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The University of Southern Mississippi

STORIES

by

Garrett Alden Ashley

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

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ABSTRACT

STORIES

by Garrett Ashley

May 2014

These short stories represent different genres, forms, ideals, and times. This collection contains the weird, the scientific, the fantastical, and settings that are real. The problems faced by the characters are a product of each story's genre, but the willingness of its characters to overcome change remains the same. In one story, a man wants to get rid of his mechanical daughter because she reminds him of his wife. In another, a man takes care of his brother who has returned from the dead as a pig. In others, a man believes his wife is trying to kill him, a woman invites three masked strangers to dinner, and a grandfather removes his skin and passes it on to his grandchildren. Two brothers wait for their mother to die, and a young scientist writes letters to a man who will only be revived when the rest of civilization is dead. These stories strive for thematic juxtaposition, and are for the most part worried about people.

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INTRODUCTION

Novelist Edward Docx says that genre fiction is a constrained form of writing whose limitations are made obvious by convention. He believes that convention, in a sense, takes control over the story. Because one thing must happen (a murder in a thriller, for example), another thing must follow, thus limiting a writer's control over character. For this reason, Docx says, genre fiction fails to meet the standard of traditional literary fiction.

The topic of whether genre fiction is or can be literary seems to be outgrowing itself, and many in the literary community, Arthur Krystal among them, think that genre fiction is already equal in standard to literary fiction. And while Docx's point about conventionality may be true in some cases, I do not believe that conventionality itself is the reason why genre fiction is commonly understood to be lowbrow, as most stories tend to follow some form of convention. In fact, I believe conventionality is a good thing. What makes genre fiction more or less literary is something else entirely.

I believe that the literary or artful quality of genre fiction depends on how much time the writer spends in explaining a concept or idea, and whether enough time has been given to character. According to Adam Roberts, the conversion in the late sixties and seventies to the less formulaic "New Wave" was a sort of betrayal to "Golden Age" fans, who were happy with the emphasis of content over aesthetic, the commitment to logic, and avoidance of the fantastical (the science needs to be there!) (Science Fiction 63). Since the 1960s, contemporary genre writers tend to avoid the way of the "Golden Age" of science fiction. Now, stories are quicker to progress, there is a greater focus on character, and a lot of the science is either explained through the actions of characters, or

is dismissed entirely. In such stories, the rules of the universe unfold throughout the story via a series of actions.

Background and context serves as more than a means of setting up a story and conflict; I think that they can signify the difference between a well written piece of science or fantasy fiction and what Edward Docx refers to as formulaic genre fiction. I argue that when used well, context can elevate the importance and overall value of a story. The amount of attention given to the rules of a story can also determine the value of what is being told. In other words, the less attention a story brings to a concept, the more literary or artful the quality.

It has become more inefficient to expand on concepts, especially in the realm of science fiction, when in the past explanations have taken control of character and story. The attention span of modern readers has shortened over the years. In the now-mostly accepted state of digital publications, stories have become shorter, more concise in their composition, and for the most part, more character oriented than what critics of genre make them out to be. In place of a lengthy explanation, we are given the image of a particular concept, and we are allowed to experience the rules of the universe through the eyes of the characters.

In "The Folktale, Wells, and Modern Science Fiction," Tatyana Chernysheva examines the influence of the folktale on modern science fiction. Chernysheva argues that when there is lack of sufficient evidence for a particular scientific theory presented by the author, the folktale brings lenience. She cites Aleksandr Belyaev's story, "Hoity-Toity" (1961) in which the brain of a man is removed and placed into the head of an elephant: "Scientific knowledge about transplanting organs from dying people was at that

time limited, and insufficient for his theme; in this case, the folktale steered the writer's imagination far more than science, pointing out the fantastic possibilities of scientific experience" (40). I think that it is far more important to express the possibilities of magic or science rather than to prove them.

H. G. Wells, who authored famous works like *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *The Invisible Man*, was mostly concerned with the application of the fantastic. Chernysheva writes: "[Wells] makes his protagonists consider how and why those wonders become possible. Of course, the lucubrations of his protagonists, one of whom is interested in occultism, should not be taken too seriously, but the readers may nonetheless wish to listen carefully to them" (36). What is important in a story involving the fantastic, is not the fantastic itself or how it comes about, but the ways in which humans interact with it.

The most interesting thing about Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" (1915) is not that Gregor Samsa has been turned into an insect, but how he chooses to deal with his newfound disability. Late in the story, Gregor is locked away in his room after having been hissed at by his father: "Surely no one would come into Gregor's room any more before morning, and so he had plenty of time in which to think without disturbance about how he should now reorganize his life" (25). Rather than ponder the meaning of his transformation, Gregor prefers to think about how exactly he will be able to survive as an insect. The lack of scientific explanation allows for a more metaphorical reading of the story. And the amount of time spent observing Gregor adjust to his new insect body, rather than trying to reverse the process, says a great deal about humanity's struggle to

accept change. The story, then, focuses on the Samsa family, their financial difficulty, and Gregor's hope that they will be able to survive without his help.

The first chapter of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) is another testament to how much can be done in a small amount of space. We are immediately introduced to the protagonist Rick Deckard, his wife Iran, and the mood organ, which is an ambiguously designed machine meant for setting the mood of its user depending on the kind of day they are expecting to have. Besides the fact that something is being said in response to global change (war, radiation, the end of the world) and the way humanity makes itself capable of responding to change, Dick presents a plethora of human emotions in a mere few pages. And it works—the reader really gets a sense of who these characters are, and how they feel about each other and the world outside their apartment. So much can be said about the machine itself, and Iran's response to Deckard as he reaches to adjust her mood to something more positive: "'Keep your hand off my settings.' Her voice held bitter sharpness. 'I don't want to be awake'" (435). Dick does not tell the reader how the machine works, but we know *why* it works from Iran's interaction with her husband. Not only this, but we see the importance of upholding emotions and the toll a recent war took on Earth. We barely have to look out the window to know what is going on.

In a more recent example of how the limited use of context works, Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie" (2011) focuses on the troubled relationship between a Chinese-American and his mother. The mother happens to have the ability to breathe life into her paper animals.

> She set the paper down, plain side facing up, and began to fold it. I stopped crying and watched her, curious. She turned the paper over and folded it again. She pleated, packed, tucked, rolled, and twisted until the paper disappeared between her cupped hands. Then she lifted the folded-up paper packet to her mouth and blew into it, like a balloon. (64)

She gives her son these wonderful toys to play with growing up, but the narrator provides us nothing in the way of an explanation of the village the mother was born in, or how people are able to breathe life into inanimate objects. The narrator is not concerned with the plausibility of his mother's ability. We know only that she and her people are able to do it, which is the only thing that matters, the only fantastical deviation the story appears to contain. We are able to spend more time with the characters all the while keeping the fantastical nature of the mother integral to the story—the paper animals eventually get boxed away in the attic, and are only pulled out again when the narrator feels guilt after the death of his mother. The lack of focus on how magic came to be, and the concept itself, allows the narrator to say something about the relationship between mothers and rebellious sons in general. We learn the importance of maintaining a relationship with a loved one and setting differences aside.

Steven Millhauser also tends to reveal a lot about the rules of his stories through character. For example, in "Miracle Polish" (2012) a traveling salesman offers the protagonist a vial of life-altering cleaning solution. The protagonist, indifferent to the image of himself, one day polishes a mirror with the solution. The resulting image of himself changes his outlook on life.

> There was a freshness to my image, a kind of mild glow that I had never seen before. I looked at myself with interest. This in itself was striking, for I wasn't the kind of man who looked at himself in mirrors. I was the kind of man who spent as little time as possible in front of mirrors, the kind of man who had a brisk and practical relation to his reflection, with its tired eyes, its disappointed shoulders, its look of defeat. (110)

In this story, we see characters who are more interested in the result of a product's magic than the magic itself. The protagonist uses miracle polish on a mirror one day seemingly out of boredom or curiosity. The narrator does not reference the illusion of the miracle polish, or even acknowledge that his new image is a product of the polish. The characters from Millhauser's story might have benefited greatly from knowing the recipe for miracle polish, but they instead become obsessed with its results, and eventually the protagonist needs more—where is the salesman that sold the polish?—and the story ends with the protagonist mourning the loss of his renewed image, the thing which is most important in the story's development.

The majority of my stories have speculative elements that serve as the crux of every situation the characters encounter. I often hope that such background information will be assumed through the actions of characters. In this collection, the science fiction story, "Hair" begins: "The wigmaker had resolved to get rid of his daughter. The girl's untamable hair reminded him too much of his wife, Melanie." The lines seem unusual at first, and in the first paragraph I intend for the reader to know as much about the situation regarding the dead wife as possible. The second paragraph clarifies the beginning of the first: "Laurent Ryan felt that he would have to get rid of Abigail himself. His son, Jeffrey,

would be too busy with school and friends to dispose of an age-six mechanical sister." So we know that it might be okay to dispose of a child if the child is a machine. In the following pages the reader learns that Laurent grafts hair to robots, which are sold as replacements for children. I never outright say what exactly is happening in this universe, why parents are buying robotic siblings for their organic children. I try to convey their importance to the reader as quickly and as simply as possible in order for the story to not seem quite so much like a science textbook, but to make the reading experience natural.

In my stories I try not to convey the sense that artificial intelligence or machinery will ever reach any level of humanity. Rather than write a story about machines experiencing human-like tendencies and emotions, I am more interested in humanity's interaction with robotics as lifeless forms with specifically programmed functions. Should a narrator worry about the makings of a machine and what goes on inside the metal box? Or should a narrator worry with the way a human protagonist ignores or pays heed to artificial intelligence? I think of Han Solo's blasé interactions with C-3PO in *Star Wars*, or Theodore Twombly's surreal romance with the operating system Samantha in the recent film *Her*. While doing so may be beneficial in the efficiency of developing character, I also feel that focusing on the interaction follows the folktale tradition. Priorities shift to the more straightforward story: how do people treat mechanisms (organic and nonorganic) that are not like themselves?

My characters interact with these machines because they look human, and they walk upright like humans, but they are reluctant to project themselves onto machines. Sometimes my characters understand the reality of their situation. For example, in "Hair" the protagonist knows that the young girl who lives with him and his son is a machine.

He does not care about the feelings of the machine at first. The protagonist's arc is focused around the death of his wife, who had shaved her head and planted her hair onto the robot in order to personalize it. The protagonist obviously resents this in the story and finds it strange that people feel so close to these machines. However, as he comes to terms with the death of his wife, he also comes to terms with robotic girl, the walking memory of his wife.

I employ a similar tactic in "Brother Swine." Rather than explaining rules of the fictional world, the narrator expresses his feelings regarding the reincarnation of loved ones from the dead, which are representative of the village and the nature of the story:

> The purple feathers woven into her brown hair were ruffled from a restless night's sleep. I had sat with her and Donna the night before and confessed I was nervous, too. Nobody in our village sleeps well awaiting a loved one. I didn't like thinking about Etgar's return, either—whether his journey had even begun, or if anything had gone wrong. It had been more than a year since we received word of his death.

This follows a paragraph in which the protagonist and Namwali are intently watching the hills for animals like a family waiting near the gate at an airport. We know that when people die in this universe that it is likely they will be reincarnated as something other than a human, and though I feel I could have done more to explain how the animals know how to find their old family, or which family to go to (because reincarnation happens multiple times), I do not think it is necessary for the story at hand. What I am more concerned with is death and overcoming a dramatic change in the narrator's lifestyle.

In "Capsule, Teardrop, Moon," I wanted a loved one to be buried in a time capsule, but I could not decide why such a thing would ever be done. Originally, Elaina was a secondary character, but there was simply no story in the future where Tom wakes to find the ruins of Earth. After making Elaina the protagonist, I was able to cover the implausibility of burying a man in a time capsule. As it is now, the story benefits from the lack of explanation—there is nothing to distract from the fact that Elaina is struggling with the loss of Tom.

The story in my collection with the most obscure rules might be "Different Faces." I wanted to write something Freud might define as "uncanny," an unfamiliar feeling associated with a familiar person, object, or setting. It is an exploratory tale set in a seemingly normal home. What if strangers wearing masks showed up at your door, but instead of murdering you, they had dinner with you? The concept needed a story to accompany it, so I gave the protagonist a back story, and tried to connect the masked strangers to her story. What results is a lack of what we might assume are the story's rules:

> The red-headed woman with a bunny mask sitting at the top of the porch steps turned and looked at Leanne and turned back to the yard. She reminded Leanne of Rebecca, the way she was sitting and looking away at the yard, the vacant air beneath the sweet gum where there used to be a rope swing. Her mask had big white ears. The right ear flopped down in front of an eye hole.

I try to convey that it is more important that we know about Leanne's daughter than how the masked strangers became masked strangers, and what they are actually capable of

doing in this universe. I hoped that the story would feel conscious of the convention of the masked stranger from movies, and that the tradition might add to the uneasiness of the situation, not knowing exactly what they would do, and I wanted the uneasiness to complicate Leanne's feelings about the strangers. She believes that one of the strangers is her daughter, so she wants to trust them. And because the story is told from a first person perspective, I hope to create a suspension of disbelief.

I fear that too much plausibility would push characterization in a direction I want to avoid. In Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), I might not be able to believe in the relationship between the computer technician and Mike, the evolving operating system on the moon's penal colony, if I knew everything about the universe and how the AI was created. In Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), it is more believable to me that there is no explanation for how the ansible, a device meant for instantaneous communication across the galaxy, works. As it is, it moves the story, and we forget that such a thing might otherwise have been a plot hole. The ansible, in this case, is made believable because we know it at least has limitations. I believe that if the characters can accept the science or magic of their universe, then I am more inclined to suspend my disbelief. This is sometimes easier to accomplish when writing in the first person point of view, when the information the reader receives is inherently limited.

Wonderbook contributor David Anthony Durham explains how in his historical novel, *Gabriel's Story*, a limited first person perspective allows him to create a suspension of disbelief. Durham uses a stove as an example—something, he says, it might not be worth the time to put research into: "We don't need to know the make and model of the stove because Gabriel doesn't know it either. He sees it, though, and I

wanted readers to as well [. . .] For me, those details—real ones combined with imagined ones—build the suspension of disbelief" (221). Similarly, Carrie Brown explains in "The Conjurer's Art: The Rules of Magical Realism and How to Break Them" that the fantastical nature of a story needs no explanation if the writing is specific enough to make the fantastical real. Imagery involving the fantastic should be treated as something that really exists in the universe. It is not a matter of rules or irregularities—it is a matter of the reader seeing the magic not as an abstract concept but as a tangible thing the characters can interact with. Magic and science becomes mundane, and the writer is then able to keep these seemingly normal elements in the background.

I believe that the only part of a story worth exploring is character, its protagonist and the circumstances pushing the protagonist toward a significant change. A story can be more literary or artful when plausibility becomes secondary, so it is reasonable that a speculative story does not spend time explaining how the fantastical is made possible; such has been a convention of different forms of popular literature and art since the beginning of art.

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THE DIVE

Our grandfather gyrates skinless on the diving board. Holds his arms out, jumps in. Water turns pink following the cramping of vulnerable red muscles twitching from chlorine, lumps of tree sap collected near the bottom. Grandfather finds the shallow end and wades up the stairs, looks at us, his grandchildren. A loose white strap of tendon stretched over where his testicles should be. We take turns wrapping his thick hairy skin over our torsos. Susan is the youngest of us. She is having her turn fitting into Grandfather's skin. Sticks her legs down his legs and furls them up so they will better fit. She jokes about hemming them above her ankles. Sweat pours down our foreheads. I am the oldest of the grandchildren. I won't get in the pool—our grandfather's greasy sweet pink coloration may get in my nose. Susan puts her arms in grandfather's arms and furls them up, says she will hem those at the wrists. On her, the arms and legs look like fleshy accordions. "When may I take off my skin?" I ask. Grandfather crosses his fleshless arms, looks at me with bloodshot blue eyes and grits his exposed incisors together, the teeth left for holding in dentures. "When you're old enough, you'll know," he gums. Susan comes forward and slings the skin over my shoulder and dives nose-first into the pool.

DIFFERENT FACES

The strangers arrived a couple hours before Robert came home from work. Leanne was in the kitchen carving pear slices into a bowl when one of them knocked on the front door. She opened the door and found the strangers there—three of them—each looking tired and slouching in dress suits, each wearing an animal mask.

Leanne couldn't see their faces. At first glance, her body instinctively lurched a bit with the inability to connect facial expressions with things she was either comfortable or familiar with. The feeling took a moment to subside. Her right hand supported her on the doorframe. She studied their bodies for a moment and asked whether she could help them or not. "Are you looking for someone?"

None of them answered.

"If you're looking for my husband, he isn't home. Do you mind coming back later?"

The red-headed woman with a bunny mask sat at the top of the porch steps. She turned and looked at Leanne then turned back to the yard. The way she did this—looking away at the yard and the vacant air beneath the sweet gum where there used to be a rope swing—reminded Leanne of her daughter, Rebecca. The woman's mask had big white ears. The right ear flopped down in front of an eye hole.

A large man with an elephant mask stood on the other side of the young woman. He just stood there, stupid looking, his big arms limp against his body, his blue-gray elephant trunk resting on his fat chest.

It was the skinny man with a fox mask who had knocked. He stood there now a few feet away, blinking at Leanne with brown eyes through narrow eye holes. She thought his eyes were very pretty.

She closed the door and stood in the kitchen for a little while, thinking. *Will they force the door?* It would be wise to call the police, she told herself, even though the strangers hadn't technically done anything wrong, unless wearing masks and being unsettling was illegal. She didn't know. Robert would be home soon, anyway, and they could talk about the situation together as a family.

She picked up the pear-carving knife from the kitchen table and stood in the foyer for a little while, the fox man still lingering outside the front door, his pasty silhouette casting a thin shadow on the wooden floorboards.

Leanne thought of her daughter again. Strange women didn't normally remind her of Rebecca. The memories pricked at her like freezing water, churned her stomach.

She hadn't left the house much since Rebecca and Rebecca's husband, Tom, disappeared. Robert had encouraged her to go out, see her friends again; her friends had come to the house for a while, sat with her, but she had felt for months now that leaving home again would be a hard decision to make, even to go to the store. There was no explaining this to Robert—it wasn't that she feared being kidnapped by the unknowable man standing behind a pallet of cereal about to go on display, or the car swooshing down the wrong side of the highway with no headlights. The thought of leaving the house simply made Leanne nervous. When she thought about her daughter and son-in-law, whose memories she tried fiercely to avoid, Leanne felt nervous and lost.

The fox man had moved away from the door slightly. Leanne could see the shadow of his body moving towards the young woman, looking down at her, taking a seat beside her. The elephant man still standing in the yard waiting.

The girl could not be my daughter, she told herself. There was no doubt about it. It was silly, anyway, associating a stranger with someone she loved.

Leanne put the knife back on the counter, went to the front door, opened it. The fox man had his hands in his lap. He, too, was looking out at the yard, examining it as though it was something he remembered.

The young woman with the bunny mask turned and looked at Leanne, who asked them to come in, if they wanted. "No need to wait out here where it's hot," she said. She guessed that was the right thing to do.

The elephant man was the first to move towards the door. He was such a lumbering thing, his arms jiggling like noodles as he walked.

The fox man and bunny woman stood up together. The fox man touched the bunny woman's elbow as he allowed her to lead the way. *Some kind of gentleman*, Leanne thought.

"You want something to eat?" she asked. The three masked strangers stood around the island where Leanne had been slicing pears. "You can have some fruit or I can make you dinner. It's not too early, is it?"

The fox man nodded, touched the edge of the bowl containing Leanne's pear slices.

"You want some pear?"

The bunny woman took a pear from the wooden fruit bowl in the corner. She took the knife herself and sliced some of the fruit onto a paper towel. She divided the pieces into two portions. The elephant man accepted one.

The fox man sliced a pear for himself. He was a skinny man, and Leanne doubted he could eat the whole thing. She almost followed the strangers to the living room to eat fruit with them, but there was something oddly intimate about their meeting—she stood in the doorway, saw how the elephant man gingerly lifted his trunk up to place a slice between his fat-human lips.

Should I ask who they are? What they want?

The young woman lifted the chin from her bunny mask, placed a pear slice between her teeth.

Not Rebecca's teeth, Leanne thought. But to be honest, she couldn't remember what Rebecca's teeth looked like. They had been noticeably, remarkably crooked once, but then she had worn braces, and then Rebecca's teeth looked like every other mouth of teeth. When Rebecca was little, they played catch in the yard, and one day the ball caught her right in the mouth and knocked a baby tooth out. *If I say her name, will she look at me?* She went back into the kitchen, tried not to think of her daughter. In an hour Robert would be home, and they could figure out what to do about the strangers. She figured Robert would want to get rid of them—not such a bad idea, maybe. Leanne still didn't know if it would be a good idea to just get rid of them.

Robert came home, saw the strangers sitting together on the couch, Leanne sitting opposite them in a recliner reading the paper. She got up to meet him, and they went into the kitchen to talk.

"They haven't said anything since they got here. I was just reading the paper because they're so quiet."

"Why did you invite them into the house?"

"I think the girl is Rebecca," Leanne said, a dryness in her mouth. She poured a glass of water, took a drink.

Robert looked at her for the longest time, went back to the living room and regarded the silent strangers in their animal masks.

He returned to the kitchen. "What makes you think she's Rebecca?"

"I don't know. Just had the feeling. And she has Rebecca's eyes."

"A lot of girls have Rebecca's eyes," Robert said.

"Maybe. But I also feel kind of sorry for the big one. I think the other two are taking care of him. Earlier today he dropped a handful of pears on the carpet and the man with the fox mask bent over and picked it all up. The big guy tried to take them back, but the woman took the pear slices and threw them in the garbage. Then the fox-mask man sat by the big guy and rubbed his shoulder for a while, like he was a big baby or something."

"You think they're from the circus?"

"What circus?" Leanne asked.

"I don't know," Robert said. "Or they could be from a home or something. You know what I mean."

"You think they're all crazy," Leanne said.

"I mean, they could be crazy. They're wearing animal masks. What're their names?"

"They don't talk."

"You let three strangers into our house and you don't even know their names."

"If I knew their names they probably wouldn't be sitting on our couch," Leanne said, quickly. Her face turned red. If she had known for sure that the girl with the bunny mask was not Rebecca, she would not have welcomed the strangers into her home. She had had enough with strangers as it was—old friends and family, everyone except Robert, had become strangers to her. Recognizable faces came into her life and left as soon as they'd made an impression.

The feeling had actually preceded Rebecca's disappearance. Rebecca and Tom were supposed to have a child, once. Rebecca had an emergency c-section, and the child came out dead in the surgeon's hands. The worst thing about this was that Leanne had been frightened by the idea of being a grandmother. She feared losing her daughter to this other thing. She knew it was an irrational thought and it only came to her once in a while in the eight and a half months Rebecca had been pregnant. *I wish she'd never gotten pregnant*. She never told Robert. Leanne bottled the emotion up, and when the child died in its mother's womb, she had felt the whole thing was her fault. She knew it wasn't her fault, she knew it was her fault, it wasn't—she prayed about it for months. Then she completely forgot about the child when Rebecca disappeared.

She hated strangers. Only Robert and Rebecca mattered. The redhead with the bunny mask had to be her daughter, she thought. There was no way the bunny-mask

woman was not her daughter—Leanne would not have allowed the woman to enter her space had it not been Rebecca.

Who were the others? Others who had also disappeared? Was the fox man Tom? No, Tom was dead. And Rebecca was simply missing. Vanished, newly transparent in a world of strangers.

Leanne started dinner when Robert went to take a shower. The strangers followed her into the kitchen. The elephant man, his big elephant trunk hanging in front of his chest, took a knife from the drawer, a plate from the cabinet, followed Leanne's directions. He chopped an onion, julienned a carrot. The fox man ripped to pieces a head of lettuce. The bunny woman—Rebecca, stranger—prepared a vinaigrette, following directions from a cookbook prescribed by Leanne: beat vinegar in a bowl with garlic, salt, sugar, pepper. This was family enough. Maybe the bunny mask was not Rebecca—so long as she didn't have to learn her name, she might easily forget their presence, whenever they decided to move on.

Leanne tried talking to the young woman with the bunny mask before going to bed. She had given the stranger a pair of pajamas, pink flannels with yellow ducks on them. The stranger took off her pants, saw Leanne watching her from the hallway—she approached the door slowly, the mask still on, eased it shut. Leanne had hoped to catch a glimpse of the young woman's face.

She went downstairs, glimpsed into the living room. The other two strangers were there, masks still on—*they sleep in those dirty things, too?*—the fox man was on the

couch, the elephant man on the floor next to him. They had some kind of peculiar relationship, these three strangers. Leanne wondered if they were relatives.

Robert lay in bed waiting for her. He had a book in his hand and shut it quickly after Leanne entered the room.

"You think one of us needs to stay up tonight?" he asked. "I mean, we don't know those people. They might do anything. If they don't try to kill us in our sleep, they'll steal from us for sure."

"I don't think they'll do anything," Leanne said. "They were pretty decent people today at dinner, weren't they?" She immediately thought about dinner. The fox man had sat at the end of the table, his mask barely lifted above his mouth so he could eat. The other two sat to his right. The elephant man would dribble a bit of vinaigrette on his pale chin, his coat, and the bunny woman would use her towel to wipe it off him.

"You still think that's Rebecca?" Robert asked.

Leanne realized she had been smiling. She lay under the covers with him, the half light of the lamp revealing her expression. She didn't remember crawling into bed. Her mind was wrapped up in Rebecca.

"She's staying in Rebecca's room," she said.

"You didn't answer my question."

Leanne rolled her shoulders, sighed. "I stayed in the room a bit with her after giving her some pajamas. I asked her what her name was. She didn't answer."

"I don't know why they won't talk." Robert huffed.

Leanne cleared her throat. "Then I asked her: 'You're Rebecca,' I said to her. It seemed to catch her off guard. She had been feeling the pajamas between her fingers.

They were Rebecca's pajamas. Very soft. She wore them at college. She looked up at me when I asked her, then looked back at the pajamas."

"We should ask them to take off their masks," Robert said. "That would be the sensible thing to do."

"I don't know. That might seem rude. I don't want them to feel unwelcome."

"We could go in there and tear their masks off. First we could call the police, just in case they get violent. We'd have the upper hand. This is our house, after all. It'd look really suspicious if people in masks put up a fight, you know?"

Leanne smiled. She could tell her husband hadn't meant it. A mockingbird chirped outside their window. Whereas the insane noise might normally drive her to a shouting fit, she lay in bed calm, thinking of their daughter. Robert turned the lamp off. Leanne lay in bed most of the night, the sound of a mockingbird so close—how could anything bad happen with such a familiarity near at hand?—and the thought of Rebecca sleeping in her old bedroom. Then, like any of the mood swings Leanne had become accustomed to experience, it occurred to her that the masked stranger might not be their daughter.

The mockingbird started to annoy her. Robert snored beside her. How could the man sleep with such a question looming over their heads?

She looked across the room at the clock. It was three in the morning. A nervous sensation shook her for a moment. She crawled out of bed, tightened a robe around her. She went downstairs, stood outside Rebecca's room for a while, put her ear to the door and listened to the sound of the young woman breathing.

The stranger was asleep. Leanne cracked the door open, careful not to make a noise. The sleeping woman still wore the filthy bunny mask. The covers were off her, an arm hanging over the side of the bed.

Rebecca's arm? It was hard to tell in the dark. A spot of moonlight splashed over the stranger's body down to the hips. Leanne eased the door open. She stood there in the open doorway, thinking about what to do.

Standing over the bunny mask now, she thought about pulling the thing off, what she might find. If it was not her daughter, the stranger might do anything. She was afraid of what could happen. She didn't want to be murdered in her own house, out here in the middle of nowhere. Her heart thumped heavily in her chest. Her hand waved over the stranger's stomach, fingers catching on the seam of the pajama top.

Leanne lifted the shirt up slightly, looking for the scar. The straight line below Rebecca's navel. Outside the room, footsteps. Leanne looked for the scar but couldn't see well enough in the dark.

A hand reached up and caught her wrist. The stranger was looking up at her now. Dark holes where the woman's eyes should be. They looked at one another in the dark for a moment. The stranger's grip was tight, then lessened—she let her hand drop back on her stomach, then covered herself where Leanne had been searching.

"I thought you were somebody else," Leanne said dreamily. "Please forgive me. I'll go."

She walked out of the room.

A figure stood in the hallway, looking down at her.

The elephant man moved closer, stood right on top of Leanne. His eyes were like black holes. Leanne looked into them for the longest time. The giant man moved into Rebecca's room, closed the door behind him.

Things were quiet. She could hear the fox man muttering something in the living room. He must talk in his sleep—that's why the big one got up and left, Leanne thought. She stood there a moment, listening, then realized she didn't care what the stranger was saying. She went back to bed. Robert lay there quietly. She got in the bed with him, turned away from her husband's body. Another moment and she could feel his chest against her back rising and falling, an arm curling around her.

It was Saturday morning. They woke at nine, lay in bed until ten. The room was hot, the sun melting in through the window like oil in water. They listened for the strangers, heard nothing. Robert said he hoped they made breakfast. "It's the least they could do for taking them in," he said. He rolled over, put his shoes on. Leanne lay in bed a while longer, waiting for Robert to come back. He never did. She got up and dressed, went down and found him standing at the front door.

"They left a note," he said. "They said thank you. Imagine that. Didn't say goodbye or anything, just left."

The couch had been made up, all the throw blankets folded and placed in their proper locations across various pieces of furniture.

"I'll make us breakfast," she said, finally. "No, forget it. It's too late for breakfast anyway."

"Let's get dressed. You want to go out for lunch?"

Leanne thought about it. She went up to the guest room, looked for more clues of the strangers' existence in the house. There was a rough spot on the carpet where the giant man must have slept. The bed was made up. The young woman hadn't left any note.

The house felt so tight around her now. She needed to get out immediately. She and her husband dressed, went out to the car. There was a momentary fogging of vision, the world around her so new, its own order in place. Don't think about Rebecca. Don't think about anything, she told herself. Robert was there now. They rode away from the house. It began to fade in the rearview mirror. Then it was gone entirely.

CAPSULE, TEARDROP, MOON

I felt strange, watching Tom Hayward go down. The rational part of me knew he would be alive—alive as anyone standing, breathing, living above ground. But he would become just as dead to me as my father.

Hayward gave me a smile before the capsule's doors closed and locked. He and my father had once shared ideas. He joked, once, that the reason I was attracted to him was because he was so like my father.

Hundreds of people showed up for the Haywards' burial, each with either useful or nostalgic gifts to remind Tom and his wife, Chloe, of the twenty-first century. A dozen more couples were scheduled to be locked and frozen in the vaults beneath Atlanta, but the Haywards were the first to go. Hayward had told me one night, while his wife was at a meeting in Seattle, that he hoped not to remember me when he woke up five-thousand years in the future. The gifts the people brought to be frozen alongside them, however, made it seem unlikely that anything could be forgotten—history books vacuum-sealed in polymer bags, celebrity magazines, photographs of children playing in yards, baseball cards. The general public had been allowed to make donations, and those items too would emerge from a separate vault only a foot from the main capsule. I had been there to help the couple load Earth's history into the vault. Tom didn't say much to me, but he never said much to me in the presence of his wife.

My fiancé, Jesse, had brought the Haywards a small photo album containing pictures of Atlanta from atop Stone Mountain. "That's good," Tom had said to him, lifting a box full of donated albums into the open vault.

"In case things change, you'll have this to remember the city by," Jesse had said. It was apparent from Jesse's rare enthusiasm for my professional interests that he really wanted to connect with Tom. They had not been such good friends, before. Jesse was the jealous type, lived in anxiety on the nights I would be late coming home from the university.

Now Tom's arms, legs, and torso were strapped into the padded capsule. He gave me a sly wink after picking me out of the crowd. Jesse never realistically suspected anything to my knowledge; there were just nights when he would lay next to me and express his jealousy, then tell me how sorry he was for feeling that way. Tom and I plus a small team of engineers had worked together on the capsule, and that was the extent of our relationship, as far as Jesse was concerned.

Chloe stretched her pinky over to touch Tom's knuckle. She had more sponsors than Tom because Atlanta loved her more. She worked in a soup kitchen and cleaned animals at a shelter. Everyone was still a little angry about Tom's early morning encounter with a control room operator from Houston.

No one knew about the two of us, though -- nights spent far from the suburbs of Atlanta.

I had read one of Hayward's articles on time jumps, particle acceleration, and the autobiography entitled *Forging Time, Frozen but Not Forgotten*. I told him, once, that I didn't like the title, which seemed a little melodramatic. In the book Tom describes his and his wife's preparation for the big sleep. There was a whole chapter devoted to saying goodbye to loved ones; a very short chapter devoted to what might happen if the atmosphere above ground has changed; a chapter explaining how quickly they might

adapt to future society/hunting and gathering; and a rosy chapter devoted to he and his wife's near divorce and how they came to make the decision to be frozen together, how the decision might theoretically save their marriage. But what if it didn't? It wouldn't be marriage five-thousand years from now, I told him. Likely, they would only be two people relying on one another for survival.

Behind me and Jesse, the crowd waved red flags and blew horns.

Jesse pulled my arm. "People are waiting to say goodbye," he said.

Hayward and I stared at one another for a moment. Then I closed my eyes and went with Jesse, who made a face at the oddly intimate exchange.

"I told you he reminds me of my daddy," I said. "It's like saying goodbye to him all over again." Tom had worked with my father years before his death, so the excuse, in my opinion, made sense.

"Your dad was a better astrophysicist," Jesse said. We walked away from the crowd, both of us glancing back to see the cylinders overwhelming the view of the city. "I didn't know what to say to him," Jesse said. "I didn't know him that well."

The first couple to be frozen underground was from Manhatten. The capsule was placed near Central Park's Conservatory Garden, and the event had made international headlines. The Haywards' burial was just as big. A monument was erected near where the capsule would burrow its way out five-thousand years later.

"Hell of a funeral," Jesse said.

A week later, after the tunnel hatch was paved over, a sculptor was commissioned by the city of Atlanta to make a likeness of the Haywards from a block of granite at the head of the burial site. Their marble faces would look down on the pedestrians for as long

as Atlanta stood, for as long as the stone would last. Below the monument, the inscription read:

HAYWARD CAPSULE OF ATLANTA, DEPOSITED ON THE SITE OF BROOK HEAVEN ON SEPTEMBER 23, 2038, BY THE HUXLEY-WESTINGHOUSE ELECTRIC COMPANY. IF ANYONE SHOULD COME UPON THIS CAPSULE BEFORE THE YEAR A.D. 7039 LET HIM NOT WANTONLY DISTURB IT, FOR TO DO SO WOULD BE TO DEPRIVE THE PEOPLE OF THAT ERA OF THE LEGACY HERE AWAITING THEM.

I thought the inscription was gaudy. I came with Jesse to drop off flowers, as had a lot of Tom and Chloe's friends and relatives. Jesse put his arm around my shoulder and I shrugged him away. I was afraid of marriage. I had learned to miss the point in it—eight years of college with no boyfriend, I suppose, does that to you.

"What would you do?" he said. "If I were buried for thousands of years?"

"I'd be sad," I said uncomfortably. I was uncomfortable. I suspect he wanted me to say, *"Well I'd be there next to you."* But I wasn't sure that I would be there. I loved Jesse, but I didn't understand why. His father owned a mining company on Tycho, but we were both born into money, so money had nothing to do with our relationship. Being with Jesse was always exciting, and our conversations of the future were always engaging, but afterwards—in our moments of silence—I always felt alone. Though I never imagined how a life with Tom Hayward might be fulfilling, he had at least filled that gap for me. I don't think it had anything to do with sex. Jesse and I had great sex. But Jesse, a man who became a geologist at the request of his father, had no ambition. It never seemed necessary to him that he should be remembered. Fading away, he thought—and he had

said this in some form or another—was a formality of nature, and we are all like cells in a tissue that do our part, and that's it. We create more cells, die, and the journey continues. But what journey is that? What are we moving towards?

Hayward had hundreds of answers.

Jesse, when I asked him about the human condition, only said that he could not understand it. It's not that Jesse was a cynic, but maybe he was overly simplistic. That is about what our symbiosis amounted to—he had no ambitions in life, and I wanted answers to questions I didn't even know needed asking. Someday I would want to talk to someone about my feelings, and I never imagined Jesse would be there for me. But it was the little things that kept me with him—his smile, the way he worried over his hair, the way his eyes dropped when he was feeling miserable, the way his voice rattled and reassured me when we woke up together. Part of me knew that I had wronged him and I wanted forgiveness.

A month before Hayward was buried, Jesse's dissertation on the composition and retail possibilities of Tycho ray dust was approved by his board of advisers. He proposed to me on his father's porch in Savannah, knee first, a tradition that ran deep in his family. Love is a complicated thing. I said "Yes," because I wanted this. I wanted this and I didn't want this. I had been sleeping with Hayward for nearly a year. I felt bad for his wife, Chloe. What better way, I thought, to make things right.

(*I get engaged, and I stop seeing Tom. I stop seeing him and that's it.*)

Along with the traditional diamond engagement ring, he also gave me a matching pair of teardrop pearl earrings that he said was exported from Tycho—tiny yellow natural spherules custom fitted into platinum hoops. The pearls had been discovered in the dust

of Tycho in three basic shapes: teardrop, pear, dumbbell. Greens and yellows, reds and browns. These were yellow—my birthstone, and extremely rare. Jesse had kept me up one night explaining how the dust was blasted into its shape when a meteor struck the moon's surface.

"There are only a few here on Earth," he told me. "It's a gift from my father."

"We can talk about them later," I said, helping Jesse up to his feet. We kissed. I felt overwhelmed. We walked over to the bridge and looked down into the water. Jesse scratched his fingers against the stone railing. He looked up at the moon. Sometimes he pretended to see the mining colonies, an American flag, miles of solar panel wrapped around the moon's surface, giving its residents warmth.

"Sure," he said. "As long as you still want to marry me."

I told him I did. I put the box in my pocket.

#

Six months later I was in the bathroom at our wedding reception shining a light down the sink drain. I was counting on the glint of a teardrop pearl earring to come back and give me hope. I had rushed upstairs to the dressing room to find and unravel a wire hanger to shove into the drain, jiggle it around until something caught; that way I could at least know I was looking in the right place. The drain curved up and over halfway to the floor. I suspected the earring was caught in the drain, and I had no idea how to take the thing apart without leaving a mess.

A knock at the door startled me. I had been in there a while. I couldn't feel anything with the hanger. I took the pocket light and shined it down the drain again, feeling lost.

The door eased open. "Elaina, are you in there?"

I knew Jesse would kill me when he found I had lost one of his father's earrings. The other was nestled alone in the coin bag down in my purse, now sitting next to a plant on the marble countertop by the door. To lose the other pearl would be unthinkable. I'd discovered after being given the earrings that they were actually originals, thrown into a sample-return container by Edwin Aldrin.

An hour before, my stepmother—tipsy from the champagne and the aroma of lavender and potpourri—had commented on "just how wonderfully they're shaped like teardrops," and, growing closer, breathing down my neck—"perfect yellow teardrops, just like Henry said." The other guests had admired the earrings as well. I was uncomfortable with all the attention the spherules were receiving, more so than the occasional nod and prayer that my marriage to Jesse may succeed. The earrings made me a target for conversation, *lucky this and that*, and eventually I had to escape to the bathroom to splash water on my face, whatever might make me feel at ease.

"Honey, you aren't sick," Jessie said from around the corner.

"I'll be out in a second," I said, my voice cracking. The wire hanger scraped the metal rim of the pipes as I tried to pull it away.

"What are you doing?" he asked, peeking around the corner.

I flung the remains of the hanger onto the countertop and perched myself against the sink, my hands on either side of me. I gave him *a look*, a part of our unspoken code, my inability to show any other expression. Jesse looked uneasy.

His face tightened. Nothing about the curve of my bosom in this tight yellow reception dress could distract him from the fact that I'd been digging around in the sink after something I'd dropped.

"Please tell me it was just the wedding band," he said, red faced. He looked at my finger. The golden band was there where he'd slid it on three hours before.

I shook my head. "Help me undo these pipes," I said.

"Help you undo the pipes—"

"Jesse, please."

"No, tell me you didn't—"

"The fucker fell off my ear when I was washing my hands," I said, pulling on my earlobe.

Cautiously, Jesse approached me and touched the tender spot where the teardrop had been. Jesse's ears turned purple when he was frustrated. "Where's the other?" he asked, using his thumb and forefinger to turn my head and look.

"In my purse."

He pointed. "Is that your purse?"

"You know that's my purse."

"Why don't you hold onto it," he said, his voice shaking now. Down the hall, music thundered. The DJ must have changed the tracks, since no one at our reception had danced to the slower songs. There were mostly elderly family members, shy college friends and colleagues. "Get the damn purse," he said, finger glued in its direction.

I walked over and snatched it up and pulled its strap over my right shoulder. "It fell off when I was—"

"I heard you," he said, bending over to examine the pipe beneath the sink. "I'll need a wrench to get this loose."

I nodded.

"What were you going to do with the hanger?"

"I wanted to make sure it was down there."

Jesse stood back up, his ears glowing. "You don't even know that it's in the sink?"

"I meant I wanted to be sure it hadn't gone down farther."

He bent back over and wriggled the pipe. "It's what the curves are for," he said. "Don't tell my father you lost his earring."

My earring. That had been given to me as a gift. "Your father wouldn't care if I did," I said, my voice rising above Jesse's. But I knew that he would. Henry had paid a fortune to have the teardrops processed and placed into the platinum hoops. And God knew the amount of work it had taken for Henry to get those miniscule chunks of glass. I couldn't even remember where he said they'd been, whether the handfuls of moon dust and spherules had been regarded useless by the old lunar receiving facility and sold at auction—Henry had only put his index finger to his lips, *shhhh*, as though the gift came from a donor who wished to remain anonymous.

When Jesse stood up again he didn't look at me but went over to the countertop where my purse had been sitting. He flared his jacket and pulled out a cell phone. "I know someone nearby that knows how to get the pipes open." For the next forty-five minutes, we took turns guarding the sink while the other went out to the reception hall to mingle, make sure nobody suspected anything had happened, that nothing more could put a damper on our afternoon.

When it was my turn, I tried to avoid Henry. He finally forced me into a corner, smiling, his eyes wavering near my hairline. He had this sandpapery skin, white hair, and a stud in his nose. A gold plated eagle he'd earned working on Terethia dangled from his breast, reflected light into my eyes.

"I can't hear anything these people are saying to me," he said, barely audible over the music. I knew Jesse's father would complain one way or the other about some part of the reception. If I could have controlled it, I would have kept both Henry and his new alcoholic wife as far away as possible, regardless of how kind they'd been to me.

"Where's Jesse?" he asked. "I haven't seen the two of you together in over an hour. People want photographs with the groom and his wife together. You two aren't already fighting?"

"No Henry," I said, trying to hold his eyes on my own so that his glare wouldn't find my vacant earlobes.

It already had. His bottom lip drooped a bit, eyes squinted, and he walked off to stand with his wife, who was laughing uncontrollably at something a relative was saying. Whether it was funny, I doubted. I couldn't stand the woman. A man in khakis with a large black bag tromped in through the front and headed for the guest bathroom. I followed. In the bathroom Jesse and I stood with our arms crossed watching the semi-well-dressed plumber tear the pipes apart. He reached his fingers in and scratched only to find scum and mold and wads of hair.

He looked up at Jesse, then at me. I felt the color leave my face. The man shook his head.

Jesse got down on the floor under the sink and looked for himself.

"You must be joking," he said.

The plumber kneeled beside him, half interested. "Can you tell me how big it was?"

Jesse indicated with his fingers the size of a pea.

"It could have been washed down," the plumber said, indifferently.

"Must be joking."

I covered my face, embarrassed. "Must be fucking joking," I said to my hands. I felt the nothingness hanging from my earlobes. It wasn't the end of the world, I assured myself, but it was definitely a solemn beginning to a relationship that I had been unsure of in the first place. Jesse's face seemed to perpetuate reds and purples after our wedding night. I began to notice a tiring side of him that would have been frightening, even if our marriage had been worth more to me.

#

It's hard to say what I want. I don't need things. I went to visit a college friend in Atlanta who lived in a tiny apartment with an herbal garden growing in pots out on her balcony. I could live in an apartment like that. I could have left Jesse and lived alone for a while. That's what I wanted—to live on my own, in a small apartment in a small town, where I could consider all the questions that had always gone unanswered.

Tom Hayward once told me that I was too shut in. That the reason I was so unsure of myself and of Jesse was because I never made an effort to go outside and experience the world. I'd never seen much of the roughness of Africa, the poverty of China, the overpopulation in India. I was too focused on my career and too stuck in the life I had been raised to manage. My life wasn't all that bad growing up, but Hayward was right. I

should've gotten out more. Jesse and I would never have worked out; I might have been happier.

I tried to keep our relationship together. We kept the remaining teardrop in a glass case in the bedroom. It looked at us in the morning, at night, in the morning again--every day. I wondered whether I would have ever learned of Jesse's true side, the side that valued things over memories, had I not lost its duplicate—whether I would have worn the earrings daily, showed them off at work, at parties, at dinner. We talked about having kids, but never got around to it. We talked about going to the moon to live for a while on Henry's colony at Tycho. We underwent a few weeks of training, but I backed out because I was still grounded on Earth. Jesse talked about how we would look out of our sunroof and see Earth in the distance, everything at once. He sounded so deep when he said this, like the planet was something that could be observed as a singular entity. I felt bad when I made the initiative to drop out of the program. The sickness I endured got to me. I felt like I was destroying some dream of his, even though Jesse had never hinted that he wanted to make such a leap before we married. I thought a lot about Hayward—what he and his wife and the others were doing five-thousand years from now, whether Atlanta still existed, whether he and his wife were raising a family on a brand new Earth, a brand new colony with languages and cultures different than our own—no academic responsibilities, no conformities, no religions, no doubts.

A year after our marriage, Jesse seemed to catch onto my longing. He knew that I kept a diary and forwarded messages to Hayward via the keypad on the base of his monument—maybe Tom would receive them sometime in the future.

I love you and I hope things are going well for you.

Each month a new message. Short, quick. There's a chance he won't get them, anyway. But things would go well for Tom because his responsibilities would be limited to cultural adaptation. I had been working on adaptation my entire life.

I told Jesse about you. About us.

Jesse did not take it well, even though it all happened before we married. He was old fashioned in that way. He closed himself in the observatory at home and changed the codes on the door lock. He ordered take-out and had the food delivered through the back entrance. I don't even know if he worked on anything. He would talk to his father on the moon, and I would listen outside the door to their one-sided conversation. I wondered about the things Henry told him. This went on for nearly a week. I went to the Haywards' monument every day that Jesse stayed locked up in the observatory. I would leave Jesse notes on the door, telling him where I had gone, just in case he happened to emerge willing to talk.

All this, and I am starting to feel bad for Jesse. I feel as though I have ruined a part of his life, but I know that if he leaves me everything will be okay for him. At least. I wonder what will happen to me.

More and more, I doubted that Tom would ever receive my messages, that the computers would still hold memory five-thousand years from now, but it was a relief sending the messages anyway. I had no family to communicate with. I could have talked to friends, but I only had one best friend, and Tom was not the man I married. My first mistake. Marry your best friend, if you marry at all. That's one thing I learned from all this.

Eventually Jesse came out of the observatory. He sent me a text and we met at a fountain near Hayward's monument. Jesse said he had taken a shower and thought about how he might fix whatever it was that had happened. He brought me a coffee from a nearby café. He looked into the bottom of his own Styrofoam cup. I asked him if he was okay.

"I'm finishing my training and will be moving to Tycho for a while," he said.

"What are you going to do when you get there?"

He shifted the cup back and forth between his fingers. "Think for a while. Work with Dad. I don't know. He offered me a job though, if I decide to go. I haven't given him an answer yet."

"I want you to think about it," I said.

He regarded me for a moment. "If you think you might still be interested in going, I think we could work things out. I just thought it'd help if we both get away from Earth for a while."

"You mean it would help if you get away for a while."

"I don't know," he said, and I could see that it was true. I had no idea what he was thinking, but I had already made my mind up.

"I've been thinking about applying for a capsule position," I said. Really, I hadn't been thinking about it, but it just occurred to me that if I couldn't go into the future, if I couldn't erase my present and start a new life with new, more important responsibilities, then I'd have nothing left to do. For a moment Jesse sat quietly by the fountain, pondering what I had said. I felt rejuvenated. It was something I had thought about, briefly, a year or

two before when we were calibrating the timers on the first capsule. There were still a few positions available, now as I stared a Jesse awaiting a response.

"They won't take you," he said, indignantly.

"I have connections."

"You don't have a background in socioeconomics. They're looking for someone with socioeconomics, right? I read the news, you know."

"I put a lot of work into the Atlanta capsules. Of course they'll take me."

I felt a little silly. Of course they wouldn't take me. But it would be worth a shot to try. Jesse finished his coffee, sat the cup down, and fished around in his pocket for something. He adjusted himself closer to me on the cement wall lining the fountain.

"What are you thinking?" I said.

"That we should work this out somehow." He moved his hand around the pocket a little more, then pulled out the remaining teardrop pearl. He pressed it into my hand. "Do what you want with it," he said.

I studied it a moment. It looked ugly. After all, it was only a rock. I hoped they might become more common after a while of mining at Tycho; that way no one else would be cursed with the rarity of something that must always be looked after—some inanimate, soulless object. I held the pearl out over the fountain, where it would be sucked into the drain and lost to me forever. I let it dangle by its flashy platinum hook.

"What would you think if I dropped this one down the drain, too?"

Jesse put his hands in his pockets again. He huffed a little, like he thought I would really do it. "I'd think it'd be better to sell the thing and burn the money, if that's what you want. That thing means a lot to some people."

"Your people."

"It could mean more to others."

"I don't understand."

"We're always going to look beyond Earth to save ourselves from economic and environmental disaster," he said. "Dad told me this is a piece of history. It looks like something you'd find on Earth, but it isn't. You go outside and look up at the moon in the morning. It hangs up in the dim blue sky and no one notices how magnificent it is up there. It's a rock floating in the sky. There are others. And they all have things that can save us, one way or the other. You just have to look."

"It's all just money," I said.

Jesse smiled, sort of held back a laugh.

"What is it?"

"I guess you would be suited for the future," he said. "But you don't know that a similar civilization won't exist five-thousand years from now."

"How could I believe this civilization will still exist?"

"Because people like my father will ensure that it does. You just have to hope that it does."

I looked at the teardrop pearl, then brought it back and put it on the cement wall where it mixed in with the little orange, purple, and gray sediments. I told Jesse I would get rid of it, and we could forget about it.

"I'm sorry about the way I've been acting," he said.

I nodded. All I could do, really—I thought Jesse had a point about the future.

"I married you because I love you, you know," he said.

"You could say it more often."

"My mom never said it very much," he said. "And my dad wasn't ever around."

"You still want me to go live with you on the moon?"

"Only if you want to go. It's the closest thing we have, now, to a new world. I figure that's what you wanted, anyway."

"It's not exactly the kind of world I had in mind," I said.

"It's something."

He was right. For the next month we negotiated my reentry into the training program, and I worried about what would happen to my body as it readjusted to the moon's gravity. I could feel my bones shrinking already. Sometimes it hurt. I thought it might be similar to the way my body would feel coming out of a capsule into a new Earth—a new thick atmosphere, the pressure of the capsule leaving and disorienting me, and all the sickness, and all the warmth.

I sent one last message to Tom.

I thought about joining you. But you have your wife, and I have other things to do.

I sent the message and closed the stone tablet. I didn't know what those "other things to do" were, not yet. I would have to leave my job and beg for another at the Tycho colony. It was becoming larger every day. There were things for me to do there, things I hadn't thought about yet. I might invest myself in botany—a large responsibility, with fulfilling possibilities. The moon was still large, old, it held surprises. All there was left to do was go out and find a thing I wasn't looking for.

HAIR

Laurent Ryan had resolved to get rid of his daughter. The girl's untamable hair reminded him too much of his wife, Melanie. She always took showers at night before going to bed, and her silky black hair would fling over by Laurent's face on the pillow. He used her shampoo on himself after shaving her head for their fake daughter's transplant because he missed the smell of her hair at night. Four years later, her hair down to her shoulders again, Melanie drove headfirst into an asphalt paver near an exit three blocks from their home. The first night alone Laurent opened a bottle of her shampoo and squeezed the scent into his nostrils before lying down to sleep.

The wigmaker felt that he would have to get rid of Abigail himself. His son, Jeffrey, would be too busy with school and friends to dispose of an age-six mechanical sister.

Jeffrey was twelve when Abigail was built. Melanie had always wanted a little girl, and this was one of the only legal ways to have a second child in the Midwest. Laurent had rooted hair since his twenties. There were only dolls, then. The kind you played with in your lap, or put in a glass china cabinet for display. He had prodded Melanie about the sincerity of her wish. The important, useless stuff of "You'll have to wait to get a new car," or "You'll have to take care of her yourself." He never suspected one of those things would ever set foot in his house, and Jeffrey was against it too, simply because, he told Laurent, "I'm too old for a sister."

He looked at the thing when his mother lifted it, still bald, from the box. Before permanently closing the vinyl around Abigail's face, Laurent set to work on Melanie's hair with an electric shaver.

Jeffrey had said all that hair was gross. Laurent had begun to understand Jeffrey would never take an interest in wigmaking. Melanie told him, "What do you think? Don't you think he wants a life too?"

Laurent dug his thumbs in his back pockets when she said things like this.

Now, Abigail was making some kind of noise in her room, banging what sounded like a brick against the wooden floor.

A new shipment of silicon scalps had just arrived for plugging. There were several boxes of hair, this week. Laurent signed a handling agreement and slid the envelope in the mailing tube. In Abigail's room, the sound of *whomp, whomp, whomp*. Laurent's sandy brown forehead wrinkled as he read over the owners' profiles.

A man in Orange County wanted his Sally-Sister's hair done in a ponytail that wouldn't come loose.

A couple from Indianapolis had sent their human daughter's hair; Indiana law, like many places, only allow one child, unless more than one is born at a time.

A pastor in Baton Rouge wanted smart help around the church. Vacuuming, dusting, bookkeeping, that sort of thing. Sally-Sister was the newest model on the line. She was smarter than the old protocol machines that never received updates. The pastor sent some of his Afghan hound's golden hair to plug into a vinyl scalp.

Whomp whomp whomp.

Laurent imagined all these people with their shaved heads. He imagined Melanie six years ago shaving her head for Abigail. He had made his wife a wig from goat's hair to wear around the house while her natural black slowly returned. His stomach tightened when he imagined the way Melanie, in her first days of baldness, looked at herself in the

mirror and cried, how it was okay, though, because now it was like Abigail was their *real* daughter.

Jeffrey walked into the workshop, the whomping in Abigail's room stifling the sound of his footsteps. "What's she doing now?"

Laurent's hands were shaking. "Go and take whatever it is from her."

Jeffrey nodded, stood up and walked to Abigail's room. "Teresa-Sister Teresa-Sister—"

A few days ago the wigmaker had tried to explain the situation more clearly to his son. "I can't get my work done when she's around. I need you to take care of her when you're at home. When will you be free? When can you help?"

"I don't know," Jeffrey had said. "I'll let you know when I can help."

"I can't get my work done with all this noise," he said, chopping his hands through the air in front of his chest.

Actually, Laurent was used to the noise. But lately Abigail had been sneaking into his bedroom and crawling under the sheets with him. The feel of Melanie's hair an inch from his nose. The static in Abigail's voice when she said "Goodnight, father" before kissing him on the forehead. The last time she did it, Laurent yelled at her. The sound of her plastic feet tapping across the floor to her manufacturer's box in Abigail's room. It was perfect that Abigail was so bored cooped up in the house, that she could make this much noise, because now Laurent could pretend this was the reason he needed to get rid of her. "It's just too hard to concentrate with her running around the house all the time wanting to play." Not that Jeffrey cares, Laurent thought, but he didn't want to appear weak to his son. His son already showed signs of never being anything like him, the way

he walked like he was in a hurry, the way he talked about sports, begged for a car, talked about going to medical school one day.

The one thing they did seem to have in common was that neither of them ever played with Abigail, not the way Melanie used to. Outside, inside, she never cared who saw. Laurent reached for a new package of vinyl and sliced it open.

The whomping stopped. Jeffrey, of course, was more interested in riding the boulevard than taking a day to help his father with chores around the shop. Why not just recycle Jeffrey, the wigmaker thought; *It would make things better for me, financially.* He smiled, thinking about dragging a human to Huxley-Burke to be recycled like a broken machine, and reached for another box of hair. One Saturday while trimming a fistful of golden goat hairs for a particularly expensive Sally-Sister's eyebrows, Laurent had called for Jeffrey to pour coffee for the two of them. Because if he could work and drink coffee with his son, maybe he would learn whether Jeffrey had decided on trying out for the high-school football team. But Jeffrey hadn't answered. Probably sprawled out in his room, talking to girls on the hologram! Without being told, Abigail had brought two cups of coffee into the workshop instead. One for Laurent, one for herself, even though she could not drink coffee, or anything.

Very kind, he had thought. But still, the sight of his wife's hair on Abigail's silicon scalp had become too much for him to bear. His sanity was at stake. Abigail sat regarding Laurent with the hot cup between her thumbs, as though she were waiting for him to speak. How very unlike his wife, Melanie, to be patient with him. He had considered making an appointment with Huxley-Burke. He thought they could do the procedure, themselves—go into the child's head, replace the memory drives and clean the rotaries

and in a month she would be available for resale. But now that the Teresa-Sister model was out of date, he had a feeling the company wouldn't even take one as a donation.

Jeffrey came back to the workshop with his father's shoe. He tossed it by the door next to its twin.

Laurent struggled to untie the ribbon from a wrinkled box. "Can you open this for me?"

Jeffrey dug a knife out of his pocket and cut the ribbon. Inside the box, a head-full of wiry blacks and grays stuffed in and folded to the box's measurements. He poked at it with a plugging needle. "This is really gross," he said.

Laurent thought about asking for coffee again but decided against it. It really was a shame, he thought, that all these grays were mixed in with the blacks. He fumbled through the hair and pulled out a folded, handwritten letter:

Huxley-Burke LLC,

I was happy when I got your response. Thanks for accepting my packet. I'd like to change to a Teresa-Sister or earlier if you still have one. Is the eighteen month payment plan still okay? Thank you.

I've enclosed a packet of hair.

Sincerely,

Vickie Reid

Laurent knew Huxley-Burke wouldn't have a Teresa-Sister in the warehouse to program and ship, but he scanned and forwarded the letter, anyway.

The sound of Abigail's joints whirred in the hallway. She walked into the kitchen on her bare doll's feet and with glassy eyes watched her father as he began to indifferently pick the grays out of the old woman's hair.

"I heard yelling," she said, her child voice emitting spurts of vibration and static customary in an outdated model. Melanie's hair, normally matted to Abigail's warm vinyl skin, stuck out in twigs.

"Come here," he said.

She walked past Jeffrey and stood between her father's knees.

Laurent dipped his fingers in a glass of water and tried to persuade the hair to lay flat. It was becoming a fruitless habit, keeping the hair tame. Melanie had always had trouble controlling her own hair so she wore it back in a bandana or pony tail. Now, on Abigail, the hair was nearly fried and ripped beyond repair—years of combing from the vinyl up, the straightening, the mechanical twirling like a real girl for when the doll grew "bored."

And what is worse, the girl always played in the mud, dust, sand, always—to the point her vinyl needed to be cleaned twice, "Which costs *money*, keep her inside," the old man had muttered several times to his careless son.

"Nobody was yelling," Laurent said, his voice soft as he brushed his fingertips along Abigail's scalp.

Jeffrey winced when his father ran his fingers through the doll's brittle hair. He winced when his father called it "her," when he held the thing to his stomach, hugged, and sniffed the hair that had once belonged to his mother.

"Go to your room and color," Laurent said. Abigail's plastic eyelids clicked. She tapped over to Jeffrey and threw her arms around him then disappeared into the hallway. Laurent looked at his son. "I was thinking. I don't know if Huxley will take her now."

"Erase her memory yourself," Jeffrey said, still looking at Vickie Reid's box of hair.

"I'm afraid I'll break her."

"Then I can do it."

Laurent looked up at Jeffrey. Why his son has hated Abigail these past six years, he couldn't decide. Maybe, he thought, he was embarrassed of her. He decided again for the hundredth time not to bring it up.

Now Jeffrey dropped the plugging needle back on the table. The hologram beeped on the other side of the house.

"I'll call them back."

"Go ahead. We'll talk later," Laurent said, waving him away. Jeffrey stood from the table and started down the hall. Laurent wondered what Melanie would think, whether she would be ashamed or intrigued. "He's normal," Melanie had tried to convince Laurent, the last time she and her son fought, something about his staying out late with his older friends with cars, a fight that nearly drove her to tears. "That's how every kid acts with their parents when they get this old. It's how I acted when I was his age."

The box of blacks and grays smelled like cigarettes and perfume. It would take too long to remove all the grays. He closed the lid and shoved the box aside and tore open another box, the one belonging to the pastor, and began work on it instead.

At night, the shop smelled of hot silicon and glue. Laurent brought the round shell of the pastor-daughter's head between his legs and stretched a column of Afghan's hair across the scalp and poked at it with a plugging needle. The library door opened and Abigail tapped her way into the shop, stopped a few feet from the door, hands parallel to her nightgown.

"I want some milk," she said.

Laurent stopped the plugging. He got up and went into the kitchen and pulled out one of Abigail's plastic teacups. He poured some milk and handed it to her. "Don't drop it," he said, returning to the shop and his chair. A feeling like suffocation weighed down on him when she came near, these days.

Abigail came in with the milk and sat at the other end of the table. She put the milk in front of her and slid her hands across the table.

Laurent took turns plugging at the empty silicon and looking up at Abigail. "Drink your milk," he grumbled, though he knew she wouldn't actually put the cup to her painted lips. "Don't hurt yourself."

She watched Laurent. "What are you doing?"

He paused for a moment. "Bring the chair over here."

Abigail stood and took the milk in one hand and dragged the chair over the floor to his side of the table. She put the milk in front of them.

"This is a plugging needle," Laurent said. "I generally use the 36g needles for dolls. I used a 42g on you because your mother had thin hair. You know?" Abigail nodded. "They're really good for getting a natural look with dark hair because they hardly ever leave a plug."

"This hair is yellow."

"It doesn't matter. Are you listening? You can just poke poke poke away and you don't have to worry about pluggy looking hair." He fanned the hair out, turned the needle at an angle, wondered why Jeffrey wouldn't sit with him like this and learn a thing or two. "This is called directional rooting," he said. "Hear the crunch?"

"I hear the crunch."

"Crunch crunch crunch. That way you know you're rooting hair in there. The 36 needle has a lot of barbs so it puts the hair in thick. See?" They looked. "That didn't hardly put in a thing," he said. "Good thing to do is not fan it out as far. Listen for that scrunch so you know it's taking the hair. Are you listening?"

Abigail smiled.

Laurent slowed his pace, breathed in. "I could probably use a 40 crown needle," he said, nodding towards a tin box on the shelf. "Problem is they may get the hair too thick. You don't want hair plugs. They're not good. Not good on men, not good on dolls. Just—bad."

Abigail slid the milk towards him. "Fan the hair thinner and use the heavier needle," she said.

Laurent put the half finished vinyl on the table and lifted Abigail up into his lap. Melanie's hair was tangled in the back. "I was thinking about giving you new hair."

Abigail's plastic eyelids clicked. "I like my hair," she said.

Laurent closed his eyes a moment. Of course the robot would argue. Six years in his house and he'd never quite gotten used to it. "It needs changing," he said, his voice turning up a notch.

She made a harsh grunting sound, the lesser of her human expressions.

Laurent bounced Abigail on his knee a moment and looked at the milk. He stopped the bouncing and took the teacup and drank the milk, nodding. "Let's get you to bed," he said, struggling up from the chair, Abigail's cold arms wrapped around his neck. Her black Melanie-hair rubbed against his cheek.

"I want to stay with you," she said.

"I'm working. I have a lot to work on."

"I can help."

"You have to go to sleep Abigail." The girl would just lie in her box through the night listening for the scrunch scrunch scrunch of a needle penetrating vinyl. She had told him before that she could hear him in the other room working and talking to himself or her mother.

Now he laid her in the box. He sat down in the tiny chair next to a bookshelf and read to her from one of her storybooks. Eventually, Abigail closed her eyes, which meant she was only listening. Her hands folded over her chest, her head tilted slightly up. The sound of Jeffrey snoring on the other side of the wall. Laurent went back to the shop and sat the vinyl between his thighs and continued his work.

The next day an email came from Huxley-Burke requesting that Laurent discard Vickie Reid's hair. Reid's box still lay untouched in the corner of the shop with the letter folded on top. He continued to work through the day on the scalp belonging to the couple in Indianapolis. The hair smelled like peaches. His hands were beginning to wear from all the prodding. Abigail came again to watch.

"I'm bored," she said.

"You're not bored."

"I want to go outside."

"You're not bored," Laurent said again, his forehead wrinkling. He had heard her pacing outside his bedroom door last night. At least she had learned not to enter. Melanie's hair was matted in clumps against Abigail's hot vinyl ears.

That evening Jeffrey's new girlfriend came over. He walked straight to his room with a skateboard and the girl stayed and introduced herself to Laurent. "I'm Kimberly," she said, "nice to meet you," extending her tiny hand.

Laurent dropped the needle on the table, smiled, shook her hand.

She went and holed up in Jeffrey's room for a while and they eventually came out, Abigail trailing behind. Kimberly was holding Abigail's hand.

Jeffrey stooped over Laurent. "We're taking Abigail outside," he said. "She won't leave us alone."

Abigail held the girl's hand. Laurent told them to keep an eye on her, don't let her go rolling around in the grass. The kids started out, Jeffrey pushing Abigail along.

Kimberly brought a rotating tooth dog comb over to try on Abigail's hair. She seemed to like the little robot. She brushed from the scalp up—which Abigail said was painful, though she couldn't feel pain, but Laurent had told her never to comb her hair from the scalp up because it might rip out the plugs. At least the tangles were coming out. Kimberly turned Abigail towards the mirror. "What's in here?" she said, poking the top of the doll's cranium.

"A brain."

"Jeffrey told me your brain's in your chest."

Abigail shrugged her shoulders and moved the hair out of her eyes.

When Kimberly left, Abigail went on a walk through the house. She straightened her hair and pulled her hands away and saw that several strands had come out and wrapped around her fingers. She went and stood over the sink in Laurent's bathroom and pulled away all the loose hairs, several dozen. Some she threw in the trash.

Laurent found Melanie's hairs in the sink. He cleaned them out and noticed the rest in the trash as he painfully discarded the few in his hand. That night he picked up the box Vickie Reid had sent; he didn't feel like continuing with the hair from the couple in Indiana, tonight, but went to work at separating the grays from the blacks, throwing the grays in a cardboard shoebox which he would then toss into the furnace. He spent most of the night this way, tweezers in hand, removing what he could see. He went to bed and in the morning continued this work, and when his son came home he asked what Laurent planned to do with the hair.

"Ms. Reid can't afford a Sally-Sister. I'm going to send her Abigail."

Jeffrey stood over his father, watching as each new strand of gray was flung into the shoebox.

"What do you think? Do you think it's a good idea?"

Jeffrey shrugged. "Is it legal?"

"I haven't told Huxley about anything. It doesn't matter. What do you think about it?"

"It's your daughter," Jeffrey said. "Do what you have to do."

"I don't have to do anything," Laurent snapped, sifting through the hair.

Later in the dimly lit workshop, Laurent set to work on Abigail's hair. His hands shook at first as he steadily removed the plugs from the doll's scalp. He put Melanie's hair on the table and when he was done, straightened and bound the wad with a blue ribbon and placed it in a metal box for safekeeping. Something about closing the lid on the box made his heart flutter; the way he knew Melanie was inside it, how he couldn't see her, how he knew part of her would always be there. When he came back to the workshop to set a few inches of Vickie's hair into Abigail's vinyl, he found her sitting beneath the table rubbing the empty terrain of her scalp with the other.

"I need you to come out," he said.

"I can't come out."

"You can come out if you want. I'm going to give you—I'll give you better hair."

"I'm stuck."

"You're not stuck." He dragged her out and sat her on his lap and held her to him. It was easier, now, holding her, the scent and feel of his wife's hair no longer there to impede him.

He spent half an hour plugging Vickie's hair into Abigail's scalp. Because she was a Teresa model, the scalp could not be removed once it was set. She sat on the floor between his legs so he could work. He prodded at the top of her head with a 43g and a handful of mostly-black hairs. Some grays had survived Laurent's wrath, but he felt that removing too many, anyway, would negate authenticity.

At eleven, he looked at the work he had done—about a palm's diameter of hair on the side, leaving the rest of Abigail's head bald. He told her not to look in the mirror until he was finished. This, he thought, might keep her from making seemingly programmed visits to the bathroom. He looked at his work, and saw less of his wife and more of the daughter Melanie had intended since Jeffrey was twelve. It excited him to know how the product would turn out, that he could do whatever he wanted with her with no real pressure from a buyer.

Kimberly came by after school to drop Jeffrey's holo-tablet off. Jeffrey was trying out for the football team, she said. "He was afraid this might get stolen."

Laurent nodded, sure this was just another ruse for Jeffrey to get away from the shop. He muttered this half to himself, half so that Kimberly could hear, just to be sure.

"There's a lot of pressure on him," she said, putting the tablet on the kitchen counter. "Cody Tomorowitz asked him to join. Cody's the quarterback and wanted to get some players he could be close to. They want to win."

Laurent nodded, told Kimberly it was good to see her again.

Abigail walked into the kitchen and asked if Kimberly liked her new hair. Laurent had still only covered half of Abigail's scalp; the doll pushed it over the bald area, making

it look more like a miniature punk-rocker than a Teresa-Sister doll. Kimberly's face blushed.

"Why'd you do that?" she asked, lowering her voice with each word. She said in a whisper that Jeffrey had told her Abigail's original hair belonged to his dead mother, and "Why would you get rid of it?"

Laurent shook his head at Kimberly and walked Abigail out of the kitchen. He told her to go draw in her books. He sat at the counter and told Kimberly the truth; how the sight of Abigail made him sick at times, how unceremoniously Melanie had died—which he could not get over, though his condition was improving now that her hair, at least, was hidden somewhere out of sight. "Promise me you won't tell Jeffrey about this," he said.

"You don't have anything to worry about, Mr. Ryan."

"Oh."

"When my grandmother died, Mama didn't know what to do with all her spoons."

"Spoons."

"Yeah. She and my grandmother used to get down on the floor and polish them. Mama cleaned out grandmother's room when she died, but didn't know what to do. She wanted to get rid of them but they had too much value."

"I see."

"She said she missed polishing them by the gas heater while grandpa watched television in the other room. She said something about the way her mom's knuckles used to redden when she polished the spoons. Anyway, she keeps them out in the safe. She knows they're there, but she doesn't have to see them anymore."

"Are you trying to make me feel bad about getting rid of Abigail?" Laurent scratched his head, looked at the tiles on the kitchen counter. "I take back what I said. I'm getting rid of Abigail because she's too much noise. I get headaches easily."

"Jeffrey said you miss your wife," Kimberly said, patting his hand. "It's fine. Really."

Laurent decided he didn't really like Jeffrey's little girlfriend, but showed her out as kindly as he had let her in. It puzzled him that his son would even mention his feelings for Melanie. He watched Kimberly go down the walk, thought about what she had said. He thought that maybe getting rid of his daughter wasn't the answer. He knew he would never be able to throw out the hair in the metal box, so what difference would it make if he sent his daughter away? He thought about it for a while, the sound of her plastic feet tapping in the attic. He laughed. He went upstairs and carried her back down.

#

The Sally-Sister from Orange County would be a problem. He thought he might be able to hold the ponytail together with glue, but it was too noticeable. Laurent had done most of the plugging, already, when he heard the door open. His son walked into the workshop, a dirty pair of football leggings and pads still on. "I made the team," he said, indifferently.

Laurent looked up at him. "That's good, I'm proud of you." He returned to work on the scalp and saw his son sitting at the other side of the table in his peripheral.

"What are you doing?" Jeffrey said.

"Right now just plugging. I have to make this ponytail so it won't come undone."

"Have you tried glue?"

"I haven't tried anything yet. I don't think glue will be very good."

"Why not?"

"It'll look bad."

Jeffrey leaned over the table to look. "How else can you do it?"

"I don't know," he said. "How old is Kimberly?"

"Sixteen."

Laurent chuckled. "She acts like it."

Jeffrey continued to watch as Laurent worked on the vinyl's bangs. Maybe, Laurent thought, Jeffrey felt bad for him—maybe his sudden interest in wig making was an act to bond with him, a way to make Laurent feel better. Jeffrey commented on Abigail's new hair. "You're about done with her," he said.

"Almost."

"I guess you'll go through with it."

"I guess."

"If you need any help just ask," Jeffrey said.

"I will."

Jeffrey went back to his room, passing Abigail in the hallway. She asked him to play but he ignored her. Laurent could hear the hologram beeping from his son's room, the sound of the door closing.

He finished Abigail's hair that night. He took her to the bathroom and held her up to the mirror. She wrapped one arm around his neck and fluffed the new hair with her free hand.

"Do you like it?"

"I like it," she said.

He held onto her for another moment before speaking. "What do you think about living with the woman who gave you your new hair?"

"I like it here," she said, the vibration and static in her voice noticeable, the way it sounded, Laurent figured, when Abigail was sad.

"I like it here too," Laurent said, putting her down. She left the bathroom on her own. A few minutes later he went into the Abigail's room and watched her coloring in her books. She only used purple crayons. Everything was purple—the sky, the animals, the trees, the people. He thought about asking her why everything was purple. She looked up at him and held up the newest picture. "You should draw something yourself," he said. She put the book down and continued to color. Purple cars, purple buildings, purple oceans. Maybe Abigail was colorblind. He had never thought to ask.

The next morning Laurent carried four boxed and ready-to-ship scalps to Huxley. An operator led him into the facility where more paperwork awaited. An office clerk added funds to his account and remarked that Laurent's progress had been slower than usual, and they talked about home-life issues. He didn't mention Abigail.

Rather than going straight home, he took a bus to the park where he and Melanie used to bring their son and Abigail to play on the swings. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of parents brought their robot children to the park to play with their organic children. It kept the dolls quiet and satisfied during the remaining weekend, until they asked to go back where they could swing and watch the movement of treetops and other children, both real and factory made.

The park was more crowded than usual today. The parents only watched their children play together, studied how their organic children interacted with the fake, as if the only use for the new robot children was to stimulate growth in the organic. Laurent was from a time when the world was not yet full enough to enact laws against having multiple children. His parents knew it would happen, though, and actively tried to give him a brother or sister, but failed. Melanie's parents had avoided having more children for financial reasons. Melanie loved children. She had been among the few parents who would actually play with them, wrestle with them in the sand, while all the other parents only studied the habits of their organic children. Some parents would watch Melanie, wild eyed. Even while Jeffrey was at school, even into his junior-high years, she played with Abigail, pushed the Teresa-Sister's swing, caught her at the bottom of the iron-made slide, made sure she didn't fall from the monkey bars.

He watched a couple studying their boy playing with his faux sister and wondered why they didn't join them in their play, too, how anyone could avoid catching their young ones at the bottom of a slide. He decided, on that note, that there was no way he could remove Abigail from his life.

Laurent walked to a beauty supply store with the intention of buying her something special. He looked at the shelves of expensive blow driers, curlers, vanity mirrors, all too expensive, he thought, for a girl like Abigail. In the children's aisle a blue-and-pink handled brush hung from a cord near the middle of the rack. He studied it a moment, wrapped the child-sized handle in his fingers and imagined Abigail holding it. The cashier commented on how her daughters were always going through them, how the handles would sometimes snap their hair was so thick.

He entered the house from the workshop door, made his way to the table, and picked up a needle but couldn't find the will to work on the scalp from Orange County. There wasn't much left, but he realized deadlines needed to be kept or Huxley-Burke would find another contracted service and send Laurent elsewhere. He stood up and went to the Abigail's room, picked a sheet of paper up from the floor with the purple drawing of a family of three—a father, a son, a sister. A little purple dog following behind. It was a poor representation, but it was a representation of a family, nonetheless. He flipped the sheet over and discovered that the drawing had been done on the back of an order form meant to be shipped with Orange County's scalp.

He called her name, but she didn't answer. Abigail's box was missing from the floor. He went back to the workshop and made his way to the kitchen, looked beneath all the counters and the dining room table. He knocked on Jeffrey's door, the brush in one hand, Abigail's drawing in the other.

"Where is your sister?" he asked as his son unlocked and opened the door.

"I boxed her up for you," he said. "Cody drove me to the post office and I had her marked for shipping and everything."

Laurent opened his mouth but kept silent.

"They were pretty funny about there being a girl inside. I wiped her memory and folded her up like the instructions said. You should call Ms. Reid."

Laurent's face turned pink. He needed a moment to process the thing Jeffrey had done. For Laurent, to make him feel better, maybe, a small act. He doubted he would be able to get her back, now. Even if he caught the post office before shipping—if what his son said was true, and her memory had been wiped—there was no going back. His grip

on the brush handle lessened and he took his son in his arms and held him. Jeffrey's head touched the tip of his chin. "You're too small for football," Laurent whispered. "I don't want you getting hurt."

"Is something wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, easing himself away from Jeffrey, pushing the brush into a coat pocket. He held the drawing out. "Look at what Abigail drew last night. Did you know that she was creative? Did you know she could be creative?"

Jeffrey asked about the dog. He said he didn't know that Abigail liked dogs.

As Laurent worked on the scalp from Orange County, he tried not to think about Abigail. Melanie crossed his mind, once. He considered how angry his wife would be. He regarded his hands as they fanned another wad of hair over the vinyl. He choked and listened for the scrunch scrunch scrunch of the silicon taking hair.

His son came into the workshop and asked if everything was all right. Laurent shook his head. "Come here," he said.

Jeffrey pulled up a chair next to his father at the table.

"The easiest heads in the world to root are silicon vinyl."

"Why?"

"They're poured thick, soft, and—very easily accept hair which makes it much easier for us as dollmakers." He realized his voice was mechanical, as though he had said this before, maybe, to his wife, or to some apprentice that never existed.

He handed Jeffrey a blow dryer and his son pointed it at the vinyl so it could heat up, so it would take the hair better. They worked this way for an hour and talked about

Kimberly. Maybe she's all right, Laurent kept saying. "I want you to be with someone you like. You have to treat her well. You have to know that she's the one."

When they finished, Laurent carried Abigail's drawing to his bedroom and reached under the bed and pulled out the metal box. He opened it, regarded Melanie's hair for a moment, then folded the drawing and placed it on top with the new brush, closed the lid, slid the box back under. He smoothed the bed sheets with his hands, picked his hairs away, brought them to the bathroom and threw them in the trash. Jeffrey made them a pot of coffee. They sat at the kitchen counter and talked about school, what Jeffrey wanted to do after, whether he would ever go to the park and play with his future family on the swing or wrestle with his children in the sand.

BREAKING DOWN THE HOUSE

There's a ballgame on. Emily has gone with Mom to the back room to do some laundry. My wife has never been much for sports. She's been quiet most of the day. Then there's a sound in the living room—Dad picking himself up off the couch, the springs moaning. He ambles into the kitchen and looks at me.

"Your mother bought one of those robots that'll vacuum the floor for us," he says. He looks around at their floor. I swept the kitchen for them earlier. The tiles have little grainy dots in them, like dust. The kitchen itself is fairly easy to keep clean, as everything is small and well organized.

It's like he's waited for Mom to go into the backroom with a hamper of laundry to tell me this. Whenever Dad tries to make small talk with me, I tend to fidget with my phone. I feel my pockets for the phone, then remember I seemed to have lost it about an hour after arriving at my parents' house. This makes me feel nervous, and I try to stay on the subject of the vacuum cleaner. "That's good, how does that work?" I ask, plugging the electric knife into the wall. The roast will come out of the oven, soon.

"You mind coming onto on the porch for a minute?" I tell him sure, why not. "Just want to talk to you about something while we have a little time. They'll hear the oven go off if it goes off," Dad says, his voice pretty low by now.

I tell him he doesn't have to explain himself. "What's the matter?"

Dad walks off the porch and continues on past my truck. He looks around the cab a moment, then turns to me. It's chilly outside, and misting. I lean against the cab door a little with my arms crossed, trying not to shake, then straighten myself out because he's looking serious.

"You know what your mother did?"

"What do you mean?"

"She made chili the other day with peanut butter. I tasted it after the first bite and I knew it. She did it the last time she made chili, too. This time I looked at the recipe afterwards and it didn't even call for peanut butter. She just put it in there on her own. The recipe is in a scrapbook above the refrigerator. I didn't eat any more of it and she asked how come I barely touched my food. You think after fifty years she'd know I might die if I eat a bunch of peanut butter."

Dad's arms are straight against his side, his hands worked into cold fists. So I guess he's fighting the cold but trying to look tough about it, too.

"She probably just forgot," I say.

"My lips started to hurt a few minutes later. I couldn't really talk or anything so I went to lie down. She tried to get me to eat it again later. It's still in the refrigerator too. It's been two days ago and she put it in the refrigerator for me to eat whenever I get hungry."

"Why don't you ask her about it?"

"You think she's trying to kill me?"

"I doubt it," I say. I take a second to laugh, and I see how serious he's taking all this. "Come on," I say. "It's not a big deal."

He shakes his head, waves a hand at me. "Stupid woman is trying to get rid of me. You ask her one thing about it, I bet she'd say she just forgot. She's not that forgetful. You don't forget I might die if I eat peanuts. You think she just forgot like that?"

"I don't know, probably," I say. It worries me more that Mom's getting forgetful of things like this. A few days ago on the phone she told me she threw her sunglasses in the garbage. Then she told me a second time, just before hanging up, like a new thought. Alzheimer's runs in her family, and she's getting old. I want to remind Dad of this, but he's looking at me like he already knows what I have to say. I don't want him judging me now. I'm still worried that Emily will find my phone. So I'm already stressed enough, as it is.

"Just don't listen to her," he says. "Whatever she says is a lie. She's one of the trickiest people I know. She'll trick you just like that." Dad snaps his fingers a little. The tips rub off one another and there's not a sound that can be heard. Every second outside by the truck in the mist my arms stiffen a little more. We go back in, one of my hands on Dad's back, rubbing a little, both his arms straight down like before, like he's a child that's been sent to his room, and he has this look on his face like if he goes back into the house all hell might break loose. I'm not used to seeing Dad this way.

I sit Dad back down in his chair, go into the kitchen, and look at the timer on the oven. There's still a few minutes left on the clock.

In the refrigerator between a jar of mayonnaise and an opened cola sits a plastic container full of chili, just like Dad said. I open the container and smell the inside. It's not much but the smell hits me. I start to the back of the house, thinking I'll go ahead and confront Mom. She stands there folding towels and stacking them on the bed. They already separated the underwear and white Ts and socks and kitchen rags. Emily curls a foot under herself; she is sitting on the corner of the bed looking at something on my

phone. She's wearing these round black earrings that really bring out the color in her face. I told her I like it a lot when she wears black jewelry, so she wears it often. A speck of black might creep out from between her blond hair. She glances at the container in my right hand then looks back at the phone, makes a kind of huffing sound.

"Found my phone?" I ask.

"I'm sad now that you're married," Emily says, holding the phone away from her face. It's like she doesn't even care that Mom is standing there.

Mom kind of ignores Emily's remark, takes a handful of towels and walks out.

I smile and tell her how sorry I am too, because now we don't have to sneak around her parents when we go over to Atlanta. But I know she's referring to the text message from Christina that I couldn't force myself to delete. Emily's neck is splotching.

"*I'm sad now that you're married*," she says again, this time slowly, looking at my phone, like she's trying to get the words right. "I thought you deleted Christina. It has her name right here."

"I don't ever talk to her."

"But I thought you deleted her. She messaged you," Emily says. "She says she misses you. What do you think that means? Why can't you just tell me what that means?" Her voice has taken a flat tone. I forget for a moment that I'm holding a container of chili.

"What do you want me to do? Tell her to delete my number? I haven't talked to her."

"Then why's she so sad about you being married?" She flashes the screen at me. I haven't talked to Christina in a month. The real, incriminating texts have already been deleted.

"She's just being funny," I say, dryly. I think maybe showing a little indifference might make Emily feel better. Indifference, patience, has always seemed to work for Dad when he and Mom get into fights. The most obvious difference between me and my father is that he has too much patience in everything and I have none whatsoever. I feel like I should have been more prepared. I don't know how else to answer.

Emily sits there on the bed quietly. She's still going through my phone. After what seems like the longest minute of the past several months she tosses the phone towards the middle of the bed. It lands drum-like.

"So why's she sad that you're married then?"

Still no answer. Emily and I have been together about four years. We were engaged for a year. The last several months of this year I'd been seeing Christina in public. We used to see each other on and off in high school, so when she came into town I looked forward to seeing her face, hearing what she had done since I left. She was a hair stylist in McComb. I took her out to the movies, bought her dinner, sat around with her at her apartment. I didn't feel like I was doing anything wrong. One time at her apartment, I ran my fingers through her hair. We'd just finished a movie and now we were talking about her dog's weight problem. Her apartment smelled like animals, which I kind of liked. I reached up and brushed my hand through her hair, felt tufts of it slide between my fingers. She got really quiet and I was smiling stupidly and our faces were already close so I leaned in and kissed her. We stayed that way for a bit before her hand reached up to my shirt. She rubbed a bit of the material between her fingers, then we separated on the couch. I don't really like thinking about it.

I don't know what Emily suspects about me and Christina. They'd met a couple of times, once at a Halloween party and another time at Christmas. I hated myself for thinking Christina looked great both times. Emily had thought so too. "She's really pretty," she'd say, and I'd act like I didn't know who she was talking about.

All of this worries me because I want Emily to know that I love her more than anyone. But I grew up pretty fast and one day all my friends were gone and when Emily and I got engaged, Christina became sort of an outlet. We never slept together, just kissed once, that's it. How do you say this to your wife?

The container sweats in my hand. Emily goes into the bathroom and shuts the door and I can hear the lock turning. I stand outside the door thinking about what to say. "I just wanted you to know I'm really worried about Mom," I say. Emily doesn't respond.

I can't hear Mom anywhere in the house. She left the stack of kitchen rags on the side of the bed. I lean over and retrieve the phone in my left hand, shove it down into my pocket, then grab the rags. I go back into the kitchen and sit the container of chili down, put the rags in the rag drawer, and reclaim the container of chili. I look at it a while before dumping it all in the garbage. I decide it was just a mistake on Mom's part. I know her well enough to know she just made a mistake. She's a good woman and she loves her husband. She'd do anything for him. She's forgetful and things probably won't ever get better for her.

We sit together with the roast between us. Dad picks at his food quietly and Mom turns a bit to her left and faces me. "Glad you came home, huh?" she says. Mom never asks when Emily and I plan on having children. She never asks whether work is good or

bad, rather the same stuff of *it's good to have a job in today's economy* and hints that it's not worth complaining or having children anyway, so we just avoid the topic.

Mom looks similar to Emily, in a way. They both have the same thin blond hair and droopy eyes. Mom watches too much television. She'll call and tell me about this show she's watching. She'll say she's getting obsessed with yoga, but I've never seen her do yoga. She'll say she picked up a stray cat off the side of the road and took care of it until it ran away. She'll say she tried some dark chocolate M&Ms and they were pretty good, she'll tell me things about the neighbors I'm not sure I want to know. One of the neighbors shoots his sick dog, another neighbor comes down with a case of skin cancer, some other neighbor I've never heard of has this kid that's doing really well for himself on the football team. Then she'll ask, if there's a reason to, whether Emily and I are still mad at each other. Then I'll casually ask Emily if she's talked to Mom—no, why?—and I'll shrug my shoulders like I really didn't mean anything by it. I hate it when Emily talks to Mom about our problems. I wonder if Mom knows about the text message from Christina.

I tell her yeah, I'm glad we came home. The roast tastes better with this mayonnaise-ketchup sauce Emily mixes in a teacup before everything's ready.

"I'm glad somebody knows how to cook," Emily says, jokingly. She told Mom once that the only reason she got involved with me was because she wanted to be able to eat my family's cooking.

Dad's head bobs a little. You can tell he wants to be noticed.

"What's the matter?" Mom asks, touching his hand.

He withdraws his hand, pulls the napkin out of his lap and wipes his lips. He is very meticulous about his lips at dinner, about being clean and presentable. It's a strange thing to see, knowing how accustomed to working out in the dirt and mud he is. I think about all that's different about us. My father cuts the grass on the most humid days; I usually just hire a local kid to come and do what he can. When I was growing up he made sure the bills were paid on time, that all of us were provided for; I scramble at invoices received in the mail, wonder at what point in the day I'll sit and think about my responsibilities. My father used to make repairs, survey land for conflicted neighbors, do electrical work; I throw things away, live in a rented house, make calls when the lights go out or the air conditioner leaks or the venting fan above the stovetop looses suction. I worry that I'll never be the kind of person my father is.

He looks at Mom. "You love me, don't you?" he says, sincerely.

Mom smiles a little, her hand still on the table where she'd left off.

"Well, you either do or you don't. That's all I'm saying." His face has turned a shade of pink, little splotches around his cheeks.

"What are you talking about?" Mom asks. A little nervous smile passes over her face.

"I'm talking about something," Dad says, and he looks over at Emily, who is thoughtful looking, then down at his hands in a confused way. "I don't know what it is. It's something. Sometimes—do you ever feel like you need alone time?"

"I mean I guess," Mom says. "It's not like being with you bothers me or anything. Are you talking about yourself? You think you're bothering me?"

"I feel like it. I feel like that might be the thing," Dad says.

I rub my eyes. There's nothing really that I can say and I know Dad could babble about caring and love all day, so I tell him I've already thrown the stuff out.

"You threw what out?" he says.

"The chili. I threw it out already. You don't have to worry about it. Mom, tell him you made a mistake. Emily doesn't need to hear you arguing about something stupid."

Mom slants her eyes a little, looks towards the middle of the table. "Oh, the chili," she says.

"Can we talk about this later?" I pat Dad on the arm.

"What did you put in the chili that I can't eat?" Dad asks. Mom still looks confused, so he asks a bit differently: "Did you put anything extra in the chili? Like you wanted to try something new? What did you put in it?" His voice is shaking now. He has this temper like you wouldn't expect from someone so patient. I feel Emily's hand above my knee. She's just above squeezing, but it doesn't hurt. I don't look at her face because I know what I'll see: eyes turned down, lips curled under slightly, nostrils flaring evenly. I hope my father's tantrum goes on so that Emily can forget about the message from Christina.

"I honestly don't know what you're talking about," Mom says. She nods once like she's swallowing a word or two and continues picking at her roast. She looks at her plate. I can hear her breathing. Something about her expression, or lack of care, infuriates me now. It's difficult to tell what she's really thinking.

"You put peanut butter in the chili," I say. "Dad was just wondering why you put peanut butter in the chili. I said I already threw it out though, don't get up."

Mom repositions herself in the chair. She looks down the hallway and back down at her plate.

Dad continues to stare at her for a moment until the color leaves his face. He looks down at his roast. He picks at it a little. We eat in silence. Then Dad says, "You did it before now, too. The last time you made chili. I can't remember how long ago it was. It wasn't too long ago. You put peanut butter in the chili and it was so strong you could smell it across the room. Remember when I asked you about it? You said you forgot. You've always gone out of your way to make sure I avoid peanuts but not with the chili. This time you put less in it so it was harder to smell." I can feel Emily's hand slipping off my leg, can sense it retreating to her lap, fingers tightening around the black napkin.

Mom comes to me later when I'm brushing my teeth. She used to be a hygienist and would always look into my mouth when I spoke. She'd ask to see my teeth right in the middle of a conversation.

Now she only asks how my teeth are doing. That's as far as she goes when it comes to teeth. The last time she interrupted a conversation we were having in order to ask about my teeth I yelled at her pretty bad. I told her she was so dense, that she didn't want to listen to me because she's so dense and that's why she always tries to change the subject.

Emily packed me this short toothbrush with hard bristles that hurts my gums. Mom stands beside me as if she's looking with me into the mirror. "Your father's not talking to me," she says.

"No kidding."

"What do I do? You think I should apologize again?"

"I don't know, Mom. He told me earlier today he knows you're not stupid."

"What else did he say?"

"He said you wouldn't have just forgotten like that. And I don't know if it's true or not. Has everything been okay?" I ask whether things have been okay more out of concern for Dad than her.

"I've been losing my memory," she says, confidently.

"You're not losing your memory, Mom." I say this like I'm telling Emily that I don't think she's getting fat.

"I am," she says, "the other day I threw my sunglasses in the garbage. I had wadded up some paper and I put the paper on the desk next to the computer and I threw my sunglasses in the garbage."

"But you knew you did it?"

"Yeah, I mean I caught it afterwards. I thought it was pretty funny but still."

I nod my head, lips tucked in a bit.

"Your father is pretty mad at me. What do you think I should do?"

"Let him forget about it, I guess. I guess you should just let it go. But you need to talk to Dad about it if you think it's going to be a problem. No Mom, I'm serious. Dad could have died. You need to talk to him."

She picks at her fingers in front of the mirror.

"Did you know you what you were doing when you were making the chili?" I ask calmly.

Mom shakes her head, leans in close to the mirror and picks at something on her face. While she's looking in the mirror, I want to ask whether Emily has said anything about me. The text message comes to mind. Christina and her black hair. Emily and her blond hair, her dry lips, the way her hand left me at the table comes to mind. I want to know about Emily. I want to know whether she'll forget about this anytime soon. I realize it's selfish to worry about infidelity when your parents are having problems. I'm a selfish person and I don't want to be.

Emily comes to bed and sits on the edge a while before getting in. I pull the covers up to my chin and fold it around my face. The guest bedroom sheets smell like dust. It gets hot and I push the sheets towards Emily, who's just lying there in the moonlight with her eyes closed. I know she's awake because she takes forever to fall asleep.

"This seriously has me perplexed," I say. Perplexed is the word I'm feeling at the moment. And Emily and I haven't had much time to speak civilly about the text message from Christina. "Are you awake? What do you think about Mom? You think she's sick or something?"

"I don't know anything about your mom," Emily mutters. I can tell she wants me to leave her alone, but I can't stop thinking about Dad. I don't know who I should be more worried about, now. I've kind of started to let go of the text message thing in favor of my parents—who's more to blame? It's a tough situation because I don't know whether to worry about Mom or Dad. I want to fix things with Emily so I can better think of something to do.

I tell Emily I'm worried about Dad. I think a moment about what it'd be like for him to live with us. I mention the possibility of moving him in if things get rough.

That seems to rouse her. "I don't know if that's a good idea," she says. "The apartment's too small. You know how that is. Where would he sleep? On the floor? He could stay in the bed with you and I could live in a hotel for a while."

"I don't want you to live in a hotel. Forget I said anything. I want to talk about the text message."

"You think your parents are too old to get a divorce? Have you ever thought about putting your mom in a home? How often do your parents fight like this?"

"I don't know."

"I mean if they don't love one another they might as well split up. Your dad could live in a home and your mom can marry someone else. I don't know how those things work."

"I don't know why I didn't delete the message," I say, suddenly losing interest again in my parents. "I mean you know I didn't respond, you saw I didn't message her back." I wait a moment, but she doesn't answer. "Emily, I'm trying to apologize."

"I hear you, holy shit. Jesus." She rolls over away from me and I'm pretty sure that'll conclude our conversation for the night.

"I love you," I try, and I think she responds, but it's very low and quick.

"What?"

"I love you too," she says, her head turned back towards me a little.

So I spend the rest of the night trying to fall asleep, feeling the bed shift next to me slightly with every breath Emily takes, thinking of the steps I took to get where I am

now with Emily, the decision to marry her, and all this reminds me of something Dad told me a few years ago. It was right before Emily and I became official. Dad and I had been tearing down a house out in the woods near some property he owned. It was a very old house, a hunting shack or something, and all the windows had been boarded up. Kids from around had gone to the back and ripped boards off the wall and entered that way and broke a bunch of jars on the floorboards. Dad had been keeping stuff in the house—old refrigerators, tires, broken furniture, boxes of clothes, old records—none of the stuff ever went missing, but the thing was an eyesore. What did he tell me when we were going out to knock the thing down—just shoot me in the head, or something?—Dad was more practical than that. It was something about women. Not women in particular, but a spouse. It applied to both men and women. We'd been talking about Mom. Or I had just met Emily? I think he really liked her and wanted to tell me something about how your other half takes control of the things you own. That's partly why I wanted to get married, though, I needed to go in halves with responsibilities. There was more to it than responsibility, but Dad had something on his mind and I for once was willing to hear him out.

I think more about the house now. The blackening walls. We climbed up on the house and went to work on the tin roof. The panels came up easily and we threw them down into the trailer. It was getting dark when we finished tearing through the tiny attic and Dad hadn't said much since we got there. We stopped working, straddled boards and looked down into the guts of the house. Dad asked how many times I'd been out with Emily. I told him six or seven times, I never really kept count of these things. Dad told me this was good. Did I like her? Sure, I said. What about my last girlfriend? It wasn't

Christina, it was someone else. I don't remember. Whoever it was, yeah, I thought I'd liked her too. Then he said something like, "Don't let anyone take advantage of you. Don't let anyone take your things and use you. If you were a girl I'd be telling you the same thing, doesn't make a difference to me. Don't trust people." Sure, I remember thinking, still think—sure, I believed in him.

"I'll keep an eye out," I told him. I was looking down into the house, my hands on a darkened board. This house could have fallen apart at any moment.

"I'm serious," he told me. "And a person laughs one way now, they'll laugh that way the rest of their lives. You can't change a person. So make sure you know her before you get too involved, or else she'll have you."

"Who told you the stuff about laughing?" I realized what he had said made me smile.

"I'm being serious. Don't tell your mother this, but I didn't love her when we got married."

I was quiet. There were things down in this house I'd never seen before. A mirror in the corner with a coat of hardened dust, milk glass standing around the hearth, a rat's nest poking out of a cabinet drawer like nose hairs. It was dark, and there were things I couldn't see even if I knew something was there.

"Don't marry someone out of convenience," he was saying. "I don't have an idea what people marry for these days. I don't see why they do. Hell if I'd get married now. I wouldn't. But I love your mother now and I wouldn't change anything now. But it's been a long time and I've had time to grow on her and let her grow on me. Whatever you want to do, though." He repeated the last thing under his breath a couple of times. I wanted to

tell him I didn't know what I wanted to do. I get nervous when I make decisions. Emily makes good decisions. That's not why I married Emily. I keep telling myself this now.

I roll towards her and push myself against her, thinking she's asleep. I reach across and graze her arm a bit and she flinches like she's having a dream.

There aren't any curtains in the room. Just these blinds that won't open. The sun wakes me up early. I can hear a television playing in the living room. Emily is gone. I reach to the left and grab my cell off the nightstand, hold the phone over my face. My eyes are glazed over. I look through the messages, find the one from Christina.

I'm not sure how deleting the message will help anything. I could message her back, tell her how sorry I am, too. All this stuff about growing up and doing the right thing. I'm still not sure what difference it would make. I type out a message, tell her I'm sorry, too. I get some of the words wrong, it's so hard to see anything straight this early in the morning. I delete the thread, then go through the contacts and delete her number. In a few moments I'll forget about it. I'll take a shower and pray or do whatever I do in the shower and forget about it.

I can hear my parents talking in the kitchen, the sound of the vent above the stove, a few dishes clanging together. I wait in bed for someone to come and get me, tell me to come eat. This is something I grew up with. My mother telling me to come eat breakfast, even on Saturdays. She only ever cooks this much when I come home, now. Dad tells me on the phone all the time, "She doesn't do much of anything anymore since you left." He laughs and we talk about other things. No one comes to get me. I crawl out of bed. Do the shower stuff. Take a moment to get dressed and look good for them. All this stuff about

the value of looking good when you're married. I want Emily to think I look good. I want her to think I'm attractive. Whatever it takes to make her know I don't regret getting married.

At the dinner table, there isn't a chance to tell her about my decision to remove Christina from my life. I don't want my parents to know anything about it. They'd ask too many questions. Emily and Dad go out to the back, load up in the golf cart and ride into the field. Mom's standing over me now, doing the dishes. I'm still sitting at the table like a child.

"You want some eggs?" she asks.

"Not now," I say.

If I talk about what happened with the chili, nothing will come of it. I realize I know my Mom more than I think. She's just like anyone's mother, so there's no point in explaining what I mean when I say I don't care anymore that she made a mistake. I'm too worried about Emily, anyway. Mom's a strong woman, I don't have to worry about her. I'm worried about myself. I rely too much on having a good relationship.

I go out into the cold wearing an undershirt. They're up on the hill next to a loblolly, Dad's pointing around at the fence line, probably talking about how the neighbors are so picky about the lining of the fence, the separation of different properties. I start out towards them on foot. Now I'm standing at the bottom of the hill, my feet squishing against the damp grass. I see them up on the hill, Dad pointing all around. I'll tell them both at the same time how I'm trying to make things work. I won't tell them how all their problems—Mom and Dad's problems—serve as a sort of vehicle for whatever it

is I'm going through. I don't know if that's the truth. It's probably not the right thing to say. I don't really know how to make this better, but I know that it needs to be said and I want things to work out. That's fine. I watch them for a little while on the hill, the sun shining on all our backs. Emily has her hands tucked beneath her arms, she's cold. Dad stops pointing, turns around, looks towards the house, doesn't see me watching them.

BROTHER SWINE

"I see something," Namwali told me. She sat at the edge of our dying snap bean patch watching the Returned crawl, gallop and run down the hill towards our village. It had been a slow week for new arrivals, but for the past several months my stepmother and I had taken turns looking through a pair of naval binoculars, always naming the animals like children debating the shapes of clouds.

"What do you think?" I said, uninterested.

"A pig, maybe." She adjusted the eyepiece with dirty fingertips. The purple feathers woven into her brown hair were ruffled from a restless night's sleep. I had sat with her and Donna the night before and confessed I was nervous, too. Nobody in our village sleeps well awaiting a loved one. I didn't like thinking about Etgar's return, either—whether his journey had even begun, or if anything had gone wrong. It had been more than a year since we received word of his death.

"Won't be him," I said, running my hands through the dry vines for a handful of pods. Of course, I doubted my stepbrother would return as a pig; people—especially young men who die fighting anarchy in the west, like Etgar—return as more desirable creatures, like birds.

Humans who deserve death return as lowly creatures. Murderers, cannibals and rapists. We often use these animals for meat when necessary, and we can only assume that by doing so, we're giving them a chance to die in the name of something good and maybe return as something more venerable.

"Even if Etgar was a pig, he'd know better than to come home to a village full of hungry folk," I said. It had been weeks since the government trucks rolled into our village

to deliver food and supplies, even longer since our gardens had tasted a drop of rain. But it occurred to me that Etgar wouldn't know our village had fallen to hard times, that its people were growing more impatient and thin every day.

I thought of little Donna's skin. The night before, her ankles and wrists had looked tightened and pale in the candlelight. I knew, sadly, she needed meat. The whole village needed it.

Namwali's mercury blue wolf eyes lit at me. She turned and glassed the hill again, watched as the pig grew closer. I yanked out a handful of leathery pods that still had life in them, tried to avoid seeing the hill.

"I see a horse," she said. "And a deer, I think. And something big is flying down towards the school."

Of course the eagle would become the center of the village's attention. I didn't need the binoculars to see it swoop down over the old schoolhouse. The eagle spiraled over the bare flagpole and caught the top, extended its wings and gave a cry like a siren.

From the other side of the village, the tower bell rang. The bell rings once when food trucks are within sight, constantly when there is danger, and like a song when the Returned clear the pine stumps leading down the hill into the village.

I dropped the handful of pods into the bucket. "Should we get Donna and head up to the square?"

"Let your sister sleep," she said. "We have too much work to do, anyway." She referred to our desperate hunt for food. "If Etgar does come," she continued, "we will pretend we couldn't hear the bells. If he is able, he will come to us on his own." Our

going to the square almost weekly had become a fruitless routine. We had started to believe that Etgar, like my father, would never come home, not even for Helen.

I sat the bucket down. It was too late to worry with the matter, for the spotted pig had already begun a line for our garden, grunting as it broke through the hawthorns my father had set out a year before his passing. The pig stopped in the weeds at the edge of our yard. Namwali abandoned the naval binoculars, used the stand to hold herself up, and I could tell she was frightened. Her breathing quickened. She let go of the stand and dropped to her knees and held her stomach like something wanted to claw its way out. I stepped into the grass, and the pig waved its head and moaned, as though it was saying hello.

#

Namwali once asked, when we were young and jealous of the animals that came to become underworked pets: "How often do I have to tell you the story of the man and the wolf?"

The wolf in the story was Namwali, who lived alone in the forest, ran into chicken coups at night and stole poultry from their owners.

"Tell us again how you were caught," I would say, because I liked the lowness of her voice when she spoke of the man who had captured her.

"A man set a trap for me, in one chicken coup. He laid old carcasses on the floor and when I came to steal a chicken, he released the wire door and I was caught inside. The man said I had a begging look, and he had pity on me. He told me that if I would live with him and keep the other predators away, then he would spare me. He held a shotgun

to my nose as he told me this. The very same gun we keep for a time when we may need it."

Donna, mine and Etgar's infant sister, kicked in her mother's dark arms, interrupting the story. I thought that Donna had once been a field mouse because of the shape of her ears. Namwali fed her milk and continued:

"The man Socrates took me in, and I loved him, even as a wolf. We hunted vermin together. This was before it was illegal to harm little vermin. He kept my stomach full and my fur dry during the winter. I still remember the feel of his fingertips scratching over my cranium, how my vision of the world and the heat of the fireplace all spun and became distorted when he did this. I slept at the foot of his bed. I longed to warm myself beside him, but the man wouldn't allow it."

Namwali's wolf eyes drifted to the floor as she grew near the end of her story.

"Eventually I died as a wolf and came back as a girl. When I was old enough, I left home and went to find Socrates. I was sixteen when I gave birth to you, Etgar." Namwali looked glaze-eyed at her son when she came to the part about his birth. "When you were four and I was twenty, Socrates died fighting a pack of vengeful wolves. I had you in my arms, and the wolves smelled my flesh and I looked into their eyes. They let us live. I took the gun from your father's hands and headed south. A month later Benjamin took me in. He already had Straub," she said, looking at me. "That is all there is to say."

As years passed, Namwali's story disintegrated into a polished version of a broken summary: Wolves attacked, the man shot, Namwali and Etgar lived, the end. It became a story she was no longer willing to tell. At the time, she had Etgar and me and my father, and eventually Donna. And after Donna, my father died, never returned to us, and there

was only the four of us to fend for ourselves. Eventually the fig tree, which Namwali firmly believed was my father reincarnated, no longer made fruit. During the winter, when she was curled beneath a blanket with Donna, no fire to keep them warm, Etgar and I contemplated going out to cut the tree down for firewood.

"He was your father," Etgar had snapped, passing me the axe. "Your decision."

I thought of my stepmother's hands, her feet, how she had always worried they might turn to ice and fall away. But when I considered how much she missed my father—how often she went out to sit beneath his branches, look up at his leaves and dwindling fruit and pray and talk and laugh—I knew cutting down the tree would destroy her.

I had to do it. Limb by limb, my father came down. I thought—maybe—he could have been made a tree to provide us warmth.

We nearly froze the winter after Donna was born. And when Etgar traveled west to fight and die and came home as a pig, it was the year of our village's starvation.

#

I could tell by the way Helen stumbled out of the car that she hadn't had anything good to eat in days. She caught herself on the door handle. There were dark circles under her eyes. Maybe she had felt long nights, like us, imagining her fiancé's return. Any form of return, she had said, would have satisfied her.

She didn't speak to us, not even to Donna, who said hello and approached her with a typical child's nervous smile. Namwali jerked Donna back, gave her to me and I put my hands on her shoulders and watched.

Helen squatted down on her haunches and looked under the boards of the house, as though she expected to find him in the dirt rooting. "Etgar," she called, her plastic bracelets jingling.

He ran around the house, squealing.

Helen took him by the cheeks and pecked his forehead with cracked lips. "Still have it," she said, throwing out her hand to show the pig a ring Etgar had given her before leaving. Her nose turned red and her eyes watered. The pig grunted and crawled into her embrace.

Namwali crossed her arms and shook her head. We had joked that Helen had been a well-groomed cocker spaniel before anything else. Now, Helen's dirty hair and broken nails were the opposite of groomed. And I couldn't watch her kiss the pig again, my brother or not.

Namwali and Donna followed me inside. The screen door slapped behind Donna, and she just stood there waiting for someone to speak.

"Be happy for Etgar," Namwali said, finally.

She never approved of my seeing Helen, after Etgar died fighting Californians. I took Helen to the movies, first. Both of us were awkward by nature with hardly anything to say to the other. And of course we were both ashamed. Sometimes, we held hands and I would rub my thumb across her index finger. I never pushed for more.

When she came to the house to eat dinner, Donna would look at us across the plates of boiled potatoes and greens and she would sneer, like she suspected something unspeakable was happening between us. Helen did touch my leg once, in front of Namwali. Under the table, her hand had slipped to my upper leg and squeezed.

Eventually Helen really started to miss Etgar. She stopped pretending, stopped avoiding. She talked about him. Mostly about the good things—how they had floated in tubes down McCall Creek, how when her car had engine trouble Etgar would have it rumbling to life in no time. Helen thought he would find out about us if or when he returned. I felt her pain.

Through the window, I could hear his drum-like grunts. I cracked open blinds. Helen opened the car door for Etgar and he hopped in like a fat spotted dog, crossed over to the passenger side and waited for her to join before reaching his pig-nose up and wetting her sandy elbow.

I tried to convince myself that it was not my brother. That it was someone else—a lonely con returned from the dead to take advantage of a random neighbor's generosity.

Donna watched out the window beside me, smiling.

"What's with the grin?" I asked, trying to sound complacent.

"I'm happy," she said. Her face had a weak stiffness to it.

Namwali came and rubbed my back after the car was halfway down the drive. I kept my nose to the blinds.

"You are my son, too, Straub."

I nodded, wondered if it would be safe to let Etgar ride the roads for hungry villagers to see.

"I don't know what to tell you," she said.

"We knew it would happen," I said, letting the blinds flop back against the windowpane.

"We knew, yes."

"Maybe they can work it out," I said, not wanting to argue. My thoughts irresponsibly returned to the way Helen's lips bent when she smiled, how one side was nearly always lopsided. Her closed, wet eyes. I hadn't seen that smile in a long time. Not even before Etgar went to fight anarchists in California. Regardless of how happy she may have seemed to have him back, I didn't think the woman I adored would get on very well with a pig. Even if it really was Etgar.

#

My brother once said he began as a mole. It was the earliest thing he could remember—the warmth of wet soil, the quiet, sightless beginning not much different than a human child wrapped in its mother's womb. And eventually he was Etgar, a fat child in the arms of Namwali. On their own, for a while. When we were kids, he would mispronounce my name—called me "Straw," even up until the days when Helen came into the picture. He would grow to love girls, baseball, things that flew. Said one day, he'd be an eagle, and we all believed him because he was such a good kid, had led a good life.

"If I'm lucky, I'll be an albatross or a hawk," he said. Eagles were apparently hard to come by, and Etgar was a rationalist. Plus his mother never much believed in luck. She taught the three of us, after father died, that life was random and inconsistent.

"You could be a fox one life, an insect the next," was Namwali's eventually inevitable motto, and it stayed as such.

I began to wonder whether regression to animal-hood was really regression. Maybe it was ascension. Creatures that have never been human don't have much reason to worry, except for being eaten. Etgar seemed to want animal-hood enough. He never

asked to be a leader. So I assumed being reborn as an albatross could have been a wonderful thing. But in my opinion, life was never random and inconsistent. I wonder if he wept when he realized he would be stuck to the ground in the form of a pig.

#

Etgar grunted, rutting his nose over the potato shavings Donna tossed into the dirt. "What else do you feed a pig?" she asked.

"Scraps from the market," Namwali said matter-of-factly, kneeling beside Etgar. She stroked his back. It was the first time she had been intimate with her son since his return. She must have had her doubts, too. But the pig did at least act like Etgar. And it seemed to like Helen, who had volunteered to go to the market and beg for scraps so we could spend time alone with our newly returned kin. Some venders kept their spoiled produce in buckets for donations to returned loved ones. I wasn't sure that there would be scraps to spare, anymore.

Donna tossed out another handful of peelings. Etgar looked tired of the dry, wrinkled skins.

"I hope she doesn't let it slip," I said irritably, referring to Etgar's condition. Helen had agreed, before leaving, that she wouldn't confide information to those who were generous enough to hand over scraps.

Namwali stopped stroking Etgar. He grunted. Namwali stood up with me and crossed her arms and looked down at the scrawny pig burrowing its nose in the dirt. "The trucks will come, and things will progress," she said assuredly, wiping the dust from her son's back onto her skirt. She stuck a finger between her lips and chewed the nail. She was never one to resort to begging.

"It's been two months," I said. I didn't want Donna to hear. Obviously, my sister knew she was hungry and that a nine year old should weigh more than she weighed, but I didn't want Donna to suspect that anyone might attempt to butcher Etgar for meat. "You know they'll turn on pigs quicker than anything else."

"Do you know of anyone who keeps a pig?"

I thought about it. I couldn't remember any of the neighbors ever keeping a pig. Pigs hardly ever returned to our village for fear of being held for food. The droves who wandered into nearby fields with no direction were captured and never identified. If anything were to ever happen to our supplies, to the trucks or the little patches of gardens dotting the countryside, swine would be the first to go. Their bodies simply had more to offer.

Donna ran out of peelings. She bent over Etgar and gave him a squeeze. The pig reached up and pressed its nose against her collar. Etgar rarely showed affection when he was human.

Namwali drew water into a pot and went inside to boil the snap beans. Helen appeared down the road, a bucket of scraps in one hand, a sack in the other. She sat the bucket on the porch and showed me the bag full of green apples. I didn't ask how she got them.

"I was followed," she said.

I glanced over her shoulder. Halfway down the path, a chimpanzee with arms long as it was tall stopped and looked towards us.

Namwali yelled out the kitchen window. She ran out onto the porch, iron skillet in hand, wolf eyes blazing. "Go on," she yelled, waving the skillet. "Shoo!"

"What do you think he wants?" Helen said.

"Probably just some food. We need to be more careful." I pressed the bag of apples against her stomach. "Put them in the cooler. We'll need them more than Etgar."

#

"You remember me," Donna said, scratching Etgar's wrinkly cranium. "D-O-N-N-A. Spell it in the dirt, like this—" she got down on her haunches with a stick and scratched the letters into the dust. "—now you try," she said, shoving the stick into his mouth.

Etgar dropped the stick and put his nose into the dust, instead. He rooted and produced what seemed more like an ampersand than Donna's name.

"He'll learn," I said, noting how Donna's wrists had begun to resemble twigs. Communication with Etgar seemed trivial compared to keeping my sister alive and human.

Donna shoved Etgar's face in my direction. He squealed. "Straub," she said. "S-T-R-A-U-B. You try—" she carved my name into the dust, this time with her middle finger. Etgar rooted his nose, making a circular pattern, and gave up.

"It's fine," I said.

He took off towards the shed and returned with a mouthful of straw from a withered pine sapling and sat it at my feet. He touched his nose to my ankle and I bent over and picked the straw up, squeezed it, remembered the way he would mispronounce my name. No doubt in my mind, then. I knew this was my brother.

I gave Donna an apple, told her to eat as much as she could. "Don't get sick," I warned. "Eat. Don't look at me like that."

Etgar ate a mouthful of scraps from the bucket and started for the house where Helen had prepared a pan of water to bathe him. "We'll need to keep him in, nights," she said. "The least we can do is keep him clean." I sat on the porch steps, let the straw fall from my fingers into the wind.

#

After our first kiss, I asked Helen what kind of bird she had been, how it had felt to fly.

"Wonderful," she had said. "I lived wherever I wanted. But I don't remember what kind of bird I was. If I was big or small. It didn't really matter to me at the time."

"Do you miss it?"

"I wanted to be human," she said, tapping a cigarette out on a rusted oil drum. She tossed the butt into a pile of empty water jugs, beer cans, cereal boxes. "People have it wrong, about being a bird. It's nothing special after you've been one a while. It's cold at night. You get tired of living in a tree and eating bugs. You have the whole sky to yourself but there's never anywhere really to go." A pause. "And I couldn't find a mate, as a bird. I was bad at finding a mate."

I felt sweat beading on my hairline.

"What had you been?" she asked, which was a tough question because in truth I don't remember too much about my past-self.

"I think I was someone else." I said. "I recall being very old. I kept a lot of books with me." But that was all. I was always so envious of those who could recall their pasts so vividly, though I learned to be thankful for the life I had now. But I kept a love for the smell of pages. That sensation stayed with me, I guess.

#

The chimpanzee made me think. I went into Namwali's closet and pulled the shotgun out from the corner, loaded it with the three shells hidden beneath the underwear in her top drawer. If the chimp came back—if anyone tried anything—we would be ready.

Helen was on the porch knocking dust off Donna's skinny back.

"If you don't eat more, you'll dry up and blow away," Namwali scolded. They were all eating apples. Donna nibbled. Helen took small, slow bites. Namwali, smelling her apple, looked hungrily at Etgar.

He was tucked away by Helen's feet, his head wrapped around her bare toes. He didn't make a sound when he saw me, just stuck his ears up and blinked. I went inside to the cooler and spooned a handful of slop into a bowl and dropped it on the porch. He grunted and ate meticulously, as if he didn't want to offend Helen.

She looked wearily at me. I reached down and touched her hand, the one vein that bulged and turned blue, especially when she was afraid. She snatched her hand back and looked down at Etgar. Shook her head, "no."

Namwali took the shotgun from me and aimed down the path. "It's heavy," she said. "Much heavier than I remember." Donna covered her ears, expecting a shot.

I wrapped my arms around Namwali, rubbed her back. Felt the edge of her shoulder blades, counted her ribs. "We can't live off apples and water alone," she said, her eyes drifting again towards her son the pig.

#

"It's the wolf in her," I said. Etgar was asleep under Helen's cot in the living room. He hadn't tried to crawl into the cot with Helen, but lay curled beneath, guarding her like a dog. "I'm afraid Namwali will snap if we're not careful. Just like a wolf. It's in her."

Helen leaned forward in the chair. Staring at the car, maybe, the moon reflecting onto the windshield above the wipers. She was probably thinking about getting away and taking Etgar with her.

"I don't think we should jump to conclusions." Her stomach rolled. "People think crazy when they're hungry."

"Etgar could have been anything but a pig," I said.

"Don't mention it."

Our voices were too low to wake anyone. I could hear Namwali snoring from her and Donna's bedroom. Donna always slept peacefully, curled under the thick cowhide blanket Etgar had bought with the money he earned hammering t-posts into the ground around our village. He did this before people stopped using money, started trading items instead. That world, surprisingly, hadn't been long ago.

"What do you think he did to deserve being a pig?" I asked.

Helen shook her head.

"Be honest."

"It's nothing," she said.

Prying information from Helen was the same as pulling the lid off a cement tomb. There was little doubt in my mind that Etgar had been good to her. I just wanted to be sure. If he had done anything questionable out west, we could never know. And Etgar

would never be able to spell it out in the dust, not with the shape of his nose or the lack of attention he paid to Donna's attempts at re-teaching him the English language.

I put my hand on Helen's knee. It was exposed and dirty, poked out of her cutoff shorts like rocks covered in wax paper. She touched my hand then pulled hers back, got up and went inside. I sat watching the empty chair rock, listened to the cot pressing beneath her weight, Etgar grunting and his hooves clicking the floorboards, imagined him reaching up and touching his nose to her lips, "*Goodnight*."

I crept into the house a few minutes later and saw a light flickering from Namwali and Donna's room. Donna's bony chest rose up and down beneath her cowhide, her breath rattling. Namwali was sitting up in bed, staring at the floor, a candle burning on the nightstand. Her purple feathers littered the floor. The feeling of wolf-hood never truly left her, she had told us before. I had always assumed the feathers were an attempt to forget what she had been. She must have yanked them out in her sleep. Now her hair was a strewn, greasy mess.

"I can draw you some water."

She shook her head.

I picked up the feathers and put them in her nightstand drawer, put her legs beneath the covers and touched her forehead, half-expecting a fever. "Try to sleep," I urged. Her skin felt normal. I blew the candle out, kissed her on the cheek and went out in the hall and stood. Thirty minutes later, she hadn't moved.

I went to my bedroom—which had once been my father and Namwali's—threw off the blanket so I wouldn't be tangled in it when I heard the sound of Etgar squealing. I

felt it coming, that night. But there was no way around it. Etgar would be our only way to survive, but the thought of Namwali eating her own son made me ill.

I lay awake as long as I could, listening to the sound of Helen moving around, muttering, probably looking in on Donna. I drifted off.

Early the next morning Namwali stood in the doorway with Donna, who looked skinnier than ever, her face dry, dirty and pale like Helen's knees.

"The snaps are gone. And the apples."

I got up to check. The beans we had poached and bagged and thrown into the bottom of the cooler were definitely gone. There hadn't been many, but they would have been enough for a few meals, maybe enough to wait on the trucks to come with more food.

Donna stood on her toes and shined a light down into the empty cooler. I walked out on the porch and went to the garden where Helen was fumbling through the snap vines, cursing and tripping over hardened clods of dirt, Etgar rooting by her ankles, looking up at Helen, back at me, back at Helen. The sound of locus, a toad, a mockingbird waking and singing somewhere in the bushes down the path.

She looked at me and stopped. Yanked at the vines. Nothing. "That monkey was on the porch," she said, her voice hollow.

I shook my head, told her there was nothing we could do, now.

"How long had that monkey been there," she mumbled.

I wondered whether the chimpanzee had seen Etgar. Maybe not—it had come only for the apples, found the beans as well.

Helen ran her fingers through her hair. "Can't believe a fucking monkey came in the house."

I went to her and put my hand on her elbow, my forehead on her shoulder. She stopped. Etgar was looking at me, watching us, and I wonder what he was thinking, what he suspected. I kissed Helen's neck, touched her face. She blushed and gently shrugged me away.

Etgar was her comfort. He watched, brushing against her bare calves. Embarrassed, I went back inside to Namwali.

#

Donna picked at the ants crawling in and out of a split in the window frame. "They taste like peppermint," she said. Nobody stopped her from eating the ants. Namwali was especially past the taboo of eating self-aware beings for survival—Namwali, in fact, had recently left to inquire about the nature of the food truck's lateness. Later she would inform us that other people and animals had gone to inquire too. Some had even set up tents outside the courthouse to wait.

Etgar watched us, his spotted flesh turning gray. Helen sat on the floor beside him, stroking his back. She still wore the engagement ring.

And I stroked Donna's back. Really, I was checking to see that she was not on a fast dive to deterioration. I knew ants wouldn't hold her. And one should not spend too much energy eating so little. My stomach rolled. I hated Etgar. For starving Donna and claiming Helen. He became to me the tree that was my father, something returned only to keep us warm and alive.

I went into the kitchen and took a knife and stuck it in the back of my pants. "Etgar," I called.

I heard his hooves clicking the floorboards. He followed me alone through the kitchen and out towards the garden. In the middle of the solemn vines I knelt down and rubbed his head. He grunted.

"I haven't said much," I told him, "since you came back."

He looked at me. More Etgar than ever—the same eyes, it seemed, as the boy I grew up with. I wondered how it all worked, the science behind returning: Whether the pig was born the exact moment of Etgar's death; how long it had taken him to remember; how simple life must have been before returning to our village.

"Why did you come here?"

He put his nose to the dirt.

"You shouldn't have come back," I said, thumbing his spine. I put my forehead down on his cranium. "I don't know what you did to deserve being a pig, but you know we still love you. And Helen's a good woman, I won't deny it. I wish I—" *I wish I could have had her.* "But you were always good to her." I reached behind me for the knife. Etgar jerked and I held onto his neck and he squealed and I pressed his back against my lap. I fell in the dirt on my ass. "Quit it," I said. "Donna is going to die. And you have to promise me that no matter how you return next, you'll come back to us again."

He stopped squirming, stopped squealing. I curled over and kissed him between the eyes. "Because you're my brother. You know that."

I thought he wanted me to do it. Maybe it had never occurred to him that Donna was starving. The blade was rested on his throat.

Helen screamed and was on me before I could do it. I felt ants crawling up my jeans, biting my thighs. Helen ran back into the house, Etgar curled like an infant in her arms. Donna's skinny figure stood in the doorway afterwards, watching me squirm on the ground like a pig.

#

I pleaded with Helen and Donna that they would keep what I tried to do from Namwali. And I was ashamed of having ever suspected my stepmother would be the first to resort to butchering Etgar. I told them as much.

I asked Helen for forgiveness. She said she understood it—that she too was ashamed, but she understood. Donna wouldn't speak to me. I tried to feel her back again as she picked at the remaining ants on the windowsill, but she went to hers and Namwali's room and lay on her mattress.

When Namwali came home, she asked if I would go to the garden and watch the Returned with her. This time there would be no snap beans to pick. I brought out the folding chairs, she the binoculars and stand.

"Braid me," she said, handing me a handful of dyed orange feathers and ties. She called out the names of animals as they appeared, slowly: "Ostrich." And: "I think, maybe an armadillo."

"You can't see an armadillo from here," I said, my voice cracking.

As I worked on the third feather her nostrils flared, ears twitching. She said she could see something weaving between the stumps, something large, something gray.

"What is it?"

She moved and I looked into the binoculars. A wolf, bigger than I'd seen in pictures, snapped at the legs of the ostrich. Wolves were absolutely never counted amongst the Returned. Namwali suggested it was because they rarely remembered, that most stayed wild and vicious and could never be taught better. Her description of her past life, when we were children, had never amounted to this.

The ostrich made a dart for the village and the wolf gave chase. The tower bell rang without pause and as the wolf grew nearer there were gunshots.

The ostrich made its way to safety. The wolf slalomed through hawthorns and nettles and the gunshots eventually drove it back to the hill and out of range. It weaved through the pine stumps and out of sight.

"Make sure Etgar stays in tonight."

I looked at Namwali. She had the eyepiece in her fingers, head tilted down to look, but her eyes were removed from the hill.

"What's happening?" I said.

Her face hovered next to the eyepiece. She looked at me and back towards the house and took up the binoculars.

"You think there'll be more?"

She rolled her shoulders. "Wolves always send one ahead of the pack." Then: "Maybe not," she said.

#

At night I brought the gun out to the porch, sat and watched the path. I had heard about packs of wolves snatching smaller creatures—cats, lap dogs, vermin—from

porches in neighboring villages even while the people sat with their animal-kin, defenseless and afraid.

The memory in Namwali's eyes had been evident, but I was optimistic. Everyone slept, Helen with Etgar, and I could hear the vibration of Namwali's snoring through the screen door.

There was a breeze, the rattle of dead kudzu and then a snap. I stood and heaved the gun up and waited for the light to emerge. Something walked around the corner, a lantern in hand. It stared at me under the porch light, stood like a human, wore a mining cap with the headlamp turned off. The chimpanzee, brave thing, had come back to steal from us again.

I flicked off the safety. "Go on," I said.

It waddled towards the car.

"I'm loaded with buckshot," I said. "Blow you in two."

The chimp turned, waddled on. The lamplight faded back around the corner. I could see a hint of its flash coming and going through the kudzu. Then it made a strangled hoot, and for a while there was silence.

The next morning Namwali asked Helen and me to follow her down the road to see what she had found on her way to the square. The chimp's insides were out in the open and chewed among a circle of wolf prints, big as my hands; its arms splayed out like a human, its fangs gnarled up at the sky, its eyes sunk into its skull. Helen vomited bile and Namwali held her up. I moved the chimp out of the road, into the brush away from sight. The headlamp and lantern lay in the weeds.

"I don't suppose we should risk eating it," I said.

Namwali's nostrils flared. She shook her head and rubbed Helen's back. It was already hot, and the smell was terrible.

#

Donna stayed in bed the rest of the day. We did what we could to keep her nourished—crushed spiders, picked wild onions from the grass and bugs from beneath the stones. She refused most of it. Namwali finally worked up the nerve to go into the village. It was late when she returned. She said there were more people in the square than the day before. They were still angry about the trucks and even more so about an invasion of wolves.

"I hope to never be a wolf again," she said. We had gotten lucky. One woman told Namwali that her grandson, a young ocelot, had been torn in half defending their home.

We would keep watch, that night—the wolves, Namwali said, mightn't attack humans, but Etgar needed to stay inside and away. We were all very tired and weak from hunger.

#

I showed Helen how to load the twelve guage—cram the shells in at the bottom, hold the button and simultaneously pump. We would take turns watching from the porch in case the wolves came.

Namwali volunteered to go first. I sat in the dark living room with Helen, Etgar asleep in her lap. There was still plenty of meat on his bones. My wildness and hunger had thankfully vanished, or maybe it had only grown on me to the point of being unrecognizable. I wondered if Etgar would be too small even for the wolves, a waste of their organized effort.

Regardless, I wasn't sure if I trusted Namwali's opinion of what wolves were capable of. I told Helen as much: "Maybe they won't come. Probably not. Definitely not." Nothing happened for an hour. We tried to rest. It was midnight before Namwali slapped open the screen door, waking Etgar, and told me to go out and watch for a while.

"How did it look?"

Etgar eased over the cot and jumped down to the floor.

"I think I can smell their scent," she said. Etgar trotted over to her, sniffed her feet and went back. "I'm tired. And keep him off the damn floor."

Helen reached down and picked Etgar up again, put him in her lap.

I sat down in the rocking chair, shotgun in hand. I looked down the path. Something howled farther across the main road. Inside, Helen shifted on the cot. I practiced aiming the gun towards the crook in the path.

That's where they'd come. Had the chimp not been on the path the night before, they might have come then. But Namwali never indicated how real wolves would attack. She probably didn't remember, exactly.

If they came I knew it would be quick. I was afraid, more perhaps for my human kin than Etgar. I still loved him. I told myself this—a way to keep my eyes opened and my mind focused on the path, the darkness at the other side of it.

Helen came out and told me she was willing to take watch. It had gotten quiet.

"You should get some rest," she said. I offered her the gun. She took it from me without speaking, held it against her chest, leaned in and kissed me on the lips.

I wished she would not have done it. This was Etgar's fiancé. Had been with him for so long. I knew I had made a mistake. I didn't know how to say it so I didn't. I didn't

know anything, anymore. Etgar was my brother. I hated my brother. But I loved him for remembering us, for never being a perfect human being, so imperfect that he came back as swine.

"Stay with him," she whispered, pointing to the door.

He lay on his side across her blanket, lifted up and looked at me. I sat next to him. He didn't try to escape. I put my hand on his ribs and pretended to count.

"Don't know what we'll do," I said. I scratched behind his ear, leaned back against the wall and nodded off.

Pop.

The gunshot brought me back to the dark living room, Etgar squirming and running out to Helen.

#

I tell everyone who asks, I don't remember the man I used to be: A lump of tobacco stuck between my lip and gums, a notebook flung over my knee, a pencil rolling over the cement and pencil shavings crammed between the furls of my dirty khaki jeans. I remember people used to stare. That I loved reading books—for whatever reason I can't remember. Now, every time I'm alone with a book, I fan the pages and smell, but I hardly ever read. Most recently I read a how-to article on cars and engines that had belonged to Etgar. I read the labels on boxes the food trucks dumped into the square. Sometimes I helped sort them out according to the needs of the people who lived there, the animal-kin they kept dear. There was nothing beautiful about words, anymore. Not on labels, nor included within instruction manuals, and our village doesn't have a library, anymore. Those books were burned for warmth, years ago.

I have often wondered why I came back as Straub—why, when all my life has amounted to is the care of Namali, Helen who barely looks at me, and Donna, who swears even today that being human is far worse than being insect.

If anyone asks me how being insect can be so wonderful, I give them a look and tell them there's no real responsibility. You eat and fly or crawl and hide. There is nothing painful about the life of an insect. And even such a short, minute existence must lead to transcendental possibility.

Etgar's life as a pig ended the night of the attack. Namwali hid Donna beneath some old tops and gowns in the closet. I ran out to catch my brother.

Helen was shouting at the wolves as they stole around the corner. One leapt onto the car, bursting out the windshield. One lay dead on the porch's steps. They circled around us and started for the porch but veered off when Helen made another shot.

Pop.

The gun almost flung her down, the scatter hitting nothing but dust. The wolves yelped and hollered. One braved over to the porch and snapped at her ankles. Before I could snag Etgar, he jumped down the steps and made for the wolves, squealed after them as though drawing their attention away from us. I screamed after him. My voice cracked and my vision was like fire, all red.

Then the wolves were on him. Six of them. Snarling and pawing, tails flinging in the air. Namwali flew out onto the porch and jerked the shotgun from Helen and threw the barrel up.

Pop.

The scatter knocked two on their bellies and the rest started up towards the main road. Namwali shucked the gun, pulled the trigger and it clicked. The remaining injured wolves picked themselves up and limped out into the brush and disappeared. We ran out to get Etgar—chewed all over, clawed, a hole big as a fist torn into his throat by Namwali's shot. The wolf in her eyes expanded and ceased. Helen dropped down on her knees, put Etgar in her lap. Blood poured over her legs.

I covered my face with my hands. It was all I could do, all I could ever do. "Get Donna," Namwali said, pushing me away. I went back to the house to check on my sister, still crying beneath the mound of clothing in Namwali's closet.

#

So this is how we passed the year of our starvation: cut up the remains, bagged and dropped them into the cooler for as long as we would need to wait on the trucks. A pig can feed a family for days. As I looked down into the cold at Etgar's remains, I reminded myself that this was not my brother, but a pig. The real Etgar was somewhere else, now. We wondered how he would return, next. Whether he would come back to us at all. We thanked him for his gift of meat. Pan fried it in oil with a handful of wild onions.

We sat at the table, together, in silence. Helen opened her eyes to look. She touched my leg and I said nothing. Donna stared into space. Namwali, prodding her fork into the hot, pink ham, was the first to put it to her mouth.

RAIN

Before she went to sleep, our mother said she could see ghosts. She lay there dormant in the hospital bed in the dining room. She had been half out of her mind. I nodded a lot. Not ghosts, she corrected when I asked, smiling. Spirits, she said, hiding inside away from the relentless heat, some larger than dad's pickup, others small as a loaf of bread. The big ones were trying to steal her things. She kept asking us to go into her bedroom to make sure all her jewelry was still in the old box, that her wedding dress was still hanging in its plastic bag in the closet. She hinted that when the heat goes away, the spirits will leave. She talked about the spirits that looked like insects, how they'd crawl over the ceiling and hide in the dark space between the refrigerator and sink. A cool, damp place. The kitchen was in sight of the dining room. We looked, and nodded. No, some spirits were better than others, she corrected. She saw her brother, Joel, looking in through the kitchen window from the flowerbed grinning at her. She saw her mother, too, just the nose up, because her mother had been short and the window was high off the ground. Her mother's eyes looked playful. She said it had been a calming experience. She didn't want her mother to leave. I've heard of people seeing spirits like this before they die. I don't believe it, my brother William believes it. He sits next to her bed now with a black leather-bound Bible in his hand. He had been reading to her before all the lamps began to flicker. The heat of the outside oozing through the walls. It hasn't rained, the wind hasn't blown, no cloud in sight for several weeks. When she fell asleep the clock on the microwave started to blink. Dad is in the bathroom shaving again. He usually calls our mother to come and check the back of his neck. Lately he's been on the phone talking about her, watching her go. He doesn't know how to read to her like William. My brother

puts the Bible on the table. Our mother has been asleep for three days but William still picks up the Bible and waits like he expects her to wake, as if the roof won't collapse on them at any moment. He stands and walks over to the kitchen window and looks around in the bushes for spirits. We go out into the heat to get away from the sound of her breathing. We're not looking for anything, just waiting. Our mother used to love sitting on the porch with a cigarette when it rained. She used to tell us the only way the rain makes it here is by magic.