SOMEWHERE I HAVE NEVER TRAVELLED A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION

Jared Jones Hegwood
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The University of Southern Mississippi

SOMEWHERE I HAVE NEVER TRAVELLED
A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION

by

Jared Jones Hegwood

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:

December 2007
The University of Southern Mississippi

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A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION

by
Jared Jones Hegwood

Abstract of a Dissertation
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December 2007
ABSTRACT

SOMEWHERE I HAVE NEVER TRAVELLED

by Jared Jones Hegwood

December 2007

This collection of poems and stories was written over the past three years, the vast majority in fiction workshops sponsored by the Center for Writers.
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The author would especially like to thank the Barthelmes.

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Finally, thanks to my wife, Elizabeth, to whom I owe everything good in my life and have no hope of ever repaying.
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INTRODUCTION

On Thursday afternoons, I teach a section of English 200: Introduction to Drama. My class is some 20-odd non-English majors more concerned with knocking out a last requirement for their degree than with theater. It's slow going so far, but I've gotten used to my students not having the same interests that I do. We're covering Shakespeare, Brecht, Chekhov, Mamet and Miller. I enjoy it, talking about it. Especially with those few students who engage with me, the ones who pay attention and ask questions regarding the lectures I give about each play's historical context. I've only been teaching a few years now, but have quickly learned that they're the ones that make teaching both tolerable and worthwhile. You're surprised by the things they think and ask. They challenge you. Their sometime questions force you to work your way back to conclusions that you'd reached long ago, had felt so confident in that you accepted them as dogma, though you could only half-remember the route that got you to the conclusion in the first place. So it was during a discussion on the writing process, particularly David Mamet's statement that "You can't sing the blues, if you don't
know the blues,” I had to answer one student’s surprisingly aggressive questions on “writing what you know.”

I recalled Flannery O’Connor’s quote about people having all experienced the spectrum of human emotions by a young age and that all someone might need to, say, write about someone’s heartbreak, was the ability to reach into their own memories and experiences. They would then, with some imagination, mold it into the heartbreak of another character. But this was the easy part, I told my student. The hard part, I said, was correctly using that memory in the story, making it believable for that particular character.

But it wasn’t the same, he argued, that it was disrespectful, having never experienced the loss of a loved one, to assume that the death of a pet might somehow be equitable. Watching a beloved cat interred in a pet cemetery not the crushing weight of losing a wife. My student is what the administration likes to refer to as “non-traditional” because he’s older. He looked at me and shook his head. I answered that no one would suggest that the two were the same, but that the loss, the sense of a profound absence, came from the same root emotion. A good writer, I said, would be able to take that small feeling and imagine it tenfold.

I tried to call the debate then, ready to get back to the lesson, but my student wanted to make one final point. The fear, he said, that he had felt when he knew his parents were going to punish him was nothing in comparison to the time in his life when a gun had been pointed at his head. He was both angered and hurt by what I had said. They simply weren’t the same, he insisted.
I usually look forward to having “nontraditionals” in my classes. They’re more likely to work, having made sacrifices in their lives to come back to school, juggling the distractions of adult bill-paying life and whatever ridiculous assignment I’d made for Composition Two. Non-traditional students are usually invaluable in group exercises for their no-nonsense attitude, demanding that their younger classmates pull their own weight. They want to learn, they want to know why and how things work with an intensity that their classmates lack. They can be, however, stubborn as hell. At this point in my teaching career, they’re all substantially older than me, and they have no problem whatsoever calling my abilities or experiences into question.

When I was an undergraduate, I spent the first four years of my time at USM as a film-production major, minoring in theatre. I took theater history, multiple acting classes, co-directed one student-play and gobbled up the usual outside reading one does when in love with a new interest. This non-traditional student was a theater major, but focusing in the technical aspects of it. So, when I compared O’Connor’s and Mamet’s thoughts to those of Stanislavsky and Meisner’s acting methods, talked about “sense memory” as to how it relates to fiction writing, particularly the revving up of the imagination, I thought that he might back down. I pride myself on being able to not be condescending in my lectures. I want my teaching to be authoritative but accessible. When I asked my student if he understood what I said, where I was coming from, he replied, “Yeah, I understand what you’re saying.” I was never going to convince him.
I was right. I'm confident in that. In the introduction to my Master's thesis, I wrote about method acting and fiction writing. Being questioned about the legitimacy of using my biography in my fiction made me think about it again, being forced to defend my position has made me aware of something new in my writing, or rather, my lack of.

"I wanted to gain insight into the thought processes of actors and their creation of the "on-stage" character... [and] I think that's very close to what I'm doing in those pieces. Toward the end of "And Then," I hadn't yet found that core bit of business which summed up the relationship between the principals until one day I sat down to "get more into" Charlie's head and stumbled upon the central emotional flaw in his life."

I wrote that paragraph in my aforementioned thesis. The funny thing about that out-loud conversation I was having with my mentors, the teachers that I've known now for a decade, was that I was telling the truth and lying at the same time.

I was told recently that I'm a very good liar. It wasn't a compliment. I do take solace that I rarely lie about big things, I don't like to lie, and I never set out to do so. But I'm nonetheless better at it than I'd like. I'm ashamed of it. Of course my interest in stage-acting has been married to my writing process. It's only natural for such stuff to mix. What I wasn't saying, however, was that I was Charlie. The majority of events of "And Then" had happened to me. The story about a couple, both of whom were unhappy in their marriage and wanting to just end it, are given a chance to do so after a traumatic event. But in the wake of that moment, neither are able, they believe, to break the other person's heart. The
action was changed slightly, events separated by years were reorganized for effect. But it was me. The car crash, the dead dog, even the crossword puzzle scene in the convenience store. That “central emotional flaw” I was so proud of finding through my “process” was my own.

I was divorced two years ago after a ten-year relationship. Five dating, five married. It turned out, oddly enough, that a few weeks after papers were processed and the two of us stood before the judge, her defiantly so, myself sheepishly so, we both agreed that it was for the best.

Raymond Carver was asked on multiple occasions if he shared any biographical similarities with his famously beat-down, lonely characters. He graciously offered that all writing is autobiographical in some way, but there had been nothing in particular. Years later, both Carver’s first wife and mother have said that aspects of his fiction, indeed whole stories, were actually fact put to paper. I like Carver. I think that he just wanted to write, knew good drama when he saw it, whether it happened to him or members of his family or was entirely made up. He didn’t want to be “figured out,” and so, he kept mum about “Chef’s House” and “Boxes.”

I didn’t want to be “figured out” either. So, when Case Miller asked, after the workshop of “And Then,” if I were okay, if I maybe wanted to talk to someone, I shrugged it off. “It’s fiction, dude.”

I was trying to figure things out in my life. I couldn’t tell my then-wife, couldn’t tell my best friend (for reasons, I’ve yet to understand), couldn’t tell my family. I could say it on the page, though. I did not want to get in Charlie’s head. I
wanted to get into mine. Writing was therapeutic. I didn’t understand why I was so unhappy, but I felt, through writing, I was surviving, and, besides, everybody liked the stories. The day I was pulled into the office of one of my mentors and given an “It’s good, seriously” talk, I went home and broke down. And when I received my second Pushcart nomination on another one of my divorce stories, on the same day that a therapy session with my ex-wife ended badly, I screamed in joy as loud as I could in a house that wasn’t mine.

And then my now-wife came back into my life after many years gone and I couldn’t write those stories anymore. They felt self-indulgent. While I could still understand those characters, I wanted as little to do with them as possible. I just didn’t want to go back to it. Now I’m happy, in love, and the last thing I want to write about is a bad marriage.

There’s an essay by Mamet called “Second Act Problems.” In it, he writes, “What you and I want from art is peace. The producer, the entrepreneur, the foundation person, cannot know that; the artist doesn’t even know it. He or she is, simply, driven.”

But what, oh what, once my drive was gone? Before the typewriter became my personal psychologist, I wasn’t much of a writer, wasn’t so good at making it up. Afterwards, once I did begin to “write what I knew,” the stories were better, but I was making up less. I felt more like a shaper, than a writer. My stories before were terrible. They were knock offs of pulp fictions that I liked. So, now that I was a shitty writer before I started writing about my marriage falling apart. Will I be one again now that I have much less personal unhappiness to

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take out on fictional characters? I worry about that. I felt like I was driven by something before, for better or worse. It has not escaped me that I could write about how much happier I am, but that’s hard. I don’t want to question my happiness, don’t want to analyze it. I just want to live it.

I’ve written some things since the divorce was finalized, but they’ve been less, somehow, than what the other pieces were before them. Two summers ago, I took a class in prose poetry, hoping that trying a different form would help my writing dilemma. Most of what was produced there has found its way into this collection. I finished two stories that were in the middle of production when the divorce came, “Intimacy” and “Velero.” The former is, I think, the last word on my then-inability to make change in my life. The latter moves differently. It’s about a failing relationship, but there’s no fear in it, I think. No frustration, just a letting go on both people’s parts. I’m proud, for that among other reasons, that it won the Joan Johnson Award.

The last time I wrote an introduction for a collection, I was very sure of where I was going as a writer, sure as to how I approached writing or why I even do it. Today, after visiting my in-laws out on Paul B. Johnson lake and watching geese waddle around, seeing two little girls walking the road who seemed to want to come to our campsite but were obviously too nervous to try, a new idea for a story finally came into my head. And I need and want to write it. I tell my students “Use your imaginations! Be writers! Make stuff up!” I should follow my own orders. I mean, how simple is it? Just write! Make it up! I don’t tell them that I know how hard it is, or that, lately, I’m not very good at it either.
The last time I wrote an introduction, I wrote what I knew about being a writer. Now, I think I write what I want to know about how to become a real one. Last time, I was saying something about my progress as a writer. I thought I understood. Now, I don’t think I understand much at all about who I am or where I’m going as a writer. I feel better about now than I did about then, but I still feel nervous about starting.

This collection is a condensed version of my four years at the University and four years of a personal tract that. It begins with three pieces about a marriage falling apart. Some of the events and all of the feelings are pulled directly from my own life, from my own but most of it is not.
INTIMACY

Nina stands at her mirror, content that the buzz-cut she’s given herself is equal length all around, that it’s only the newness of the haircut that she’s having trouble with. The shadows that fall across her skull aren’t tell-tale of a hatchet job, but, instead, the unfamiliar shape of a head hidden for a lifetime underneath a pile of coffee-colored hair.

The eyebrows next, she thinks. All of it gone. Her legs, crotch, the rest of her head and the faint lines running the length of her forearm. Everything. She wonders how she’ll look once she’s rid herself of what little is left. People will think she has cancer, when it was just one more thing to fill the time.

Her husband, Bryan, is in Portland on a business trip. He sells veterinarian pharmaceuticals, specializing in domesticated pets, and was asked by the firm he works for to go on this trip for the unveiling of a new drug to treat emphysema in felines. An important drug, he told her, and an important trip. It’s a step up, he said, a step up for both of them. They were going places, finally. They could get out of their two-bed-two-bath, find another car, live a bit of a better life, he said. They deserve a better life than the one they have, he said.

He’s been gone seven days of a ten day trip and she’s slept none of it. She’s tried warm milk, exercise, hot baths. She’s tried Ken Burns documentaries, soups, and foods high in carbohydrates. She bought turkeys, smoked hams, ordered special audio tapes with forest sounds and whale song. Her mother once
said that two shots of Kentucky Bourbon a night cured the bouts of insomnia she suffered after giving birth to Nina.

Still, no matter how she stacked the extra pillows, no matter what side of the bed she took, Nina had not slept since he left.

“Well,” she had said to her mother during their weekly phone conversation. “I suppose it’s not so bad if it’s hereditary.”

“Oh, it’s not,” her mother replied. “It was only those two times. I might have just been crazy. Pregnancy does that.”

Nina dips her head close to the faucet and massages warm water onto her scalp. It’s strangely soothing, this new nakedness. She’s out of her own shaving cream, having spent the rest of her mango-scented gel on her legs and arms. The only thing left for her is a blue and red can of Barbasol tossed in the cabinet under the sink by Bryan a few years after he decided to wear a full beard. It’s strange, shaving her face. She doesn’t need to, but wants to, mimicking the movements she remembers Bryan making in the mirror. She pulls long, slow strokes up the nape of her angled neck while holding her breath, struggling to not swallow. The smell of the Barbasol is medicinal, something she hopes is natural and not from some form of souring.

The eyebrows come quick with a few strips of hot wax. She rummages through the cabinet’s drawer for a lipstick color that feels right.

She’s sure he’s sleeping around. He insisted that she not work, to be proud of her associate’s degree, to frame and hang it on the wall, but stay home where he needed her. The empty hours were manageable when he was around,
but his trips became longer and to nicer places. And he never asked if she might want to travel with him. He would call on the first day of every trip, tell her the wonderful things he was seeing. Once, while in Vermont, he told her, “You wouldn’t believe this place. Every morning I wake up, look out my window, see mountains and ask ‘How did I get here?’” Two years of marriage and Nina wonders if she’s ever been happy.

It wasn’t even so much that she was tired and couldn’t find the peace necessary to let go and fall into that nighttime world, but instead that there was no need for sleep. Nothing in her brain or body demanded it. She lay in bed only out of habit and boredom. She was tired of jigsaw puzzles and high-speed internet and cleaning the hidden, forgotten spaces of her kitchen. The third night in, she found a model kit in her husband’s closet and started piecing together the small die-cast fragments of a ’75 Pontiac Firebird. She fumbled with the glue and lost several apparently unnecessary pieces in the carpet, but something resembling the muscle car on the box finally emerged. Once she finished, however, once she finished painting and applying orange flame-lick decals on its doors and hood, Nina found she was missing the sense of satisfaction she had expected.

And now, looking back at her hair-free reflection, she feels the same.

*
Two days ago, she’d driven the three hours north to her old neighborhood just for something to do. After her parents had divorced and moved away to opposite sides of the country, there’d been little reason to go back to her small town. She traveled back-roads mostly, dusty ones she used to haunt as a kid. Retracing the route her school bus took every morning when she was a child brought back strange memories and even stranger sights. Many of those roads had grown over, become dead ends or disappeared altogether. A narrow bridge where one had not been before was already overtaken by the woods surrounding it, and a pair of crows picked apart the remains of a dead rabbit. Further down, she found a wooden cross nailed to a tree that said “Joseph Craft met Jesus Christ here.” The sun beat high overhead and Nina would stop the car every now and then to walk around, put her hands in the warm, red sand of the road.

One road still navigable came to an end near a small hitch-camper where two boys on her daily bus-ride, Shane and Eddie Paxton, had grown up, but from the state of the camper were now long gone. Like everything else she’d seen on her trip, trees and vine threatened to swallow it whole. It was grey-green from mold, the outside paneling swollen by rain and hanging in disrepair. Windows were broken out and Nina thought they looked like hungry mouths, the remaining glass their shining teeth.

It occurred to Nina that things of the world that you count on to not change, the things that you need to not change, will do so anyway.

Looking through the trailer’s windows, at the state of its guts, she wondered where Bryan might be. The kitchen had gone a dull green and black.
Half-peeled, glittery butterfly stickers speckled the cabinets with the only vibrant color of the room. Loose gravel sat in light scrawl over the checkerboard tile. In the furthest corner, a yellow and plastic trashcan was tipped on its side, an old, blue t-shirt hanging out. She wondered what food Bryan might be eating, hands he was shaking, the view of Mt. Hood from his hotel room. She wondered about the size of the bed he was sleeping in, how firm the mattress.

She once broached the idea of her tagging along for his business trips while they were shopping for towels in the JC Penny bed and bath area. Bryan had been checking price tags on a celery green set, telling Nina how easy it had been for him to learn the New York subway system, the quickest route from Rockefeller Plaza to Broadway to Grand Central Station, when she cocked her best grin and said in mock-frustration, “Gee, Bryan, if you really want to take me out of the city, all you have to do is ask.” The next trip, three days for a pharmaceutical seminar in Bermuda, Bryan packed only for himself and Nina spent the weekend putting up new wallpaper.

* 

Nina, having remembered that the all-night convenience store two blocks down the road had pinball machines, pulls an old sweatshirt over her head, throws on one of Bryan’s baseball caps, his slippers and locks the door behind her. Pinball, she thinks, she was good at that once, wasn’t she? You could sweat to pinball, lose yourself in the concentration necessary to play the game right. The theme
didn’t matter. NASCAR, Doctor Who or 50’s sci-fi all played by the same simple rule: don’t drop the ball. Besides, it was a world better than reading back issues of Rolling Stone or going through a pirated version of Tae Bo her nephew had downloaded to Bryan’s computer. At 2 in the morning, she might get a few silent games in before the truck drivers arrived, or the well-dressed, insomniac businessmen that descended on that smoky little room, muffin or coffee in one hand, three bucks in change in the other. She knew the type. She was the type now.

She makes her way down the street, walking the middle when she can. Looking back every now and then, she drops to her knees and puts her face against the asphalt. She takes her time, feeling each individual rock, knowing that no person might have such contact with it for years, if ever. It’s comforting in a way that she can’t describe.

The store is small, sitting on an island of concrete on the outer shore of the local community college. Nina’s been inside only a few times, when the credit card slots on gas pumps were down or she’d need quick, cheap beer, but she remembers the pinball machines, a swath of them, from her only year at the college. Nina didn’t understand the attraction until an ex-boyfriend managed to coax her into a game, standing behind her as she played, letting his arms lay on hers, tapping her fingers on the flipper buttons. After they’d split, she found herself dreaming about the games, waking up in a sitting position, manically working the flippers. She’d take afternoon classes so she could play at night, setting high-scores while her friends went drinking and dancing.
It’s cold inside the store. Every inch of her skin feels exposed, is exposed now, and the heavy air-conditioning raises goose bumps on her scalp. Her thin feet feel like they might seize up in her equally thin house slippers.

A handwritten sign is taped to the change machine near the arcade: NO CHANGE. SEE CLERK. REALIZE WE GIVE FUCK-ALL ABT YR MORTAL KOMBAT SCORE. THX--MGMT.

Two boys in red smocks that tie at the front work the service desk. They seem too young to Nina for overnight work in one of these places. But everyone seems too young to Nina lately. One is tall, lanky, an eyebrow locked in an arc of suspicion. His short blond hair is tight around his ears and a blue coffee straw hangs, bent in several awkward angles, from between his lips. “You might have gone too far. You might have gone too far,” he tells his friend. The other boy is small, almost womanly. He holds one hand behind his back while he punctuates every word with his other. “’Pancreas, pancreas,” the small one says.

“No,” says the tall one.

“Pancreas,” says the small one.

“No,” says the tall one.

They look at each other, each boy’s arms akimbo.

“Hey,” says Nina. “I need some change please.” She holds out two crumpled dollar bills. The eight quarters she’ll get in return will buy her six plays on most pinball machines. Six plays could buy her three, maybe even four hours of distraction. Two dollars, she thinks, might be too much.
The tall one makes change for her while the small one leans forward eyeing her.


“You’re lying,” the small one says. The store phone starts to ring, but neither boy goes for it. The small one won’t take his eyes off her. The phone rings until it stops.

“Jesus,” Nina says. “You should feel really terrible and ashamed.”

The two boys stare at her. She stares back.

“This,” she says, taking a handful of a tinfoil-wrapped chocolate-covered cherries from a display box. “These are mine now.”

The small one stares back, unmoving. The tall one leans back into the counter, disinterested. “I might have, you know,” she says. “You’re cruel.” Her hands go to her bald head. “There’s no need to be cruel.”

*

During the trip before last (two weeks in Chicago), Nina had found Bryan’s pornography stash in the utility closet, under a nest of Sports Illustrated and Vet Today. She couldn’t tell how long they’d been there, the nicer ones like Playboy had dates on the covers while the raunchier ones didn’t. The Playboy was dated three months before, had a skinny redhead, a sitcom star the cover print said (though Nina didn’t recognize her), with her fists on her hips, a red boa covering the obvious places, an airbrushed smile cutting across her face like a half-moon. Others smelled like old curtains and had corners gnawed at by mice. When Nina
opened one, a silverfish ran up to her ring finger's knuckle before falling off and disappearing back into the dark of the closet. The magazines had titles like "Cum Hungry Coeds" "Lick Me" and "Scandinavian Debutantes." Women inside were thin, with hair like they'd just stepped from the shower. Their smiles were strained and full of bad teeth. Every other page had "more amateurs than any other magazine," girls that looked too young or women that looked too old, each in various states of undress or costume, all spreading their legs, a finger or two or three hidden from view. One girl reminded Nina of her best friend from college. She thought about burning the lot, but instead returned each in the order she had found them.

Nina let her discovery sit a secret, though it hung in her head during every conversation with him. While Bryan talked about feline AIDS over his pork-loin and saffron rice, Nina wondered how exciting it must be for him to imagine other women. She wasn't exactly sure how to bring it up, wasn't even sure if it was a problem. Men liked pornography, she knew, though she didn't understand it herself. When she was younger, her brother tore pages from magazines bought by his friends and hid them in Ziploc bags under the chinaberry tree.

* 

The first pinball is fired with too much force, a timing mistake that Nina chalks up to rust and the strangeness of a Desert Storm-themed machine. The second slips straight into the magic groove where neither flipper can reach. The third bounces around for a while, knocking between bumpers with US and Iraqi flag
decals, before falling into the same path as the ball before it. A plastic, cartoonish mock of Saddam Hussein coughs an electronic laugh out if its mouth, its head rocking back and forth. Nina kicks the machine’s leg. She has the same luck every other play, no game lasting more than a minute or two, no game hitting multi-ball, no free plays off high-scores, nothing. Saddam laughs. Nina taps the side buttons frantically trying to keep the small, steel spheres in play. Fifteen minutes after walking in, her pinball adventure is already over.

“Motherfuck,” she says and kicks the machine again. Saddam laughs.

On the way out, she overhears the small one tell the tall one: “You can’t cut no slack, Wayne. You just can’t. Got to treat ‘em all like meat.”

An alarm clock in the apartment above Nina’s goes off at 5am like it always does, piping country music through the central-air’s vent. She’s throwing random things into a small black luggage bag: panties, t-shirts, CD’s, pencils and pads of stationary, a roll of tape, tampons, toothpaste and a paperback mystery novel. The country music is light, but up-tempo. “Rowwwboat,” Johnny Cash sings. “Row me to the shore.” She hasn’t heard Johnny in years. It would be hard to not recognize him. Nina stops when she notices her reflection in the adjoining bathroom’s mirror. What she sees looking back is abnormal, alien-looking.

It’s a good time to leave him, she thinks. He’s gone. No fuss. He wouldn’t anyway, would he? He wants this. And now she does too. Waiting has been slowly killing her.
Her gums are sore. She hooks a finger in her mouth, pulling the lip up for a better look. She should brush more. She will brush more. She can remember to do that away from Bryan. A new life means new rules and commitment to those rules. Rule number one: More brushing. Rule number two: no more husbands. Not that she could really help that one, the unpredictability of the human heart being what it is.

Maybe, she thinks, she should find somebody to fuck tonight.

Her thoughts go to a conversation she and Bryan had a month into their marriage. They were flying to Los Angeles to bury his favorite uncle, young, 45, and dead from a heart attack. She was eating a club sandwich, picking out the cucumbers as Bryan typed away on his laptop, putting together invoices for his local customers. The clacking of the keyboard stopped suddenly and he had taken her hand in his.

"Sometimes I have to remind myself to breathe," he said. "And when I do, when I let out that stale breath, my lungs burn."

She looked at him, uncertain what to say.

"My true human character," he went on. "That's me. You can audibly exhale and everyone thinks you're crazy. A deep breath, something to regain focus and people expect the worst. When I make that sound am I very unhappy? Sure. That's my unhappy sound. I just don't like people assuming it anyway."

That had been a little over a year ago. Since then, Nina had been waiting for the worst. She would walk into his home office and he would jump, immediately clicking off of what he had been reading on the computer. He made
jokes about divorcing her in front of her friends, when they all got together, laughing around the television. She thought it was his version of playing the hen-pecked husband. Who knew what he might have really been thinking? Sometimes she would joke back with him.

“The place might smell better,” she once said, pointing the television remote his way. He had laughed, the joke pulling wine from his nose.

She starts packing again when she hears what sounds like a bag of potatoes fall against the opposite side of her bedroom wall.

Nina puts her ear to the wall, hears a woman shriek and beginning to cry.

*

Only a few minutes have passed, when Nina hears knocking at her door. She’s been waiting for it. It’s her next-door neighbor, she knows without having to check. Apartment 3, a pretty girl, skinny and blonde who jogs in green, white-striped soccer shorts. Drives a nice car or at least a nice-looking car. Cooks out in the apartment building’s breezeway with her loud, chain-smoking friends while listening to the college’s baseball games on the radio. But despite knowing all this, Nina doesn’t know the girl’s name. Blonde Girl, Jogs, Likes Chili Dogs.

Bryan had long bemoaned the state of a country when people were too afraid to step out and meet their neighbors, making himself instantly and immediately available to her. Nina, however, only stayed inside, watching through the blinds.

The girl knocks and knocks and rings the door-bell a few times, but Nina stands off from the door, afraid of the small jarring movements the door makes
from her neighbor’s quick fists. Nina tries to run her fingers through hair that’s no longer there.

“WAKE UP!!!” the girl screams and begins knocking on another door. “SOMEBODY PLEASE WAKE UP!”

Nina gains enough courage to look out the peephole in her door. She sees a frightened, twenty-something girl in army fatigues pounding on the opposite apartment door. The girl’s yellow hair rides her shoulders and Nina notices for the first time the cut is very much like her mother’s. What is it that men like so much about yellow hair? she wonders.

The girl in apartment 2 opens her door in a blue nightgown. She’s young, too, but not as pretty as the blonde. Her hair’s a short bob, but matted together and spiky. Nina’s seen her before, in red polo shirts with a restaurant name embroidered on the chest, the sort of places that Nina didn’t like to eat. But the girl was quiet, Nina knew and appreciated, though she also might leave a bag of garbage outside her door all day, not taking it to the dumpster and stinking up the breezeway.

“I heard a noise,” Blonde tells the girl. Blonde’s words are jerky, like she’s trying to breathe between each syllable. “My friend Josh he came to pick me up for our weekend he fell he hit his head on the sink he’s jerking think he’ll swallow his tongue. Can you help me, please?” She reaches for the girl’s hand, who slaps it away.

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“Don’t touch me,” the girl says, grabbing her door. “I’ll call the police, but I’m not touching nothing.” Nina sees for the first time that the girl was missing a limb. One real, milky white leg, the other a light-rose facade. She closes the door.

Blonde tries to compose herself. She rests her hands on her hips. An ambulance arrives an hour later. Nina watches the blue flashing lights pull away through the slats in her blinds.

*

Two nights later and no word from Bryan, Nina is in bed with the small one from the convenience store. Paul, he says, is his name. The sex is strange, but pleasantly new. The way he touches her, the way he rubs her calves and feet. His thumb guides the rest of an open hand from her lap to the shadow under her skirt. She keeps quiet when he makes small mewling bites on the slope of her shoulder, but neither does he mention the thin carpet of hair slowly growing back onto her head. He’s asleep soon after, but Nina is still restless. People keep walking by the bedroom window, talking loud in the parking lot. Paul’s turned away from Nina, turned into the wall, pulling his legs up to his chest. Nina spoons him.

“When I was in high school,” she says. “There was a boy I knew. He was quiet, but beautiful. I’d look across the room during class sometimes and catch him staring at me. I liked it. Our senior year, he was in an accident while helping a chemistry teacher move some of her lab equipment to another room, and somehow he tripped and broke a few bottles of 6-mole Hydrochloric acid all over
his arms and legs. The skin grafts on his arms healed pretty normally, but most of the damage was done to his legs, because the pants he'd been wearing held the acid to his skin longer. He was missing most of the meat of the backs of his calves and had big patches of skin missing in huge squares on his ass. He was pretty mean after that, bitter I guess. It didn't matter to me, though. For some reason, I loved that he'd had such a terrible accident and survived it. It seemed tragic and beautiful—things which seemed really attractive to me when I was 17."

Headlights shoot through the window, onto the wall. It's not Bryan. She knows there's no reason for her to expect that sound tonight. No reason to hear its sputtering engine, the muffler barely hanging to the undercarriage. She couldn't count the number of times she had complained to him about it. It scared her, but money was tight and the problem never rectified.

"After a New Year's Eve party, I took him to a motel. I think we had only said five words to each other all year and now I was paying for a room to be with him. I just wanted a snuggle so bad that I let him fuck me so that he'd fall asleep next to me with his arms around me. That's so lame and sad. What a stupid way to spend the New Year."

He doesn't answer. Nina places her face against his, her cheek on his. She rubs her nose into his stubble. "Intimacy, intimacy," she says. She looks at him tenderly, attempts a smile. "I'm a mess."

Nina rolls away from him, her back to his. She imagines how from above the shape they make is like butterfly wings. She turns the alarm clock with its soothing, blue numbers away from her and closes her eyes.
I want to slide a hand underneath her shirt, open mouth kiss her, taste the smoke on her teeth and tongue. My hand down the front of her pants, my palm over her belly button. Hook my other arm around the small of her back.

I Google Tracey’s name every day, hoping that I’ll get something new. Things she never told me. What brand of cigarettes she smokes, her favorite Prince album. Can she dance to it? I have four pictures of her on the computer; low resolution jpegs that I obsess over every pixel of. All I can see is how lonely her eyes look. In one pic, she’s wearing a fishing hat, is on a bicycle in some city I’ve never been to. She smiles at the camera. The second is a simple headshot, her neck crooked at an angle. The third is of her in someone else’s wedding party.

She seems so small on the screen. I imagine that her hair flares out and her sweater rides up enough that I can see a side of her stomach. I imagine her unbuckling that studded belt she wears, jerking it out of the loops and unbuttoning her pants’ top snap. She sticks her index and second fingers into my mouth.

Tracey’s on Friendster. Twenty-five friends. Thirteen testimonials. She uses the fishing hat picture. I imagine her in a one-bedroom apartment, typing away with only the light of the laptop to illuminate the keys. She needs someone.
I can tell. I can tell when someone needs someone. The fourth pic is her drunk, pitch in hand, arm around some obnoxious looking girl practically screams it.

“Me at Pinochle Night. Which is only best when stupid and vomiting.”

*

Diane and I have been separated for a month and a half. We were on the couch together a week ago, after I'd gotten home from work. She had her hand on my lap and wouldn’t stop saying how sorry she was. I almost told her about Tracey, but I figured I should ride her guilt as long as I could. She offered to move out for a while. I didn’t say no. I even gave her the name of an apartment with a good super.

*

Tracey’s angry, hurt. About everything. The tornado that wiped out her apartment and savings. The husband she left at 24. The hole in her hat. The George Michael CD that was stolen, though she sock dances still on a linoleum floor while ‘Faith’ plays in her head. Snaps her fingers. Angry that she only gets to see her daughter on holidays that are too cold to go out on. She hates moving to Baltimore, hates having to live off her parents. She doesn’t like her hair. She reads the paper as she walks.

*
I consider the chance that she’s a 60-year old receptionist for McCormick & Co. Seasonings, 18 Loveton Circle, Baltimore, MD, 21152.

* 

I was walking down St. Louis on my way to lunch with a prospective employer when I passed by a small pet store, the kind with the open bins for petting. And one of the tribe looked like Diane or rather reminded me of Diane: quizzical nose, smell of sawdust and a slight hint of mental retardation in the eyes. The dog licked my fingers and I bought her, I’m so lonely. I call her Diane. Sometimes I kick her.

* 

pepperpot says:
    ok first album
traceyroxor says:
    first album period? or first album bought
traceyroxor says:
    cause there's a difference
pepperpot says:
    good point. both
traceyroxor says:
    first ever: top gun soundtrack. on vinyl even
traceyroxor says:
    then is michael jackson. Blood on the dance floor. exclnt album. while other girls were writing soundgarden or nirvana lyrics on their notebooks, slapping black flag stickers on everything in sight, I grooved to michael. particularly the early stuff. And that one particular album, blood on the dance floor, was this really great moment in music. like a hiccup between disco and hiphop. Lot of synthesizers sure, but the music never sounded fake or electronic. there were trumpets and sax and it made you want to move your booty. you want to move. if rock and roll appeals to that base animal in all of us, that herky jerky kill or be killed animal, then michael
 appealed to what’s silky in us, the refined sex in us, a smooth, easy step glide that mimicked
the beating of our hearts

pepperpot says:
I’ve been masturbating like crazy lately

traceyroxor says:
ah.

pepperpot says:
you know, you know

traceyroxor says:
v. romantic of you . super toknow really

pepperpot says:
well have you(?)

traceyroxor may not receive your message as user has signed off

pepperpot says:
good night. love you

pepperpot says:
sorry?

*

I tell Tracey we can make love anywhere she wants. On the stairs. The bathroom
at Taco Bell. A cabin I’ll build for her. Basketball court. Anywhere on Bourbon.
Hot air balloon. My mother’s guest room while she’s gone (I know where she
hides the key). The Chrysler building should we ever be there. A Chinese place I
know on the east side of town with a, well, it’s not an alley, but there’s privacy
and it’s nowhere near the dumpster.

Tracey types back, “LOL. How bout a bed?”

One testimonial reads that Tracey is bold and beautiful and smart in ways
that most people are missing. She’s inspiring to know, it continues, and a delight
to see. Fresh faced and ironic at the same time.

Another hopes that she’ll grow wings and join the circus.

19
She’s a divorcee, she says. I tell her I hope to join the ranks soon and she cautions me that it’s more painful than I imagine. She says I’ll want to stay friends with my wife, that it’s only natural, but my wife won’t want to be friends with me. Or vice versa. Tracey’s husband worked fishing boats in Alaska for months at a stretch and the time apart eventually welled up into something insurmountable. He would come home tired, looking for his wife; she would’ve grown accustomed to living alone, staying out with friends. It was the only way she could stay sane, she would say, and it was like a stranger was touching her and he could never understand that. His calloused fingers frightened her, his lovemaking seemed more out of need than passion. He’d come home tired, annoyed and fall asleep. She’d watch British sitcoms and go dancing. She would need to go dancing and he could never understand that.

The abandoned train depot, I tell Tracey. We could go there. Like after a rainstorm we can take shelter from. There’s a large NASA poster of the moon, a detailed map of the major craters that somebody hung after the depot had closed. My wife won’t go there with me, much less have spontaneous, dangerous sex there. She leans too much on her brain.

I initiate every conversation we have, but time them so I don’t come off as pushy. I say, “Well, how’s the weather?” And she says, “Well, fine.” I say, “Well, how about the President?” And she says, “Oh, he’s okay.” I say, “Well, how are you?” And Tracey says, “I’m lying on the floor, taking pictures of myself.”

Our email ratio is, say, 4:1 in my favor. “I think you’re terrific,” I type.
"There's a scene in the Wild Bunch," says Tracey. "After the horses fall in the desert, William Holden tells, ah, Robert Ryan. He says, 'When you side with a man, you stay with him. And if you can't do that you're like some animal.'"

* 

I get mugged on my way to the Internet cafe, punched and kicked by three teenage girls in domino masks. They're little, but have heavy feet. I taste the bottom of their size-5 Keds. One of the girls has long red hair and a stud in her nostril. When she bends over to yell at me, I can see down her shirt. There's a tattoo across her chest, but I can't make out what it is except for the snake that comes up to where her larynx would be. She rifles through my wallet, tossing my Red Cross card and saved receipts into the road. She takes what little cash is there and the girls run away giggling. I wipe the blood from my lip and make my way to the library. Free Internet, there.

* 

pepperpot says:
so what i'm saying is
pepperpot says:
fuck psychoanalysts. They want you to get divorced
traceyroxor says:
whodisbe?
pepperpot says:
you know you know

21
traceyroxor says:
   ah, plain' just playin' wit you

traceyroxor says:
   well damn. how're you? i saw this movie last nite, the third man w orson wells

pepperpot says:
   i saw diane today, shes lokking pretty fucked up

traceyroxor says:
   orson is the real dick, bus so likeable, I feel sorry when hes shot

traceyroxor says:
   *turns on radio to find something worthashit*

traceyroxor says:
   went to lunch w my mom yesterday. She started in on the college thing again, so I excused myself from the table, went to the ladies and out through the window. lol

traceyroxor says:
   see? bitch me.

pepperpot says:
   I bought a dog

pepperpot says:
   you're my kind of bitch

*

I tell her about the lunch I had with Diane yesterday, in a sandwich place in Slidell. We’d decided to meet, for some reason or another. She had called me, I remember. The dog kept barking/vomiting and at the time I’d agreed to anything she had asked, just to get to the problem at hand, mainly my carpet and regurgitated Milk Bones. The place was a sports bar, I think. I don’t really go to those places. But it’s a renovated train depot, yes! A renovated train depot. And she says, “Oh, God, I love these places.” So naturally, I call her on the sex thing which winds up being a mistake considering I didn’t, and get this, know that the reason she called me, wanted to meet with me, was that she’s seeing her analyst, slept with him their last meeting. “It was wonderful,” she said. “Very
relaxing.” I’m about to take the opportunity to tell her about Tracey, when she tells me, “I’m sure you know that I still love you. It was as noncommittal as sex with your shrink can get.”

“Fucking Henry was wrong, I know. Fucking Eddie and Clint and Barton was wrong, I know. I want to make it up to you. I want to make things right. I still want to work things out.”

“By fucking your doctor?”

“He has a name.”

“Sure. ‘Cocksucker,’ I call him.”

“Part of the healing process, he said. He wanted to make sure I was still capable of orgasm. Can’t you see how important that it, that I can still come, how important that is to us?”

What do I say to that? Nothing. So we rent one of those two-person bicycle boats and take it on the Mississippi river. I can’t fight the urge to push her in, so I jump into the water myself and swim back to my car.

*

I can’t sleep, so I fix myself a sandwich and watch TV in bed. The late show, a Bob Hope movie without Bing, and then a commercial for an online travel agency. Priceline.com has tickets, car rentals, plane tickets! Even vacations! I buy one! I lie to my wife about a business meeting and skip out on our therapy session!
On the plane ride over, I sketch on airport stationary. My doodles are crude sex-fantasies where women squeeze Jupiter-size tits, purse their lips into tight bows and come-ons snake from their mouths in oblong word balloons. They twist and contort over the space of the notepad. My balls feel on fire. And concrete. Concrete on fire.

But it can't be all sex, right?

* 

Once Diane and I were coming back from the video store, were waiting at a red light when I noticed a couple, hand-in-hand, walking in darkness across the street to the local Italian place. “That's nice,” I said. “A date.”

“Ten points,” she said and made engine-revving noises.

That's what I miss most of her. She's real in a way that most are not.

Sometimes--- it's funny, but I wonder how Tracey will let me down.

* 

Baltimore is cold; two days of snow has yielded a foot and a half of the white stuff. I've seen snow yes, and from the third floor of a Red Roof Inn, snow looks like shit. How can anyone live here? Next door, some newlyweds that checked in right before me are going at it. The girl comes like a squeeze toy.

Checked my email at the motel’s “business room.” Tracey has sent me an email. The subject says “Baltimorean abstruse.” “Tell me about New Orleans,” she types. I didn’t tell her I was coming; don’t tell her I'm here.
I say, "New Orleans is an armpit. It is the armpit of a brown and mercury-polluted river. The people are its hairs. They are tough, wiry, ugly and overgrown. The food is not as good as the television says. There's no excitement here. There's no romance. There are only bars, strip joints and churches. It is an orange and black city where no one should ever live."

I add: "But once you've fallen in love with her, there's no escaping where you're meant to be."

She types back: "Sure, sure."

She's not hard too hard to find. I Google her name, get directions to her house.

*

When she opens the door, I forget that she doesn't know what I look like.

"Hello?" she says.

I don't know what to say, but something comes out of my mouth anyway.

"Bluurgh baba, klell."

Tracey takes half a step behind the door. "Gary?" She calls over her shoulder. "Gary, could you come here? I think it's for you."

*

Sitting in Tracey and Gary's living room is like being back in public school, in the principal's office. Tracey looks at Gary and he at her, worried expressions on their faces. They talk at me, but I can't hear anything that comes from their
mouth. They’re like overly concerned mimes. I feel ashamed of myself. I feel small and growing smaller, so that I might slip between the cushions of the sofa.

His hands are exactly as she described. Her hands aren’t.

The way they talk, I figure he still keeps his toothbrush here.

“It was something to do in the day,” she says to him. “I was bored!”

Their place is very nice. Long broad walls with family pictures, some framed art. Two large book-stuffed cabinets with windowed doors. Framed Italian movie posters. A woven-straw basket with perfectly stacked issues of Rolling Stone and Organic Style.

It’s very nice. She’s a little older than I imagined, but this isn’t the sort of place I imagined her Battleship tournaments taking place. “I’d like to see your album collection, Tracey,” I say, but she ignores me. “And I think I know how I might know how to fix your bike.”

“Where’s your daughter,” I ask, but they talk talk talk around me.

They talk and I try to not talk. Diane once told me that the tell of a good man, you know, are the bite marks on the tongue.
After every box had been packed in the back of her truck, every tied garbage bag squeezed into its cab, they had a silent moment alone together and he offered her a beer. He pulled out a loveseat they had kept in their office.

She was standing against the refrigerator, beer half-empty. She wore a tank top and shorts, another shirt tied around her waist. She angled her head to catch the breeze coming from the vent.

I want the dog, too, she said.

Pardon?

As if knowing it was being talked about, Manny, the dog, came through the pet-door from the back yard and jumped onto the La-Z-Boy. Manny was a galgo, a Spanish greyhound and in need of a home five years ago when their relationship was still new and her Uncle Pipes had briefly gotten into breeding animals.

Did you hear me? She asked.

Oh, sure sure. He said. But no.

I'm taking the dog, she said. The dog's always been mine. You never wanted him.

I didn't at first, he said. But he sleeps on my side of the bed. I take him for walks.
And I don’t? She emptied the rest of the beer into the sink, turned the faucet on to chase the liquid down. I’m taking the fucking dog.

Manny had fallen asleep, his head burrowed under a throw-pillow.

Well, I want the dog, too, he told her.

She smiled. That’s sweet, she said. She wiped the sweat off her forehead and walked over to the television that every remaining piece of furniture was now angled towards. She unplugged the cord and gave it a slight lift, but couldn’t get it up entirely.

What the hell are you doing? he asked.

She tried again, this time successful, but holding it partly on her knees. She waddled back into the kitchen, hefted the black box one more time and threw it onto the linoleum. The television took a hard bounce, but it seemed as if only the casing had cracked.

He sat stunned. Manny craned his neck around, gave a slight bark, but with his master having not moved, laid his head back down.

Should have dropped it on the screen part, she said. She tried again and was, this time, successful. Black glass shot everywhere. Manny sat up and barked loudly.

I want the dog, she said.

Are you crazy?

She took the satellite receiver next, then the DVD player and his stereo. She burned his Incredible Hulk #180 and an autographed set of Man of Steel.
She smashed his plates. He never got up from the loveseat and, when Manny tried to run off, held the dog close.

The dog, she said.

She chucked the laptop through an open window, dropped his toothbrush and comb into the toilet, broke his bookshelf apart with a baseball bat, splitting it in the process. She went through every room, systematically destroying everything that he was keeping, destroying everything they once shared.

The dog, she said.

No.

Give it to me.

Burn this fucker down if you have to.

I might, she said. But I want you to imagine what I might do to the dog, instead, should we keep this up. I want you to imagine the toolbox out in my truck and what I might do to the dog. I want you to imagine what I can do with what’s left of your baseball bat.

The air compressor kicked off and the apartment was suddenly very still.

Maybe you should imagine what I might do, he said. He took a firmer grasp of Manny’s neck and the dog tried to kick out of the headlock, whimpering.

I already have, she said. It will never be enough.
On the bank of Bay Street is a man who is all biceps, veins and purple evening gown. He sits on the back of a bus-stop bench and waves at the whole of Duluth in elbow-length purple gloves. His name is Dorian.

I'm no punk, Dorian likes to say. They might think so, he says and points to the street. But I've fought sand samurai. I'm all man.

For a month of Sundays, we've fished the streets together, casting our lines into the sea under the city and pulling back lemon fish, snapper and the occasional mahi-mahi. I clean a few for frying, but we let the others go. We're not cruel.

I say to Dorian, I can't shake it. I'm jealous of every man in my wife's world. We've three children together, but I don't think I'll ever feel secure.

Trust, says Dorian. He squeezes a cut of lemon over his steaming plate. Heels clop, horns blow. The ocean around us heaves and palpitates.

And even though she's cycloped, I say, I eye every gesture, every turn and twitch of her mouth. I walk on eggshells, waiting.

My wife, Dorian says, would leave me in a minute for somebody with a boat.
NIGHT SEA

Driving through the night at 4am, you'll find only me, ambulances and freight trucks on the streets. When I drive in to Taco Bell, a knot of purple shirts, all under sixteen, laugh, play, gesture grandly in the parking lot. I mean to turn down my radio, but get the wrong button instead and boom out '80's Jersey rock. I'm a little embarrassed, but no one seems to notice.

At a red light, I open my door and touch the asphalt. I take my time with it; feel as many individual rocks as I can. When I look up, the light is still red. I have to close my door twice so the warning chime will stop.
Debs wants to fuck, but I'm cooking. She doesn't understand, has never understood that my cooking comes first of all things. The measure of a stew isn't in the ingredient but in the time, the cut of your vegetables, the attention paid. "I got treats," she says. "I want to. It's been a long time. And I want to do it in the new house." Debs steals things now, to get her horny and she wants to hold what she stole during the sex. We're still working on our house. From the interstate you can see it, the bones of it. We stay here in this mousey apartment, waiting waiting waiting. I call the contractor every few days, but all I get is his daughter who tells me he's sleeping at 3 in the afternoon, working at 10 or out with his wife for breakfast. But patience, I'll remind you, is the first ingredient to any dish worth pursuing. Debs kisses at the back of my neck and I sigh as audibly as I can. She starts going through all the rooms of the new house we can fuck in, fuck around, fuck on. She describes a room for fucking. I just shave my carrots, razor-blade the garlic. I think about the house. I imagine it as grand as our bank account will allow. The living room. A den. A library. Stairs, because I've never had them. Wallpaper that I like. A garden for vegetables. She whispers in my ear about a round-faced alarm clock she swiped. Holding up my hands, palm out, “Whatever you say,” I say.

Before, it was tattoos and sex. She got a bright red 1% on her back in a ring of flames that fall onto the shelf of her ass. Then her father's name, a
lightning bolt and “Diabolitos.” Then more. Her arms and back are a biker’s Sistine Chapel. Her twin sister, Jackie, has none. When Jackie is naked, lying on a pillow, her ass in the air, I can remember why I married Debs from before. When Jackie closes her eyes and opens her mouth so wide I can see the fillings in her teeth, I can remember saying the vows I wrote for Debs. When Jackie takes off her skirt and top, wearing only the most non-descript underwear, pauses to look at me, I can remember everything. The lines of Debs. How her hair would fall. Now, when I kiss her forearms, I’m kissing a line of spiders crawling into the bend of her arm. The whole house smells of steak and tomatoes.
After it was over, after the doctor switched off the machine and its droning, they turned the lights back on, the overhead fluorescents. “9:17 pm,” the doctor told a nurse. Nattie gave a tug on the doctor’s shoulder, asked “Well, why were the lights even off?” And the doctor said back, double-clicking his pen, “It’s more dramatic that way.” Then she tugged again. “Ok, then why are these doors so goddamn heavy,” she asked. The doc smiled, scribbled onto a clipboard, handed it off to a nurse. “It’s all been carefully planned,” he said. He touched her shoulder, but even that small gesture felt orchestrated.

The backs of her mother’s hands are all tape and wires and tubes.

“If you’d like a few minutes,” said the doctor. “Then by all means do. If not, paperwork’s done in the morgue, make the appropriate arrangements. The ladies at the nurse station can point the way.”

The doctor waved good-bye, stepped out into the hallway. He stopped at the nurse station, took off his white coat and stethoscope, trading it for windbreaker and baseball cap.

Nattie checked her pockets to make sure her keys were still there. They felt like teeth in her hand.
Donna counts every punch. The eleventh time her fist connects with the woman's face, she feels the unmistakable sensation of her ring-finger popping out of socket. It's not as painful as the first few times it has happened in the past, it's really only a minor inconvenience, but it's enough for her to stop, snap the digit back into place and consider how much more privacy the Out of Order sign she had hung on the women's room's door might buy her. She's been careful enough to keep the majority of the work in the handicapped stall at the end of the row, but there was enough blood over the floor that it had started to stink. Most people don't know that blood has an odor, a surprisingly sweet one to match its consistency, but Donna does.

She has so much time to herself these days. To read, to think. Every night, she steps out into the fall chill, her bare feet on dew-soaked grass, wearing only a thin yellow nightshirt, and she looks up past the trees to the moon or the not-moon. And she remembers what it's like to be alone, to wonder where someone is.

The woman gurgles. Donna makes no sign that she notices. Instead, she leans onto the partition, careful not to slip on the slowly-forming puddle. The air conditioning kicks. Donna lets her heart rate slow, her breathing level off. She pulls a Kleenex from her purse and wipes the sweat from her brow. The air from the vent cools her moist face. Her head angled as it is, Donna mindlessly counts
the pockmarks in the ceiling tiles. She can’t get past ten before losing focus. It’s been a long day.

The K-Mart intercom announces a sale on Halloween candy. Brach’s prices half-off, Nestle and Mars products buy one, get one free.

The woman, leaning headfirst into the toilet, jerks her back and lets out two wet coughs. Her right hand makes an attempt to gain leverage with the tank, but her broken, twisted fingers can’t get a grip on the lid and slip in the blood. She makes one last attempt, but falls off the toilet and onto the floor. The thud echoes across the room.

This suddenly strikes Donna as the single saddest thing she’s ever seen. She crouches and reaches into the spilled remains of the woman’s purse, pulls back a white leather wallet so new that it almost glows under the fluorescent light above. Donna thumbs through its contents, which are as immaculate as the wallet. The bills are paper-cut crisp, presidential portraits all right-side-up, facing the same direction and in order of value with the exception of a single sawbuck caught between two tens. Even the photographs inside seem new, no creases or folds, the flip-book hasn’t yet gone foggy. Donna pulls one out, one of a girl about ten years old in softball gear, down on one knee in the turf. The picture is a mocked-up baseball card and the girl’s face beams with pride. Another photo is of the woman, but from years ago, in a backyard somewhere, her arm around a young man with long brown hair curling out from under a baseball cap. The woman is slightly pregnant.
She’s calmed down now, but Donna can still hear the woman’s little girl scream, can still remember how the woman grabbed her tiny little arm and twisted. How she slapped the girl’s face. Two A.M. in a K-Mart. Donna plants her foot into the back of the woman’s head. She steps out of the bathroom, sees the little girl sitting Indian-style, reading magazines. Donna thinks of Katie.

Outside under the streetlights, the small roads stretch out before her like long, grey fingers and Donna holds out her hand, splaying it wide, overlaying the view. She can see the veins of the city, how they branch and interweave. There’s something at the back of her brain, some realization that she’s been waiting to have. Veins, she thinks.

A street-sweeper does figure-eights in the near-empty parking lot. Donna drops surprisingly loud coins into a beat-up Fanta machine. She pops the drink open, guzzles it down. Donna tosses the empty can into a bin, then wipes her nose. She reaches into her purse to find her keys. But once she gets to the car, a teenager with puffy eyes and a cold sore on his mouth steps out of nowhere to get between her and the front door.

“You got money,” he asks. “A few dollars? I’m just trying to get some gas to get home. I saw you got money for the drink. I just need some gas. Jesus will see this, if you do.” Loose, yellow curls frame his pudgy face. He takes hold of her shoulder. “Gimme some money.”

Startled, Donna moans and trips on her own feet, falling against the shopping cart corral behind her. Donna’s tears come quickly and she puts a hand to her chest. Her crying becomes deep air-sucking gasps. She thinks about the
woman folded over the toilet. Pregnant in that picture. Donna leans into the corral behind her, slowly lowers herself to the asphalt. "Hey," the boy says and he takes her sore hand with both of his. "I'm sorry for scaring you. I... I just... it's okay. You don't have to cry." His eyes are small, blue moons and his smile a tight, pink slip. The smell of mentholypus hangs on his graying jean jacket. When she doesn't stop, his smile disappears and he drops her hand and runs off into the woods behind the K-Mart.

Donna brings her knees to her chest. She sees the street-sweeper buzzing the far corner of the adjacent lot. She lowers her head onto her arms and cries a few minutes before she drives home.

* 

While getting dressed for tonight's performance, Donna thinks about a conversation she and Katie had last year. Donna had been in the kitchen making stir-fry, an apron tied around her work shirt. They had gotten into the habit of having dinner with a movie, were making their way through a run of Korean films. Katie did her homework at the table while Donna steamed vegetables and boiled noodles. Most nights, Katie would ask questions about whatever subject she was studying and Donna would do her best to answer or joke when she couldn't.

"How does a car engine work, Mom?" she had asked on stir-fry Tuesday. She was only fourteen, but Katie was quickly growing into a beautiful woman. It was too early for Donna. "I've got, like twenty diagrams and all these—Jesus, it's like... Mom. Explain it to me, please." She's small, with short sloppy dark hair
that spaghettis over her forehead. The year previous, for a best friend that went as quickly as she came, Katie became a vegan and never stopped. She’s thinner than Donna would like, but she’s happy. Her smile is so wide that it can swallow her face sometimes.

Donna was a reverse engineer. “I was your age the first time I took an engine apart and put it back together,” she said. Then she talked to Katie about sparkplugs and cylinder heads and carburetors. She spoke about how the puzzle pieces fit together and what their roles were. But what Donna waxed on, what she turned the oven off flipped a chair around for, and what made her hands move like a conductor’s was what she said took place inside.

“It’s beautiful, actually,” Donna said and took a moment to fully consider the thought. She explained to her daughter the congress of air and gasoline, the brief spark that came from turning the ignition. She described the chain reaction inside, the pistons coming to life, waking the crankshaft, coaxing it to turn faster and faster. Katie leaned forward on the table, her chin resting on the back of her hands. “It’s momentum,” Donna said. “There’s that initial violent action and the one that follows. Then the next and the next. We move forward in a series of small explosions. It’s what makes us go.”

“Okay, Mom,” Katie had said through a pencil held in her teeth. “It’s not like I was losing sleep over it. I only need 250 words. How ‘bout next time you give me the Reader’s Digest version?” They laughed. While they ate, she read science books, flipping pages between spun forkfuls of noodles. Donna watched her, amazed that Katie was hers. She knew there would be a time that she
wouldn't have answers for her daughter, that those were days creeping closer, but Donna felt relief in what little of the world she could explain away.

Looking in the mirror, checking her hair, Donna is bothered by how nervous she is. She eyes the hemline of her shirt, and rubs off some of her blush. Once she's out the door, Donna sits on her front steps and stares at the car, the keys at her feet.

* 

Part of Donna's job is to know things, to take things apart and see how they fit together. She is handed things occasionally, or rather parts of things and told to understand it. Her company is hired out by other corporations. Her office, her desk is cluttered with gears, with empty boxes. She has micro-screwdrivers, magnifying lenses of varied size and power, soldering kits, blue pencils. Gutted kitchen mixers, cracked open DVD players and disassembled MP3 players are scattered over her workspace. She wears an apron, goggles and gloves.

Donna likes to lean back in her chair, prop her feet on the windowsill and watch the clouds that pass overhead. Sometimes she looks out the window, leaning into the glass and for hours, watches people enter and exit their cars, park, drive around for spaces while ignoring others. Disassembler theory, she knows, is the process of analyzing a system to create representation of the system at higher abstraction. She's stenciled this onto a banner of paper now
taped above her office door. She watches people move around in the cafeteria. She watches and learns. She examines.

* 

When in the City, Donna has to take the subway to the Child Services Office. Across from her in the train car is a man that looks shrunken, like he’d been in the bath too long. The man pulls his dull brown windbreaker tighter at its vent. “Afternoon” the man says to Donna, but looks away before getting a response. The man crosses and uncrosses his arms, shifts in his seat. Donna doesn’t answer, only smiles and gives a faint wave. The man sticks his hands deep in the pockets of his jacket, stretches his arms out, pulling the fabric up. He yawns and Donna can see the man’s teeth. They have black lines that crescent the white tops.

A short order cook, Donna thinks. He smells like coffee and bacon and his hands are smeared with black grease. “Long long day,” the man says. “Long day.”

High-school drop out. Learning disorder. Frayed pants legs indicates cheap jeans and multiple washes over a short period of time indicates limited wardrobe and two maybe three pairs of jeans indicates no woman or early death of the mother explains the teeth, the shoes, the kinky unwashed hair, the small goiter on the side of the neck, thyroid gland, inappropriate diet, the poor man, no woman, no mother, most likely series of failed relationships, all with women who want to fix him, realize they can’t then leave.
The train is swollen with passengers, but they're all periphery to Donna; the sound of their conversation is like cackling geese. They smile, nod, sleep, stare blindly ahead, hang to the handholds.

The man pops his collar. He looks sad and tired, like his entire life is spent in the reflection of a single bad day. When he blinks, it's slow and heavy. His face is a lined and craggy yawn and Donna imagines prying the man’s jaw open until it snaps.

The mandible is connected to the maxilla, connected by the pterygoideus internus. The jaw produces 100 psi of pressure, enough to break a bone, but easily snapped if you know how.

“You’re dressed up pretty” the man says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. His hands drop to the seat and his fingers drum lightly against the yellow plastic.

“The school,” Donna says. “My daughter sings. I’m going to hear her sing.”

“A golden moment, then,” the man says. “Few and far.”

“Can she sing, your little girl?” The man rubs his thighs and pats his knees.

“No,” says Donna and betrays the briefest of smiles. “But she loves to.”

Of the seven ways to quietly kill this man in a crowd of people, only three would make Donna feel better. Eye, nose, throat. Easy, breezy.

“I did a little time,” the man says. He holds up his arm, pulls down the sleeve of his jacket. A thick braid of rope coils around his skinny forearm in fading blue ink. “A mistake. I regret it. I had to ask myself what I’d been doing.”
The man leans back into the seat, straightening his legs, stretching them their full length. The tips of his feet point out. He reaches into a crumpled paper bag, pulls out a small, wet-looking hamburger and bites into it. “My little girl was six when a car jumped a curb in a Pizza Hut parking lot. I missed her being born and I missed her being buried. I missed every day of her life.”

He tears off a piece of the sandwich, offers it to Donna. Before she can accept or refuse, the train rolls to a stop. The seals between the doors break and a pre-recorded voice calls out the name of the station. The doors sigh, people exit and enter.


Donna fingers the wedding band she still wears on her left hand. She wonders where her ex-husband is; she struggles to remember how she’s gotten here, why her right hand is so sore. “What was her name? Your daughter’s name?”

The man scratches at his scalp with both hands. He tugs at the bottom of his jacket, runs the zipper up, then back down. “Hey, lady, I just met you.” He repeats the zipper motion nervously.

A young couple walks between them in raincoats. They have university t-shirts under their slickers. Donna notices for the first time that it has begun to rain. The boy wheels a bike through the crowd on its back tire and hangs it on a rack mounted to the end wall of one of the cars. He shuffles over to his girlfriend. They lean into each other and close their eyes.

43

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Donna takes off her coat, drapes it on an armrest. “I’m a scientist. An engineer. I figure out how things work,” she explains. “For businesses that want what other businesses have. They give me a computer, a new format to encode, a can of soda. I take them apart. I make them better than what they were before.”

Donna’s knuckles are swollen and she rubs them, working the joints with a thumb. She bathed her hands in ice after the first few times. In the beginning, with the first few, every bone in her hand felt thick and heavy like lead. Carpal, metacarpal, digits 6-10. Connective tissues wrapped tight around bone and strands of muscle. Soon though, her hands had grown tough, her fists stony, like a man’s. Her knuckles were no longer ladylike, but twisted and calloused.

The first time, the first one she hurt, went by too fast. She had been lucky at first, but ever since then, just too smart. Too quick and too mean.

The pre-recorded voice comes up again, announcing in its monotone a new stop. Donna stands, hangs her purse over her shoulder. “I can’t help thinking that there’s a solution to everything,” she says. “Even me.” Several other passengers rise and before Donna can extend her hand to the man, he’s gently nudged through the doors.

The man taps two fingers to his forehead, then towards Donna.

* 

The square of her fist connects with the back of her ex-husband’s head, the third and fourth vertebrae buckling, Donna’s knuckles catching the lip of the skull cap. Johnny’s head bounces off the shower floor from the forward momentum and
Donna takes hold of his short red hair, hammering her fist at the same, reddening spot.

Donna can’t feel her hand anymore, but neither does she stop.

Donna had been standing in line at the school auditorium box-office a half-hour earlier when Johnny approached with his new girlfriend. She was beautiful, dressed in a floral-patterned black skirt and white linen shirt. Donna pulled the wedding band from her finger, dropped it in her purse. As they walked up to her, Donna saw the woman’s hand go to the necklace at her collar. Two fingers, Donna knew, at the right angle, with the right burst of pressure could crush a man’s windpipe.

“Donna,” said Johnny, holding out his large, pink hand. Donna didn’t take it. “I didn’t think you’d be able to make it.” He pulled his date close to him, hooking his arms under hers, his hands cradling the round belly where their baby waits. “I’m excited about this. We know Katie is. She’s been practicing so hard.”

“She has,” Donna said. A few people left the queue and the three moved closer to the cashier’s window. “She’s nervous, but the practicing... this means a lot to her.” A pen, she thought, up the right nostril like the Egyptians would do.

They shuffled a little further down the line.


Donna slid a five under the Plexiglas window and took back a single blue ticket stub. She suddenly felt a hand rest between her shoulder blades.

“Donna,” Johnny said softly. “Are you okay?”
“Have a good night, guys,” Donna said. “I guess we’ll all meet later.”

Johnny waved to her. Donna waved back.

Katie stood fifth from the far left end, third row from the front. Sixty of them, in long dark red robes and standing on a tiered platform. They sang “Danny Boy” first. Donna couldn’t pick Katie out from the all the voices, but she was amazed at how soft her daughter’s voice can be when it part of a larger group. She was gorgeous, too. Donna managed to find cruelty-free make-up for her, one of the few times that Katie bothered to wear any; that she wanted to wear any at all. Her hair was pulled back, the curls resting on her shoulders rather than her face. On another row, some distance from her daughter was the former best friend. How, she wondered, could anyone not want to be with Katie?

When she saw Johnny excuse himself in the middle of “Kyrie Eleison,” Donna decided to follow.

Now Donna leans close to Johnny’s ear, takes slight hold of the man’s earlobe with her teeth. She has followed Johnny to the men’s room, sneaking up behind him with a folding chair. He’s heavy, but it hasn’t been too hard to pull him to the boy’s showers, where no one would hear.

Donna raises the chair above her head. She brings it back down across Johnny’s neck. The sound of singing wafts through the ventilation. It fills the tiled walls of the shower. Donna raises the chair again.

“You can’t understand me.”

Then back down. She raises again.
“You don’t know what I know.”

Donna tosses the chair aside, puts her foot at the small of Johnny’s back. “When you strip away the skin, the casing, you can see how it all fits together. The wires, the gears, the nerves, the organs, the blood, the oil. People are just machines. I always knew they were.”

She pulls her leg back, the muscles in her calf tightening. She angles her foot as to lead with the heel. “I’ve been battering headfirst into things, not thinking them through. I’d never open a laptop with a hammer. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Donna’s foot hits the back of Johnny’s elbow. He screams.

“I know what keeps you going,” Donna says. She imagines for a moment that she can hear her daughter’s voice in the song. The song is in Latin, says something about Christ, she knows. “I can see all of you. The clothes you wear, the cologne. I know what your body movement says. You don’t think I can break you down. I know what keeps you running. I know your fuel. I’m going to take you apart. I’m going to make you a better father for our daughter and your new child.”

Donna aims for Johnny’s spine. She doesn’t hesitate. “And I’m going to take my time with you.” Donna tenses her leg. “Love is my motor.”
On Sunday, while David’s at church with his family, Cora walks the streets of her neighborhood until they become the streets of some other neighborhood and then another. It’s been her habit, lately, to lose herself in the avenues. As she walks, she lightly touches the tops of mailboxes. Some are black plastic boxes while others are shaped like small red barns or painted to resemble cowhide. One is a shark’s head, meant to catch cable bills and birthday cards in its teeth. It’s cartoonish, but it’s the only one Cora won’t touch.

She’s close to the zoo when she sees the yard sale, a small group of people gathered around several card tables, picking their way through magazines, Burger King Disney glasses, plastic toy ponies and several stacks of the same star-chart jigsaw puzzle. Off from the group is a circular clothing rack stuffed with mismatched coats and slacks, shirt sleeves sticking out like tongues, some pants legs dragging the ground where a dachshund sleeps. The dog snores, his tail popping the chair of a man who seems to be running the show. The man is thin, with a crescent-shaped scar on the side of his neck and a cashbox in his lap. His long face reminds Cora of Lee Marvin and this makes her smile. People haggle with him over chess sets, VHS tapes of Spiderman cartoons, and someone tries to buy the water-hose on the man’s porch which makes him laugh. A woman sits beside him, maybe his wife, and they playfully slap at each other’s knees. As Cora sifts through a leaning pile of mismatched
blouses, she watches how the man and woman let their hands meet for a
moment or two before they break off. The woman makes quick brushes of his
lap; the man often stares a little too long at the woman.

A professional-looking woman in a pants-suit and tight hair calls back and
forth to a larger woman, hair unkempt, in a butterfly-patterned dress. “Hey, girl!
Weren’t you looking for salt shakers last week?” “Are they like animal-shaped?”
“Do monkeys count?”

Cora moves around the tables slowly, keeping her hands tucked into the
front pocket of her sweatshirt. The yard sale seems to her like every other she’s
seen as her eyes scan the silverware, paperback novels and comic books. She
stops at the end of the table closest to the man, pulls her hand out of her
sweatshirt and lifts the corner of a plastic dry-cleaning bag. Inside is a white
wedding dress, satin, rhinestones on the straps. She lifts the bag up, looking for
a price sticker.

She and David have been living together for a year, the relationship a
quiet romance under lamps at steakhouses or in the backseat of her Escort. He
was an artist that taught private lessons and was previously divorced. Things had
cooled with David lately, and the pace is slower than Cora wants. There were
times on his couch when they would watch TV in the dark, her legs curled
underneath her body, her shoulder leaning into his chest. She would let her
hands rub his stomach under his shirt, feeling the warmth of skin, but lately
David’s arms wouldn’t come off the back of the couch.
“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” the woman says. She picks through a red box of raisins, shakes off a few in the man’s hand, who drops them for the dachshund to eat.

Cora looks up, startled. “It’s very nice,” she says.

“I was thinking ’round two hundred dollars,” says the man, leaning down to scratch the dachshund’s head. “But I’ll work with you since it’s so pretty a day.”

“Oh,” says Cora. She puts the dress back and tucks her purse under her arm. “Well, it is a very nice dress.”

The woman in the pantsuit walks up, several shirts hanging in the crook of her arm, three vinyl records fanned out in her fingers. The man takes the bill she clumsily offers and makes quick change in the cash box before waving goodbye to her.

“I bought that dress for this one here,” the man says, nudging the woman.

“He’s kidding,” the woman says, waving him off. “It was his sister’s.”

“I’m not,” he says, looking at the woman. “She never wore it anyway.”

The woman flicks a raisin that bounces off his cheek. “The price, I meant.”

“Sure, sure,” he says, wiping at his eye, grinning.

She leans forward in her chair, the back legs coming off the sidewalk, her hands clasped like she’s about to pray. “I don’t know what he’s on. How does seventy-five sound?”

The man stands up, sits the can drink on the edge of the table in front of him. A car passes by on the street behind Cora and honks. The man waves once he’s recognized the driver. “That son of a bitch got his license back,” he says to
the woman, who nods, before turning back to Cora. "There’s a bathroom inside to try it on, if you don’t mind a bunch of cats."

“I don’t think so,” Cora says and tries her most polite smile. “It’s very pretty, but I’m not engaged or anything.”

Cora looks at the dress again and imagines her skin touching the satin, the lace between her fingers. A young couple comes up to table, the woman in the butterfly dress smiling at them, making room for the girl, college-aged, to sort through a stack of old magazines. Their smooth hands hold tight while they each look at different things and when the girl walks a little further around the table, the boy pulls his arm taut for a second before winking at her and letting go. Cora lets the dress go back to the table. An arm of the dress dangles off the edge.

“Well.” The woman pats the man’s knee and stands up. She drapes the dress over an arm, holds out the other hand for Cora. “I’ll show you inside.”

* 

Ray and Cora do yardwork together on the occasional Saturday that they’re both off from the phone company call-center. Cora rakes up pine straw, stuffs it into string-tie bags. Ray brings over a gardening kit that Cora never uses. She’d rather get her hands in the dirt, soil under her nails. They’re going to burn the small garden to prepare the ground for spring tilling and seeding. She’ll plant tomatoes and summer squash in a month or so.
The clock says 11:32. David, Cora thinks, is in the middle of fourth period. Fourth period, he teaches art history. She and Ray have three more Wednesday hours together yet.

It's warm out, warmer than anybody expected it to be. Ray has a sweater tied around his waist. Cora is in a sports bra, her blonde hair tied back. She bends over, gets her back into it, prefers to let her hand slowly work the soil. Ray works harder, moves faster, splits a fingernail against a brick. He yelps, falls back and she runs over to help. One half of the nail has been pushed into the quick and his thumb starts to bleed. She helps him to the kitchen, holds his hand underneath the running faucet.

"Once," Cora tells him, sitting at the small dining table, wrapping his finger in gauze. "I took a night class for Religion. A girl, one day—this really pretty sorority girl in the middle of class—she fell over and her head hit the corner of the table she was sitting at. There was a quick spew of her blood, just for a second, like from a busted water hose. Someone called an ambulance."

The gauze is from a first-aid kit kept in David's model train room. She doesn't know why he needs a first-aid kit in a model train room. She has never asked.

"We crowded around at her, gawking at her skirt being up. Striped men's boxers. She just jerked and jerked. There was a little more blood, but just where she had bit at her lip."

Ray doesn't ask about David. She doubts he ever will.
“I remember her being wheeled away,” she continues, “She didn’t want to go to the hospital; she said that it happened regularly and it was no big deal. The blood had stopped quickly, but it was in her hair. The ambulance guys, once they’re called, they were legally obligated to pick her up. I remember she said there was a wedding that day,” and for this, Cora stands up. “‘I’m the motherfucking maid of honor!’"

Cora goes to the refrigerator, breaks ice and pours two glasses of tea. She stops to put her hand on the counter, closes her eyes. “It was funny. It made me laugh.”

She’s made a picnic for them, roast beef sandwiches and salt and vinegar potato chips. They sit on the outside deck; he on a bench—she on the porch swing. He’s barefoot, she has pom-pom socks. He mumbles approval for the sandwich, gives a bandaged thumbs up. “Roaf behf,” he says, raises his iced-tea to her.

“Here,” she says. “Do this. Take a chip, then,” she drags a corner of a chip over her lips like lipstick. “Now lick.”

He does, then screws up his face. “Oh, Cor. That’s just godawful.”

She laughs at him. “There’s gloves for when we go back outside. Don’t know why I didn’t grab any before.”

She asks for him to do his Uri Gellar spoon-bending trick; she never gets tired of it. He doesn’t either.

It both bothers and excites Cora the way her and Ray’s hands bump into each other as they walk, how comfortable just being in the same room with him.
is, the strange things he’s passionate about. She worries about his small hands and how warm they are. But at 1:30, as Ray pulls away in his pickup, the back tires kicking up an orange cloud of sand, she finds she can’t wait for David’s familiar shuffle through the kitchen door.

★

It’s an awful place to sleep, here in her dirty, white hatchback in a car garage, floor 3, in Houston. David had sketched her while she slept, stretched her full length along the driver-side seat that’s been set back all the way. Now he was curled into a ball, pulling his jacket up to his neck. The cement beneath them reverberates as people leave, the vibration occasionally setting off car alarms and making her stomach sink. Voices echo throughout, keys jingle, ignitions cough.

Cora loves what David can do with his hands and a pencil. She loves the scratch of his pencil against paper, the grimy smear of graphite that stains his fingers, the shapes that spill out. She loves sharpening his pencils. It means he’s been working, instead of sitting at his drawing table listening to mix-tapes he never gave away. She loves the smell of pencil shavings.

Her father was an amateur artist between swing shifts at the bottling company. He would stop on his way home at this hut, this one room store on the highway to pick up charcoal pencils, bricks of sculpting clay, and paint with names like “Olive.” Cora’s mother would sometimes watch him draw, a mixture of perplexion and admiration on her face. “It’s like you’re pulling out of thin air what
was already there, but couldn't be seen before,” she once said. David drawing has always made Cora feel like she was watching that same kind of magic.

When David opens his eyes and sees her looking through his sketchbook, he snaps the seat up. “What time?”


“I can eat,” he says. “Pancakes, maybe.” He holds out his hand for the sketchbook and Cora passes it over.

They’re halfway to Mexico, a trip planned out three months ago, when Cora had won a charity raffle for five hundred dollars at her job. Ray had bought her a sombrero the day after. He had pulled his plush desk chair to her sad, blue cubicle and taught her the few Spanish phrases he knew, things she could get by on. “Velero” was the only thing she could remember. It meant “sailboat.”

She crawls into the back seat and changes her pants. She pauses before she gets the fresh pair up around her waist. She rubberbands her hair back and gives him a sleepy grin. “You want to get a quick one in?”

“Jesus, no,” he says. “I don’t really feel like it having slept in a car all night.” David tears the sketch out, crumpling it and tosses it out the window before starting the engine. The paper ball bounces off the window of a car in the adjacent space. “Besides, we've a long day ahead. I don't want to smell like that, for hours on the road in this car. I don't want to smell like that at all.”

She can't remember the last time they had sex, let alone the last time she wanted to have sex with him. “Sorry,” she says. “I just thought it might be fun.”
“I don’t want to do it solely for the sake of doing it,” David says and eases the car out of its space. A car, a long, metallic green LTD, takes a quick turn around the corner and David nearly backs into it. Cora can’t see the person behind the wheel and can’t make out what he’s saying, but it’s loud and angry. The driver honks the horn twice, before peeling off.

Cora puts her hand on his. He knocks the transmission into first, shaking it off.

“Sorry,” he says.

When she reaches for his hand again, David reaches for the air controls, flips the AC on. “Fucking Texas, huh?” he says.

The restaurant they find is busy. Its name is High and Tight, is only a three booth diner attached to an oversized gas station. Cora walks the line of trailer trucks in the parking lot, making note of their tags, how far each is from home. David shows her the gas-pump stickers on the cab doors, tells her how they’re like a travel passport for truckers, each sticker acting as permission to buy diesel in that state. His father and mother had been a driving team for a few years, he explains. And as he recounts old stories of his summers on the road with them, smiling while reminiscing about cold nights off the interstate, Cora hooks her arm around his back, pulls him close.

She feels so suddenly relieved that she, for a while, forgets about the wedding dress she had packed in her tall, green garment bag.

*
They find the motel abandoned by the staff and whatever stragglers were brave enough to stay this long into the storm. The cash register is locked; the room-key box is locked. Their sleeping bags are unfurled on the lobby floor. The sky outside is black and sheets of rain slap against the windows and lightning flashes through the oversized window-blinds. Water pools at the base of the door. They’re on the outer rim of it, but David thought it best to wait for the hurricane to pass over.

The lobby of the motel has been decorated in a Hawaiian theme. Small, potted palms line the walls. Balloons, half-deflated by the change in pressure, scratch along the floor, blue and red udders pushed by the air-conditioner. A banner that says, “Gone Fishing, Terry” is taped to the wall. An open box of leis has been tipped on its side, spilling out.

“It’s like we’re on honeymoon,” Cora said, when they first walked in.

She smokes a cigarette while sitting at the motel’s check-in desk, working crossword puzzles by candlelight while David, wet from the rain, sleeps on a couch in his underwear.

Now she looks out the window into the rain. She looks out the window, at the blue-black jungle outside, at the flickering streetlights, the trash and palm leaves blowing in the air, wrapping around benches, catching onto cars. The weatherman has predicted 40-foot waves to hit the coast in the morning. Cora notices her reflection, the bags under her eyes. Her hands go to her face, to her ears, and then glide through her hair.
They were on their way back from Mexico, stuck now in a small Louisiana town named Eva. They’d had fun together, losing themselves in the bodegas and small neighborhoods that seemed to grow wild on the mountains of Puerto Vallarta. But a change had come over Cora and she couldn’t help feeling that the same had maybe gone over David. As their vacation went on, she noticed the gradual lessening of hand-holding. When they slept, it was only turned away from each other. They only had sex once, the day they had arrived, and she figured it had more to do with the natural eroticism of visiting hotel rooms than any real hunger for each other. What really surprised Cora was how little it seemed to bother her when just a few weeks ago it seemed so important. A quiet had come over them, she thought. A quiet had come over her.

She goes through her duffel bag now, having had to switch the dress from the garment bag when David decided to buy her a sundress. She holds it now, the fabric between her thumb and forefingers, teasing the satin. It only takes her ten minutes to pull the entire ensemble together; small gloves, shoes, Cora even manages to pile her hair up, attaching the veil, letting it curtain her face.

Cora steps in front of one of the lobby’s larger mirrors, a door-mounted slab of glass in which she can see the entire length of the gown, except for her shoes. She’s surprised to see how pretty she is in the dress, almost proud of it. Slowly turning, Cora models for the mirror, a hand holding the modest train that spills out behind her. The rhinestones sparkle even under the fluorescent lights.

She suddenly puts her hand to her chest; “Oh!” she says, “Dance?” She smiles wide, curtsseys and holds her hands out for her invisible dancing partner.
She kicks off her shoes and dances with herself, going through the steps her aunt had taught her. Her feet stick to the parquet-patterned linoleum with each step. Soon, however, sooner than she expected, the dance stops being fun.

For an hour, Cora sits on a stool, still in the dress, the white fabric bunched at her knees like an open flower. She watches David breathe. Her eyes drift over his body, his athletic legs, the brown freckles that spill over his back, the way he holds his clasped hands to his chest while he sleeps, like he might be praying. He snores quick, whistling breaths that go deep and craggy, but never loud.

Ray, she thinks, where might he be now?

The front doors to the motel had been locked, boarded up when they first found the place, but after a few tries David had been able to kick in a utility door. Cora stood off to the side, hugging herself under the building’s awning, her hair a wet mess. “How can I help?” she had asked, but the wind must have been too loud for him to hear. Now she pushes away the short, red couch they had found blocking the entrance, its steel-shoed feet making intermittent tears in the linoleum. Rain had come in through the cracks of the door, leaving dark water stains on the fabric. She unlocks the deadbolts to the double-doors, ready to be knocked back by the wind, but is surprised to find only a strong breeze and slanted rain. She steps out slowly, trying to make out the world around her. A few abandoned cars wait for their owners in the parking lot; there’s little else to see save pine woods swaying in the dark. The cracked cement feels cool and rough
under her toes. The streets are strange, empty, the only light coming from the yellow heartbeat of a traffic pole. The dress drags behind her.

“What are you doing out here?” he calls. David stands in the doorway behind her, still in his briefs. Not since the first time he had kissed her, when she was leaving the party where they had met, could she remember his face seeming so lost.

“Come out here,” she says, holding her arms out. “Come out here where I am.”

He does.

The rain eventually falls away, the wind carrying it to another, smaller town.

* 

Years later, Cora’s in New York, having dinner with friends in her home. The apartment is very nice, lots of simple lines, glass, and metal-framed movie posters. They’re already a bottle of wine into the night, sitting around her dinner table, half-finished plates of lamb curry stacked in the sink. They lean forward conspiratorially when they talk and always with a sly grin. A conversation gets started about men, those they truly loved, those they truly didn’t, the ones they hurt and the ones that hurt them. Cora goes through a few stock answers. She’s had this girl talk before.

An hour or so later, she herds them out, making plans for lunch later in the week. They wave and jingle their car keys as she closes the door.
She brushes her teeth to an egg timer, already dressed in her pajamas. And when she moves into bed, she clicks off the lamp, closes her eyes, and throws an arm over the empty half of her bed. She thinks about the dress still hanging in her closet. She sleeps.
For a short time in her life, Marta thought she only wanted the bakery. She loved having her hands in dough, kneading the shapeless piles into form. She loved the smell of warm bread, the turn of the mixers and how flour settled on everything in the store, including herself. Especially herself. The hours, too; Marta loved to stand on the bakery's sidewalk under a blue-gray sky, awake and working while other people stumbled sleepily to their jobs. She would count the parking spaces that were hers only, and pick up stray litter, waiting for the world to catch up to her. Every morning, she read in the cool quiet under the storefront's awning while she drank coffee and waited for rolls to rise.

But when the Wallaces, the owners of another bakery in town and her only competitors, decided to retire to live upstate, the sudden influx of new business had threatened to overtake her quiet world. Her cake orders tripled overnight, walk-in business cleared her éclairs, napoleons and croissant as fast as she could fill the displays and she was deluged by catering requests, something the Wallaces had long offered, but she had never seriously considered. She was comfortable to have been a small-time baker.

Marta knew she would have to bring on a part-time someone to run the register so she might be able to focus solely on her kitchen, but the offered hours and wage only brought a series of incompetent, inconsiderate teenagers. They struggled with the early mornings and the patience necessary for baking, and
few, if any, really understood what they were doing. After firing her third over a five-week period, Marta called her husband Joel, a math teacher at the community college, asking that he might offer some temporary help until she could find someone new. They'd been separated for six-months, an idea that had been Marta's.

"Just between the semesters," she had said to him in a telephone call. "I'm in a spot and need help." There was a long pause while she waited for his answer and Marta suddenly felt uncomfortable to be talking to her husband but not know where he was. She'd pay him, she said, hoping to break the silence.

In the first few months of the separation, Joel called often, but she rarely heard from him anymore.

"I sort of figured you would," he said. "Sure. Tomorrow's fine."

The morning that Marta walked out on Joel had been a random Thursday and, when asked, she had been unable to give a reason for packing her bag and moving into the bakery. Such had been her habit of working late into the night that Joel hadn't even realized things were amiss until the following morning when he woke in a half-warm bed.

* 

Marta wiped her hands on a dishtowel and waved the woman to the back of the bakery. After giving Joel a thumbs-up, she opened the door to the small, cigar-box office and offered the woman one of the black folding chairs pushed up against the desk. The woman looked to Marta to be in her late-twenties. Marta
remembered her twenties less than fondly. Champagne-colored silk blouse, black skirt, red hair; the woman was long-legged and too skinny, Marta thought, with a neck that made her think of the cartoon stork that sold pickles. Her left wrist was weighed down with gaudy, knobby bangles and bracelets, and the skin around her mouth was red, like she’d been drinking wine.

At her desk, Marta flipped through a folder of papers, shuffled and smiled back at the woman. “You’ve worked at a bakery before?” Marta asked. She glanced back at the woman’s application. “In San Diego?”

“Born and raised,” the woman said, nodding. She then added, with a quick point to the ceiling, an awkward “Go Padres!” like she realized a beat too late that the idea had been a stupid one.

The woman crossed her legs, shook out the arm with the jewelry. “I have, yes. A good while, too.” she said. “Like the resume details, I've three years experience at my previous place of employment. I worked catering mostly, doing office parties and smaller-venues. I don’t see that you have a service set up yet.”

“Well, no not yet. Still thinking about it, actually,” Marta said. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands. “But, tell me, what’s your favorite pastry?”

The woman was surprised at the question. She smiled, but Marta could see she was uncertain how to answer. She uncrossed, then recrossed her legs. She shook her arm again. “God. Tarts. Fruit tarts, particularly.” Her teeth were large.
“Oh, I love tarts,” Marta said. “Would you say that was your specialty? Do you have a specialty?”

“I think tarts, yes. You can go to any hotel and get a fancy tart,” the woman said. “Pear, apple, peach. Some sad little fruit, overcooked, lying limp on top.” With this, the woman let her eyes roll back and feigned sickness. “And you’ll pay too much for it, too. But, man, I love to put as much as I can on them, like a Carmen Miranda hat. Big and colorful. Strawberries, powdered berries, mandarin orange slices. Little nuts.”

“I like that,” Marta said, smiling. She grinned and tapped her pen in the woman’s direction. “Honestly, I’m getting my ass kicked out there lately. I only have some temp help. And a grown woman would be nice to have around.”

The woman smiled, pleased with her answer, and tugged at the front of her blouse. “I see you’re married.” Her head cocked slightly to the side, as if she were asking a question rather than making an observation.

“Pardon?” Marta said, looking up.

“Your ring finger, you’ve got the tan line,” she said. “But I understand. You’ve got to take it off to work or it gets all sticky and gunky.”

Marta folded her arms, tucking her hands out of sight.

“I’m married, too,” the woman said. She beamed, like she had won something. “Three months now. To the most wonderful man. I fought it a while, but my girlfriend Carol tricked me into a date with him and after that… aren’t husbands wonderful?”

Marta nodded, without looking at her. “I suppose they are.”
"Have you been married long?" the woman asked. She leaned forward to show Marta her ring. "Isn't it nice? Isn't... does it come out in your cooking? Like in that movie?"

"It's lovely."

"You and your husband, we can all go out together maybe. Do things."

The phone on Marta's desk rang, a small green light flashing off and on. The two women didn't talk, only exchanged awkward smiles.

"Would you like to answer that?" The woman asked.

"No," Marta said. "It's fine."

The woman's face straightened and she leaned back into her chair. "I'm very sorry. If I got the job, I mean. Of course I mean that. I have a special tiramisu, too," she said. She took her hand off Marta's desk. "And a white chocolate wedding cake."

After Marta had shown the woman the door, Joel walked over to her and handed her a coffee. He leaned against the counter and watched the woman pull herself into a jeep. "She seemed clumsy to me," he said. Marta didn't say anything, only went back into the kitchen and spent the rest of the evening shaping cakes while Joel solved crossword puzzles at the register, taking the occasional walk-in. They closed the store together, but went their separate ways.

* 

Marta had been seeing Cam, a photographer for the local newspaper, for a month. They met in a bookstore at the customer service desk. He'd been talking
to the guy behind the counter, a teenager with black nail polish. The kid shook his head, said they didn’t carry the book Cam was looking for. Overhearing, Marta turned around, held up her new copy of Selected Poems of E.E. Cummings. “My favorite book,” she said.

“So it is,” he said. “My daughter’s in fifth grade. Required reading.”

And then he did something Joel had never done. He winked at her. She had a few minutes and they had coffee.

* 

A storm came through the fourth day Marta and Joel worked the bakery together. Torrential rain washed down their town’s streets, gutters and creeks, and though it came down white, the rain pooled blobby and brown. Litter from the nearby grocery store parking lot floated and spun, sometimes catching in grates or hedges. It was an all-day wind and rain, and no customer had braved the weather. Joel had done his best to help Marta around the bakery, wiping down the few tables, sweeping up, restocking shelves, answering phones. They rarely spoke of anything other than the business of the store. Near close of this day, however, they found themselves on opposite sides of the counter, playing dominoes and drinking hot chocolate.

“Six,” said Joel, and laid down a tile.

Marta took a pull from her chocolate and bit her bottom lip. “Again?”
He laughed and she reached for a handful of the artificial sweeteners in the middle of the table and threw them at him. Joel laughed. “You’re an asshole,” Marta said, laughing too. “God, it’s nice to have such a slow day.”

Marta stood and hitched her jeans up. She walked to the door and flipped the “Open” sign. Before she turned around, Marta stood at the door and watched the rain fall. In the night sky, it was nearly invisible, save for what was lit by the plumes of orange light that dotted the road outside. “Yeah,” she said. “It’s nice to just fucking breathe.”

“I’ll spot you the points there.” Joel scribbled in the notepad they were using to keep score. He pulled the dominoes to him, and began to stir them with his hands. “You know, Marta,” he said, not looking up. “We could just call the rest of the day quits and go for a sandwich. Coffee and a sandwich.”

Marta laughed and walked around the counter to the cash register. When she punched the no-sale button, the register tray popped out and Marta began to collect the cash inside a green bank bag. “Honey,” she said. “We are in a bakery. I have a cappuccino machine. There’s, like, twenty different coffee types we can sell. I mean, it says ‘bakery’ on the front, but it could just as easily say ‘coffee.’ If you’re hungry, go across the street to the burger joint.”

Joel stopped shuffling and began to stand the tiles on their ends. “Would you like to go somewhere where somebody else can serve coffee to you? Where you can sit down, or we can sit down and somebody can ask what we want for a change?”
Marta flipped a switch behind her and the bakery's parlor went dark. A car quickly pulled into a parking space in front of the bakery and its head-light beams shot into the store. For a brief moment, the lobby, the small chairs, Joel and his dominoes, the still-full pastry shelves were all of a sudden bright yellow. Marta could only barely make out a figure behind the wheel of the car. Suddenly the car honked and the girl from the nail salon next door suddenly stepped into view, drenched from the rain, but still clutching desperately to a newspaper held over her head. The girl quickly got into the car.

Joel stood up and pushed his chair under the table. "I'd be flattered, I think, if you kept coming for me."

"You know, maybe we should call it a day, Joel-y."

Marta reached behind her head with one arm and began to massage her neck. "It's been an easy day, I think I'll go home, get some sleep."

Joel sat back down and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He stretched his legs out and slid his hands into his pockets. He asked her, "You remember Carol Danvers?"

"Senior year, yeah," Marta said. She leaned against a wall. "Tall, pretty blonde. Always on about the Air Force."

"Out of the blue she called me, heard from my sister that you and me were separated. She asked me to lunch."

"Lunch?"

"That's it. Two months ago." Joel crossed his legs and turned away from Marta, looking outside the door. "We've been seeing each other."
Marta smiled. “I’m not going to come back, Joel.”

“I know that.”

“You do.”

“I knew it, but I didn’t, you know? When you left and you couldn’t tell me why. People who don’t really want to leave, or just want to fuck somebody new, they have excuses. They make them up.”

“I don’t know why I called you.”

Joel rubbed his eyes. “I swear to God, Marta…”

“Stop a sec,” Marta said. The oven buzzer went off in the back room. She walked to the counter. She waved a hand in the air dreamily. “God, do you smell that?”

Joel stood again and found the coat he had tossed on the far end of the counter. “I asked her, ‘Isn’t that a bit forward, Carol?’ And she said, ‘Too little time to be anything else.’ Your Chinese fortune cookie for the day.” He dug in his coat pocket for a moment and tossed something shiny and jangly Marta’s way. “Here,” he said, as she caught them. “Car keys. I was going to hide them.”

“Jesus,” Marta said, rolling her eyes. “That’s a little juvenile.”

Then Joel kicked over a table and sent the metal frame clanging against the ceramic floor. A sugar shaker exploded against the tile; napkins fluttered in the air and artificial-sweetener packets scattered across the room. No one said anything, and Joel walked over to the table and kicked it, flipping it again.

“Fuck you,” he said, and left.
"The day!" Cam said as he came through the door. He flipped the shades up from his glasses and tossed his equipment bag on the motel room’s floor. Before Marta could respond, he had kicked off his shoes, and was pulling his hoodie over his head. “The fucking day I’m having,” he said and started with his zipper. “You would not, just not, believe the day.”

Marta sat against the bed’s headboard with the blankets pulled up to her waist. Empty diet soda cans cluttered the end table. She pointed a remote at a television bolted to the wall and flipped through the available channels.

She and Cam fell into a quick and easy relationship. He was new, different from Joel. He walked with his hands behind his back when he was thinking. He smelled different, told different jokes, touched her differently, more aggressively. He made hungry noises in bed. She knew it would wear off. He would talk about his job and she only half-listened, just enough to keep him coming back, just enough for her to have someone to pass the time with. The bakery’s sudden influx of business made it easy for her to control the relationship.

Carol. Carol, she thought.

Cam jumped onto the bed, crawled up to her and began to kiss across Marta’s chest. He sloppily kissed her, one hand blindly pulling back the covers to what habit had made his side of the bed. “TV?” he asked. “Dirty movie channel? Huzzah!”
He continued to kiss her while he said, "Your friend, P.T.? God, what a historic asshole. They should never have given him his license back. Listen what he said—"

"Hush. I'm watching television."

Cam stopped, pulled back from her. "Television?" He tossed his balled-up socks at the small black box in front of them.

Marta waved the remote in front of his face. "Yes. Yes, God. Television. Now please let me be."

"Whoa, whoa," Cam said, moving behind her, rubbing her shoulders.

"Wait."

Marta dropped the remote in Cam's lap and rolled to her side, pulling the blanket over her head. "Oh, just go away." Her voice was slightly muffled under the sheet. "This—all of this was just a mistake. I'm going home."

Cam grabbed her arm hard. "Hey, hold on. I think I've been pretty patient with you so far. I'm a mistake? I invite you to coffee, treat you like a lady, like a classy lady." He paused a moment, then touched her ear. "You haven't even bothered to meet my daughter. How about we go to my place for a change?"

Cam gently tugged the sheet from her face, but it wouldn't budge. "Let me cook you dinner, take you out for real."

"I was. I was happier alone. I'm going home," Marta said. "I want a bath. I'm going to take a bath with bubbles. And then I'm going to figure out what to do with myself."
“Good! Go figure yourself out. I’m a good guy. I’m a likeable sort and I’m honest and I’m true and I’m a fun date, but you’d never know.”

“What are you, fifteen years old?” Marta yelled. “A ‘fun date’?”

“I’m a fucking fun date!”

There was a sudden and enormous noise of crushing metal outside the motel. Cam sprang off the bed, but tripped onto the floor in his rush. Once he’d steadied himself, he opened the drapes wide.

“Jesus, Cam, everybody can see you,” Marta said. She had gotten up from the bed herself, wrapped in the bedsheet. She tried to pull the curtains closed, but Cam stopped her.

“Look,” he said. “Out on the interstate? Do you see that flipped minivan?”

Marta could see the van lying on its side on the exit ramp and barely make out the twisted black smear that followed it. Marta and Cam watched for signs of life, but such a long time passed that they were relieved when the passenger-side door opened up into the air.

“They need help,” said Cam and he found his jeans. “At the very least,” Cam hefted his camera bag over his bare shoulder.

From somewhere they couldn’t see, a loud horn blew, but before anyone could crawl out of the open door, the squeal of diesel brakes were heard and a Dole bananas truck smashed into the van, pushing it out of their sight.

Marta grabbed onto Cam. “Don’t go.”
“Are you kidding?” he said, pushing her off. “Call an ambulance.” Barefoot, he trotted down the stairs to the parking lot. Marta watched him cross the median to the wreckage. She sat down at the head of the bed and picked up the phone.

*  
The next day, in her mother’s kitchen, Marta poured herself another iced tea and toyed with the idea of going the rest of the day without putting her wedding band back on. She slipped it back on for a moment and twisted it clockwise, pulling at the skin slightly, then counter.

It wasn’t even that nice of a ring, she thought. Plain, she thought.

But she suddenly felt bad for even thinking that. She had picked it out. They had a little extra money when they walked into the jewelers and Joel wanted her to have the ring she wanted. What she wanted, she told him, was something that worked. She wanted a ring, she had said, not a conversation piece. They’d almost gotten into an argument there in the store.

Marta took the ring off and dropped it into her purse. She sipped at her brandy, swirled it around in the glass before pouring out the rest.

Her mother called out from the bathroom. “One second, sweetheart!”

Marta ignored her.

“How’s work?” her mother yelled across the house.

Her mother stepped into the kitchen, a towel wrapped around her head. She wore a blue dress, patterned with daffodils. She turned around in a circle, her arms stretched out.
They never left for the restaurant, but instead talked over the kitchen counter and picked from a can of pistachios.

"I like Joel," her mother said. "I miss him and I love him, too." Her mother coughed and brought a napkin to her mouth. "You seeing anyone else?"

Marta wiped her hand over the countertop. "I'm too busy."

She liked her mother's new place, had been living with her since she left Joel. It was small, the right size for a woman on her own. She'd had something similar before moving in with Joel, a nice little condo. She missed her condo. Joel liked carpet in every room, carpet that matched the paint. Marta had had hardwood floors. She liked the parquet pattern, how her feet would stick to the wood, the creak of it under her heel. Joel needed a television on when he read. Marta liked the quiet. Small things, small things. She felt petty, but it didn't change her mind.

"When I was in high school," Marta says. "Hell, when I was in college, I dreamed about going to Egypt. I wanted to ride a camel through the Valley of the Kings. And I wanted to touch something that was so much older than me, something that would outlive me by leaps and bounds.

"Joel was happy on the couch, under a quilt, grading exams while watching TV. And I wanted to be on that camel alone. I didn't want to share it with anybody.

"There were times when we were still living together that I would stay up as late as I could, so late that Joel would go to sleep before me. I didn't want to fall asleep next to him. I didn't want him to put his arm around me in the middle of
the night. I stayed up late so I could be alone. I walked a lot at night. Worked out at night. One day I realized that I couldn’t remember why I married him. I couldn’t remember why I thought I needed anybody at all.

“But God, Mom, what he wants isn’t bad. It isn’t even close to bad.”

Her mother stood up, opened the cabinet. She pulled out a loaf of bread, took a knife from the cutlery drawer and began to slice the bread. She pointed at the refrigerator. “Could you get some turkey out of the crisper?”

Marta found cheese slices, mayo, tomatoes, and a jar of pickles. She carried them to the counter in her folded arms like puppies. She spread out some paper towels, and with another knife began to work on the tomatoes. Her mother built sandwiches for both of them. After they finish, Marta fished a two-liter diet soda out from underneath the sink and poured drinks. Through the kitchen window, Marta watched what little traffic passed by. It was March outside, but the sun was so bright that it looked like June.

Marta emptied her drink into the sink and washed out the glass, resting it on the windowsill behind the faucet. She rinsed her plate, and then her mother’s. When she reached for the silverware, her hands slipped and she cut her palm on the paring knife. “Motherfucker!” she yelled, jerking her hand back. Then she reached out for the knife with her bloody hand and threw it into the living room where it bounced off the couch cushions and onto the floor.

Her mother took Marta’s hand, put it under the faucet. The cold water stung, and Martha had to grit her teeth. “Your father was a decent guy,” her mother said, scraping a half eaten sandwich and its crumbs into a garbage can.
She pulled the towel off her head, ran her hair through her fingers. “Jimmy Flack, who lived two doors down from us when we had a house on Chimney Cross. You remember him?”

“He owned the pawnshop,” Marta said. She put her hand to her forehead. “It was for a summer. I’m sorry for telling you this. I fucked him. For a while. But I wasn’t in love with him. Not that I’m making excuses.”

Holding Marta’s hand, her mother reached for a wad of napkins and dabbed at the cut. “It’s not too deep,” she says. “God knows it’s long, but it doesn’t look like it got the muscle. I once cut the bottom of my foot like this. It was worse than this.”

Marta took her hand back and turned the faucet off.

“But I did, among other things,” she said. “Jimmy Flack. He would trip over himself to get to me, those khakis around his ankles. But there were other times when it was nervous and fumbling in the best sense. The kind you can look back on as being sweet. The first time was quick and on the floor of his garage and after he put that weird laminate down.

“Just that I was working in my garden. And I knew he was having a hard time. His wife, Hannah, had done some things and they were trying to work through it. I was working, planting some bell pepper plants and he was tilling that big flower garden we had. He was always doing things like that for me and your father. He was a helpful man.

“Jimmy, he finishes and I say hi and he says hi and I ask him if he’d like some water. He tells me he’d rather have some company; that Joan’s so busy
and he’s so lonely. He was awful at talking to women. I tell him I’m flattered, but I’m a married woman and he wipes his forehead with his handkerchief, waves and drives on.

"I thought about it for a while, my hands in the dirt. Your father was working at the library and I thought about him for a little bit, too. I loved your father. He treated me like a queen. Like a real queen. But I dusted off my hands and walked to Jimmy Flack’s house anyway."

Her mother leaned against the countertop, took a pear from the fruit basket and rolls it around in her hands. "I thought about coming clean to your father. For a while, it was all I could think about. Holidays, birthdays, long work weeks. It ate at me for a while, but then one day it just stopped mattering to me. Your father never knew. I thought Jimmy might break down and confess, but then he renewed his vows with Joan. And then their plane crashed into the Ozarks.

"So it was just left with me. And your dad, you remember, he was always so happy, so thrilled to be with us. And I stopped thinking about what I had done as being wrong. I miss your father."

Her mother propped both of her elbows on the kitchen counter, the palms of her hands open and up. "We’re not owed anything, Marta. We’re not owed good and happy relationships just because we’re alive. And you’re not required to be with somebody." And she closed her hands tightly. "It’s all just... opportunity."

"I don’t think Joel will ever talk to me again."

"Do you want him to?"
Marta put her hand to her mouth and shook her head.

Her mother stopped and attempted a smile. She walked into the living room for the knife and Marta followed her, her hand swaddled in paper towel. Her mother laid the knife on the end table and eased onto the loveseat. "I was really looking forward to that lunch," she said.

*  

Joel unlocked the front entrance for a young man in a pair of blue scrubs. Joel offered him a seat before turning the OPEN sign around. Marta motioned for the applicant to meet her behind the counter and gave Joel a thumbs-up. "Want me to stay?" Joel mouthed. She waved him on and Joel shook his head disapprovingly. Marta extended her middle finger his way.

"Night," Joel said, louder than he needed. He pulled his coat on and left.

Marta looked the applicant over. He couldn't have been more than 18, 19. Short, curly hair and sideburns. Scrubs, frayed slightly at the sleeves, with the words Coleman General stamped over the breast pocket. He might've been considered handsome were it not for lack of a chin. His saggy neck and worried expression reminded Marta of boys that even she picked on in sixth grade. The look of boys who would pine away for her, thinking that an average girl like her might be in their league. She shook his hand and when he smiled, she noticed a bottom tooth that halfway hid its neighbor.

With the office closed, she said, "You're the last of the day."
He pointed to her window. Behind the bakery were birch trees and their limbs and leaves kissed the window’s glass. “That’s a nice view,” he said. “Lots of trees. And you’ve got a bird nest there.”

Sitting across the desk from Charlie Stills, Marta leaned back in her chair and chewed on her pen. “You’re awful young for scrubs,” she said. “I’ll be honest with you, Mr. Stills, I really don’t want someone your age. Mornings are too early. Do you have any idea how early you have to be up for this job?”

“I worked in my aunt’s bakery back home. When I worked, it was getting there around 4. Sometimes earlier, depending on special orders. I’m not in school, either.”

Marta stared at him for a few hard seconds, trying to push him out of her chair, out of her room with her eyes, but he didn’t move. “Fine,” she said, and clicked her pen into the business position. She took the clipboard from off her desk and wrote his name at the top of her blank paper. “Tell me a little about yourself.”

He scratched the back of his neck, then twisted his arm to reach the middle of his back. “My aunt’s place, it was about this size,” he said, looking around. “We did pastry, some sandwiches. It was more of a café, really. A café that made its own bread.”

“You make bread?” Marta asked.

“Nothing too fancy. Didn’t have the demand for it. Wheat, rye, some sweeter stuff.”
Marta leaned forward in her chair. “Tell me about that. Tell me what else you like to make. And why, too. Why do you like to make these things? What is your philosophy on bread making?”

“That’s a real question?”

“You can’t answer it?”

“Bread more than anything,” he said. “Bread because it’s so simple yet so easy to get wrong. Bread because it’s a gift that you can give to people whenever. People are always happy to see it. They rarely eat it, just toss it somewhere in their pantry and let it get old, which is a waste.”

“That’s a ridiculously sentimental answer, I think.”

“And you’re being a bitch. Because... I don’t even know why.”

Marta stood up, hitched her pants. “Thank you for—”

“You don’t make rockstar money at this,” Charlie said, gripping the armrests of his chair. “You either like what’s simple and good or you don’t. And I’m pretty good at it, too, which works out for me,” he said and offered his hand. I like cakes, too. There’s no day that a cake isn’t perfect for. Birthday cake, wedding cake, King cake, cakes to wish someone congratulations, Tuesday cake. They’re make the day better for everyone around them.”

He extended his hand. “Please. I need a job. And I want this one.” Marta didn’t take his hand, but instead sat down and reached for a coffee mug on her desk.

“Would you like some something to drink?” she asked and pointed to a water cooler close to the door Charlie had come in.
The tank glug-glugged as Charlie filled a paper cone. “Why do you have that bandage around your hand,” he asked.

“Kitchen accident,” Marta said.

Charlie pulled a book off the shelf, flipped through its pages, then did the same from another. “Oh, I hate this book,” he said. He turned the cover to show Marta. It was *The Glass Menagerie*. “He just walks out. And because he can’t stand his family?”

“Sometimes,” Marta said. “You have to.”

“No, you don’t,” Charlie said and pushed the book back into its space. He points to another. “E.E. Cummings. Is better.”

She scanned his resume. “You’re from Cranberry, New Jersey?”

“I am,” Charlie said and sipped from his cone. He balled the paper and dropped it in the nearby wastebasket. He looked at her bookshelves. “We’re so small we don’t have a Wal-Mart.”

“But you came from L.A.?”

“That’s right.”

“You didn’t like it?”

“Am I still interviewing?”

“Did you enjoy high school in Cranberry?” Marta asked.

Charlie placed the current book back in its original slot. He grinned at Marta. “I suppose so. I didn’t hate it, if that’s what you mean. Would I go back and change some things? Some social status things? Sure.”

“But you liked it?”
He shrugged. “I wasn’t super popular. But I had lots of friends. I liked high school.” Charlie turned to Marta’s desk. He picked up a framed picture, turned it around to show Marta. It’s a photograph of a little girl about eight, staring into a bathroom mirror while an older woman takes the picture. Both are wearing aprons that say “C’est la Vie.”

“This you?” he asked.

“How long have you been doing this?” Marta asked.

Charlie rubbed his hands together, looked around and sighed. “God, I hate interviews. It’s like dating. It’s like high school dating.”

“You’ve taken a pretty lax attitude for someone trying to get a job.”

“You don’t want to give it to me. You won’t. But I drove all this way.”

Marta asked, “Why are you here in this town? How are you here?”

“My sister’s sick with leukemia. I help out her husband. I worry about how he holds up.”

Marta checked her watch. She leaned back in her chair, pulled her hair up, let it fall back to her shoulders and repeated the motion. She pushed back from the desk, stood and walked up to Charlie. She stepped into him and fingered the vent of his shirt, at some small hair she could see. “Have you ever had sex in a bakery? With all the smells? Honestly, would you like to fuck me?”

Charlie gave Marta a small push away. “No.” His smile was gone. “I am flattered. I am flattered, I am. But no. I think you might be drunk. Or high or something.”
“What?” she said. “Come on,” She grabbed the waistband of his scrubs and the pants dropped from her tugging.

He stooped and tried to pull his pants back up, but she pulled in her own direction. “Stop, seriously,” he said.

“Chicken.”

“I don’t want to. Please, I don’t.”

And the way Charlie had said that, struck something in Marta. She stopped and suddenly felt embarrassed. “Oh, my God,” she said. “What’s wrong with me?” Marta plopped into the chair where Charlie had earlier been sitting.

When she started crying, Charlie handed her a restaurant napkin from her desk and then left.

*

Marta and Cam were at the coffee shop, sitting at an iron patio table, huddled in jackets while leaves brushed the tops of their feet. Cam took off his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Can you tell me why?” he asked.

Marta pulled her jacket tighter.

“No, you said some words, but you didn’t tell me anything. You’re putting an end to us because you feel bad about it?”

“Yeah. Because it’s stupid. And we’re never going to go anywhere. And I think about Joel. And a million other things, the most important being that I just... I don’t want to anymore.”
Marta noticed a family of four standing around a truck in the parking lot. The hood of the truck was up and they were, all of them, looking over the engine. The father had a hole torn in the back of his red flannel shirt, wore thick workmen's gloves. The mother was shining a flashlight over the chassis. Someone told a joke and the parents and their two grown daughters all laughed. Their hair, even the father's comb-over, blew in the wind. It was the sort of thing, she knew, that Joel would have loved to see. It was the sort of thing where he might tell her that that family, those people, that's how he and she could be. And he'd look at her like that was enough. He would tell her that he loved her and she would smile and nod.

"I've got to go to work," she said, and picked up her coffee and purse. Cam reached out for Marta's hand, but she was too quick for him.

"I cut my hand," she said. "I've got this pink-brown bandage wrapped around my hand and you never once asked about it. And I'm not exactly sure why."

"Now that is dumb, Marta."

She kicked at his ankle, but Cam jerked away in time.

He swallowed the last from his cup and wiped his mouth. "Did you ever tell Joel about us?" he asked. "Because I don't think you did. You are free and clear and it was your idea, Marta. You told me. You should tell him. I think a wife, even a lousy one, owes her husband that."
Marta's face curled. She flipped off the black, plastic top of her coffee and slowly poured it over the table they had been sitting at. Cam pushed his chair back with his legs and the chair's feet scratched against the sidewalk.

"You're a shit," Marta said. She reached into her purse to pull out a few ragged dollar bills and handed them to a waitress walking by.

"No, I'm not," he said. "And I think that bothers you."

She said, "I'm not going back to him."

He shrugged, frowning.

*

When Joel went back to teaching, Marta made another call.

"I love this," her mother said, holding up her flour-caked hands. "I feel like a little girl in a weird way."

They laughed, listened to music together and her mother showed Marta her new hobby. They stood in the alley behind the bakery where there were only rental storage units and they burned through two joints by the end of the day.

*

A month after her interview with Charlie, she ran into him while shopping for hot dogs in an all-night grocery store. She was dragging her finger along the price stickers that lined the freezer bins, when she saw him, elbow deep in a box of cold cuts and looking back at her.
“Hey,” she said, walked up to him and offered her hand to him. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Oh,” he said. His face flushed. “It’s... no harm.” He shook her hand, then reached back into the box, hung a handful of salami packs.

“I wanted to say,” Marta said, and touched his shoulder. “I wanted to say, but I threw out your contact information that night and couldn’t find it again, that you can have the job. I want you to have the job. If you wanted it.”

Charlie wiped his hands on his uniform and closed the box he had been working with. He looked at her, squinting his eyes like he was trying to figure out if she were drunk. “At the bakery?”

“You’re weirded out,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“No. I’m stunned.” He points to his face and grins. “This is 'stunned.'”

“Well, good. Come by tomorrow and we'll figure the paperwork?”

Charlie nods, his lip stiffens. “Not a problem.”

“Good, good. I'm glad this is how this worked out.”

“Me, too,” Charlie said. He looked around and when he saw another man in uniform put his hands on his hips, Charlie held up his forefinger. “Wait,” he mouthed. He turned back to Marta. “I'm gonna finish out my shift if that's okay with you.”

“It is,” she said and laughed.

Marta grabbed a pack of hot dogs, smiled and waved at him with the package. But before she was at the end of the aisle, she heard him say, “Stop for a sec.” He trotted up to her. “There's a fair in town,” he said. “I'm new. I'd like to
go, but it's sort of sad to go to the fair by yourself. I think it's a law that you can't. Would you like to go with me, maybe? To prevent any laws being broken?"

*

Before she and Charlie left for the fair, Marta was suddenly overcome by her conscience in a way that she had never felt with Cam and she dialed Joel's number. It never stopped being strange calling her old phone number, her old house. She wondered how he might have changed the place. If he had taken out those things that made it partly hers, taken out those things that had made it comfortable. She imagined what the bedroom was like and most of the other rooms of the house before she realized that she'd only gotten Joel's machine.

"Oh, hello," she said. "Joel. I just... I wanted you to know that I found somebody for the bakery. He's a young man, his name is Charlie and we're going to the fair today. We're going to the fair and it doesn't mean anything. I actually tried to have sex with him. In the bakery. And he told me 'no.' We're going to the fair and I just wanted to tell you that. I hope you're okay."

*

"Do you know your mother very well?" Marta asked Charlie. She was holding a flashlight as he changed the flat they'd been unlucky enough to have on the way to the fair. Charlie worked the jack, slowly lowering her hatchback to the ground.

"Sure," he said, grunting every few words. "My mom sits in a cubicle and writes country songs. Some get bought, most don't. Shania Twain used one. I
really didn’t care to ever hear it.” Charlie paused, then looked up at Marta. “She’s okay. She likes Schubert, too.” He shrugged.

They were on the interstate and cars continued to move past them, making both them and the car rock. Marta surveyed the space around her, the large curtain of black that she knows is made of trees, but can’t quite see the making of. She had never really given much consideration before to what lined the roads she travelled on. And now, the world beyond the few pines she can make out worried her for how uncertain it seemed. Cars continued to speed past and Charlie’s voice slowly becomes another hum of the other world. She wondered how anything could live out there. She wanted to learn how.

“Marta?”

She turned around quickly, abruptly woken from her daydream.

“Flashlight,” Charlie said. “Might be better pointed at the tire.”

“Sorry,” Marta said. She took off her jacket, laid it on the wet ground and sat beside him. “Your mother?”

“I ask my mom,” Charlie said. “How she could possibly stand to churn out bubble-gum thick, piles of words that were written more by marketing groups interested in churning out a buck than really doing something that she feels.”

“And she says?”

The car was now firmly back on the ground. Charlie held the jack and tire iron up, “Ta-da!” he said and opened the trunk.
“She doesn’t say, really,” He said. “Or she says that it pays the bills. Or that she really does like it. Who knows. I don’t get her, but I’ve long gotten over that.”

Marta clicked the flashlight, killing the beam and handed it to Charlie.

“Hey,” he said and turned the flashlight back on. “You’re a pretty lady.”

Marta put her arms back through her coat and pulled her hair back over the collar. “Yeah?”

“You are.” Charlie reached out for Marta’s hand. “I think I may have made a mistake at the bakery, turning you away.”

Marta waved him off. “I don’t think you did.”

Charlie said, “Ah,” and closed the trunk. He waited for a few minutes, his hands on the trunk door. “But it was pretty hot, you coming on to me like that.”

Before she could answer, a taxi pulled off the road and Cam stepped out.

“Marta,” he called out. Cam held a hand up, like he was signaling that he meant no harm. “Is that you, Marta?”

Marta quickly hooked her arm around Charlie, who seemed surprised, but let her hang on. “We’re okay, Cam.”

Cam turned back to the taxi, leaned into the door he had stepped out from. He waved someone from stepping out. Satisfied, he tucked his hands in his pockets and shuffled over to them. “Sorry,” he said. “I recognized the car and when I saw it was you outside, I had the driver turn around. Are you okay?” Cam walked over to Charlie and held his hand out. “ Anything I can help with?”

90
Charlie took the handshake and pointed to the spare tire. "Nah. Seems fine with the spare. Marta here should check the pressure on her tires more often."

"Well," Cam said. "That's an opinion."

Marta could see a woman in the backseat of the taxi leaned into the window, cupping her hands around her face to see. She asked, "Is that your daughter?"

"We're going to a movie," Cam said. He walked around the car, kicking each tire. He took his time with it, dragging his hand over the car. "I guess I should go if you're all right. I just wanted to see."

After the taxi had pulled away, Marta and Charlie slid into the front of her vehicle. They sat in silence for a while. Marta sat with both hands on the wheel.

"A few weeks ago," she said. "My mother told me that she had cheated on my father. She was telling me how she was really very lonely and she couldn't quite express why. She was heartbroken and didn't understand the world, didn't understand how all the things that once seemed possible to her had suddenly disappeared overnight. She tried another man, but he never really made her feel like he could give any of that lost stuff back. But her husband, my dad, was so happy with her that it made her happy to stay with him and to make him happy instead.

"Look," she said, and turned the ignition. "There's a convenience store just up ahead. Maybe we should stop, grab a snack. I'm hungry, but I'm too beat for the fair."
“Me too,” Charlie said. He crossed his legs and turned to her. He moved his hand to her thigh. “But I can’t stand to go into gas stations anymore. Cashiers look like you’ve just intruded into their homes.”

Marta laughed. “I know that feeling.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said and chuckled, too. “I think we sort of all do these days.”

Suddenly Marta reached for Charlie and kissed him. At first, the absence of his hands on her worried Marta, but they quickly found the right gear and moved against her back. She was surprised when he unlatched her bra one-handed and on the first try.

He took her hands and held them, palm-forward, to his face. “These,” he said. “Are the smallest hands I’ve ever seen.”

* 

Her old house was too warm. Since she moved out six months ago, the house had come to smell mostly of Joel. His shoes, his cologne, his shampoo. Marta sat at their dinner table, and drank a slow beer from the refrigerator. She pulled off her sneakers, her jacket, and folded herself onto the couch. It wasn’t hard for her to go to sleep; she dreamed about their honeymoon and how he tasted like suntan lotion. She remembered driving on the beach road back to the hotel and that the sky was something from off a postcard. It was the sort of moment that you wanted to share with someone, and were glad to.

Marta woke to a finger tapping on the side of her foot.
“Hey,” Joel said. Several white plastic bags were clumped at his feet.

“How long have you been here?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Two or three hours. I took a nap.”

“I see that,” Joel said. He searched her face for how to proceed.

“You home for the night?” asked Marta. “What’ve you got there?”

“I bought groceries. Carol’s coming over. Thought I might cook for once, instead of ordering out. But maybe instead we might cook, or she might cook and I tell her how great she was while cooking.” He pitched his keys onto the coffee table.

“You’re still seeing her?” Marta asked.

“I don’t think you should be here, Marta.”

“Does she stay here sometimes?”

“Of course, she does. She’s moving in two weeks.”

“I fucked a teenage boy tonight,” she said. “I did. And it was different. But it wasn’t good or bad. He had a hard time keeping it up. I guess his adrenaline was running pretty hard. His teeth were chattering. I felt bad for him. And I would’ve stopped, but I think the embarrassment...” Marta stopped, leaned into the couch. “I wouldn’t want that for myself.”

“You should go.” Joel said. He stood held out his hands and pulled her to her feet. “C’mere.”

He hugged her, then hugged her tighter. Then Joel held her face in his hands and said, “This isn’t your house anymore.”
Before she could stop them, tears started to well in Marta's eyes. “You want her?”

“I don’t know,” Joel said. “But I do know that… Marta, I can’t handle anymore.” He let her go, sat down on his couch and worked his knuckles. “I want to say that I should tell you that over the last couple of months I seem to understand…”

She slapped him before she was aware of the movement.

Neither of them said anything. Neither of them took their eyes off the other.

Marta sat next to him and, after a moment, scooted closer. He unbuttoned her shirt while she watched. She slid her bra straps from her shoulders and Joel smelled her neckline, rubbing his hands up and down her sides. His hands were confused by the four snaps on her new jeans and she winced when he pinched her stomach while forcing his hands underneath the denim. Joel touched her hair with his fingers and began to knead the muscles below. After a few minutes, she kissed him.

The sound of keys jostling shook them from it. Carol stepped in, wearing a service uniform, but her blonde hair untethered and resting around her neck. When she saw Marta and Joel on the couch, she dropped the stack of papers she was carrying. They hit the floor with a clap.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, God. I’m… I’m so…” She put her hand to her mouth and looked at Marta. “Excuse me,” she stammered before turning and running out to her car.
Joel looked at her, his eyes more like frightened than angry. “See?” he said. “See?” And then he got up, got dressed, and walked out the front door, leaving it open. She heard the sounds of the car starting, backing out, and Marta pulled on her blouse.

Carol, Marta thought. She watched the taillights of his car get further and further away, until he turned onto another street. Carol. Marta fastened her pants, and took the house-key off the chain and left it under a glossy sales paper in his mailbox.

“Carol,” she said out loud and she could remember the girl she used to know.

This small city is quiet, she thought. So small, so empty when the college is closed on break. Marta stood there for a while, her sock feet on straw-covered grass, and admired her old house.

* 

When Marta woke up, Charlie’s alarm clock read half-past one. She quietly dressed, letting him sleep. He was stretched his full-length, naked on the bed. She leaned against his bureau and watched him turn and curl, listened to him snore. When she sat down beside him, he stirred slightly and she rubbed a slow hand over his belly and chest. “I like how hairy you are,” she said. Charlie didn’t say anything, only smiled with his eyes closed. Marta unlatched a window and lifted the glass. Outside his apartment were the sounds of the interstate, but the day was a gorgeous one. A breeze rustled the window screen and hedges just
underneath. She thought about the bakery. "Look," she said, and pointed somewhere just to have his attention.