A Madness in Marion County: Stories

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the

Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2019

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ABSTRACT

This collection of strange stories, linked by their relationships to the fictional Marion County, investigates themes of family, agency. Rurality, violence, and transformation.

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Dead Hand Man, 1953

When we were young, Shelly collected stuffed animals. She had a cat, a dog, a pig, and at least a dozen bears in different colors. I teased her about it even when we were small. Why even bother with them, I said, when there were so many real ones outside? I guess the stuffed ones didn't smell as much, at least. Besides that, Shel never took to farm work the way the rest of us did. She milked the cows and fed the pigs and chickens, but she preferred the company of those that she could cuddle. She played with her toys until we were well into high school, lining them up on her bed like churchgoers in pews.

I only wanted her to knock it off, but Shel hated when I teased her.

Shel had a soft heart and sometimes she had a soft head, too. Instead of being realistic she liked to imagine there was magic in the world. This was especially true of those things newly born, the animals most like the toys on her bed, the ones that were small and would let her wrap her arms around them. Each baby chick, each piglet, and each worthless kitten out of dozens of litters were like miracles to Shel. I never felt that way. Animals were good for one of two things – to provide and to be eaten. The Book of Genesis said that God created mankind to have dominion over all other living things, and while I never got much further than that in my Bible reading, I believed it. I didn't coddle the babies the way Shel did because I knew I'd be swinging the axe down on those pullets or piggies just as soon as they got enough meat on them, while the kittens would grow into mean barn cats that shunned all human contact before too long.

Shel never could watch when I was at work. It made her retch. Ma called us two halves of one whole. "The alpha and the omega," she'd say. "Don't repeat that to the

pastor. It might be blaspheming." One of us was there at the beginning; the other was there at the end.

The beginning of our end was when that calf was born, in April, during the ungodly night hours between sunset and sunrise. Shel and Pa had been out there with Daisy, our prize-winning Holstein, as the cow struggled to bring that monstrous, miserable thing into the world. I had run out to the barn with hot coffee for them, but Pa met me outside. "Well, Leslie," he said to me, "your sister is a little upset about this one." He took the coffee from me and helped himself to a capful. "This one isn't long for this world."

That peeved me a bit. All that effort with Daisy, bringing her to term safely, making sure she fed well and rested, now for naught. Oh hell. At least we weren't losing a full-grown heifer.

"She's trying her best," Pa continued. "But it's a lost cause."

"Is Daisy okay?"

"Sure, Daisy's fine. The calf is messed up, is all."

"Messed up how?"

"Go in and see for yourself," Pa told me as he handed back the thermos. "But don't give your sister a hard time, please. She's bent out of shape about it."

Any newborn calf looks a fright at first. When they're fresh, they're covered in their mother's membranes, sleek with blood and slime, hooves not yet hard enough to stand on. But this one was a special kind of ugly. It had two faces, one centered on its head the way a face is meant to be, with the other, thin and weird, running up against it on the right. The faces shared an eye – one big, black, unseeing ball – and a double-wide

mouth with gums that peeled back, showing off too many teeth. It had four limbs for walking and four small and skinny ones that hung down behind their functional counterparts, too short to reach the ground.

This was the opposite of a miracle. I think the church word for it was *abomination*.

"That's one nasty little dogie," I said to Shel as I offered her some coffee.

Shel bristled and waved me away. She had wiped the caul from its faces and was brushing blood from its back. "He's all right, he's all right," she said, as though in a trance. "He'll be all right."

The animal was not all right, and neither was she. It had been a long night for her, and she was tired and tense, but she did not stop moving even for a second. She operated like she was running on gasoline, all stilted and clumsy, popping and jumping.

Pa called the vet as a precaution, and he said Daisy would be just fine. What had happened to the calf, he said, was likely a fluke. "I seen 'em born bad before," he said. "Not as bad as this, mind you – worst I've ever seen – but some with crooked legs, crooked backs, heads too big, things like that."

I offered to get Pa his rifle, but Shelly grabbed me by the shirt collar and cried against my shoulder. Shelly had too much love in her heart; she didn't know what to do with it all, so she gave it away to the least deserving of it – those toys, those kittens, that calf. In the few short hours since its birth, she probably learned to love that calf just as intensely as she loved me, or Ma, or Pa.

And Shel was obstinate. Sensitivity and stubbornness were difficult qualities to deal with in a sister, and I imagine it was tough too for Ma and Pa. Now and then Pa

would pull me aside to say something quietly about it. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with that girl,” he would say. “Too damn sensitive for farm life, but she takes after me too much in other ways, if you understand my meaning.” He meant she had neither brains nor beauty. I certainly never met a boyfriend of hers. She wasn’t going to be in the running for any yearbook superlatives at the end of the year; that was for sure.

“Listen up,” the vet said to her. “If it comes out this scrambled on the outside, the inside is probably much, much worse. It’s either going to go painfully or we can make it quick, with mercy.”

“He wants to live,” Shelly insisted. “Just listen to him!”

Truth be told, I’ve never heard a noisier calf – not then, and not since. Double the lungs, maybe. Double the cries. Double the hunger it had for it’s mother’s milk, even though Daisy had long ago heaved herself to her feet and walked away. Even the cow could recognize a hopeless case, but poor Shel couldn’t. And the calf couldn’t either, as it continued pleading and bleating with the persistence of two.

“Let her learn this one the hard way,” Pa said finally. “She’s worked up now, but in a day or two nature will take its course, and she will know better from then on.”

After he left, the vet must have said something to somebody about the abomination in our barn. That day and the next we turned away seven or eight curiosity seekers who showed up on our stoop to take a peek. One even made it as far as the barn door without being intercepted by me or Ma or Pa, but we all came running when we heard Shelly’s shrieks. She convinced him to leave on her own with a rusty rake, and by the time any of us reached her the man was already high-tailing it out of there.

On the afternoon of the second day – "this is the last day I'm letting you skip school, Les," my mother said – the calf was still living and a Ford Model 48 pulled onto the grass in our yard. Its occupant was well-dressed, with a gimpy gait. I met him at the front door with a half-eaten apple in my hand. I remember the moment well because that apple was too mealy, having been left over from the previous fall. It was small and sticky, and from the very first bite I wanted to spit it out, but I'm the sort to finish something already started, and I was going to chew my way through that stupid apple if it took me half the day.

The man was neither tall nor wide, with a mustache like the end of a push broom and eyes so dark and small he could have been half-rodent. The skin of his face appeared thin and shiny, like the skin of a wax fruit. He extended his hand when I opened the screen, and I reached out automatically and took his hand in mine to shake. The coldness was a shock. The limpness. It was unsettling. He introduced himself, but I cannot for the life of me remember his name. His hand I remember – the weight of it, the cold.

"Can I help you?" I asked, and I dropped his hand and watched as it fell back to his side. I figured it to be some kind of prosthesis, made with some flesh-colored material to look realistic. But as I stared at it, examining each detail, I saw that the nails were yellowed and long. A prosthetic hand wouldn't have nails like that. It had to be real. But maybe it had died, the way a tooth dies when all the blood underneath dries up. Can that happen to a hand? I do not know. But that was what I thought at the time. That was how his hand had felt – dead and dried up.

"Surely you can, if this is the address I think it is," the man replied. "I was passing through town and I heard you folks got yourselves a little something unusual lately."

"We're not entertaining visitors," I said. Shelly would have another conniption.

"Perhaps you would allow me to briefly explain my business." His manner was like lukewarm liquid – languid, indifferent. He waved his left hand as he spoke, and I didn't get a good enough look to compare it to his right. "I am a purveyor of the odd and eccentric. I'm not simply a wondering passerby; the weird and unusual are my bread and butter." The man smiled, but his eyes didn't wrinkle, and the small hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. "If you've been to the Marion County Fair, you may have seen my work," he said. "I run an exhibit composed of various curiosities."

"An exhibit," I repeated. "Curiosities." I thought I'd seen the tent before but I wouldn't pay even a nickel to go in. I had never been that curious.

"Oddities, if you prefer. I take anything I find interesting – perhaps even perverse – and put it on display. Much of my collection is pickled in preservatives, but some is taxidermy, and if what I heard today was accurate, I think you may have something that would be very much in keeping with my aesthetic."

"Mister, I've got work to do," I said. "I can't stand here all day squawking with strangers."

"Of course not," said the man. "I don't mean to waste your time. Allow me to make my point. If what you have here is even half as queer as what I hear, I would pay a pretty penny for it."

"Sure you would," I said, suddenly feeling protective of the damn thing. At that moment it seemed the lesser of two evils. "Only it belongs to my sister and sorry, but she ain't selling."

"She hasn't heard my offer yet," said the man, smiling crookedly. He cocked his head and emitted a sound – an imitation of laughter more than laughter itself. It came from low in his throat, like a turkey's cobble, and it pitched unpredictably as his chest rose and fell in jerks. "I'd be doing all of you a favor, taking it off your hands."

I crossed my arms. "The thing is, mister," I said, "she loves it."

He stopped short, and narrowed his eyes. "Are your parents home?" he asked.

"I'll go find them," I said, and I let the screen door slam behind me.

I had hoped my parents had more sense than they exercised. Pa had too much else to do than deal with this, but he told Ma to convene the rest of us – her, me, Shelly, and the dead hand man – around the kitchen table to have a reasonable discussion. Ma offered each of us a glass of milk when we sat down, and we all declined but Shel. She'd been in in the barn all day with the noisy ugly calf, and I wasn't sure if she'd eaten since breakfast.

The man offered fifty dollars – fifty dollars to take it and stuff it and make it the headliner of his traveling exhibit.

"Well hell," I said. I'd never had that much cash in my life.

"Church words, please, Les," Ma said to me. "It ain't worth that much as hamburger," Ma said to Shel.

Shelly burst into tears. She turned to me in appeal, wrapping her hands around mine. "You can't let him do that, Les," she said. "It's just a baby."

I should have asked Shel why she was acting so queer about this. I should have told her that she was not acting normal, not even for herself. She was taking it too far, from lack of sleep and good eating. Instead I told her to calm down, that it was just a

wimpy calf.. Shel was still such a child, so caught up in her toys, so particular and peculiar. I didn't know how else to be towards her but mean.

The man with the dead hand spoke up again. "Young lady, we were not formally introduced when we sat down to pow-wow." He extended his hand to her, and she obliged by placing her hand in his. He quickly turned it towards him and kissed her fingers on the knuckles. "Enchanté."

"Ugh," I said, mealy-mouthed.

"Oh," said Shel.

"I understand how you must feel, really I do," said the man. "Something so helpless, so alone in the world – it's a testament to your character that your first instinct is to protect it."

Shelly's lip quivered. "People will laugh at him, I think. They'll point at him, they'll call him names."

Her hand was still in his.

"Such a tender heart," he said. "I know. I have been there too. I have been ridiculed time and time again – for my limp, for my complexion, for my manner of speaking." He did not list his hand among his peculiarities.

"It just isn't fair," Shel said softly.

"Fifty dollars for a freak sounds more than fair to me," Ma interjected, and Shel's eyes watered precariously.

"You care deeply for him. I can see that. But I care about him too – I care about every animal in my collection," said the dead hand man. Shelly sighed. She was listening. "It's very dear to me," he said. "I am just as much a part of it as I am its curator, I think.

Your calf will be in good company, with so many others like him. He's a rare and valuable creature," he said. "All of my creatures are rare and valuable." He stroked the back of her hand and listed them. "A small two-faced kitten, a two-headed snake, a two-headed turtle. Birds with rows of teeth in their beaks. Deer with antlers that twist in beautiful ways. A ram skull with four horns. Cyclopean piglets and lambs. Your calf will be a part of something larger – a part of a community. He belongs there, with me."

The way he went through all of them reminded me of the animals Shel had lined up on her bed – all of them worn and worthless, but in her eyes they were special.

"I don't want him to die," Shel said in a small voice.

"He will die," said the dead hand man. "All things do. But in my collection, he will, in a way, have the opportunity to live forever."

At church the pastor often talked about eternal life, especially now, since we had just had Easter. Shel had always been a believer, and what the man had said made her light up the same way she did in the pew when we sang her favorite hymn.

"I hadn't thought of it like that," she said. The man kissed her hand again and grinned. He excused himself and Ma walked him outside to seal the deal, leaving me alone in the kitchen with Shel.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

Her eyes were puffy and her hair was all over and her face was red and glistening. "Are you going to tease me?" she asked back. She stood up and stalked away from the table before I could answer.

The man and Ma agreed to let the calf live out its natural days, provided its natural days were done by the middle of the week. The man had other business to attend

to. Fifty dollars was a lot of money, after all, and he impressed on us that he was a very busy man. He left Ma a number to call when the time came.

By Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday – the time had not yet come.

Shel finished most of her chores and was late to school every day but still managed to keep the ugly little thing alive all week. I don't know when she slept – her bed was made when I went to sleep, and it was made when I got up in the mornings. The stuffed animals remained in their rows, their naked glass eyes staring. The only indication that Shel had been inside at all was that the bookmark in her Bible moved.

I ate the rest of the mealy apples that week. With each bite their skin would catch between my teeth and make my gums bleed.

On Friday I walked to school alone, like I had been doing all week, and I saw the Model 48 go by on the gravel road as I cut across the McGarys' yard. I figured that the calf had bitten the big one after I'd left. Now things could return to the way they had been. Everything could be normal again.

I hate to admit it, but I had seen so little of Shel that week that it took me hours to realize she was gone. She hadn't turned up at school, but I figured she'd gotten gummed up with grief and Ma had let her play hooky. When I got home I was busy with all the chores she'd left undone, but other than that I did not notice her absence until I got ready for bed. The bookmark in her Bible hadn't moved. She'd left it in the book of Job, the same place she'd been reading the night before – chapter forty-one, verse three. Had she been home, she'd have moved on.

And then I saw her stuffed toys were gone.

The police said she'd probably run off on her own. They told Ma and Pa that it wasn't uncommon for girls our age to run off with their boyfriends, especially if they were the wrong sort of boy. I butted in to explain that the only boy in Shel's life had been that stupid, miserable calf. I told them about seeing the Ford Model 48 that morning, but Ma denied ever calling the dead hand man. I told them about my misgivings about him, about his dried-up handshake. They humored me and tried the number that he left, but it connected to an empty hotel room in town – a dead end.

My parents were practical people. They waited for news, for a time, and they were sad for a long time after that, but they still had animals to feed and crops to harvest. They still had another child, I suppose – but I only had the one sister.

It wasn't until years later that I finally mustered up the courage and paid my way into the tent with the freaks at the Marion County Fair. Neither the dead hand man nor my sister were there. There was no one but some kid taking quarters at the door. Inside there were some made-up, moth-eaten jackalopes and cactus cats with the stuffing coming loose. There weren't any of the scrambled animals that the man had described in our kitchen years before. They were all stitched-up phonies.

"What happened to the tent that used to be here?" I asked the kid. "What happened to the man that used to run it?"

The kid shrugged. "I just work here," he said.

It embarrasses me to say this, but now I go to see those freak shows whenever they come through town. I'll even drive a ways to go and see them if I can make it there and back in a few hours. I always return home disappointed.

I can picture the dead hand man in my memory as clearly as the day is long – his waxy skin, his thick mustache, his mousy eyes, the swing of his leg when he walks. I can even recite all his horrible collected things in my mind – the two-headed turtle, the monster-faced piglets suspended in jars – and I wonder what Shelly would have seen in all of them. Magic, maybe.

The vet said mixed-up animals were a fluke, but Shel and I were both mixed up in our own ways. She didn't look like such a mess on the outside, with twisted limbs or busted-up looks, but everyone who knew her could tell she wasn't normal. But me – I'm crooked on the inside. I suppose I won't know just how scrambled up I am unless I'm cut open and stuffed.

The Burial

When Becky had her baby, her boyfriend asked me to check on their dog. They kept the spare key under a pile of old garden tools along the side of the house, but the door was unlocked when I got there. They'd left in a hurry, after all.

Boomer, the dog, waited by the door when I got there. The house was a mess because Becky and her boyfriend had only moved in the past week. They hadn't unpacked much because the baby came early. There were dirty dishes dominating the sink. Curtains caressing couches beneath windows where they belonged. Boomer's toenails clicked against the linoleum floors. They hadn't been clipped in a while.

Becky and her boyfriend wouldn't be back until the day after next, so I let Boomer out in the yard and got to cleaning.

I was scrubbing the sink clean when I looked up and saw the dog assume a fighting position in the yard, with the hair on his back all stood up and his tail sticking straight out behind him. Boomer was a big dog, part pit bull and part mastiff and all muscle underneath a thin bristly brindle coat. If he was scared, I was scared, so as I went out the side door I grabbed a shovel from the key-hiding pile, brandishing it like a weapon as I walked towards the back of the yard.

Turned out it was a possum, only a possum. Boomer was crouching and pawing and growling, but the possum was already dead. It would have been felt cruel to let Boomer continue tearing at the thing; its cottony fur already slick with saliva; its mouth wrenched open in a wretched grin; its raw naked tail curled underneath it, skin scratched and torn from Boomer's too-long nails. I don't like possums much, but I was responsible

for his accidental demise because I wasn't watching the dog. I made up my mind to bury the thing. It seemed the least I could do.

I took Boomer by the collar and dragged him back inside. From behind the storm door I could still hear him whining and pawing. I used the shovel to dig up a hole next to the dead possum. It didn't take long. When the hole was as deep as the blade of the shovel, I rolled the possum right into it and covered it up in dirt, the whole while Boomer crying and clawing at the storm door, begging to be let out. When I let him out later, I took him on a leash, so he couldn't dig the possum back up.

I don't remember when it occurred to me. It was after Becca got home with the baby. It might have even been after the boyfriend broke up with her. It was far too long to have done anything about it.

But possums play dead. They play dead.

I bought it. And I buried it.

Gattara

This is a story about a curse, a curse that is contagious. This curse is spread through kindness, transmitted like a virus from one person to the next, invisible until the symptoms have already taken hold. Not every kindness is a vector, however – it has to be an act of kindness that led to more pain than necessary. This is how the curse got started. A generous baker shared a portion of surplus goods with a hungry child, and the child choked and died. The child's mother, in her grief, cursed whoever was responsible for the death of her boy. The poor grieving woman did not know how her words would grow into something strong and twisted. The generous baker then fell ill, and not long after, so did his daughter who cared for him in his illness, catching the curse as well. The daughter was religious, and she had a friend who went to church to pray on her behalf, but the friend's sleeve caught fire from the offering candle and burned through to the flesh of her arm. The baker's daughter's friend's engagement was cancelled on account of the disfiguring scar. The priest at the church showed the scarred woman the way to a life of vocation, but in doing so fell in love with her himself, and felt grief tighten around the loss of her when she took her vows. Here the curse becomes difficult to track, as it spread like wildfire through the parish. Over time, though, people learned how to be less kind, or maybe there are fewer chances to be kind nowadays. Up to you. The point is that the curse had gradually come to rest only on one particular woman.

She was an old woman, who had a stooped back and walked with a limp and a cane. Let's call her la donna vecchiaia. She caught the curse from a boy who tried to cross the street at an inopportune time. La donna vecchiaia reached out and grabbed the

boy by the collar, and pulled him back towards the sidewalk out of danger, but in doing so lost her balance and hurt her back badly.

Fate would have liked the curse to die with her. She was an old woman, after all, and had already lived a very full life before catching the curse. She had been married but her husband died. She had children, but they were grown and had moved to other cities in other places. They had children themselves now, and la donna vecchiaia could look through pictures and videos of them on her phone, even if they never came to visit her in person.

La donna vecchiaia did not know she was cursed but there were those that did – namely, the cats. Cats have a better sense of these things than people, after all. So do dogs, but dogs treat curses with raised hackles and low growls and by tugging at their leashes in the opposite direction. Cats, on the other hand, are attracted to curses. They are immune to them, especially curses of kindness. The cats sensed the curse in this woman and flocked to her. They could tell she had a vulnerability, a loneliness, a need to be needed that wasn't fulfilled. They pitied her and let themselves grow dependent on her. They did this for her sake. They let her feed them and coddle them and try to medicate them against fleas.

So this woman, this old and tired woman, la donna vecchiaia, she had only two constants in her life now, only two devotions: her cats, and her church. But really the cats were not hers any more than the church was. They both belonged to the whole neighborhood, or else the whole neighborhood belonged to them. We can say that it was one way or the other. Up to you.

The church that la donna vecchiaia visited every day was very, very, old – older than the curse, perhaps. It was also very beautiful, just as la donna vecchiaia had been in her youth. Because it was very old and very beautiful, it was mentioned in some of the guidebooks for visitors to the city – three stars, can't miss, good gelato across the street. The doors were open for all who came by, even though sometimes it was very crowded when la donna vecchiaia left the church services. She always walked very precariously down the steps. They were not steep but they were worn from centuries of foot traffic, just as la donna vecchiaia's shoes were worn down from decades of use.

It was at this church that la donna vecchiaia fell, after a service that had either gone on too long or not long enough, in the way that church services often go, depending on whether one is devout or not. Up to you. Somehow it was on these stairs, these stairs that she climbed every day for service, and descended every day to go feed the cats, that la donna vecchiaia slipped. She dropped her cane. She tumbled backwards, her head destined to smash against the stone. She was meant to fall, to injure herself and be taken to the hospital. She should have died later that day from blood on the brain. Her children would be called back from the places they lived, to gather together with their own children at this same church for a funeral service before the week's end. If that had happened, the curse would have died with la donna vecchiaia, the thread of the curse would have been severed.

But that is not what happened. Instead, the curse was transferred.

La turista americana had come to this city with her husband a few days prior to the old woman's fall. She was very short and very wide and smiled a lot at strangers because she was self-conscious about the way she occupied space. She had been married

to her husband for twenty-two years. They had children together, and when the youngest had moved out of their marital home, la turista americana realized her husband did not like her very much. She thought a trip abroad might help recapture some of their waning romance. She had pestered him with ideas and suggestions until he let her plan the itinerary on her own. The only help he'd given was in setting a budget. So la turista americana had spent months finding the cheapest airline tickets, the most reasonably priced hotels with all-you-can-eat breakfast buffets. She'd catalogued restaurants with good reviews, nearby locations, and less expensive options. In spite of all her efforts, though, the husband of la turista americana complained at every step of the way. The seats on the airplane were too close to the lavatories. The hotel did not serve enough familiar options at breakfast. The weather was too cool in March to enjoy the outdoor seating at any restaurant, and there wasn't enough room inside for them to sit comfortably. There were too many tourists everywhere, even though he and his wife were also tourists.

Another thing the husband complained about was the cost of admission at all of the sights of interest. They were not so bad, la turista americana thought, to see something interesting or historical or once-in-their-lifetime. But still, the husband complained. So the woman had added some churches to their sightseeing itinerary. The churches, after all, were free to visit, not to mention beautiful, so la turista americana thought she'd found a good compromise. This particular church was rated three star, can't miss, good gelato across the street in the guidebook she'd brought with her.

La turista americana was climbing the steps to the church, her husband far behind her, when la donna vecchiaia slipped on the smoothness of the

stairs. La turista americana did not recognize this as an act of God's cruel mercy, a chance to finally kill the curse for good by killing its carrier. La turista americana, whose arms had been outstretched to take photos on her phone, who was already tense and stressed by the attitude of her husband, and who had had years of practice catching people from her experience in raising children, reached out immediately for la donna vecchiaia, dropping her camera-phone, and cradled the falling woman's head before impact.

So the two women, as it happened, went down together. La turista americana broke the fall of la donna vecchiaia, but the knuckles of la turista americana's left hand connected with the surface of the hard stone steps instead of la donna vecchiaia's head. La donna vecchiaia was saved from serious injury because la turista americana received an injury herself, transferring the curse instantly from one to the other.

Everything was madness for a few moments. Onlookers, churchgoers, and sightseers all flocked to the pair. Some helped la donna vecchiaia, whose small frame shook with adrenaline, while others turned their attention to la turista americana, whose knuckles were skinned and bleeding on the steps. They asked in several languages whether the two women were alright. La donna vecchiaia answered that she was fine, she would be fine, she was merely upset, she was not badly hurt. La turista americana stared and gaped while her husband forced his way through the crowd and rudely dispersed the people who had gathered with concern for his wife. The husband shouted at them all in English, calling them vultures and ambulance-chasers.

The two women had a brief interaction, before they were pulled apart by others. La donna vecchiaia grasped the uninjured hand of la turista americana, and squeezed. La

turista americana looked at la donna vecchiaia and smiled shyly. Then la donna vecchiaia was swept up in the attention of worried parishioners, and la turista americana was directed by her husband to keep moving, there are only so many hours in the day, and dammit, there was already a line for the good gelato across the street, even in this chilly weather. La turista americana asked if he still wanted to stop. He only frowned and shook his head. Up to you, he told her. Up to you.

La donna vecchiaia insisted that she was all right, and simply needed rest at home. She was walked home by someone who recognized her from the church service, a fellow parishioner who had seen her often but never interacted with her before now. The parishioner called on her later in the day to make sure la donna vecchiaia was feeling fine. The parishioner invited la donna out for dinner. It was the first time la donna had gone out for a restaurant meal in a very long time, and she liked sitting outside eating in the plaza, enjoying the fresh air and the company of someone new.

When la donna vecchiaia arrived home that evening, she found the cats in the neighborhood lingering by her door. They recognized that a change had occurred, that the woman was not the same. But they were also hungry and used to routine, so they meowed loudly at la donna, hoping for attention, not ready yet to move on to the next lonely soul.

Why do I break my back caring for these ingrates, la donna vecchiaia wondered as she unlocked her door and went in. None of the cats followed They never did. La donna realized they valued their freedom more than her company. She questioned her habit of feeding them so often and decided the responsibility for their care didn't always have to fall on her. She looked around her apartment and realized she didn't like living here so much. It was small and shabby and she couldn't care for it the way she

would like to. She called an agent to see what it would take to list the property for temporary rentals in the summertime. She phoned first one son, then the other, and announced her intention to come for long visits while her home hosted tourists. Over the course of the next few weeks she threw out all her old shoes and bought orthopedic ones with strong soles. She set out food for the neighborhood cats less and less to prepare them for her long absence, and they came to understand that it was finally time for them to move on. Did the few who remained sulk at her doorway still because they were angry with her, or were they sulking simply because they were cats, and that is something that cats do? We can say that it was one way or the other. Up to you.

Meanwhile, this is what happened immediately to la turista americana. When the crowd had scattered, the husband asked la turista americana if she was all right, and she said the injury to her hand was very painful. I don't want to waste any of this trip waiting around, he said to her. I didn't come all this way and spend all this money to wait all day in an emergency room when we can do that at home. But it's up to you.

That's okay, said la turista americana in reply. I don't need to see a doctor. I have ibuprofen in my purse. Everything will be fine.

That was what the husband wanted to hear. They went into the church together and didn't speak for a while. La turista americana tried to enjoy the beauty of the devotional art and the elaborate architecture inside, but the throbbing fingers of her pink and injured hand distracted her. The bleeding had stopped but a bone might be broken, she thought. La turista americana dropped a coin in the offerings box when her husband wasn't looking, proffering a prayer, but it was too late. The curse was already taking hold.

La turista's hand throbbed in pain until they returned home several days later, and by then it hurt even more. She went to the doctor, who recommended a cast. There was little at home she could do comfortably with the cast on. She had difficulty cooking and cleaning. She asked her husband for help with everything but laundry. Should have gone to the doctor earlier, he told her, grumbling while he washed his own dishes.

The trip had not helped to rekindle the romantic feelings la turista americana and her husband had once held for one another. In fact, it had accomplished the opposite: it had scrubbed away the remnants of any soft feelings they had for one another. La turista questioned whether there had been any love between them in the first place, or if their relationship was held together by ordinary things like sex and children and societal expectations. La turista decided not long after the cast came off to file for divorce. Perhaps it was the curse's influence that helped her arrive at the decision, or perhaps it was the curse that made her go through with it. Up to you. In either case, it was difficult for la turista americana to follow through. Her husband fought her every step of the way, and her children hated her for it, but eventually la turista americana was free.

La turista americana and her husband – now ex-husband – sold their family home and divided themselves into smaller places for separate living. La turista americana, like la donna vecchiaia, plunged into that peculiar state of vulnerability that any cat within miles could recognize. In a particular pique of lonesomeness, the woman visited an animal shelter. She had never had a pet before, because the husband could not tolerate their shedding, and she thought she might adopt a dog. Of course, it was the cats who responded enthusiastically to her presence,

pressing themselves against the wire doors of their cages, calling for her attention. La turista americana, overwhelmed by their attention, selected the most tired among them: an old feline with missing teeth and urinary tract problems, who had been living at the shelter the longest. He was a lot of work to care for, but la turista americana enjoyed the gentle pressure of his head when he rubbed against her ankles, and the warmth of him curled up in her lap.

La turista americana, as far as we can tell, still carries the curse. She hasn't passed it on to anyone through that familiar act of kindness tinged with pain, because she hasn't needed such an act, so far, from anyone. In fact, she feels better now than she has in years. Is she sad and lonely, or is she happily independent? We can say that it is one way or the other. Up to you.

Porcelain

MY SISTER and I have recurring dreams about bathrooms.

My bad bathroom dreams – and they're always bad dreams – they start off like most of my other dreams. I will be doing regular dream things, like ordering eggs at a bar, and the bartender goes "Do you want milk on your eggs? Milk costs extra." Or else I'm a guest at the wedding of Lego Han Solo and my sixth-grade science teacher and it's a lovely ceremony but what's with all the spiders? Or maybe I'll be driving to Toronto along the Buffalo Skyway when the whole road tilts over and the cars slide off and float gently to the ground like feathers.

But there will come a point in these dreams where I, you know, feel the urge, so I'll look for a bathroom to use. That's when the weird parts start. Like I'll go into the bathroom and all the toilets are really tall, or miniaturized, or made out of sponge cake. Or none of the stalls will have doors on them. Or maybe all the toilets are missing, or covered in fur, or full up of teacups, house keys, fetal pigs from anatomy class. Or maybe it will be a regular toilet until you sit down, and then you're stuck to the seat but you're not actually stuck to the seat, turns out that you are, in fact, the seat, and your point of view shifts and shifts and shifts until you become one with the toilet and the toilet is you and your best, your only hope is to wake up as soon as possible before the dream-people shit and piss into you.

A hotel. By ourselves. We were kids still, my sister and I, but our parents thought we'd be okay on our own while they went to the wedding. "Don't let anyone else in the room," they told us. "Don't use the phone at all," they told us.

Five minutes after our parents left, the toilet overflowed. A flood followed a flush followed a flood following a flush — we jiggled the handle and only made things worse.

My sister and I blocked the the bottom of the bathroom door with towels to keep the seeping water from the carpet, and we peed in the sink until our parents got home.

They were pissed. "You could have called for help," they said. "You could have called the front desk, and asked for repairs." My sister and I were like — What? But you told us. You told us.

MY MOTHER claims to have never used a public restroom in her life, but there's no way that can be true. Can it?

My father, meanwhile, will piss freely wherever he pleases. The whole world is his toilet.

THE OTHER night I dreamt I was looking for the bathroom in an ordinary house, except every time I opened the door to what should have been a bathroom, it turned into another kind of room – a kitchen, a library, a lounge. Like a shit version of Clue.

My sister used to sleepwalk and I'd find her in strange places — on the couch in the living room, or sometimes under it. Two or three times I caught her sitting in the kitchen, her head on the table, surrounded by items she'd taken from the fridge or the cupboards or the recycling. A table setting made of tomato cans or paper towels or loose grapes. Another time she had wandered into the laundry room and curled up in a pile of dirty towels for the rest of the night.

One time, while sleepwalking, she went into the bathtub and ran the tap as hot as it could go, burning and burning. I had been dead asleep, but at the sound of her screaming I shot up and ran to her. I had to turn off the water and I tried to pull her out of the tub and the skin up and down her legs was so, so red. The fabric of her pajamas wouldn't peel clean away. She had to be taken to the hospital.

MY SISTER, when we were kids, used to get me to look at her poops. When we're together at our parents' house, sometimes she still tries.

"It looks like a dolphin!" she'll say. Or else it looks like Milk Duds, or a baby doll arm, or a chess piece.

And now I look at shit and think of her.

I HAD this one dream where I was the ruler of a small island nation with laws like "no pictures of naked people in the museum" or "Internet access after dinner hours only." When I tried to change these laws there was a revolt. I escaped by boat. But when I tried to use the bathroom on board, the boat started sinking. I was trapped, so I drowned.

GROWING UP my sister and I weren't allowed to use our parents' bathroom. They needed their own private space, my mother said.

But one time my sister had used up all our tampons so I went into our parents' bathroom to look for more. I went looking for them under the sink, and while I was crouched down I noticed a pregnancy test in the waste bin.

I didn't want to touch it but I also couldn't not touch it, because I needed to see what it said. I turned the test over. It was positive.

I thought "this sucks," before grabbing the tampons and sulking out of the room.

I girded myself for the eventual conversation about a new baby joining the family. I wasn't going to be the one to bring it up – can you imagine? – so I waited for my parents to say something. It would be so embarrassing. The whole thing was so embarrassing. I was embarrassed for everyone involved, the whole family.

But no conversation was ever had, and no baby sibling ever came.

WHEN MY sister and I were little, we played a game when we went to use the bathroom. When you had to pee, you had to say the alphabet at the same time and see which letter you could get to. Whoever got farther into the alphabet would win. If we went to a public restroom at the same time we'd get stalls side by side and shout the whole time – "Eee, eff, gee! Aytch, eye, jay kay, ellemenopee!"

I was thinking about this lately and I brought it up to my sister. She told me that she doesn't remember doing it.

Still doesn't mean it didn't happen.

Brats

I didn't know why my parents split up. In fact, when I think back to it now, as an adult, I still can't figure it out. They were happy, I thought. Maybe not in love anymore, but love is fleeting and fickle anyway. They had a home together. They had a child together. The reasons to stay together were clear, the reasons to fall apart were murky, vague, and unfathomable, and yet they chose the latter.

So I acted out.

It was easiest to be angry at my mom, because I rarely got to see my dad. For weeks my mother moped around the house, feeling sorry for herself. She didn't care about anything anymore. She still kept going to her job every day, and she kept the house clean, but she spent most of her time at home lying on the couch watching TV and eating microwave dinners, and she didn't make my lunch in the morning before school anymore. While all my classmates had fresh sandwiches and fruit snacks, I had to eat cold leftovers from mismatched Tupperware. With every mouthful of cold manicotti, I began to understand how my dad could hate her enough to leave.

And then something else happened just before the end of the school year that distracted her even more. I can't remember ever seeing my mother as livid as she was then, on the phone with a friend. It was easy to tell she was mad. Her eyes would widen and her voice would drop to a stern, solemn whisper. I'd gotten used to recognizing it when my parents had arguments, and I guessed from what I overheard that she was talking about my dad.

"I mean, a woman *died*," she hiss-whispered to whoever was on the line. She twisted the curly telephone cord around her fingers as she talked, so tight they got white

past the knuckles. “And she died horribly, and alone, and afraid, and all he can think about is how it’s going to affect the property value. It’s so frustrating.” She started to cry, a small, stuttering sob. She’d been crying like that a lot lately. It was getting on my nerves. “Honestly, he gets me so worked up, I feel like I could… never mind. I shouldn’t say it.”

The woman who died was a neighbor of ours, Mrs. Hazel Taylor. My mother had not spoken to me about this, and she would not speak to me of this, because I was eleven she thought I was too young to have to face something so gruesome. But she could not hide the ambulance and several police cars that swarmed our street on that Sunday night, nor could she prevent me from hearing the rumors the next morning at school. All the kids were talking about it. Theories sprouted at the smallest of details. Misinformation spread like infection. The denizens of Mrs. Roderick’s sixth grade class fancied themselves detectives, and if not that then sensational journalists. My classmates thrived on the drama of it – a murder in their own town. Happened all the time in the Marion City, and maybe even in its immediate suburbs occasionally, but here, in Juniper Township? All those brats could talk of nothing else for a week.

One unanticipated consequence of Mrs. Taylor’s dramatic demise was my sudden surge of popularity. I lived the closest of anyone else at school we knew – only two doors down and across the street from the scene of the crime. I had known the victim personally, having often chatted with her when she was out in her front yard to pull weeds from her flowerbeds, and my schoolmates bombarded me with questions. At first the attention was scarier than the actual crime and my face burned with embarrassment. Attention is addictive, though, and a lot more fun than basic geometry. And then the

wave of notoriety ended as quickly as it began. It seemed the more I told my classmates about Mrs. Taylor, the less they could fit her into their speculations that she was a witch involved in Satanism, or that she was a con artist living under an assumed identity, or that she was a spy sent from Russia to monitor the activities of good old-fashioned red-blooded Americans.

"She was just a regular old lady," I remember telling those who gathered around me during gym class. "She liked gardening, and she had an orange cat." It didn't even occur to me to lie and say the cat was black, or that she was growing marijuana in her yard, or that something had always seemed amiss about her. I didn't know what else to tell them. Her Halloween candy was historically awful, and though her clothes were always neatly pressed she smelled like body odor, and her hair was thinning at the top, but these details were not what they wanted to hear.

"What about her husband?" Josh Bowers asked, needling. "Maybe he was involved in something hinky."

I shrugged. "He died a while ago." It was a boring death, and not worth discussing.

We were interrupted when the coach blew his whistle and told us all to get our rears in gear, but no one minded because I wasn't giving them what they wanted. The truth was not enough. They craved something more entertaining. It did not take those brats long to get bored with me. My mom kept me home from school on Thursday morning to attend the funeral (the sermon and the eulogy both alluded to the awfulness of Mrs. Taylor's death without mentioning the word "murder") and by the time I came back to class after lunch, they had all moved on to a better informant.

Matthew Skinner was a shrimpy thirteen-year-old in the grade ahead of me. His ears stuck out too far, he had an overbite, and when he spoke his voice was still shrill and pitchy. But his father was a detective, and according to Matthew, he was leading the investigation into Mrs. Taylor's death, and when the attention shifted from me to him during the week following he knew how to spin it, how to keep his audience engaged. He entertained rumors and encouraged speculation. He delivered answers to questions that neither affirmed nor denied their thoughts, He was able to ride out his newfound popularity to the end of the school year, all while encouraging the development of Mrs. Taylor's Miserable Death Narrative from measly whispers to the stuff of urban legends. There was nothing I could do to win back the attention of my peers, even though I knew that Matthew Skinner was lying through his teeth when he said that Mrs. Taylor might have had some kind of prescription drug problem, or that she could have been targeted by a cult.

These are the indisputable facts of the case: Mrs. Hazel Taylor died in her own yard in broad daylight while tending to her backyard vegetable garden. Her death had been caused directly by a stab to the guts with her own pruning shears. She bled out in a matter of minutes, toppling forward in pain, dying with her face in the dirt. She didn't scream. In fact she made no sound at all. Her diaphragm was punctured. Afterwards she was flipped onto her back, and several of her other gardening tools were jammed into her lifeless body – arms, legs, shoulders, face. The woman loved to garden; there were a lot of tools to use. The adjacent neighbors were home the whole time. One of them later found her when it was time to take out the trash for Monday morning's pick up.

Matthew Skinner probably knew none of these details in spite of all his posturing – they weren't made widely available until long after the case had gone cold. The police, inexperienced as they were dealing with such brutal crimes, made no headway at all. By the time summer vacation started, two weeks and two days after the crime, they had no suspects and no leads and it was unlikely that they ever would. People were afraid to go to the grocery store or spend time outside in their own yards alone. They were uncomfortable taking out their trash. What scared people the most was not that they'd ever know who did it, but that they'd never be able to understand why. Even so, the students in Mrs. Roderick's sixth-going-into-seventh grade class had it figured out to their own satisfaction. Some thought it had to do with gangs. Some thought it had to do with the mob. Some thought it had to do with the supernatural. Each explanation made as much sense as the next one.

And then, a few weeks later, Matthew Skinner was dead too.

Ultimately they ruled it an accident, probably the result of some stupid stunt that only thirteen-year-olds pull. His body was pulled from an in-ground swimming pool one morning in early July, although he had not drowned, nor was it even his pool. It puzzled the citizens of Juniper Township even more than the Taylor murder had. One day Matthew Skinner had ridden his bike home from baseball practice, enjoyed a root beer float and watched a movie at home with his older brother (their family had a VCR) and went to bed. The next morning he was found dead in someone else's pool in someone else's yard by a neighbor he didn't really know. The police, even Matthew's father, determined that he must have snuck out that night – he'd done it before, apparently – although none of his new friends from the end of the school year would own up to going

out with him. The circumstances were suspicious but not necessarily indicative of foul play. People told each other that the poor boy was probably just horsing around near the pool when he slipped and hit his head so hard on the concrete that it killed him. He fell into the pool afterwards, blood leaking from his mouth and his ears and his nose, mingling with chlorine and other chemicals. The story was easier to believe than the truth would have been, so the investigation stopped there.

My mother asked whether I knew Matthew Skinner at all. She asked if I wanted her to take me to his funeral, and I declined. My dad had gotten me an NES when I got straight A's on my report card at the end of the school year, and I was stuck on a level I wanted to beat.

She wasn't too happy about that but she didn't force me to go. Later I heard her on the phone with a friend, crying again, and I turned the television volume up so I wouldn't have to listen.

I missed my dad so much that summer. He didn't visit a lot, because it hurt him too much to see my mom and me living our lives without him, he said. I told him he should come back if he misses us like that, and he told me I wouldn't understand, that this was grown-up business, and it would all be resolved soon enough, and we'd get to spend more time together once it was all taken care of. This was all over burgers and sundaes and sodas from Dairy Queen that he told me this. I reminded him that my birthday was coming up, and I wanted to spend the day with him. Right after that was when he got me the NES. He wasn't there when I turned twelve.

He never talked to me about Mrs. Taylor, just like my mom. He never asked me about Matthew Skinner, either.

A murder, an accidental death – in a small town, in such a short span of time, how did no one else realize that these weren't just coincidences? Mrs. Taylor had been tricked by an offer to help her with her garden. She'd willingly handed over her pruning shears, the weapon of her own destruction. She'd even provided gloves to use, old raggedy things that were discarded as soon as the deed was done. All the angry instruments once used to encourage life and cultivate growth from the ground were thrust into her own body as a test of the murderer's strength, a way to gauge how much force it took to pulverize the living shit out of a human being. That brat Matthew had been an experiment of another sort. It was easy to kill, and have it look like murder, but could someone be killed in a way that could make it look like something else? He was thirteen years old but still so stupid and shrimpy. He'd have followed anybody out there that night for the promise of potential popularity. The only possible slip-up was that he was targeted not for weakness, as Mrs. Taylor had been, but for revenge – revenge for all the attention he stole, the attention that rightfully belonged to the murderer of Mrs. Taylor. Fortunately for me, this was a connection no one else ever seemed to make.

Their deaths weren't coincidence. They were practice.

As the weeks wore on and no one came to ask me questions, I felt confident enough to do what I'd really wanted to the whole time. I wanted it to look like a suicide, which was easy when once I found where she kept her pills. The little tablets were easily crushed and mixed in with her microwaveable mashed potatoes just before my dad picked me up on a Friday for another fast food dinner. When he brought me back and no lights in the house were on, he walked me inside. I let him be the one to discover her. For

the third time that summer the squad cars came down the street and someone was carried away in an ambulance.

But my plan only partially worked. Dad didn't come back, but instead took me with him. The house was sold (at a loss) and we both moved in with my Nana and Pop-pop across town for a while. Their house was dingy and smelled like cigarettes and cinnamon, but at least Nana would pack my lunch for me every day, and I was allowed to play video games as much as I wanted. Then my dad left me and Nana and Pop-pop too. He'd come back on occasion until I started high school, but then he stopped coming completely, and eventually stopped calling too.

I still have that NES, but I don't have my dad anymore. Nana filed a report with the police. He's officially a missing person now.

When they find him – if they find him – I wonder what they'll call it.

Blanchland Inn

The second-to-last time I ever spoke to Rob was when he called me on my birthday. I had been fielding texts and messages and phone calls all day wishing me well, so I hadn't checked the ID before answering.

"Hey, Mel," he said, and I cringed when I recognized his voice. I hated his nickname for me – it always sounded like he was talking to someone else – but our breakup was still fresh enough to hurt. My tongue grew heavy in my mouth, my lips pulled together tightly, and the flesh of my face and neck ran hot.

I very nearly hung up on him. I was still that angry. But he very quickly blurted out that he'd booked a room at the Blanchland Inn for my birthday weekend. He'd done it back when he was still planning to propose and had forgotten about it until they emailed him a reminder of his reservation. It was too late to cancel, he said, and he'already made other plans, but I was welcome to go by myself for the weekend. Nonrefundable, after all. Happy birthday.

He'd known how crazy I was for that house. It had been an obsession since childhood. I accepted his offering without even checking my calendar. I could postpone my other plans.

When I was a child, Blanchland was someone's home, possibly abandoned at the time, and definitely decrepit. It looked like a sinister house in a storybook, surrounded by tall twisted trees and set back further from the road than any of its neighbors. Not that it had many neighbors on the narrow, winding road between my hometown of Kokosing Falls, and Juniper Township, where my softball team played away games in the spring.

Even though Blanchland was terribly old and terribly trashy, I looked at it and I loved it in the same instant.

I collected stories about the house whenever I found them. When I was young, it was mostly the ghostly kind. Some said the house itself was some kind of supernatural entity; others said it was haunted by restless souls. My softball opponents all had a friend of a friend who claimed to have broken in and faced some seriously spooky stuff. My high school biology teacher had told us in class how he'd attended séances in the living room to impress a girl he liked, but had scared the crap out of him when he was our age. Some said it had a poltergeist, and that the people who lived their moved out because it wouldn't leave their things alone. When I was older I learned how to sift through county records and find out more about the building's history, and, by extension, that of the family that lived there. The builder was a man who had three children, who had three children each in turn, and it was the third generation, now in their forties and fifties, who cared for it currently as part of an estate trust. It was when they took over, I suppose, that Blanchland transformed from a sad but stately home into a warm, inviting bed and breakfast.

Rob had found that out for me after I told him about the house. We had been speaking of the future, the kind that involved marriage and settling down somewhere besides the city. Even at its worse, Blanchland was the kind of house I wanted to make my home, with its old-fashioned elegance and room enough for a large family. Rob asked me where it was, and after some internet sleuthing, discovered its current incarnation. It made me happy to know the house was useful again. It was a better fate than being knocked down or left to slowly rot.

I called on the morning of my visit to verify that they had my name connected with Rob's reservation, and told them I would be late checking in. I left the city in my rented car at noon, but it was nearly a five-hour drive to Juniper. I crossed the Marion County line as the sun was just beginning to set. I stopped by my parents' graves to lay fresh flowers in the snow. It was another half-hour to Blanchland from there.

They had put a sign at the end of the driveway – a nice sign, large and wooden and painted in bright colors that stood out clearly against the snowy yard. It was a good thing, too, because I would not have recognized the place without the notice. The house's shape and structure was the same as ever, with its asymmetrical sprawl and steep roofline gabled in different directions, but the old scalloped shingles, which had given the house a pockmarked appearance by falling off or fading individually, had been replaced by new siding in a pale, wintry blue. There were new windows framed with dark blue shutters – no longer the patchy paint job and the busted panes of glass I remembered. The sagging porch had been repaired or replaced, elaborated with gingerbread trim and a jigsaw balustrade. Even in the fast-falling January darkness, it was a beautiful place.

I parked at the side of the house and climbed the front steps to the door. I recognized it – its diamond molding along the bottom, its deep walnut hue, the thick transom window obscured by aging glass. The door was original. The door had remained. I formed my hand into a fist and suspended it in the air for a moment, prepared to knock. An electric feeling crackled through my flesh, across the surface of my skin, setting the hair on the back of my neck on end. Was this a warning? Was it a welcome? I hesitated. I shivered.

I saw a card in the window to the right – GUESTS AND DELIVERIES – PLEASE USE SIDE DOOR.

The side door! A relief. It was so much less imposing to circle to the attached garage – another new addition – to a more ordinary doorway. A chime sounded when I stepped in, and a woman appeared before I even set down my luggage. She introduced herself as Linda. We had spoken on the phone.

"My husband's grandfather built the house himself, during the Great Depression," she told me as she found the key to my room. "Would you like to take a look around?" I declined due to fatigue, but before she found the right key, the phone interrupted. "Darn it," said Linda, glancing at the caller ID. "Do you mind if I take this? It's our snow removal service. There's seating in the next room if you want to make yourself comfortable." I said I didn't mind, and Linda smiled and gestured towards the next room, saying "This will just be a minute. Watch your step!"

I took my luggage with me into the next room and sank into the plush leather couch I found within. The room was paneled with wainscoting, the walls above it painted a deep red. A Christmas tree still stood in front of the window opposite my seat, decorated with baubles and ribbons and electric candles. A dozen or more photo albums lay on the coffee table before me, and while I waited for Linda I pulled one onto my lap and flipped it open. It contained what I assumed to be family photos, dating back to the sixties and seventies, judging by the styles of hair and clothing. I guessed at their relationships based on my knowledge of the family. Here was the builder, here were his children, all grown up. I'd never seen a picture of them all before but their faces seemed

strangely familiar. Their mother must be holding the camera, I thought. From the records I'd looked up, I knew her name was Violet. I'd always loved that name.

"That's me," said a voice over my shoulder. Startled, I shut the album and turned so quickly I almost slid right out of my seat. "That's me, in the middle," the voice said, but now I saw that it came from a withered and wiry old man.

"Hello," I said. I have to admit, my heart started racing. I had come primed to be frightened.

He had a pair of glasses on a cord around his neck, and he placed one hand on my shoulder to keep his balance while he slid them on. The warmth of his hand was almost as comforting as the warmth of his welcome. Glasses solidly on his face, he turned to me and grinned. "Oh, it's you!" he said. "You're back! It's been so long." He clapped like a child, with joy. "Linda!" he called out into the garage. "Linda, she's back! She's here!"

"She's a guest, Uncle Terry!" Linda called back, still engaged on the phone. "Leave her be!" There was the familiar click of the phone being set back into its cradle, and Linda appeared a moment later. "I am so sorry," she said. "I would have introduced you. This is my husband's great uncle, Terrance. Everyone calls him Uncle Terry. Even the brothers at St. Paul's Monastery call him Uncle Terry, and most of them have a few years on him."

I nodded and extended my hand politely. "It's nice to meet you, Uncle Terry," I said.

He took my hand in both of his and held it close to his heart. "I'm so glad you're back," he told me, bending his head to kiss my knuckle. "I'm so, so glad you're back."

The room where I'd be staying was on the second floor. After climbing the stairs, we turned down the corridor and followed it towards the front of the house. "I'm sorry about Uncle Terry," Linda said as she led the way. "Sometimes he can be a bit of a turn-off to guests."

"Alzheimer's?" I asked.

"Dementia," Linda said. "But he's always been special, if you know what I mean. Since he was a kid, from what I understand. If they'd had more knowledge back then, he'd have a more specific diagnosis, I'm sure. Although, to be honest," she said, "I'm actually surprised he warmed up to you so quickly." We had reached the last door on the hall, and Linda pulled out the key and unlocked the door. "He's normally shy around strangers. Anyway, this is you." She turned the knob and let the door swing open. "If you haven't had dinner, there are a few takeout and delivery menus on the desk, and I can recommend a few places in town if you're looking for something specific."

"I'm too tired for all that, I think," I said, "but thank you. I'll look into it for tomorrow."

"The gentleman who made the reservation – he called earlier and said that it was your birthday this week," Linda said.

"It was."

"Happy birthday," said Linda. "I made a cake to mark the occasion, if you'd like any. The man said you liked lemon with glaze."

I blushed. "You didn't have to go through all that trouble!"

"There's tea and coffee in the sitting room," Linda said. "But I can't promise the cake will last through the night. Terry's had his eye on it all afternoon." She turned back

down the corridor and I heard her mumble under her breath. “That’s what I get for letting him lick the spoon.”

I did love lemon cake, so after I changed into my pajamas and before I settled down with the novel I’d been trying for weeks to read, I slipped into the yellow robe provided in the wardrobe and wandered back down the stairs. To the left of the front door was a wide threshold leading to a parlor with matching furniture and drapes. A buffet along the wall had two Mr. Coffee machines, one filled halfway with coffee and the other with water, with the necessary beverage accoutrements in between them.

“Do you like the robes?” Linda asked. She was sitting on the loveseat, flipping through a glossy magazine. “We let Terry pick them out from a catalogue.”

“They’re very nice,” I said. “But bright. It’s nice of you to let him live here.”

“It’s actually sort of the reverse,” Linda said. “Terry owns the house. His father built it, and his mother made provisions in her estate to make sure he kept the house. She wanted to make sure he always had means.”

“Is that why it was in such a bad state for so long?”

Linda looked surprised. “Are you from around here?”

“I grew up in Kokosing Falls,” I said. “Not too far from here.”

“I didn’t know you were a local!” Linda said. “You must have heard some crazy stories about this place when you were a kid.”

I stayed quiet, hoping to add Linda’s crazy stories to my mental collection, but she instead went a more sobering route. “You’ve only just met him, but I’m sure you can tell that Terry is easily influenced. Taken advantage of. He was even institutionalized for a bit after his sisters died. That’s when the house really began to fall apart, by the way,

when it was vacant for a bit. And then, oh, maybe ten or fifteen years ago, my husband – you'll meet him tomorrow, I'm sure, he's a recluse when there's a basketball game on – anyway, he got something worked out with his family to make sure both Terry and the house are in good hands. Our hands, I guess. Would you like some cake? We've even got candles, if you'd like us to sing."

"Where is Terry?" I asked. "Won't he want some?"

"Paul's got him watching the game. I'll go see if he wants to come out again," Linda said, and excused herself from the room. Not long afterwards, she reappeared with Terry trailing behind, sheepishly smiling in anticipation of cake.

"Happy birthday," he said.

"Thank you, Uncle Terry."

"I like your robe."

"Thank you," I said. "Linda told me you picked them out."

"It's yellow," he said. "Like the cake." And then he said, "Do you remember the last time we did this?"

I tried not to laugh. "I don't remember, Uncle Terry," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he replied. "I'm just so glad to see you one more time."

Linda and I made small talk, and Terry interjected a few times, but it wasn't long before we'd finished our cake.

"I love you," Terry told me as we said our good-nights. He looked ready to cry.

Linda frowned. "Terry," she said, as though in warning.

"It's okay," I said. "I hope you have a good night, Uncle Terry."

"You too," he said to me. "I hope you enjoy your stay."

"All right, Uncle Terry, it's time to go," said Linda, prying his hand from mine and leading him out of the room. "See you tomorrow," she said to me. "Continental breakfast served from seven to ten."

I went back to my room, and I never saw Linda again.

I found the room very tastefully done. There were a few nods to the house's history in the details. The baseboards and crown molding were painted over in white, and the walls were painted a warm, buttery orange. The nightstands were a light wood, as was the wardrobe, a necessary piece as the closet had been converted to a half-bath for privacy's sake. The bedspread and curtains had complementary color schemes; the pillowcases were floral. There was a wide window that pointed out towards the front of the house, while the window opposite the door looked over the driveway and several large trees. As I sunk down into the mattress, still in my robe, I imagined that this room would be for a girl child, had the house been mine.

I often had thoughts like this – if this house was mine, if I had children. If, if, if. It was the principle reason that drove me to break up with Rob, even though we loved each other dearly. I wanted so badly for these thoughts – these wishes, more like – to come true, but Rob had been less inclined than I was.

Perhaps the Blanchland house had ruined me for him, before we even met. I wanted a big family, five children ideally, but if I was to be realistic, considering my age, I'd settle for three. But even with a family that size, I'd need a house like this to keep them all. I wanted them to grow up with the same freedoms I had – to wander from one yard to the next, finding friends among neighbors, exploring and having adventures

among trees and fields and streams. This was exactly the place I pictured in my head when I thought of the man I'd like to marry, the children I wanted to have. I couldn't picture his face but at that moment I could almost feel the weight and warmth of his hands on my shoulder. That electric feeling returned. Goosebumps rose across the skin of my arms. Was it happening? Was this what it meant to be haunted?

The lamplight flickered. I looked at the clock, and was alarmed by the number of hours that had passed. Did I fall asleep like this, lying on top of the covers, still dressed in the robe? I reached across to the bed and clicked off the switch, drenching myself in darkness.

But then there was a knock at the door, so soft I might have missed it if I had still been sleeping soundly. The light from the hallway seeped in underneath, with matching shadows where blocked by feet.

I got out of bed and shuffled over to the door, pulling it open. Standing on the other side was a pajama-clad child.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"You're not Gracie," said the boy. "Mother? What are you doing in Gracie's room?"

I dropped down to my knees to meet the child's accusatory gaze. "This isn't Gracie's room, sorry," I said. "I'm not your mother."

The child's eyes grew wide, and he hollered in a momentary terror, before turning and running back down the hall, his footfalls making soft thudding sounds on the carpet.

I was shaken, but it seemed a harmless enough interaction. I rose to my feet and shut the door behind me, heading back toward the bed, wondering if it was a visiting

family with a sleepwalking problem, dreaming that he was at home, getting the rooms and their occupants confused.

And then, as I felt myself drifting off, I had that electric feeling again, surging through my nervous system and jolting me awake as I remembered that the hallway hadn't been carpeted when I'd brought my luggage up to the room. Maybe I had been the one dreaming.

Or perhaps I'd just been haunted.

I sat up in bed, straight as a bolt, and considered my options. I could go to sleep now, attribute this experience to a restless night in a strange place, and have a story to tell others later on. Or I could try to find the child, and discover who this child was, and where he had come from.

So I got up, and went to the door, and when I stepped through, everything changed.

The light was dim, but I didn't need to see to tell how much was different. Instead of a hardwood floor, there was a soft, dense carpet underfoot. The moon shone through a curtained window above the front door. The banister was different. Some of the doors on the hall were ajar, and I felt a vague worry creep up the back of my spine, but I pressed forward, afraid to peer into each dark room I passed, but unable to help myself. I could make out nothing in the darkness. Perhaps it was better that way. Only the last door was closed, and within there was the sound of harried whispering, which I chose not to investigate.

I felt like I had stepped into an alternate universe, one where Blanchland was happily occupied by a loving family, well-maintained and cared for differently than it

was as a place of business. I stepped carefully down the stairs, gripping the banister despite my shaking hands. When I reached the bottom, I stepped on something – something small, like a misplaced toy. It pressed painfully into the arch of my foot and I howled. I clapped my hands over my mouth, and leaned back against the wall to get steady. My heart was racing. I heard a door creak open at the top of the stairs.

"Don't go, Jeannie!" It was the voice of the boy I heard earlier.

"It's probably only Gracie. Calm down."

"Come back!"

I didn't want to wait to get caught by Jeannie, whoever that was, so I staggered into the sitting room, where we had enjoyed lemon cake earlier. Once I made it across the doorway I turned to see what I had stepped on, but there was nothing there. The house had gone quiet again.

The sitting room looked nothing like the place where I had been only a few hours ago. I staggered over to one of the front windows and pulled back the curtain to get a better look. There was no longer a buffet with Mr. Coffees on either side. The matching loveseat was gone. The furniture now seemed shabby, the cushions lumpy and the upholstery worn through in some places. The rug beneath my feet told a similar story.

I was not alone.

A lanky woman was rummaged through a desk against the opposite wall. She turned slowly when the light fell against her, her layered, feathered hairstyle falling across one shoulder and onto her back. "Jesus Christ," the woman said, her wide-eyed gaze connecting with mine. "You're fucking real!"

I was too confused to respond. The woman dropped the items she had seized from the desk and ran through the nearest door, towards a part of the house I hadn't yet seen. I walked around the couch and picked up that which she had dropped – a handful of checkbooks, copies of forms, half of a torn Social Security card that read "Terrance Da – ."

This woman, whoever she was, was stealing from Terry. Stealing his checks, taking his identity, I don't know exactly, but I suddenly grew hot with anger. I dropped the items back onto the desk and hurried after her in pursuit.

But if the sitting room was a jarring change, the kitchen was even more so. The woman was gone, first of all – like she had never been there at all. The room was dated. The oven looked like a wardrobe, and the refrigerator was small and round. The cabinets had no doors, but instead everything inside was hidden by curtains. I was enveloped in the fragrance of fresh coffee, a scent which I should have been able to notice from the sitting room. In the center of the room was a wooden table, at whose corner sat the boy who had first knocked at my door. He was older than he had been earlier, and had gained several inches in height, but it was unmistakably him. He wore the same pajamas, except now there was a much larger gap between his wrist and the cuff of his sleeve. The boy was drinking a glass of milk, cultivating a creamy mustache with each sip.

"It's you," he said. "You're back."

"Did a woman come through just now?" I asked.

The boy shook his head. "Only you. I'm not afraid of you this time, though. I knew you were coming. My mother marked the date for me." He gestured to a

promotional calendar hanging from the back of the door behind him. It said FARMERS FEED SUPPLY in large letters across the top. “She said I don’t have to be afraid of you.”

“I’m sorry that I scared you earlier,” I said. I had been so uneasy when I came in, but the boy seemed so familiar that it lent me comfort.

“My mother said you’d say that!” the boy replied, and his grin stretched from one ear to the other. “Would you like a glass of milk?”

“No,” I said, “thank you.”

“There’s a lemon cake in the icebox my mother made for us.”

The boy was so relaxed that I relaxed just from being near him. There was something so recognizable about him, but I could not place it. He leapt from his seat and went to the stove, taking off the coffeepot and turning off the flame beneath it.

“She made you coffee before she went up to bed,” he said. “All I had to do was turn on the burner to make it warm again.”

I took a seat at the table next to where the boy had been sitting. “Then I will gladly have a cup and a piece of cake with you,” I told him. What else was I to say? How could I turn down such hospitality? If this was a haunting, I wanted to know if it would taste as convincing as it smelled and looked. I had forgotten the story about Persephone and the pomegranate seeds. The boy set a mug of coffee in front of me, and went to the icebox to find the cake. I wrapped my hands around the ceramic, and let the warmth seep into my palms. “What’s your name?”

“First name Terrance, middle name David,” said the boy. “But everyone calls me Terry.”

“Uncle Terry?” I asked, and understanding finally began to seep into the dusty, dark corners of my brain.

The boy laughed as though that was the greatest joke ever told. “Uncle Terry!” he said. “That’s a good one. Uncle Terry. That’s funny.” He set a slice of cake in front of me, and another in front of him. His slice was bigger, but I pretended not to notice. “It’s a school night,” he said. “I don’t get to stay up this late on school nights most of the time.”

“What’s your best subject in school?”

“Lunch.”

“Not math?” I asked. “Not reading?”

“I like to eat,” the boy said. “And then I like to run outside. I’m a fair runner. I’m not much good at anything else.”

I ate my cake and drank my coffee and the boy and I made conversation. “But you have to study to be something when you grow up,” I said.

“My mother says you don’t have to study to be kind. You just have to practice.” The boy ate his cake and drank his milk. “And that’s what I want to be. I want to be kind.”

“That is actually a very respectable aspiration.” I lowered my eyes, feeling chastised, even though the boy said it as gently as a lamb. I thought of his Social Security card, and the checkbooks, and the woman with the feathered hair who I had inadvertently chased away. Poor Uncle Terry, I thought. Too kind for his own good, probably.

“I’m glad you came,” the boy said, “so we could have cake.”

“I’m glad I came, too.”

"I like your robe," he said, "because it's the same color as the cake. Yellow is my favorite." The boy finished his last bite and set his fork down on the plate with a clatter. "Okay," he said, "I'm going to bed now. Will you do the dishes? Otherwise I can do them in the morning, but if I start now I'll wake up my sisters, probably." He rose out of his chair and turned to the door without waiting for me to answer. "Good night."

I brought the plates and the glass and the coffee cup to the sink, but I couldn't make out anything familiar like soap or a scrub brush, and the kitchen was not equipped with a dishwasher. I lay the dishes at the bottom of the sink and leaned against its cool enamel surface for a moment, trying to regain myself, trying to figure out what, exactly, was going on.

According to the FARMER FEED SUPPLY calendar, it was the first Wednesday in April, 1957. The date had been circled very lightly in pencil, like a secret.

Eventually I returned to the sitting room because I thought I saw a telephone in there, and I hoped the time was right for what I needed to do. The desk was no longer in disarray; the items had either been returned to their rightful places, or taken away entirely. A woman shrieked – the same woman as before, perhaps, but I don't know for sure. In the darkness I couldn't make out how many people were there. They splashed me with water, while some of them chanted wildly in a parody of ecclesiastical Latin, and a man's voice rose above the shrieking woman. "Be-gone, devil or demon, whatever you are!" he yelled at me. "The power of Christ compels you!"

"I just want to use the phone," I said, but I had to cover my face with the sleeve of my robe to keep from getting drenched. The man kept shouting, and the woman kept shrieking, and the others kept chanting. I wanted to panic like they were panicking, but

these people were dressed like they'd come right off the set of a teenage John Cusack flick, and it was tough to be scared of that much acid-washed denim and big hair.

I grabbed a pillow from the couch and tossed it at them. "Stop it!" I said. "I need to make a call." I continued throwing whatever items lay within reach – a lamp, a stack of magazines, pens and pencils.

The people fled, and I waited a while until my heart rate returned to normal.

I found the phone on a console table near the hallway. It had an old-fashioned rotary dials, dark and shiny and with a bit of heft in the receiver when I lifted it. I remembered Rob's secondary number, a landline from when he briefly moved back in with his mother after her surgery. It took a few tries, but eventually I heard it ring, and someone answered.

"Do you know what time it is?" said a woman on the other end of the line. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Is Rob – Robbie there?" I said, stammering. "Robbie Junior."

"If this is you again, Mikey Simmons, I'll have your hide."

"Please, I need to speak with Robbie."

"Is school cancelled today? Are you calling from the phone tree?"

Young Robbie would never forgive me for blowing his chance for an extra day off school. "Yes," I said, formulating a lie. "But I need to know what the homework was for reading."

For a few minutes the conversation went quiet, but I heard no dial tone from hanging up. I waited patiently until I heard the mumbly-mouthed speech of a sleepy child

on the other end of the line. “Hello, this is Robbie speaking, how may I help you?” he said automatically.

“Listen, Robbie, I don’t know how to explain,” I began. “But I don’t think I’ll ever see you again. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. Thank you for being such a good friend, even when you didn’t have to be. I love you, and I’m sorry it didn’t work out between us, but you have given me the greatest gift.”

“Yeah, okay, sure,” said Robbie. I could hear the sleepiness in his voice. “Who is this?”

I set the phone back in the cradle and sat down on the ratty old couch a bit for a while.

I wandered for a long time, it seemed. It took me a while to resign myself the possibility that I’d never get home again. I lingered by the front door and felt that electric charge shoot through my skin. I went back up to my room again and again – creeping so quietly up the stairs, shuffling and staggering as I tried to avoid toy cars and teddy bears left carelessly behind. But when I opened the door, it was always a girl’s room, never mine. Often the girl child sat up in bed with the lamp on, a chapter book in her lap. “I’ll turn off my light in a minute, Ma,” she would say, without looking up. “I need to finish reading this for school tomorrow and Terry keeps bothering me. Can you close the door behind you?”

“Sure thing,” I’d reply. “Good night, Gracie,” I’d tell her as I closed the door.

I started going in and out of the other bedrooms as well. I saw all of the children, their ages jumping up and down at random. Here, Jeannie was an infant, crying because her pacifier had slipped out of her crib and to the floor. Now, Gracie the toddler was

tossing and turning, and I went to the side of her bed and lay a hand on her back to keep her steady. And then, here was teenaged Terry sick and feverish, shivering and sweating, and I went and held his hands as he sucked in ragged breaths. He stared coolly at me but gripped my hands as fiercely as I gripped his. Sometimes Gracie and Jeannie would be French-braiding one another's hair as teens; other times child-Terry would be asking one of his sisters to read him a story.

When I went downstairs again, time shifted forward, closer to the present. I broke up several séances run by teenagers in the living room. They busted the windows and overturned candles, which I then had to stamp out upturned candles before they started a fire.

I don't know how long I wandered that house in the dark, in the end. It could have been the space of one night; it could have taken a thousand. I knew intimately each creak of the floorboard, each crease in the wallpaper. I found myself making messes out of boredom, pulling cushions off couches and food out of cupboards and, once, smashing a china plate left carelessly on the dining room table. I darted from the room when I heard footsteps on the stair. And other times I'd think I was doing the family a favor by cleaning. I scrubbed the baseboards in the foyer with a bucket I borrowed from the kitchen two decades earlier. I folded laundry left unattended in teenagers' bedrooms and leave it in their childhood dresser drawers.

Once I ran into adult Terry as he came out of the bathroom. "But I don't have any cake!" he said, panicked, but only an instant later he crossed the threshold into the kitchen and vanished.

He wasn't there, but his sisters were, now grown into adults as well. I lingered at the open doorway to the kitchen and heard their hushed voices within. "I don't see why Ma did it this way," said Gracie. "It's not fair to him, really. It's much too big, and an awful lot of responsibility."

"I get what you're saying," said the Jeannie. "And I agree. But Larry and I had the will independently reviewed, and the lawyer said it would be better not to fight it at all."

I leaned against the threshold and crossed my arms. I wanted to listen in to satisfy my curiosity, but this seemed a painful conversation to behold. I had wondered how this had happened – how Terry had come to own the house over his sisters. I worried that this was a painful point in family history that may best be left unseen, but I remained in the doorway, transfixed. I felt that I knew them well now, but I'd never been fully part of their lives, just a lonely ghost in the shadows, watching them grow. I knew the ending of their story, but not the middle part, and I worried that, since Terry got the house, his sisters would hate him for it.

"I don't think he can take care of this place," said Jeannie. "He can't even drive a car."

"Bruce and I don't live too far away," said Gracie. "And Tommy will be old enough to drive in June. We'll check in on him from time to time, make sure everything's all right. At the first sign of trouble, we'll call you."

And then Jeannie looked up, and saw me, and gasped, and Gracie turned and saw me too and spilled her coffee.

My mouth hung open but I said nothing. To come into the kitchen seemed like overstepping. It was not the same as switching off the light for a sleepy child, or soothing

a fussy infant. Who was I to them, really? I was no one then. I couldn't let myself interrupt.

I stepped backwards into the sitting room but their terrified faces remained fresh in my memory for a length of time I could not measure.

After that scene I found myself in the foyer, leaning against the front door, letting the electric feeling I got when I was near numb my fingers and toes. I was tired, now, and restless. I had, by then, seen calendars with dates from all decades. I had seen newspapers older than my grandparents with ink so fresh it stained my fingers. I did not know what to expect as I uncoupled the locks and twisted the knob and pulled that weighty piece of hardwood inward.

I peered outwards and saw small slices of sunlight glimmering over the horizon. The grass of the lawn was gem-green and glistening with dew. I stepped forward without hesitation –

And tumbled to the ground. The porch I had expected was not there to catch me. At least the ground was soft, and the sun was coming up, and I lifted my head to see a stranger extending his hand to me. But he was not a stranger after all; I recognized him from the photos in the albums with his grown children. I reached up and he grabbed be solidly with his strong, wide hand and pulled me to my feet.

The builder led me to his truck, which sat in the grass, and I looked over my shoulder in the direction from which we had come. The door was not there; the threshold was empty. In fact, there was nothing of the house but its frame, sketched out in timber, waiting for its walls to go up and its floors to go down. There was nothing of the porch

but its shape laid out in two-by-fours, nothing of the windows but casings, and nothing of the gingerbread trim or the stained glass windows but my memory of the house's future.

"Are you all right?" the builder asked. "You had quite the fall." He held my hand in his hand, and it was warm. I found the weight of it relaxing.

"I'm fine, I think," I said.

"You seemed to come out of nowhere."

"I think I did come out of nowhere." I leaned against the bed of the truck, feeling dizzy. Inside, there were more planks of timber, and a handful of tools, a lunch pail, and an enamelware coffee pot, still warm. I could smell it emanating from the spout.

The builder's mouth, a flat straight line, turned up at the corner in a small smile. He would not look me in the eye. He was blushing. "I think maybe I wished you into existence," he confessed. "Lately it's been pretty lonely around here."

"I might have wished it too," I admitted. "Could I have some coffee?"

"Long night?" asked the builder. "We'll have to share a cup."

"I don't mind," I said, and he poured me some coffee in his small tin mug. I sipped at it and watched him get back to building Blanchland, and I knew the house had been meant for me all along.

"Do you have a name?" sked the builder.

"Violet," I told him. I'd always loved that name.

Bone Gold

The ultrasound at twenty weeks indicates that something is wrong. The bright spots of the spine and the skull illuminated against the dark static of the screen stick in your mind. They did seem off, didn't they? Or did they? Is this actual memory or has the image you hold in your head been altered by your imagination? After that frightening ultrasound, you are shuffled in and out of offices and medical suites, being seen and poked and prodded by doctors with specialties you can't pronounce.

Now and then a nurse or a technician will lend you a sympathetic ear. "I can't believe this is happening," you tell them. "I want this baby so badly. I don't understand what is going on."

They smile with pity and try to assure you that they are working on it.

When you finally make it back to your regular OB/GYN, the top-rated women's health practitioner in all of Marion County, she has stacks and files and records of the results of the imaging and blood work and procedures.

"It's a very rare disorder," she says. "Instead of collagen and calcified material, the bones grow into gold."

"Gold?" you ask.

"That's right," she says, and goes onto explain that, while gold is a very precious metal with its own special properties, it is too weak to support a human body. "With gold bones, your baby will never lead a normal life," she says. "Especially since, inside the body, bones are soft and warm, they'll be malleable, prone to manipulation and damage. Imagine a fall – normal children fall, right, and they bounce back up again? They're fine, mostly?" The doctor phrases these statements as questions, as though you don't know

how children work. It makes you feel small when she says it. “They might get scrapes or bruises, and that’s nothing to worry about for most kids. But if your child – this – a tumble, a spill,” she stutters as she points to the ghostly image on her computer screen, all shades of shadowy grays and blacks and sickly whites. “It can be very harmful. Could even be fatal. A violent cough, a sneeze, someone holding her too closely or squeezing her into clothes, those could all hurt her very badly. It can be a lot of work, a lot of stress to bring up a child like this. It’s likely she won’t even survive being born, and even more likely that even if she does, she won’t live to see kindergarten.”

“But,” you say, “I want this baby so badly.”

“They always are,” says the doctor, knowingly, patronizingly. She tells you that she understands how tough this must be for you, and she pats your hand “I’ll let you think about this a while, and I’ll contact some more specialists, and then we’ll discuss the options.”

So now you know, that if brought to term, you would be damning your child to a life, however short, of hazard and misery. And for as long as she lives, you would be responsible for her in every way, never leading life on your own terms again.

This baby is the most precious thing to you.

So you sit alone and try to think, and yet instead you wonder.

If her bones are gold – what must the marrow be?

Breakthrough, 1978

Doraine says that all the kids in her neighborhood called Mrs. Hostetler the tooth fairy because she'd pay a quarter for every tooth that they brought to her. Mrs. Hostetler collected the teeth to put in the potted plants she grew in her greenhouse. She said the they were useful, that they helped keep the pests away. It was an old wives' tale, Doraine says, but I'd never heard it before.

Then Billy Plotzky and his brother took a baseball bat to one another's face because they were saving up to see *Star Wars* a second time. Mrs. Hostetler gave them five quarters each in exchange for the teeth that they brought her, even though they were broken and bloody and some of them were meant to be permanent. Mrs. Plotzky had a screaming fit when her sons came home from the matinee that afternoon. Doraine says she shrieked so loud that dogs could hear her as far away as Kokosing Falls.

After that, the parents of Sycamore Street decided amongst themselves that they needed to put an end to Mrs. Hostetler's tooth hustle and questionable gardening practices because they were endangering the children of the neighborhood. Mrs. Hostetler was a sweet woman, they thought, but an old one, and obviously cracked. They could tolerate the taking of teeth before it rose to this level of violence, and all for a few measly quarters now and then. Mrs. Hostetler had to be stopped.

She had no family that anyone knew of. She had been widowed a long, long time ago, before most children in the neighborhood were even born. Even before some of the younger parents on Sycamore Street had even met, Doraine says. Nobody knew if Mrs. Hostetler had children of her own. No one was ever seen visiting, and the people of the neighborhood were too afraid to ask. They decided to press into service a volunteer,

someone who could check on Mrs. Hostetler frequently, to act as helper, to meet her needs and guide her gently back towards normal neighborhood living. Of course, none of the parents themselves could do it. They were all too busy. The dads worked, and some of the moms did too, and those that didn't all had four or five kids to look after most of the time, their own or their neighbors'. One of these children could do it, though, they thought. And since Mrs. Hostetler paid as much for the teeth of black children as she had for the teeth of white ones, it was decided that Doraine, the only daughter of one of Sycamore Street's two black families, could provide this neighborly aid. She was perfect because she was shy and diffident and easily cowed, but she was also entering the second grade. If a child could receive her First Communion at that age, surely she could help an old woman out, and report any pressing concerns to her parents.

Doraine swears this story is true, by the way, and I do my best to believe her.

During their first official meeting as helpee and helper, Mrs. Hostetler asked how many teeth Doraine had left to lose. "I've got a stubborn rabbit who keeps shitting in my hedgerow," the old woman said matter-of-factory. The cuss took Doraine by surprise. It was like Mrs. Hostetler didn't even know it was a swear word, and it sounded funny coming from a woman who looked like an aged, stooped-over version of the housekeeper from *The Brady Bunch*.

"Do not under any circumstances give her your teeth," Doraine's mother warned her beforehand. "That's exactly the sort of foolishness we are trying to end."

In the fall, Doraine only visited Mrs. Hostetler on Saturdays, after her favorite cartoons were on in the early morning, but before her brothers' weekend football games. She'd bring in the paper and open a tin of food for Mrs. Hostetler's elderly cat, who had a name like Olaf or Otto or Oskar – not a pet name, but a people name – and then Doraine would stay for an hour or so, helping Mrs. Hostetler with whatever chores she needed done. This often involved getting laundry to and from the machines in the basement, Doraine tells me. Mrs. Hostetler was fastidious about washing everything – her dresses, her house coats, her bedsheets, her wash rags and dish towels and table linens and an infinite number of hand-knit ornamental doilies. And, Doraine says, Mrs. Hostetler starched and ironed everything as well, even her socks and undies. Mrs. Hostetler didn't have a television, but often hummed along to songs on the radio while they worked alongside one another.

Mrs. Hostetler ate sauerkraut and sour cream for breakfast, and Doraine says she always offered some to her. The sauerkraut was cold, though, and Doraine didn't like it. Doraine tells me, though, that Mrs. Hostetler started keeping a selection of sugary cereals around after a while, and Pop Tarts, and Eggo waffles, so that when Doraine began visiting Mrs. Hostetler before school on weekdays as well, they could enjoy breakfast together.

This is when Doraine really began to learn Mrs. Hostetler's magic language. Well, Doraine tells me it was magic. Before, she'd only heard Mrs. Hostetler use it to talk to the cat, and the cat always listened. Doraine thought talking to animals must be a magic power, something normal people couldn't do, but maybe a tooth fairy could. "Sitsit unnah," Mrs. Hostetler would say. "Essah, essah." She'd mutter in her magic tongue as

she pulled the chairs away from the dinette table, beckoning for Doraine to join her. They'd sit across from one another with large doilies for placemats, one with cold sauerkraut and sour cream, the other with a bowl of Cocoa Crunchies.

Doraine says that Mrs. Hostetler liked to quiz her on spelling.

"Spell *capsize*."

"What does it mean?"

"It means a boat will tip over. *Capsize*."

"C-A-P-S-I-Z-E. Is that right?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Hostetler. "Read a book and find out. Now spell *gregarious*."

"G-R-I-G-A-R-I-U-S. Am I close?"

"Maybe. I have no idea. Why do you think I ask? Now finish breakfast before your fruity loops get soggy."

Doraine says Mrs. Hostetler called all cold cereal "fruity loops," whether it was chocolatey or fruity or flakey.

"Now that I look back on it," Doraine tells me, "I don't know if Mrs. Hostetler could read or write very well, if at all. I don't think English was her first language."

"What was her first language?" I ask. "The magic one, maybe?"

Doraine shrugs.

Gradually Doraine began stopping by Mrs. Hostetler's house after school as well. She'd step off the school bus, run past her own house, and go automatically to the side

door that opened to Mrs. Hostetler's kitchen. On these occasions Mrs. Hostetler would offer Doraine a slice of homemade milk pie, which Doraine liked very much. Doraine says milk pie tastes like Christmas – a stiff custard in a flaky pie crust, seasoned with cinnamon and nutmeg.

Doraine says that on these afternoons, when her parents were working and her brothers were at football practice, she would sometimes stay for hours at Mrs. Hostetler's house. She would help with chores, of course, since that was what she was supposed to do, but even as they were folding laundry or ironing doilies Mrs. Hostetler would ask Doraine about school, about homework, about normal stuff, almost like a grandmother would. Sometimes she would ask Doraine to explain the rules of a game, like softball or soccer, and they'd empty out the spice cabinet and set up the field on the dinette table so Doraine could demonstrate.

"Do you want to learn to cook?" Mrs. Hostetler asked. Doraine didn't know how to refuse, and so Doraine learned how to cook hog maw and pot pies and potato rolls. She burnt the rolls much of the time.

"Do you want to learn to knit?" Mrs. Hostetler asked. Doraine didn't know how to refuse, and so Doraine learned how to stitch thread carefully into antimacassars. Somehow her efforts always ended up in knots.

"Do you want to learn to garden?" Mrs. Hostetler asked. Doraine didn't know how to refuse, and so Doraine followed her into the greenhouse and helped pull weeds and water plants, many of which occupied pots so large that Doraine thought, without all that loose and loamy soil, there'd be plenty of room for her to fit inside.

The greenhouse was kept locked, with a key that Mrs. Hostetler kept in the pocket of her house coat. Above the door hung a disc as big as a dinner plate, painted in a symmetrical pattern portraying two lamps and two thistle-finches facing each other. The foreground animals portrayed in white and yellow against a blue and green field, with thick black outlines blurring the distinction between foreground and background. It was primitive, Doraine says, but it was beautiful.

The problem was that Doraine was inhabiting two worlds without knowing it. The small world was the one she shared with Mrs. Hostetler, with only the two of them and the cat named Otto or Oskar or Olaf. It was a small world, but a good world. There was a lot of responsibility to helping Mrs. Hostetler, but there was a lot of reward for it, as well. Doraine's parents never bought Pop Tarts or made pie for no reason in the middle of the week. They didn't always show an interest in Doraine's spelling. And neither of them had ever taken the time to show her how to knit – they probably didn't know how, either. But the small world could get boring, or lonely, and sometimes Doraine pressed her face against the glass of the side door when Mrs. Hostetler wasn't looking, watching Billy Plotzky and his brother toss a baseball back and forth, or climb the tree in their backyard, or whip each other with switches they made from its branches, and she'd feel jealous.

The larger world was that which included everyone except for Mrs. Hostetler and her cat, and the larger world was not as nice. The larger world had Doraine's teacher, who marked tests lower for Doraine's crouched handwriting, even when her words were spelled correctly. The larger world had Doraine's brothers, who resented that she had access to sugary cereals when all they had at home was Malt-O-Meal. The larger world

had not only Doraine's parents but the other parents in the neighborhood, who constantly prodded Doraine about Mrs. Hostetler's lifestyle, asking whether she was having memory lapses or mood swings. Doraine found their nosiness annoying and intrusive.

And, of course, the larger world had Billy Plotzky and his brother.

Billy Plotzky was a grade above Doraine at school, and his brother in the grade below. They rode the school bus together from the stop at the end of the street. Doraine says they held a grudge against Mrs. Hostetler for getting them in trouble, even though they were the ones who ruined their own teeth. I guess it turned into a whole big thing for the Plotzky family, who probably had to pay hundreds of dollars in dental work for the boys, but even so, they shouldn't have taken it out on Doraine.

"You know she's a witch, right?" Billy Plotzky said to Doraine, who had just come from Mrs. Hostetler's house, one morning. "Everyone knows it." He whistled a little when he spoke. His new fake teeth were slightly the wrong size for his mouth.

Doraine tried to deny it, but her retorts only strengthened Billy Plotzky's conviction. "She's a witch, and you're her apprentice," he said. "Or else she's fattening you up to eat you, I'm not sure." Billy Plotzky and his brother began compiling some convincing evidence, at least to a second-grader.

First, they said, she was an old woman who lived alone. That was very suspicious, especially since she was in a big old house, the scariest-looking one on Sycamore Street, with its sagging porch and fading siding and some of the shutters hanging askew.

Secondly, the cat, Oskar or Olaf or Otto, they claimed was either a familiar, or her husband transformed long ago (that's why it had a people name). They went back and forth on this point quite a bit, Doraine says.

Thirdly, they said, they'd seen her casting spells. Doraine didn't dare tell them about magic language, but somehow Billy Plotzky and his brother knew about it anyway. They claimed they'd seen her at night, with a cauldron in her greenhouse, making potions and chanting and doing other strange things. Doraine tried to tell them that she had big potted plants, but they wouldn't believe her.

"Doraine's gone over to the Dark Side," Billy Plotzky's brother said on the bus one day, and even though most people knew not to take Billy Plotzky or his brother too seriously, kids love to have something to tease each other over, and Doraine became a target for all the other kids at Mount McKinley Elementary after that. They started calling her Darth Doraine, which even her brothers thought was pretty cool, but it only made Doraine mad and upset.

But even worse than that was that Doraine's relationship with Mrs. Hostetler was tainted from that point on. Every small strangeness was now stained with something sinister.

Doraine says Mrs. Hostetler had no pictures around the house. At her own home, and at the homes of her friends', Doraine saw family portraits hanging over fireplaces, or school photos framed and hung along the stairs, or albums lined up on built-in shelves. But Mrs. Hostetler had none of these things. She had doilies, and some cross-stitching, and a lot of cat hair floating around, but nothing else.

One time, Doraine says, Mrs. Hostetler gave her a doll with no face.

Doraine became miserable throughout much of the second-half of her second-grade year. She dreaded going to school, dreaded getting on the bus, dreaded going over to Mrs. Hostetler's house most of the time. Mrs. Hostetler had never been anything but nice to her, and on most cold mornings, she had hot chocolate ready and waiting for Doraine when she let herself in the side door. Doraine could still spell, and knit, and iron with Mrs. Hostetler, but she became worried about what she ate, afraid to become Gretel in the fairy tale.

It was around that time that David Kollman, who lived several streets over, disappeared while delivering newspapers on his route. His bike was found at the end of Sycamore Street, leaning against the Mastersons' mailbox, with a sack of undelivered papers next to it.

Doraine says that Mrs. Hostetler pestered Doraine for updates for several days. "Did his parents hear from him? Do they think he ran away? Does anyone at school have an idea what happened?"

Doraine didn't know what to tell her. Her brother was in David Kollman's grade, but they weren't talking about it much. All Doraine's parents would say were reminders not to talk to strangers.

"It's obvious what's happened," Billy Plotzky whispered to Doraine on the bus one morning. "Mrs. Hostetler is out in her greenhouse at night, with her cauldron, chanting spells."

"It's true," said Billy Plotzky's brother. "She probably chopped him up to use parts of him in spells. She's probably feeding the rest to her cat – or to you!"

"Stop it!" Doraine said, and she hit Billy Plotzky's brother, who hit her back, and then Billy Plotzky got in on it too, and eventually the bus driver had to stop and pull over because half the students on the bus began brawling while the other half were egging them on.

They all got detentions. Doraine had to stay in from recess for a week. But by the end of that week, David Kollman was found wandering the mall by himself at night, underdressed for the weather and unable to remember what happened to him. The neighborhood breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"So that's good," I say.

Doraine shrugs. "David was never the same."

When winter began its turn into spring, Billy Plotzky and his brother warmed back up to Doraine. Their antagonism towards her had galvanized into a mutual respect. In fact, the way Doraine tells it, they practically admired her. A girl who wasn't afraid to get hit! Just the kind of friend they wanted to have. That, and she had access. They wanted to get into Mrs. Hostetler's greenhouse.

"We know she's up to something," said Billy Plotzky. "We just want to know what it is."

"Yeah," said his brother. "Once and for all. With your help, it will be like infiltrating the Death Star – zhuuum! Zhuuum!" Billy Plotzky's brother pretended to wield a lightsaber, mimicking the noise it made as best he could.

"She would notice if I went out to the greenhouse without her," Doraine told them, and it was true. Mrs. Hostetler kept it locked with a key, and she kept the key on

her most of the time. Doraine didn't know where it was kept, otherwise, and she'd never been in the greenhouse without Mrs. Hostetler, either.

"You just have to keep her distracted," said Billy Plotzky. "We'll wait for a day that's really rainy so she can't see out the window, and you can keep her indoors doing whatever it is you do together most mornings. My brother and I will break in."

Billy Plotzky's brother nodded in agreement. "I want to see her cauldrons," he said.

Doraine says she was skeptical, and said that Billy Plotzky's brother should act as lookout. She said he was too short to be a Stormtrooper. They were, fortunately, amenable to this amendment, and waited for the rain to come pouring down.

April showers brought both Plotzky boys to Mrs. Hostetler's backyard on a Tuesday. Doraine saw them dodging through neighborhood backyards while she took the sidewalk. As she let herself in, she pointed to Billy Plotzky's brother to station himself between the house and the greenhouse, where she could signal him from the inside if she needed to, and where he could try to get her attention if that was necessary as well.

Doraine says everything else about that morning proceeded as usual. She fetched a load of laundry from the basement, and helped Mrs. Hostetler set up her ironing board. They had just sat down for breakfast when they heard a crash in the yard. It came from the greenhouse.

Mrs. Hostetler was immediately alert, and Doraine dropped her spoon right out of her mouth, trying to come up with an excuse or a cover story, except then Billy Plotzky's

brother started knocking furiously at the side door. “Doraine! Doraine! You have to help – hurry!” He was in tears. “He fell in, Billy fell in!”

Mrs. Hostetler ran through the wet grass in her house coat and slippers, searching her pockets for the key to the greenhouse, so fast that Doraine and Billy Plotzky’s brother struggled to keep up. After a moment of fiddling with the lock, Mrs. Hostetler swung the door open and marched inside. All the while Billy Plotzky’s brother was crying and screaming, screaming and crying. “I’m sorry!” he repeated over and over. “We just wanted to see your cauldrons!”

Doraine says what she saw was horrifying. “Billy Plotzky was bleeding,” she says, shaking. “I didn’t know a person could even have that much blood.” His limbs were at odd angles. His back was crooked. Mrs. Hostetler leaned over the boy, turned him on his side. The back of his skull had caved in where he’d struck the edge of a potted plant. His hair was thick and wet and matted to the back of his head. He was not moving. He was not breathing. Shards of glass of all different sizes from where Billy Plotzky had fallen through were scattered all around.

“Stay back, Doraine,” Mrs. Hostetler warned. “You, boy, come closer.”

“Is he going to be okay?” asked Billy Plotzky’s brother, choking back sobs. “He didn’t mean to break anything. I’m sorry we called you a witch.”

Mrs. Hostetler laid Billy back down on the ground and seized a shard of glass. “Your brother will be fine,” she said. “You will be fine, too.” She rubbed his back and hugged him close to her, letting him put his head on her shoulder. She hummed and he cried. She started speaking softly in her magic tongue. “Daymedich… dopplich… rutschy

nix-nootz…" She was blessing the boy, maybe, or cursing him, or chastising – Doraine doesn't really know which.

Then Mrs. Hostetler shoved the pointed end of glass into Billy Plotzky's brother's neck. Blood, blood, blood, more blood – it spouted from his wound like a geyser, soaking Mrs. Hostetler and her house coat in crimson, and she gently took him by the shoulders and laid him next to his brother.

All the while the rain dripped in from the empty space above them.

Doraine says she stood there, staring, afraid to move, afraid to do anything, until Mrs. Hostetler turned to her and spoke again in English. "These two, they never learn. If it's not one, it's the other, or both," she muttered. She then said to Doraine, "Go into the kitchen and take the set of pliers from the top drawer. I will need your help."

Doraine was afraid – afraid of Mrs. Hostetler, but also afraid to disobey her. She ran across the backyard into the kitchen, and returned with the requested tool within minutes.

"I am glad you are here today," Mrs. Hostetler told her. Her housecoat was soaked through from rain, and much, and blood. "I do not think I have it in me anymore to do this on my own. I need you to do something very difficult, and very strange, but I think you have the strength to do it."

Doraine shivers when she tells me this. Her voice cracks. Her words catch.

Mrs. Hostetler asked Doraine to pull out the Plotzky boys' fake teeth. "Or else Mrs. Plotzky will be very angry with me once again," she said.

The cat, Olaf or Oskar or Otto, had followed Doraine back into the greenhouse, and was curling its way between Mrs. Hostetler's legs. It lapped at the murky liquid that dripped from her hem.

"There is no time to explain," said Mrs. Hostetler, "or else you will miss the bus."

Doraine straddled Billy first, hooking the pliers to the wide white incisors, hand-crafted, to replace the ones knocked out last summer. It was an arduous task, prying them from the gums, trying not to damage them, as the rain fell against her back. Droplets ran down her neck, down her forehead, into her eyes. She pulled and she pulled and she pulled. She wrestled and wriggled and winced. Eventually the first one came loose, and she started again with the second.

Meanwhile, she could hear Mrs. Hostetler puttering in the potted plants behind her. "Oh no, not this one," she overheard her say. And then, "This boy moved away, didn't he?" and "These ones aren't large enough yet. I know I have others somewhere…"

Doraine moved on to Billy's brother, running her finger along the inside of his lips, trying to determine the real from the fake. He'd only lost one permanent tooth, and it was right up front, but he was smaller and the pliers wouldn't fit in his mouth the right way.

"Once you are done with the teeth," said Mrs. Hostetler, "I will need you to take off their clothes, bitte."

Doraine didn't want to do it. She would rather pull out all their teeth without question than chance seeing a Plotzky pecker. "What do you need their clothes for?" she asked.

"So their cuttings can wear them," said Mrs. Hostetler. "The spares, I mean." Brandishing a trowel, Mrs. Hostetler began digging out the soil from one of the large plots lined up in the greenhouse, and from the dirt she coaxed out the head of Billy Plotzky, or at least something like it, something identical to the Billy Plotzky that lay on the ground. "Get off their clothes, or get them out of the pot, I don't care which, but in either case you must hurry and make up your mind or you will all be late for school."

Doraine doesn't go into detail about what happened after that, except to tell me that in ten minutes' time, she walked with a brand-new Billy Plotzky and his brand-new brother to the bus stop. The boys, Doraine says, had a waxy quality to their skin. It had never yet seen the sun. The dirt washed right off as the rain came down, the residue dripping off their chins. They all stood silently and somberly at the end of Sycamore Street among the other silent and somber kids of the neighborhood, reluctant to face another school day.

The worst part, Doraine says, was what happened after. She was afraid to go back to Mrs. Hostetler's house after that, so she lied to her parents later that day.

She said Mrs. Hostetler was getting forgetful.

She said that Mrs. Hostetler was having mood swings.

She said the Mrs. Hostetler had reached the point where she needed more help than Doraine knew how to give. At least this, she felt, was true.

And even though her parents didn't care about spelling or gardening or Eggo waffles, they said thank you, Doraine, and told her what a good job she'd done, and they

let her stay home while they made some calls and the adults in the neighborhood took over once again.

Mrs. Hostetler's home was vacant by the time school let out for the year, and by the end of the summer, the greenhouse was razed. The painted disc that hung over the front was cracked and thrown away.

At the time, when she was still young, Doraine's parents told her that Mrs. Hostetler, tired of living alone, moved somewhere else to be near family. Nowadays, she thinks maybe Mrs. Hostetler died, or was forced into a nursing home.

Doraine says that the cat, Oskar or Olaf or Otto, lingered around the neighborhood a long time afterwards.

"Did Mrs. Hostetler wear dentures?" I ask.

"No," says Doraine. "She kept all her own teeth."

Hypnopomp (Paper, Leather, Iron)

The knock. It's back. Sherry can feel it this time – pounding, pounding, pounding.

She breathes in deeply as she leans against the bedroom door, as though pinning it shut with her body. She's afraid the knock will come through, but she can't hold it back. She's already weak with fear and exhaustion. She holds the pistol close to her flesh. The barrel is warm from having been fired once, and the heat makes her skin go red where it touches. There should be one more bullet left. There should be one more bullet.

Sherry hasn't been sleeping well. Sherry hasn't slept well for a long, long time.

The knock started when Donny died. He'd had to go to the hospital, and Sherry stayed with him for as long they'd let her, sleeping on the vinyl couches in the surgical ICU waiting room. The plastic cover pressed into the skin of her face; it itched when she peeled herself away. The nurses told her to go home, take a shower, get some rest, so finally she did. So tired, she was. The waiting room was no place for real rest. She laid on the bed for just a second, just a second, and then came a crack. It sounded like it came from downstairs, and she shot up in bed, heart pounding, when she heard it.

It sounded like one of Donny's beer bottles, fallen to the floor. For a moment, disoriented, she panicked and thought she had failed him. She was supposed to clean up his empties. She had left him lingering without a fresh cold one. It took some time for her to recognize that it was the middle of the morning, and Donny wasn't home, and then the phone rang, and someone on the other line told her to come back to the hospital right away. By the time she arrived, Donny had passed – in fact, he'd passed even before she'd answered the phone, but she'd slept through the first several rings.

The next few days proceeded in a blur. There were arrangements of flowers and a funeral. There was a burial. There were casseroles and canned goods brought over by people at the nearby church.

And she didn't sleep well. She didn't sleep well for a long while.

Sherry lay awake at night thinking of all she and Donny had promised to one another when they were young. They told one another they'd grow old together, and they did. His hairline retreated, while her own locks lost luster. His belly grew big and round and her flesh grew soft and dangly. The whites of Donny's eyes papered into yellow, and Sherry's freckles faded, and she began to bruise more and more easily.

Sherry found herself wishing they'd considered what they'd do after that.

The knock, the knock, the knock. It keeps coming and coming and interrupting Sherry's sleep.

At first the knock sounded like Donny's bottles, the vessels of cheap beer she'd bring to him while he sat in his easy chair while watching a game, or the news, or anything really, as long as the TV was on. Sometimes if Sherry wanted to spend time with Donny, she'd have to bring the TV trays for them to have dinner together while watching game shows in the early evening. Donny would be four or five beers in by then, and they'd clank together as he set them beside his chair for Sherry to add to the trash later.

But Donny was dead, and the remaining beers stayed cold in the fridge, where they were pushed to the back of the shelf under the crush of all those ecclesiastical

casseroles. There hadn't been an empty bottle in the trash for weeks, and yet the knock. The knock. The knock.

Sherry found herself nodding off whenever she had a moment of quiet and stillness. She'd doze during dinner. She'd nod off while knitting. She'd start to snooze during church service. Someone further down the pew will politely shake her awake afterwards, and Sherry will feel less than refreshed but it will better than what happened at home. At home, when she lay down alone in the space she had shared with Donny for decades, she never knew how long she'd be able to sleep before she was woken again, terrified, punctuated by the pound, the pound, the knock, the knock, the knock.

When it didn't sound like bottles, it sounded like the cast iron pan. It had been a gift from Donny for a birthday or an anniversary or Christmas. Wasn't that a traditional thing? Paper, leather, iron. Whatever the occasion, it had been expensive. Donny liked to remind Sherry of that from time to time, on days she suggested they go out to eat, days that were special occasions, or days she was too tired to make breakfast, or too busy to cook dinner. Sherry hadn't used it in years, actually, since it was heavy and unwieldy and it broke her finger one time when Donny swung it at her and she lifted her hand to protect herself and a crock pot worked just as well for most things, as long as she planned ahead and prepped everything in the morning.

That was, of course, if she could function well enough in the morning to get a crock pot meal together. Sherry hadn't been sleeping well. She hadn't been sleeping well for so long.

When Sherry retreats to the bedroom at night, the knock begins to creep closer, and closer, and closer. One night, when it sounds like it's on the stairs to the second floor, Sherry wakes up in a panic, thinking it's an intruder, and she calls 911. Two officers arrive with lights flashing on the top of their car, and they knock out a window in the side door to let themselves in. By the time they arrive, Sherry knows there's no intruder, but she's strangely comforted by the presence of the officers going from room to room in the dark, noisily, shouting to one another. She descends the stairs with her arms raised, just in case, so they know that she's harmless.

Afterwards the three of them, the two officers and Sherry, convened in the dining room. They wanted to get Sherry's statement.

"Do you want coffee?" Sherry asked. "Or tea. I can put the kettle on."

"That's all right, ma'am," said the first officer, who remained standing near the lintel that demarcated the space of the dining room from that of the foyer. "We just need a few minutes of your time."

"Unless you'd like to come down to the station," said the other officer, who was a woman. Both of the officers were dressed in identical blue uniforms, both crisp and clean and cared for, but the man had short hair while the woman had her hair pulled back from her face and wrapped in a knot above the nape of her neck. That way it didn't interfere with her hat, which sat on her head so so straight – so so straight, Sherry found it distracting. "Would you be more comfortable there?"

Sherry didn't think so. She'd only been down to the police station once before. It was in one of the old municipal buildings, before they'd knocked it down and rebuilt it on the other side of town. A neighbor – not the one with the ugly dog, but the one who had a

dead tree in her yard and worked in a bakery, Sherry couldn't remember her name – had called the non-emergency number with a noise complaint, and Donny was arrested because Sherry was disoriented and bleeding from the head when an officer arrived to check up on that. The police at the station had been kind, offering her coffee or tea or water or whatever you'd like, we can get it for you. Do you have anyone we could call? The DA would like to speak with you. But Sherry insisted she'd only gone to get her husband back, it had all been a misunderstanding, it was an accident it was always only ever an accident and besides, she'd deserved it, please can you let Donny out now? I don't know what I'd do without him.

Nothing came of it, in the end, except they were cited for the noise complaint and had to pay a fine.

"Ma'am?" asked the woman officer. "Do you want to go down to the station?"

Sherry shook her head no.

The dim yellow light from the old bulbs in the chandelier made the city's icon on the front of the hat shine. Sherry found herself wondering about the woman officer. Was she married? Did she have a family? What did they think of her job? Why was she working so late at night? She found it difficult to concentrate on the questions she was being asked. Her eyes wandered around the dining room – how different it looked at night, without sunshine pouring in from the big windows in the front of the house. How strangely shaped the shadows were, how severe the dark in the corners! Sherry lingered while looking at the tchotchkes that had accumulated on the antique hutch Donny had inherited one of his great-aunts. The shelves were lined with his collectible plates commemorating presidents and events from the Korean War, and a few Hummel

figurines, and all the nice china they'd received for their wedding, never used but always available. Nothing was broken. Nothing was missing. Everything could be accounted for.

"Describe to me what you heard," said the woman officer.

"It was nothing, just a knock," Sherry insisted. "I'm not sure it was anything at all." She told them her husband died not long ago, and she was still getting used to living without him. She admitted she hadn't been sleeping well. That she hadn't slept well in a while.

The cops were very kind. They offered to stay until Sherry felt safe, but she dismissed them as they allowed her to. "Silly me, hearing problems," she told them.

The officers let her leave it at that.

The next day a different officer stopped by to do what he'd called a wellness check. Just want to make sure you're all right, ma'am, after last night. Did you get back to sleep? Is there anything we can do for you? The officer had gone to the front door while Sherry's neighbors – not the bakery neighbor, she'd moved out years ago, but new ones – while they were in the front yard.

Donny hated these neighbors almost as much as he'd hated the previous one for calling in that noise complaint. These neighbors had moved in only a few years ago. The whole family were Arab, or Pakistani, maybe – Sherry couldn't tell the difference. The man of the house, who Sherry assumed was a doctor, had a turban and a thick beard, while his wife wore curious clothing in Easter colors. "There goes the neighborhood," Donny would mutter every time their kids rode their bikes on the sidewalk past our

house. Or else “this country’s going to hell in a hand basket.” Or sometimes just “We’re all doomed, I tell you. Doomed.”

When they moved in Sherry had gone over with two baskets full up of zucchini and tomatoes, surplus from her gardening efforts that year. The wife had come over later to return the baskets, but Donny saw her on the porch before Sherry did, and wouldn’t let Sherry answer the door. The wife left the baskets on the porch, and Sherry deserved what she got that time, she knew it without Donny having to tell her but he did anyway, she shouldn’t have gone over there in the first place, especially not without telling Donny, and didn’t she know these people were our enemies in the Gulf War, and Iraq? How dare she. Now we’ll have to throw those baskets away. They probably have anthrax. And don’t waste tomatoes by giving them away – make your Sunday sauce and freeze it, if you have to, we’re not in the business of handouts over here, we don’t have money to throw out the window, for Chrissake, Sherry.

But now Donny was gone and the police were there and there was cardboard taped up over the missing glass pane in the side door, so the wife came by to ask if everything was all right.

“Nothing’s the matter,” said Sherry. “I was being a fool. Hearing things that go bump in the night.”

But the wife was stubborn, and she would not let the issue drop. When her turbaned husband returned home from work that evening, the wife brought him over, and asked Sherry to speak with him, even just for a moment.

“I didn’t know you were a doctor,” said Sherry, even though some days she watched him come and go in his white coat.

"I'm a gerontologist," he said, without even a trace of an accent. "I split my time between the hospital downtown and Covington Creek Convalescent."

"The hospital downtown," said Sherry, "that's where Donny died."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," said the doctor. "My wife and I have been meaning to do something for you. We didn't realize he'd passed until it was too late to send flowers. We didn't see much of him. Still," said the doctor, but Sherry didn't know if it was comment or command. He checked her vitals, pressed his cold glistening stethoscope underneath her shirt. She felt her skin go goose-bumped when it touched her flesh. He asked about her diet. He asked about her hygiene. He asked about her sleep.

Sherry hadn't been sleeping well. She hadn't been sleeping well for so long.

So she told him about the knock.

"It sounds like a hallucination," said the doctor. "They're more common than you might think."

Sherry crossed her arms. "I'm not seeing things," she said.

"Auditory hallucinations are completely normal. Everyone hallucinates from time to time, and the ones we hear probably happen more often than the ones we see. For many people, they think it's the phone ringing, or the doorbell, or something like that. I sometimes think my kids are making noise in another room when they aren't even home. It's a natural phenomenon, and often amplified by stress or grief."

Sherry nodded as though she understood.

"The sound will probably go away, given time," said the doctor. "But I am worried about what might happen if you don't get enough sleep. That could lead to some terrible problems. Do you have a general practitioner we could call? My wife could drive

you, if that's an issue. There's no shame in asking for help, and something to help you sleep might be in order."

"Where are you from?" Sherry asked.

"My family moved here from a town called Medina," said the doctor.

"Medina?" Sherry repeated. "Is that in Asia?"

"There might be one there," said the doctor. "But we're from close to Cleveland."

"Do you know the most common auditory hallucination?"

"No."

"The sound of someone saying your name."

After that Sherry found herself acutely aware of what people called her, and she realized no one called her by her first name anymore. Not since Donny died. Not even in a hallucination.

And still, the knock. The goddamn knock. It came back, and it came back, and it came back.

Sherry started taking pills. There were a number of prescriptions that Donny had accumulated throughout the course of years, many of them unfinished and left behind in the nightstand drawer where Donny kept the pistol, too. In case of an intruder, dummy – he'd said that to her when she objected to keeping it in the bedroom. He always knew how to cure her unhappiness with fear. But now the pistol lay untouched in the drawer, and Sherry picked up the nearby pills with funny names, meant for pain, because Donny had injured his back once at work and never got over it. At first she was careful about them, looking up the doses and splitting them in half if she thought they were too much.

They didn't help her sleep, as it turned out. In fact, Sherry can't tell now if she's been able to sleep at all.

This time she's determined will be the last time. When the knock interrupted her in sleep, it also divided her into two – the before, and the after. She reaches for the pistol this time before she leaps out of bed and crouches and leans against the door.

The knock again.

The pistol goes off.

Did Sherry pull the trigger? She doesn't know! Her ears are ringing. The knock continues. Drywall dust sprinkles from the hole in the ceiling. Sherry is lucky, so lucky, so so lucky she could have been seriously hurt oh god for Chrissake Donny why are you doing this – but the knock, the knock continues. Her blood is pounding through her ears, the door behind her vibrates from some kind of force on the other side.

Sherry's hearing all kinds of things now. She hears the woman police officer shouting through the house. She hears her neighbor, the doctor, and the neighbor's wife. She hears their children shrieking with pleasure as they ride their bikes down the sidewalk. Her hands are shaking. The knock gets louder. The door behind her. The pounding, the pounding.

Sherry hasn't been sleeping well lately.

She positions the gun with intention this time, and she fires.

A Madness in Marion County, 1919

The elephants came to town on my thirteenth birthday. It was September 13th, a Friday, and yet in spite of that, the entire town of Soldier's Grove was caught up in a celebratory mood. The circus was in town, after all, and everyone was talking about it. It was madness.

The benches of the circus bleachers were shiny and slippery, worn down from the behinds of hundreds of circus-goers before us, but my younger brother John and I didn't mind. We arrived early enough to find two seats together in the front, and John bought a bag of buttery popcorn to share as we waited for the show to begin.

"I wish Mother could have come," I said to John.

"I wish Father could have, too," John replied, but I fell silent, putting another handful of popcorn in my mouth to excuse me from replying. He didn't know the truth, and his world was better for it. "Do you think he's in Europe by now, on the front lines?"

I shrugged and passed the popcorn back to John. "I don't know," I said, and changed the topic back to the circus. It was easy to do when John was so eager. We took turns listing the acts we were most looking forward to seeing. We mostly recounted those we'd witnessed coming down the main avenue of Soldier's Grove earlier. There had been a parade that morning, extending from the railway station in town all the way to the Marion County fairgrounds, and like most of Soldier's Grove, we had skipped out on our other responsibilities and obligations (in our case, a spelling test and other lessons at the one-room schoolhouse) to huddle together at the edge of the boardwalk to watch the circus go by.

To some people, Soldier's Grove on September 13 looked much the same as it had on September 12. The main avenue through town was, perhaps, a little more littered with trash, a little more dusty and ruddy from yesterday's traffic, and perhaps some of the storefronts needed to be adequately swept. The grocer's window still displayed fruit, the butcher's shop had sausage links and cuts of beef lined up against the glass, and a boy hawked newspapers on the corner with little success, as most people cared not to remember there was a war on, and if they did, they didn't want to think too much about it. But that morning, there was a stiff crowd of people, children and adults alike, lingering on the raised wooden sidewalk behind us, craning over our heads and looking towards the station in anticipation.

Already at nine or so in the morning, the September heat came down on us all like a thick blanket. The shade of the steeply angled storefronts only offered small relief. I remembered that when I was really small, I could fit beneath the planked sidewalks to search for dropped dolls or penny candies, so John and I staked out a spot along the edge of the timber walkway and I told him to climb underneath where he could see and stay cool. I lifted the hem of my dress, and framed his face with my stockinged calves, creating a window for him. Mother would have died of embarrassment to see us like this, but she had stayed in the apartment, like always. She hadn’t even dressed before we left.

When the parade did start – oh my! John and I had seen the posters up all over town for four long weeks preceding this, but even with their bright printed colors and bold lettering, we could not have imagined all the wonders we saw parading down the center of town, each display more impressive than the next. First came men with ponies pulling wagons, all of them elaborately decorated with tableaux, some with the name of

the circus emblazoned at the top or along the side. All of them were painted in an array of colors seen only on songbirds in summer, or at the penny candy counter at the hardware store. And then a bandwagon came down out side of the street, with a five man band warming up their horns. They came so close to us that when the trumpeter pressed open his water key and blew into his instrument, I felt the mist of saliva spread across the side of my face. It felt almost refreshing, given the early heat of the day.

"Oh my gosh," said John, pointing. "Mary, look! The lions, there are lions!"

I had been so intently wiping the spit from my cheek that I nearly missed them. A cage on wheels, just as richly appointed as the other wagons, rolled by, and if I squinted I could make out its contents. Within the wagon, cast in striped shadow from the iron bars of its prison, were a family of lions. One paced restlessly back to front and front to back and back to front again, its mouth hanging open as it panted. Its coat was ragged and patchy, especially towards the hindquarters, and its skin sagged and wrinkled in some places, but for an instant it caught my gaze in its jeweled yellow eyes and I felt my heart stop for a moment. Behind the pacing lioness were two more that reclined against the bars, the hair and skin sticking out in ways that could almost be touched should a member of the crowd reach out towards them, and in the back, lying against the wooden door on the back of the wagon, was the maned male, keeping as much out of sight as possible.

Across the street was Mr. Gordon, who had an office nearby and brought his terrier everywhere with him. It had belonged to his son, who had gone off to the war. Since then, Mr. Gordon kept the dog at his side all the time, even in church services, even though it was prone to interruption. When Mr. Gordon pushed through the crowd to get to work, the dog, no larger than a house cat, saw the lions going by and dashed into the

street to confront them, barking and jumping and barking and jumping. The lionesses leaning against their bars paid no heed; to them, the terrier was merely an annoyance, not a hazard. Mr. Gordon ran into the street after it, but before he could reach the wagon, the dog was pulled under the its back wheel. I covered my eyes. The dog squealed horribly, and Mr. Gordon stopped still in the street. As soon as the wheel was clear, the dog took off again, staggering towards our side of the street. It flung itself into the shard beneath the walkway beside my brother.

"My dog!" Mr. Gordon called out. "You there, boy – can you reach him?"

John, always obedient, obliged Mr. Gordon, even as the parade continued. Underneath the boardwalk, I heard a growl and a yip and a cry; a moment later, John came out from under the walkway. "I can't get him," he said. "He's in a biting mood."

"Give him this," Mr. Gordon replied, holding out a bit of dried beef. "Coax him, won't you?"

"No good," said John again, and he balled up his fists and refused to take from Mr. Gordon's hand. "He won't let me near him."

Mr. Gordon tried once more to convince him, but John was steadfast. I knew that my brother would know better. Before we'd moved into the apartment, back when we lived altogether with Father back in the country, John had a talent with most animals. He knew to recognize when one was feeling injured, for example, and what they were likely to do when cornered.

Mr. Gordon muttered something to himself, and dropped to his knees in the dirt to try to convince the dog himself. He stuck his hand beneath the wooden planks as far as he

could comfortably reach, clucking his tongue and cooing like the dog was a child. “Come here, boy. Be a good boy. Come on, little fellow.”

“Mister, you’re blocking the view,” said a voice beside me.

“Yeah, get out of the way,” said another voice, with words edged with meanness.

Then there were more jeers, some directed at Mr. Gordon, some directed at his stupid dog, and others at his son. Someone threw a pebble, and it bounced harmlessly off Mr. Gordon’s shoulder, but then came an apple core, and and Mr. Gordon finally stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets and withdrew from sight.

But that was not what John and I were sitting on the circus bleachers recollecting from that morning. We were laughing at the way the clowns had gone by, giving flowers to pretty young ladies, while the monkeys that sat on the clowns’ shoulders stole them away again. And then we talked about the acrobats, who came down the packed dirt road tumbling or riding on unicycles, their tight-fitting clothes adorned with satin and feathers and free-flowing ribbons. And then John and I discussed one of our shared favorites: a team of red-clad riders on horses so immaculately white they looked straight from a fairy tale. These were the famous Lipizzaners from Austria, according to their posted advertisements (I liked to pretend that I was above childish things much of the time, but I had studied the posters in great detail). While the horses on the end trotted tall like a Tennessee Walker, the lead horse in the center reared upwards once, twice, three times before launching itself into the air. At the climax of its jump, it kicked its back feet out behind it so powerfully that for a moment its rider left his saddle. The crowd gasped, and applauded, and when the lead horse came back safely and squarely back down to earth, the other Lipizzaners, thus encouraged, reared upwards in unison.

How did they train their horses to do such things? I wondered. Our old ponies at home on the farm would have been hard-pressed to do more than pulling carts or eating apples. I thought, at the parade, that nothing could out-do the noble stallions. These horses seemed miraculous.

But then came the elephants.

Neither John nor I had ever seen one in real life before, and nothing could have prepared us for what it was like to see them stand before us. There were two of them, both ponderous, thunderous beasts, although their differences were apparent from the outset. The first one that came marching through had tusks as long as a porch pedestal, and ears like fans, and when it tilted back its head, its trunk curled against its face in a backwards S shape. It was costumed in the manner of some ancient royalty, it seemed, with a sequined crown spouting a colorful matching feather atop her head, and a saddle of satin and silk. While above it looked all glitter and gold, from the knees down it was shackled with four restraints, one on each leg, all chained together with solid metal links that dragged on the ground as it walked. A lady acrobat, dressed to match in all but the chains, sat astride its neck and shoulders, while a man below guided its step with a long solid bull hook. "Come into line," he said. "Come into line, come into line, come into line!" He punctuated his commands by striking the elephant on the back of its leg, and the elephant twitched its ears in annoyance.

"That one isn't happy," John said. "I think it's also in a biting mood."

"Do elephants bite?" I asked.

John shrugged. "Wouldn't want to find out," he said.

Behind this lumbering African example was its more petite Asian cousin, although it was by no means small except in comparison to the other elephant. It was still twice as tall as a man, and wider than a Peerless Motor Car. This one had no tusks and smaller ears, and a generally more humble look, but extended its trunk towards members of the crowd with a gentle curiosity that I'd never seen in an animal so wild and strange. Another man with another bull hook kept it from wandering too close to either side of the avenue, but I swear – I promise – this is true – as it paced past me, it stretched its trunk just enough to graze the fingertip of my own extended hand. For one electrifying moment, we made contact.

And then the man swatted the elephant with the bull hook. "Get back, come into line!" he commanded the elephant. He turned to me and glared. "No touching."

"Like a walking wall," John said with wonder, and he was not wrong. "As big as a house!"

"Definitely bigger than our apartment," I said, and we laughed together.

There was more to the parade than that, of course, but after the elephants both John and I were truly overwhelmed. I remember almost nothing that came after them, at least not in detail. More clowns, perhaps, and more wagons, and a moving calliope playing pipe-whistle versions of schoolyard tunes. The ringleader must have come through, speaking loudly, naming all the planned showtimes throughout the weekend. Then, once the parade had dwindled to a few supply carts pulled by plain ponies, John came crawling out from under the walkway cradling Mr. Gordon's terrier in his arms.

"It died," said John.

"You could have left it underneath there, you know," I told him. "You shouldn't touch dead things like that."

"It's not a stray, and it wasn't sick or anything," John said. "Mr. Gordon will want him back, even if he's dead, I think."

At John's insistence we found Mr. Gordon at his office, who took the dog in his arms and cried and cried and cried. It was a strange thing, to see a grown man cry like that, but without hesitation he hugged the dog close and, through his tears, thanked us for bringing the dog to him.

"Mr. Gordon's son is in the war," John said afterwards. "Do you think he's in the same part of the war as Father?"

"I don't think so," I said, but in fact, I knew it for sure, because Father hadn't gone to the war at all. That was Mother's lie. I knew where Father had really gone, but I kept it to myself.

But waiting for the circus to start, John and I didn't talk about Mr. Gordon and his dead dog. Instead, we went back and forth about clowns and acrobats and the various animal acts. The seats surrounding us began to fill in with people we recognized, if not by name than at least by role. The circus drew a large and varied crowd. There were families with children of all ages, and there were couples that came in and sat close and held hands. There were grocers and shopkeepers and clerks, and it was strange to see them out from behind their counters and desks. There were other folks I remembered from church, wearing coveralls or dresses made of calico. They looked so different when not wearing their Sunday best. Besides myself and John, were other sets of siblings, some who we knew from school, and others like the pastor's housekeeper, Mrs. Thornton, and her

sister, who had been kicked in the head by a horse as a teenager, and had never quite recovered well enough from it. The pastor graciously allowed both women to stay in his cottage. Behind us, Mrs. Thornton chattered to her sister, who, though in middle-age, bounced up and down on the bench with the excitement of a small girl. There was Trent McElroy, a boy we knew from school, and his granddad sitting at the end of our row.

My heart leapt into my mouth for a moment when I thought I saw Father, with an infant child slung over his shoulder, searching for a seat on the other side of the big top tent. I thought it might be him, with the family he abandoned us for, the woman and child who took him from us. I found out the truth in Mother's mail, the correspondence she kept up with the bank about the account she used to share with Father. They said there was a new missus who used the account, and the name was not Mother's, but the new woman's. I hated the woman for a while because of it, and it was easy to hate someone so anonymously. I hated her for making us move out of our home into the dingy apartment in town, for taking John away from all the out-of-doors activities he enjoyed, for taking me away from all the pigs and chickens I used to be responsible for. But after a while our life in town seemed better than our life in the country in many ways, and the hatred faded.

And anyway, the man across the ring wasn't Father, just a man with similar color and build. Upon second glance I was able to relax. When each seat was packed full, people lined up in the aisles and against the back wall. It seemed like nearly the whole town had turned out for the circus' opening performance, except Mother.

Mother had not gone outside at all, as far as I knew, since the day we moved into town. She hovered around the apartment like a moth with nowhere to land. She had

always been pale, but since our father left, and we had to move out of the country, Mother had taken on a ghostly appearance. The skin on her palms and knuckles was chapped and torn to bleeding most of the time from taking in laundry and washing it with lye, and lately she'd get bruised easily, on her arms and her legs and the sides of her neck. She'd gotten so thin, her clothes hung from her form the way they did from the laundry line, and her hair, once lush and lustrous, was limp and dry. There were always rings around her eyes, the whites of which had gone yellow. She looked like a victim in a vampire novel.

Mother had given me the tickets just that morning; they came as a total surprise. We didn't even have money for bacon or eggs to go with our coffee and toast in the morning, so I hadn't counted on being able to go at all, even though it was my birthday. I had resolved myself for weeks to give up the possibility of cake or presents, because for weeks Mother had been telling us she was too tired for backing, and it was too hot besides. I was convinced I'd be happy with well-wishes and a song perhaps, but I was getting too old for birthdays anyway. I was going to be thirteen now, after all, only a few years off from finishing school. If I had been born a boy, I'd be headed to the Great War soon, like Mr. Gordon's son.

I felt embarrassed at how occupied my thoughts still were with silly things, and tried forcing myself to be more practical. Most of my friends and classmates, even those younger than me, were looking forward to adulthood. They wore stockings more than socks and stopped plaiting their hair. They eyed the makeup that the chemist sold, while I still coveted what was on the candy counter at the hardware store. My friends' minds

were filled with thoughts of romance, where as mine were distracted, thinking of animals. I may as well have been thinking of teddy bears or unicorns.

But when Mother handed me those tickets, she grinned more widely than I'd seen her do in weeks. She slurred "Happy birthday, darling," and I wasn't even mad she was drunk so early. I squealed with excitement.

And it was as much a gift for me as it was for John, of course. He had peeled one of the pasted-up circus posters that had been hung up in town, and though its edges were shredded from his picking, and the poster had been creased terribly when he brought it home, John tried to affix it to the wall in the bedroom. It had been all he could talk about for weeks, and he took on various odd jobs and errands, trying to save up the scratch in order to go. He must have been the one conspiring with Mother to get them, but I never found out for sure.

And the show, at first, turned out to be worth every penny. As the circus tent filled up with spectators, the ringleader emerged from behind a curtain and urged us all to lower our voices and pay attention.

"It's starting!" John said, and he smiled, and we took each other's hands and squeezed together like conspirators. We all dropped our voices to low buzzy whispers until, somewhere beyond the canvas curtains, a drum started to keep time, and the crowd erupted in anticipatory applause.

Despite the thunderous sound of our clapping, the calliope began to play, and the curtain pulled back to allow in the Lipizanner horses, prancing into the ring as lightly as if they had wings. If someone had told me they were dancing ballet, I would have believed it, so dainty and delicate their movements. Their mounted riders smiled and

waved at the crowd, but, I only had eyes for the animals themselves. How did they move so quickly, and so uniformly? They were like one organism, synchronized perfectly together, and in time with the music. The colorfully-dyed feathers on their headdresses bounced attractively back and forth as they turned and twirled and reared back and kicked forward and trotted in circles in tune with the calliope's metallic galloping notes.

The transition to the next act was so fluid as to be unnoticeable. The Lipizzaners gracefully dispersed and disappeared back behind the curtain from whence they had entered, and a number of clowns came strolling in from all sides of the tent. They were dressed in unruly wigs and oversized shoes, and clad in garish plaids and stripes and polka dots, with ruffled sleeves and collars. Some of them were recognizable from before – the ones that were very short, or very tall, or very wide, or very skinny. They tumbled over one another, hurrying from one silly errand to the next. One made up a pie, another snatched it and threw it his face. One ripped off the pants of another, leaving the bare exposed flesh of his legs in stark juxtaposition with the white paint on his face. One spilled paint, and another was knocked onto his ass right into the puddle. Two of the clowns pulled a boy from the audience and gave him a bouquet of flowers that squirted water into his face. Then they kissed a fat woman near us in the front row and left smears of red greasepaint on her cheeks, giving her a rosy blush. The woman recoiled, embarrassed.

It reminded me of Mother. I thought of her leaning too close to kiss me on the cheek until just recently, when I told her I was getting too old for this, and how she would leave slobbery imprints that smelled too much like alcohol. The clown scene, as merry as it was, sent an uncomfortable jolt up through my spine. The hair on the back of my neck

went up. With my free hand, I clutched the fabric of my dress at the knee and bit my tongue to keep my whole body from shivering.

John took no notice of the change that had come over me, or if he had, he said nothing. He was engrossed by the new act that had come to the center ring. Against the backdrop of a canvas tent, two figures grappled one another, grunting and growling all the while. They wore similar jumpsuits, striped in red and white like a peppermint stick and fitted tightly against their torsos and all the way down to their knees. Their muscly arms were bare from the shoulders down to their hands, showcasing tattoos all the way down to the wrist. Both of them had short-cropped hair, and aside from one mustache, the two wrestlers appeared nearly identical.

As the struggle continued, we realized that these were not two strongmen contending with one another, but rather one strongman and one strongwoman. Neither one could pin the other to the ground; it was an equal match. The two demonstrated their athleticism in an astounding number of ways as they grappled with one another, tossing and flipping and swinging each other around like a whirligig. The clowns joined in on the fun by jeering or cheering or applauding or booing. Some of the clowns had squeezed their way into the bleachers around the ring, encouraging the crowd to pick sides. John and I were at the edge of our seat, in anticipation. We had no idea who would win.

Eventually, it was the woman who pinned the man to the ground, holding him in place until he surrendered. When she allowed him to stand, he offered her his hand to shake, the woman surprised him instead by going in for a kiss on the cheek. The crowd, even those that had been cheering for the man to win, erupted in applause. The woman clasped her hands together and raised them above her head in victory, while the man

covered his lips with his hand and batted his eyes coquettishly. The clowns swiftly assembled a mock-marriage ceremony for them, complete with a dapperly-dressed trained dog to act as pastor.

I laughed so hard my sides began to hurt. I looked at John, who howled so much that he had doubled over with tears in his eyes.

From then on, the strongman and the strongwoman acted as a team. They lifted the clowns up in chairs, one or even two at a time, or balanced them across their shoulders like deadweights. Eventually, much the same way the Lipizanners had disappeared without our recognizing that a transition was occurring, the clowns vanished and were replaced by the acrobats. The strongpeople bent their knees and clasped their hands together to let the extravagantly-dressed gymnasts step onto them, only to be propelled up into the air when they stood upright. They did this, and similar stunts, again and again and again, much to the delight of the crowd. John and I were in awe as they climbed up the poles that supported the tent, where a tightrope had been suspended twenty feet off the ground. The acrobats crossed one, two, three at a time, and never once lost their balance. Their costumes glittered when they caught the light filtering in from the tent top at just the right angle.

It was the most fun I'd had in my whole life, I think. The circus was beautiful, and thrilling, very funny, and a little scary. What joy I felt! What laughter burst forth from both me and John! What an enthusiastic crowd, so ready and willing to cheer and applaud! I never wanted that afternoon to end. If they hadn't taken my ticket I would have tried to sneak in with it again, even though I had never been the kind of kid to try something like that. I looked towards John, whose eyes sparkled brightly as he traced the

movements of the acrobats as they now took to the trapeze and flung one another back and forth so high up in the air. I understood now why so many of my peers often said they'd run away to join the circus sometimes, and I felt my pleasure spiked with sadness – the knowing realization that this feeling was short-lived. I could not stay at the circus. I had neither the strength nor the skills to belong in such a place. The most I could hope for was the stretch the length of the afternoon here somehow, and then, when it did have to end, wait an interminable year for the circus to circle back to Soldier's Grove again.

As one acrobat flipped across the ring, so high above us all, the sequins on her suit seemed to explode in a burst of bright light, each emitting a small beam on its own. We were completely mesmerized by the scene.

We didn't know, then, that that wasn't supposed to happen.

The canvas on the far side of the tent had been torn down, letting the daylight in, but few of us had noticed, because the effect of it was so beautiful. Through the hole in the tent we could hear the African elephant trumpeting before it came forth, backlit in the glorious sunshine, looking like it must have that day in Genesis when God created all creatures of the land and the sea.

Before the elephant, on the ground, was a man — her trainer, I recognized from earlier, the one who had threatened her during the parade — and she was rolling him along before her, kicking him with her feet. What a strange and spectacular entrance, we thought — me, John, and the whole congregation beneath the canvas. But the acrobats came to a halt immediately, and once they'd all made it safely out of the air, they clung to their poles and each other with worry. They'd been interrupted. This had not been rehearsed.

The rest of us didn't notice until the elephant had kicked her trainer towards the center of the ring and came to a stop. The man did not move. Even his chest did not rise and fall, as one might naturally expect from a living, breathing man. We didn't know yet. We didn't understand. We didn't realize. Lifting one large, flat foot, the elephant pressed her whole weight down into the man's torso. Snap, snap, snap! It was unbearable.

The effect was universal and immediate: it was madness.

John and I reached out to one another in instinctual fear. He held the fabric of my blouse, and I gripped his forearm in my hand. All around us people had sprung into action, but of all different kinds. Some ran willy-nilly in panic. Many people screamed or shouted, although I could not work out what they may have been saying. Others drew weapons and took aim. I felt frozen in place. Time slowed as the elephant withdrew from its trainer. People had begun to open fire, and it swung its trunk violently, swatting at the bullets as though they were nothing but insects. Agitated, the elephant stalked towards me and John, but my absolute terror did not compel me to move. It locked my knees in place. It kept my feet firmly planted on the ground. The beast bore down on us, and I was frightened, and John must have been frightened too, but, oh God, Oh Jesus, oh Christ in Heaven —

With a solid thwack, the elephant trunk came down between us, cleaving us apart from one another. The animal then turned its head towards my brother, pinching him against the bleachers with the width of its tusk, holding him down effortlessly even as he kicked and wailed against it with his fists. It seemed like eternity, it seemed like no time at all, when the elephant released John and backed away, turning its attention to bigger troublemakers, the ones with weapons.

John could not get up from that. Instead he slid down onto the ground, and I knelt beside him. I clutched his hands, despite the pain in my own, but could do no more for him. I watched the life seep out of him slowly, in ebbs and waves and pained gasps for breath. He twisted his lips as though trying to speak, but there was no sound in it, none at all.

Meanwhile, the sound of gunfire surrounded us, and the African elephant trumpeted wildly in response. The bullets apparently did nothing but chip its hide, and it continued to prowl around the ring, knocking several people over as easily as though they were bowling pins.

I felt a pair of hands around my waist lift me from the ground, pulling me away from my brother. I struggled, but was only pulled in tighter. I twisted and turned. I bit the hand that held me close, so hard I broke the skin with my teeth, but the hand did not waver. Through the tears in my eyes I saw the strongwoman lift my brother from the ground, and his head dangled at a strange angle from the crook of her arm. He was already dead.

In that moment it was like my mind split in two. In one part of my brain, the more rational, mature part, I knew that John was dead, that he was gone. I had watched him pass away. This fact was indisputable. But the part of me that was still childish and stupid, the part that still dwelt on imaginary things, begged and pleaded and demanded that John be brought back, that he be made whole again, so I could be forgiven for allowing this happen.

The strongman had brought me out of the tent and set me on the ground, as lightly as if I were a doll. I refused to sit still, however, and flung my fists ineffectually on his

chest and face and shoulders with as much intensity as I could muster, pulling punches with my right hand, where the elephant had struck me and separated me from my brother. "Are you hurt?" he asked. "What's wrong with your hand? Can I see it?"

Insolent, I held my injured arm closer to my chest. "Fix John first," I said, knowing it was wrong, knowing that it couldn't be done. Even so, I insisted. "Fix my brother." There was an awful feeling swelling up in my chest, rising up my throat like bile, and if John were here, maybe if I could see him, if John was all right, I wouldn't have to feel this way —

"Did you see it?" I overheard a voice in the distance ask. "That sure was something else. A hell of a thing!" Whoever was speaking sounded almost jubilant.

"A hell of a thing, yeah," another replied. "Less blood that I would have thought, but it finally fell over."

"Do people eat elephant?" the first voice asked. "It could probably feed the whole town. I wonder if that's what it's like to be on safari."

That terrible feeling crawled its way up my throat, and out.

I vomited everywhere.

As dusk began to fall around us, the police arrived and counted the dead. Without considering the elephant, eleven lives were lost that day. There were the elephant trainer and John, who had been killed by the rampaging animal. The pastor's housekeeper Mrs. Thornton and her sister, who'd been sitting behind us, died from gunshot wounds, although it wasn't clear whether they were in the line of fire or hit by ricochets off the elephant's hide. Six people, mostly children, were crushed or trampled when the terrified audience pressed together to squeeze through the tent's main exit. Trent McElroy's

granddad keeled over dead without getting up from his seat. Some say he died of fright, but it was more likely a sudden failure of the heart.

Dozens of people had been injured, including myself. My wrist had been badly sprained, and somehow a sling appeared to support my arm. I don't remember where it came from, whether it was a doctor or a policeman or some other Good Samaritan trying to help in the confusing aftermath. All over town, one could observe the limps and gimpy handshakes, the sore backs and twisted limbs. These marks of suffering reassured us that yes, it had really happened, and we felt right to be angry still. Beneath the injuries, there was infection festering underneath, in our collective psyche, in our collective soul. Many were injured, but many more than that had been hurt more deeply. The town of Soldier's Grove would never be the same place again.

On that night, after the circus, I slept only fitfully in the bedroom I had, until then, shared with my brother. A neighbor had given Mother a pint of something strong-smelling and said it would help with the pain, and it made me gag to choke it down. I don't know if it helped or not. I tried to take the sling off to sleep more comfortably, but that only allowed me to turn over onto my hurt wrist, and I'd wake up with a burning pain shooting up my arm. I put the sling back on, and while I managed to get twisted and stuck in it, it helped prevent that searing pain (I wore my sling for weeks following the event, long after the sprain had healed, until its fabric became saturated with dust and lint and grime, and my mother cut it off and threw it off while I was sleeping).

It seemed the next morning the whole town had been as sleepless as I was. I rose out of bed at my usual time, and looked over to the spot where my brother normally lay, and for several confused moments, I wondered where he was. The realization stuck in my

gut like a bad meal. I threw off my covers and went to make coffee on the stove. Before the water was boiling, I saw a note from my mother, left on the counter for me to find.

Gone to make plans for John. Won't be home til later.

I drank all the coffee on my own. It gave me a sour stomach, but everything felt sour to me anyway. I didn't know what to do with myself, then. The whole world seemed topsy-turvy to me. It had taken me a long while to get used how we'd been living, and now everything had changed again. All the anger I'd felt towards myself, I now directed towards Mother. For all that time she'd stayed here, she left now, when I needed her to tell me what to do with myself. In months she hadn't left; she languished in bed most mornings, hungover, and relied on me, and John, or neighbors to bring in the laundry to wash or groceries. I didn't want John's death to be my fault, so I decided it could be hers. She was the one who gave us the tickets. She should have gone with us. There would have been some way she would have stopped it.

My angry thoughts were satisfying in some respects, but they solved nothing. I was angry until I became sad again, and then was sad until I got tired, but there was too many problems coursing through me now to let me go back to sleep. After I finished the coffee, I moved mechanically through the apartment, seeking something to do that occupy my hands and excise some of the nervous energy that I otherwise wasn't sure how to use.

So I set myself to cleaning. I never liked cleaning itself, because in our home it never seemed to last; something would be worn or dusty or smudged almost as soon as it had been wiped down. But there was nothing quite like chores to help empty one's head

of troublesome thoughts, and since moving to the apartment, the number of chores had been reduced significantly.

I started in the kitchen, working first on the cast iron pan, often used to make breakfast, when there was breakfast to be had. It had been collecting dust on the counter. I found it impossible to lift with one hand, so I took a clean rag and wiped out most of the dust and set the pan back on the stove.

There was little ash accumulated in the center of the stove, but it would be good to shovel it out anyway. Besides, this chore needed to come early in the cleaning process; better to do it before sweeping the floor, and getting ash everywhere once again. Again, I struggled, clutching my injured arm close and angling awkwardly so that I could shovel sufficiently with my opposite hand, scooping and spilling as I continued shoveling the ash into the ash bucket. The scrape-scrape-scraping of the tin shovel against the inside of the stove set the hair of my arm on end, a sensation that I normally despised, but I didn't mind it at this moment. It allowed me to focus on nothing else but that sound, that awful vibrating of one kind of metal against another. When I got all the ash I could reach, I wrung the rag out into the bucket to soak the ash with a little bit of water, and then I took the ash bucket outside. Like most people in the neighborhood, I simply dumped it in the nearest alleyway, where it would wait until rains came and washed it away.

It was clear at this time that there was something amiss in the town, but it was still early, and I wasn't sure yet what was going on. I stuck to my agenda; my next goal was to wash up all the dishes. There weren't much aside from those used for lunch yesterday, since no one had eaten since then. I rinsed my rag in water and wiped out the glasses that

had stacked up in the sink. I dumped the coffee grounds from the percolator into the sink and washed them down the drain.

I swept, and struggled with the dustpan. When it was full, I tossed the accumulated dust and lint from the pan out of the nearest window.

I plugged the drain and filled the sink with water, adding a little vinegar, in order to wet a new rag and wipe down all the surfaces in the kitchen I could comfortably reach. It was difficult to wring the rag one-handed, but I found that squeezing out the water against the side of the sink was effective enough to keep from dripping everywhere.

I had taken up these tasks in order to keep herself from dwelling on terrible thoughts, but when my mind went blank as I worked, I couldn't always stop it from wandering.

When I was truly lost in distraction, I thought of the circus. I thought of specific moments during the parade, or sitting next to John on the bench before the show started. I got caught up in the smells, the sounds, the dust kicked up by the bandwagon or the prancing Lippizaners that caught in the corners of her eyes and mouth. And then, clear as a bell, I could almost hear John's voice beside me, remarking on the beauty and the wonder of it all, and I would have to remember he was gone. The loss would catch in my throat like a small bone, and I'd choke and stagger and slump against a cabinet until I could breathe normally again.

After an hour of in-depth scrubbing and satisfied with my work in the kitchen, I turned my attention next to sweeping the carpet and washing the floors. I knew I wouldn't be able to get the cleaning bucket, larger than the ash-bucket, in and out of the sink

comfortably once it was full of water, so I took it to the lavatory to fill it up in the bathtub.

Once filled, I brought it back into the apartment, and went back to work washing the floors on my hands and knees. I carried the bucket with me from one corner to the next, as dots of sweat beaded up on the back of my neck and in the small of my back. Whenever I moved, the dots were soaked up into the fabric of my clothes.

There was a crack in the floorboard in one part of the kitchen, near the stove, a splinter in the hardwood that I had caused by dropping the lid of the Dutch oven onto the floor. It landed on its rim and rolled away, chipping the top of the floorboard, and splitting off a piece as wide as a finger. It had occurred only days after they'd moved in, when they were all reeling from the change, Mother especially. When she heard the thud and came in and saw the splinter in the floor, she was livid.

I had already been in trouble that day for something stupid she couldn't remember, oversleeping or under-eating or something else I felt couldn't be helped, so when Mother prepared to let me have it with the nearest belt, John stepped in and took the blame.

"It was an accident," he said. "I was trying to help but it was too heavy." He even screwed up his face and feigned a few convincing tears to really sell the sense of guilt.

Mother had a softer spot in her heart for John (and I didn't blame her for it, so did I) and decided that trying to help shouldn't be punished, but clumsiness should be avoided in the future. She warned him that any further accidents would be followed by a lashing.

He'd been so convincing in his white lie that even I shifted the blame to him, every time I walked over that particular part of the kitchen. Many times I'd caught my foot on its edge, whether bare or socked or stockinged, and had given myself a splinter or torn a hole in my clothes. Now, in fact, while I was on her hands and knees washing the floor, I was wearing one such pair of ruined socks. They had resisted any attempt at mending, and were not considered replaceable quite yet, as the holes didn't show when I wore shoes.

After all that, I sat at the table and cried until my head began to ache. Outside, the unsettled noise grew louder and louder, until eventually I was overwhelmed with curiosity. I wiped the tears and grime off my face, put on new clothes, and went outside.

The apartment where we lived attracted a lot of noise. There was always something going on in the street, or at a neighbor's, and we could even hear the train traffic from the station most of the time. The milkman's bottles rattled against one another as he carried his deliveries through our neighborhood, or there'd be the stamping of hooves as ponies pulled carts here and there. Or there'd be slamming doors, the *whsp-whsp* sound of a clothing line being pulled across the courtyard, or children hurling a ball against a blank wall. At all times of the day I could hear some boys from school playing games, throwing cans at cats cornered in window-wells, or otherwise engaged in errands or petty crimes, their voices cracking against the walls up to the third-floor window where I could hear them.

But today, the noise was different. It wasn't just boys' voices rising up above the other normal din; it was low conversation, which hummed through the air. It was the shouts of grown men, hooting and hollering or yelling angrily. It was a shriek once in a

while, or a long, slow keening wail that gradually rose and fell again when the mourner lost their breath. If the whole town seemed to come out for the circus the night before, this seemed like all of Marion County turned up overnight, and was overflowing from peoples' homes and businesses into the streets.

Even after death, the elephant had proven to be a challenge to contend with. Her body weighed thousands of pounds and was impossible to move without hitching her up to a team of draft horses. Some of the local folk began digging a hole beside the body, preparing to shove the corpse right in. In the meantime, others had sneaked up with their pocket knives and hatchets, slicing off bits of skin and hair and nails for souvenirs. By the time the Marion County coroner arrived to examine the body — there were, after all, eleven people who required his attentions first — it was a spongy, bloody, gruesome mess.

Only enough remained of the dead elephant for the coroner to guess at the cause of its rampage. Death had been due to several bullets that had managed to enter the skull, through the ears or the eyes or the jaw, rending through the brain matter until the elephant finally keeled over. In the course of his brief investigation, the coroner also found a nasty, pus-filled infection in the animal's teeth. It must have caused terrible pain, he determined, and if it had gone undetected and untreated much longer, the elephant surely would have died anyway. It would have developed sepsis, and gone quickly, or else it would have stopped eating and slowly starved.

Knowing this, however, did nothing to soothe the injury Soldier's Grove. The offending beast was dead, but Soldier's Grove could not be satisfied by only one dead

elephant. The lives of eleven people weighed more than one animal, on the scales of justice.

Justice had to be served.

A firing squad would not be effective enough; the animal was killed only by chance, after many wasted bullets. For the crime of its companion, the town decided that the other elephant would have to hang.

I hadn't realized a collective decision had been taken, and that word had spread to friends and relatives of those in Soldier's Grove who had lost someone — a niece, a neighbor, a fellow member of their congregation, and so on. However tenuous the connection, every person who had gathered in the streets wanted to see some justice done, and they were going to do it by taking the elephant that remained, leading her down the main avenue past the train station and to the quarry. There, they had a derrick that could lift several tons of stone into train cars for transport. Surely it could lift the elephant high enough to crack its neck.

When I went down the stairs and stepped outside, I was immediately swept into the movement of the crowd. It was almost like being carried. On the way, I heard overheard various conversations. One boy boasted to another that he and his friends had already gotten some blows against the elephant. "Smashed a bottle right up against its hide," he said.

"Did it bleed?" asked the other boy.

"No," said the first. "It only bounced right off, actually, and then the nearest law man said he'd box our ears if we tried it again."

"Mary," said a voice I thought I recognized.

I turned. It was one of the boys in the neighborhood, one of the bullies I normally saw flinging cans at cats.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I…" The boy hesitated. In his hand he held three or four wrinkled, tattered cards. "These are John's," he said finally, thrusting the cards at me. "I took them from him earlier this week. I know he doesn't need them anymore, but I want you to have them."

I was too stunned to say anything, and dumbly I took the cards in my free hand.

"I didn't mean to keep them," said Tony. "I was always gonna give them back. Okay, bye."

I looked down at the cards for a moment. They were trading cards of some sort, but the ink had been lightened by the sun and smudged in some places. They were so worn they'd lost whatever integrity they had; along the wrinkles, they felt as soft as cloth. I slid them into my sling, safe beneath my injured arm. They reminded me of the bedraggled circus poster John had tried to put up in our room, beat-up little things that John cared so much for.

There were two women behind me whose conversation ebbed and flowed over my head as we moved along. They gossiped back and forth about the children who had died in the trampling, speculating on how a parent could let that happen to their child, as though mothers and fathers were supernaturally capable of keeping their children safe from all harm. My ears were burning. I wished John was there.

And then, even worse, the women's attention turned to me. One woman noticed the sling on my wrist and called out to me, trying to get my attention. "Girl," she asked, "were you there last night?"

I didn't want to answer, so I looked away and pretended not to hear.

"How did you hurt your arm? The animal did it to you, didn't it?"

I felt my cheeks grow hot and my throat felt sore.

"She was there, I'm sure of it," the woman concluded. "Saw her last night, sitting up front."

"Was her mother with her?"

"I don't think so. It's like you were saying, Mabel — ain't no one watching out for their own kids anymore. Irresponsible. Was your mother there, girl?"

I held my tongue and balled up the fist of my un-slung hand.

"Maybe she's deaf and dumb," said the other woman. "If the animal hit her in the head hard enough, she could have lost her wits."

I wanted to disappear, but the best I could do was sneak away deeper into the gathering crowd, away from those nosy women.

As I walked with the crowd, I tried closing my ears to more unwelcome conversations. My hands were now idle, and there was nothing preventing my thoughts from lingering on memories of John. The day of his birth, in particular, returned again and again to the forefront of my mind. It was one of my most vibrant early memories. My mother had spent the day wracked and shrieking, confined to the bedroom with some ladies from church who periodically raced from the room to the kitchen and back again with various bowls and rags and vessels of water. Father sat on the porch, smoking and reading week-old newspapers. I don't remember how I passed the time — playing, perhaps? — but it seemed to take so long for John to come into the world.

When John finally arrived and one of the ladies invited me into the bedroom to meet him, he was raw and pink and wild, screaming and squirming in my mother's arms. And yet, how delicate, how perfectly formed he was – each fingernail the size of the head of a pin. His ears were like hers, only in miniature. He had no teeth, but he could fold his face in expressive wrinkly ways. I liked him instantly.

When I watched Mother feed him from her breast, I sat nearby, listening to the sounds he made while rooting around Mother's chest, searching out a nipple to latch onto, tiny baby noises of discovery and dinner. I modeled her mother's posture, and held my dolls made of cornhusks up to my own chest one at a time, even though the dry vegetal material itched and scratched against my skin.

As a young child, John could be malleable, so I grew to like his company as a playmate. Together we could stack old pots and pans into a tower, and I could trust John not to knock it over immediately. I could share the rag dolls her mother made with John, and rely on him not to pull the knots apart. In games of make-believe, even before he could speak fluently, John could be counted on to play the role of dwarf, any number of animals, or the prince to my princess. He was easily coaxed into taking my face in his chubby, grubby fingers, and pressing his lips against my cheek with an exaggerated "Mwah!"

As a result of my reveries, I did not feel the distance between my home and the quarry at all. I simply looked up, and there it was.

The crowd at the quarry was composed of so many of the same people at the parade, and at the circus — mothers and fathers, children and grandparents, people on their own or in groups. And, strangely, the mood was not dissimilar either. The electric

sensation of merriment that stemmed from those who had not witnessed firsthand the trauma of the elephant stampede must have been infectious. Now even those I recognized from under the big top were rowdy, and laughing, and pouring beer down their throats and afterwards tossing the empties into the depth of the quarry below, even as workers hollered at them to stop.

"You gonna go down there and clean that up?" one man growled at another. They shouted back and forth in one another's faces, and within no time had escalated to a brawl. One gripped the other beneath the armpits and tried to pull him to the side. The drunk one relied mostly on unsuccessful head-butts and high kicks to attempt to knock over his opponent. Some men tried stepping in to pull the men apart, while others jeered and laughed and egged on the fighters. Watching this, I turned to my side ready to remark on how these two buffoons were nowhere near as elegant and entertaining yesterday's parade, but I bit her tongue and breathed in deep when I realized John wasn't there.

The brawl was broken up, and then men, only slightly bloodied, went their separate ways.

I tried to set myself apart from the crowd, afraid of being crushed or squeezed or hurt again. How stupid these people were being — if the elephant broke free of its restraints and ran straight through there, there'd be trampling all over again. I began to tremble, even though it was already very warm again that day. I crumpled the fabric of my dress in my fist and tried to keep my knees from shaking.

At least I could see what was happening. Even at a distance, the shape of the elephant was clear and distinct, swaying from side to side in the hot afternoon sun. It flapped its ears, and whipped its tail back and forth, and chewed the end of its trunk as

though nervous. Without its decorated saddle and sequined head adornment, she looked naked and plain and vulnerable. All four of its ankles were bound together with chains, and another chain was wrapped around its neck. That chain fell down from the height of the quarry's derrick, a rickety-looking structure that was, nonetheless, several stories tall.

And then, to the cheers of the crowd, the chain began to move. It snaked its way back up, up, up the derrick. The chain waved as it went, clanging and scraping, and the portion wrapped around the elephant's neck began to tighten.

"There she goes!" someone shouted, but I could not tell what they meant at first. The elephant didn't move. The crowd cheered again; it was caught up in madness and anger and revenge. The chain tightened, and was now completely taut. The elephant, only now realizing the danger, began to struggle. It did not trumpet, nor did it thrash its trunk or stomp its feet, but it rocked itself back and forth on its legs. The chain squealed. As it was pulled upwards from the neck, the elephant's front feet lifted off the ground, first an inch, and then several more. The elephant, perhaps thinking this was a strange new kind of training, reared up on its back legs like it had at the circus, and crouched, carefully balanced. It even pressed its trunk against its face in the familiar S-shape that people liked to see. It tried every trick it had been tortured into learning, and its lips curled back in an imitation of a human smile — it was nothing but complacent.

The chain went slack again, but only a moment later and it was tight once more. The elephant had bought nothing except brief relief.

The crowd roared and hollered as the chain got tighter, tighter, tighter. The elephant tried to stand back on its front legs, but they wouldn't reach the ground. The

chain squealed again, and — snap! All it took was one weak link, and the chain broke apart. The elephant slammed forward onto the ground, and it made a terrible sound.

The crowd reaction was mixed. Those closest to the derrick instinctively moved back, but the swell of movement was countered by those in the back rushing closer, unable to tell what had happened. The elephant groaned and rolled on the ground; its front legs had been broken, and it was helpless. Someone let the chain come down the derrick again, where several men took it by its broken end and looped it around the elephant's neck once again. They were going to try again.

This time the elephant did not respond at all except with terrible moaning and crying that was all but drowned out by the calls and shouts of the crowd, who, realizing they had nothing to fear from the defenseless beast, began throwing their empty bottles and other trash at it.

I tried to cover my eyes, but at the same time, it was impossible not to watch. This time, the chain held, and while the derrick struggled to lift that five-ton animal from the ground, it remained steadfast. The elephant did not die from a broken neck, but rather strangled, twisting and swaying for an uncomfortable length of time until the nearest men were satisfied that it was dead.

The crowd lingered for a while, but there was nothing else to do but kick the dust and head home. Watching the elephant hang had been more thrilling that even the circus, but the instant it was over, we felt rotten from the inside out. John wasn't coming back after this. Neither was anybody else. We had compounded tragedy with more tragedy, and even though some people left the quarry still seized by a spirit of revelry, it would not last. A photographer who had his studio in town had come to take some shots of the

elephant's lifeless body swaying perilously from the derrick, but by the time he'd gotten the photos printed and reproductions made, no one wanted to remember the elephant's hanging anymore.

I remember the elephant's hanging vividly, without any need for historical record to aid me. What I've forgotten since then is John. No matter how hard I try, I cannot recall the look of his face when it was clean, the smell of his shirts, the weight of his hand on my shoulder when we played or ate together. I cannot remember the creaks in the stairs under the weight of his footfalls, although there were times long afterward when I'd wake up in the dead of night, thinking that I'd heard them. In the dark, I'd look across to where John used to sleep, and tried willing the shapes and shadows into the silhouette of his form until my eyes adjusted to the darkness and it was clear there was no one there. But after a few weeks, a few months of this, life without John became normal, and he fell away from my memory in bits and pieces.

It's strange the things that stand in sharp relief. I remember passing Mr. Gordon on the sidewalk on my way home, who was lingering by his office on a Saturday.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said as I went by. He looked at me, and pinched his forehead, and I was grateful that he said nothing in return.

Aeromancy

The sky was fresh and blue that day; the wind was slow and cool and pleasant. The clouds looked clean and cottony, and tall, too, spread far apart from one another, like smokestacks of white, each to their own – an unlimited ceiling. Sybil guessed that they ascended a mile or more above the ground. There were two or three turkey vultures feasting on a carcass towards the end of the runway, but there were no birds in the sky. No one but the birds could read the sky like Sybil did. Most people just saw good weather, all the right conditions for a fun day of gliding, but the signs that Sybil could read pointed to imminent disaster. How would one compose an appropriate NOTAM? "Description: Effective immediately, hazards presaged and portended until further notice. CTN ADZ."

Sybil thought it a real shame that the FAA had never specified an appropriate category for premonitions.

The sharp scent of AV gas brought Sybil back to the present moment. Bob had parked the tow plane nearby, and since it had been a few hours since he'd gone up last, he was checking the fuel for contaminants. The heavy, humid air of a late August afternoon carried the odor of discarded fuel to the golf cart where Sybil leaned back in her seat with the club logbooks and a bag of orange slices in her lap, and half-empty pallet of water bottles by her feet that had long since gone warm.

In one hand, Sybil held a paperback novel, marking the place where she'd left off with her thumb, but she knew she wouldn't be finishing it any time soon. She could tell how it would end, anyway. Most stories were predictable. The detective always caught the killer. The sheriff always hanged the villain. The girl always got her man.

"Is it a good one?" asked the woman sitting next to her in the cart – Minnie, he name was. She had hands that smelled like sunscreen, a thick pasty variety that she applied liberally to her son, Aidan, who followed Bob on his preflight check like a shadow.

"It's all right," said Sybil. "It's too hot to concentrate on the words, is all."

Aidan was a tall boy, having recently reached adolescence, but he retained a childlike disposition, and an innate inability to understand when he was in the way. He watched Bob with fascination, cataloguing Bob's every action out loud. "What are you doing that for?" he'd ask, and Bob wouldn't reply. "Why are you wasting gas? What are you looking for now? Why?"

Bob didn't reply. Sybil could tell that he was getting annoyed. A factor, Sybil thought, wondering if she'd report it to the NTSB when the time came. Stress.

"Autism," Minnie said. "Diagnosed just before we divorced. Sam's never really accepted it."

"That so," said Sybil, not even feigning surprise. And then: "Is he gonna be all right going up?"

"Oh, yeah, he'll be fine," said Minnie. "It's not so bad. He's in a regular class at school and everything."

"Oh," said Sybil. Shit, she thought. Well, at least she couldn't say she hadn't tried.

The boy's father, Sam, was one of those guys who had an ambitious, high risk kind of lifestyle – a long-hours kind of job, more money than sense, a tendency to take high risks to feel good about his choices. He'd started on ultralight aircraft and moved on

to gliders after getting bored of his Pegasus GT450, which he'd paid for in cash. He was qualified, but his experience was limited, although he'd never admit it.

Sybil noted that Sam's lack of appropriate experience could be a factor, too. That may be what she should tell the NTSB, she thought, depending on what happened, and how. The signs weren't real clear on that just yet.

Bob came down from the ladder, and the boy followed him around to the back of the plane. He ran his hands along the trailing edges, wiggled the rudder back and forth, lifted the elevator up and down and up and down. Bob's plane was an old Cessna 182 with a dated maroon and orange paint job. The skin of the plane was dented and scratched – not in a dangerous way, but not real nice to look at. Even with a good wash and wax the old thing wouldn't ever be a stunner, and Sybil suspected Bob was embarrassed by how much attention it garnered from Aidan. Bob adjusted and readjusted his ball cap. That was a sign. Bob kicked the tires with more force than usual. That was a sign. Bob wiped the back of his neck with the same rag he used to check the level of oil in the engine — that was a sign, too.

Sybil weighed Bob's agitation against the boy's father's inexperience in the cockpit of a glider. Could go either way, she figured. Because she already knew what would happen. She just didn't know how, yet.

The boy's father had told Sybil early in the day that he was planning to bring his son up in the glider with him, but Minnie didn't arrive with Aidan late in the afternoon, after all the other club members had gone home for the day. Even the members of the Civil Air Patrol, who enjoyed drilling in even the most oppressive weather conditions,

had called it quits not long after lunchtime, when the hazy hot air rose up from the ground and distorted the visual straightness of the lines on the pavement runways of the airport.

In spite of Sybil's signs to the contrary, it had been a good day for gliding. But Sybil was glad that it was her turn to act as club recorder, never getting a chance to go up. That way she could be sure the signs weren't meant for her. All through the day the club had two or three gliders in the air at once, and each time, Sybil felt the bile of anticipation rise up in her throat. A couple of club members were able to stay airborne for an hour or more at a time without ever leaving visual range, only coming back down due to dehydration. For as hot as it felt on the ground, the intensity of the sun in the cockpit could cook someone up real quick if they weren't careful.

But the day got long long before Aidan and his mother arrived. "They're coming," said the boy's father, in his periodic updates to Sybil and Bob. "They're on their way." Eventually all three gliders came back to the ground and didn't go back up again as members returned to the FBO, returned to their cars, returned home. At three it was just the three of them – Sybil, Bob, and the boy's father – waiting on the arrival of two more. They got two of the gliders back into the hangar. That ate up some time. They tidied the hangar. They put more gas in the golf cart. They made small talk. For Bob that meant complaining about "men dressed as women, using the women's bathroom." For Sam that meant considering out loud about trading in last year's BMW for this year's model.

It meant that Sybil knew for sure now who, even if she didn't know what.

It was easier, in a way, for Syble to handle her premonitions when she didn't care much for those they were meant for. She couldn't say she'd miss Sam as much as she'd

miss his club dues. And Bob was a jackass. The boy, Aidan, though, and his mother – Sybil tried to press her feelings back. There was nothing she could do anyway. Nothing she could do but watch.

When, still at the hangar, they finally saw the dark sedan pull into a parking space near the FBO, somehow it fell to Sybil to head over there in the golf cart to pick them up, while Bob and Sam went back out to where they'd parked the plane and the remaining glider. Walking could be dangerous for civilians unfamiliar with the layout of the runways and unsure of the traffic patterns. This was not a towered airport, and did not have a lot of incoming or outgoing planes outside of the gliding club, the CAP, and a few light-sport pilots trying to keep their time up, but Sybil didn't like to tempt fate any more than she had to. She was already well aware what it was capable of.

The boy's mother – "Hi, I'm Minnie" – she looked relieved when Sybil pulled up and hopped out of the golf card, introducing herself as a member of the club, here to take them directly to the right runway.

"It's overwhelming the first time you're here," Sybil said. "Unless you have some kind of guide." She left the novel on her seat and brought the logbooks and a liability release form with her. The boy's mother began filling the form before they left the car, so Sybil turned to the boy and asked him to sign the logbook.

"Aidan, right?" she asked. "Can you fill this out for me, right here? I'd put it in for you but I don't know if you spell your name with an E at the end, or an A. And then once you're in the glider, I can record the time you go up and the time you come back down."

The boy kept his hands in his pockets and didn't make eye contact. "Aidan," he said, "with an F."

Sybil had pressed the pen to paper to write the name herself, but the boy's answer was, for once, something she had not expected. "With an F?" she asked, narrowing her eyes. "Is the F at the start?"

"Do you get it?" said the boy. He smiled without making eye contact. "It's a joke."

"I can fill it out for him, if that's all right," said the boy's mother. "Aidan, let's get in the golf cart. Your father is waiting."

Sybil shrugged. It made no difference to her. As the boy climbed onto the middle of the seat, Sybil watched the woman's fluid writing fill the empty space on the page in wide, curvy lettering.

"So not Aidan with an F," Sybil said, hitting the gas. "Aidan with an A."

"It's a joke between me and him, sorry," said Aidan's mother, shouting a little over the ambient sounds of golf cart travel. "Is that all I need to fill out?"

"All that I care about," Sybil replied. For now, at least. Afterwards there would be insurance forms, inquiries, investigations. But to bring that up would be to get too far ahead of herself. "It's just a record for the club." She tossed the logbook on top of the stack of water bottles, coming loose from their plastic and cardboard packaging, and climbed back into the driver's seat. The woman followed suit, and sat on the end, so the boy was seated between them.

"So this is your job?" Minnie asked, speaking loudly.

"Oh hell no," Sybil replied. "This is volunteer work. Everyone in the club has to take a turn now and then."

"I'm so sorry we kept you here all day, in that case."

Sybil was sorry, too. This woman didn't deserve the disaster that was meant for them. If they'd come earlier, it still would have been meant for them, but at least then Sybil would have enjoyed a comfortable distance of reasonable doubt, entertaining the possibility that it could have been someone else – someone older, maybe, or at least someone more experienced, someone more ready to die than some poor kid.

"Que sera, sera," said Sybil, pursing her lips. "Whatever will be, will be." She hummed that old familiar tune, despite knowing she was off-key.

"It was hell getting him here today," the boy's mother went on. "Even small changes to his routine can make for big meltdowns." She looked down at the logbook, noting all the names listed in columns before her son. "All these people were here today?"

"We have nearly thirty members," Sybil said, pulling off the runway and onto the nearby grass where Bob had parked his plane earlier to wait on them. "When the weather's nice, we can have all our gliders going at once. Bob's been at it all day. Hi Bob," Sybil said, waving as they came to a stop.

Bob shook his head and huffed in acknowledgment. He spat on the pavement, a globular chaw-stained ball of spittle so large it splashed on contact.

"Bob's the pilot?" the boy's mother asked. "Poor Bob. I'm sorry if we've kept him, here, too."

"Bob's a jackass," said Sybil. "But he's got the tow-plane, so here he is."

Same came over to the golf cart and greeted his ex-wife first. “Hello, Minnie,” he said, his voice full of false warmth.

Minnie smiled coolly, then she turned to her son, and her voice went smooth as glass. “Aidan, it’s your father. Say hello.”

“Hi, Dad,” said Aidan, looking up from his lap for the first time since he sat down, but not meeting Sam in the eye.

“Hey, buddy, it’s good to see you again. It’s been a while – two, maybe three weeks? Sorry about that. But you’ve been busy too, haven’t you?”

Aidan didn’t answer. His mother prodded him. “Have you been busy, Aidan? What have we been up to these past couple of weeks?”

“I’ve gone to school,” said Aidan.

“And your friend, Lewis, he had a birthday party, didn’t he?”

Aidan rolled his eyes. “Lewis is not my friend,” he said. “He’s just from my school.”

“Want to come look at the plane?” Sam asked. “Bob’s got to do his preflight checklist still, so we’ve got some time.”

“Yeah, sure, okay!” said Aidan, who slid off the seat after his mother and then followed his dad around to the plane.

“Keep an eye on him, please,” said the boy’s mother to his father, and then to her son she said “Listen to your dad and don’t touch anything. Oh! Let’s get some sunscreen on, first.”

After lathering her boy up in the thick paste, the boy’s mother hesitated before returning to her seat on the golf cart. Sybil could tell she’d prefer to be somewhere by

herself, not forced into awkward conversation, but shade was hard to come by this far out from the hangar.

"This is totally safe to do, right?" Minnie asked.

Yes, but also no, Sybil wanted to say. It's been safe every time until now. It would have been safe had the signs been meant for someone else. But Sybil knew she could not interfere, not with a premonition. She'd tried before. It never worked. If she said anything, she'd only make this poor woman suffer until the signs caught up to her one way or another. "I've been here for… oh, I don't know, maybe fifteen years now," Sybil finally replied. "And I've never seen anyone get hurt doing this."

That much had been true. It wasn't the first time she'd read the signs, but it would be the first time the gliding club would be affected. Most of the time she could assume it was something meant for CAP – something like a missing person, a search and rescue, which were always more search than rescue. Once there was talk in the FBO for days about how Gerry never should have been flying in the first place, how had he even passed his medical that year? His plane had been spotted from the air, and he found by the lake. Dead of a heart attack at pattern altitude, his plane glided until tops of trees scraped at its belly and pulled it down. Or else it was Hank Macomb, who fell shoulder-first into the moving propellor of his Aeronca Chief, a hand-prop gone wrong. He bled to death before an ambulance arrived. Hell, even just the other day, some goon in a Cirrus struck a deer during landing when he should have gone around, totaling his plane and killing the deer on the spot. The corpse lay since then undisturbed towards end of the runway, broadcasting its location to scavengers through the smell.

"He'll be all right," Minnie said. "Everything's going to be fine."

Sybil said nothing for a long while, until she shifted the bag on her lap and offered it to Minnie. “Orange slice?” she said.

“Tell me everything will be fine,” said Minnie.

Sybil found that she could not lie to her, so instead she said, “It’s okay to worry.”

“That’s not very reassuring.”

Sybil knew that, of course, but was hoping it was vague enough to at least sound comforting. “A lot of people think worry is a waste of time,” Sybil said. “But it’s not. It helps you prepare for whatever comes your way.” Sybil peeled open the plastic bag. The scent of citrus emanated forth from its mouth. “It’s okay to worry about the worst while you still hope for the best.”

Minnie was quiet for a short while. “I will have an orange slice, please,” she decided.

“Water?” Sybil asked, kicking the bottles between their feet, as though Minnie could have somehow missed them.

“Thanks, but I’m too nervous. I’m sorry.” Her voice pitched with emotion as she spoke, caught up in the corners of her mouth. “I hate — this makes me sound so petty, I know — but I hate when Aidan spends time with his father.”

Sybil ran her fingers along the soft page edges of her novel. “You don’t get along.”

“Aidan, my Aidan,” said Minnie. “Aidan with an F.”

She had such long fingers, Sybil noticed, watching her peel away the skin left on the orange slice.

"That came from an argument we had, Aidan's father and I," Minnie said. "He didn't want to, you know, he didn't really acknowledge Aidan's differences, let's say. He didn't want to admit that Aidan has special needs, that he's not like other kids. He accused me of coddling him. We fought all the time about it. And one time, one time he called him 'fucking Aidan' and I was in such a mood – do you have kids?"

"I do," said Sybil. "They're grown."

"Did you curse in front of them?" Minnie asked, and then didn't wait for an answer. "I've always been careful not to curse in front of Aidan. He can hang onto vocabulary like, like his mind is a steel trap, and he can't always tell what's appropriate and what's not. Anyway, Sam calls him 'fucking Aidan' and I can't, I don't know. Like, forget what he called his son, his own son — Aidan was only maybe eight or nine at the time. I wasn't even thinking that right then. I just, like, automatically corrected the curse word. 'Effing Aidan,' I said to him. 'You mean effing Aidan.'"

"Hmm," said Sybil, who had nothing to say, really, but wanted to register that she was listening, because it seemed important right then for the boy's mother to be listened to.

"And then Aidan comes in. He'd been right in the next room, I think the whole time. He could hear everything. So right then, right then, right after I've said 'effing Aidan,' that's when he chooses to interrupt. 'Mom,' he says, 'there is no F in Aidan.' Because that's what he heard, you know?"

"I get it now," said Sybil. She forced a smile. "Aidan with an F."

"I feel so bad about it still sometimes. I didn't even think of him hearing us argue, how bad that would be. Just – we would get so caught up in making each other crazy, the two of us, that we'd forget we had a child to raise together."

"It can be like that sometimes," said Sybil. "Another orange slice?"

"No thank you," said Minnie. "How do the gliders stay up?"

"Beg pardon?"

They looked to the runway now, where Bob and Sam had positioned the glider appropriately, without Sybil's help – she was glad they hadn't even asked. She'd have felt complicit, somehow, even though there was no way she could cause or prevent what would happen. They'd attached the tow rope to the back of the plane, and were just getting started on fastening it to the glider.

The glider, unlike the plane, was new and shiny and beautiful and strange. This particular model was the newest in the club, and it bore the brand name HELIOS in big bold letters on the side. Aside from that, it was glistening and curvaceous and white. It had a cockpit just large enough for two adults to sit tandem inside, with a clear acrylic canopy that stretched like a bubble across the top. The wings looked dangerously thin. Its tail was similar – stretched out, delicate-looking, distorted. The glider looked like an insect out of proportion, like a dragonfly. It looked like a pupal, prepubescent plane. It looked like a pill. It looked like an egg. It looked like a coffin.

"So the plane tows the glider into the air," Minnie said. "I get that. But once it's, you know, not attached to the plane anymore, how does the glider stay up on its own? It doesn't have a motor, right? Is it like a kite?"

Sybil sucked on another orange slice, taking her time. “It’s called ‘thermalling,’” she said. “Maybe it is the same thing kites do, I don’t know. I don’t know much about kites. But gliding – gliding is about finding the right air.”

Minnie frowned. “Air is air,” she said.

“But hot air rises,” Sybil told her. “And will carry you up with it, if you catch it right. On a day like today, when the sun’s really warm, and you got the right geography, you’ll get these – these, say, like, these pockets of air that warm up faster than others, and those are the thermals. When you’re in the glider, you want to catch the thermals, they’re these big pillars of air, and they’ll take you as high as they’ll go. Once you find one, you can catch it and rise up. You can circle back to the same thermal over and over again as long as it lasts, or you can go from one to the next if they’re close enough. You don’t need fuel, or a motor, or anything like that. You just need the right conditions.” Sybil paused. “I know a guy who went from Florida to Louisiana along the Gulf of Mexico on a good weather day without needing to come down even once.”

“Oh God,” said the boy’s mother. “That sounds terrifying, actually.”

“Terrifying, yes,” said Sybil, “but in a good way.” Usually.

“I don’t see any thermals,” said Minnie.

“You do see them,” said Sybil. “You have to know what you’re looking for, is all. Know the signs, and look for them.”

The boy’s mother was losing interest. She looked satisfied to take it for granted that the signs were there, accepting of her ignorance, but Sybil continued anyway.

“Highway intersections, for example – thermals like those,” she said. “The pavement gets nice and hot, and the air above soaks up that heat. Hills can be good spots

for them, too. Forests aren't, because the trees will trap any warmth close to the ground. Or you can look at the clouds – see how there are some really tall ones?"

"Cumulus, I think," said Minnie.

"They're tall because they've got thermals beneath them, pushing them up."

Minnie leaned forward, hanging out of the shade of the golf cart, squinting upward at the sky.

"You can also watch the birds," Sybil suggested. "They ride thermals, too."

As soon as Sybil heard herself say it out loud, she understood what was bound to happen. She turned her attention to the runway. The deer carcass was still there, and turkey vultures. Without the constant disruption of human activity, they'd begun to gather. And that end of the runway faced west, towards where the sun sat sinking towards the horizon.

Birdstrike. That's what the NOTAM would say. Risk of birdstrike. CTN ADZ.

While the two women looked on, Sam and Aidan had climbed into the cockpit of the glider, with Aidan up front, and Sam planning to fly from behind.

"Clear prop!" Bob called out from the window of his plane, and the thing sputtered and stuttered to a boisterous start.

Now Sybil and Minnie watched as the tow rope stretched taut, and then the plane pulled up, up, up, up, and the glider followed along the runway until came up off the ground. Where the plane went, the glider followed, connected by the tow rope, stretched tighter than the strings of fate, heading outwards towards the sun and towards the too-many turkey vultures that lingered at the end of the runway. Bob probably couldn't see them for squinting, Sybil thought, he readjusted his ball cap all wrong. And if Bob

couldn't see them, then Sam definitely wouldn't be able to. Even if they saw them, there may not be time to act. Careless, Sybil thought, but there was nothing to do now. Que sera, sera, she hummed, biting the inside of her cheek. Whatever will be, will be.

She looked towards the boy's mother beside her, who watched her son fly forward in that small glider, rising higher and higher. She was smiling. She was proud. She was glad. For a few moments more, everything would be all right in her world.

Sybil reached for another orange slice. In a few moments more, she knew, that world would come falling apart, and Sybil preferred not to watch.

Fish Friend

The storefront is misleading. There's a brightly lit sign outside, brand new. In the windows there are posters of families enjoying their new pets, pictures of puppies, colorful words listing that weeks' special on guinea pigs. But with a closer look it's obvious that the posters are washed out from being in the sun too long, and inside the store it is dark and crowded and noisy and unwelcoming. There are topless bins near the door with all kinds of furry creatures for display – puppies and kittens with watery eyes, rabbits, ferrets. John knows better than to linger near them before Brooke starts to ask for them, so he grabs his six-year-old daughter's hand and pulls her to the back of the store where smaller animals are kept.

There are several large cages with parakeets and cockatiels and finches against one wall. They chirp and warble at one another. They climb up the wire of their cages with their claws and beaks. There's no room to fly. "What about a bird?" John asks.

Brooke tentatively lifts a finger to one of the cages. She just wants to touch one of the birds. She wants to know how soft the feathers on his belly are. But at the moment of contact, the bird reaches for her finger and snips her with his beak. She pulls away, not crying, but not happy either. "I don't like them."

"Fair enough," John says. He turns around, looking for the next available option. He scans right past the snakes and turtles and tarantulas, instinctively knowing his ex-wife would never allow such things in her house, and his attention settles on a display case of small rodents. "What about a gerbil? Or a hamster?"

Brooke is still nursing her wound from the bird. The skin wasn't even broken, but her eagerness had diminished entirely. She wasn't keen on getting a pet that could bite. "Um, maybe," she says. "The black and white ones are cute, I guess."

John looks around for some help. There's someone lingering at the end of the aisle who looks like an employee – he's wearing the right color polo and a nametag. He's doing something to look busy, scanning bar codes or something, so John interrupts him. "Excuse me, sir, how much do these hamsters cost?"

"Those ones?" the guy asks, pointing. "Ten bucks apiece. But you gotta make sure you have the right cage for them, and all sorts of other stuff. There's a list near the display. If you don't any of those things already, they're on the shelf underneath."

John steps back and looks down at the bottom shelf. There's a variety of small animal cages, and the cheapest option is forty bucks. He mentally adds in the cost of a water bottle, food, bedding, and he figures maybe it's not worth it to invest so much in an animal that'll probably die in a few weeks anyway. Six-year-olds, even a kid as good as Brooke, weren't great about responsibility, and John doubted his ex-wife would step in. "Maybe not a hamster, honey. What about a fish?" he suggests instead, when he sees her face fall. "Don't you want a fish friend? Fish are pretty. And they're easy to take care of. And since they're quiet, Mommy probably won't even mind it so much." He leads her to the back wall, which is practically made up of individual aquariums filled with fish of varied sizes, shapes, colors. "And they don't bite. They aren't going to hurt you."

Brooke presses her palm against the smudged glass of the tank nearest her. The tiny silver fishes inside dart away. "They're boring," she decides. "They don't do anything."

"That's not true," John says. By now he's already decided to get her a fish. They're the lowest upfront cost, the easiest to maintain, the most worry-free pet. And they're replaceable. Now he just has to convince his daughter that a fish is what she wants. "They're… they're very good listeners."

"Da-*ad*." Brooke's singsong voice indicates that she thinks he's being silly. But she smiles. "Can you teach them tricks?"

John has no idea. "You can try. Maybe you'll discover a hidden fish-teaching talent. You can travel the world as a famous fish-teacher, teaching fish tricks all across the globe!" He smiles. "I had a fish when I was your age," he lied. "I called him Oscar, Oscar the fish. He was a good friend to me."

Brooke laughs and turns back to the wall of separate aquariums. She looks at the fish again, more intently now, this time determined to like at least one of them enough to take home. "Can I pick whichever one I want?" she asks.

John scans the price tags marking the separate aquariums and cracks his knuckles. Prices vary from very low to very high. He hopes Brooke doesn't get enamored with something too expensive. "Just let me know which one you like and we'll ask the guy about it."

Brook steps back and scans the wall from top to bottom, side to side. And then she sees the one she wants. It's the size of a goldfish, except it's long and black with red markings. It twists and twirls and tumbles in the water. It's the only one of its kind in the store. She stands on her tiptoes to get a better look. "Can you do tricks?" she asks it, and it follows her face to the bottom of the aquarium. She presses her finger against the edge

of the glass. It follows her finger too. “This is it,” she says, pointing. “That’s the one that I want.”

But this fish is missing a label. John calls out to the employee he spoke to before. “Excuse me! What kind of fish is this?”

The employee looks up from his task, rolling his eyes. “There should be a placard right by it, bottom right.”

John double-checks before answering: “This one doesn’t have a placard.”

“Then I don’t know what it’s called.” When John rolls his eyes back, the guy continues. “Look, man, there are a lot of different kinds of fish here. Some of them only go by their scientific names. That’s a lot to remember when you’re only making minimum wage.”

John feels bad. “But you do take care of it, right?”

“Yeah,” the employee says. “Sometimes.”

“Well, what can you tell me about it?” John asks. “Is it an exotic fish? Does it require special care?”

“Nah. This one’s just, like, a fishbowl, maybe with some marbles at the bottom, and one of those castles or fake plants or something. Eats regular fish food, as far as I know. That’s what I feed it, anyway.”

Brooke traced her finger along the glass, with the fish following intently. If she sped up, or slowed down, the fish matched her speed. Where she stopped, it lingered.

“What do you think, sweetie?” John asks, mentally adding up the cost of the fishbowl and a few marbles. Half the price of the hamster. “Sounds like he’s probably a good kind of pet for you.”

Brooke pulls her finger away. The fish tries to follow but pulls up and flips over when it reaches the corner. “I like him,” she says.

“Okay, then,” John says. “Let’s get what we need for him and go home.”

That night when John brings Brooke back to her mother’s house, there’s a fight. There’s almost always a fight. John doesn’t dread arguments with his ex-wife the way he used to. In fact, he almost enjoys them. They wait for the girl to be safely ensconced in her bedroom with her new distraction before they lay into one another.

“A pet?” she asks, aghast. “You bought her a pet? Seriously, John? She’s six. It’s going to die in a few days and where will you be? You’re not going to be the one explaining it to her. You’re not going to be the one comforting her. You’re not going to be the one dealing with a mopey child every weekday when she has to get ready for school and do her homework and .”

“Turning seven soon,” John points out. “It’s an early birthday present.”

“Don’t start,” she warns. “Don’t even start.

“You coddle her, Michelle. She’s got to learn responsibility somewhere. You love taking care of her like she’s a little doll. She’s an accessory to you. Should have gotten a yappy little dog. They don’t need to brush their own hair or fold their own clothes. She doesn’t fold her own clothes, Michelle. She doesn’t know how. I show her every weekend and still every time…”

“That’s because she’s a child, John. And a fish is a living thing,” Michelle counters. “Who do you think is going to be responsible for it, really? Do you think it’s going to be her? Do you think she’s going to be interested in that stupid thing for more

than a day or two? Because when she does lose interest, and forget to feed it, or change its water, I'm not even going to try. It will go straight down the toilet, I promise you that."

"It's just a fish. It's not like a puppy or a rabbit or something," John says, cracking his knuckles. "They gave her a pamphlet about how to take care of it. I'll call every day this week to make sure she's fed it. After that it will be a routine. She'll get used to it."

"What if she gets attached to it and it dies anyway?" Michelle asks. "You don't even know what kind of fish it is. It might only have a lifespan of a week or two. It might not like the water we get it. The food it's eating might be slowly killing it."

"So what do you want me to do?" John asks. "She picked it out herself. She's already attached to it. I could take it back but it would break her heart and you would be the bad guy."

"Fine, John," Michelle hisses at him. "Fine. But I'm not happy about this."

Before he leaves he goes upstairs to his daughter's bedroom. She's set the fishbowl on her desk so she can sit right up close to it, pressing her nose against the glass. In the lamplight he can see smudges from where she's done it several times already.

"So, Brooke, how do you like your new friend so far?" He sits on her bed. It's too low for him to be comfortable for long, but it's okay. He doesn't plan to stay.

She doesn't look away from the bowl. She starts tracing her finger along the glass, and the fish follows. "He's okay," she says. She's so subdued that John wonders if she heard the fight downstairs.

"Have you named him yet?"

Brooke pulls away from the fishbowl turns to her father. “His name is Verrier,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Wow,” John replies. “Is that like one of those Pokemans?”

“It’s Poke*mon*, Dad,” Brooke says. “But it’s not a Pokemon name, or one I made up,” Brooke says. “He told me his name when I asked him.”

“Really?” John says, not sure if this development is pleasing to him (take that, Michelle, Brooke loves this goddamn fish) or if he should be worried. “He talks to you?”

“Yeah,” Brooke says, “because I talked to him first.” She goes quiet. She casts her eyes downward. She heard the fight. The fish twists and twirls and tumbles in the water, searching for Brooke’s fingertip.

John is sorry, but he doesn’t say so. He places a hand on her shoulder. “I told you fish were good listeners.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Da-*ad*.” She looks back at Verrier. “You’re such a pretty fish,” she tells him. “And you have your own castle to live in. I wish I had that.”

Before John’s supposed to pick Brooke up on Friday, Michelle calls him. This is alarming. She only willingly talks to him anymore about their daughter.

“John, the goddamn fish,” she says when he answers.

“Whatever happened to ‘hello?’” he mutters.

“She says it’s talking to her.”

“So what?” he says. “She’s got an active imagination. It’s cute.”

Michelle is hesitant. Michelle is never hesitant. Her voice is reduced to a whisper: “It’s not cute, it’s creepy and it’s weird.”

John doesn't say anything.

"I want the fish to go back."

"Oh, come on," John says. "That's a little extreme."

"John, it's unnerving," Michelle says. She pauses. He can hear Brooke in the background, asking about having a snack. "Not now, Mommy's on the phone." There's another pause in the conversation. "Brooke's got an active imagination all right. The fucking fish has been telling her all sorts of things. Things about fighting, and dying, and monsters. And she just rattles all this off, reports it back to me like it's normal. What kind of six-year-old…"

"She's almost seven," John interjects. "And kids get into all sorts of stuff. Maybe she's been reading a lot lately."

Michelle ignores him. "I've gotten notes from her teacher about it. Her friends' parents have called me. She's scaring her classmates. And it's only been a week. If it was a puppy or a kitten and she was this obsessed, I don't know, I guess I could understand it better, but it's a fish, John, just a fish, and it needs to go back."

"Are you sure it's, not, like, something she picked up from someone else at school? Or something she saw on TV? Maybe it's a Pokeman thing."

"She brought the fish with her to school yesterday for show-and-tell," Michelle says. "She told the class the fish could talk, and had powers, or something stupid like that. And I don't know exactly what happened, she says some of the kids were teasing her about it, and she got in a fight today at lunchtime. She sent two boys to the nurse, John. She bit them hard enough to draw blood. She says the fish did it, or told her do it, I don't know."

John thinks about the last time he saw Brooke, how she had overheard their argument, how sorry he felt at the time. He feels sorry again now. Not for Michelle, of course, but for his daughter. “Michelle,” John says, “have you considered that maybe Brooke needs some kind of help? Some counseling or something, I don’t know. We’ve kind of put her through the ringer in the past couple of years.”

Michelle goes quiet for a moment. “I know what’s best for our daughter, John. I’m not a part-time parent, like you.”

John bites his tongue. “That’s not what this conversation is about,” he says finally.

“You’re right,” Michelle says. “It’s about that goddamn fish.”

“Can Brooke hear you right now?” John asks.

“You have to take it back, John.”

“If it’s that big of a problem, why don’t you take it back?”

“I already tried. I called ahead and they told me they couldn’t because I’m not the one who made the purchase in the first place. It’s not on my credit card and you didn’t give me the receipt. They charge a restocking fee, too, for the fish and all used items. And besides, why should I have to be the bad guy? You’re the idiot who went behind my back to buy her a pet in the first place.”

“Fine, Michelle. Fine.” John accepts defeat. “When I pick her up on Friday I’ll take the fish, too.”

A week and several terse phone calls with his ex-wife later, John pulls up to the store again. The brightly colored brand new sign out front is dimmed. The washed-out

posters have been stripped from the front windows. There are very few cars in the parking lot, and a large truck blocks the entrance. The front door is propped open as wide as its hinges allow, and there are hoses being dragged into the building. John spots a man in a button-up shirt and khakis near the truck. His shoes and pants are wet up to his ankles.

"Can you wait in the car for me a second?" John says, craning his neck to meet the eyes of his daughter in the back seat. She's still buckled in, clutching her fishbowl in her lap. There are tear stains running down her cheeks; when John told her what they were going to do that day, she sobbed for a full half-hour before they left. She wouldn't even put on her shoes. She doesn't respond when John tries to talk to her, so he gets out of the car and approaches the man in the wet khakis.

"Sorry, sir, we're closed for business today," the man says as John walks up to him.

"I just need to make a return," John replies. "It's necessary."

"It'll have to wait," says the man in khakis. "Probably until Monday, at least. We'll honor your receipt even if it goes past the ninety day return limit, I promise. I'll let the guys know that you came today."

"What happened?"

"Pipes burst or something," the man said. "My employees called me when they were opening the store. By the time I got here it was a mess. It's like some kind of flood."

"Guess you should build an ark," John says, trying not to be discouraged, "for all the animals."

The man in khakis doesn't laugh. "Excuse me," he says instead. "I have a few more calls to make. The adjuster hasn't made it here yet. It's going to be a pain to sort out all the paperwork."

When John returns to the car he catches Brooke's reflection in the rearview mirror. She's staring at him with wide, wet eyes. The stains are gone from her cheeks. She looks like Michelle. She looks pissed.

"Well, guess the fish doesn't have to go back to the store today after all," he remarks. "Although maybe with all that water, he'd be happier in there than he is at our house."

"Verrier did it," Brooke says. Her words have a gravity that unnerves John. "He did it on purpose because he doesn't want to go back."

"Brooke, don't be ridiculous," he replies. "Nobody made this happen. Especially not a fish in a bowl."

"He doesn't want to go back," she insists. "I don't want him to go back either."

"It was coincidence," John says. "An accident."

"No," Brooke insists. "It was on purpose." She clutches the fishbowl so hard her knuckles go white. Inside the fish twists and twirls and tumbles in the water.

John doesn't say anything.

"I'm his only friend, you know," Brooke says. "And he's my fish friend. They didn't take care of him there, not like I take care of him. And he doesn't want to go back."

"Honey," John says, turning in his seat so that he's looking at his daughter's face instead of her reflection. "Verrier is just a fish. He can't make things like this happen. He

just swims in his bowl, and he eats, and he poops. That's it. That's all. You know your mother is tired of you talking like this, and I don't want to hear it anymore either." He turns back, buckles his seat belt, and starts the car. "It's one thing to play pretend," he says. "But you're taking it too far, Brooke. You had your chance to knock it off, but the way you're talking to me and your mom, and getting in trouble at school... it's too much. The fish is going back as soon as the store reopens, or I'll give him away to someone at work if I have to. Sometimes you have to learn lessons the hard way."

Brooke holds the fishbowl tighter. She's become a child again. "I don't want him to go," she whisper-whines.

"Brooke, stop it," John says. "It's obviously way too much responsibility for you."

"If he goes back, I'm going to go with him."

"Brooke, I swear to God…"

"Da-*ad*," Brooke says. She doesn't roll her eyes like usual. "I'm his only friend, you know, and he's my only friend too. If he goes, I go. Or else we both get to stay."

John pulls out of the parking lot, cursing under his breath the whole way home. Now he understands what Michelle was talking about. Now he wants to see the fish disappear as badly as she does.

"I wish I was like you," he hears Brooke whisper into the fishbowl.

John's fed up. He's tried the humane option and that's failed. Waiting for the store to reopen would just be prolonging the agony of Verrier's eventual return. Desperate times, desperate measures and all that. John decides that first thing in the morning, while his daughter still sleeps, that fish is going down the toilet.

He tells Michelle this over the phone when they get back to his apartment.

"What the hell, John," she says. "What are you going to tell her, that the fish ran away?"

"I'll tell her it died during the night or something," he says. "It's not going to be a problem anymore. I promise."

When he hangs up the phone he goes into his daughter's bedroom. The door is ajar, and she's already in bed. John cracks his knuckles. He's relieved; she must not have heard his half of the conversation. The fishbowl is as close as possible to her, though, sitting at the edge of her dresser. John leans down and kisses the side of her head. "Good night, Brooke," he whispers, and as he leaves the room he shoots an evil look at the fishbowl before shutting the door behind him.

Brooke's eyes open as the door closes. She isn't sleeping.

When John tiptoes into her bedroom in the morning, however, he realizes that Brooke is not in her bed. He forgets about the fish entirely and panics. He searches his apartment for her, and she's nowhere to be found. He looks under every piece of furniture, in every closet and cabinet. She's gone. She's gone. She's gone.

The fishbowl is still on her dresser. Inside two black fish with red markings twist and twirl and tumble together in the water.

The Asaph Church Witch, 1826

This is what happened, when it happened the first time.

Jed, the older boy, doubled over at dinner, his eyes fluttering open and shut. He fell out of his chair to the ground with a thud, and at first his stepmother said "Jeduthan, quit horsing around," before Judah, the younger, shrieked and darted away from the table in terror.

"Christ!" the woman muttered upon standing. From her new vantage point, she could see the boy coiled up on the floor, writhing, dribble and food bits falling from his mouth. It was a wonder he hadn't yet choked.

She hollered for her husband and knelt on the floor beside Jed, grabbing him by the shoulders. "Be still," she told him sternly. "If you flail you will hurt yourself, and me!" In spite of her efforts his arms and legs thrashed around as if on their own accord.

The boy's father came in from the back of the house and saw his eldest, lying prone, and his youngest cowering in the corner behind the tea table.

"What on God's good earth…?" he began, genuflecting besides his wife and laying his hands on Jed to hold him still.

"Flossie," cried Judah in the corner. "I want Flossie…" The word transformed into a high, keening wail, but until Jed, finally exhausted, lay motionless on the ground, no one paid Judah any mind.

They called her Flossie Pumpkinpile, and she was a dark woman, a tall woman, a broad-shouldered woman. She could have been twenty or she could have been forty-five. Her dimensions were such that if she wore pants she could be easily mistaken for a man,

both from the front and the back. Her people, man and woman alike, kept their black hair long and straight, according to Pa, and their faces clean-shaven. Her people, according to Pa, had once lived all over Marion County and beyond, before the white settlers came in. Her people were Jed and Judah and Pa, according to Jed and Judah.

Flossie worked for the Boatwells, who lived in the woods a few miles outside of Asaph town proper, for as long as both boys could remember. She came into their service, in fact, just a few months before their mother died, to take over the cooking and cleaning and the other household duties. Their mother had been sick with a cancer, according to Pa. It was a mercy when she'd finally been taken.

Flossie was not strict with the boys, but neither was she lax. She expected them to come back to the cabin from the woods for all three meals of the day with clean nails and without having to holler. If they tore a button off their jacket or pants, she taught them how to fasten it back themselves. She did not make them attend service on Sundays, even when she knew with certainty that they were playing ill to avoid it. Once, when a foam-lipped raccoon circled their cabin, Flossie lured it close with a bowl of lunch's leftovers and then killed it by striking the back of its skull with a rock. She taught them the native names of all the birds and snakes and bugs they caught and brought to her. The boys loved her more fiercely than they loved one another.

After several years Pa met a woman in the city, and decided to remarry. This is what started the talk of sending Flossie away. The city woman didn't want people to think she wasn't up to the task of keeping house and raising children, even boys. There was no need for two women to do one job.

"And wouldn't Flossie be more at home with her own people?" Pa had asked Jed and Judah that night, tucking them into bed for the first time in their memory. "She's been living with us white folk too long."

Their new mother wasn't bad to them, but neither was she good. She fixed all their torn and ripped clothing herself, and babied them when combing their hair or wiping their teeth. She chattered throughout meals and scolded them if she didn't like their table manners. Her cornbread was dry. She didn't even know the white-folk names of most birds, and she shrieked if Jed or Judah brought her anything else. When a strange dog appeared outside, skinny as a stick and mewling with hunger, she shut the boys in the cabin with her to pray until after dark, terrified. By the time Pa came home, the dog was gone. "The Lord has delivered us from evil," said the woman, but it had been only a dog.

That was all before Jed had fallen over at the dinner table, taken with a fit as though possessed. The doctor could find nothing wrong.

"Let me call on the pastor," the woman said.

"Pa," Judah said, "I want Flossie."

Jed shot him a look from the bed but Judah continued. "Flossie always knew what to do."

"Flossie always knew what to do?" Pa said, sharp suddenly where he was soft before. "Has this happened before?"

"I just mean that Flossie took good care of us," Judah said.

"I don't like the idea of her coming back here, John," said the woman, their stepmother.

Pa sighed and left the room, and Judah got to sleep in his father's bed beside his brother for the night.

The boys asked all the next day if Flossie could come to nurse Jed but the woman said "You seem fine now," and that was the end of it.

When they were supposed to be asleep the boys leaned over the edge of the loft and watched their father and the woman discuss the matter over tea for her and whiskey for him.

"I didn't want to say it before," said the woman. "I didn't want you to think me a silly, superstitious woman. But there's always been talk in town that she practices some kind of strange magic. Hexes and spells and the like. The Penhams say she killed their cows because they ran out of milk to sell, and that she stunted all of Nancy's dog's whelps just by giving them the evil eye."

"Ridiculous," said Pa, and the boys were relieved to hear him stick up for her. "Those are stories, and stories are foolish."

"She came to you and then your lawful Christian wife died," the woman said, "and then you were a bachelor in the woods with two children for far too long. The whole town knew you lived like heathens in these woods." And then she grew bold and asked, "Were you fucking her?"

Pa remained silent. Jed and Judah pictured the pigs in the yard, how one would heft itself over another and grunt, grunt, grunt until the act was done.

"You were under an enchantment," the woman continued. "That's what they say in town. And now she's cursed your boys since she's been cast aside for another."

“I warn you, darling,” said Pa, “this is treacherous territory. Mind where you walk.”

“Did you promise her marriage?” asked the woman. “Did you promise her children? Now she’ll pay you back for breaking those promises by taking the ones that you already have.”

“There is no such thing as witches,” Pa said finally.

“With God,” said the woman piously, “all things are possible.”

—

The next day the boys sat taciturn at the breakfast table, so solemn that their Pa was afraid Jed might keel over and topple to the floor again. But this time the problem was his other child, Judah the younger, who turned pale and suddenly vomited onto his plate.

“What in the ever-loving – ” Pa began, but he was interrupted when his wife gasped and dropped the cast-iron pan to the floor, nicking the plank into splinters.

“Judah!” Jed cried, grabbing his brother by the shoulders and pulling him close. “He’s sick, Pa!”

“I can see that, Jed,” Pa said, attempting to remain calm, leaning towards the boy’s plate with an air of confusion and curiosity. He plied apart the sputum; it was a wad of wet feathers.

“It came on sudden,” Judah said. “I don’t feel so good.” And then, pitifully, plaintively: “I want Flossie.”

“I told you,” said the woman. “You know.”

Pa said nothing, and took no action.

Every day Pa did nothing, the boys got worse. Jed fell to the ground and thrashed at intervals, knocking furniture over and spilling a bucket of water. He struck his head against the foot of a desk and bled. Judah kept spewing up an assortment of objects – the feathers, the nutmeg grater, the lid to Pa's snuffbox and a writing well that had gone missing several months before, as well as all manner of rocks and pebbles and twigs and leaves. "Flossie," Judah cried. "Pa, we need Flossie."

"Flossie won't break the hex," said the woman. "She'll come back and curse us all."

Pa called on the doctor, but the woman came back with the preacher from Asaph Church. The two men examined the boys together as the woman watched, speaking in low whispers they thought the boys wouldn't hear.

"Flossie Pumpkinpile would make us well," Jed told them, his voice wavering with weakness. "Why won't anybody call on her?"

"We want Flossie," Judah added. His face was drawn and his eyes bloodshot from his vomitous trials.

The adults spoke to one another in another room, while the boys lay in their father's bed, holding hands.

The doctor and the preacher and the woman agreed among themselves that, even if there was no such thing as witches, there would be no harm in taking chances either. Pa no longer had any objection. He sank into the nearest chair and spoke not a word. There were things in the natural and native world that they didn't understand, but they sought no understanding either, and that was when Pa reached his limit and grew too tired to protest any longer.

They knew where to find Flossie Pumpkinpile. She'd found a new position keeping house for another family in Asaph town proper. The doctor, the preacher, and the woman mounted horses and rode into town in a hurry. The woman arrived first, her filly dripping snot from its nostrils and shrieking from overexertion. "Flossie Pumpkinpile is killing my sons!" the woman screamed into the night, and men poured out of their homes and the public house like ants from a hill when Jed and Judah poured water into the hole, while their women held candles at their windows and looked on. Flossie Pumpkinpile was pulled from her bed by her new master, who was so frightened by the mob outside that he offered her up with a quickness.

This is what happened after it happened the first time.

When Jed finally went limp, Pa carried the boy into his own bedroom instead of up into the loft, where the boys normally slept, and laid him across the quilt tenderly, like a lamb. Jed's breathing was slow and ragged, and his stepmother fanned herself with one and twisted the fingers of the other through the laces of her corset. It was clear she didn't know what to do, and kept her hands busy to put off the panic.

"Judah, come here," Pa called, and the boy appeared in the doorway, still trembling. He turned to his younger son and said, "You keep your brother company while I go call on the doctor."

"John, what should I do?" asked the woman. It was clear she was not capable of doing anything, so he advised her to clean up the mess they had made in the kitchen.

Judah listened to the door close, listened to the horse whinny as it was saddled and mounted, and listened to the dull thud of its hooves on the swept yard. He listened for

the sound of the dishes clang together, listened for the sound of the city woman hum a hymn to herself, and listened for the scraping of the cast iron pan. When he was confident that Pa was gone and the woman was occupied, he leaned in close to this brother's face and shook him good.

"I think you done it," he said.

"Stop shaking me!" Jed whispered harshly. "I had enough of it on the floor. I got so dizzy I thought I might shit my mouth."

"They believed it," Judah said. "Do you think Flossie will come back now?"

"She might," said Jed. "When Pa finds the doctor can't mend me, he'll bring Flossie back to nurse me back to health, and then maybe they will let her stay."

Just as Jed predicted, the doctor was unable to do anything substantial for him. He found no signs of fever or injury. He prescribed a tincture to be administered in correspondence with the movement of the boy's bowels, and advised that he be called first thing should another episode occur.

The boys waited a few days for another opportune moment. When their Pa was chopping wood out back and the woman was tending to the garden, they trundled a hoop back and forth between one another until Jed fell and Judah screamed and they began their play-acting all over again.

When they realized Jed alone couldn't bring Flossie back, they decided Judah needed to be stricken as well. "But not with fits," Jed said. "I'm already doing fits. You have to pick something else."

Judah had already been pulling the down from his pillow out of nervousness, and that gave them a start. It was a bit fun, swallowing things, and Judah gladly tried anything

they could find that would fit in his mouth. Vomiting them back up again was less fun, but it was very dramatic, which they thought would work in their favor.

They were confident now that once Pa convinced the woman, Flossie could come back and stay with them forever.

But that is not what happened.

Flossie Pumpkinpile was buried in an unmarked grave outside town. On one side was a nameless vagrant, and on the other a suicide. They lay beneath a gnarled choke-cherry tree, where the Penhams sometimes grazed their cattle.

And the real witch of Asaph Church lived on.

Wander

Marcie stood at the edge of the wide open expanse before them, a dog standing on either side of her, and breathed deeply of the dry desert air. The sun had begun its steep decline to the western horizon, and she was hesitant to move any further in the diminishing daylight. She looked back over her shoulder; her car was a distant dot against the black river of asphalt of roadway behind them. She'd gone far enough for now. The black dog to her left, King, panted from thirst, and Marcie knelt down and offered him water from her bottle. Then, to be fair, she offered some to the other, Lulu, who could barely hold still long enough to lap at the stream pouring out of the plastic.

"I guess now we wait," Marcie said out loud, and the dogs snuffed and wagged their tails and sat with her on the ledge as they, all three, waited for the moon to rise.

Weeks earlier Marcie had been in a different place, being a different person, leading a different life. She was responsible and adult, and she an all-right job and an all-right boyfriend, Jay, and an all-right apartment they shared, where she could take either the blue line or the yellow line to get to work every day and it was an all-right commute. The city was caught in an early spring heat wave, with temperatures reaching eighty degrees during the day, and even with the balcony door open the apartment was still muggy and uncomfortable. The dog on the balcony of the next door began to bark, not urgently but regularly, as though conveying a message in code. Bark, woof woof, pause, bark, pause, bark bark bark woof.

"Thursday!" Jay exclaimed as he hung up the phone. He'd called down to the superintendent's office to see what would be done about the air conditioning. "Goddamn,

why do they have to wait until Thursday? Can't they turn it on now?" And then, shouting at the dog: "Shut up!"

Marcie fixed a salad in the kitchen, using leftover bits of chicken and a homemade dressing made with olive oil and apple cider vinegar and whatever spices they had in the cabinet. It was too hot to use the stove, even though Jay hated cold dinners.

"I need the air conditioning," Jay continued. "I pay fourteen hundred dollars a month for this fucking place, I should be able to control my own fucking air conditioning. I can't live without it."

Sure you can, Marcie thought, but she wisely kept her mouth shut. The dog next door continued to bark, in a cadence like a telegraph transmittal.

"I don't know how you can stand it, Marcie. This heat is oppressive."

Sure it is. She sprinkled some cranberries on top of the greens, and considered adding goat cheese before deciding against it. The dog continued making noise.

"I'm dying in here."

Sure you are. Bark, woof woof, pause, bark, pause, bark bark bark woof.

Later that night when Marcie took the trash down the hall, she realized that her life was not as all-right as it seemed. Somehow she already had her purse with her, and the keys to the car. She threw the trash down the chute and, instead of returning to the apartment, the stifling apartment, she went down eight flights of stairs, and into the parking garage, and into the car, and within half an hour she had left Washington DC headed to god-knows-where.

She'd started out going south, thinking she was on her way to Florida, maybe to see her grandparents in the Tampa Bay area, but after a few hours of driving she took a hard right and went west. There was no reason why; she knew no one who didn't live somewhere along the east coast, nor had she previously travelled that way except by plane, once, to San Francisco. But something tugged at her in her gut, and pulled her where it wanted her to go. It was very late at night, or else very early in the day, when she finally pulled over on a dark country highway to get some sleep. Her phone had rung ten or twelve times, and she missed countless texts from Jay, but then the battery died and Marcie had no charger with her.

When the sun came up she recognized neither the place she was in, nor the way she got there. She exited the highway in a lonely little town to get something to eat and to top off her gas tank. She bought a map but it didn't keep her from getting lost again on local roads several hours later. She wasn't even sure she what state she was in anymore. In any case, she had to use the bathroom sometime, and she couldn't anticipate there being anyplace ahead but more of the same barns and fields she'd been going by all day, so she stopped at a friendly-looking farmhouse and hoped somebody was home.

She knocked, and the door opened almost instantly. Inside was a small woman, an old woman, and she trembled as she looked up into Marcie's face. "You came!" she cried out, near near tears as she weakly pushed her storm door open. "I was so worried," she said, taking Marcie by the wrist and guiding her inside. "Come in, come inside, it's cooler in the kitchen, I'll get you something to drink."

Baffled, Marcie followed her in. "I'm sorry, I just – can I use your bathroom?"

"Of course, of course, down the hall, second door to the left," the old woman replied, pointing. "I'll have your tea ready when you come back."

When Marcie returned to the kitchen, the old woman gestured to an old aluminum chair and set a glass of tea on the table. "Please, have some. Take your time. I know you had a long drive to get here."

Marcie did not sit down, though she gladly took a sip from the glass on the table. It was the most refreshing drink she may have ever had; icy cold and super sweet. "Thank you, ma'am," she said, and then "Do you know why I'm here?" It was a sincere question. The ache in her gut had not yet faded.

"Of course I do," the old woman said, with a small sigh. She lifted a finger to her temple and rubbed it. "I'm not as senile as they might have told you. You're here to take the dogs."

"I'm here to take the dogs," Marcie repeated. As she said the words out loud the old woman disappeared from the kitchen; there was the sound of a door opening, and suddenly two mutts rushed in. The first one was large and furry and black; the other was smaller and short-haired and brindle-colored. The first one barked; the other stayed quiet. The first one wagged its tail incessantly and pawed at Marcie's leg for attention; the other stayed back, cautious, and sniffed Marcie's hand.

The old woman returned from wherever it was she was keeping the dogs, carrying a cardboard box that rattled as she moved. "The big one's King," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the dogs, "and the smaller one is Lulu. They'll be good if you treat 'em good."

"I'll treat 'em good," Marcie promised. She set her glass of sweet tea back down onto the table as the old woman handed her the cardboard box. In it were bowls and leashes and other accoutrements that came with dog ownership.

The old woman's voice wavered as she spoke again. "They were my son's dogs," she said, "and I just want to make sure they're taken care of."

"I will take care of them," Marcie promised, although she wasn't sure why.

"Good. Now I won't have to worry about what will happen to them," said the woman. "Can I get you anything else as long as you're here? Is there anything else you need to know?"

King sat on Marcie's feet and leaned all his massive weight against her. Lulu licked her fingers.

"I think we'll be fine," Marcie said.

"Then maybe you should go," the old woman told her, "before I start to cry."

The dogs followed Marcie to the car without question, and Marcie was once again on her way to who-knows-where.

Marcie had never been anywhere like this before, and now she was speeding through small towns and meandering through back roads. She was not afraid of getting lost – her gut directed her, pulled her, guided her – but she was wary of whatever her destination would be. She stopped at a farm feed store for bags of dog food that weighed forty pounds each. She bought herself something new to wear at an old thrift store, a couple of old t-shirts and two pairs of jeans. King hung his head out of the back window and barked – woof woof woof, pause, bark woof woof – at other cars on the road, while

Lulu occupied the passenger seat, looking ahead as though nervous. They didn't stop to sleep until they'd almost reached Shreveport, where Marcie checked into a Super 8 motel and snuck the dogs in with her while the man at the front desk pretended not to see. There were two full-sized beds in the room, but they all slept together, limbs and paws and fingers and elbows poking one another all night long. King snored. Lulu whined. Marcie still slept more soundly than she had in all the time she'd lived with Jay.

The next day Marcie took out her map again, this time trying not to look ahead but to look back at where she'd already been, tracing her finger backwards along the route she thought they'd taken. Her life with Jay in city seemed a lifetime ago. She wondered, briefly, whether he'd successfully gotten the air conditioner to work properly, but then King pawed at her feet, and Lulu licked her hands, and she folded the map back up and took the dogs outside for a walk in the parking lot of the motel. She fed them, she watered them, and she had them wait in the car while she took a hurried shower and checked out at the front desk.

As they travelled further west they stopped more frequently to stretch their legs. At a gas station Marcie went inside for a few more jugs of water and was surprised to see a busy bakery counter crammed into the small, sterile space like some kind of shrine. In the display case were dozens, maybe hundreds, of pastries, all following the same general shape and form, but with slightly different coloration. This one had a red filling, this one black, the next – some kind of sausage, perhaps?

"What are these?" Marcie asked without looking up from them.

"Kolache," said the woman on the other side of the counter. "Ever had one?"

Marcie shook her head, and the woman on the other side of the counter grabbed a napkin and pulled one free, the pastry flaking and tearing at the edges as she pulled it away from its siblings. "Try it," the woman said, offering it across the counter. "This one's got raspberry filling."

Marcie took it graciously and bit into it. It was sweet, and bready, and the raspberry was pleasing on her tongue. "How many different kinds are there?"

"Here we have over fifty," the woman said. She lifted a finger to her temple and rubbed it. "Well, only the fruit and nut fillings are technically kolache, and the savory ones are called something else, but we use the same dough for them all."

"I want to try them all," Marcie confessed. "Can I? Can I get two of each?"

The woman across the counter wasn't even baffled at such a large request. "No problem," she said, and a few minutes later Marcie staggered back to the car carrying a dozen bakery boxes in plastic bags. She had to go back when she remembered the water.

Marcie had never had dogs before. She'd never been allowed. Her mother claimed to be allergic and forbade them entirely. In every place Marcie had lived in since then, there'd been a strict policy regarding pets – mostly that they were restricted by size or breed, and that they required an extra deposit Marcie couldn't have afforded anyway.

Not that she'd ever really wanted a dog. She'd never felt a strong need to have a pet. She'd kept a few fish in her life, more to go with the décor than for any sense of connection. She'd briefly had a hamster as a kid, as part of an effort to teach her responsibility, but Oreo's lifespan under her care was closer to two weeks than the two

years that had been advertised at the pet store. She'd taken him out to play and he'd bitten her; she dropped him immediately and no one saw him again until he turned up in an old-fashioned mousetrap underneath the kitchen sink several days later. His neck had been snapped when he went for what he thought would be an easy meal.

Maybe that was why she'd never felt comfortable with the idea of companion animals. She thought she got enough of that from the people in her life. But King and Lulu proved her wrong. They neither judged nor criticized. They enjoyed her attention but they did not beg for it. They gratefully accepted whatever Marcie offered them, whether it was a scratch behind the ears, a bowl full of water, or a savory kolache from a strange gas station bakery in the middle of nowhere.

In fact, as they continued driving, the kolache stayed surprisingly fresh. Marcie constantly left a box open on the dashboard, and yet the pastries never seemed to dry out or go stale. There were so many flavors – lemon, raspberry, blueberry, strawberry, poppyseed, sausage, pepperoni, pepperoni and cheese, cream cheese, mixed fruits, apricot, spinach – that Marcie could never have finished them all on her own. Instead she took a bite out of each, sampling each flavor and then, satisfied, tore the rest into two pieces and gave the remainder to the dogs.

They continued on a westward heading and stopped for more gas, but the ache in Marcie's gut only got stronger. Hours and hours of driving had exhausted her to the point where she merely pulled off onto the road's shoulder, rolled down the windows, reclined the front seat and dozed off. They were getting close to the place where they were meant to be.

When measured in distance, Marcie had travelled hundreds of miles. When measured in time, it was four days. When measured in kolache, it was nearly one hundred, and none were completely untouched. Some of the pastries still sat half-eaten on the floor of the passenger side of the car, their fillings lapped up by Lulu. King, for his part, had dropped several out of the open backseat window when he opened his mouth to bark at other cars.

The ache in her gut guided them from one deserted rural highway to the next, where they skirted forest and farmland until they reached an empty, wide, quiet space. King stopped barking, and Lulu curled up in her seat before falling asleep. They passed through Tucson in the daytime and headed north from there. They would make it. They would get there.

So they ran out of gas. Marcie hadn't even thought about it since filling up somewhere in New Mexico. She had stopped watching the fuel gauge, exhausted after having monitored it so carefully for so long. She took it as a sign that it was time for them to get out of the car. They left the dog bowls and the extra food. They left the change of clothes Marcie bought. They left the map. They left the keys. Marcie grabbed a bottle of water, but that was her only affectation of civilization she kept besides the clothes on her back.

"I guess now we wait."

When the sun disappeared the three were surrounded by a most intense darkness. The moon offered only small comfort in the vast, open desert. Marcie drew her breath inward, suddenly aware of the wetness of her nose, and she turned to King beside her,

almost invisible but for the way his eyes glimmered in the subtle strands of moonlight, and his methodical panting. Marcie turned to her left, and Lulu licked her face. The odor of her breath was pleasing, and Marcie was tempted to return the gesture.

The empty bottle of water rolled away, falling backwards down the slope that brought them here, back towards the car, and the road, and everything else they were leaving behind.

"Okay, guys," Marcie said, "I think we can go now." All three stood up on all fours, and they sauntered off together into the darkness.

The Bug Jar

When I heard about what happened on the news I first thought of Nathan, who was playing in the yard. He had to come back inside. I left the radio on and ran to find him.

Of course he was okay. Maybe I was overreacting. Maybe it was still too early. Nathan's a good kid anyway, stays out of trouble on his own. I just worry about trouble finding him.

"It's still light out," Nathan complained. "I was going to catch lightning bugs in a jar."

"Not a good night for that, bud. Maybe tomorrow."

He made a little fuss but followed me back inside. Like I said, a good kid. I didn't remember about the radio until we got back to the kitchen.

"…estimates of a hundred fatalities, possibly more," the announcer was saying, "and countless casualties." I switched it off before the broadcast could continue.

"What was that?" Nathan asked.

"It's the news," I told him. "Something happened down in Marion County, is all."

"Marion County? Where's that?"

"Just south of here," I said. "You've been there before – we had a couple of Little League games down there this year. Sound familiar?"

"Oh yeah," Nathan replied. "Maybe. What's happening there?"

"Nothing you need to worry about. Do me a favor, bud," I said, "and get me the big container of salt from the cabinet behind you?"

Obediently he crouched down and opened the corner cabinet with the lazy Susan, spinning it once or twice more than necessary before he found the cardboard cylinder of iodized salt. He handed it to me with an intentionally glum grimace; it wasn't fair that he had to stay in if I was going outside.

"Don't give me that look," I told him. "When I come back in, we'll have ice cream for dessert."

They always travel north for some reason; I haven't figured it out. When I was younger it was almost fun to come up with theories. The first one I can remember was that maybe they were all heading to see Santa Claus at the North Pole. I thought maybe they were going to become elves and make toys at Christmas. When I was older I thought maybe they were going to see the aurora borealis. Then I thought maybe they were being sucked up by it or something, like it was a gateway to some other world. I don't know. It was just a theory. I try not to think too much about it now. Always north, though. I think of Cain, who killed his brother Abel, and I wonder which direction he wanders. I read somewhere once that east and west are different from north and south because if you head east or west without ever changing direction, you'll head that way forever. At least north isn't forever.

So I took the salt outside to draw around the house. I've done it so much at this point there's a dirt line surrounding us where the salt's gone into the soil and killed the grass. My neighbor asked what it was for one time, and I told him it was pest control.

I wasn't truly lying, I suppose. It's more like a little extra security; doesn't hurt to be too careful. I've never seen them walk through walls before, but that's not saying they

couldn't if they tried. I've seen them do worse, that's for sure, and with an estimate of a hundred coming our way, I didn't want to leave anything to chance.

When I got back inside Nathan had turned the radio back on. He can be such a sly little asshole sometimes. "Survivors describe the scene as horrible, unreal." I clicked it off again.

"What do you feel like having, bud?" I asked him as I pulled a pair of bowls from the cupboard. "Strawberry, or mint chocolate chip?"

"Strawberry," he said. "Only you like the mint chocolate chip."

I caught one once, when I was still just a kid, before Nathan was even born, after years of trying to convince my parents that I wasn't just making things up. I thought if I could get a hold of one, I could show it to them, except I didn't know how to trap them. I remember trying to explain my dilemma to the librarian, who cocked her head and pointed me towards a shelf of ghost stories. I tried calling a psychic hotline. I asked Jordan Tomello at school for help because I'd overheard her once saying that her older sister read tarot cards, but she laughed at me and told me to never talk to her again. Then one day after school when I got off the bus I saw a big, black cat in our driveway. It was lying in the sunshine, stretching, lounging. Being a little superstitious, I posed the question quietly to him, but he leapt to his feet and ran away at my approach. Still, that night in a dream, he told me to find a cord, or some twine, an extra shoelace – anything like that would do. "Tie it in a knot when you next see one," he said, "and it will bind them."

So I followed his instructions. I took to carrying a shoelace in my pocket at all times, waiting. The next time I saw one – she was tall, and broad-shouldered, with close-

cropped gray hair, always holding her hand to her cheek as though permanently incredulous - I tied a knot, just as he said. I don't know why it worked but it did. She was bound to the knot in the cord, and as I carried it with me into the house she followed. But still my mother could not see. Neither could my father. I never felt so alone as I did then.

It felt weird having one in the house, so I buried the shoelace in the yard. Some mornings when I woke up too early I'd look out my bedroom window and she'd just be sitting there, right above where the cord was buried. I tried several times to get her to talk to me, but she wouldn't even look in my direction. I was as invisible to her as she was to other people. She must have been sad and lonely, or else I thought so because I was sad and lonely. Eventually I dug the shoelace back up and untied the knot. She instantly started heading north again, just like all the others.

The cat came back to me in dreams a few more times. Sometimes he has a message of warning, but I'll be damned if I could ever figure out what he meant until after something happened. Like when Mom left, or when Dad died. But usually they were about those that headed north – ones to look out for, ones to avoid. He'd leave an image of them in my head that I wouldn't remember until the moment I saw them. I used to run inside when I saw them. Now I just carry the salt.

"Be careful," the cat said to me last time. "They'll get under your skin if you let them."

I thought he was being metaphorical.

"I'm timing you," I said to Nathan as the television began warming up. "Thirty minutes, then bath, then bedtime."

"I know," he said. "You don't have to be an ass about it."

"You don't call people ass, bud," I told him. "You know Dad would have beaten you black and blue if he heard you using curse words."

"Sorry," Nathan said. He already had his controller in his hand and wasn't looking at me as he said it.

I went back into the kitchen and rinsed out the bowls before putting them into the dishwasher. I turned the radio back on, the volume slightly louder than the video game in the next room, and I stood by the window to watch and wait. It had been a few hours, now, and Marion was directly south of our house by maybe fifteen miles. It was only a matter of time.

I've seen them for as long as I can remember. They normally come one at a time, and they look older, stumbling and shuffling their way past me. Sometimes I see more than one at a time, but it doesn't happen often. Sometimes they'll be in twos or threes, heading the same direction, trying to stick together but also ignore one another at the same time. I know I've said before I try not to speculate, but sometimes it can't be helped. I wonder what happens when they travel together like that. Accident? Coincidence? Once I saw a family of six going by, all holding hands and staring vacantly forward. It made me sick to see them.

Most of them go by without notice. I see them, they don't see me, and they keep moving. But when they do see me, I can feel it in my stomach like the twist of a knife. They may not mean me harm, but they mean no good either. I watched one knock over our garbage cans as they sat near our garage. I saw one kick a dog; poor thing yelped and cried and ran into traffic.

The twilight had just turned to dark when I saw the first ones. It was chilling to see so many at once. The number reported on the news had been wrong; it had to be wrong. There were more than they'd estimated for sure.

I felt the twist in my gut and I straightened my posture as I peered out the kitchen window. Most of them moved forward without noticing me at all, but I could not shake that awful feeling.

"Hey."

Nathan had crept into the kitchen without my notice and made me jump. He was holding his jar. A lightning bug crept up the side. It didn't occur to me to ask where he caught it.

"Hey, bud," I said, holding my hand over my heart, "time's not up yet. Did you turn off your game already?"

"I'm tired," he told me. He did look pale. "I want to go straight to bed. I'll take a bath in the morning."

"Sure thing, bud. Want me to tuck you in?"

"Yes."

"Cool beans," I told him. "Go on up, I'll be just a minute."

Nathan was already in his pajamas, lying in bed with the blanket pulled up to his chin. It was a warm night, and it was warm in his room. He smiled when he saw me come in.

"Can I ask you something?" he said, still grinning.

"Sure thing," I answered, and I took a seat at the edge of his mattress. "What's up?"

"The radio…" he began, "the thing that happened in Marion…"

"No way, bud," I said. "That stuff is for grown-ups to worry about." I leaned over to kiss Nathan's forehead. It felt cold against my lips, and it was only then that I realized something was wrong.

I looked out the window as I stood up. I could see them even then, from that distance; they flickered dimly in the night like the lightning bug stuck in the jar next to Nathan's bed.

"Can you close the curtain when you go?" asked Nathan.

"All right, bud," I said. I closed the curtain, and shut off the light, and closed the door.

Then I went downstairs.

And got the salt.