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THE ONES I LOVED FIRST: STORIES

by

Jennifer Jill Brewington

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
and the Department of English
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:

__________________________
Steve Barthelme, Committee Chair
Professor, English

__________________________
Dr. Monika Gehlawat, Committee Member
Associate Professor, English

__________________________
Andrew Milward, Committee Member
Assistant Professor, English

__________________________
Dr. Charles Sumner, Committee Member
Associate Professor, English

__________________________
Dr. Karen S. Coats
Dean of the Graduate School

May 2016
ABSTRACT

THE ONES I LOVED FIRST: STORIES

by Jennifer Jill Brewington

May 2016

The following short story collection explores characters dealing with the loss of love from separation, alienation, and death. The stories were written between 2012-2015.
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INTRODUCTION

When I was in my late teens, I left the religious sect I’d been born into and raised in. It was a close-knit and closed off community, and I had no ties beyond the religion. In order to protect the group from – what is in their minds – the infiltration of evil, those who left were shunned and marked as apostates, cut off from the community. For me, that meant near total loss: family, friends, and beliefs. In more practical terms: economy, home, safety net. Everything went back to zero. The day I left, I felt free, ecstatic. I half expected a Welcome Party. “Congratulations! You’re in, kid.” It wasn’t like that and never has been since.

Most people shed their familial ties as they grow up and into their lives, but the process is usually gradual, not all at once and on the same day. In her essay, “Place in Fiction,” Eudora Welty writes:

There may come to be new places in our lives that are second spiritual homes closer to us in some ways, perhaps, than our original homes. But the home tie is the blood tie. And had it meant nothing to us, any other place thereafter would have meant less, and we would carry no compass inside ourselves to find home ever, anywhere at all. We would not even guess what we had missed.

The loss of my original community, felt most sharply in the loss of family, has shaped my writing in such significant ways that I find it difficult to talk about my writing process without tying it to personal experience. Yet, that deep love experienced in my childhood has allowed me to create new connections with friends who have become family, a second spiritual home. The paradox of being formally removed from the same
community from which I originated has created a curiosity about relationships and connections at the center of my work as a writer.

My timeline inside of the religion was eternity and goals were based on thousands of years, not the solid eighty or so of the mortal world. At first terrifying, the idea of temporariness grew on me and provided the beginnings of a new way, a path forward. Rebuilding a “system” was the key for connecting with the outside world. Literature played a significant role in building that system. I found my way into libraries and spent hours pulling titles with little reference. In those early years, the books I read were mostly titles I recognized like *Leaves of Grass*, *Great Expectations*, and *The Great Gatsby*. Those three in particular made an impression on my mind and provided a path toward the aesthetics that I would eventually consider my most influential. Also important to this process was discovering books I didn’t like. *Gone with the Wind* comes to mind. Other kids liked Kurt Vonnegut and Jack Kerouac, but those guys weren’t for me. The process of discovery, of finding what I liked on my own, was critical after a life of doing, saying, and thinking in the ways I’d been trained to and, as a result, not knowing my own mind.

For years, I kept Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Well Dressed Man With a Beard” taped to the walls of whatever temporary place I called home. I don’t recall how I discovered the poem, but it was soon after leaving the religion and well before becoming a student of English literature. The poem is one of my favorites from the first line to the last. It was one of those moments when a thing written distant from me in time, place, and circumstances felt like it was written about me, for me, to me. From the first two lines, “After the final no there comes a yes/ And on that yes the future world depends,” to the last one, “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never,” the language resonated and
reflected my feelings. I felt less alone. I had no idea what the poem is actually about. In it I found a way to keep something permanent in a life surrounded by the temporary – an unexplainable faith in language.

Language for me tends to look backward in an effort to process the past. The effect is that, once a story is complete, I am able to shelve an intense nostalgia that interferes with my waking life but enhances the imagination necessary for storytelling. In many of my stories, the characters are confronted with their pasts, confusing their presents. In telling their stories, I am able to process my own past and not dwell on it as much as I might otherwise. It goes something like this: if I am overwhelmed by loneliness, and I am able to write a character dealing with a similar sadness, and those stories connect in some way with readers, then the loneliness dissipates as does its uniqueness. My hope is that readers will encounter the story and recognize some parts of their own experience, as I did when I first encountered F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, and Jean Rhys. And as it continues to do as I encounter writers who demonstrate qualities I seek in my own work, such as Donald Barthelme, Grace Paley, Mary Robison, and many others. Through this system I’ve created of reading literature, writing stories, and sending those stories out into the world to be read by others, I have managed to find something I believe in that has the power and flexibility to account for the complexities of living in this temporary world.

In order to cope with suffering, my own and the world’s, I rely heavily on humor. It provides perspective and an opposing energy to the brooding to which I am prone. I laugh easily and often, and I consider that ability one of my greatest strengths. Humor has carried me through many painful experiences. Laughter provides us with a feeling of
happiness. It immediately alleviates depression and anxiety. Like yawning, a person rarely laughs alone. The sound of laughter, even if the initial reason for it is unknown, often prompts others to laugh or to at least feel pleasure in hearing laughter, and so its benefits spread and connect people to one another. Humor is one of the easiest ways to form bonds quickly with strangers, and it is how I’ve made acquaintances with most of the grocery store cashiers in my hometown. When I find myself in a dark moment, the quickest way for me to come out of it is by stimulating my mind with something funny, a book, a stand-up routine, or simply seeing the same situation though a more humorous lens. We laugh to relieve the suffering, to gain agency over circumstances beyond our immediate ability to control. Humor is rebellious and subversive in its resistance to accepting powerlessness and loneliness as a permanent state of being.

The stories in this collection are character-driven studies of relationships that attempt to balance tragedy and comedy. I am endlessly interested in how people respond to the circumstances of their lives. For me, there is nothing more sincere than implementing parts of a person into my work where they become a permanent part of my community. It is through these connections that I make my way out of the old thoughts and the false belief that there is no home for me here, in the world beyond my original home. The old familiar but difficult dance of disappointment has not entirely lost its appeal. It is comfortable and easy to remove myself from others. I get something from the well worn and carved out place of the exiled. In order to be present, I must stay connected. The same goes for my writing. The best of my stories represent a world in which I am fully engaged and interacting with in a meaningful way.
The characters in this collection find themselves in the same position, feeling ruined, somehow permanently. “What’s Done” and “Bitter Me,” demonstrate the ways in which nostalgia turns past romances into something absurdly pure. I write a lot about failed romances, but it’s not because I’m especially concerned with failed romances. I’ve had my share, sure, but someone once told me that if a relationship ending is a mark of failure, then all romances are doomed. Thinking of it that way makes sense to me. I’ve had lovely romances that lasted mere months and terrible ones that dragged on for years. But what romances represent in my work, and in my life, are easily accessible relationships that allow me to explore the deeper losses: the family, the religion, etc. These two shorter stories do not dive too deeply into the past.

“In-Between,” and “Safe in the Grave,” are more serious than most of my stories. They represent how the sadness settles in with the happiness until a person cannot separate them. Not exactly light fare, but each one in its own way surfaced from the same desire to express something about carrying childhood experiences in our minds forever. “In-Between” recalls some autobiographical moment of being torn between two worlds. I wrote it from the place in my mind that has not and will not heal. It came from a desire to express the loss of being separated from the ones I loved first. “Safe in the Grave” was written in a similar place. I had been thinking about the first year after being shunned and the strange connections made with others who lived in some way on the fringe of society, though not in the expected ways. There was an older man who was protective of me, and because I’d never been protected before, I mistook it for love. Maybe it was in its own way. He disappeared one day, and I think of him all of the time.
“Ruby Alone” is my version of a monster story. I’ve never written a story like it before or since, but it seemed important to write about what happens if the connection to the world and accountability to others becomes lost for good. I often wonder if my shunning was warranted and if there is some part of me that absorbed the wickedness I’d been raised to fear. I don’t really believe I’m wicked, and I find words like “evil” and “sacred” curious in their inherent claims that we are something other than mortal, fallible, and broken. “Ruby Alone” fleshed out the idea that there perhaps were situations where a shunning would be justified, but then where do we put the Rubys of the world? There are those among us who feel no need to connect, who embrace destruction, and want only to break things.

“The Ruined Ones,” in my view is nearest to a success in its blending of humor and darkness. It balances out my strong belief in humor as a method of coping with the suffering of the world and my desire to accurately express the dark nature of disconnecting. It represents the ways in which I hope my work reconciles the complexities of love. Though this story is the least autobiographical, it is the most personal. It feels like the closest I’ve come to a writing process that I hope to repeat many times over.

Writing for me is a way to form connections with a world that still feels strange and unfamiliar, even though I have been in it nearly as long as I was in my original community. Our original experiences shape us in ways that can never be shed entirely, but it is in our ability to define our lives on our own terms that we might begin to form meaningful and lasting connections with one another and with the world in which we are all bound together, for better or worse. Though our experiences are unique to our
individual lives, our suffering, joy, worry, and peace are translatable. The stories in this collection are thematically similar in that the characters are struggling to cope with their present circumstances, often due to a block in their ability to process some aspect of their pasts. Rather than making the impossible choice between the past and present, they must learn to deal with finding balance both through humor and understanding that what makes them different from others also makes them similar.
WORKS CITED


Sisters, Cole and Laine, sat on the hard cement bunk built into the cinder block wall of their one room cinder block apartment. The apartment was part of a small row of one-room bunks on a campground surrounded by pine trees with a lake at the center. They’d been built right after WWII for returning soldiers but were not meant to be anything permanent. The family who owned the land felt compelled to help the pitiful, and so Cynthia, the granddaughter of the owner and manager of the property, didn’t ask questions when they showed up two weeks ago with nothing, not even identification. She arranged for them to do some cleaning and caring for the land and let them raid the Lost and Found for clothes. She paid them in cash once a week and left them alone, mostly. Sometimes they’d find a casserole or cookies or socks or blankets left for them. One of their jobs was to clean the community showers and walk the grounds at midnight to make sure all of the fires were out.

A radio from Lost and Found played The Beatles. It was Laine’s turn to choose the station. Cole wanted to listen to the blues. She said it reminded her of home. Laine braided Cole’s long, thick, dark hair that matched her own by the light of a reading lamp. They trimmed their hair for dead ends but otherwise had never had a haircut. Their eyes were green and their lashes long and dark. Cole had a very slight under bite that made her look like she was pouting even when she wasn’t. Often she was. She had about fifteen pounds on Laine and her skin was not as bright and even. The elders had told her that she was not a pretty girl and that she’d have trouble attracting a brother to marry her. She thought about that a lot even now. She hadn’t expected to hear their voices so clearly from so far away. It wasn’t far enough. It never would be.
Laine held up a mirror and positioned it so she could see both of their reflections.

“We’re like twins,” she said.

“We’re not like twins. It’s like when you say you’re starving, but you’re not starving. You’re hungry. There’s a difference.” Cole thought they should call things by their proper words. It was important to keep their wits.

“I am starving,” Laine said.

“Eat a peanut butter sandwich.”

“Is that what you’re having?”

“No, we’re out of honey and the jam tastes like shit.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk like that,” Laine said. She put her hands together and mouthed a prayer.

“Hey, don’t pray for me.” Cole reached over and pulled down her prayer hands.

“We should treat ourselves to the snack machine,” she said. Laine put on their flip-flops and a men’s red hoodie, and Cole put on her rainboots. They walked over the dead pine leaves and cones. Cole jumped on the cones to make a crunch, while Laine eased through nearly soundless. They walked down to the bathrooms where people who were camping took showers to wash off the muddy lake at the center of the grounds. For three dollars in quarters, they each got a bag of peanuts and two diet sodas.

They made their rounds, but all was quiet. No fires, and only five sites occupied. The stars out were a thing of beauty. So many stars they spent much of their walk looking up instead of forward. Cole linked an arm with Laine and put her head on her shoulder, while they walked. “I couldn’t do this without you,” she said.
“You keep saying that, but it isn’t true,” said Laine. She unlinked her arm and walked a step ahead.

* 

Three old men founded the church in 1864 after breaking away from mainstream churches. They said there was no hell. The world was hell. Right now. This was hell. They wanted to etch out a small piece of Eden here on earth where the faithful could live apart from the world. And so they had a religion. Communities of believers built houses on the private land and lived and raised children and goats and planted gardens. At the center was a church built by the members of the religion and made of bricks with no windows. Three elders ran the whole thing, as set by the original three founders. Not always the same ones, but always three. It was like a pilot test for theocracy. They called the women sisters and the men brothers, creating a family through language. It all seemed like a photograph. They kept silent borders with the world and limited interaction with the people in it. Crossing the boundary meant certain doom. Everyone inside would be saved some sunny day. Everyone outside would be torn to pieces.

Cole was fourteen when she saw Brother Martin touching Laine. She was on her regular evening walk in the woods taking time to be alone. She was never alone, and all she wanted was to not feel so watched. She saw movement and recognized her sister’s laugh, but when she got closer, she saw the two of them embracing. Laine’s face looked terrified and blissful all at once. She’d never seen anyone make a face like that. Laine looked gorgeous and flush in the sunlight. Brother Martin was forty and married to their cousin, Ginger.
Cole saw his erect penis rise as he pulled his polyester, brown dress pants down to his knees. He took Laine's hand gently in his own and put it on top of his crotch. He guided her hand and then pushed her head down. Cole thought he was making her smell it, but then she saw her sister put her mouth around it like she knew just what to do. Like she’d done it a thousand times. Brother Martin closed his eyes and groaned. He said, “You’re such a sweet girl. You’re such a pretty girl.”

Cole stepped on a branch and made a crunch sound. Brother Martin pushed Laine aside and stood up. Cole thought about running but stood still like a deer. She thought she might die from nerves. She’d seen that happen to a deer once. It got stuck in her grandpa’s wired fenced, where he kept his hunting dogs, only one was loose, a hound. The rest were in a pin, but they howled and growled and threatened so long and so loud, the deer fell over and died. Right then, she thought she might do the same.

Brother Martin walked right up to her furious and in a rage. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Are you spying on me? Is that your place, child?”

“No, sir.”

He put his hand around her throat and squeezed hard. “What did you see?”

She couldn’t speak so she shook her head.

He released his hand. “What did you see?”

“Nothing.”

“If you lie to me, you lie to God.”

She took a step back to put space between them and then ran away. He yelled at her, “God made you fat to show the world what a wicked girl you are.”
When she got home, she told her mother what she saw. Her mother had been chopping carrots for a soup to take to the elders who were having their weekly meeting in the church. She stopped and gulped in air, and Cole thought she might cry. She walked over to Cole, embraced her in a rare hug, and kissed her head. For a second, Cole felt safe, but her mother’s mood shifted and she said, “Don’t lie about such things, child. It is a sign of the devil.”

* 

Laine filled the apartment with bible verses and prayers written in chalk on the walls. The whole place reeked of nostalgia. It was poison to someone so young in the world. Cole couldn’t stand it. She stood in front of Laine and clapped her hands. She said, “The end is near. We haven’t much time,” mocking a sermon they’d heard a hundred times. Laine shook her head and stepped around Cole. She taped up a picture of their family that she’d snatched on the night they left. The girl couldn’t think to bring a pair of pants and sneakers, but she thought to swipe a photograph. In the picture, her mother and father laughed while holding the pair of them, one each. It was the only picture of their father they’d ever seen as he left the church when they were five and seven. They didn’t know where he went, and all of the photographs along with his belongings had been burned for fear of demons attaching themselves to the possessions of their wicked father. Cole saved this one photo from the fire pit and kept it under her mattress. The corner of it was burned and curled. He was no longer theirs in the church’s mind. And so they tried to forget him. When someone left, that was it. Say goodbye, father. Goodbye, father.

“Don’t you miss them?” Laine asked.
Every second of every day and sometimes so much her whole body filled with memory and regret. She had a place and purpose and a people inside the community, but out here there were entire minutes when she felt she didn’t exist. She turned on the radio and found a static station playing a woman singing the blues. It sounded like Cole felt. “No,” she said. “I don’t miss it.”

*  

Away from Laine, Cole could fit in or at least do a pretty good imitation. Their apartment turned into a shrine of something Cole wanted to forget. Laine developed a pattern of praying in mumbles over and over, and Cole developed a pattern of leaving. She didn’t have any friends, but she met this guy, Ben, who worked at the store on the campgrounds.

Ben said strange things like, “We’re all captives of capitalism,” and “I don’t eat anything that could be named Buddy.” He looked strange too but in a cute way. He had puffy hair that flopped around his head like wool. A small space between his two front teeth made his smile interesting. He was skinny and probably malnourished which made him seem weak, which made her feel safe. Like the bunks, the store was built with cinder blocks, but it was painted a cream color with Provisions painted on the side in red. The store sold toilet paper, toothbrushes, water, matches, things people forgot to bring camping. Everything was double what it cost in town.

Ben went to the college in town, but he said he was an artist and felt stifled in “the ruins of the city,” so he lived in a tent on the grounds, another of Cynthia’s strays. Cole found this strange but charming. She didn’t know him exactly, but she knew him as well as anyone. They went out in back of the building to smoke a joint. He lit it and shivered
in his thin t-shirt with a band she’d never heard of written on front. He passed the joint to her, and she mimicked him beat by beat. She coughed and hacked.

“Take a smaller hit,” he said and took the joint from her, showing her.

The wind picked up at night and made gentle waves on the surface of the lake. It was a lovely evening. He talked about his art project building sculptures from fallen trees. She wanted to go to the place where people went to art school to build sculptures made from fallen trees.

“Why aren’t you in college?” he asked.

“I’ve thought about it, but I’m not really smart.”

“Yes, you are. And even if you weren’t, it doesn’t matter. I’m dumb as shit.”

“I never went to school.”

“Whoa,” he said and shook his head.

“Are you like a gypsy?”

“I don’t know. What’s a gypsy?”

“They just kind of roam around and don’t give a fuck about society. I don’t really know either,” he said and inhaled and passed it back, she repeated his movements, a silent communication between them. Was she making a friend? She watched him and imitated the way he held it gently between his thumb and finger, the way he inhaled but not too hard and held his breath but not too long. She wanted to get it right.

“Does your sister have a boyfriend?”

“No.”

“A girlfriend?”

Cole looked at him and rolled her eyes. “You’re not her type.”
“People adapt, darling.”

“I’m counting on it,” Cole said.

“She’s pretty cute,” he said.

“Oh, fuck off.” One of her new favorite things to do was to curse. Each time, it felt like she was getting away with something. *Fuck* was a new sound. Sometimes she’d spout off a series of words just to say them aloud. Motherfucking fucking cocksucker cuntfuck bastard fuckhead.

“We should all go into town some time. There’s an open mic night on Tuesdays at this bar I like. It’s kind of a dive, but the beer’s cheap, and they have pool tables.

“What’s a dive?”

He laughed. “You really are from some other place, aren’t you? Do you think Laine will want to go?”

Laine would not want to go. “Yeah, definitely. She’s been saying she wants to leave the grounds.” Laine needed to get out of the small space of the bunk. Leaving one enclosure for another made them feel like zoo animals. She’d been thinking too much. She needed to quit thinking or at least cut back.

* 

It rained for an entire weekend. The campers deserted their sites. The sisters stayed in their small, concrete room with the door open. There was a mist from the rain over most of the room, but they liked the way it sounded with the door opened. They lay in the single bed crunched up to one another face to face.

“I wish I was hot,” Cole said.
“Are you cold?” Laine asked. She put her arm over Cole and pulled the blanket around her.

“No, I mean, like hot hot. Like sexy hot. Like really hot,” she said.

“That’s a dumb thing to want,” Laine said.

Cole shifted to her back away from Laine’s embrace. “I think I like Ben. I think he knows. He wants to take us to a bar in town on Tuesday.”

“We aren’t old enough to go to a bar.”

“I don’t think it matters out here. Don’t you want to see people? Like real people. They can’t all be bad.”

“That’s what I’m worried about Cole. What if they are all bad? What if we’re bad too now?”

“We aren’t bad.”

“I miss everyone.”

“I think about mom.”

“I don’t just mean mom. I was in love, Cole.”

“Who with?” Cole asked.

“We have to have things for ourselves. Even you and me.”

“I don’t keep anything from you.”

“Maybe you should.”

Laine rolled over on her back and the two stared at the cement ceiling.

“What is your biggest fear?” Laine asked.

“That I’ll be buried alive. What’s yours?”

“That we can never undo what we’ve done.”
“I don’t want to undo it, Laine.”

“It’s supposed to be hard to be a chosen ones. We were weak.”

“No, it isn’t supposed to be hard,” Cole said. “We aren’t weak.” It worried Cole that she referred to them as chosen ones. It meant she hadn’t left the old ways behind, not yet. She reached over to hold Laine’s hand. “I’m sorry I brought up Ben. I know you hate talking about boys.”

“That’s not true, Cole. That’s something you made up about me.”

Another shift between them as quiet and powerful as when the continents do it.

Their connection was losing its strength, and Cole felt that if that happened then soon they would disappear. They had to get out of here. They turned their backs to one another and fell asleep to the sound of rain.

*

The bar was twenty minutes north. Cole made a deal with Laine: One night out, away from this static space between before and after. One night away and then. And then? They’d talk about what came next after this night or they argued about it. The sisters rode in silence staring straight ahead while Ben listened to loud music and smoked cigarettes. He told them about things he’d heard on the news. “What chemical warfare can do for love,” he said. Always talking in code, like some cross between the news and poetry. Cole wanted to hear more of both. Laine was stiff and crunched in the corner of the front seat. They arrived at a place just off the highway with a parking lot full of pickup trucks.

They went inside, and Ben asked them what they wanted to drink. The bar was lit mostly by Christmas lights and crossed fingers. Nothing seemed secure or safe, like one
loose screw could cause bricks and mortar to unbuild themselves. Laine said nothing but Cole rolled her eyes and said, “We’ll have two of whatever you’re having.”

Ben laughed and ordered three whiskey shots and three draft beers from the bald bartender with sleeve tattoos. Laine sipped the shot and acted like she was drinking poison. Cole watched Ben put his head back and pour it down his mouth quick and easy. She did the same. It burned her throat but then it was warm, and she liked the warm part. “Can we do that again?”

“Planning on getting fucked up, huh?” He laughed. He ordered two more whiskey shots.

Cole had a few beers sometimes from the store on the campground but this was her first real drinking. She drank two more shots before Ben said, “I’m not carrying you out.”

Cole said, “I really wish you would,” and did her best impression of sexy, but it came off like a little girl asking for her mother’s lipstick.

Laine leaned in and whispered, “I don’t like it here.”

Cole said, “I think it’s wonderful.”

Laine frowned and crossed her arms in front of her. As one felt relief, the other felt trapped. They could not be happy at the same time in the same place, and they could not be happy apart from one another.

A man with a scraggly beard in a flannel shirt sang a country song, and Ben led them to the pool tables. “Ever played pool before?”

“No,” Cole said. Laine didn’t say anything.
He racked the balls in the wooden triangle and rolled them into position, flipping the rack in circles and placing it into the slot on the side of the table. He took a pool stick, leaned over, and made a shot causing the balls to crash and jolt dispersing in heavy reaction. Two balls, both striped, went in the corner hole. “That’s called breaking,” he said. He passed the stick to Cole.

She copied his movements but hit the ball too hard and in the wrong place. It hardly moved at all. The eight ball cozied up to a red solid in the middle of the table. The whiskey made her feisty. She said, “That’s called connecting.”

Ben said, “That’s not really the goal.”

“Maybe you’re the goal.”

Laine rolled her eyes and took the stick from Cole. “That doesn’t even make sense,” she said.

“At least I’m trying.”

Laine leaned over the table slow, her shirt fell from her chest and Ben’s face glazed over. He zoned in on Laine. She took aim at a yellow striped ball and maneuvered her position “Punch it right in the middle,” Ben said. Laine leaned down slow and punched it in the middle like she’d done this a thousand times. She made the shot and two more.

“I thought you never played pool before,” Cole said to Laine.

Laine said, “I never told you that I never played pool. The Martins had a table in the basement. I practiced sometimes when I babysat. They asked me not to tell.”

Cole grew angry but even she didn’t know why. She wondered what else Laine did in the Martin’s basement. Cole missed several more shots and said, “Fuck it,” and
went to sit at the bar. She watched her shy, pious sister turn into the woman she wanted to be out here. Laine giggled and made eyes at Ben and touched him quickly on the shoulder, wearing those dumb rainboots from Lost and Found. It wasn’t even raining. *You’ll never be loved,* said the elders through the jukebox. *Shut the fuck up,* said Cole. But they never did.

A young couple danced slowly in a way that made Cole feel like she was missing out on something. An older woman, maybe in her fifties, wore red lipstick and a sequin dress on stage and sang, “I’ve been loving you too long.” She wasn’t a very good singer, but she was a very good storyteller. She sang it like she wrote it in a letter to a lover who never wrote back.

The woman in the couple was bigger than the man. She wore a skintight black dress up to her ass with Oxford black and white shoes that looked like men’s shoes and somehow that made them even sexier. Her leg muscles moved as she shifted her weight from hip to hip, pressing into her partner’s body and moving perfectly to the rhythm. She wore bright red lipstick, winged eyeliner, and mascara. A red bow tied around her Afro, and she smiled like she was on the verge of laughing all of the time. The man looked at her like she was a miracle. Cole tilted her head and moved her hips in the barstool, an awkward seated dance. She smiled big like the woman.


The bartender said, “I still don’t think you’re twenty-one.”

“I still don’t think you care.”
“Nice attitude. Keep practicing, and one day you just might look like you belong here.”

“That’s what I’m hoping. I’m trying.”

“Stop trying,” he said.

“I have no idea what that means.”

“Me neither.” He filled a glass of water and put in front of her.

“Does that water have any whiskey in it?”

“You don’t need any more whiskey.”

“You don’t know what I need.”

“I know whiskey.”

Laine and Ben walked up. “I want to go now,” Laine said.

“I’ll catch a ride home with Sailor here,” Cole said and looked at the bartender who shook his head no.

Laine put her hand on her sister’s and said, “Let’s just go home, Cole.”

“We don’t have one.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Cole slammed her fist on the bar so hard the glass shook. The bartender changed from jovial to cautious. “I’m so tired of your guilt games. I don’t need any more fucking guilt. I’m staying,” Cole said.

“Fine,” Laine said. Ben shrugged and followed Laine toward the door. “We can’t leave her here,” he said. But that’s just what they did.

Cole looked at the bartender who was unamused. “We don’t have cabs out here.”
She spit out a sad laugh and a few tears fell down her face. The dancing woman came up to the bar and ordered a beer. She put her hand on Cole’s back. “Oh, honey, he ain’t worth all this.”

“It’s not really about him.”

“It never really is.” The woman took the napkin from her beer wet with condensation from the bottle. She dabbed around Cole’s eyes. “All you got is you, boo.” The woman put her shoulders back and her chin up and cocked her head to the side. She looked like she owned the place. She looked like she owned the whole world. “Like this,” she said.

Cole sat up straight, put her shoulders back, her chin up, cocked her head to the side.

The woman said. “There you go.”

The couple gave Cole a ride back to the campground and dropped her off. She stood at the dirt entrance looking up at the stars. She said, “I’m so sorry.”

A barred owl hooted, “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you?” It was a joke Laine and her had with one another when they were kids. She supposed they weren’t anymore.

The next morning, she walked in the apartment with her smeared mascara. Her clothes smelled like cigarettes and her blood shot eyes revealed everything. When she walked in Laine was sitting on the bunk with her head down, and she was crying.

Cole said, “Hey, chicken, don’t cry. I’m sorry about last night.”
She looked like she’d been crying all night. Laine cried some more and Cole put her arm around her and hugged her. “Did something happen last night?”

Laine laughed. “No, something happened when we left home. I’m going back, Cole.”

Cole’s heart raced. She panicked. She recalled the dead dear but then took a deep breath and said, “It won’t always be like this.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.” But she didn’t know.

“Cole,” Laine begged. “Come with me. There’s nothing out here for us.”

Cole put her head on Laine’s shoulder, resigned. “I can’t go back there.”

“I can’t stay out here.”

“We can go some place else. We can try some place else.”

“It’ll just be another place in the world. Another place away from home. I don’t want to be like this, Cole. I feel so dirty. I feel so empty. Please come with me, Cole. If you don’t, we’ll never see each other again. Is that what you want?”

“No, Laine.”

They looked at one another and for a moment, and Cole remembered a day. Her mother took them off the commune to pick berries on a neighbors’ farm. They spent all day laughing in bushes, picking berries. She recalled the taste, straight off the vine and warm from the sun, sweet and tart. Cole and Laine sat under one of the bushes for shade, their fingertips stained pink, safe from the world outside.

“We’ll have one another. We’ll have our family. Isn’t that enough?”

“No, it isn’t. Not nearly.”
For a while, they sat in silence, but then too soon, Laine got up, hugged Cole, and kissed her on the cheek. And that was it. Say goodbye, sister. Goodbye, sister.

* 

It’d been three months since Laine left. Ben moved back to the city, too, but she’d become closer with Cynthia after telling her story. One of her new apartment neighbors, a ten-year-old girl named Marisol, peeked around the concrete wall that kept the outside of their apartments separated. Marisol’s half-brother, Miguel, raised her though he never mentioned why. He was older than Cole by a few years, and they had an across-the-concrete-wall sort of friendship. They’d begun recently spending weekends together, the three of them, grilling or watching movies or, if Marisol had her way, learning choreography from music videos. The three of them made for an interesting study in friendship. “What are you doing?” Marisol asked, sassy and with no sense of boundaries.

“I’m saying goodbye to my sister,” Cole said. She washed the chalked scriptures from the walls, the last remaining sign of Laine.

“You have a sister?”

“I had a sister.”

“Is she dead?”

“No, I am,” Cole said and smiled.

“Can I have your phone?”

“I don’t have a phone,” Cole said.

Marisol grunted and shook her head. “Who doesn’t have a phone?”

“Jesus. I mean, fuck,” Cole said. “I’m working on it. Doesn’t Miguel have a phone?”
“He won’t let me use it.”

“You can watch television. No porn.” Cynthia gave Cole a small tube television when she bought a flat-screen along with a DVD player and a box of movies. Marisol accepted the compromise.

Less than an hour later, Miguel peaked around the wall and grabbed the side of it with both hands. “What are you doing?”

She held up her sudsy hand and sponge. “My sister,” she said.

“She’s in the wall?”

“Invisible,” she said. Miguel knew the whole story. She’d told him once as a way of letting him know he was not alone in being alone.

“Marisol with you?”

“She’s right there. Like right in front of you.” Marisol had fallen asleep on her bed.

“She can’t keep doing this. I’m sorry.”

“It’s no bother. I don’t even watch her really. She might be dead.”

He said, “You are too funny,” instead of “so funny,” and Cole smiled. She liked these small slip-ups in his mostly flawless English. They reminded her that he knew entire languages she did not know, that he’d been places she’d never heard about. “Can I come in to get her?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “I was just thinking…”

“You think too much.”

She smiled and thought he used it how he intended that time.
Miguel did not go in to get Marisol. Instead, he sat beside Cole, grabbed a rag, and started scrubbing. Cole thought, Look at me. I am someone’s neighbor.
SAFE IN THE GRAVE

How does a shy girl from Florida wind up in love with a criminal? Start low. One of Adrienne’s most vivid memories was of a day when she was ten. She had wandered down the street after being told to stay in the yard while her spent mother cleaned the house after a whole day of work cleaning other people’s houses. A neighbor saw Adrienne standing in the middle of the street and asked her where she lived. She said, “I’ve seen you before. Are you lost?” Adrienne dropped her head and turned her feet toward one another, pigeon-toed, with her hands behind her back like she was being arrested.

The woman asked her where she lived and she said “The brown house.” She knew even though she couldn’t put it into words that that was a bad answer. The brown house meant overgrown yards, peeling paint, cracked driveway, and a net-less basketball hoop on the edge of the driveway. It meant two broken down cars perched in the fenceless back yard from the couple of months her father thought he could take a stab at being a mechanic. They’d been there so long weeds grew in and around them. The brown house meant the dirty children, the terrible father, the pathetic mother. Adrienne wore her big brother’s hand-me down green-striped shorts and green t-shirt with blue knee socks and a pair of tennis shoes. The woman put her hand on top of Adrienne’s head and patted it. Adrienne liked that. She walked her back home and delivered her back to the arms of her frazzled mother. She didn’t like that.

Hours later, her mother and father raged from what began with her father’s proclamations of “no daughter of mine” and “what kind of a mother?” Her mother yelled back through sobs that she’d been working nonstop for forty-eight hours, and who would
clean the house if she didn’t? Adrienne and her brother, Eric, exhausted from not being able to sleep through the noise of it all, hadn’t been to school in three days. They built a sheet fort in the corner of the living room and stayed inside of it for hours pretending it was some pretty, quiet place. They heard their mother’s scream stifled and peeped through the holes where the sheets’ edges overlapped to see their father pick their mother up by the throat and hold her a foot off the ground. Adrienne thought about screaming but didn’t scream. She held her breath instead and decided not to breathe again until her mother could. But Eric, his mother being his most precious thing, lunged from under the blanket with the forward momentum of a predator. He jumped on his father’s back and wrapped his arms tight around his father’s neck. And that was it. The fight ended.

* 

Adrienne and Eric looked like twins with the same bone structure: sharp cheekbones, thick, jutted collarbones, broad shoulders. Same smile, same eyes, same gestures that made it seem as though they were always up to something. Whenever they didn’t want to do something, they would cock their heads to the right like puppies. They did this often enough in sync that their mother accused them of plotting. Each had a slow way of thinking about a thing before speaking about it. They hated to repeat themselves or to answer personal questions and would often refuse to respond.

When she was fourteen and he was sixteen, their mother was in the hospital for two weeks recovering from a hysterectomy. Their mother joked that she’d been gutted, and Adrienne thought it was true. They convinced nearly everyone – the nurses, doctors, janitorial staff – that they were twins. Their hospital routine was to watch game shows in their mother’s room until the nurses came in to wash her, then they’d take the elevator
down to the cafeteria, order food they’d never be allowed to eat at home, and run around the hospital trying to get to new hallways through new doors on different floors.

The day before their mother’s release, Adrienne and her brother took an elevator to the cafeteria. A nurse introduced them to a priest as The Twins. They laughed and punched one another. The priest said, “You seem like you’re up to no good.”

And they cocked their heads to the right at the same time.

“You remind me of my brother and me,” he said. “We weren’t twins, though.”

The priest wasn’t as old as he sounded, maybe in his early fifties, but he tossed his head back whenever he laughed. His laugh was coarse and turned to a cough. He had a large, colorless mole on the tip of his left ear. Adrienne kept looking at it. “What’s your mother’s name?”

“Gloria,” they said at the same time.

“Last name?”

“Locklear.”

“Gloria Locklear. I’ll pray for her,” he said. “My brother died of polio.”

“Is that true?” asked Eric.

“No. I wanted to see if you’d believe anything a priest said. Lots of people do, you know? My brother lives in Ohio with his wife and three children. We spend August in a cabin in Montana and pretend we’re frontiersmen. I’m not kidding. We really do pretend. Wear the clothes, churn the butter, ride horseback.”

She wanted to know, since he mentioned it, and finally asked after much consideration about phrasing, “What’s it like to ride a horse?”

“Bumpy.”
They talked to the priest for nearly an hour. He showed them a card trick and told them a joke about priests in a bar that they didn’t get but laughed anyway. He patted the table and stood up. “What’s your mother’s name again?” he asked.

Neither of them answered.

He said, “Locklear!” and snapped.

Their mother was in a wheelchair when they returned and wore the same pink wrinkled dress she’d worn when she was admitted. Like prison, Adrienne thought, you wore the same thing going out as you wore going in. She’d read that somewhere.

Eric and her argued over who would drive.

“You drove us here, so I’m driving us back,” Adrienne said and grabbed the keys from his hand.

He pinched her and said, “You’re not even allowed to legally drive. I’m a better driver.”

“You ran a red light just yesterday.”

“Nobody was anywhere near there but us and I was going five miles per hour.”

“Please stop talking,” their mother said.

“You’re not driving.”

“Just stop talking,” she said again.

“I’m driving!” They shouted at the same time.

“Please shut up,” their mother said again.

Eric woke her up two weeks after that in the middle of the night and said he was catching a bus to California. He was wearing a blue jean jacket and an army bag stuffed full. He never came back. She never heard from him again.
* 

So she fell in love? Who among the conscious does not desire love? She was seventeen, and William was nearly thirty. He did not fall in love with her when she fell in love with him, but rarely is love simultaneous. He would not fall in love with her for a decade.

She’d found sympathy from Jim, the Vietnam vet who owned a beer-only dive bar near the trailer park her family moved to after Eric left, and his father lost his job, and they lost the house. The bar was intended for truck drivers. It was one big ugly room of plywood painted black with concrete floors with ash built up in them that left the cracks darker against the gray. There were no windows save the glass door, which had been busted out by some angry drunk so many times the glass was replaced with plastic. The bar was just about a mile down the highway from the trailer park near a small gas station that claimed to be open twenty-four seven but closed at 3 a.m. nearly on the dot. And where there weren’t worn down buildings, there were nothing but pines.

Adrienne already applied and had been turned down from the gas station and the Waffle House a mile on up the other way of highway, so it was the only other place close enough to walk there and back, and she needed to earn money in order to get out of there. She wanted out of there so badly, it filled her every thought. At first Jim turned her down saying she was too young to work in a bar. “You gotta be twenty-one to serve alcohol,” he said. She said she was twenty, and he said, “No you’re not, but I don’t think I care enough to argue with you. You seem to have made up your mind.” She was pretty, he said, though too thin. “Men are going to grab you. I’ll stop them if I see it, but I won’t always see it. Can you handle that?”
“I’ve been grabbed before,” she said, but she had not been grabbed in the way he meant. He hired her. She started that night.

About a month in, on a night ordinary as any other, she saw William. He had an average build but he seemed large. He wore a black leather jacket and military boots with jeans and a t-shirt. He was with a group of guys who gathered in a dark corner. They drank cheap beer, their only option here, and stayed huddled for two hours talking. Jim watched them but did not join them. He even let her serve them beer. They were up to something, and she thought maybe they sold drugs or stole cars. She followed William out on the deck and asked for a cigarette.

He said, “You shouldn’t smoke.”

“Neither should you.”

“Can’t argue with that,” he said and passed her a smoke, lit it, stared at her with a furrowed brow. “How old are you?”

“Old enough.”

“Old enough,” he repeated and laughed. “That sounds like something you thought up in school.”

“Why do you care how old I am?”

He smiled with one side of his mouth. “I guess I don’t. Just wondering what brought you here. You feel sorry for yourself?”

“Why would I?”

“You tell me.” He leaned against the wooden rails of the deck and bounced off occasionally with one foot. The nocturnal insects called for one another in the woods.
“I don’t feel sorry for myself,” she said but she knew she did. She hated that he saw it, that she couldn’t cover it up.

“You shouldn’t.”

“I don’t.”

“I know this boy called Samuel. About your age, maybe a hair older. He was born in Bangladesh. His family was made homeless by the floods, so they moved in with relatives spread around the U.S., Canada, India. They were the lucky ones. He hasn’t seen his mother or father or siblings in ten years, and all he does is smile.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s happy.”

“He seems pretty happy to me.”

“His name isn’t Samuel, is it?”

“No.”

“Why’d you say Samuel?”

“To protect him.”

“Why does he need protecting?”

He shrugged, put out his cigarette, and walked over to the overflowing garbage bin to toss it in. “Most everyone I know needs protecting.”

She put out the half-smoked cigarette in an overflowing ashtray and then emptied the ashtray into the overflowing garbage bin, and said, “I don’t really expect you to answer my questions. I just like asking them.”

He smiled at her for long time like he was thinking about something. “What’s your name?”

“Adrienne.”
“I’m William,” he said and extended his hand. They shook hands like they made a deal about something, but she was not sure about the nature of their agreement.

*  

Adrienne didn’t see William again for three months and some days, but she thought of him so much that there never seemed to be any thought that wasn’t colored by a thought of him. She couldn’t so much as wipe down tables or refill the beer cooler without wondering where he was and what he was doing. She’d saved about five hundred dollars, not nearly her goal but more than she’d ever had at once. One night after work, she found the red plastic coffee container where she kept her cash emptied out and tossed on her bed. When she ran around hysterical for an hour and confronted her father he said, “You want electricity or you want to throw a hissy fit?” After that night, she slept at Jim’s on the deck in the back in Eric’s sleeping bag. It smelled like him, dirty like a boy, clean like a boy, all mixed together. She didn’t so much think or wonder about Eric as she did simply miss him without hope or desire for consolation. And now she had someone new to miss alongside her brother. She lived this way for three weeks. Each night she walked toward the trailer park to throw Jim off, and her parents never bothered looking for her. They made runaway children. After Eric left, they treated the loss as a package deal. There was a hose in the back where she cleaned up and rinsed out her clothes, which she kept stuffed in an old cooler to keep it from the rain. It was showing, though, she knew. She wasn’t as pretty. She wasn’t making as much in tips. She’d have to figure something out soon.

She didn’t care how long it took to make up the difference or how many times she had to start over. Again and again and again if necessary. There was nothing to this life
but Agains. Her courage slipped away from her like a layer of skin without her noticing. Whenever something looked like a choice, it could be dismantled in such a way that she saw no choice at all. What did she want for dinner? She couldn’t buy the groceries. She tired of Waffle House and couldn’t afford it most days. She dove in the gas station’s dumpster some nights and ate stale chips tossed out. She never told Jim her troubles, and he never asked. Everyone’s got troubles. Sometimes there was nothing in her but hunger, and she’d drink lukewarm, past due milk, candy bars, pickles, anything. One night, she pulled out a banana that was bruised black on the outside, but she ate it anyway.

She jumped in to the gas station bin after her shift on a Saturday night and found some pastries and diet cokes. She made a pile just outside the bin and noticed headlights over the dumpster. Her heart pounded so hard she could hear it, and she froze in the light.

“Addy?”

William’s voice calmed her down in one way and sped her up in another. He walked over to the dumpster and said, “Come here,” in a tone that sounded like scolding. He put his hands under her arms, and lifted her from the dumpster. It reminded her of how her father picked her up and spun her around when she was a child on days when he found something to be happy about.

“Jim suspected you’d be here. He said you’ve been doing this for weeks. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“Mm-hmm.” He held her hand to guide her to the passenger side of the truck, opened the door, and helped her in. They drove around in his 1994 F-150 looking for some place open and finally came to a gas station with a restaurant about twenty miles up
the road. He ran inside and stayed in there waiting for the order. She listened to some man on the radio talk. “There is no guarantee that the power that fills the void of corruption will be any better,” said the voice. She pushed the channels to another station that played music.

William returned to the truck and handed her a coffee and a bag full of smells that made her stomach growl. “Dig in,” he said. The bag tied by the handles contained a Styrofoam tray with mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, fried okra, and corn bread. “Owners from Georgia,” William said.

She popped the lid, and a rush of something warm and edible caused her stomach to growl even more. Her first full meal in weeks gone in less time than it took to make. Once she was full, she noticed things other than her hunger like how her clothes and hair smelled like sweat and garbage. Like how William looked scared when he looked at her, or worried, or both. “Where’d you go for so long?” she asked.

“I’m a wandering man,” he said and grinned breaking his stoic expression and giving her a moment’s relief. “Got back tonight.” He cranked the engine and drove down the highway. “What are we going to do with you, Addy?”

She shrugged. When they got back to Jim’s, he let her in and showed her a sleeping pallet in the office. “I’ll be right outside sleeping in a booth,” he said and closed the door behind him.

The next morning she woke up happy and felt lucky. Beside her was a bag with soap and shampoo and lotion and powder and lip-gloss. William left a note in the bag saying he’d see her later that day. She walked around the woods on the other side of the
highway until her shift. She spotted an owl’s nest, three wild rabbits, and a bright purple flower on a vine that wrapped all the way up an oak tree.

When she got to Jim’s, he said almost immediately, “William’s on the deck. You need to go see him.” She went on the deck and saw William talking cozy with woman in short jean shorts and black t-shirt with black eyeliner and military boots.

He introduced Adrienne and the woman said, “My god, you’re pretty. Did you like the powder and lip-gloss? I was worried the powder wasn’t your color but it worked out, didn’t it?”

Adrienne didn’t respond. When she realized who chose the shampoo and the soap and the lotion and the powder and the lip-gloss, she wanted to wash her face and wallow in mud.

“I’m Kat,” she said and offered her hand.

Adrienne didn’t shake it.

“Oh, I’m Kat,” she said and offered her hand.

Adrienne didn’t shake it.

“Okay,” Kat said. “Good talk” and then turned to William. “I’ll see you inside. We leave in ten minutes. Ten minutes.”

Adrienne pouted and gnashed her teeth, clenched her jaw, stomped her foot.

“You got something you need to say?”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“I don’t have girlfriends, Addy. My work doesn’t allow it.”

“Do you have sex with her?”

He paused and breathed heavily out of his nose. “Addy, I’m thirty years old, and I’m guessing you’re somewhere close to eighteen, if I’m being generous. You got to stop
thinking of me like that. You’ve got to stop looking at me like I’m some kind of hero. I’m not. I want to help you, but we’ve got to be straight on that, okay?”

“I’m nothing to you.”

“You’re not nothing,” he said and walked to her. He got close enough to touch her but didn’t. “You want out of here? I’ve got a way for you to get out of here. It’s safe, but you should know, it’s illegal. Nothing harmful, but illegal.” He told her about some business he had in New Orleans. He needed her to drive his truck and carry a bag with some papers in it. He’d pay her two thousand dollars and buy her a ticket anywhere she wanted to go.

*

She’d never driven in New Orleans before and got lost in the traffic. The horns and speed and buzz of it all frightened her. After she parked the truck, she walked through the crowds clutching the bag. William gave her a cellphone and an address of a hotel where they would reconnect. It was loud with voices and traffic, and the smells disoriented her. An energetic man stopped her and said, “I’ll bet you five dollars I can tell you where you got them shoes.” She walked around him, but he followed her. “Come on now. I’ll give you five dollars if I can’t.” She walked faster and he said, “All right, it’s a deal. You got ‘em on your feet,” and laughed. She walked past him again, and he grabbed her bag and said, “Trying to cheat a man out of his rightful earned cash?” A woman wearing golf shorts and a polo got between them and pushed the man back. She handed Adrienne her bag. “Be careful. You look like prey,” the woman said.

Adrienne walked faster so when she finally made it to the front desk, she was out of breath and light headed. It took her a moment to realize that police officers filled the
lobby. A few minutes later, she saw William cuffed and led away. Look up, she pleaded, just look up, but he did not look up. She followed him out and watched as he got in the back of the police car. She didn’t know what to do. Should she follow him? Should she wait? She sat in the lobby for an hour trying to figure out what to do when the receptionist asked, “Adrienne?” and she nodded and walked to the front desk. “Phone call from your father,” the receptionist said. She handed the phone to Adrienne.

Jim didn’t say hello. “William called from jail. He said he saw you. He said to leave the truck and get out of town as soon as you can. You got that? Don’t come back here, Adrienne. It isn’t safe right now. We’re being watched.”

“Who’s watching us?”

“No one is watching you. William didn’t tell anyone about you, not even me until now. They thought the papers were with him. Tell me where you land and I’ll send cash. Good luck, kid.” He nearly hung up and then said, “Adrienne?”

“Yeah?”

“Those papers. I need you to burn them, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Burn them.”

“Okay.”

“As soon as you can, kid.”

“Just leave him?”

“We’ll take care of William.”

She handed the phone back to the receptionist. She left the hotel, walked down the sidewalk past downtown, past a cemetery, past a crumbling neighborhood and on toward
the highway where she stood with her thumb extended for less than ten minutes. A trucker called Hank pulled to the side of the highway and opened the door. When she jumped up into the cab, he said, “Don’t worry, sweetie, I won’t rape you.”

“I hadn’t thought you would until now,” she said, half in and half out.

“Get in. It was a joke.”

“I really wish you hadn’t said it.” She got in anyway.

“You’re not the type that hitches.”

“What’s the type that hitches?”

“The type of women hitch? Ones out of options,” he said.

“Well, that’s me,” she said.

“What’s your name?”

“Tandy.”

“No, it’s not,” he said. He started down the highway and talked nonstop. “I once traded hitches for blowjobs from a toothless woman. She’d been a prostitute but was too old for it anymore. She did a lot of crack, as I’m sure you are not surprised to hear. Never give a crack whore cash. Not even five dollars or you’ll never be rid of her.”

“What happened to her?”

“I married her for a minute, but she ran off. They always do, honey.” He told her about other girls who traded hitches for sexual favors and one he’d driven all the way from Miami to Seattle just for what she could do with her hands. “You think sex will always run plentiful when you’re young.”

“I’m not giving you a blow job.”
“I didn’t ask you for one, darling. I’m just telling you my story. I’m a redeemed man, made holy by the outreached hand of our Lord Jesus Christ,” he said. He took out a joint from his shirt pocket, lit it, rolled down his window and took a deep inhale. After three hits, he offered it to her but she shook her head and he took another hit. “I’m washed clean of my sins and don’t plan on soiling my soul no more in this life.”

They drove for nearly a whole day, so that by the time he dropped her off in Colorado, she’d considered him a sort of friend. He gave her a hundred bucks and told her to keep away from truck drivers. He gave her a copy of Coleridge poems. “Kubla Khan changed my life,” he said.

“I thought Jesus changed your life.”

“Oh, my life has been changed many times, sweetie. Many times.” He recited loudly over the diesel engine his favorite part, “Weave a circle round him thrice, and close your eyes with holy dread, for he on honey-dew hath fed, and drunk the milk of Paradise.” He put his sun spotted hand on his chest and shook his grey mullet. He looked beautiful for a moment.

She held the book, turned it in her hands, smelled it. It had a library catalogue number taped to the spine and a card in a pocket full of dates in red stamps. She pulled out the card and looked at the last date. May 1996. He rolled up her window and gave her a wink.

She stayed in a hotel for a week and slept until her body wouldn’t let her sleep and then she daydreamed about Abyssinian maids until it would again. The motel was loud and dirty and mostly full of people yelling and having sex. Some nights she went to
a bar nearby to sing karaoke and smile and laugh, to be a part of something. There was very little hope.

*  

William, it turned out, had been involved with a resistance movement intent on freeing the unjustly incarcerated. Folks across the country who were locked up for peaceful protests, hacking government websites, stealing classified information. The group was funded almost entirely by an eccentric billionaire who lived in Brazil and was wanted by three governments, including the United States. William worked with him to come up with bail money, defense in some cases and means to run in others. Some needed to disappear, and that was where the papers came in. As years passed, the group became larger with different factions vying for power. The pretty woman on the deck was the leader of one such faction and had ratted William out. It was a move meant to get rid of competing interests. Adrienne did burn the papers but not right away. She discovered through the package and bits and pieces she picked up from Jim’s weekly phone calls that William had been on his way to help out Nashaat, a.k.a. Samuel, who had been released on bail and was awaiting trial. Nashaat broke into a corrupt police chief’s personal email in an attempt to expose an agreement between him and the owner of a private prison. Paid per prisoner, the scheme involved judges, lawyers, and even the mayor.

Adrienne settled in working at a diner in Fruita, Colorado. She kept in touch with Jim and wrote weekly to William who wrote back less frequently and, when he did, apologized or else wrote about the news or something he’d been thinking about that had nothing to do with him. She wanted to know about him. Once she wrote a letter with only one question, “How are you?” Three weeks later she received a book. It was about the
psychological effects of incarceration. On the inside he wrote, “Bout near as I can get to explaining it.”

Ten years passed. Something her mother said came to her one night when she sat on a blanket in her front yard. Her mother called Adrienne into her room, and Adrienne piled in bed wrapped up in her mother’s arms. Adrienne tried to release herself from her mother’s grip, but her mom laughed and laughed. She said, “My children ruined my life. I used to have a great body. Not the best face, but a great body, and that was enough for a lot of things. Now I’ve got stretch marks like purple earthquakes all around my hips, my thighs, my breasts. My feet are a whole size larger than before. I’m missing teeth,” she said and pulled the corner of her mouth to show Adrienne a row of four missing teeth on one side. “Be careful who you love, my dear.” Then she passed out drunk and sweaty.

Jim called and interrupted her thoughts. He asked her if she could pick up a package for a new transfer. A man out on furlough has to get to Canada as quickly as possible. He needed papers. “I’ll mail them to you overnight. All you have to do is drop them off. You say when and where, kid.” She hadn’t been actively involved in the group, and Jim had never asked her for this kind of favor. She hesitated but agreed. She figured she was a part of this now, whether she wanted to be or not.

“There’s a museum here. It’s a natural history museum. I go there on Sunday mornings, before the church crowd.”

“I’ll send it mixed in with some other stuff.” The next day, a box from ‘Pamela Sterling’ with pink butterflies on it showed up at the diner.

Her coworker, Mary, picked it up and shook it. “It’s so cute. What’s in it?” Her eyes were wide with wonder. “Who is it from?”
“My sister.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“We’re not close.”

“I’m not close with my sister either. Well, heck, nobody ever sends me anything.”

She handed the box to Adrienne expectant. Adrienne didn’t open it.

On Sunday morning, she biked to the gallery about two miles down a hill from where she lived. The small gallery was west of the mountains. Adrienne enjoyed the ride. She never tired of the orange mountains of the mesa, the big clouds. She felt good today, like she had a purpose.

The museum looked like nothing more than an old library from the outside, but it was fully renovated on the inside. A sensitive mayor made it is priority to be exemplary in display quality. He’d managed somehow to borrow for a three-month window an exhibition of 1,000 year-old skeletons of a couple forever preserved in an embrace. She went to the large display of rocks in a dark, air-conditioned room with smelly blue carpet. She sat on fossilized trees, held obsidian to the light, looked into crystals. She put her hands on a white sheet of stone that looked as though it might turn to powder. White sediment was left behind, which she did not hurry to brush off. She thought it a wonder that somehow she ended up in the same room as something millions of years old.

Down the hall was the display of the couple locked in love. They were positioned so that they tilted in a way that made it easier to see both of them from behind a glass encasement that was large enough to be a bedroom. It was roped off with a thick red rope, which hooked onto a gold pole. No expense spared. The bronze plaque beside them explained the story of the couple sharing a common grave. An archeologist and her crew
found them quite by accident during an ongoing search for dinosaur bones. They’d been together in a private hole dug so deep in the earth it took one thousand years to reach them. The male skeleton’s arms scooped around the female skeleton so closely their bones melded together and turned to stone. It was as if they were born dead and always were bones.

Bored townsfolk tired of public pools and hot dogs gathered around the display and swapped theories about the couple. Adrienne overheard a guy explain to a child using tiny words that the couple were carefully removed from their grave, each bone measured and catalogued, their one-bodied selves brushed free from dirt, and transported from the dig site in a cushioned van that drove ten miles per hour the entire twenty miles. “We’re lucky they’re here,” he told the child and winked. But Adrienne did not see it that way. What if, she thought, they hadn’t wanted to be found? What if they hadn’t been buried at all but dug themselves a hole to hide away from the world?

She carelessly unwrapped the paper like a birthday present and used a pocketknife to release the tape from the edges of the box and removed a stuffed brown teddy bear. She gave the kid near the guide the teddy bear. “I already have two,” she explained when he tried to give it back. The box was full of candles that smelled like lavender, a smiley-face keychain and a beer koozy that read *Smile Til You’re Happy*. When the box was emptied and there were no documents, she panicked. That kid. Where was he? The boy held his mother’s hand in view of Adrienne who approached them like she was going to ask them for something. She said, “I’m so sorry to bother you. That’s my teddy bear.”

The mother said, “I was wondering.”

“She gave it to me.”
“It was a misunderstanding,” Adrienne said.

“Give it back,” his mother said.

The pouty boy threw the bear at Adrienne.

“What’s gotten into you? That’s not how you behave, son.”

Adrienne bent over and held the teddy bear to her chest. “It’s okay. It was my fault,” she said and walked away. She pulled out her pocketknife and ripped the back seam of the bear. She reached in and gutted the thing. A passport, a driver’s license, a birth certificate, a social security card, forged electricity bills, and credit cards settled in the bottom of the bear. The passport and license had the same photo. That photo. She scanned the crowd of bored children and sighing parents and the sleepy elderly and finally looked towards the man sitting on a bench across the room. She saw him earlier, but he hunched over in such a way that caused her to pass him by. He looked more than ten years older. His brown hair turned gray, deeply held beliefs showed up in the wrinkles on his face. He frowned. But it was him, and he was beautiful to her. He spotted her and then put his shoulders back and stood up. He was an average build but seemed large. When there was less than a foot between them, she picked up her pace, but he put up a hand to stop her from moving forward. He held a finger to his smiling mouth and said, “Be calm.” But how could she? How could he ask it of her?
“We must always be in service to others.” Ruby's mother said this to her so often in her childhood that it repeated in loops even now, even though she hadn't seen or spoken with her mother since she was sixteen. She didn't feel the pull of altruism like her mother.

They had moved often, wherever her father found modest jobs, wherever someone put them up in their basements or garages. The longest she ever lived one place was in a trailer in Montana. They rented it from a cattle man who gave work to her father and milk to her mother and her brother made friends. Ruby never knew how. Her mother, a nurse, offered her assistance to families who could not afford medical care. She delivered babies and eased the suffering of the elderly, of the dying, of anyone who needed it. Ruby's best times, her favorite times, were when her mother took her with her on jobs. “Watch what I do, so you'll learn how to do this yourself one day,” her mother said. And Ruby made a good student. She delighted in what most found frightening – the screams of labor, the blood of birth, the guts of farm injuries, the last moments before dying. When people felt pain, they really started to live.

When she was thirteen and her little brother just turned eight, her mother stopped letting her go with her to help. “I need you to watch your little brother for me,” she said each morning and each morning Ruby begged to go with her.

One day, when they walked near the river close to the farm, Ruby had an idea to get to go on the jobs again. The river was filthy with trash and run-off chemicals from the paper plant nearby. People threw things in the river like it was the city dump. It smelled
of dead fish and mud. The water, so thick with muck, seemed to flow slower than a river should flow. “Do you want to go swimming?”

Her little brother's eyes widened with possibility and excitement. He loved to swim. “Mom and dad said we can't swim in there. It's too dangerous.”

“I swim in the river all of the time,” she said. “It isn't dangerous at all. There's a mermaid who lives in it, and if you swim far enough out, she'll find you and carry you away.”

“There aren't such a thing as mermaids,” he said. “And even if there were, they'd live in the ocean, not a dirty old river.”

“There are both kinds – sea and fresh water – like fish. The river isn't dirty at all. It's an illusion she creates to keep people away.”

He thought about it long and hard and asked, “Will you go with me?”

“She won't come if there's two of us. She has to keep her secret.”

Her little brother's face, freckled and dirty, contemplated the possibility. He was such a smart boy, so logical, but in the end he decided to go in. He wanted to believe, even when he didn't.

She smiled and watched as her brother went to the river's edge, took off his tennis shoes with holes worn out by his big toes because they were too small. “It's slimy,” he said and started back towards her.

“It won't be once you're in. I promise,” she said.

When she remembered it now, she thought she hesitated. She remembered regret. She called him back, didn't she? But by then he was waist deep and caught in the current and then he was gone. The cattle man saw the whole thing. He'd been looking for a sheep
that wandered out of the pasture. She didn't hear him call out but when he passed her, running to the river and then jumping in, she knew she'd been caught.

Her brother spent a week in the hospital, his care beyond even his mother's ability. There was nothing to do but wait. No one spoke to Ruby. She sat at home alone, not allowed to visit her brother or to see her mother. The cattle man asked them to leave once the boy was out. He called her a wicked girl and said he could not allow such a person on his property. Ruby’s father, furious and silent, disowned her then and there. But her mother, her mother. Her mother said, “What you put in your heart now stays there forever,” and she was never left alone with her brother again. When they moved, her parents found an old RV that stayed parked in the back yard of their home. Ruby stayed there until her parents decided she was old enough to be on her own.

* 

The fish were dying and no one knew why. Vera bought the small bowl and two goldfish on impulse, filled it with tap water, placed it in the window to settle and added the fish a couple of hours later, “Like the guy at the pet store told me,” she said to Ruby. “But they keep dying.”

Vera wanted the bowl near her father's bed so he could see them when he woke up or was going to sleep, which were the two things he did most. Ruby had never seen someone sleep so much, and she wondered if he dreamed of being young and fancy in his military uniform, or if he dreamed of fire or drowning or flying or if he dreamed at all. Vera hired her six months ago to help care for her elderly father.

Vera liked Ruby, and Ruby liked the job. It paid well, and she didn't have to be alone. She'd lived by herself and had no friends. She had a roommate for two months. A
girl her age who answered an ad she put up in the apartment complex lobby. They got along well enough for a while. The girl wasn't very bright, and Ruby helped her fill out applications for jobs and organized her clothes according to color and type. One day, she peeked through the cracked door and watched her undress. The girl disappeared after that, and Ruby never knew why. It had been nice to be around people again.

Vera asked Ruby to get rid of the fish like she had expertise in getting rid of dead fish, but Ruby didn't mind. “Make yourself useful,” her father had said on days she sat lingering in the fields with a book. She never knew what it meant until her job with the Petersons.

Mr. Peterson lived in an apartment within a larger retirement village. The entire building smelled of medicine and bad hygiene, and the residents took years to get from one end of the hall to the other end. The pace suited her fine. She liked to watch families sooth their guilty feelings by visiting on Sunday afternoons and bringing fried chicken and pie so that the whole place smelled like medicine and bad hygiene and fried chicken and apple pie.

Vera, Mr. Peterson's daughter, spent as much time there as she could, but she was a lawyer, and she took on the majority of the family's responsibilities. Her daughter shipped her grandson down to stay with her after he was kicked out of three schools and tried to catch his math teacher's pants on fire by throwing lit matches at him during recess. Vera explained it to Ruby. “I don't think he meant to harm him. He made a bad grade, and the teacher called his mom and told her he'd been causing problems in the class all year, and then Nathaniel called him a liar.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” Ruby said.
“He's got more imagination than we know what to do with,” she said. “He'll be around here a lot. Will you be able to stay longer hours?”

“Of course,” she said.

“I'm so grateful. You'll be compensated,” Vera said.

Vera used words like ‘compensated’ and smelled like a rose. She brought the residents tomatoes from her garden and chocolates, the good kind. Ruby admired her determination. She held her shoulders up, imitating Vera’s posture.

Ruby walked to the window, picked up the tank, brought it to the bathroom, lifted the plastic lid and dumped it in the toilet. She said, “Goodbye, fish,” before flushing. The bathroom, white and steel, smelled of bleach and urine. Always two opposing smells in this place, she thought.

Vera hired Ruby after another family had recommended her. She worked for them after their twelve-year-old daughter fell into a coma following a car accident. The girl stood no chance of recovery but was kept alive for reasons beyond Ruby's understanding. The father was driving and wore guilt so heavily on his shoulders that he wasn't capable of doing much of anything in way of caring for his daughter. The girl's mother never said coma but instead referred to her as sleeping. Ruby watched her die. It'd been hot and rainy for days; no one else was in the house. After the girl stopped breathing, she waited fifteen minutes before calling 911. She knew they'd try to keep her alive if she called right away. She told herself she was being kind.

Ruby returned to the room and watched Vera brush her father's hair with her hand and whisper something about Virginia in the fall. “The leaves have already begun to change,” she said. Vera, the youngest of a brood of children, seemed too young to have a
father so old. She was pretty in her painted red nails and gold jewelry, in her pressed silk white shirt. Ruby sweated too much to wear silk and wouldn't look pretty in red. She wore scrubs and kept her hair in a messy ponytail. This work required no glamour, and it appealed to her in its insistence on practicality. But still she admired Vera.

Vera looked up at Ruby and said, “Before you leave, would you set out his nighttime medicine?”

“Sure,” she said and so she did.

* 

Mr. Peterson looked too old to be alive and only awoke for brief spurts between long naps. When she first started caring for him, he spent more hours awake. The first few weeks were a trial of patience. He punched her in the face, when she tried to shower him after he peed himself in bed. It didn't hurt, but it made her struggle with him, and it left him bruised. She worried the bruises would get her fired, so she told Vera that he slipped in the shower, and when she caught him, she grabbed his arms and left a bruise. Vera bought a plastic chair used in hospitals made for such a thing and kept it in the shower. He refused to take his medicine, spitting it out and ruining expensive pills. Vera showed her how to crush them and put them in his morning milk or split them in half and tell him it was candy. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

Mr. Peterson seemed okay for a week or so. In fact he'd been awake more than usual, a downright jolly old fellow. He didn't seem to have the spite he had in her first few weeks on the job. She went grocery shopping, cleaned the apartment, waxed and shaved, brushed and cut, whatever put Mr. Peterson at ease, whatever helped him retain some dignity. She clipped his toenails and massaged his feet, her least favorite chore. His
toenails were made from petrified wood and his feet from sand, she was sure. It took special clippers.

She started to like this Mr. Peterson – the one who told her stories and laughed at things that weren't funny. On the afternoon before Vera returned, after a particularly trying evening, Ruby grew concerned. His mood swung from bliss to anguish and back around, and she couldn't get him to rest. “Martha! Martha!” he cried. “Are you Martha?”

“No, Mr. Peterson. I'm Ruby. I'm your...” but she wasn't sure what to tell him or if he'd recognize her. “I'm your friend,” was all she came up with.

He said, “I wish you were Martha.”

“I do too, Mr. Peterson.”

“Martha and I went off to New Orleans one summer to get married. Her folks thought she was in school. She wore my army jacket, and I bought her beignets at that cafe – what's it called...”


“We danced on the Riverwalk at midnight. It was my best day.”

Ruby wondered who Martha was, not his wife or Vera's mother, but someone else from a time long past. Maybe she wasn't even real.

“I miss Martha.”

“Me too, Mr. Peterson.”

He looked at her startled like he'd forgotten she was in the room. “Who are you?”

“I'm your friend,” Mr. Peterson. “Vera asked me to sit with you. Will that be alright?”

“Vera? My Vera.”
“Yes, your Vera,” she said even though she didn't believe it. You can't keep people for yourself, she thought. She'd tried with her family and with her roommate, but they left anyway.

For the next two hours, she listened to stories about Martha. It was the most he'd spoken since she knew him. Then quick as a summer storm, he turned to rage and threw a fit, tangling himself in his sheets. He shat himself and struggled with her when she tried to shower him and then they were both filthy and miserable and there were no pills to help either of them.

*

Mr. Peterson's great grandson was a terror of a child. It was no wonder his mother sent him away. He visited nearly every day in his khaki shorts and navy blue polo shirt like it was a uniform. Vera said she wanted to teach him about discipline and routine.

“Not everything is for entertainment,” she said.

When he walked in the apartment ahead of his grandmother, he flung his Spiderman backpack on the table, knocking over the bottles of pills, some of them opened. Ruby was sitting at the table trying to sort them into a container marked by days and times of days. She shot him an evil look but stayed calm and measured. She stood up from the table, picked up the Spiderman backpack and put it on the couch beside him, where he'd already turned on the television.

She said, “I like Batman myself.”

“He's not even really a superhero,” Nathaniel said like she was the lamest person on earth. Nathaniel was nothing like her own little brother, but being around him made her miss him, and so she liked being around him. At least until he started talking. Missing
was at least something. Vera came in behind him, put the grocery bags she'd been carrying right where he'd flung his backpack, and Ruby sighed loudly causing Vera to look at her for a moment before turning off the television.

Nathaniel's parents were both professors and he did things like go sailing and visit museums, things she'd never done at twice his age, and yet he was the most unrefined thing she'd ever met. Even the junkies at her complex at least said “please” before begging for money.

“Why don't you go read something to your great grandfather,” Vera said. “You like to read.”

“I don't have anything to read,” Nathaniel said.

“Well, your Papi has some books. Why don't you go to the bookshelf?”

“I don't want to read them.”

“Well, then why don't you write a story?”

“That's boring,” he said.

“You could draw,” she said.

“I want to watch television.”

“You can't watch television.”

“Then I want a soda.”

“You can't have a soda.”

“I want a soda,” he said.

And on and on this went until finally Vera said to Ruby, “Be a dear and take him down the hall to get a soda. Nothing with caffeine and something diet.”
Ruby took Nathaniel down the hall to the drink machine, and he found the one he wanted in D8, but the slot was jammed, so she said, “Get the one in D7.”

“I don't want the one in D7. I want the one in D8. Eight is my favorite number.”

“They're the same thing.”

“If you don't get me the one in D8, I'll tell granny you used corporation punishment on me.”

“Corporal.”

“What is corporal?”

“It's the word you meant to say.”

“You'll get in trouble.”

“Adults can't get in trouble,” she lied.

“Please? Please, please, please. Please! Please! Please! I'll tell her you touched my penis, if you don't.”

“Good grief. Where did you even come from?”

“Virginia.”

“Look, I can't make the D8 slot work. I don't have powers or anything. I'm more like Batman than Spiderman. What do you want me to do?” Then she remembered the soda machine downstairs. “We can try downstairs. I'm not sure if they have a D8 or if it's even the same thing, but we can try.”

He ran down the hall to the elevator and waited for her saying in an exasperated voice, “I'm waiting,” until she reached him, but she took her time.
This is how things went between them for weeks. Eventually, he wore her down, and she didn't mind his company. At least he was interesting. Better than fish for the old apartment.

One evening, when Vera left Nathaniel in her care for an extra twenty dollars, he helped her change his great grandfather's sheets. “Are you married?” he asked and pointed at the small, gold band on her hand.

“No,” she said.

“Then why do you wear a wedding ring?”

“It's not a wedding ring. It's my mother's. She gave it to me, when I was sixteen, just before I left home. She said it was to remind me to always be good. She worried about my soul.”

“What's wrong with your soul?”

“Well, she thought maybe I didn't have one.”

“That's dumb. It's not even a pretty ring. You should take it off and get a new ring. Grandma Vera has lots of rings. I bet she'll give you one, so you don't have to wear that one anymore.”

“I'm not family, Nathaniel.”

“You're here more than anyone else in our family.”

“There’ll be a day, probably soon, when I won't be anymore.”

“Why? Where are you going?”

“Virginia,” she teased.

“That's where I'm from,” he said.
It was a nice moment between them, but then he got bored again, and held the matches up to the fire alarm, while she was giving Mr. Peterson a shower, and the entire place was evacuated. She dressed a wet Mr. Peterson in a bathrobe and struggled to get him to understand why they had to leave. Nothing moves slower than the evacuation of a retirement home. “We would have all burned, if it'd been real,” she told Nathaniel, and he laughed.

He could also be kind in surprising ways. Once when they watched a game show, Nathaniel spotted a spider crawling on the quilt Mr. Peterson kept on colder days. He pointed at it, and she shot up from the seat by the bed and swooshed it off with her hand. The spider scurried along the floor to the bathroom nearer Nathaniel than her. “Kill it,” she said.

“I can't kill it.”

“It's not so hard as you think,” she said.

“I can't kill it.”

“I'll kill it then,” she said and moved towards it, lifting her foot when she was near enough.

“No don't kill it,” he said and grabbed her foot. “Is it venomous?”

“I don't know. Let's ask it.”

“If it's not venomous, don't kill it.” They looked down at the spider frozen in a ball trying not to be noticed.

“If you don't want me to kill it, then you'll have to do something about it yourself.”
He went into the bathroom, got some tissue and very gently picked it up so as not to crush it between his hands. He walked slowly to the opened window. “Get the screen,” he ordered, and she removed the screen, spreading dust that made her cough. “He put his hand with the tissue out of the window and shook it loose. “There,” he said. “Don't be such a baby.”

After that they sat around the kitchen table, and he watched as she spread out the medicines, in big bottles, and small bottles, childproof caps for the dangerous pills, and turn caps for the vitamins. He watched her separate them out, yellow, blue, pink, and white pills. Round, square, and triangle pills. One she cut in half.

“Why'd you cut that one in half?” he asked while picking his nose.

“Go get a tissue,” she said.

He rolled his eyes and sighed and got up and got a tissue and blew his nose and sat back down. “Why'd you cut that one in half?” he asked again.

“It's very strong. A little dab'll do you. Too much and,” she put her index finger to her throat and moved it across like knife.

“Can I have one?”

“No, you can't.”

“Can I have any of them?”

She looked at all of them spread out and handed him a large, round, orange, “You can have this one. In fact, you can have two.”

He took them and threw them in his mouth and chomped, chomped, chomped.

“Those are good ones. What are they?”

“Vitamin C.”
“They taste like candy.”

“My mom used to give them to me all of the time, and she told me they were candy.”

Vera bought another fish. This time a white goldfish called Angel. She shimmered in the light, her fins like chiffon swaying in the water. Ruby thought it was heavy handed on the metaphor to call the fish Angel, but it didn't matter much, because from the time she shimmered to the time she died, Angel's symbolism shifted into something funny. At least to everyone except Vera. Mr. Peterson laughed a labored laugh that sounded more like a cough. He clapped his distorted hands, his eyes wide as he looked at the bowl. Such a boring life mostly spent in a hospital bed, Ruby thought, that even watching fish die entertained his old mind, so the fish worked after all.

“What am I doing wrong?” Vera asked her. Vera was wearing a white pants suit with a navy blue shirt and a gold necklace. She looked to Ruby to be the very image of classy. Ruby felt shy and small in her scrubs.

Ruby said, “You think the fish mean something, but they don't mean anything. They're just fish.”

Vera snapped her eyes at Ruby, and Ruby realized the question wasn't meant to be answered. She lowered her head, moved on to the closet, pulled out the broom, and started sweeping even though she'd swept already only two hours prior. “Maybe we're not feeding them right. Or it could be the water.”

“No more fish. Did you hear me? No more fish,” Vera said loudly so everyone – even Mr. Peterson in his slumber – could hear.

*
Ruby and Nathaniel found a routine. Vera spent less time in the apartment and threw money at Ruby to compensate for sitting with two people instead of one.

They sat at the kitchen table playing Go Fish, Nathaniel's idea of a joke, and he asked, “Why are you sad?”

“I cut my hair,” she said.

“Why did you cut your hair then?”

“I was sad.”

“You're weird,” he said.

“You're weird,” she said back.

“All of the adults are sad around here, and I have to be here with all of you and your sad.”

“Sadness,” she corrected. “Do you have sevens?”

“Go fish,” he said. “My dad is the only adult I know who isn't sad. I want to live with him, but mom says he doesn't have a lifestyle conducive for a child.”

“Conducive,” she corrected.

“I visit him sometimes in the summer, but not every year. He doesn't have the Internet or anything, so it's kind of boring, but he takes me snake hunting. Last time he let me shoot a rifle. He lives in an RV. Do you know what that is?”

“Yes,” she said. “I lived in an RV once.”

“He has a big dog I like, and he took me to see the wrestlers.”

“What wrestlers?”

“I don't know. Just some wrestlers.”

“Do you like wrestling?”
“Not really, but it was better than sitting around here all of the time.

*

Mr. Peterson slept more and more and more until one day Vera said, “We don't expect him to make it much longer. I've begun making arrangements. The doctors said two weeks tops.” She was very matter-of-fact about the whole thing. “We could use your help through the funeral, especially with Nathaniel. There's something about you he responds to, but he'll be going back with his mother after the funeral. Of course, I'd be happy to give you a recommendation. I don't know what I would have done without you.”

“We can talk about that later. When the time comes.”

“The time is coming, Ruby. Sooner than you think. You're young, and so you don't know how quickly things change, but it's always better to be prepared.”

Ruby knew how quickly things change.

Mr. Peterson cried out from the other room. “I want to go home. Can't you please take me home?”

“Even he's ready to go,” she said.

Ruby, forgetting her place, said, “I don't think he means home like you mean home. I think he means his real home. His house.”

“I can pass your name along, but I don't know who...”

Ruby interrupted, “It's okay. I’ll be fine.”

“Oh?”

“I’m working on a plan,” she said.
“Oh, good, then I won’t feel so guilty about leaving you in a lurch,” Vera said and smiled. Nathaniel will miss you, Ruby. You really do have something special, don’t you?”

Ruby smiled.

“Well, I'll be happy to give you a good recommendation if you need it. Happy to.”

* 

Mr. Peterson nearly passed away the night before, so Ruby knew it was time to leave. He likely wouldn’t make it through the night. She crushed up some pills, a dangerous mix, and sat Nathaniel down at the kitchen table.

He said, “I'm bored.” And then he burped and wiped his whole arm across his nose.

“Do you want some chocolate milk?”

“I'm not supposed to have chocolate milk.”

“It'll be our secret.”

“Like the spider?”

“Yes, like the spider.”

Nathaniel smiled wide-eyed and happy. She smiled back and went to the kitchen, took a small glass from the cupboard, opened the fridge and poured the milk, stirring in the chocolate syrup, stirring in the powder. She stirred and stirred and put it in front of the boy. “I'll be leaving soon. We should say our goodbyes.”

He said, “Can I go with you?”

“No, Nathaniel. You can’t go with me, and I can’t go with you,” she said.

“Ruby, you’re my favorite person.”
“And you’re mine,” she said.

He drank the milk, almost in one gulp.

She waited fifteen minutes before calling 911.
WHAT’S DONE

Anxiety begins with a thought, I thought. And I thought about thinking that thought and so on and so forth until I was exhausted from my thoughts. My brother, Jeremiah, invited me over to a grill, to mix and mingle, to be “in the world,” he said. “To get your mind off Adam.” But the thing about getting my mind off Adam was that thinking about getting my mind off Adam made me think more and more about Adam, and already I feel I belong more in a schoolyard braiding my best friend’s hair than at a gathering of adults who read the news, vote, and discuss their jobs. One thing those people do not do is wallow in the memories of Adam.

Adam was my something special. We’d turned ourselves into a couple, tore out whatever made us individuals, and healed back up skin-sewn and heart-tangled. There’s no undoing it. Not even now that it’s undone. We attempted friendship, but what was a friendship after a decade as lovers, partners, companions, whatever the bigger word is than friendship? Friendship: a demotion, cunning in its good nature. “This is my friend, Kali,” “This is my friend, Adam.” Anytime I heard it or said it, it felt like one of us was punching the other in the guts. Ever so, we were no longer in one another lives. It has become, in this late hour, a point of deep sadness. So I drove to my brother’s house to mix and mingle.

I lived in the noise and movement of downtown, but Jeremiah preferred the suburbs, where his dollar stretched long enough to have something of a yard. The problem with the empty road that took me to his house was that it gave me a good thirty minutes to myself to do nothing but think. “This is my friend, Adam.” I’ve seen him naked a thousand different times, not all of them pretty, let me tell you. I’ve seen him
weep for his dead brother. I’ve seen him go ape shit crazy from jealousy over my ex so-
and-so. He was there when my father said, “I love you, but I can’t stand the sight of you.”

We know all of one another’s moods. I was his date to the late but longed for wedding of
his Aunt Laurel to her wife, Darla. His dad flirted with me at the wedding. “This is my
friend, Kali.” So cutting.

It was late July and hot in Mississippi. Jeremiah threw this last minute backyard
gathering to celebrate the 50% chance of thunderstorms predicted for the evening after
two months of no rain. I walked through the house like it was my own and went into the
backyard, the reason he lived thirty minutes from town. Jeremiah stood over a too cool
grill wearing some apron his girlfriend, Tomeka, bought for him that said, “Grill me,”
and now he thought he could grill or, at least, he wanted to try. I’d seem him do the same
thing with snow skis and chainsaws.

“Oh those coals are too cool,” I said.

Tomeka walked up behind him and put her arms around him. He put his free hand
over hers and leaned back into her. “None of us know what we’re doing,” she said.

“We’re very bougie here.”

“That’s not really meant to be a point of pride,” I said, but Tomeka smiled in this
confident way that made me wish I was a very bougie, too. She wore a flower-patterned
sundress with military boots and had sharp features but soft lips and curves. Her black
hair was nearly to her waist and straight like Demi Moore’s. She hardly wore any
makeup. She was black and younger than Jeremiah by a good ten years. When I first met
her about a year ago, I worried he was collecting her like snow skis and grills, but once I
was around them, I saw how much they cared for one another. I’d never seen him so
gentle with anyone. His whole mood shifted when she was around. I liked her, and we became friends easily, mostly because I was very lazy and she was very active, and she wouldn’t stop trying to be my friend.

My dear brother, just shy of middle aged and full of our shared sadness. So together in feeling completely alone. Neither of us had ever quite gotten over growing up. Jeremiah and I must have picked this habit up from the same place, longing for love and running from it all the same. It wasn’t from our parents, who settled into adulthood easily and with great enthusiasm. They loved paying back loans and wearing socks. I sat beside Jeremiah on his steps, accepted the beer he offered. “You want to do a shot?” he asked.

I took a sip of beer. “I haven’t really been drinking since…” I began but decided to switch mid-sentence to a less Before and After way of counting time. “In about six months.”

He tipped his beer to me. “Then you should take two shots,” he said. He took out a fifth of whiskey from beside the steps and passed it to me. “Just drink until you can’t fit anymore in your mouth,” he said. “Then swallow.”

I took a shallow swig, swallowed, and passed it back. Jeremiah gave me a sideways glance and took a swig five times longer than me, to prove something I supposed.

“How’s dad?”

“He’s fine, I guess,” he said. “He’s mean and old, just as he’s always been. We don’t really talk much. How’s mom?”

“I haven’t talked to her in a while. She plays bridge now.”

“Jesus, that’s depressing.”
The whiskey burned my mouth and throat, and then I was numb. My eyes watered, and I worried I might be sick, but then that passed too, and I took another swig, larger and more familiar. We watched his friends, dancing in fedoras and bohemian dresses, passing by to chat but moving on to the living ones, the ones mingling and mixing, not the two siblings sad sapping all over the steps. Even Tomeka left us to dance with her friends to some song I’d never heard before. There was a strong pre-storm breeze. We looked up occasionally at the sky full of heavy, dark clouds, but mostly we sat in silence. In the middle of his friends, and the energy of a gathering storm, we were at rest. I put my head on his shoulder. He put his head on my head. If the storm didn’t break soon, I was certain we would.

“Are you okay?” Jeremiah said after a few minutes.

“I’m fine,” I said. I’ve assured everyone I’m fine a hundred times. I am jogging again. I joined a small yoga class in my neighborhood, and I go three times a week now. Or, at least, I did this last week, and I plan to again. The instructor commended me on my flexibility and form. Tomeka and I have been meeting up at one or the other’s house to do resistant training or go for long hikes in the botanical gardens. She’s a fitness instructor, whatever that means, and she talked a lot about the connection between the mind and body. It annoyed me, but also, my ass was looking pretty tight.

“You look defeated,” he said.

“Yeah, well, you look better than you have in years.”

“Tomeka is making me drink this green stuff.”

“Well, it’s working.”

“Yeah, that or the sex.”
“I don’t want to hear about the sex.”

“Maybe it’s possible for Dalton kids to be happy after all.”

I was going to say, “We’ll see,” but he looked happy in that way that comes from the toes, and even I believed him.

The group of ten friends or so talked about jobs and dogs and politics. I tried to join in a few conversations to mixed success. Mark and Eli, a couple visiting from New Orleans, thought my ability to quote *The Big Lebowski* was hilarious but when I couldn’t deliver on *The Royal Tenenbaums*, misremembering two lines in a row, they moved on to *The Godfather II*, and that wasn’t my bag, no offense to the entire world. Whiskey-deep in conversation, I turned to the one remaining audience member, Tomeka’s friend, Sean. He was very handsome, and he smiled a lot, so I thought, why not? Am I not woman? Do I not roar? We ate cake and drank wine. White cake, red wine. They say you shouldn’t mix beer and whiskey and wine all together, but I felt great! Sean had a nice, warm smile. He had eyes like Keanu Reeves. “You have eyes like Keanu Reeves,” I told him.

Sean seemed to know what he was talking about in terms of barometric pressure, “The storm system has already passed,” he said. “It won’t break now.”

Everyone dressed beautifully in vintage clothes and jeans with artistically ripped holes, folded at the cuff, artistically. One man dressed in a purple and red plaid suit, complete with a vest and matching wing-tipped shoes. A woman, platinum blond and skinny, stood with her silver heel kicked up against the fence. “Everyone here is so beautiful,” I said.

Sean looked at me and then at the people and smiled.
“Jeremiah’s always been that way.”

“What way?”

“He likes to surround himself with beautiful things. I think it makes him feel like he isn’t dying.”

“Is he dying?”

I smiled. “No, I meant existentially, how we do things to disguise our mortality.”

“That’s one way to see it,” he said.

“I’m sorry. I’m being dark, aren’t I? My ex used to say to me, ‘Don’t go dark, Kali.’”

Sean smiled. “You’re beautiful, too.”

I shrugged. “I’m okay.” I gestured towards the blond woman. “She’s a model, isn’t she?”

“I think she was when she was younger but she’s a social worker now.”

“Of course, she is,” I said, shaking my head. “I bet she’s really nice too, isn’t she?”

“She is very kind, sensitive like you. And smart. She has a doctorate in public policy.”

“Jesus. Give me something. Bad breath? Terrible taste in music? Does she snore? Does she breathe loudly in her sleep?”

Sean laughed. “We haven’t been dating that long.”

“You don’t know if she snores yet? Are you waiting for marriage?”

“We’re getting to know one another.”
“That’s so adult of you,” I said. “I never get to know anyone. That’s a terrible shirt, by the way,” I said, flirting, I hoped. He was wearing a white button down with a large, coral flower along the side of it.

“She gave me this shirt.”

“I believe you.”

He laughed again. He laughed easily, and I wasn’t sure if was because he thought I was funny or if he thought the character of me was funny, who I’d become, how I’d gone dark. “You really don’t remember me, do you?” He asked. He stepped in a bit closer and he put his hand on my arm.

“Remember you?”

“We’ve met.”

“I doubt that. I’d remember you.”

“It was about six months ago, at the hospital, through Denise. Adam and her…”

“Adam,” I repeated. “You were Denise’s boyfriend,” I said, remembering. But it’s fine. It’s fine. It’s fine.

The night we met was also the night I lost Adam or he lost me or we lost one another. The details are still being sorted out by the gods. What is certain is that the day I met Sean was the day I found out that Denise and Adam were in love. They were also in a car accident. The one revealed the other. Denise broke her arm but was okay otherwise. Adam was unconscious, and she wasn’t able to get any information, so she called me. In the fury and hurry of getting to the hospital, producing the paperwork and identification that showed I was his power of attorney and legal surrogate decision-maker, etc., I did not question who Denise was or why she was in a car with Adam. He explained later that
he was still in love with me, too. He hadn’t stopped loving me. He must have thought that’d be reassuring.

“You’re upset,” Sean said. “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“They’re married now, you know?”

“I heard.”

We looked at one another for a minute, both smiling with sad eyes, until he took a few steps towards me and hugged me. The blond and I made eye contact but then she turned back to her conversation. “No one understands,” he said.

Least of all me, I thought. “I should go,” I said.

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m going inside. I have my own room.” I walked away from Sean, rubbed Tomeka’s arm as I passed her, and went into the house where I collapsed in the guest room and fell asleep. When I woke up, the house was silent. I went home from the party, ate three pieces of white cake and drank a half bottle of red wine swiped from the aftermath, threw up, took off my dress, found my vibrator, lay on the couch, turned it on, decided it was too much trouble, turned it back off and tossed it by my cat, Sophie, who was really over my shit at this point. As was I! Sean was right about the storm. It never broke.

*

And so there was Adam. Our unseen hero, our ghost of a champion. There he was being Adam right in the middle of the farmer’s market, on a Saturday morning, holding reusable bags full of produce, strawberries in his hand. All Adamed up in an Adam sort
of way. He still dressed like Adam, in boot cut jeans, toe-tapered brown leather boots, and checkered button down shirts, like a cowboy moved to Brooklyn.

When he spotted me, he stared for a long time past the crowded streets of happy families and children and dogs. We walked towards one another at an easy pace, I was careful not to look too eager, to maintain a sort of ho-hum about the whole thing.

“For the Missus?” I asked pointing to the strawberries. No hellos, no how-are-yous. Straight for the knockout punch.

“We’ll probably share.”

“Cause that’s what marriage is all about.”

“Something like that,” he said. We stared at one another for a while and then looked away. “I heard you’re seeing Jeff.” Jeff was this doctor Adam and I knew who used to hit on me right in front of him. It made Adam crazy, and I loved it. I was not seeing Jeff. I hadn’t seen Jeff in months, but we were friends on social media, and he posted links to articles on my pages with messages like, “Check it, babe,” insinuating things. Adam and I were still friends on social media, too, so I assumed that’s where he “heard” it. And why not let him think it?

“Did you hear that?”

“He’s a weasel.”

“He’s funny.”

“He’s definitely not funny. He’s misogynistic and crass. I’m pretty sure he’s a sociopath.”

“They’re good to have by your side in social situations.”

“And he makes his own beard wax,” he said.
“That’s worse than being a sociopath?”

“Yes, it definitely is.”

I didn’t say anything, because all of the language in my mind was colliding into itself. I kept my eyes forward, watched him smoke his cigarette, and then said, “First meeting, huh?”

He smiled in the way an Adam smiles at a Kali. “It’s good to see you. You look great. You always do.”

“That’s just something you heard you were supposed to say.”

“I miss you,” he said. “A lot.”

“I miss you, too,” I said. “I don’t think that’s something we’re supposed to say.”

“Just not him, okay?”

“Adam,” I said. I put my hand on his arm in a reassuring sort of way, or that’s how I meant it. There was nothing left to say, after all. There was nothing left to do. I took my fever-sweat-soaked heart, heavy from loving him, turned and walked away. On my way to my car, I felt for the first time a bit of relief. He was only flesh and blood and bones, just like the rest of us. Maybe we could have been happy. Maybe we could have had a beautiful life. Or maybe we would have destroyed one another in new and fantastic ways. It’s impossible to know. These things happen all of the time.
BITTER ME

Merriam started this. She called me a whore on a Sunday morning in the middle of the small grocery store. To be fair, she had some facts on her side. Her fiancé, James, and I had this on and off thing for years beginning in college. We’d remained friends, in a way, or something like friends. We’d go years without even talking but then he’d call or I’d text or we’d chat online and it was like we were eighteen again. He was one of those people, you know? The ones you can’t shake. He called me on a vulnerable night after I found out my job as a Graphic Designer at a small press had been cut due to the budget. This guy I was seeing, Sam, had recently confessed his deep love for Santana. Which I guess could have been overlooked, except the last time we had sex, he kept asking me over and over, “Are you okay?” and the more he asked the less I was.

When I answered James’ call, he said, “I was thinking about your hips today. You had the best hips of any of my lovers, hands down. I fell in love with your hips first, even before your mind. I’ll admit it. You’ve got great hips.”

“I hate when people say lovers,” I said. But, really, I wanted him to keep talking.

I wondered how Merriam would feel if she knew about these calls. If she knew how I waited for them. I hoped her heart tightened like mine did whenever he talked about her. James was mine first. Finders keepers.

*

I decided to start smoking again. I’d quit seven years prior, but things were going to shit with the job and the stirring up of feelings, and it seemed like a dumb thing to do. In order to start smoking, I needed materials – a pack of smokes, a lighter, but it was early Saturday, and I was still in my bird pajamas with a tank top and a sports bra that
smooshed my large breasts into one enormous uniboob. I walked to the gas station down the street. It was a quick walk and the weather was nice, a little windy but sunny. The barking neighborhood dogs seemed surprised when I barked back. The woman down the street in her garden, always in her garden, never waved back. Some punk kids around ten were riding their bikes and one of them pretended to shoot me forming his hand into a pistol.

“What’d I ever do to you?” I asked.

Inside the store, the tall, round man with grey and black dreads down to his waist bowed his head, when I entered. He did that to everyone. It was very classy. This was a new, nice gas station, and everything was still clean. I’d been in there every day this week, and every day, he said, “Be good.” I went to the counter and asked for cigarettes.

He asked, “What kind?”

I said, “Not menthol.”

He shook his head. “What kind?”

“American Spirits?”

He shook his head again.

“Camels?”

“What. Kind?”

“Lights?”

“Blues,” he said and handed me a blue pack of cigarettes.

“No, lights.”

“They’re Blues now.”
The whole goddamn world was changing, and what about me, huh? What was I supposed to do about it? I hadn’t been paying attention to the line forming behind me, but a little boy said, “Is she going to hell, daddy?”

Then I noticed him. Standing there behind the boy and his father.

He smirked with that smirk of his and looked me up and down and I said, “Of course, it’s you. Of course, you’re here.”

I took my pack of smokes and flung my arms around wildly.

“You know her?” asked a young guy behind him.

“Almost,” he said.

“Close call,” I said and left.

But, wait. What did he mean by “Almost?” I paced outside of the gas station until he came out, smoked my cigarette, remembered why I quit smoking, felt nauseated, kept it burning for appearances. “What did you mean by almost?” He was still tall. Bastard.

“Almost means not quite but very nearly,” he said.

“Stop smirking.”

I punched him in the arm and turned to leave, but then he got on his stupid bike without a helmet and rode away past me blending in with that same group of kids that fake killed me with their hand pistols. “Stop leaving me!” I shouted.

But when he turned around and started biking circles around me as I walked, I said, “Leave me alone.”

“It’s impossible to do both things,” he said.

*
What I was doing was a mystery to me. A lot of it, though, had to do with mindset, I found. Well, I found it in a book called *How to Be Happy and Find Inner Peace* that I picked up from the town bookstore. It called for a lot of breathing. A lot of not talking to James. A lot of not answering his calls. And yoga, of course, but who had time?

I caved. I always did with him. We met at the bar nearby about a week after the gas station meeting. It was Saturday. The college bar packed full of undergrads seemed like a good place to go unnoticed. Boys all dressed in their best t-shirts and girls in sparkling shirts and shiny lips. I walked in and moved between people looking for James, but the crowd made me nervous, so I went outside. The wooden patio was quieter. Even though I was the same age as most of the people there, it made me feel old. None of these people had been in love with James. None of them had known what it was like to lose him.

James asked, “What you doin’ here?” mimicking the conversation style of the guys sitting at a table nearby with their polo shirts and backwards baseball caps.

“Taxes,” I said.

“Can I join you? I haven’t done taxes in years.”

James sat beside me and scooted his chair as close to mine as possible. It was a big table, and this made us look like a couple.

“My boyfriend…”

“I don’t care about your boyfriend,” he said. He held my hand, and I held his, and that’s when I knew we were pretending. It wasn’t him I wanted to see, and it wasn’t me he wanted to fuck. We were pretending to be an earlier version of ourselves. Maybe a
better version. Maybe just a different one. Maybe in this version of us, we get to keep our jobs and be happy forever.

“Have a shot with your old pal.”

“We don’t even know each other anymore. Isn’t that awful?”

“I know you,” he said.

“You know a memory of me. I think you should go,” I said and hoped he didn’t.

He didn’t.

“Two tequilas,” said the waitress. He took my hand in his, licked the side of my thumb, sprinkled salt on it, and handed me a lime. We did those shots and three more. I leaned over and kissed him and then got out of my chair and climbed onto his lap, straddling him and showing those boys at the table beside us how it is you kiss a woman. He put his hands in my back jean pockets and pulled me even closer, as if he wanted no space between us. We weren’t even trying to be discreet. It didn’t occur to us. In the moment, there was no future, and if there was no future, there were no consequences. The world would end any second. The sky would open up at and suck us all in. No more longing.

He stood up and picked me up with him. I put my feet on the ground. “Let’s go to your place,” he said.

“It sounds so simple,” I said.

“Take me home with you.”

“It’s a good pitch, don’t get me wrong.”

“Take me home with you,” he said again.

“It’s impossible,” I said.
“It’s very fucking possible,” he said.

“It was good to see you,” I said and walked away. And just like that, it was over.

We should have known someone would see us and report back to Merriam.

*

The cottage didn’t have a washer and dryer, so the next week, I went to the Laundromat. I hated it, but there were brief moments of beauty like the way the whole place smelled like dryer sheets. Sometimes an entire row of dryers would swirl in sync. I put on my headphones and got lost in the colorful, circular dance, mesmerized by the warmth of it. I noticed a young Mexican woman outside the glass doors with an infant strapped to her. She held two baskets of clothes beneath the baby. It looked like an uncomfortable and fragile balance. An older couple with wrinkles from decades of consumption noticed her, too. I got up and opened the door for her, and the couple moved in right away. The old man took the baskets from her hands, not saying a word. He set them down by empty washers and pointed, “Here?”

The woman was flustered, her eyes wide. She didn’t understand what they were saying. It made me nervous to watch this invasion. She looked as though she’d been trespassed upon, and I felt I understood her. I too wondered in my passings with strangers if they were out to get me or if we were all in this together somehow. Probably it was both. The lumpy woman walked to her, waddling from side to side, and said loudly, “Precious, precious. I want to hold her,” and scooped the child away from its mother. The woman’s face, panicked now, froze. She said something none of us understood. She shook her head. This was a violation, but there were no words to stop it.
Suddenly protective of my Laundromat sister, our confusion the same, I took the crying infant from the old woman, passed her back to her mother and stood between them. “You can’t just take people’s babies.”

“I wasn’t taking her baby,” the old woman said angry and shouting and calling me names, and how dare I and she had six grandchildren and did I know who she was?

“How dare I?” I asked.

The manager of the Laundromat shouted, “I’m going to call the police,” in the way people do when they have no intention of calling the police.

I turned to the woman, my comrade, as if to say, “We’re safe now. You’re welcome.”

She was on the verge of tears and looked me in the eyes. And then she slapped me across the face.

It stung and surprised me. “No,” I said, loud and slow, “I’m on your side.” But the woman grabbed her baskets and left in tears.

* 

A short list of things going on in the world that were more important than my near affair: violent anti-government protests in countries with loose borders. Twenty-two people frozen to death this winter, because they were too poor to heat their homes or didn’t have them to heat. Syria. Sudan. Entire countries on the verge of bankruptcy. Extinction of wildlife at an alarming rate. Furious weather patterns. It made me feel so small. Nearly invisible. Maybe that’s what James was about. I wanted to be seen. I wanted to matter. Or maybe I’m letting myself off the hook.
There’s nothing quite like an empty grocery store on a Sunday morning. Nothing was out of place. I had the whole store to myself for fifteen glorious minutes. Cans moved to the front of shelves, boxes stacked like they’d just arrived. Choicest pick of zucchini, greens, and bell peppers. Time to smell the oranges and squeeze the avocados before selecting the best ones, before they’d been manhandled by strangers who sneezed in their hands. My mistake was loitering near the meat section and flirting with the butcher, Paul. We went to high school together and knew one another in the way you know people from high school. Not at all. He went into the back and came out eager to show off his prize cut, a T-bone slab on a white plate. He wasn’t my type at all, but I giggled in response. He was muscular in a lazy kind of way and bearded with a heavy brow.

I leaned towards Paul to look at the raw flesh he held up. “Looks good,” I said. I’d had too much time on my hands lately, thinking and planning and worrying, and it was either compliment Paul’s raw meat or devour a chocolate ice cream flavored box of wine alone while watching *Casablanca*. People were coming in a rapid pace now, surrounding me, and soon the whole place was full of people in suits and dresses and children, grabbing their goods for post-church lunch. They gathered their rotisserie chickens and potatoes and salads and potato salads.

Merriam walked right up to me. It took me a minute to process how on earth she could be there, but it was the only grocery store near any of us, and it wasn’t such a chance encounter, really. Small towns have a way of forcing resolutions. I thought she was going to slap me like the Mexican lady and closed my eyes in preparation to take the blow. Instead she asked, “How could you? Don’t you know how this feels?”
I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to answer. She looked beautiful, hardly aged. She dyed her hair red now and wore red lipstick and a designer red dress. If I’d worn that much red, I’d have looked like a stop sign. She looked gorgeous. Behind her was James. I knew then the question was directed at him.

“Hello, Lucy,” he said.

“Don’t you dare talk to this whore,” she said. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Steak,” I said and pointed at Paul who had moved on to another customer. James kept his hand on the small of her back.

“I thought you lived in Arizona. I heard you were married and lived in Arizona, and I know you don’t have family here anymore. So what the hell are you doing here?”

“I don’t really owe you an explanation, Merriam,” I said, but it sounded like a question. And then I said, “James left me for you. He chose you. A decade later, and I’m lonely and sad, and I’m considering sleeping with Paul, the butcher, just so I can feel something else for a minute,” I said. “No offense,” I said to Paul, but he hadn’t been paying attention. “I’ve got nothing worth being mad about. You win. What do you want?”

“I don’t give a fuck about your pitiful life,” she said but then paused and waited. She wanted to hear more about my pitiful life.

“More?” I asked.

“More,” she said.

“Okay, sure. I lost my job. That’s why I’m here, Merriam. I had this really great gig for a while, and I lost it. I don’t like my boyfriend. I think he may be one of those
‘barely legal’ porn guys, but it’s just a hunch, you know? He hides the screen when I walk up behind him.”

She raised her eyebrows and gestured for more.

“Some days, I feel so hollow inside that it burns. It’s like I’m getting emptier instead of fuller. I always thought it’d go the other way. I haven’t spoken to my parents in years. No one has ever been proud of me.” Then I shrugged. “That’s it.”

“You’ve gotten fat,” she said.

“I don’t know about fat,” I said and put my hand on my belly.

THE RUINED ONES

It was early spring: chilly, rainy. Lyle was depressed about his knee. An old injury from playing basketball in high school showed itself nearly daily now. He hurt his knee in the middle of a tennis match that Sela used as a cover for telling him she was dying, which he already knew. She’d been dying since he met her. What it was she suffered from was one of many secrets she kept from him. It frustrated and annoyed him, but he’d long given up pressing an issue. She’d tell him only what she felt he needed to know. That day she wanted him to know that it would be soon. He noticed her labored breathing, her near constant fatigue, and the occasional wince or grimace or far off stare during the match. It wasn’t much of a match at all, more like volleying the ball back and forth like children learning the rules of the game. “A few months,” she’d said. That’s when he tripped and fell on his knee. He blamed it on new shoes and threw them in a metal garbage bin on their way off the court. When she went to retrieve them, he told her that it was his right to throw away his own damn shoes. But once she left the parking lot, he went back to get them.

He’d ignored the ache for two weeks before the throbbing sent him to his doctor who told him he’d need surgery eventually and assured him there were breakthroughs with stem cells and that this was normal for men his age. “No one escapes the wear and tear of the past,” the doctor told him and laughed. Lyle thought the laugh was a bit much. The doctor was old himself and perhaps enjoyed the deterioration of a younger man.

It was in this state of mind that he met Amanda Bixby.

It was raining when he left the doctor’s office. He drove slowly and carefully, but the rain fell harder, and he could not see two feet in front of him, so he decided to stop at
his favorite sushi place for take-out. He would go by Sela’s on the way home and drop off some miso soup. It would make her happy. She liked miso soup on rainy days. He sat at the bar so he could watch the old Japanese man named Mamoru slice fish into different sizes; some thin as skin some thick as steaks. He never said anything to Lyle, but sometimes he offered him a roll if there was an extra one, and Lyle said “Mmm” and Mamoru nodded. The bar was crowded. He heard something above the hum of voices, a woman’s laugh. It was a deep, worn-in laugh.

The woman wasn’t striking and wouldn’t have been the most beautiful in most rooms, but she dressed like she lived on a beach in the fifties with nearly see-through white, wide leg pants and a silk, peach tank top and high heeled, open-toed white sandals. Completely impractical shoes for this weather. Her lips were large and glossy red. Once he spotted her, he couldn’t stop watching her. She looked like lemons smelled and laughed like she was in a movie with Fred Astaire. Her smile reminded him of someone or something or some time. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he wanted to find out. She said something to a younger guy with a shaved head and blue eyes wearing a worker’s jacket with his name stitched in white. She leaned over to the guy and opened her hands like a magician revealing a trick. She laughed so hard she bent over. The worker laughed too but it seemed he found more delight in her laughter than in whatever she said.

Lyle was jealous of the young guy. He wasn’t bad looking himself, but he wasn’t shiny and keen like this kid. Lyle was classic handsome. He dressed well and smelled nice and had a cabinet full of skin products. If he wanted to date someone, he would go to a bar and date someone. He once dated a Swedish woman who didn’t eat onions and so for nearly a year he ate spaghetti with no onions so that when they broke up, the first
thing he did was make spaghetti with just loads and loads of onions. She had the best legs, gorgeous, tan, toned. They went on and on like lollipops. This was one girlfriend and one situation, but he’d had dozens of similar scenarios. Replace onions with: the beach, hiking, his mother, or jazz.

She must have been around his age. He wondered if she had a bad knee, if her best friend was dying or if she was falling out of love with life or her job or the blue of evenings. He stared at her too long, and she caught him, so he looked away. The young guy paid his bill. He put the woman’s number in his phone, nodded, and left. She laughed when he left, like it was such a clever thing to do. Then she turned to Lyle. “Why are you staring at me?”

“I wasn’t,” he said. He turned back around in the barstool, put his elbows on the bar, and watched Mamoru who, if he’d heard the question, showed no sign of interest in anything other than the sharpness of his blade and the white flesh of the fish in front of him. She stared at him now, and so he finally turned to her. “If I was staring, I’m sorry.”

“No reason to be. I know you, don’t I? We’ve met somewhere. I can’t place you.” She faced him in her stool and sipped from a clay cup.

“I don’t think so,” he said, but he felt the same.

“That sounds like such a line,” she said. “I’m not hitting on you. I really did think we’d met. I thought that might be why you were staring. I’m Amanda Bixby,” she said. She leaned forward and offered her hand. He took it and held it unsure of what to do.

“Now we’ve met somewhere,” she said. “Or maybe that was always part of my line. What’s your line?”

“What do you mean?”
“What do you say to someone you’re hitting on?”

“I’m a lawyer.”

“So lawyers don’t have lines?”

“That is my line.”

She raised her clay cup, which he was now certain contained sake.

A young waitress in a black kimono-like uniform delivered a paper bag to him with his order and smiled and bowed as she set it down. He thanked her and bowed in return. He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to or not, but he said “Gracias” at Mexican restaurants and bowed at Japanese ones and spit peanut shells on the floor in very American ones. And so he bowed, and Amanda Bixby laughed at him. He didn’t mind. He didn’t want to leave. He decided to unpack the sushi and eat there, pushing Sela’s avocado rolls to Amanda. He thought Mamoru noticed and was displeased, but maybe he was amused. He opened his rolls of sashimi and offered, but she made the same cringed face Sela made when he offered it to her.

“Why did you get so much?”

“It wasn’t only for me.”

“You got sushi for someone else?”

“Yes.”

“A woman?”

“Yes.” He enjoyed being vague.

“She won’t like that you’re giving me her sushi.”

“She’s not the jealous type.”
“Everyone’s the jealous type. People are predictable in that way. The only people who aren’t jealous haven’t realized what they have to lose yet. Do you love her? Or is it new and you’re trying to impress her with how thoughtful you are?”

“It’s not new,” he said.

“But that doesn’t tell us much, does it?”

He didn’t want to talk to Amanda about Sela or who she was to him or how long he’d known her. He thought for a moment that he’d said some of this out loud; she looked at him perplexed by his expression that he only then realized was serious. She moved her bag and her body down the three barstools between them to the one right beside him. Their knees, good and bad, nearly touched.

“Did you see that guy in the plain blue coveralls with his name stitched in white? Were we ever that young? Were we ever that beautiful?”

“I was never young,” he said.

She smiled and then they both watched Mamoru who could have just as soon been rolling sushi on an ice sheet in Antarctica for all the attention he paid to them.

“I bet you treat your girlfriend like gold, don’t you?”

“I don’t know that I do, Amanda. You’re eating her sushi.”

Amanda made a square face and pushed the plastic tray away. “I’m sorry for being forward. I’m going through a divorce. Or I did. Just now. It was so easy. I just paid a thousand dollars and marked the right boxes. It shouldn’t be that easy, should it? Shouldn’t it be soul-crushing?”

“I’m sorry to hear about your divorce.”

“No, you’re not. You’re a lawyer.”
He knew from his work that when it came to these common tragedies most people were looking for the smallest of gestures, a signal that they still had a place in the world. He put a hand on Amanda’s shoulder and said, “I’m sorry to hear it.”

Her eyes watered a little but she caught herself and switched quickly to anger. “One day we were drinking coffee and reading *The New York Times* to one another over breakfast and the next day he moved to Montana to tune pianos and trade syrup for tools in the mountains.”

“Is that true?”

“I don’t know. It may as well be. No, it’s not. It’s something I heard this morning on the radio. I don’t know where he is. He doesn’t want to be found. When someone wants to disappear, I suppose we should let them. Anyway, he’s not here.”

Lyle didn’t respond, only smiled and allowed a quiet space to move in place of conversation. When things felt settled down he said, “I have to go.”

“She’s going to be mad about the sushi.”

“She won’t be,” he said and pulled the one remaining item, the miso soup, from the paper bag. “She would be about the soup, though.”

Amanda laughed. “It was nice meeting you. I mean that. It’s not a line.” She smiled and offered her hand for the second time. This time he took it in both of his and shook. He pushed away from the bar, away from Amanda Bixby, and walked to the parking lot before he realized he’d never told her his name.

* 

Sela and Lyle visited his mom and two brothers. She wanted to say goodbye. She didn’t say that, but that’s what she was doing. He’d been short with her all morning.
When she emerged from her apartment fifteen minutes after they agreed, he honked the horn at her and yelled, “What is the deal?” out of the rolled down window. He didn’t get out of the car to help with her bags, and he drank a fresh, hot coffee right in front of her without offering her any. It was like she didn’t notice. She skipped down to the car, threw her bags in the backseat and practically bounced into the passenger side. “You’re going to have to pee in like five minutes,” she told him and pointed at the coffee cup.

“Seatbelt,” he said. The drive to his mom’s place was about an hour from New Harmony, a small town between Athens and Atlanta and a little ways north. The scenery went from busy to cement to green and back again. And, boy, did he have to pee. When they got to the green part, Sela rolled down her window and hung her head and arms outside. She leaned back but kept one arm extended, palm open, and let the wind carry it in waves.

“Seatbelt,” he said again. She kept taking it off like a child on a road trip. She was trying to prove something about how little she had to lose. Or maybe she was trying to remember being a child.

She sat back in her seat, and put her seatbelt on. “I grew up in the woods,” she said. He knew that. “Of course, you know that.” This was the first time they’d spent alone in nearly two months. She disappeared, as she did, and he stopped trying to reach her. She seemed frailer, thinner, the signs more difficult to overlook. If he’d known…well, what would he have done? Whatever it was, he should have done it. It was too late now. With their old, quiet routine unpracticed, they’d fallen into an odd rhythm in the middle of their drive.
He’d noticed things about her that annoyed him. He’d forgotten how she dressed like she was going on safari in khaki shorts, tank tops, and hiking boots. She kept plain lip balm in her pocket and sometimes she’d forget to take it out before doing laundry, so her clothes had grease spots and she wore them anyway. She smelled like dog when she went to dinner right after work. She was a veterinarian and had explained on numerous occasions the very few fucks she gave about his disgust. Like anything, she said, you adapt to your surroundings. And she talked about Kenya too much, even though she hadn’t been there in nearly fifteen years. She’d sulk over men who did not deserve her and go into public rants about people cutting in line or touching all of the chips at parties.

Imagine those were the worst things about a person. They cared too much about the world and dressed practically. They worked hard at a job they loved and expected people to respect one another. Really, she was wonderful, his closest friend. Still he couldn’t shake this resentment for her daring to die so young, not yet middle aged and already as aged as she ever would be. Driving through woods and patches of field made her happy, so he decided to take the long route. She belonged there with the pine trees, the dirt and bonfires, the smell of honeysuckles and ponds. He thought at any moment the wind might take her hand and pull her from the car and she would disperse into a million molecules. But that was not how it would happen. She’d leave the way she came, violently.

Sela listed all of the species she could remember that went extinct since they met fifteen years earlier. “Caribbean monk seals, Saint Croix racer. It’s a snake. Eastern cougar, the Formosan clouded leopard, which I’m really pissed about. And so many birds. Birds adapt to anything, but they can’t adapt to us. We’re living during a mass
extinction right now.” She pointed down when she said *right* and *now.* “Isn’t that terrifying?” She gave statistics to everyone she met about extinction. It wasn’t only him. Isn’t it horrible, she would ask, and most people agreed it was. He glanced at her, and she turned to face the window. “Don’t ever say, ‘She passed away.’”

“Okay.”

“And don’t ever let anyone else say, ‘I’m sorry for your loss.’”

“Sela…”

“I hate those phrases.”

They arrived at his mother’s after driving down a long gravel road that came to a dirt road that turned two ways onto grassy trail roads. One side led to his mother’s cottage and the other side lead to his brothers’ RVs. They cared little about shelter and a lot about land. Being back on the land felt right to Lyle. He considered briefly getting his own RV, but he liked access, he liked noise, he liked Amanda Bixbys.

He loved his family, but they weren’t alike in many ways, and he felt burdened after visits. This one would be tense, not only for Sela, but because he’d been arguing with his brother, Charlie, over money that came from the sale of fifty acres of their parents’ property. It bothered him that he’d fought with his brother, who had always been his favorite, quiet and sensitive and large. And it bothered him that they fought over money.

The horses were still out, probably because his brother, Owen, was napping. There were five of them now, a white colt with brown patches followed closely beside his identical mother. Their old black stallion, Champ, was grey and slow but still enormous and grand. His mother had adopted him from a racehorse retirement rescue, and Sela
made him drive out once a month at least just so they could visit. The other two he didn’t know as well, both solid brown. His mother was probably fostering them. She asked, “Can we see the horses?” but nearly threw herself out of the door to get to them before he had a chance to stop. All but Champ ran away, startled. She knew better than to charge prey animals. This was something like the seatbelts. Sela climbed the first rail of the wooden fence and snuggled and pet Champ while he snorted and stomped in place.

She walked back to the car, frowned, and said, “They ran away,” and settled back in her seat while they drove the half-mile and arrived finally at the cottage style house with potted ferns hanging from the porch. There were rocking chairs and tobacco pipes and glasses half full of tea. It was, Lyle thought, exactly what you’d expect. But Sela seemed in wonder of it all, even though she’d been there many times. She looked up in the sky and pointed. He followed her guidance to see a sparrow chasing a mocking bird from its nest. They’d started bird watching the previous summer. Would they have time to go again? She rang the doorbell and brushed her hands over her shorts, new and lip balm-free. “Do I look all right?”

“You look beautiful,” he wanted to say. “You look great,” he said.

His large mother opened the door and hugged and rocked them both for a long time. She cried and punched Lyle in the shoulder and then hugged and rocked him again. She pulled them into the house and pushed them into the living room where his brothers, tall, dark, and dirty, picked Sela up one by one and spun her around. The house smelled like his mother’s cooking; only her cooking smelled like that. He never knew how that could be possible, but it was. He could pick that smell out of any line-up. Owen made jokes about how small Lyle’s penis was and how surprised they were he could land such
a babe. The brothers knew Sela and Lyle weren’t a couple, but his whole family treated her like she was his wife. She took it all in stride, as usual. They sat down at the table. His mom brought the food from the kitchen. A giant bowl of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, greens with ham hock, corn-on-the-cob and potato bread with honey butter. He looked at Sela and whispered, “The corn-on-the-cob was boiled in baby bacon water.”

She laughed and kicked him under the table.

“If you ever want a real man, Sela, I’ve just bought a double bed for the RV,” Owen said. Owen was the youngest and bravest of the brothers. He traveled most of the year taking up work as a fireman in California during the wildfire season or working a fishing boat in Alaska. He spent most of his time hunting and riding horses and occasionally worked fixing up people’s barns and cars. He didn’t like to be tied down. He thought Lyle was an asshole for being a lawyer and called a town with a population of a hundred thousand “The City.”

Charlie was the oldest, a bit more worn out. He was a giant, a foot above any of his brothers, and he lifted weights in his garage and drank too much and dated strippers and was covered in tattoos. He looked like he would kill a man over a good steak, but really, he was the sweetest of the brothers. He just couldn’t seem to settle in this life.

Sela eased the familial tensions by telling all of them how she took care of a lion cub in Kenya abandoned by his mother. “He joined a new pride of other rescued lions that we reintroduced to the wild. It was so hard to let him go.” She explained that the cub had been injured from getting tangled in a wire from a fence in the village nearby. “The
lions got too close to the livestock, the villagers shot at them, and the cub was left behind in confusion. Half of our work was diplomacy between the lions and the villagers.”

“Well, isn’t that nice, dear,” his mother said. She scooped some more potato salad on Sela’s plate and winked at her.

Lyle looked around the table and felt like the least interesting person sitting there. He went to private school on a scholarship, went to a public university near his family for undergrad, and went to law school in Boston. He’d interned for a year in New York City but had neither time nor money to enjoy it. He wore tailored suits to work and a t-shirt and jeans to everything else. He’d never been abroad. Oh, sure, he’d been to Canada and Mexico, but nobody counted those. It wasn’t Kenya. He hadn’t rescued a damn lion cub.

“Your Aunt Phyllis passed away.” Oh, his mother, with her perfect timing.

Sela and Lyle looked at one another and laughed.

“What’s so funny about that?”

“You told me already.”

Sela said. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Lyle snorted through his nose and spit out corn.

“You have lost your mind, son,” his mother said and stood up from the table.

“You didn’t even send flowers.”

He picked on a piece of corn silk that caught in his teeth. “I thought I did.” It was a lie. He knew he didn’t. He didn’t think of it. He was too busy. His knee ached.

Sela leaned over and whispered, “No flowers either. Donations to wildlife conservation, but not in my name or anything.”
Charlie kept his hands in his pocket, hunched over. Lyle remembered he sat like that as a kid. Angry, waiting for someone to notice. Rarely anyone did. Lyle suspected he was waiting for an apology. He would not get one. That money needed to stay in bonds.

“You’re not hungry, Charlie?” He wasn’t sure why he asked that question. It was a question his mother would ask instead of whatever it is she wanted to ask.

“He’s always hungry,” said his mother.

“He doesn’t eat pork anymore,” Owen said.

This is what growing up was like for Charlie. Everyone speaking for him. Lyle wondered if he even knew his brother at all or if Charlie had allowed everyone their illusions of him and kept the real parts secret and safe.

Charlie said, “Pigs are smarter than dogs. I wouldn’t eat Bastard.”

“Hippie,” Owen said.


“Maybe you shouldn’t watch so much news, honey,” his mother said.

Lyle rubbed his knee and stretched out his leg, propping it on a footstool nearby. Knee ached. Knee ached. Today same as yesterday same as tomorrow. What on earth were they even doing here? Is this how they chose to spend their last days together?

Owen and his mother walked them outside after lunch. Charlie stayed inside. They all hugged, promised to call more often. Owen and Lyle laughed over their mother’s waddle. Sela followed behind her with a stack of Tupperware. “You’ve got your own silly gait to think about,” she said to Lyle.
They drove back in comfortable silence and then she said, “It’s good to know your family.” She said this mostly because she did not know hers. “You mom told me she thinks you’re in love with me.”

“Yeah, she told me that, too,” he said.

“I’m sorry I was late this morning. And I’m sorry I haven’t been taking your calls. We don’t have time anymore to readjust to one another when things get awkward between us.” She put her hand on his knee and patted it. That was the last he heard from her for another two months.

*Amanda Bixby. What an unusual name. He’d never known a Bixby. He’d been thinking of her constantly over the past week. He entered her name in a search engine on a Sunday after calling Sela and filling her voicemail to the point of capacity. If something did happen, he wouldn’t know, and that made him agitated and that made him hyper and that made him search for Amanda Bixby. He meant no harm. He wanted to know things about her. Her age, where she was from, where she’d lived. He clicked and found that she was 33, divorced, but he knew that part. She had two siblings, Isaiah in Washington and Timothy in Oregon. She was the far away one. Was she lonely? Had she followed her husband here for a job? Did she leave her best friend? Before he knew it, he was paying $35.99 for a report to find out whether or not she’d been arrested. She had, once in the 90’s. Her ex-husband’s name was Matthew Campbell. What a dumb name, he thought, like the soup. No wonder she left him. Bixby was her maiden name. When he entered his credit card number for the $99.99 report, he decided he’d gone far enough. The rest was left to fate. 
But, then, what was fate? What was the difference between running into someone in a sushi bar by coincidence and running into them by positioning oneself in a place and time where fate had not far to reach? He was being poetic, not ludicrous. These were trying times for fate. “Now we’ve met somewhere,” she’d said. She wouldn’t have said it had she not desired another meeting.

He showered and, wrapped up in a towel, sat down at his desk and looked at pictures of Amanda Bixby on Facebook. He didn’t have a Facebook account, so he set one up solely to look her up. He saw photos of her in a snowsuit holding skis and smiling with a group of people. He saw her making faces in a bridesmaid dress with other women wearing the same dress also making faces. He liked the one of her staring at the camera straight on, not smiling, not frowning. She looked natural and bold. He sent her a friend request and immediately regretted it. She would see, he realized too late, that he had no other friends. It was easy to misread his enthusiasm for suspicious behavior. He looked up how to undo a friend request, but by the time he found instructions, she’d accepted the request. He sent a quick message saying he thought he saw her at the farmer’s market and did she remember him from sushi? He hadn’t gone to the farmer’s market. He looked up how to unsend a message on Facebook. He didn’t understand Facebook. He looked up how to delete his account and went through the steps like he was disarming a bomb. Well, I’m never doing that again, he thought.

On the way home from the office one evening, he drove past her house. It wasn’t entirely out of his way. This turn here instead of that one there. He turned in a cul-de-sac and drove past it again, made the block and drove past it once more. Her lights were on. She had a nice little brick house with lamps outside burning soft yellows. Her lawn was
freshly mowed and her garden weeded and pruned. There was a wooden fence around her house that led to a wooded area. He saw fireflies in her gardenia bushes and thought, What a nice life! On his way home, he rationalized the detour. Maybe one day, he’d run into her at the grocery store or they’d face one another at a four way stop sign and she’d recognize him. Maybe she’d been hoping for another chance meeting as well. Some enchanted evening, when you find your true love. She’d give him her number, and he wouldn’t tell her that he already obtained it by paying $195 for the super-deluxe report. “I never got your name,” she’d say.

From that evening onward and for a solid month straight, he took the same route home from work, passing her house but never ever was there an Amanda Bixby. He decided to start running, so that passing by her house took longer. There was a good parking spot in the area park, and he could make a loop so that he passed her house several times without attracting attention. Her neighborhood was full of people walking dogs, riding bikes, walking, and jogging. Even though his doctor told him specifically not to run on his knee, he enjoyed the pain. Knee ached, knee ached. Eventually, he became such a natural part of the community that he made friends with Amanda’s across-the-street neighbor, Mrs. Henderson, a widow. He helped a teenager find his missing dog, and spoke at length to a young couple considering buying a house in the neighborhood. “It’s quiet but convenient,” he said. “It’s safe.” He dropped ten pounds, felt stronger and faster. He stopped thinking about his knee or his wrinkles or his sagging face. Or that other big thing he wasn’t thinking about. He definitely was not thinking about that. Still, he never saw Amanda Bixby.
He decided one day in mid-July that this would be his last day. It was getting hot, too hot to run outside. He was becoming aware of exactly what it was he was doing, and he found it more difficult to explain, even to himself. What if someone tracked down Sela the way he’d tracked down Amanda? He’d have their throat. It was different for him, wasn’t it? That day in the sushi bar had been unexpected, spontaneous, a blip in the system of ordinary things. This was so contrived. Even if it worked, what would he say to her? He had to stop. He wasn’t a crazy person. This would be his last day. That being the case, he saw no harm in ringing the doorbell. If she didn’t recognize him, he could say he had the wrong house. And if she did, he could say he just moved in and what a coincidence it was that she lived there.

He ran past, looked around, and walked a ways up the driveway before turning around and walking back down. He repeated this nearly five times before finally walking up to the front door. He pushed the doorbell, his heart racing, and did not hear a buzz. He went around to the side door, rang that one too, but no buzz. He heard barking on the other side of the unlatched fence. A large, brindled dog, he could not identify what type, charged from behind the fence, and he ran. He just cleared the driveway, when the dog jumped and bit him in his right thigh. The pain shot through his whole leg and without thinking he kicked the dog. The dog steadied to charge again, but Mrs. Henderson came out and called to the dog. “Get back, Jolly. Get back,” she said and clapped her leg. The dog whimpered but trotted beside her and growled at Lyle. His eyes darted between them. Mrs. Henderson grabbed the collar while Jolly dragged her one-step closer. “He does not like you,” she said sweetly. “You better go. I’ll make sure he gets back in the fence. I’ll let them know he attacked a jogger. They won’t be happy about that. Good people.”
Lyle obliged and walked off in the direction of the park, his thigh began to bleed through his black shorts, which he only realized because he felt wet and worried for a moment that he’d peed himself. A thigh to match a knee. He wondered what Mrs. Henderson meant by *they*. Only when he reached his car did he realize he dropped his wallet.

He waited until midnight to go back. There were no cars in the driveway and the house was dark, so he parked boldly right in front of Amanda’s house and ran up the driveway. Motion detector lights came on, and he saw himself how someone else would see him: a stranger wearing dark clothes, poking around at midnight. The wallet did not turn up anywhere he looked, so he decided to look in the back yard cautious of the dog, but the dog was no where to be seen. Then without warning the dog burst through a doggy door and came for him. Lyle jumped on the highest surface possible, a large, green garbage bin with the lid denting under his weight. He held a small gardening hand shovel like a sword, convinced he could use it to take the fucking head off this rabid beast. He thought, I’ve gone too far. This is too far. He had to find a way to get out of that yard without being bitten again. He could climb over the fence into the neighbor’s back yard and hope they had cats. As he schemed, a terrible feeling came over him. He was being watched.

The back porch lights came on, and there stood Amanda Bixby in a silky, white nightgown with splashes of red. She was barefoot and her hair was wet and wrapped in a bun on top of her head. She looked alert and cautious. Then someone else opened the creaky screen door, a little boy, wearing only red underwear, sucking his thumb, and reaching for her hand. Amanda kept her eyes on Lyle while she moved her leg in front
and across the child’s body, blocking him from moving or blocking Lyle from seeing him, probably both. “I’ve called the police,” she said.

“I lost my wallet back here.”

“You’re breaking into my house,” she said.

“No, no. No, no. No, no, no.”

A man came through the gate and stopped by Lyle. Startled by the scene, he looked between Lyle and Amanda. Amanda pushed the child back through the door and spoke in shorthand to the man. She called the dog into the house. He was reluctant to go, but he finally did, and Lyle realized this was not a good sign. The man was taking the place of the dog that bit him. The man was younger than Lyle, considerably younger. He shaved his head bald and had blue eyes that matched his blue coveralls with his white stitched name. “It’s you,” Lyle said.

The man did not reply. Lyle realized neither Amanda nor the man recognized Lyle at all. Maybe it was the baseball cap and workout clothes or the lost weight. It hadn’t been that long. Only a couple of months. Maybe he wasn’t who he was anymore. When the cops arrived, they handcuffed him and patted him down. They took his i.d. and called in his driver’s license number. They took their time. He thought about going to jail and felt a pang for Sela. The last time he saw her might have been the last time he saw her. She’d never forgive him. He begged and pleaded and said it was all a mistake.

Mrs. Henderson, woken by the noise, confirmed with them that he was not a stranger. She told the officers that he jogged past that morning and was frightened by the dog. She apologized for not telling Sela about what happened earlier. “He’s a good boy,”
she said. After some convincing, they took off his handcuffs and handed him his wallet. He apologized to Amanda Bixby.

She looked at him different now that she was closer to him. He worried she recognized him after all. “Do I know you?” she asked.

“Oh, he jogs by every evening. Always says hello,” Mrs. Henderson offered.

He looked one last time at Amanda Bixby. “No,” he said. “You don’t.”

*  

It was fall now, and after weeks of avoiding him, Sela finally came around again. She needed help packing. Her house once full of lights and music and purple-painted walls was all packed up and dismantled. He taped up one of the final boxes and marked it Salvation Army with a marker before throwing it across her hardwood floor. The apartment was nearly empty. Lyle rented a cabin in some woods about an hour from town. He arranged for hospice care and planned to take some time off from work to stay with her. “This is depressing,” he said.

“No shit,” she said. She breathed heavy now, closed her eyes often, sat every few minutes and coughed. She seemed torn between being awake and being asleep.

He sighed deeply and collapsed onto the floor beside her. “I was nearly arrested for stalking a woman.”

She said, “You’re drunk.”

“You’re drunk,” he repeated. “Are you supposed to be drinking?”

“I’m not supposed to do anything anymore,” she said. “I’m so tired. I never knew a person could be so tired,” she said. “You look like shit. I need some air,” she said. She stood and then offered both of her hands and pulled him up to her. They hugged for a
while and walked over and around boxes, went outside, and sat on the steps of her front porch. She lived in an old house in the historic part of town, so one of her neighbors had a Victorian-style three-story house and the other one lived in a dilapidated duplex with a pit bull chained to the tree. “That dog’s coming with me to the cabin,” she said. He lit a cigarette and offered her a puff. She took three. “Did you really stalk a woman? I mean, define *stalk*. Does she work at a coffee shop and you go there every day even though it’s out of your way? Did you follow her around the city on your bike? Did you analyze her social media profiles?”

“Yes,” he said. “The last part. And worse.”

She laughed so deeply that no sound came out for a long time, and when it did she sounded like she was hacking up a hairball. “It’s not funny,” she said and punched him. “I’m not laughing because it’s funny. I’m laughing because I’ve left my memory to a crazy person.”

“I know. It’s really bad. I mean really, really bad. I’m sorry,” he said. “But you’re not leaving. That’s like saying passed away.”

She put her hand on his knee and rubbed it. “What did you do exactly?”

He told her the whole story.

“You can’t stalk women, Lyle. I can’t be your friend if you stalk women.”

“It won’t happen again,” he said.

“I know. We both know why you did it, and I’m only dying once,” she said. She leaned back on her elbows. “Would you start a war to retrieve my corpse?” she asked.

“Why?”
“I heard this story about a woman – something Padilla – Juana, I think,” she said, coughed, and paused to search for her thought. “Anyway, she fought alongside her husband in a guerilla war against Spanish occupation of what is now Bolivia. She was injured in battle, and her husband was killed trying to save her. The Spanish soldiers cut off his head and took it with them as a trophy or a warning or something. She gathered a small army and charged the camp just to recover his head.”

“Did she get it?”

“She did get it.” Sela took his hand in hers and said, “This isn’t going to get easier.”

“I’ll start a hundred wars,” he said. “I’ll burn the whole damn place down.”

Sela smiled in the saddest way he’d ever seen a person smile. He put both hands on the side of her face and kissed her straight on the lips, and she kissed him. It was not a romantic kiss. It was closed mouth and still. But then he couldn’t say what sort of kiss it was if not romantic

A group of laughing old men in undone tuxedos walked down the sidewalk. Sela and Lyle moved closer into one another, and she wrapped her arms around him. “Back to the women,” one man said. He turned to the two of them and shouted, “Yeehaw!” They laughed at the surprise of the moment. The old man winked and skipped down the sidewalk, knees crisp and peachy.