condos with trimmed grass in the summers and plowed sidewalks in the winter. They had heat and electric and running water. They had enough income to keep their homes livable, but they purposely damaged them in cosmetic ways—a missing shingle here, a drooping drainage pipe there, replaced windows with plastic tarp. It was part of a craze in the Middle District where it suddenly became chic to pretend you were a Lowerite. They mimicked our ramshackle homes, our outdated work clothing, and—perhaps most offensively—the costumes of our rival gangs. The Upper District sold the apparel at astronomical prices and the Middies ate it up. It was their way of showing that they "got us" when they clearly didn't "get us."

Emily Malkovich lived at the far end of the Middle District. Her condo was moderately famous among the socialites because of her artfully torn vinyl siding, aerodynamically designed to whistle "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" during strong gusts of wind.

As the whistling of Emily's condo grew loud enough to hear, Axel pulled back. He had been docile since the Lower District, but suddenly reverted back to the dragging steps and the curses under his breath. His arms tensed up and his lower jaw started this back and forth movement like he was sawing through his molars.

I made a move toward him. Not sure if it was to hug him or strangle him. I jumped back at the clanging of metal. It was likely a trash can that had blown over in the

wind, but I still looked around, waiting for one of the convicts to jump out and attack me. That was a scary feeling. Having lived so long in the Lower Zone, I shouldn't have been so unprepared for danger. Rival gangs—wearing Madonna-inspired cone bras or flapper hair and short, red Betty Boop skirts roamed the streets. Muggers jumped from the shadows. But, it was almost like the threat wasn't real. You always knew what they wanted—usually just a cellphone or some money or the address of a rival—and if you gave them that, you were fine. It wasn't the intangible threat of being an unarmed woman, walking alone down a deserted street while faceless men watched and plotted and grinned at how powerless you looked and how great that made them feel. That was a threat I hadn't felt since the plague.

The plague arrived twenty years ago. It didn't strike everywhere, only in certain cities. Typically poorer ones. The men in these areas got sick real quick. Died within weeks. Their skin turned a pale shed of green. They deteriorated; spewed their bodies from their mouths. They complained of sharp headaches, said it felt like an excavation team drilling out every memory they held dear. They got lost and confused, until, finally, their bodies hollowed out and they basically just floated away from us. Women used to tell stories that on days of clear sky they could see the shells of their lovers floating amongst the treetops, ascending toward the sun.

#

Emily answered the door in a lace, lime-green teddy. Her bare legs tensed with a gust of wind, making her petite body contort in surprise, and her house started screaming/whistling "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah." She wore heavy black mascara and eyeliner that made her face seem like a void.

Axel pressed himself against my back and pinched my jacket with his fingers. Super-Market Axel again. It made me forget how rotten he'd been on the walk up. I assumed it was hormones and the uncomfortable sight of seeing his high school teacher in a state of "fuck-me-silly" fanaticism. She called to him and Axel released his grip from my parka. He adopted a King Shit swagger and nudged me on his way to the door. Emily giggled at his wide gait.

"This thing is kind of exciting isn't it?"

"Not particularly," I said. Checked the time on my cellphone. My shift started in a few minutes.

"By the way, Axel," she said, "I loved your new magazine spread. It'll be great having a man like you in the house."

I tried hug to Axel before he went inside, but he must have seen it as the empty gesture it was. "Save it for yourself, the only person you really love."

"Don't worry about it, Alicia," Emily told me, "he's under a lot of pressure."

She closed the door gently and I held myself still. Listened to the emergency sirens wail. Still felt the ghost of Axel's chest pressed against my back. Emily had always been odd, but she restrained herself in my presence. Never answered the door in negligee making come-ons to my son. The approaching quarantine lift had suddenly turned her into a dick-hungry poltergeist and it was frightening. As much as I tried justifying things to myself, I couldn't stop wondering if I'd done the right thing. If I ever did the right thing.

#

No place in Zone Eighteen was better fortified than the Z18 Corporate Headquarters, even compared to the towering walls of the Upper District. High security gates surrounded the compound to ward off attacks from the gangs, armed guards patrolled the premises at all times, and the whole place operated on a computerized security system. Z18 was the media center—television, newspapers, magazines, advertisements—for our Zone and the elites were desperate to protect it against possible uprising. Outside of the Omega-18 reserves, it also provided the biggest source of revenue for the Upper and Middle Districts.

There were only two ways to get into Z18. The standard way was the front gate, which required special security clearance to unlock. The second way was a hidden tunnel at the far end of the property. It was used by the local celebrities to come and go without being mobbed by fans. They weren't well guarded because no one really knew about them. I was one of a select few privy to that information, since Ms. Marcy used it to shuttle Axel back and forth during his modeling jobs.

It was a gamble to enter through the tunnels. Caught without permission meant immediate termination, but I couldn't be late. I turned off my cellphone and walked around the front gate. Crab grass sliced against at my slacks as I hustled toward the back of the building.

The newest billboard for the zone loomed overhead: *A large black-and-white photo of Axel with his shirt off. An attractive woman in sunglasses and a dark suit dumped vodka over his body. Slogan: "You can't own a man until you drink like a man."*

The entrance to the tunnels was hidden in the basement of a condo near the headquarters—a single guard posted at the door. I practiced growling into my armpit. Let

my voice go the way of a heavy smoker, hoarse and raw. Starting barking gruff and menacing-like. It felt good going full-out rabid dog, pushing my boiling insides through my throat and letting them burst in the air. It did a number on the guard and I swear she sprinted away so fast her tiny legs were spinning like windmills.

I had to navigate through the winding corridors of magazine offices, passing rows of open doors and windows where ad executives shouted to each other down the hall. After a few missed turns, I arrived at the TV18 studio without detection, my body drenched in sweat. I grabbed a clipboard and a headset and tried to find the line producer. Prepared myself for the drudgery of the job and the beratement of my superiors.

When I was younger, I was an actress. It was something I loved until I realized that none of the men took me seriously. I was pretty, but carried myself with non-sexual authority. A big no-no for women in Hollywood and I ended up with a string of female commando roles—women who talked tough, boned a side character, and died in the first act.

Then the plague hit and I thought it was my chance for a do-over. I landed a string of great roles—a daytime news anchor, a poster girl for St. Benedick's Dildo Factory, and a recurring role on *Law and Order: Zone Eighteen*. Everything went fine until Axel was born and I struggled with the option of being a mother or being an actress. The hours were too erratic and the pay too low to continue, so I pleaded with Ms. Marcy to find me a regular position. This ultimately led to all-around gopher: intern/assistant/janitor/slave/soundwoman/whatever.

"Alicia, bring me a D30 lens from the back," the producer yelled before I found her.

After a lot of fumbling around in the equipment room, the line producer issued me an additional task of setting up boom mics for the impromptu Prop-Ad that Ms. Marcy was shooting. I grabbed the mics and slung them around my shoulder. The steel ends of their stands scratched along the ground as I dragged them to the duct tape markers. I tried to set up the first one, but the boom kept swinging around and conking me on the head. With my ears still ringing, two of the newswomen started barking out orders for sandwiches and coffee.

Still, the emergency alarm roared outside, not even the banging of equipment and the demands of celebrities could block out the sound. I tried hard not to think of the barking convicts, of Emily in her lime-green teddy, of Axel's hand tugging my parka.

#

A silver-fox newswoman finished Take #142 of our Ad-Prop commercial. Everyone around me had a bleary look in their faces that was only broken by yawns. She kept flubbing the line: "Don't let the men scare you or we're doomed when more arrive." Stylists buzzed around the woman before the next take began—tossed her hair, added make-up, etc.

Ms. Marcy eyed me from the control booth as I ducked behind a larger woman in flannel. Ms. Marcy always wore this fire-engine of a sweatsuit that blared against the blackness of the studio. It took a lot of guts for a boss to wear something as tacky as a sweatsuit to work, but that was the confidence she owned it. It made me think there was some secret power hidden under the cotton that could control the whole universe.

Ms. Marcy didn't look at any of the other women, just scrutinized me with her bug-eyes and craggy oak tree of a nose. I wondered if she knew I had arrived late. She

never trusted me and any infraction would be my end. When she finally announced my name over the loudspeaker, my heart did this little "machine-gun-fire-at-my-feet" dance. The other women watched as I walked the stairs to the control room.

Before I had even closed the office door, Ms. Marcy spoke, "No time to fuck around. An eyewitness claims Axel is the one who shot President Avila. We need to know where he is."

My mind kept flashing to different scenarios. I wanted to believe it was a mistake, but clearly remembered the blood painted across his face as he walked down the stairs and the smell of it on his clothes. I failed my duty as a parent. Raised a killer. My intestines gurgled like they were drowning in adrenaline. Every blink of my eyes brought a new shade of emotion: anger, sadness, frustration, fear, regret.

"I don't know," I lied. "I couldn't find him in the chaos."

I wanted to give him up and save myself. For some stupid, selfish reason, I kept looking at Ms. Marcy's sweatsuit—the clothing equivalent of an exclamatory phrase, just screaming at me to cross her. "I dare you!" it would yell, if sweatsuits could talk. It burst a supernova image in my head of huddling shoeless near a burning trashcan, waiting for that big Nada in the sky to finally descend. I thought about my son's last words to me "...yourself, the only person you love." That couldn't be true. All of this, all of these things I did, couldn't just be for me. And I knew I couldn't give him up.

"I don't believe you, Alicia. I think you know exactly where he is," Ms. Marcy said. She did this aggressive tap-tap-tap thing with her shoes that sounded like a gorilla banging on a typewriter. Even though most of the women in the Zone idolized Axel—he was the Messiah after all, the first male child! born of a virgin mother!—Ms. Marcy

could only appreciate his economic value. Axel was a commodity to be sold and his value had dried up. And it's difficult to turn a presidential assassin into a sex symbol.

"I swear I don't know, but I can find him," I said. "Just let me leave."

Ms. Marcy considered her options. Walked over to her desk and sat down. "Exit through the front gate. You have two hours. If you don't come back with him by that time, I'll come looking for you personally."

I grabbed my coat from the backroom. The producer tried to stop me, but I didn't bother explaining where I was going. I just kept running. After passing through the front gate I grabbed my cellphone. My hands shook. I could barely turn it on.

The screen read: Six Missed Calls. All of them from Emily.

I dialed the number and she answered on the first ring.

"Alicia, thank God you called. I kept trying your cellphone, but you didn't answer. I-I don't know what happened. He said he had to take a shit, but he was in there for an hour. I waited and waited and then I thought 'Wow, this is a really long shit,' but I figured you were feeding him dog food again because—no disrespect, I know you try hard—but you're not the best mother, so I didn't think anything of it until he had been shitting for two hours and then—"

"Is there a point to this?"

"Axel is missing," she said.

#

By the time I arrived back at Emily's house, she had already enlisted the help of a group of middle-aged churchies—a pudgy brunette, a woman in a bright pink parka, and

an elderly woman with an oversized gold cross around her neck. I didn't bother to learn their names. I didn't care.

Emily left the door of her house open and I could I hear an Ad-Prop blaring from her TV: *"After the quarantine lifts, head on down to Jenny's Naughty Shop to make those men your bitches."*

The churchies didn't mask their contempt for me. Emphasized they weren't helping for my benefit. They just wanted to make sure Axel was alive. They expected him to repopulate the earth when God's curse had been lifted. To save the convicts' souls.

"He is necessary for the propagation of our species," Emily said in a way that was unsubtly lascivious. She still hadn't changed out of her lime-green teddy.

It might seem old-Testament, but I didn't think a forty-year-old woman should lick her lips and salivate when she used the word "propagation" in reference to a sixteen-year-old. It was that kind of thing that always exposed the churchies for who they really were. They hid behind brimstone sermons, sold promises of salvation to the Districts, trying to keep them from questioning their station in life. For what end? They called their God a loving God, but he seemed awfully cruel to be cursing the land and running the supposed "Messiah" through the ringer.

These were the women who ruined my son. Called him a Messiah, but only wanted him for their own selfish ends. They spoiled him. Gave him this stench of privilege that he took back to our home: "So what if he shoved a dildo up my cat's butt? Boys will be boys." I couldn't discipline a child when the rest of the world forgave his every trespass. So I stopped disciplining, starting viewing him as an enemy.

Our first order of business was deciding where to search. I suggested we start at Kylee's. Emily said we should start locally—meaning in her neighborhood. I disagreed, saying that he had no reason to stick around there. Emily got red in the face and said we needed to stick to the "proper areas"—meaning the suburbs of the Middle and Upper Districts, where "proper" churchgoing ladies wouldn't have to deal with anything outside of their comfort zone. I reached down in my gut and pulled out that horrible barking sound bubbling inside me.

I stood there barking at them. Doing this Woof!Woof!Woof! thing. There was a long transition from confusion (why is this strange woman standing in my friend's driveway and barking at me?) to fear (this has been going on for ten minutes...the woman is clearly deranged). They gave up arguing shortly after that.

#

Kylee lived in the lesbian commune at the far end of the Lower District. Shortly after the quarantine, the local church groups rallied against the lesbians. They needed to point a finger at someone, needed someone to hate, and it wasn't profitable to take a stand against a hypothetical concept like God. I guess the gays were next in line.

It started off small enough, not much more persecution than the lesbians had become accustomed to in more traditional times. But, as the years passed and the promise of male companionship became nothing more than a fantasy, a lot of the straight ladies found themselves admitting, "Yum, I like the way that skirt tapers at my neighbor's ass." It scared the churchies and they got louder and more violent.

So they lobbied Z18 with petitions. Flooded the airwaves with Ad-Prop. Sensible women ignored it, but many didn't. There were a lot of "accidental" fires in the lesbian

homes around that time. If you were tentative, you stayed in the closet. If you weren't, you moved to a bigger closet on the outskirts of town and invited all your friends inside to party.

The lesbians didn't mind much and banded together in a close-knit community, housed in a luxury apartment building. They grew their own food, made their own clothes, and protected each other. It was safer than anywhere else in the Lower Zone. And they didn't have bullshit politics pulling them apart.

I hadn't been to the commune since Kylee and I split. Axel still visited her, but I didn't want to see her. I told myself it hurt too much, but even that wasn't completely true.

#

We were a half mile from the commune. A weather-worn billboard whipped in the wind: *A faded picture of two women touching each other's breasts through overcoats. The devil pointed and laughed next to them. Slogan: Don't make the devil happy, keep your boobs to yourselves.*

I'd almost stopped to take a break when we heard three consecutive gunshots to the left of us. Then came the convicts and their horrible barking—a pack of wolves roaming the Zone for blood. I couldn't see them, but knew they were close. I could smell their sweat, their body odor. I kicked off my heeled shoes. Made a beeline for a collapsed building, slipped through, and rushed to the commune. I didn't check to see if the other women had followed me. "Let God protect them, I'm out of here," I thought. Under enough stress, I guess they decided I was a fine leader and when we reached the commune, they were right behind.

I hit the buzzer for Kylee's apartment again and again. The barks turned to shouts and the men burst through the collapsed building, their orange jumpsuits popping against the night. I bashed my finger against the buzzer so many times it sounded like I had busted open a nest of angry hornets.

Finally, the intercom kicked on and I heard Kylee's voice.

"It's Alicia. Open up, please. It's an emergency."

The electric door clicked as Kylee unlocked it. We rushed into the darkness of the apartment building. Their only electricity came from a hand-cranked generator that really only had enough charge to power the intercom and security systems. I stumbled down the halls, trying to locate her door through sense memory. It had been too long. Kylee must have known I wouldn't find her, so she stood in her doorway with a small candle.

"You can't be here. You have to go," she said. Her face held this Greek statue sternness that made me think I'd fare better with the convicts outside.

"We're looking for Axel. He ran away," I said, not wanting to tell her the truth.

The mold of Kylee's stoned face melted. She clicked her tongue and ushered us inside. A few candles placed throughout the apartment generated enough light to guide us to the kitchen.

Kylee patted my hand. "I'm sure he'll turn up. He's a tough kid."

She was always supportive of me. It was a weakness I didn't have the ability to reciprocate. We dated for a few years when Axel was a little boy. They always got along well, even if we didn't. Kylee always had everything together and talked to Axel in a way I never could. Even after things with us fell apart, they remained close. I think he

appreciated the fact that she had patience with his tantrums, but still didn't fawn over him like the rest of the women in his life.

The churchies in the kitchen didn't speak. I knew they felt uncomfortable in the house. Their pastors and clergy had warned them of women like Kylee. They'd get 'lez'd' up if they weren't careful—which was pretty dumb considering everyone still experimented behind closed doors. Yet, the women put on this icky, uncomfortable feeling around Kylee. Made it clear they didn't want to be around her. They weren't about to walk outside, though. Not with the barking convicts running around. Not with that gunshot still ringing in their ears.

Kylee offered the women coffee. The lady in the pink parka was about to accept, but Emily stopped her. She shook her head and whispered something into the woman's jacket.

"So, how do you two know each other?" Emily asked.

"We used to date," Kylee said.

The other women exchanged glances, poked each other on the elbows. Their hatred of me used to be something abstract, but now they had concrete grounds for their anger and gossip. They didn't need words for their thoughts to be communicated, their self-righteous smirks did all the work.

I walked into the hallway and opened my cellphone. My two hours were up long ago. I tried several times to reach Ms. Marcy, but every call went to voicemail. It was strange that she wouldn't answer the phone, especially when there was so much riding on me. My joblessness had suddenly become a certainty.

Kylee stuck her head into the hall. "You doing okay?"

"I've never been cut out for this," I said.

She didn't acknowledge what I said. Just stared at me with a pitying gaze which in Kylee-speak meant: "You've never understood your value." It was a conversation we had throughout our relationship and the main reason things went sour. I didn't know what I wanted. Once passionate kisses became a string of misunderstanding. I thought hating men would automatically make me love women, but that wasn't necessarily the case. I loved her, sure, but in a far off way. I loved the idea of a lover and turned our relationship into a cinema in my head. I wish I could say the problem was her. That she didn't fit the part I wrote for her, but the truth was I was just a terrible actress. Kept forgetting my lines. When I was supposed to say "I love you," I flubbed and said, "Screw off." When I was supposed to hold her in the dark, I rolled to edge of the bed and dreamed of my own cold sheets waiting for me at home.

"I'm such a fuck-up. Things between us were good, right? Why did I run?" I asked.

"Jesus, Alicia. You're always waiting for someone else to answer your questions. The whys, the whats, the hows. How do you expect Axel to find peace of mind when his own mother is always so goddamn uncertain?"

She walked away from me and I followed her back in the kitchen. Listened to the alarms beckoning me outside. Emily started weeping. The elderly woman handed her the crucifix from around her neck.

"Pray on this. You'll feel a lot better," she said.

Emily grabbed it without looking at the woman. She pressed the gold cross against her forehead so hard it left a red welt. Mumbled a prayer under her breath. I'd

known Emily for ten years and she never let anything phase her. She found comfort in God, in the Middle District, in her authority over the students. I'd never seen her crumble.

"I thought this was all over. I thought we were saved. No one's ever going to save us. Nothing's ever going to change," she said

I stared at Emily and the red crucifix staining her forehead. I wondered how Jesus felt that morning he hung from the cross. He wasn't born a Messiah. It took thirty long years to prepare for that role. *Who decided he was ready?* I thought of Jesus sitting in his mother's kitchen one morning—eating breakfast, hung-over as hell and just saying "Fuck this. Time to be the Savior." *Or worse, what if they got it all wrong?* I had never told Axel he wasn't a miracle baby. He didn't just appear. What if Jesus' mother, through one simple lie, forced her son into a role he couldn't possibly fulfill?

Kylee placed a tiny bowl of sprouts in front of the silver fox. "Eat something. You're probably hungry."

She plucked a sprout from the bowl and rubbed it between her fingers. The other women waited for her to react. Instead of putting it down or cursing Kylee, Emily nibbled on it. She grabbed one after another, nipping the buds with her incisors. The entire time she kept her eyes on Kylee. It wasn't a mean glare. More something thankful, something asking for penance.

"Why am I wearing this?" Emily said, motioning toward her negligee. "Who have I become?"

The other two churchies each grabbed one of Emily's hands. They rested their heads against hers. Still Emily kept her eyes trained on Kylee.

"I loved a woman once," Emily said. "We kept it a secret for a long time. She died alone in a bed far removed from mine. I knew she was sick, but I couldn't get the nerve to be by her bedside. Told myself I didn't want to get caught, but really I was just afraid to lose her. Thought maybe if I wasn't there when it happened, then maybe it didn't happen, you know? That she'd be by my side forever?"

The other churchies didn't say anything, but they didn't cast each other judging looks or make tsk-tsk noises with their tongues either. I wanted to speak, but didn't. I just let the moment disappear into the ether, swallowed up by more passing moments of silence that seemed louder than the emergency sirens.

I told Kylee I needed to talk to her and we went to her bedroom. I crashed on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Kylee laid next to me. She smelled of lavender. It was a smell that brought me back to simpler times—picnics in the field behind the commune on sunny spring days.

"Axel....the real reason I need to find him is I think he killed the president."

Kylee gasped, a quick squeak of air that she tried to cover by rolling her face into the bedspread. Always the strong one. She curled into me, laid her head on my chest. Pushed her lips to the side of her face. "You need to be there for him."

I kept smelling the lavender and thinking of open fields. Thinking of sunshine.

"It's hard. I know I need to find him, but I don't know why. He's gone from me forever. He's been gone for a while. I can't be a mother without a child."

"Then what are you?" she asked.

It was an important question. One I'd been struggling with a lot. I failed at being a lover. I gave up being an actress to be a mother and failed at that too. I always thought

that when Axel left me, I'd go back to my dreams. I looked at my wrinkling hands with the smudges of the word "HOPE" still written over the cracked lines. My hair had begun to grey, my breasts had begun to sag. I was no longer fit for the camera.

Kylee added, "Axel's been through a lot in his life. Things you'll never know. I'm not saying you're a bad mother—you did what you could—but you weren't always there for him when he needed you. Be there for him now."

It scared me to think about what would happen when I found him. There was the push/pull of emotions that made me want to hurt him. I kept trying to picture that small boy at the grocery store, but kept thinking about his finger curled around a chrome trigger. But, somehow I still felt his hair in the crook of my neck and knew how frightened he was.

"You're right," I said, "whatever happens, I should be the one to find him. I don't know what I'll do, but I shouldn't let the options be taken from me."

I wracked my brain, trying to figure out where he might have headed. Where could a man go when the entire Zone was out looking for him? Where could a man find protection?

And then it hit me: James's shack.

I kissed Kylee on the lips. A soft kiss with skin barely touching. My lips felt like I'd pulled a muscle. I didn't know what it meant: if it was an admission that I missed Kylee or if I missed intimate contact or I just needed the encouragement at the moment. At least it was something I could carry with me as I snuck out of the apartment and set out to find my son.

#

James pressed his face against the glass when I approached his shack. I closed my eyes and waited for his gun to appear.

There were two men in Zone Eighteen unaffected by the plague. Axel was one, the other was James Dramuss—a Southerner with missing front teeth and thin, stringy hair. Following the plague, he became the neighborhood lothario. Making his way around the District like James Bond with a license to screw. Had his own line of Ad-Props that even made him fairly appealing after enough make-up was applied. He said he got sick of it after a while, but the women kept harassing him. I remember seeing him at block parties getting groped by women from all angles. Fighting with each other over who would take him home. Before long, he hermitted himself near the lake in the Lower District woods. If a woman came up, he point a shotgun out his window and started firing.

"Expected you," he said.

His head disappeared for a moment and the door opened. He invited me in. The shack was small and bare, with just enough furniture for he and one guest. I didn't see a bed, so I assumed he slept on the shaggy bear rug near his fireplace. A kettle whistled loudly. I thought of the sirens and thought of my son.

"Can't afford tea, but I can offer you a glass of bubbling lake water. Flame kills most of the germs, but ain't guaranteeing you won't have some nasty shits tomorrow."

I declined and took a seat at the table. He told me Axel came to see him a few hours ago, but didn't stay long. He had left to join to convicts. They had a plan to escape. "Wanted me to join, but...well...there's not much left for me outside this shack anymore. You gals made sure of that."

I was about to interject, but he stopped me. "I know you didn't have nothing to do with what them women did, but you didn't stop it neither and, if we're all going to be honest here, that's as big a sin as any. God's truth."

I waited for him to clarify, but he didn't. He just poured himself boiled lake water and made loud sucking noises against the rim of his mug.

"Your son was a good kid," he said. James walked away from the table and opened up a chest in the corner of the room. He came back with a few books and a scratchpad. Told me things about my son I'd never known. He loved the Transcendentalists—Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau. He liked to write. Used to come down to James's shack on weekends and spent hours reading and writing.

I grabbed the scratchpad from James. Axel's handwriting.

Poetry: "The petals on the horizon/wither like my soul/I am black, black, black/the night is cold/death."

My son was a god-awful poet, but I'd have still hung it on our refrigerator if he'd only brought it to me.

"I thought about killing myself a lot," James said. "Every dawn I curse you gals about what happened, but I can't help but think how things used to be. You're no different than us. Nothing changes. Power just shifts. And I guess'n a man can't really blame you for not stopping it. I didn't neither and got shit on in the end."

We didn't move for a while. James turned on a radio. Broke the silence with the words: "Solar powered"—I guessed he was talking about the radio. I listened to the crackle as James rotated the dial for a signal.

The garbled sounds of an Ad-Prop came between stations:

"God...towering...pray...cash."

There was a time before the plague when I sprawled myself on casting couches, desperate to get a part in this movie or that. Dirty, sweat-stained casting couches put a bad taste in my mouth. I made concessions at times. Stored a lot of power between my legs. I hated the men who made it happen, hated the men who allowed it to happen. Were things really so different now? James didn't think so. The convicts didn't either.

The government sent convicts into the Zones every five years. Death penalty prisoners with nothing else to lose, so they the government turned them into objects, test subjects. The government injected them with different vaccines, trying to find one that would keep males alive. They never survived more than a year...until now. We never really thought they'd survive, so the women of the Zones started using the convicts for their own ends: propagating the species and/or satisfying their own desires. Not all of the women were daring/cruel enough to do this, but some of them were. Drunk on power, they entered into cells with armed guards at their backs, fucked the prisoners—willing or not. Everybody knew this happened, but no one stopped it. Those men, we gave them their horrible barks and they deserved to have them.

James continued flicking the dial on his radio, voices started growing stronger in the static. Suddenly a clear voice broke through: "I repeat this is not a drill. The Upper District is still under attack and now the convicts have taken control of Z18."

#

I borrowed James's bike and pedaled as fast as I could to the headquarters. It was difficult in my bare feet—my feet kept slipping on the pedals, grinding on the ground. I

ran into several snow piles, slid on slush. Managed to pedal eight miles in less than fifteen minutes. For an out of shape forty-five-year-old, it was impressive.

The Upper District was in chaos as I rode past. Women from the Lower and Middle Districts threw themselves against the gate, against the high brick walls. They demanded to be let in, demanding safety. Upper District security was firing their weapons at them. Beanbags. One of them slid under my front tire and tossed me off the bike.

Someone shouted at me and I started running, shaking off the pain in my wrists. I wiped the blood on my pants and raced toward Z18. The remainder of our already small police force was lined up outside the gates. Most of them had dedicated themselves to suppressing the rebellion in the Upper District.

I passed the front gate and headed directly for the secret tunnel. Axel must have led the convicts there. That was how they got in. The guard from earlier was splattered on the side of the house. She was another employee of Z18 who died doing what she hated.

Inside the headquarters, two orange-jumper convicts patrolled the corridors of the magazine offices. The blinds were down in all the rooms and the doors locked. I assumed the workers were in there, cowering under their desks. I pressed against the walls, peeked around corners, and hid in the shadows.

Slowly, I made my way to the TV18 studio where a larger group of convicts circled the room, knocking over equipment. Cameras and lights burst against the floor. I could easily make out Alex walking around in the control room. My coworkers were face-down on the carpet near the far exit. Two more convicts had guns pointed at their backs. The silver-fox newswoman screamed, "Don't you know who I am? I'm a fucking goddess. You should be bowing before me, you apes."

The convicts had hard eyes that didn't really blink. Eyes that reflected nothing but the light from the fluorescents overhead. It was hard to tell if there were anyone inside. A thought that made me guilty when I thought of Axel's father.

There was only one other time in the Zone's history that a convict breakout occurred. It was on a smaller scale, only a few got out. All of them were shot within hours of escape, with the exception of one man. He was a dusky, muscular gentleman with calloused hands. Somehow he wandered into the alley near my apartment. He was curled in a ball when I found him. It was the first time I'd seen a man so powerful reduced to such a defenseless animal state. It woke something in me, a need to protect him. I told him to be quiet and let him into my home. His name was Rafael. He said he was an innocent man. I knew without him speaking that disease had already started to work its way into him. He seemed so sad. I pulled him close and we made love. Unable to let him go, I hid him for weeks. Eased his pain with vials of morphine I stole from the neighbor's house. On the last day of his life when his body went hollow, turned to paper. We walked out of my apartment and into the sunlight. He didn't remember who I was, but he seemed grateful for my touch. I kissed his forehead, told him I loved him, and let him go. He tried to walk away, didn't make it far. I liked to imagine him picked up by a strong autumn that carried him skyward until he became a speck in the clouds.

#

I studied the convicts' movements for close to an hour, trying to work up the courage to run past them. Zig-zag patrols around the busted equipment. Occasionally they walked toward the supply room. I waited until their backs were turned and darted to the control booth. Closed the door behind me.

Axel turned as I entered. "You're a terrible mother."

Ms. Marcy lay dead in her swivel chair. A bullet hole in the head. She still wore that amazing sweatsuit that didn't seem so red anymore when compared to the blood running down her face. In fact it looked dim and burgundied, like it could blend into the background of any boardroom. Her face had a look of emptiness. I hadn't expected that face from a dead person. In my years as a B-grade film star, I'd come to expect the faces of the dead to be painted in horror. Shrieking fear at the blackness of eternal rest, the loss of being. Ms. Marcy didn't look like much of anything, except a dead mannequin waiting for meaning. As lifeless as a frame of film.

"What do you want?" Axel tried to sound tough, but his voice cracked on the consonants.

I was taken aback by his question because I wasn't really sure what I wanted. As aimless as ever. "How are you?" I asked.

Axel didn't respond. His face flushed.

When I learned I was pregnant, I tried to rid myself of it. I'd heard women in the old days used coat hangers, but all I had were plastic ones and it just kind of tickled my insides. Fully intending to give it up for adoption, I laid across the tarp on the midwife's floor and let the child slide off me. I looked into its face and my belly became a washing machine that tumbled joy and fear and love around. Other women gathered around when they saw the infant had a penis. Impossible, they said. A boy? Males never survived the womb. They asked about the father. I told them there wasn't one. Raphael was mine to keep. That image of Raphael floating past the trees was the only part of me that was a gift. I didn't want anyone else to have it.

#

The corpse of Ms. Marcy had a twinkle in its eye. A sparkle that made her seem definitely human once more. It's weird, but when you reduce a person to death, you start noticing things you never had before. Not while they were still alive. Like the way her eyes were smaller and less threatening, or her nose less was pointed and mean. All her power was wrapped up in my ideas of her and I finally realized how easy that idea could change.

"I didn't kill her, if that's what you're wondering. Not Ms. Marcy. The convicts did her in. I tried to stop them, but now that it's over, I'm not really sad about it," Axel said.

"What about the president?"

Axel told me about the plan. That the convicts needed him to murder the president. It was the only way to start a change. To remove the old power. He told me about cocking the hammer. Squeezing the trigger again and again. And as the sulfur filled his nostrils, he realized the gravity of his mistake.

"Viva La Revolución," he said to the ground.

There was so much I didn't know about Axel. Things I ignored.

Flashes of Child-Axel: despondent after leaving the homes of neighbors and fear in his eyes as we approached the doors. "Why do they like this?" he asked me once through the bathroom door.

Flashes of Teen-Axel: cuts along his wrist—"I was just climbing trees, you cunt!"—and the look in his face at the press conference when President Avila brought up his role as the Messiah.

Flashes of Me: Focused on the career I'd have when he was gone, focused on who would watch him while I was away, focused on the women warmed by trash fires.

I suddenly didn't want to stand anymore. Just wanted to fall asleep. I lowered slowly, my back to the desk. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say I gave him everything I could, but did I really?

"I'm sorry," I said. "I failed you."

Axel sat down next to me, rested his head against my shoulder, picked at the fabric of my coat. "I hated you for so long," Axel said. "You sold me to this place. I never wanted to be a sex object. I never wanted to be a Messiah. I just wanted to be a normal. To be a little girl."

"Why did you come here?" I asked.

"The convicts thought we could control this Zone if we took over this place. I followed. I don't know why. I knew it wasn't true. As soon as the Nation finds out about this, they'll blow the whole Zone to smithereens. I guess maybe I was just looking for you. To say goodbye."

He put his head in my lap. Pressed his ear against my uterus, as if he were trying to hear his own infant heartbeat. "I wish I would have died in there," he said.

A roar of gunfire erupted in the studio. We both jumped to our feet. Watched out the window as the police penetrated the Z18. They rushed in, firing their weapons indiscriminately. News anchors, actresses, camerawomen, and convicts alike hit the floor. A few of the convicts, ones who had procured weapons, shot back. Bodies were flying. Blood was flying. Women squirmed on the floor, trying to claw at the ankles of the convicts still standing, trying to suffocate the ones on the ground.

"It's funny," Axel said, "when it's all said and done, it doesn't matter if you're male or female, rich or poor. All that matters is who has the gun."

Axel pulled away from me and walked over to the desk. He studied the corpse of Ms. Marcy. "God, this sweatsuit is so ugly. It's just a giant bull's eye."

"What happens now?" I asked him.

"They called me the Messiah. They wanted me to lead the men when they arrived. They wanted me to shepherd the convicts. That's what I'll do."

He said he'd walk down there. He'd asked them to surrender. He'd ask the other women to forgive.

"I won't let you leave. They'll kill you," I said.

"I know."

It was then I realized why I'd come. I wanted to get Axel back. He'd been gone from me for a long time, and that truly scared me. I was a mother—everything else was secondary. And in all the years of indecision, I never stopped to consider that Axel was giving up a lot to find himself. To assume his role.

I sat on Ms. Marcy's desk. Waited for a sense of control to arrive.

"You know, these women kept talking about Messiahs and leading and all that, but they never really told me what that meant. I don't think they knew themselves. Probably thought it just sounded prophetic. That might have been the best gift they ever gave me."

He handed me his revolver and kissed me on the cheek. "I was wrong. You are a good mother."

I wanted to reach for him, but I knew that was selfish. Being a mother was about sacrifice. I held my hand out in a symbolic way, to show that if he ever wanted to come back to me he could. I noticed the repetition of HOPE was still scrawled on my hand from the symposium. The ink was smudged from the hours of cold and snow, but it was there. My HOPE was faded and blurred—looked more like "HOLE" than anything—but it was more than the women had on the studio floor where police fired bullets at innocent and villain alike. They didn't care if we survived. There was more of us where that came from. There were still women pressed against flaming garbage cans waiting to replace us, waiting for "HOLE."

"Go forth, my son, and propagate," I said.

"As We Rise from the Ocean, the Goddess Holds our Hands"

The Atlantic Ocean woke to the sound of wind and the lapping of its own waves against the shore. Deep in its bowels it felt the tickle of fish and the vibration of whales communing in a language it didn't understand. The Atlantic was cold and alone. It felt trapped in its own giant body and tried calling for help, but found it had no voice. Sooner or later someone will save me, it thought.

#

Tracey rubbed her sore knuckles. It was the first time she'd ever punched someone and it hurt more than expected. The other girl looked shocked. She wiped a smear of blood from her nose and sucked her cheeks in and out. Her lips puckered tightly. She reminded Tracey of a fish gasping for air.

They were the only two bodies in the hallway. It was silent. The girl threw herself at Tracey's feet and kicked her legs in the air. She screamed for help as she thrashed on the ground.

"Help me, help me. This bitch is crazy," the girl yelled.

Tracey didn't move. She wasn't sure how to respond to such theatrics.

Mrs. Jettison threw open the door of her English classroom and ordered her students to remain in their seats. They ignored her and pressed themselves against the door, fighting each other for a view. She rushed toward the girl on the floor and helped her to her feet.

"She just up and punched me," the puckered-face girl said.

"She called my mom a whore," Tracey said.

It wasn't anything new for Tracey. She heard it every day since her mother left over a month ago. This girl was different though. It was her first day at the school—

Tracey didn't even know her name—yet the girl already thought she had the right to gossip about a woman she hadn't even met.

Mrs. Jettison sighed and glanced back at her classroom. She told the girls to shake hands and apologize.

"I will not ask her for forgiveness," Tracey said.

Mrs. Jettison leaned over. "Apologizing isn't asking for forgiveness, it's just pretending you feel regretful so you don't get yourself expelled. What would your father say about this?"

The girl held her hand out for Tracey to shake. The streak of blood from her nose had already dried and darkened against the girl's pale skin. Mrs. Jettison grabbed Tracey's elbow and nudged her hand forward. Their fingers jostled past each other's and were pulled away.

Mrs. Jettison and the girl walked back toward the English classroom. Tracey waited until they were gone and closed her locker with a soft click. No one in this city understands forgiveness, Tracey thought. And she knew it was Pastor Thomas's fault.

#

Pastor Thomas preached sin, but he never preached forgiveness. Tracey didn't think he had it in him. He told her once there was no point: "We are slaves to sin. Only God can forgive and we're already unworthy."

On Sundays, Tracey would sit in the front pew of Port Smith Baptist Church and itch her skin against the splintering wood seat. The congregation would nod and yell and praise His name as Pastor Thomas rose above the pulpit like a copper monolith and

shouted about fire and hollered about brimstone and never—not once in Tracey's eleven years of life—mentioned redemption.

Tracey never knew him as Dad or Daddy or Father, only as Pastor Thomas of Port Smith Baptist Church. He never dropped the persona. Even in the quiet hours of the evening, after his white linen suit had long been hanging in the closet and he filled his belly with six o'clock supper, he was still Pastor Thomas of Port Smith Baptist Church—a man who sat on the front porch into the long hours of the night, carving demons into broken oak branches.

She would watch him from the window as his hands worked, shaving away bark, chiseling lips and tongues into the wood. The hours spent with his tools left his hands calloused and coffee-colored, while his arms stayed smooth and tan. She thought a lot about those hands; she wondered if their leathered flesh and rough lines were capable of feeling love. It frightened her to think they were. "Or at least they used to be," her mother would say with a sigh.

What frightened Tracey more than those hands were the carvings they produced. He propped them up on the mantles and cabinets. He hung them from the walls. There were thousands of the figures spread throughout the house. Tracey couldn't turn in any direction without seeing a cadre of faces with horns and serpent tongues and narrowed eyes staring back at her. She swore at night they whispered. Tracey sometimes sat with her back against her bedroom door and listened until she fell asleep, desperate to catch a hint of what they were saying.

#

Tracey arrived home from school. The house empty. Pastor Thomas wouldn't return until later that night. She sat at the kitchen table and remembered how her mother used to wait for her there with a peanut butter sandwich and a tiny bag of pretzels. Her stomach growled. She climbed on the counter and patted down the empty cupboards until she found a half-empty sleeve of stale saltines. After two crackers, she stashed the remainder back where she found it.

She walked to the front porch and sat in her father's rocking chair, pushing a pile of sawdust around with her tennis shoes. Her father's chisel lay on the stool next to an unfinished demon with large hollow eyes and a jagged mouth. She picked up the chisel, held it against her forearm, and wondered if she'd look better in the shape of a demon.

If her mother were home, things would be different. She would run fingers through Tracey's hair and hush her until the dark thoughts evaporated. But her mother wasn't home—she might never be home again—and that was something she just had to get used to. Tracey wondered if there was a secret to living that the world kept hidden from her. Some way of accepting the awful things that people did. Some way of understanding them.

She knew her mother had plenty of secrets. She stashed them under a loose floorboard in the bedroom. Tracey had often found her mother there, board pried open, staring at the herb garden through the curtainless window. Tracey never looked under that board. It never made sense to. As long as her mother loved her, there was nothing else to learn. Now that she was alone, though, she hoped there'd be an answer that could ease her pain.

Tracey held her breath with every creaking step on the way to her parents' bedroom. She knocked on the floorboards near the dresser until she heard a hollow sound. The board easily popped from its place. Inside lay a musty-smelling sweater. She unraveled the wool to reveal a bottle of cheap rum, a leather-bound diary, and a photo of her parents smiling against the backdrop of a sprawling grey mountain range.

She unscrewed the bottle of rum. Memories of her mother's breath rushed to her. She took a sip from the bottle. First one and then another. She spit out more than she drank. It made her cough and gag, burning her throat as she gulped. But the more she drank, the easier it became. Her senses dulled. She stared hard at the picture of her mother and the smile she didn't recognize. She asked the strange woman if that was the secret to life—numbing yourself to the world until you had no choice but to forgive it.

#

Tracey's mother was the one who taught her about forgiveness. Her beautiful, mousey mother with the bright yellow hair and pale skin. She told Tracey that no matter what her daddy said anyone can be redeemed. Tracey didn't really think her mother believed that though. She spent most of her time hiding from the pastor and sneaking quick nips of rum.

That's why Tracey wanted to save her mother more than anything and, for the longest time, had no idea how. It was on the day her mother burned dinner that the solution came to her in a rush. Pastor Thomas arrived home from church and found his dinner burned and his wife crying. He paced around the kitchen table. Grabbed a breast of chicken in his fist and squeezed until charcoaled meat ashed to the ground. "You're useless. You and your daughter. All the women of this house are useless," he said. His

voice cold and even. He threw the squashed chicken against the wall. Tracey watched from the doorway, unable to act or think.

When it was over, Pastor Thomas went outside and carved his demons while her mother scrubbed food from the kitchen floor. Tracey took a seat at the table, listened to smack of wet rag against tile, and removed a box of crayons and some notebook paper from her backpack. She wrote her mother a greeting card. It read: "I love you, Mom. You are beautiful."

After this card, Tracey wrote more. Every time the pastor came home from work and grabbed Tracey's mother in a way that made her uneasy, she made her mother a card. Tracey's mother returned the sentiment by addressing her own greeting cards to her daughter. It became their own private way of communicating love in a house occupied by wooden demons.

On the day her mother left, she made Tracey one final card: "I'm sorry, Tracey. I love you, but I can't be here anymore. For this, I can't be forgiven. Love, Mom."

#

Tracey took another gulp of rum and opened her mother's diary. The spine cracked loudly and the pages were stiff at her fingers. She didn't know what to make of what she found inside. Instead of writing, her mother had filled the pages with drawings. Small, crudely drawn images of a woman with squiggly hair and razor-sharp teeth, who Tracey assumed was supposed to be her mother. In each image, the woman was surrounded by tiny demons. They dangled above her. They roasted her in an oven. They dragged her around by the feet.

The room started to spin. The pictures blurred. Tracey closed the diary and tried to stand. Her legs danced of their own volition. She braced herself against the bed post and knocked over the bottle of rum. The liquid darkened the wood floor.

A tiny demon with the face of a half-moon and cylindrical tongue sat on the dresser. Tracey stumbled toward it. Pressed her nose against its face.

"This is all your fault," Tracey said.

She wrapped her fingers around the demon figure and threw it as hard as she could at the window. The glass shattered. A crash rang in the air. Tracey stuck her head outside and found the carving caught amongst the weeds in her mother's herb garden.

Looking down made the room spin harder. Tracey grabbed the dresser for support and vomited across the top. Purging the alcohol helped. She dragged herself down the hall and into her own bedroom. She pulled a pack of markers and a sheet of yellow construction paper out of her desk and scribbled a final card for her mother. It read: "I still love you, Mom. I'll make everything better. Please come home soon. XOXO."

On her way out the house, Tracey grabbed at the various demons around her. She imagined them laughing at her. Hissing, whispering, gossiping. She hurled the carvings at the wall until they were nothing more than chunks of splintered wood.

#

The sun began to set on Port Smith. Smudges of orange light flickered behind the tall oak trees surrounding the city. Tracey braced herself against the railing as she made her way down the stairs of her home on the hill. When she reached the main road, where cottages lined the overlook like the cover of a storybook, she began to run. She ran to escape the hurt in her stomach coming from the liquor. She ran to escape the wrath of

Pastor Thomas when he saw the damage done at home. She clutched her mother's card to her chest as she hurried to the boardwalk before the sun had completely disappeared.

Near the coast, shops closed for the evening. Owners swept the sand from the doorways and latched the windows of their diners and gift shops. They smiled at Tracey as she moved past, but no one asked her why she was running and where she was running to. Their faces brought to mind the wooden demons she had just destroyed.

When she arrived at the beach, Tracey collapsed in the sand and vomited. She thought all of the liquid had left her system, but when she tried to sit up, she only vomited more. Her mother's card crinkled in her hand as she curled her legs against her chest. She didn't have it in her to move from that position.

#

It was sometime after dark when Pastor Thomas found her on the beach. He grabbed her by the neck and raised her to her feet. He sniffed around her face in loud, drawn-out snorts like a hunting dog. His face contorted at the smell of alcohol.

Tracey tried to show him the card she had made for her mother, but he grabbed it out of her hands and tore it into pieces. He tossed them in the air. His hands felt like sandpaper as they wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her toward the ocean. Her legs left deep trenches in the sand. He dragged her into the water until he was submerged up to his waist and he pushed her head under.

Tracey closed her eyes and swallowed mouthfuls of salt water. She couldn't breathe. Her mouth was dry; her throat raw. Everything inside her burned. She could feel his rough hands tightening around her shoulders. He would pull her out of the water and scream "Puke it out of you, devil" and he would push her back under and he'd pull her

back up. Again and again. She didn't fight him. She let herself be pushed under. Again and again. Her eyes were on fire. Everything around her alternated between blur and darkness. Her lips were chapped. Her tongue lapped at the back of her teeth. As the pastor pulled her out one final time, she felt the sand give way below her knees. She tried to focus on the hairs of his arm and the way the follicles danced in the ocean breeze. She choked. She saw only black. And then she was nothing.

#

The Atlantic Ocean heard someone calling to it, from somewhere deep inside. Amongst the fish and coral and creatures unknown—a girl. She felt warm. She filled the water with her tears. The vibrations rumbled in its stomach and the sensation shocked the Atlantic. It could communicate with the girl. It told her to hush. Told her everything would be alright. She just needed to let go.

#

Thomas felt his daughter's body fall limp in his arms. He stopped throttling her and turned her body toward him. He wrapped his fingers around her thin wrist and tried to record the pulse that had ceased to beat. He pulled her body to the shore and laid her out in the sand. She was unmoving and unspeaking and unbreathing. He tried doing CPR, but wasn't sure how to go about it. He pumped her chest like he'd seen in the diagrams posted on the lifeguard stand. He tried breathing into her mouth, but all he could taste was the salt on her lips and it made him unbearably thirsty.

He didn't know what to do next. He was shaking. He hadn't meant to kill her, hadn't meant to kill his daughter. God would not leave this sin unpunished. Of that he was sure. Yet, God surely knew he was acting only out of allegiance to Him? He just

wanted to punish her. He just wanted her to see the sin in her own heart and acknowledge it. God wouldn't fault him for that.

The imprint of Thomas's fingers were carved into the flesh around her shoulders. The marks looked black against the whiteness of her dead skin. With no other option, Thomas dragged the body across the sand and back into the ocean. He waded out as far as he could go and heaved. His daughter floated back to the shore before even he had time to reach it himself. He looked around for a boulder to weigh the body down, but found only tiny pebbles and soda cans. He figured that was better than nothing, so he filled the soda cans with pebbles and used her shoelaces to affix the cans to her arms. This attempt fared no better and she drifted back to shore like a giant buoy.

Eventually he gave up and left his daughter's body knocking against a cluster of driftwood. Her arms moved up and down as the waves crashed into the shore and pulled away again. Thomas thought it looked like she was waving goodbye.

Back at home, he lie in bed; his clothes sandy and wet. He refused to change; he was simply too exhausted. The room was cold. The air from the broken window whistled through the room. The sound of his breath was like waves crashing against his lips—shallow, but prolonged.

He missed his wife. They'd been happy once, he was sure of it. He knew he could be cruel, but it didn't justify what she'd done. He couldn't believe it when they told him. About how his wife had been spending her nights at the wharf, offering her body to fisherman for safe passage away from the city. How she'd made love to dozens of them, each of them abandoning her at the shore like a piece of detritus. That wasn't the woman

he married. He convinced himself it was the alcohol. All that rum she pushed through her lips when she thought he wasn't looking.

"I couldn't let my daughter end up like that whore," he told God. "Please forgive me."

It was the first time in over a decade he had asked God for forgiveness. He asked because it was the first time he truly knew there was none for him. He had driven his wife away to sea and pushed his daughter beneath it.

Only one of his demons survived Tracey's destruction, he placed it on the pillow near his bed. It had a face comprised of tiny concentric circles and a long, spiked tongue in the center. He couldn't remember how long it had taken him to get those details correct, but it was too long. He knew that much. In the dark he swore he heard the demon whisper. Nothing tangible, just a constant tingle against his ear. It lulled him to sleep sometime around dawn.

The ringing of the house phone woke him. Thomas expected it to happen. He took a deep breath and prepared to feign surprise when whomever was on the other end of the line revealed that his daughter's body had been found on the beach.

He picked up the phone, but all his preparation was for naught because what he heard on the other end of the line truly did surprise him: "Did you hear? The Atlantic Ocean has turned red. Completely red. Like the color of a fresh wound."

#

The investigation into his daughter's disappearance lasted little more than a week. The city was too preoccupied with the sudden color change of the Atlantic Ocean.

Thomas started spending less time at the church. He couldn't stand the way people looked at him with pity, trying to console him for the tragedy he brought on himself. They would smile and touch his arm gently. They would hold his rough hands and rub them so that their skin against his elicited the sound of a grasshopper rubbing its legs together. It was torturous the way they'd stare into his eyes and not see the killer in him.

"She probably ran away like her mother and she probably got what she deserved," they'd tell him, thinking that would make him feel better, but it only made things worse. He couldn't believe they were so cold. He couldn't believe he was responsible for that coldness.

At home he buried the remnants of his wooden demons and buried them in his wife's old herb garden. He couldn't bring himself to carve another one. With nothing left to occupy his mind, he took to sitting at the kitchen table and flipping through his wife's diary. He found it on the night Tracey drowned, laying atop a pried-up floorboard in his bedroom. That pages reeked of liquor. The pictures inside made his mouth dry and his head ache. Hastily-rendered simulacrums of his wooden demons tortured his wife on each page. They ran their long tongues down her legs, dug their nails into her chest. A page-after-page assault on her.

At the back of the diary, he noticed a smaller picture. More detailed than others, thin lines with charcoaled pencil shading. It showed his wife standing over one of the demons, submerging its head in a basin of water. Another demon with spread wings hovered above, pouring water over her head with a chalice. A double baptism, Thomas thought. The notion struck him as something important. If his wife could forgive the demons and find forgiveness in return, maybe it wasn't too late for him as well.

#

That following Sunday, his church was packed for the first time since Christmas. More packed than that. People stood outside waiting. Port Smith was in a panic over the crimson ocean and certain the end was near. They relied on Pastor Thomas to show them the way and help them come to terms with the guilt they all felt about their wasted and immoral lives.

He muddled through the mass, distracted by the crowds that hung on his every word, curious to see if this ordeal had changed him. If it made him reconsider his ideas about sin. When it came time for the sermon, he stood at the pulpit and decided it was time.

"Today we head to the ocean," he announced. The congregation seemed confused and looked around at one and another, trying to gauge how to react to this peculiar declaration. But when Thomas held the side door open, one by one they rose from their seats to follow him.

He led the procession to the beach. To the same spot he'd drowned his daughter. He waded into the red water until it came up to his waist. He raised his hands and hollered above the crashing waves.

"This is the product of our sin. This ocean is the blood on our hands. We come to baptism to erase the sins of our past, but, the truth is, they can't be erased. We must accept them and we must forgive them. We must forgive ourselves. Only then can we be free."

And they lined up and they approached. Individually, Thomas grabbed them by the shoulders and pushed them under the water. They came back up dripping with red and

he blessed them and set them free. He did this over and over again until his arms were sore and his throat was raw.

A young girl with a puckered-face approached. "Pastor, I am beyond forgiveness. I met your daughter once. Right before she disappeared. I said ill things about her mama and I drove her away."

The pastor ran his fingers over the girl's face. Lines were forming in her forehead. He thought of her as a chalkboard, rubbed the lines, trying to erase them.

"This is not your fault," he said.

The girl began to cry. Pastor Thomas dipped her into the water and released her. She pushed through the waters to join the remainder of the congregation.

Pastor Thomas turned to face his flock. "I call upon you to cleanse me."

They gathered around him. They each grabbed hold of his cloth and lowered him down. Below the surface, he opened his mouth and sucked in the water. As he gasped for breath, he heard it. A voice from somewhere deep in the ocean. Tracey's voice.

"Father, why did you kill me?"

The congregation pulled him out of the water. They released him. Thomas couldn't believe his ears. He thought it only a hallucination until the voice repeated itself, louder this time.

"Father, why did you kill me?"

The others heard it too. They looked around at one another, bewildered.

Thomas didn't know what to say. He couldn't find the vocabulary. The words built up inside him like steam in a boiler until finally they just exploded.

"Tracey, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I never meant for this to happen. Please forgive me."

The ocean was quiet for a moment. Even the lapping of the waves at the shore had muted.

"Submit to me and you will find forgiveness," the ocean said.

Thomas didn't resist. He dipped his head below the water and sucked in mouthfuls of the sea. It tasted like copper and he didn't struggle as it filled his lungs. The hands of his congregation grabbed at his body, but he pushed them away with his elbows and sank deeper into the water. He felt a heat rising in his stomach that coated his insides like a thick syrup. The water soothed his aching hands. He could taste his daughter's blood on his tongue.

"I never meant for it to end this way," he told God.

#

The Atlantic Ocean dried up. Places that were once wet, weren't wet anymore. It was as if the girl inside had sucked up the spots she didn't need and pushed herself inside. The presence of another being within, warmed the Atlantic. Its body moved and shifted until the water flowed through long canals from coast to coast. Veins. The girl pressed herself against those canals. The Atlantic couldn't see this, but felt it. And it became the only thing that ever mattered.

#

Samantha lay on her back at the bow of a small metal fishing boat. The boat was docked off the shore of some island she had never heard of. She could taste her own matted hair in her mouth. Pushed strands of her bangs out of her eyes, trying to look at

the stars. A fisherman grunted and moved and sweated on top of her. The hair from his pudgy stomach rubbed against her pelvis and she could feel the heartbeat of the ocean pound in her chest. She tried to sync it with the man's thrusts, but the timing was always slightly off.

She caught a glimpse of his hands as they gripped the guardrail above her head. The hands were rough and calloused like her husband's and it brought her mind back to the daughter she left behind. The blood rushed to her head. She shoved the man off her and leaned over the side of the boat and dry heaved.

She still couldn't believe she had abandoned her daughter, left her to those cruel and calloused hands. Hands that dulled the burning in her veins with each touch. She could not be forgiven for that. And if she could not be forgiven, then what was the point? It would be better to drown in the crimson waters of the Atlantic than continue another day as a demon.

When the water around her first turned red, most of the boats evacuated. She thought as long as she was in that water, she would still have passage back to her daughter in Port Smith. Then the ocean began to dry up, and the odds of returning home reduced to nothing. She didn't want to give up hope, so she latched onto one of the last remaining fisherman. The old fisherman called her crazy, but he didn't seem to mind the danger as long as she offered him regular sex and the floor didn't completely drop out from under him while he was having it. He figured as long as long as the boat was docked, he still had a chance to escape if need be.

Samantha put her clothes back on and walked down into the cramped sleeping cabin. The fisherman followed her and threw himself on his cot, not bothering to dress. His tanned, wrinkled skin resembled a piece of leather that had been hung up to dry.

She searched a cabinet near the cot. She untangled a half-swallowed bottle of rum from some fishing net and took three large swigs. In a suitcase, on the lowest shelf, were all of her remaining belongings: a flannel coat, a flask, a wood carving of a demon, the greeting cards her daughter had drawn for her over the years—her childish attempts to rescue her mother from depression.

Samantha couldn't fault her daughter for trying to save her, but she knew in her heart she couldn't be saved. She tried to find redemption in Port Smith, but it wasn't there. She tried to understand her husband, but his demons were too abstract. And that's why she had to leave—she didn't deserve her daughter's love and certainly not salvation.

The thought made her sick. It was selfish to think that now. Selfish to leave her daughter in the hands of a man who could no longer feel anything except pain. She tried to justify it by thinking she was the problem. He'd change if she left. He'd return as the man she once knew. A wide-smiling student, fresh from the Seminary. They'd travel up to the Alleghenies, lay against the rocky crags of the mountains and watch clouds roll overhead. He would whisper Psalms in her ear as he ran his fingers along her face. He carried the ocean in those hands and she could smell salt and fresh air on his fingertips as he petted her nose. That was the man she wished her daughter could meet.

Samantha gathered her daughter's cards in her hand and tossed them overboard. They lingered fleetingly on the surface of the waves and then were destroyed, torn apart by the crashing red waters of the Atlantic.

The fisherman snored loudly. Samantha reached back into her suitcase and grabbed the wooden demon. It had one large eye that protruded from a horn in the center of its head, dozens of tiny limbs, and a crooked mouth that perpetually sneered. She examined the carving as she listened to the snores of the fisherman and the thumping heart of the ocean. It made her think of all the years spent with those demons hanging from every wall, decorating every mantle.

Samantha squeezed the carving in her hand and finished off the bottle of rum. It hit the floor with a heavy thud and she curled up next to it. She placed the demon next to her face and stared into its mouth. She closed her eyes and tried to recreate the image in her head. Had a hard time remembering what was so frightening about the creature. It wasn't long before she fell asleep.

When morning had come, the fisherman kicked Samantha in her ribs and told her to wake up. Her head was pounding and her mouth was dry.

"We're getting out of here. This shit is too fucking freaky. Do you feel that? This ocean is alive," the fisherman said.

He told her how the ocean had grown flesh overnight. It covered the red canals and all the structures and missing spaces in-between.

"Go out and see for yourself if you don't believe me," he added.

Samantha refused to leave. The fisherman tried to scoop her up with his gravel-like hands and carry her off the boat, but she slapped him and told him no. She wasn't going to leave the ocean. Not now. Not ever.

"Suit yourself," said the fisherman and he gathered up a few of his belongings and climbed onto the dock.

She rested her head against the wall and felt the fleshed ocean as it started to inhale/exhale. The boat rose and fell as if each breath were a gentle wave. The movement slowly rocked her to sleep.

#

The next day the fisherman returned to the boat. He told Samantha the ocean had been spotted growing an arm off the coast of England.

Every subsequent day the fisherman returned to the boat to inform Samantha the ocean had grown another limb and another and another. On the last day the fisherman came to tell her the ocean had grown a head.

"Fucking thing supposedly looks like a young girl."

The fisherman begged with her, pleaded with her to leave.

"Look. I'm not in love with you or anything, but I feel like it's on my conscience if you get killed by this demon ocean."

"It won't be your fault. This is my decision."

#

Later that day, the boat began to shake. It lurched and groaned as it tilted vertically. Samantha grabbed her husband's wooden demon and raced to the bow of the boat. Launched herself onto the dock and landed on the wooden planks hard. A sharp pain jolted through her body and the demon figure jammed into her ribs. Within moments the boat glided down the vanilla flesh of the Atlantic and disappeared into the darkness below.

The ocean rose into the sky, revealing two very long legs that jutted out from the depths. It sat itself upright and yawned loudly. Two giant arms flew across the sky from

the east and the west. It groaned loudly and then stood up, soaring higher into the clouds than ever before.

Samantha noticed a head covered by a large patch of cumulous clouds. She squinted her eyes and waited until the clouds passed before she could analyze its features. She knew instantly who it was.

"Tracey," she called. "TraceyTraceyTraceyTracey"

Tracey-The-Ocean held her breath. The whole planet fell silent.

"Did someone say something?" Tracey-The-Ocean asked.

"TraceyTraceyTraceyTracey" Samantha repeated.

Tracey-The-Ocean relaxed its breath. Samantha heard sniffing from above. Tears the size of comets crashed all around her. She raised the wooden demon above her head and waved it toward the ocean.

"Mom?" Tracey-The-Ocean asked quietly—or at least as quiet as an ocean can be.

"Mom, why did you stop loving me?"

"I never stopped loving you. What happened to you? Why are you so tall?"

Tracey-The-Ocean bent down on her knees. She moved slowly and it was almost an hour before she had gotten herself fully down. She didn't speak in that period, just moaned and whimpered.

"What happened to you?" Samantha repeated when her daughter's head was finally below the clouds.

"You left me with him. He killed me." She gulped to restrain her sadness.

"Drowned me in the ocean."

Samantha gasped. The hate for herself towered even higher than the body of her daughter, the ocean. "I can't believe I let this happen. I can't believe I left you to die."

Tracey-The-Ocean lowered her hand to the island. She held her smooth palm upward. "Climb on, please. Throw away that demon first. I don't want to see those things ever again."

Samantha obeyed without hesitation. She tossed the carving into the void, climbed onto the outstretched palm, and closed her eyes. Tracey-The-Ocean lifted her arm and held her mother close to her heart. Its beat was louder than a stadium filled with bass drums.

"Listen to that. That is my heart. It has never stopped beating in its love for you. Step inside me and be redeemed."

Tracey-The-Ocean lifted her hand to her mouth and swallowed her mother.

#

The Atlantic Ocean relaxed. For far too long it was alone, voiceless. It spent centuries climbing against the shoreline, scrambling up rocks and sand in a desperate attempt to connect with someone, but its waters could never go far enough. That was a thing of the past. The girl had come to it. She understood it. And the Atlantic felt its eternity of knowledge give way, lightened as the girl claimed her share of the burden. The Atlantic could no longer remember where it ended and the girl began. Their bodies mixed and entangled. And she awoke.

#

Tracey-the-Ocean was surprised as any when she woke to find herself taller than the sky. She opened her eyes one morning and saw only clouds. Looked down and saw

her body, naked and shivering. Her warm-complexion gleamed in the sunlight. At first she found it hard to move her limbs. She felt almost paralyzed, but soon the movements became easier.

On the first day, she swallowed her mother. She could still taste her skin on her tongue. She wasn't sure why the desire to devour her had become so voracious and she wasn't sure why she agreed to do it, but it was over with and it felt right.

She remembered it hurting to kneel down and reach out her long arms to pick up the tiny ant who was her mother. She wouldn't have even known it was her if she hadn't heard her crying out "TraceyTraceyTraceyTracey" in a small, distant voice and holding up one of the horrible demons her father

Tracey-the-Ocean didn't know where to go from there. She had absorbed her father and she had swallowed her mother. There wasn't much else to do. She could feel them slosh around in her stomach and it kept her warm like an internal heater.

The only thing left to swallow was her home—Port Smith.

Tracey-the-Ocean struggled to move her legs. It took an amazing effort to convince her body to move. Each step was tiny. She could only walk in tiptoes. She couldn't see her legs. They were lost to the darkness below the surface of the earth. She trudged along slowly as if walking through quicksand. Every step took an entire day. And as the days turned to months and then to years, Tracey noticed that she had begun shrinking. Ever so slightly—barely noticeable—but each year that passed found her at least a million feet shorter than the previous year. By the time she finally reached Port Smith, she towered little more than a thousand feet above ground.

Port Smith was no longer the Port Smith she knew. The loss of the ocean had closed the fisheries and factories and left the city all but collapsed. She had come all that way to swallow it, but there wasn't much left to have. It hurt her deeply and not even the little mommy/daddy radiator in her stomach could warm her up.

She cried when she saw what had happened to the city she grew up in. A city she once hated, but now forgave. She wanted it be a part of her. She wanted to heal it. Her tears slowly filled up around her body making pools she could feel between her toes.

The city was dead—the houses almost empty, the board abandoned, the vegetation turned brown. Tracey-the-Ocean noticed the large oak trees that still surrounded the city. The green had fallen from their leaves and their trunks were uprooting. Their powdery white bark and angular branched reminded Tracey-the-Ocean of her father's demon carvings and their grotesque limbs that seemingly reached out for her in the dark. She picked up a sharp rock and she started carving figures into them. Figures of angels. She gave them wings of tiny feathers and thin smiles and wispy hair. She gave them halos and she gave them robes and she gave them harps.

She worked day in and day out for the next two years. Her hands grew rough and calloused; she could feel her father in those hands. Her tears never ceased for more than an hour at a time. She carved and she cried. Carved and cried. Until the salty water rose to her waist and the city was surrounded by wooden angels.

#

The Atlantic Ocean had one last task. To give the girl hope. It was difficult. The ocean's mind was tied too deeply with the girl's. Every thought the Atlantic had was filtered through the girl's despair. It knew the only way of saving her was to leave her. To

return to the dormancy it was born into. The Atlantic poured itself out of the girl. Its consciousness dwindled. It slowly became nothing. This sacrifice did not bring the Atlantic sadness, but instead gave it a sense of purpose it had never felt.

#

Years passed. The waters rose beneath Tracey-the-Ocean. Her tears filled the darkness below. People returned to Port Smith, rejoicing in the return of the ocean and inspired by the angels that appeared in the trees. Factories opened one by one. The fisherman arrived with boats and fishing line, ready to strike out into the waters.

Tracey-the-Ocean watched the boardwalk fill with life. Novelty shops and seafood restaurants opened their doors. Children ran in the sand, waving tiny plastic buckets and shovels in the air. Their parents followed with cameras and yelled for them to remain still. Lovers appeared at dawn, steaming cups of coffee in their hands. They snuck kisses and shared prayers in her shadow as the sun burned brightly in the backdrop. No one in Port Smith seemed frightened of Tracey-the-Ocean. They accepted her as she was, a hulking giant of a girl who towered above their city, standing guard. This was something Tracey-the-Ocean was thankful for and she took to reciting blessings of protection when the moon rose into the sky. Her whispers soothed the city to sleep and continued throughout the night.

Eventually a new pastor took over the old Port Smith Baptist Church. A young, blonde woman fresh out of the Seminary. She taught her congregation about the mercy of Tracey-the-Ocean, alongside stories of Jesus and the apostles. Every Sunday she led her flock down to the ocean to praise Tracey, the Ocean Goddess. They thanked her for replenishing the waters and granting them forgiveness. Tracey-the-Ocean would smile at

them. Happy to see the city prosper once more. She had stopped crying years before, but remained in one place, slowly sinking back into the water. She had no desire to move. No desire to abandon them. Even as the water rose to her neckline, then her mouth, then her nose.

#

Tracey-the-Ocean disappeared on the day of the festival. She had become nothing more than a pair of eyes hovering above the surface of the water, and Port Smith knew her presence was limited. They called the festival: The Ocean Goddess Harvest. They designed it to commemorate her and offer allegiance to her memory.

In the morning, the mayor and a group of local children draped a handwritten banner between two of her wooden angels. The banner read: "We Love You, Goddess. You Are Beautiful." A parade started at the top of the sloping hill, wound its way past the tiny cottages, and down to the boardwalk. A motley band of jesters and young women in mermaid costumes tossed candy from the decorative floats. Tourists and residents alike lined the streets and applauded the antics of the jesters as they weaved on giant stilts between the arms of the angel carvings.

On the center dock, a crew of musicians assembled. All of them students from the state university. A woman—who Tracey-the-Ocean vaguely recognized as the new girl she had long ago punched—introduced a piece of music she had crafted. A three part symphony retelling the story of Tracey, the Ocean Goddess. It opened in melancholy—a low hum of woodwinds, underlined by violins—and roared to a crescendo of trumpets and percussion. The music soared into the clouds, swept down the boardwalk, and stopped the parade in its tracks.

#

Tracey-the-Ocean listened to the notes they had constructed for her. The haunting blast of trumpet and the stroking of violin strings matched the lapping of her own waves against the shore. It opened something inside of her and the Atlantic poured into her skin. Her body grew heavy and sank deeper into the water. Her vision became a murky green silhouette of the world she was leaving behind. Inside her stomach, her mother and father hummed along with the blasting coda of the woman's symphony. With her body free—finally hers and hers alone—Tracey-the-Ocean submerged the rest of her head in the water. She felt cleansed. Reborn.