ANYONE IS COMPANY

A Thesis

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by

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jenni Cragun grew up in the Sacramento Valley in Northern California where she never touched a surfboard in her life. She received her MFA in fiction from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York and her BA in English and Psychology from the University of Montana in Missoula. She is the recent recipient of the Arthur Lynn Andrews Prize for fiction.

For Dave, whose yawns I adore

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Flour Baby

The first time I got sick felt like an umbrella opening up inside of me. I sat on my knees with my head over the toilet until my feet fell asleep and became big swollen blocks bracing my body. I traced my finger over the large flowers stamped in the center of each beige tile. The bathroom floor that I had lived with every day for the last fifteen years suddenly, against the tips of my skin, became entirely new, beautiful even.

"Sympathy symptoms," was how Mrs. Blackwell put it.

I had just gotten Marla, my baby girl, the day before. The Planned Parenthood crew had set up a row of tables with a big sign above it that said "Baby Factory." The first station presented five pound sacks of flour. "I know," Mrs. Blackwell huffed, "it's a bit messy. In the past, we used sugar, until someone's sugar baby caused a massive ant invasion." From there, you drew a slip from a shoebox that announced your baby's sex. One girl even unfolded fraternal twins. Next, you picked out an outfit from a stack of used baby clothes. I chose a blue, duck sprinkled onesie with matching yellow shorts.

I even filled out a pale grey birth certificate with a section for the father. I thought about writing in Brian's information, but they told us that at out age a majority of girls end up as single mothers and to leave that section blank. The system was based on statistics: how much the average baby woke up at night, cried, slept, ate, pooped and peed.

The next day, at our first "check-up," Mrs. Blackwell explained that my body was "responding to the baby, acting as if it were pregnant so to speak. I'm afraid you're experiencing morning sickness."

"But I already have a baby," I protested. "Why should I feel pregnant?"

"I don't mean to rain on your parade," Mrs. Blackwell said, "but you may be feeling under the weather for quite some time. The lack of sleep won't help either."

Marla woke me up every two hours. The alarm clock that they gave us was specialized for the Preventing Teen Pregnancy project. The wail from that thing was unreal. The longer you ignored it, the louder it became. And it sounded nothing like a human baby. It took nearly half an hour for my nerves to calm down after hearing that sound. One day at school a fire drill almost had me in tears. I quickly learned to comfort myself though in the night with warm milk and Nestlé's snack-sized cookies, the quiet crumbling around me and Marla in the deserted kitchen.

Brian brushed off my nausea as food poisoning. He was convinced that anything that didn't fall directly from a tree or come handpicked from a garden was toxic. He was horrified that my father used pesticides on our orchard, yet charmed by the availability of life that surrounded me outside the city. Brian and his mom lived near downtown, in the slick of Seattle—rows and rows of buildings, with stacks and stacks of windows—where "nature didn't have a chance," as he put it.

The first time Brian saw Marla, he asked what our son's name was.

"She's a girl, dumbass."

"Why is she wearing boy's clothes?"

"Her name is Marla," I said.

"She looks a bit pale," he joked. This whole thing was funny to him, even though his mom was the one who insisted on the program. She had come home from work for lunch one day and caught us together in the shower.

"Besides," I said. "She's a tomboy."

"I don't think a tomboy would be caught dead in ducks. I'm just saying," he said.

"Why don't you buy her some new clothes then? She needs some other stuff too."

"Alright," Brian said. I think the idea of a being father amused him.

By the third day my nausea was in full force. Brian had to pull over several times on our way to the mall. He was irritated, but mostly because he didn't want to shop at Target. "Where else can we get stuff for the baby?" I asked him.

"Every dollar is like a vote," he said. "Do you want to vote for a company that uses gun imagery for advertising? Would you want to expose your child to that?"

In the end though, Brian couldn't come up with an affordable alternative. To pacify himself, he brought along a few tire bombs—one ounce mini-bottles of liquor that he stole from his mom and refilled with a stinky vinegar concoction—and wedged them under the wheels of SUV's in the parking lot.

The program gave us a list of what we needed for the baby: clothes, hat, pacifiers, diapers, baby powder, blankets, even a stroller. We got everything but the stroller, which, when Brian saw the price tag, he refused to buy. I told him my arms were tired, and he offered to carry Marla in his backpack. "I think I'm going to be sick," I said. "Oh God."

"For real?" Brian asked.

“Where’s the bathroom? Hurry,” I said. I felt my hands beginning to sweat and my tongue swell with saliva. I hoisted Marla up to my shoulder.

“Seriously?” Brain asked.

“Hurry,” I said.

Brian looked up helplessly at the big signs hanging over each aisle.

“The red phone. Ask the fucking red phone,” I said.

I heard him getting directions, but it was too late. I threw up in the middle of the aisle to try to prevent spattering anything on the shelves. A few shoppers slowed down as they passed, but no one stopped to ask if I was okay.

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The nausea was one thing, but the sore breasts and weight gain were another. These things were leaving a permanent mark—it was more than just “retaining water” as Mrs. Blackwell tried to say. My nipples spread out and thickened like lava spilling from Mount Rainier. And what about my thighs turning into applesauce? Mrs. Blackwell, who I continued to check in with twice a week, a requirement until the month long program was over, said that this was all still in the realm of normal. Even still, she made me take another pregnancy test—negative—just to be sure.

“Who am I sympathizing with?” I wanted to know. “Myself?”

“Teen mothers,” she said. “Perhaps your future self, yes, if you continue to practice unsafe sex.”

“But I’m on the Pill,” I said.

“Here.” She grabbed a handful of condoms as if they were lollipops from a basket on the front desk. “The Pill’s a start, but there’s more to it than that.”

Brian and I had waited for three weeks to hook up since it was my first time. I remember him asking me if I was “a clit or a hole girl” before we had sex, and I, not knowing what he meant and not wanting to call attention to our two-year age

difference, said that it depended on my mood. I figured that it was a flexible stance, and I could ask my older brother about it later. Brian seemed pleased with my answer, saying that he "had never heard anyone respond that way," which made me wonder what kind of girl I had just become.

I never got a chance to ask my brother what Brian meant though. Jake shipped off to college at Western, joining the ROTC in order to pay his own way. My parents were broke that year because of the floods. Rain for eighty-seven days straight. The apple trees didn't know what to do with that much water.

Mom turned the dining room into a second pantry and stocked up on huge bags of grains and oats and flour. She still believed in things "working out for the best," as if she didn't notice the orchard drowning, the trees flailing in the wind. The mornings that the rain wasn't beading the sky, she would head out to the barometer and measure the pressure. The ache in the grey sky was obvious, but she checked anyways.

The worry kept my parents busy enough to not only stop talking to each other, but also ignore for the most part the reasons behind Marla's presence. Brian's mom had agreed not to tell them about the shower incident, but Mrs. Blackwell called my parents and explained my involvement in the program and what their role should be in the process. But neither my mom nor my dad approached me with a lecture on sex. They couldn't talk about those things. Once, when I was a little girl, I asked my mother for a tampon, which I had confused with a Q-tip, and her whole body had flushed so completely that my own cheeks tickled without knowing why.

Marla seemed to infuriate my mother though. One evening when I was breast feeding her in front of the TV, Mom told me to stop acting "disgusting." Dad, however, took to Marla instantly. He held her in the nights and taught me how to change her diaper. Dad even offered to buy Marla a stroller, even though this was

strictly against PTP rules. As a compromise, he dug up my old stroller and vacuumed off all the cottony spider nests.

Jake told me one time that Mom had gotten her tubes tied secretly after I was born. She didn't tell Dad until she was all stitched up because she knew what his reaction would be. He wanted a big family. That was when Dad finally got the apple orchard he had always wanted. He decided to grow the Pink Lady variety, a name that quite accurately describes my mom's face when she gets mad. Mom had never said a word about her surgery to me, but she did vocalize her opinions about over-population whenever the topic arose. In fact, one evening she and Brian had quite a lengthy conversation about the depletion of the earth's resources while my dad and I tried to teach Marla to sit up on her own in the living room.

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I began to notice things about Dad that I knew, but had never acknowledged. Like his scent: toasted bread. Some days I would sneak into my parents' room and lay my head down on Dad's pillow. His odor became a smelling salt for my nausea. It was the only thing that made me feel better, and I began craving it more and more.

Brian, on the other hand, morphed more and more into a giant cigarette. When his smoked-out smell was making me feel really bad, I would close my eyes and try not to imagine his tall cigarette-thin body.

"Please," I said one day when he tried to kiss me.

"Don't worry," Brian said. "I'll be quiet. Won't even wake the baby."

"She's not asleep, Brian," I said

"She's not exactly awake either though." He began unbuttoning my shirt.

"You know the cigarette smoke makes me sick," I said.

"What the hell is this?" he asked.

"A bra," I sighed. He tugged at the "convenient single-hand release mechanism." My swollen breast surged out of the opening, as if the cotton cup had been a dam.

"Whoa," he said. "That's fancy."

"Jesus Christ, Brian. It's a nursing bra."

"Do you not want me to talk to you?" Brian asked.

"Doesn't smoking kind of defeat the purpose of reducing air pollution?" I asked.

"Because you sound annoyed," he said.

"My voice sounds like I'm annoyed," I said. "But I'm not. I'm just fatigued. I'm just asking you to be more sympathetic, is all." Brian watched me as I slipped off Marla's itchy blue knit hat. "What if this was?" I asked.

"For real?" Brian said.

Brian offered to take me and Marla for a picnic the next weekend to "prove how much he loved me—loved *us*." We decided to go to Woodland Park because neither of us had been there since we were little. The cloud-cover left large swatches of shadows on the grass. Since we couldn't find a place in the sun, we planted our quilt under a group of evergreens muting the crush of the freeway.

Marla was dressed in a new red sweater that had pink ladybugs for buttons. Brian wrapped her in an old green fleece that he had found in his closet and put her down for a nap on the blanket. I unzipped the collapsible cooler and brought out and lined up the ingredients that Brian had gotten from the grocery store after work: bread, tomato, cucumber, sprouts, bell pepper, avocado, and Dijon. I snapped open the pocket knife I had borrowed from my dad and reached for the tomato first.

"Hold up," Brian said, pointing to the blade. "What do you need that for?"

"How else are we going to make sandwiches?" I asked.

"Who said anything about making sandwiches?"

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked. I was ravenous.

"Yes."

"And aren't these ingredients to make a sandwich?"

"I guess," he said. "I was planning on just eating each thing whole though. That's how they're meant to be consumed, you know. That's how they grow."

"Okay," I said. "Let's just eat before Marla wakes up."

I watched Brian's teeth break through the tight skin of the tomato. He made sure to suck in conjunction with each bite so that the juice didn't funnel down his chin. He worked the tomato over for a couple minutes before handing it off to me. Next he moved onto the cucumber, eating it lengthwise like corn-on-the-cob. He proceeded down the line like this, until, as I watched with horror, he squirted a blob of mustard straight from the bottle onto his tongue.

I got sick soon after eating and threw up near the rocky slope where the rabbits lived. The bunnies had been there when we were little, and we discovered that we had a similar memory of holding out carrot sticks. Apparently, at some point, someone had released a bunch of domestic bunnies, and now they were making it all on their own. "Serves pet stores right," Brian said, though a part of me wondered if locals replenished the supply each spring.

A few rabbits came over to investigate my vegetable-seed-littered puke. The other parents stared at me and Marla, while their kids tried to trap rabbits in their sticky embraces. "You want some tea?" Brian asked, reaching for the thermos. "I brought some nettle tea just for you."

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For Marla's last night, Dad took us out to dinner. The three of us went to a fancy restaurant in the city. Mom refused to go because—one—it was for Marla and—

two—we couldn't afford such extravagances. I thought of inviting Brian, but Dad didn't offer, and I didn't ask. When we got there, the waiter wanted to know if we "needed a highchair for the baby," who was buried in the stroller.

"Oh no," Dad said, grinning.

"That's not necessary," I said.

The waiter led us to a table for two overlooking the bay. Dad told me to order whatever I wanted, which turned out to be a sea bass cooked in a light oily sauce. For dessert, Dad and I split an apple pie and quietly watched the water contract with each rain drop, like a million baby dimples.

The next morning, my brother called and told Mom that it was likely he would have to go overseas. "Likely. What does likely mean?" Mom asked. She was against Jake going to college in the first place. She wanted him to attend a two-year somewhere in the area so that he wouldn't have to go into debt. Just until we're back on our feet, she had promised. But Jake didn't want to put his trust in the whim of the weather. "So soon?" Mom continued. I was nearby giving Marla a dry bath in the sink, sweeping the fine white powder off her body with my hand. "Well, perhaps you won't have to go though," Mom said.

I wanted Marla to look perfect when she returned to Planned Parenthood, where all the "mothers" were to meet and talk about their experiences. I dressed Marla carefully in a green corduroy jumper and a purple ruffle hat. To protect her from the rain, I chose a white, heart-covered sweater, which Dad had dug up out of the attic from an old box of my baby clothes. I realized the sweater was nearly too small for Marla when I tried to zip it up. The rainbow-colored hearts stretched wide across her back. I packed the diaper bag, just in case, with a bottle and an extra outfit. Brian had agreed to drop me off on his way to work.

"Are you sure we have to give her back?" he asked.

"What else did you have in mind?"

"It just seems like a waste," he said. "I mean, to throw the flour away."

"You want to bake her?" I asked. "You want to make some cupcakes or a pie or a loaf of bread?"

"Well, I guess it is bleached white flour," he said, turning to me with a smile.

"Oh," I said. "She's not organic enough for you, right?"

"Here," he sighed, "let me see her."

Brian kissed Marla dramatically on both cheeks and elepahanted her belly before handing her back. "I'll come get you," he said. "I'll leave work early and pick you up in a few hours, okay, when you're done."

A woman at the front desk pointed to a door when she saw the baby. Half of the girls I had seen on that first day, drawing and naming and dressing their flour-bags, were already sitting in a group. I saw that none of them were holding their babies.

Mrs. Blackwell came into the room from another door, and smiled when she saw me holding Marla. "Crystal," she said. "I'm so glad you're here. I was worried you wouldn't show. I can't wait for you to share with the other girls your physical reaction to the whole ordeal."

"What should I do with Marla?" I asked.

"Oh," she said, "you can just disassemble her over there."

I walked over to a large garbage can. A pile of ten or so flour sacks was at the bottom. Some were patched with masking tape like band-aids, but all were naked, revealing that same blue and gold sun logo. There was one bag that was slightly longer and skinnier with a different brand name on the front. Somebody must have replaced their baby, I thought. I undressed Marla slowly, folding her jumper and hat before placing them in my bag. I held the flour sack over the garbage can and lobbed her soft

body downwards. When she hit, an eruption of flour pumped up and out of the trash can, forcing me to move back and close my eyes.

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When I got out of the building, I saw Brian's car parked across the street, waiting on the other side of traffic. He had his seat leaned back and his hands folded behind his head. His eyes were closed, so he didn't even notice me until I knocked softly on the passenger's side window.

"I got something for you," he said, before I could say anything. I glanced around the car.

"What?"

"You'll see," he said. We headed north, towards Lake Washington. Brian pulled the car into an empty mud lot overgrown with weeds.

"Where is this?" I asked, but he had already climbed out of the car.

"Come on," he said, shutting his door.

"Seriously?" I asked out-loud. The rain needled hard against the top of the car. I had to jump over a puddle just to get out.

I trailed Brian through the tall brambles, which soaked through the bottom half of my cotton pants, towards a fenced-in area. Brian unlatched the gate and went in first, holding it open for me to follow.

Once inside, I saw waves—one after the other—of red and purple and white tulips. "Look," he said. "I got you flowers."

Surveillance of Nothing

My daughter Mia was here to throw me an Alzheimer's party. She drove all the way up from Cleveland (where she and little Henry live) to visit me in New York for the first time in five years. Apparently some doctor-friend of hers told her that a "here's-to-life-bash" could be a healthy way for family members to say goodbye.

"Hello? Dad?" she says, waving her hand inches from my eyes. "I need you to pick up the cake. Do you think you can do that?" she asks.

Mia has spent the last week trying to change everything. The first thing she said when she got here was "you've let the house go," like she knew something about it, though she had never actually lived here with her mother and me. After taking what turned out to be a permanent break from the Navy, Jean and I decided to make a home for ourselves in central New York. I had been doing research near Geneva Lake for the past few years, and Jean had found a good part-time job at Cornell working as a secretary at one of those places that collects things like paintings.

That was ten years ago. Mia had already made something of her life by then. After graduating from Ohio State, she had started working for senators and involving herself with politics, eventually working her way into to her current job (lobbyist).

Little Henry was the first unplanned thing that had ever happened to Mia. Her mother's death was the second. She dealt with both incidents similarly: on her own. She didn't even make it out here for Jean's funeral, which conflicted with an important campaigning event.

"The cake is at that big grocery store on Meadow St. Do you have a map?" Mia asks.

I go there all the time, I say. How do you think I eat?

She glances up at me. She still has that beautiful sleepy posture that she had when she was my little girl, when she used to flop her kid-arms around me and kiss me, fishlike, on the cheek. "Here," she says, handing me a post-it with "cake for John" written on it. I start to put the note in my pant's pocket, but I discover another one already saved there. This piece of paper says "scrub jays" in my own handwriting. Wendy (her talk-show plays on 88.7 every morning at nine) was reporting on these birds last week, describing how they could remember thousands of secret cache sites in several different states. They could stash a treasure under a pine in the middle of Idaho and recover it years later. I want to know what they have to hide that's worth flying hundreds of miles for.

In the Navy, we also hid things, but we didn't necessarily come back for them, and we put them in places where nobody else would ever try to find them. I spent years on planes, not as a pilot, but as a passenger, someone to make sure what got tossed into the ocean was all hooked-up before we sank it. A sonar here, a sonar there. The surveillance of nothing.

I had to take a submarine from my station just off New Zealand all the way to Antarctica—usually a six month stint. Once you get that far south, you think that all you'll see is a flat plate of ice. But there were mountains like baking powder and wide crystal valleys. It's not so much the landscape that numbs but the hollow noise your

voice makes when you try to talk there. Nothing to do out in nowhere but fly with the other naval researchers and drink cold cans of Busch on days off. We actually had to warm the beer up between our thighs before drinking it so that our teeth wouldn't echo with pain. For amusement, if someone passed out drunk early, we took away their bedside water. In the morning, especially after a night of dehydrating, your face would purse shut—like a paste had been smeared across your eyes and mouth—because of the dire low humidity. You had to feel out your way to the bathroom and splash your skin with water before you could even think about beginning to see. Sometimes being there felt like being born.

"Remember," Mia says, "party starts at four."

Mia had tried to round up some of the extended family for the occasion, but no one could make it out on such short notice. I only have two remaining siblings anyhow (a brother in Iowa, a sister in Florida). As a last resort, Mia decided to invite a few of the neighbors, whom she figured must be my friends. She and little Henry drove my car up and down my street (Comfort Rd.), pulling into each driveway one by one, and inviting whoever happened to open their door. She got two people to bite: the Howsers—the Howlers Jean and I used to call them because they had two coon dogs—and the young family that lived in the blue house with the enormous dome cage in their front yard. Jean had once explained that the empty cage was for those large, gliding birds, the ones that hover above fields looking for mice, but I liked to joke that the cage was probably for the husband when he misbehaved.

Of course, Mia stayed away from my immediate neighbors, nine headstones in a graveyard. Quiet folks next door, I used to tease Jean, who didn't like the fact that all of the headstones are blank. John and Jane Does, as far as anyone's concerned. No one cares enough to dig the bones up and find out who they belong to.

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Everything in the grocery store has moved. I try to find the beer first (located in a walk-in cooler in the back of the store). The beer, I am told by a young man scraping cans with a long ruler to the front of the shelves, is now kept by the summer barbeque supplies near the deli. People are pushing huge empty carts around everywhere. After giving up on finding the deli, I go to the bakery to pick-up the cake. But it turns out the deli and bakery are in the same place, behind the same counter. I don't know who to ask for what when a woman in green asks me if I need help. I hand her the note that Mia has given me.

"Scrub jays?" she says.

I search around in my coat pocket for the other note, but all I find is my wallet. Mia must've taken back her post-it, though I can't figure out why she would do that. She probably made a mistake.

A cake, I say.

"For whom?" the woman asks. Clearly she's a deli worker.

I'm picking up a cake for my daughter Mia.

The woman glances back at a row of pink boxes. "There's no Mia here."

I know, I say, frustrated that I can't talk to one of the real people who make the sweet things, the ones with the white hats on. This green apron knows nothing. I'm picking up the cake for her, I try to explain.

"What's your name?" the woman asks.

I open my wallet to show her my I.D.

Where's my I.D.? I ask the woman.

"I just need your name, sir," the woman says.

I seem to have lost my I.D.

"Do you know what kind of cake it was?"

I wonder what Mia could've done with my driver's license. Why would she be looking at that? What information was she trying to find out? Or perhaps it was Henry getting into my stuff again. Just the other day I caught him poking his finger into the fish tank. Bird (needs two pinches of food a day) was a gift from one of Jean's friends after she died. At night, when I lie in bed, Bird shadowgraphs in the moonlight on the wall behind his tank. His silhouette floats back and forth, beating its wings, trying to fly away.

When I get home, Mia looks down at the case of beer and asks, "Where have you been? Where's the cake?"

They didn't have the cake.

"I called them this morning to be sure. They said it would be waiting," Mia says.

I need to get this beer in the fridge.

Mia sighs one of her fake sighs, just like she used to do when I used to pretend that we were strangers. She used to sit out front of our house for hours hoping for unexpected customers. When I got home from work, I would walk over to her make-shift booth and ask her what she was selling. Same as always, she would say. It was a twist on the lemonade stand. Instead of refreshments, she took old yellow margarine cups and packed them full of dirt and then stuck the stems of a few hand-picked flowers in the top, as if they were still growing.

"Henry and I will go get the cake," Mia says. "But first I need to get these lights working. Do you know where those extra bulbs are?"

Outside? A joke. It's early May and the ground is popping with the soft cheeks of tulips and surprised mouths of daffodils.

"People are going to be here," Mia says.

I tell her that the light bulbs are in the cabinet above the refrigerator, but it turns out that they have been moved some place obscure. They end up being in an old laundry basket in the room where Jean used to store our food.

"Frosted or clear light?" Mia asks, holding up a white box and a blue box.

"Frosted!" Henry says.

I have no preference. I won't use the lights, but if she wants to balance on couches and chairs and go to all that trouble, I will let her. When she first inspected the house she went from room to room futilely snapping the light switches up and down. I had let most of the bulbs burn out in the fixtures because I didn't need so much light. Why did I need to see everything in the whole house at once? I had lamps in every room that worked just fine, even one in the kitchen that had a bendable neck so I could position it right over the stove if I wanted.

But Mia had insisted that there must be some sort of wiring issue with so many lights dead. She wanted to call one of those people who fixes things, who connects things, but I told her that would be a waste. Then she systematically checked all the outlets in the house with an old hairdryer of Jean's she found in the bathroom.

After her initial light-bulb tirade, Mia ripped into my bedroom, tossing clothes in piles and tearing the sheets off my bed, saying I needed new ones.

"Have you washed these linens since Mom died?" she asked.

It isn't like I exercise in bed. The sheets were perfectly clean and papery soft. Until Mia washed them. Now my bed smells like the chemicals in a public restroom. I woke up the other night on the verge of peeing just because I dreamt I was standing at a urinal.

The house is now completely blank. All of my stuff, my stacks of important notes, the jars of cashew butter that I leave on the counter, even the fish tank cleaning supplies (which I need to use whenever Bird's tank looks silty), have been put

somewhere impossible to find. I check on Bird, to make sure he hasn't been flushed away too, and he just wiggles his tail, small bubbles, like miniature submarines, rising from his mouth. Good Boy, Bird. I crack myself a beer and head out to the deck to relax, a temporary break while Mia goes to the store.

In the cemetery, one of those animals with long legs and big alert eyes gnaws at the overgrown grass. At first I think there are two, then I hear a woman call out "yoohoo" across the field. She has on white pants and a purple blouse. It is Mrs. Howser, taking a short-cut through the cemetery.

"It's me, Lydia," she says as she gets closer to the deck.

You're here for the party, I say.

"I'm not too late, am I?" she asks

Mia's gone to the store, I say.

"Oh, it was a joke. I know, I saw her in your car leaving a bit ago. I was joking though, you know. I mean, I'm not too late for you to remember me yet?"

Ha, I say. Not completely. No. Not at all.

"Well," Lydia continues, "I guess you remember that time you called the sheriff on my dogs then too?"

That must've been Jean.

"A joke again," she says, apparently delighted in her ability to trick me.

Where's Mr. Howser, I want to ask, but I can't come up with his first name.

"Party of two, it seems. Have you *forgotten* your manners? Ha," she says, eyeing me, but not really laughing. "I guess my humor's what shoed off my husband."

I'm sorry?

"How about one of those?" she says, pointing to my beer. "I'm parched, if you don't mind."

I can't tell what I'm supposed to do. I mean to ask about her husband, but I can't remember his first name.

"Oh," she says. "You mean about my husband. Well, he ran off. Despite what people think, we do get divorced in our sixties. I figure, hey, one of us was probably going to leave sooner or later, one way or another. Sorry, not about your wife though. I didn't mean about your wife."

Oh, I say. We both stand up straight, the sun skewering my eyes as I try to look at her face. Mrs. Howser keeps fanning herself. Can I get you a drink? I ask.

"Please."

She stays on the porch while I go inside to the refrigerator to get her and me both a beer. By the time I'm back outside, she has sat down on one of the green and brown—what used to be white—striped lawn chairs. Beer's not that cold, I say. You can never get things cold here, not like in Antarctica.

She laughs, and I notice when she smiles the insides of her lips are a different color than the outsides, which she has softened with beige lipstick. "Well, I know it's not the Dark Ages anymore. I mean, they think they have a medication for every one of our problems, don't they? But how are you feeling?" she says, suddenly serious.

The truth, there is no medicine. Except for a multi-vitamin with ginkgo biloba (take once in the mornings) that I keep by my toothbrush but rarely swallow because the bitter, stiff pill disagrees with my minty toothpaste. Other than that, the doctor checks up on me once a month (on the seventeenth). His secretary always calls in the mornings—usually interrupting Wendy's program—to remind me of that afternoon's appointment, which I had already written in on the calendar (I cross each day off before bed). Sometimes I find a stack of notes too, all saying the same thing, "doctor on the 17th," because that secretary keeps calling.

The doctor appointments are unnecessary and aggravating. The doctor does the same thing every time: prove to me I can't spell backwards, poke at my ribcage, ask me if I am remembering to eat. The surveillance of nothing. What can the doctor do besides tell me that the part of my brain that sounds like a massive animal is slowly dying? Sometimes the doctor even has me feel an object blindly, like that game I used to play as a kid at the carnival. I would pay twenty cents to reach my hand inside a soft velvety box which housed some type of object that was always impossible to recognize. But I was unbeatable at penny-in-the-flour. The trick was diving your face into the castle of powder without any hesitation, until you felt the cool coin on your skin. By the time I had the penny in my mouth, my dark hair would be salt-and-peppered.

"Lydia," Mia says, suddenly emerging from my house. "Sorry I wasn't here earlier."

"Oh that's alright. You're not too late," Mrs. Howser says, smiling in my direction.

"Grandpa," Henry says. "Can we have cake yet?"

"Not yet Henry," Mia says. "Let's wait for the other guests."

Wendy often has guests on her radio shows. She asks them questions about their lives, gets them to tell their stories. These guests are never famous, but they aren't regular people either. Wendy always calls them ordinary people living extraordinary lives.

"Who else is coming?" Mrs. Howser asks.

Don't ask me, I say.

"Harry and Cheryl from down the street," Mia says. "And they're bringing their daughter. She and Henry really hit it off the other day when we went over there."

"Who?" Henry asks.

"Your new friend Raina. Remember her?"

"Yeah," Henry says unenthusiastically.

Don't you like your girlfriend? I ask.

"Dad, please. Henry's too young for that."

Well now, just how old is my grandson? I ask Little Henry, waiting to see his excitement in responding to a question for which he knew the answer. I have found over the past few days that this is something that makes my grandson happy. So I continue to ask him these same questions: how old are you, who is your preschool teacher, what city do you live in, what is your mommy's name, do you know who I am?

"He's three, Dad," Mia says.

"I'm three-and-a-half," Henry says. "It's almost my birthday and Mom says I'm going to get a party too."

Well, what about you? I ask my daughter. You're not too young to date still are you? Henry's dad lived somewhere outside the city. He was younger than Mia by almost five years. Mia didn't have time for his wishy-washiness. He had tried to reconcile with her several times, but she wouldn't let him get anywhere near her or Henry. "It's not my job to make Henry's father a worthwhile person," she had once told me.

"What do you mean? Me? I'm too busy for any nonsense," Mia says.

"You? Old? Now that's just a bag of chickens," Mrs. Howser says.

"Oh, I hear them," Mia says.

Mia brings the neighbors onto the deck. I watch Mrs. Howser greet them. Her skin is like waves encountering waves when she smiles. Someone must make a joke because now everyone is laughing, except for Henry and the little girl who stare at each other awkwardly.

Go over there, Henry, I say. Go say hello to her. What's the worst that could happen?

"John," the man says, walking over to me. "How are you feeling?" he asks, instead of the regular "How are you?" He has a bony handshake, but solid eyes.

"He's at his own funeral, for God's sake," Mrs. Howser says. "He looks pretty well considering that, I'd say."

"I wouldn't say that," Mia says. "This is a celebration, really."

"Yeah," Mrs. Howser says. "So was my first husband's funeral."

This time no one laughs but me.

"There's children here," Mia reminds us.

So there is, I say. How about a game? I ask. The little girl synchs in around her mother's legs. No? Henry?

"Hide-and-seek. I'm it," Henry says, which elicits a very small smile from the girl. I am confident that if I play one round with Henry, she will join in the next.

Give me some time to hide, I say, as Henry covers up his eyes.

He counts to three, then screams "Here I come. Ready or not." I am not ready, but I manage at least to slip into the house. I head up the stairs while he begins searching the backyard.

I go towards my room first, thinking I will hide in the closet. When I open the door though, I see boxes stacked and piles of clothes everywhere. No room for me to hide in there. I go into the other bedroom—the one that Jean had kept as an impeccable guest room in case Mia ever came to visit. Now that Mia was here though, she and Henry slept in the living room, where there was more "wiggle-room" for the both of them. Henry had been sleeping in my recliner so that I often had nowhere to sit in the mornings while I listened to my radio show.

The extra room is just as packed as the closet though. Mia must have stuffed it full. I wedge my way in and find a place on the edge of the daybed to sit down. At my feet is a box of all my sports plaques from school. Most of them are for wrestling. I was never a star, but I did earn the nickname the Lean Lion from all my teammates. Next to that box is a plastic tub full of tangles of jumper cables. Something that I should have in my car, not up here in the room, I think. I try to work out the knots, like I used to do for Mia, when she would come home from swimming lessons, smelling saline clean, with miniature bird-nest-knots in her hair. One hundred combs, I would promise her. We would count down together until there was only one stroke left. By that time her auburn hair was soft corduroy.

When I scoot my foot over I hear a loud hollow crunch. I see the mosaic of a snail's shell beneath my shoe. Hopefully the slug has a back-up plan. This is probably just his vacation spot, I think. How is it though, that a snail suddenly becomes a slug when it loses its shell?

I try to move my other foot, but that bumps into something too. I feel, suddenly, like this world doesn't fit my body anymore, like I have accidentally put it on inside-out. I have the urge to rip out everything that seems to hold anything together. Then things go quiet, as if suddenly headphones have fallen off my ears, headphones I hadn't even realized I was wearing.

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My father puts me on a bus all alone. I am going to visit my relatives in Nebraska. I am only eight, I plead, but he says to toughen up. It will be good for me, he says. But somehow, as I listen to the in-and-out stations of the radio on my walkman, I fall asleep before my connection in Iowa City. Now the bus is stopped. Everything dark. I feel my way down the aisle with both hands reaching for the backs of seats. The bus door is closed, but I am able to push it open with the side of my body.

It doesn't make that noise like a pipe exploding like it usually does. When my eyes adjust to the dark, I make out rows and rows of parked buses. A graveyard of buses. And I'm indoors, some kind of warehouse. I can tell by the concrete beneath my feet and the absence of stars above my head. When I finally make my way to a wall, all I can feel is a corrugated material, like they have at school around the baseball diamond. I try to find a door, but only half-heartedly, because I am afraid of what is outside. I can hear nothing. No cars, no people. I sit with my back to the wall and wait, wondering if anyone is wondering where I am.

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"John?" Mrs. Howser says, opening the door.

I came up to get some jumper cables for my car, I say. I have a set in my arms, a yellow wire and a red wire.

"Oh?" she asks.

Yes, I say. I've been storing them up here incase something like this ever happened. Just lucky it happened here at home, not out on the road.

"Henry's been looking for you." Mrs. Howser says, blushing. The blush drifts across her face slowly, like lips blowing on the surface of a pond. A real blush, not like the blush Jean used to put on each morning. By the end of a week the bathroom wastebasket (trash out on Fridays) would be full of tissues splotched with Jean's pink silky make-up.

I want to say something to her. The first sounds of speech gurgle up in my throat. Words have never been spoken before. Fire hasn't yet been discovered. Humans still transport on four feet. I want to ask her how to begin anything when everything seems to be coming to an end. Or how to end anything when I can only remember the beginnings.

"Mia was thinking we should cut the cake," Mrs. Howser says.

I lay the jumper cables down and wipe the dust on my hands onto my pants. Everything in the room is covered in dust, I realize, including me. It seems as if I have been in here forever with the rest of this stuff, just waiting for someone to pick me up and leave their fingerprints all over my body. Even once I leave the room, I feel as if I'm leaving a trail of ghostly footprints behind me, like markers in a forest, on my way downstairs.

"Dad," Mia says. "Henry was too afraid to go into the house by himself." Henry and the little girl are on the other side of the deck, playing my flowers as if they are cymbals.

The young couple is now sitting side-by-side on one of the lawn chairs, both holding bottles of lemonade that Mia has bought.

Mrs. Howser found me, I say. I guess I was lost.

"Well, it was a good hiding place then," Mia says.

You can't really hide from this, I say.

"Dad," Mia says. "Do you want some cake?"

"I'm still stuffed from dinner," Mrs. Howser says.

"Not me," Henry says. "I didn't get to have any dinner." He pouts up his face.

I could make my own dinner when I was your age, I say.

Mia slips into the house and returns in a matter of seconds balancing the cake on a cutting board. She's smiling again, with Henry at her side, holding onto her pant pocket with his thumb. She sets the cake down on the picnic table and picks up the knife. The cake has an old picture of me—one Mia must've taken from an album—right on the top, as if they had scalped the photo and pasted it to the cake. The young couple comes to admire the handsome close-up of this man on the cake. I hear Mrs. Howser snort and I look up and face my reflection in the sliding glass door: scruffs of

nose hair, deep shadows like sun-spots, cracking lips, my mouth clipped open as if it's about to make a sound.

The sun creaks down below the trees and I feel a chill sink into my bare arms. I am cold. It's too late. Mrs. Howser looks ready to bolt, just as quickly as she had appeared. I want to turn on Wendy. I want to hear her voice. I need a story, before all the stories are gone.

My daughter says "Dig in," and starts cutting away pieces of my head.

Jobos Beach

The waves came into Jobos Beach hard, gasping, and then exploding like a soda bottle from the hollowed-out blowhole on the rocky peninsula. Richard warned the kids. Not even a single toe in the water, or else. Hurricane Faith was spinning off somewhere in the middle of the ocean, threatening to touch up against the island. Pauline had wanted to stay home, skip the Saturday beach routine, but Richard was up for a stripe, and that meant schmoozing with the officers.

They had stopped by Portuguese Man-of-War Beach first, but it was empty. The danger sign was up. Man-of-wars out today.

"What will happen to the men-at-wars during the hurricane?" Linda had asked.

Will whispered something into Patty's ear.

"I know," Patty said. "They're going to ejaculate to another ocean."

"Excuse me?" Richard said. "Do I need to pull this car over?" It was an empty threat though, even the children knew it. The road down to Jobos was too narrow and too steep to stop for a leg-swatting.

"Like the airplanes," Patty said quickly.

The year before, the Air Force had evacuated all of the aircrafts to save them from the fury of Tropical Storm Betsy, Puerto Rico's biggest storm in '65. Everyone on the base had filled their bathtubs with water to prepare. When it was over, Pauline and the kids had watched from their backyard as all of the military planes landed one after the other like sighs of relief.

But it didn't look like Hurricane Faith was anywhere near them now. The sun was up, a steady, filmy heat. And Jobos was packed with locals and all the NCO gang from the base. It was an unsponsored beach, meaning the Air Force deemed it unsafe. But the only sponsored beach, Crash Boat, was much rockier and didn't have the nice gradual slope of sand and water.

Patty and Linda were out of the station wagon before the engine was even cut. The sour smell of pig skins smeared the air, luring the girls to run over and spend their weekly nickel allowance on the greasy newspaper-wrapped packages.

"Don't get sand on your ears," Pauline called after the girls. They had to keep the cat gut string in their ears for another week. The woman who pierced them at the BX had shown them how to pull the string back and forth and how to dab the alcohol before bed at night. Richard had surprised the girls when he offered to take them to get their ears pierced. He had just found out that he was being considered for the promotion, so he was in an unusually good mood that night.

Patty reached up to pet the cat gut as if it were alive. "*I* won't" Patty said.

"*I* won't either," Linda said, perfectly mimicking her sister. Then both the girls took off, screaming at each other to wait up.

"I'll carry the Coca-Cola cooler down to the beach," Will said. The cooler was new, like the one Raul had at the gas station that he kept stocked with baby bottles of beer. Pauline was still surprised by the bottles in PR—all different colors and sizes, not like the standard ones in the US.

"I don't think so," Richard said, smiling like he did when he talked about politics or the war, that smile that proved he knew how ridiculous everything else was. "You wouldn't be strong enough to lift it."

Pauline was going to ask Will to carry the bag down to the beach, but her son had already started walking away towards town before she could even hoist herself out of the passenger's seat. Her belly was getting to the point where it was difficult to move properly. This pregnancy felt different than her others. She was older now. Linda, her youngest, was already eight.

At the rum-shack, a few of Richard's superiors occupied the stools. "Mary's waving at you," Richard said, pointing. Mary was the Chief Master Sergeant's wife—everybody not only knew her but was always looking at her too. She was a large, lively woman who moved soft and seductively, making her a favorite of the men in the Square Dancing Club.

"Hola Pauline," Mary called out. She was already blasted, at ten in the morning. "Try this," she said, holding out her coconut-sized cocktail. She bent the straw, like an antennae, in Pauline's direction.

"I'll get you a soda," Richard said. "There's a bunch in the cooler."

"I'm fine," Pauline said, but Richard had already started out towards their "beach base," the small piece of sand they had claimed with their towels. He thought it was inappropriate for a woman in Pauline's *condition* to be drinking alcohol. Since Pauline began showing, Richard had insisted that she not have even a single drink in public.

"A pop?" Mary asked. "You haven't gone all Catholic on me, have you? You have to try this."

Pauline took a brief sip of the icy slush concoction. It was too sweet. She hadn't been able to handle anything sugary since she conceived.

"Whoopsy," Mary said. "Your face says it all. Let me order you a rum and coke."

"I'm fine," Pauline said, "really."

"I'll just order one for myself then. And you can drink it until I finish this big old bag of tricks," Mary said, pointing to her cocktail. She leaned into the bar, jingling coins in her fist. But the man behind the bar didn't look up from his newspaper, even when Mary stared yelling "Hola? Hola?!"

The barman was familiar. Pauline had run into him around Isabela before they had moved onto the base. When their family first arrived in Puerto Rico, no base houses were available, which meant they would have to live off-base and then relocate, yet again, six months later. Their first home on the island was just up the road from the beach, a few miles outside of Ramey Air Force Base, one of two houses that shared a small lot. The pair of houses had plumbing and running water unlike most other homes in the area. Nearly everyone else got their water in buckets from a pipe at the end of the street.

A church and a grocery mart bordered opposite sides of the lot. On Sunday mornings, the kids used to shimmy up the brick wall and listen to the stringy music coming from the windows of the church. The grocery mart resembled their old carport in California, covered but open-aired. Several yellowish refrigerators strained for power on the back wall. Every Monday, the owner of the store would clear the stands of food to the side and cook a pig over a fire after splitting its throat, silencing its shrieks.

Raul and Yara had been their neighbors then, their two houses connected by a clothesline. It was an instant friendship. Pauline's kids savored Yara's special homemade coconut candy, and Yara's kids enjoyed the NCO pool, which Pauline would get them into with a guest pass. The two women would laugh at how Yara's

children loved the dingy pool compared to the warm clear ocean; the other base moms stared, wondering what was so funny. And Richard used to go to Raul's gas station at the edge of Isabela every Saturday, to drink beer and get a fifteen-cent carwash.

Now the families rarely saw each other, except Will, who still considered Yara's son Armando his only friend in Puerto Rico. Will always walked to town to find Armando whenever they came to Jobos Beach. But Pauline had to stay and socialize with all of Richard's friends.

"Mario," Pauline said to Mary. "The bartender's name is Mario."

"A friend of yours?" Mary asked, winking at Pauline.

"Mom," Linda said, her lips still glistening from her earlier snack. She tugged hard at the tails of Pauline's shirt. "Where's Dad?"

"Where's your sister?" Pauline asked.

"I don't know," Linda said.

"Well hello dear," Mary said to Linda. "Here you go Pauline. This should loosen you up a bit."

Pauline took a long drag from the straw. The ice in the drink was already melting. Before long, the syrup in the coke would thicken in the heat.

"You two are supposed to stay together," Pauline said to Linda.

"But we're not swimming. And I'm thirsty."

"Look," Pauline said. "Here's your father. With a soda for you."

"Daddy!" Linda said.

"How's my golden popcorn kernel?" he asked Linda. He pulled her onto his lap after sitting down at the bar. Since the pregnancy, Linda had turned towards her father for affection. And, surprisingly, Richard had taken on the role of Linda's hero. But he continued to antagonize their other children whenever he got the chance.

"Can I have that?" Linda asked.

"This? I got this for you mother."

"But she already has a soda," Linda said, crumpling her face.

"No," Pauline said, "this is Mary's drink."

"But you were drinking it," Linda said.

"But your mother was just having a taste," Richard said.

"Why don't you just give it to her," Pauline said. "I'm going back to the towels to get a smoke anyways." Pauline sucked up the rest of the rum and coke, leaving behind small shards of brown stained ice.

The air was really beginning to sponge up. Even though the wind was gathering, it didn't provide any relief. The breeze on Pauline's face felt good for an instant, and then it would settle back down, and then the absence of the hot draft felt good too, but only momentarily. Pauline could feel her face and hands puffing up with the rising humidity. Since they had moved here, the moisture had slowly washed up tiny blue veins beneath her eyes and under her chin, whereas it seemed to iron away Richard's wrinkles. His skin stayed warm and sandy like the kids'.

Pauline found the Pall Malls and matches in the beach bag. She crossed her legs and eased back onto one of her hands, letting her belly rest on her thighs while she smoked her cigarette. She tried to imagine what her baby would be like. What would she become? Would she be quiet like Will or serious like Patty or silly like Linda? What would she look like?

Patty had stunning dark hair like Pauline. Her joints stuck out like barbs and sometimes it seemed like her bones grew faster than the rest of her body. Linda had light, tangley hair that reached to the bottom of her back. In her pink bathing suit, the back of Linda's legs rolled in towards each other. And she had dimples: on her cheeks, above her elbows, on the back of her thighs.

Pauline spotted Patty at the water's edge, being watchful not to get splashed. Patty kept her eyes on the ground, stopping now and then to pick up pieces of salt-worn glass and sandy shells. She looked at each one carefully, throwing the ones she didn't like back into the water and placing the good ones in her bucket. The morning was the best time to look, before all of the other children had picked over the beach. After the girls had found enough, maybe a couple months' worth, Pauline would glue the creamy pink shell shards and colorful glass chips onto empty cigar boxes and send them as jewelry boxes for Christmas gifts to her family back home.

Pauline looked down the beach for her son, but only saw bodies moving in ways she didn't recognize, not the slender form of Will, the way he stood on both legs equally at the same time always, never shifting weight, the way he kept his arms stiff and straight at his sides while the rest of his body walked lazily. She recognized a group of boys about Will's age from the base. They had their arms linked together. Their distant chant overtook the rise and fall of Spanish words around them: "Hey! Hey! Get out of our way! Just got back from the U S A!"

"Hey," Richard said. He held what looked like a crème de mint in his hand. "Mary's over there. She's asking about you."

"Ok," Pauline said, but she didn't make any move to get up.

"You're not going to blow her off, are you?" Richard asked. "You know how important her husband is."

Pauline ground her cigarette down into the sand with her thumb. "Have you seen Will?" she asked.

"I'm sure he's off with that Armando kid," Richard said.

"That Armando kid? The son of our good friends you mean?"

"Besides," Richard said. "Do you want a red hyena face, sitting here in the sun with your belly hanging all over the place?"

"God forbid the Chief Master Sergeant should see a pregnant lady," Pauline said.

"Keep your voice down," Richard said. At home, the matter would've been settled with threats of abandonment. Now he looked nervously from side-to-side. "This promotion could mean a lot for the family. For the baby." He held out his hand stiffly towards Pauline, to help her up.

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Pauline managed to get down two more rum and cokes, both on the strong side, before Richard came back over to her. He had been down at the other end of the bar, laughing and pacing himself with Amstels.

"Honey," Mary called out to her husband. "Where have you been? I was beginning to think you'd gone off to Vietnam without telling me," she said.

"I've been on the beach," Chief Master Sergeant said. "Hello Pauline. How are you?" he asked.

"Hot."

"Yes," Mary said. "Your face is red. Looks like you got too much *sun*," she tried to whisper.

"Hello John," Richard said.

"Whoa," Mary said. "That didn't take long," she said, laughing.

"I don't know what you mean," Richard said, smiling.

"Here he was," Mary said, pointing her thumb at her husband, "then here you were."

"Yes," Pauline said, "funny how husbands can sneak up on you."

"Did you see the hobos surfing?" Chief Master Sergeant asked Richard. "I was off enjoying their stupidity."

Out towards the peninsula, some of the locals were surfing, crouched on top of their surfboards, floating across the rough water. A bunch of the surfers' wives and girlfriends had climbed up onto the rocky ledge to get a better view. With each surge of the ocean, water shot up from the gap, as if it had been underground for an unbearable amount of time. The women didn't seem to mind getting sprayed though.

"It's starting to get nasty out there," Mary said.

"I don't understand why those coconuts would put themselves in any unnecessary danger," Richard said.

"Another drink?" Mary asked, and when no one took her up on the offer, she added, "Pauline?"

"I should really check on the children," Pauline said.

"I see them," Chief said, pointing past the stilts that held up the low roof over the bar. "Playing with those Puerto Ricans."

Patty and Linda were giggling with two other girls. They all brought their fingers to their lips like they were smoking cigarettes and walked on their tiptoes as if in high-heels. Pauline couldn't tell if they were actually talking or just laughing. She knew her girls learned Spanish in school, but she realized that she had no idea how much they really knew.

"Those your girls' friends?" Mary asked.

"No," Richard said. "Patty. Linda," he called out.

When the girls looked up, Richard pointed at the towels with his finger. Both of them sulked back over to the "beach base," smothering themselves with Coppertone when they got there. The girls had become infatuated with their tans, comparing their arms and legs regularly. It was a gradual change, though, and Pauline had forgotten how her children used to look when they were stationed in Georgia—before that California—before that New York—a goddamn tour of the country.

A few months before, Pauline had seen Patty naked accidentally. She had assumed that both of her daughters would be sleeping still, but Patty was awake early, dressing for the day before her sister woke up. For a moment, in the scant light from the hall, Pauline thought her daughter was wearing her black-and-white striped bathing suit and was about to scold her. Then, when her daughter turned quickly away, crouching into herself, she saw the slit of Patty's bottom and realized that the sun had gone right through the white stripes in her bathing suit, grilling her daughter.

After that, Pauline started to wonder what else she missed. How else her children secretly changed right in front of her. She tried to find signs, things she should notice as a mother. But all she could uncover was a drawing of Linda's pinned to the fridge. Instead of the big green puffy trees her kids used to draw, three spindly palm trees lined the horizon.

Pauline loosened the scarf around her head. She slid it down around her neck. It was too hot to wear. She didn't care if her unraveling curls were matted down underneath.

"You don't look well," Mary said to Pauline. "You sure you don't want another drink?"

"I think she's had enough, dear," the Chief said.

"Oh no," Richard said. "She's not drunk. It's just heat stroke. Pauline was sitting out on the beach in the bare sun."

"I think I might go for a swim, myself," Pauline said.

"The water's too choppy for that," Richard said.

Pauline laughed.

"And you don't even know how to swim," Richard said.

"I might dip my legs in," Pauline said.

"Not on my watch," Richard said.

"Well, don't look at me then," Pauline said.

"In your clothes?" Richard asked. "With your stomach?" He grabbed Pauline's arm.

"How about some ice?" Mary asked.

"There's plenty in the cooler," Richard said.

"You and that cooler," Pauline said.

"Ohhhh," Mary said. "I saw you carrying that thing. What do you have in there? A body?"

Chief Master Sergeant laughed.

"Of course not," Richard said.

"I wish I could fit my body in there," Pauline said.

Chief laughed again.

"Don't worry," Mary said. "I won't tell the Chief Master Sergeant," she said in a hoarse half-whisper to Richard.

This time Pauline laughed, deafeningly. She could hear Richard's voice in her head like a distress signal on repeat. "You're drunk. Jesus Christ. Look at how red your face is. What kind of mother are you?"

"Well," Pauline said. "I really need to find my son."

"Better hurry," the Chief said. "It looks like we'll need to evacuate the planes tonight. If this storm really comes through."

"You know I'll be there," Richard said.

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Pauline was surprised to find the beach mostly empty when she stepped back onto the sand. The few people who had driven cars were packing up quickly. The ocean roar shivered loud, but the water looked far away, like a crease in gray fabric. Dark clouds splotched above, stains soaking into the sky. At first, the rain was just a

slow tickle, as if the drops couldn't find a space of air that wasn't already saturated. Pauline looked towards the sheer chest of the rocky peninsula for Will. It was really unusual for him to be gone for so long. Typically he and Armando prowled around on the beach, sometimes snorkeling out past the cove, where the water got deep. The wind started to whip down faster. Water sliced up the shore, each layer of waves leaving behind spinal cords of seaweed.

Richard piled everything on top of the cooler to make it to the car in one armload. In the drenched parking lot, sand crabs came up and out of the dirt, their pink shells the size of a baby's hand. Pauline walked among them, careful not to step on any. She thought about the time when she was a girl and a heavy rain drudged up their freshly buried dog. Recently she had dreamed again and again that when she came out of the anesthetic and saw her baby for the first time, it would look like that dog: bloated, mud-caked, diluted eyes.

"Get in the car," Richard said to the girls.

"Can we go to Pepe's?" Patty asked. It was a custom, to stop there after the beach for beans, rice and pork.

"No," Richard said. "We need to get home."

"But I'm hungry," Patty said.

"Get in the car," Richard said to Pauline.

"What about Will?"

"I'll stop by Raul's on the way. He better pray to God that he's there."

The girls shut their eyes and pretended to fall asleep before the car had even started. They could tell someone was in trouble, and they wanted to make sure that it didn't end up being them. There had been times they didn't even open their eyes after the car had come to a stop in the driveway. They would keep pretending and let their

dad carry them inside, their ability to hold up their necks and arms giving them away. But now the girls were too big for that.

The low-slung houses passed by the car window like a slur. The colorful swatches of roofing pieces throbbed as if Pauline's eyes were closed and she was looking up at the sun.

Will was out front of Raul and Yara's. He was spraying the hose in a steady stream at Armando's back. Pauline slid out of the car before Richard had the chance to unbuckle.

"One-hundred forty-six bottles of beer on the wall, one-hundred forty-seven bottles of beer on the wall," Will was counting.

Yara must have heard their car pull up, because immediately she opened the front door and ushered Pauline and the kids inside.

"Your soaked," Pauline said to her son.

"We were playing torture," Will said.

"I lasted for one-hundred forty-eight seconds," Armando said.

Pauline looked up at Yara, who just shrugged her shoulders. Raul was listening to the weather report in Spanish on the radio, mumbling under his breath.

"This is going to be a big storm," Yara said.

"I know. Richard is probably going to have to fly the planes out tonight."

"When?" Raul said. "There's not much time."

"You should stay here with the kids," Yara said. "So you don't have to be alone."

Pauline could still hear the station wagon idling out front. "I don't know," Pauline said.

"Please," Will said.

"Raul has even made a soup. Enough for everyone," Yara said.

Pauline heard the car door open and slam shut.

"Richard's coming in," Yara said. "You can tell him your plan to stay here."

Richard didn't even bother with any "hellos" when he got into the house. He told Pauline and Will to get in the car. He needed to get back to the base. He didn't have time to play around.

"Well?" Richard asked.

Will looked hesitantly at his mother, then reluctantly said goodbye to Armando and ran out to the car.

"I think I should stay here with the kids," Pauline said.

"Absolutely not," Richard said. "It's dangerous."

"It was dangerous to come to the beach," Pauline said. "Just so you could make a good impression."

"Do you really want to continue to embarrass yourself today? Here, in front of your friends? Stop acting like a child," Richard said.

"Who goes to the beach during a goddamn hurricane?" Pauline asked, looking towards Raul and Yara for agreement.

"Apparently, a lot of people. You saw how packed the beach was," Richard said.

"All you care about is your stripe."

"Which you could've blown today with your behavior."

"Me? I'm not the one in the Air Force," Pauline said.

"You have a problem, Pauline. Now get in the car."

"Not today," Pauline said.

"You can jeopardize your life. But the children are coming home with me. They're going to ride out the storm in the safety of our house."

"That home isn't any safer than this one. We don't have solid windows. We don't have a basement. This practically used to be our home," Pauline said.

"That was temporary," Richard hissed.

"Everything's always temporary," Pauline said.

"I don't have time for this," Richard said.

"It's very safe here," Yara said to Richard. "Raul will not have to leave like you."

"No," Richard said. "He won't."

Pauline followed Richard out of the front door, but stopped on the front patio. The wind screeched up high. What was Hurricane Faith capable of? How many homes would she sift like flour through her fingers? How many roof tops could she iron over? How many lives could she squeeze to death in her embrace? She thought about all the big storms she had heard about on the news: Audrey, Cleo, Hilda. Nothing could stop these women.

"I'm staying," Pauline shouted through the rain.

Richard ignored her. He hurried into the car and shut the door. Big puffs of exhaust swarmed as the engine started up. All three of her children were packed in the back seat of the car. Their trapped breaths like television static on the window. Will put up one of his hands as the car began to pull away. Richard peeled off with a take-no-prisoner mentality, almost mowing down a cat in the street. As the car sped away, Patty turned her head around and opened one of her eyes.

Pauline stood in the rain. She let the water in. Pelt her body. She let her baby, safely sheltered within the warm fluids of her womb, hear the rain on the roof of her belly. A calmness tingled over Pauline, like when they first flew over the ocean to get to Puerto Rico. It was the first time Pauline had ever been in a plane. All that blue and blue and blue beneath her. They flew over the Bermuda Triangle, and Pauline had

thought that she wouldn't mind disappearing. Evaporating. Becoming part of all that water. Pauline rubbed her belly. She wished her baby could hide in there forever, but soon she would have to face the world on her own, a place she couldn't even dream of.

Downfall

Obviously, things that are round are also well-made—efficient. Can you imagine a square light-bulb? Or a fist. Take a fist for example. Round enough, stronger than a slap. Of course planets, at least all of our planets. Gravity practically invented roundness: balloons, parachutes, bubbles. Roundness is completely natural: eyeballs, skulls, nostrils.

I call this obvious. Dad called this biomimicry. "Genius," he said.

"Right," I said. "Eggs know how to protect themselves. I mean, right?"

"Exactly. Not from predators. And not from long-distance drops. But nature knows what's what. We'll just need to enhance it. Enhance everything."

Dad entered us all into an egg-dropping competition: the Hamlin family. He told us about it one night during dinner. Haylie was sitting at the table cutting out evening newspaper headlines for her time capsule. I continued to hold the microwave shut while leftovers heated. There was a small crack in the door from the corner to the glass that prevented it from properly sealing. Dad was all terrified of micro-radiation, so we had to keep one hand on the door at all times. Mom continued to bake in the glow of the computer screen, where she was working on perfecting her blue tan.

"No thanks," I told him. "Aren't egg contests for science nerds?"

"Not me either," Haylie said, her scissors now chomping through the back of a cereal box left on the table from breakfast. She cut out a large diamond, leaving the pale cereal bag inside exposed like a shriveled brain.

"You're ruining that," I said.

"It's not *your* cereal," Haylie said. It was Mom's healthy cereal.

"The whole family," Dad said. He sat down at the table to wiggle off his work-boots. Khakis, a polo and a pair of Timberlands: Dad was the fanciest kennel worker in the world. I had seen a few customers drive past the house on the way to the kennel though, and Dad always wanted to look nice for the pick-ups and drop-offs. "Cas, you're on research and design. Haylie, you're the supply collector. I'm the manager."

"Why should I have to do it?" Haylie said. "Mom doesn't have to."

"That's right," Dad said. "Your mom can make her own decisions."

"I'm busy," Mom said, and, to prove her point, she didn't even turn her head towards us in the kitchen. Busy forwarding the dozens of e-funnies she got everyday in her email. Occasionally she would call me over to share in the laughter: a clip of an elephant shitting on a zookeeper or a monkey who wouldn't let go of a man's head.

"I'm busy too," Haylie said. Nothing interested Haylie other than her tedious cataloguing of human life. The year before, she asked for a fire-proof safe for Christmas. Not a lip-balm locket or a scooter, like most nine-year-olds. She said she needed something to protect her time capsule. In case something big happened, like an earthquake. She got her safe, even though Dad didn't understand her collecting. Everything she chose seemed so arbitrary. There was no method, no logic to her preservation.

"Screw it," I said. "I'll do it."

“Language,” Dad said, but I could tell that his response was more of a habit than a disciplinary action. He went over to the fridge and took out an egg, cupping it in both of his hands. Then he began lolling the egg between his fingers, like he was trying to guess what was inside. Like something might actually hatch.

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The first rule: all contestants must use a fresh large-grade A variety. Any eggs soaked in vinegar or treated in any other manner to enhance durability will result in immediate disqualification. The second rule: the egg capsule can not, in fact, be a real chicken. Finally, each egg-dropping device will be judged on weight (the lighter the better), creativity, accuracy on the drop-zone target, and egg integrity factor (whether or not the shell remains in tact).

That next morning, before school, I snuck a turn on the computer when I heard Mom talking on the phone, her laughter like a clogged vacuum. You would think that the world was constantly entertaining her from the way my mother spoke on the telephone. I looked up eggs on the internet. Everything worked to guard the yolk. The egg was in and of itself a vessel of protection. Two twisting threads—the chalazae—anchored the yolk. The albumen—egg white—served as padding. The shell was the outer layer, the final protection.

Who knows how to protect a yolk better than an egg itself? It seemed only logical to make the egg capsule like an egg. I took out the half-empty carton from the fridge to confirm what I had read on the internet and to try to get the feel for some of the materials I might need to use.

It wasn’t the first time I had broken eggs open for the sake of knowledge. Once, I stole eggs out of the chicken coop at my grandparents’. They still lived on the same farm Dad grew up on. Grandma and Grandpa were the type of people that traded eggs

at the gas station for cases of single-serving orange juices. That was one thing about the kennel: it tied us down and gave Dad an excuse for not visiting his parents.

Each egg that I had stolen felt equal in weight to my hand so that they seemed to float beneath my fingers. I had never held an egg. This was before Haylie was even born. I certainly knew what an egg was though. I had seen my mom whiplash them against the edge of the counter before throwing them in a pan, but I hadn't ever been allowed or offered the opportunity to hold one myself. Some of the eggs had translucent veins that I could almost see through. I tapped the eggs one by one on the ground. Softly. Unbearably. Until small fissures shot out like fault lines.

My grandparents flipped when they found out what I had done. "Look at the mess," they had said, standing over the yellow mucous cluster in the grass. I had mixed everything up with my fingers and stood by all the adults observing my creation with them, tacking my fingers together and apart. "Is she an ignorant? Does she know nothing about the world?" Grandma wanted to know. Mom wouldn't look at me. I had embarrassed her. Dad told them, evenly, that "perhaps it was they who knew nothing."

Before heading to the kennel to run a few of my ideas past Dad, I stopped by Haylie's room. She sat on her bedroom floor surrounded by stacks of Mom's glossy, unused cooking magazines, scores of newspapers, and old books.

"Gross," I said. "What have you been doing in here? It smells like a butt."

"Then get your *ass* out of here," Haylie said.

"Oh, are you going through a cussing phase?" I asked. "That's cute. You're really maturing into a woman."

"Like you?"

"Are you planning on helping with the egg thing or not?" I asked her. She ignored me, flipping through a children's book in Spanish that I had used for one of my classes. "Hello? Haylie Stupid Scissorhands?"

"Did you know that cows can speak Spanish?" she asked. She pointed to a picture of a brown and white cow. A speech bubble squirting out from its mouth said "Mu."

"That's no different than moo," I said.

"Didn't you fail Spanish class?" she said. "You should've asked this cow for help," she said. "I think I'll cut this out for my time capsule. Because cows are smart."

"Fine," I said. "Have fun all by yourself. Oink-oink."

"*I'm* not the Oinker," I heard her quietly say as I shut the bedroom door.

Across the field, with the gauze of morning stuffed into my head, I could just hear the soft tap of dog doors closing. The kennel was a good quarter-of-a-mile away from our house, close enough to hear trouble, but far enough that the dogs' barks sounded distant and weak, like a Morse code signal. But as soon as I stomped the dew off my feet onto the kennel's doormat, the dogs began unleashing their accusations.

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Living at a kennel means your day either begins or ends with shit. There was something about slinging that bag of dog-doo over my shoulder though, my tall rubber boots, my mom's freshman-fifteen jeans from college, my basic white Jockey tank, the kind that boys wear when they play basketball in the park—there was something about this work that made me feel capable. I would slap that bag down on the hood of my old Chevy and drive it up to the dumpsters near the house. I didn't care about the damp shit imprint left on the rust-rashed paint. I didn't help out as much as I used to, but the kennel always felt like something my Dad and I shared. No one else in the family understood the thrill of facing an onslaught of barks, the knowledge that all that noise was just for you.

Amazingly, starting a kennel was Mom's idea, even though she wouldn't get near me or Dad after we had been working, "rubbing noses with those grimy animals,"

as she put it. Dad had grown up on a small dairy farm outside Clovis and had decided that he was ready to move on from rural living by the time he met Mom. But Mom was tired of working for other people, and saw the kennel as an opportunity for her to be the boss. She took care of the administrative details of the business while we actually took care of the dogs. Dad always thought she would grow to love the species, but if anything, the more she was around them, the more distance she needed. Once when I was younger, I asked for a puppy for Christmas, and Mom began laughing hysterically. “Have you forgotten where you live, sweetie,” she had said.

The front office of the kennel looked deceivingly calm, like usual. A pyramid of clean dog bowls dried on the counter. I could hear the quiet grunt of the washer struggling with a load of towels. I found Dad towards the back of the kennel, dealing with a tape-worm infestation. He had on yellow arm-length gloves and was scrubbing all the runs feverishly with a bucket of bleach water. “One of the customer’s dogs must have brought them in,” he said.

“I think our device should mimic the composition of an egg,” I shouted over the noise.

That’s when Dad started talking about biomimickry. He had read about it in an article. He explained how humans were beginning to see the real advantages of using nature as a model to build machines. “What will we use for filling?” Dad asked, dabbing the sweat from his forehead with his knee.

“Jelly,” I said. “And how about rubber-bands to anchor the egg in place.”

I could tell Dad was already sketching a model in his head.

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When I got back to the house, Mom was upstairs in Haylie’s room.

“There’s been an issue,” Mom said when she saw me staring from the doorway.

The mystery of the heady smell coming from Haylie's room had been solved. Haylie glared at me—she probably figured I had told Mom about the stench. But Mom explained how she sniffed something foul from all the way down in the kitchen. At first, she thought Haylie was hiding food in her safe. Mom had once found rotting peanut-butter cookies hiding inside an old pillow that I had made in my seventh-grade Home Ec class. She had just sighed and threw the whole thing out when she saw the mold. I guess she figured that Haylie would follow in my food-hoarding footsteps. She often commented that we were all alike, meaning everyone in the family was "big-boned" except for her.

"Haylie's hamster has died," Mom said.

Mr. F. W. Squeaker had finally run himself to death on that rickety wheel. When Mom had noticed the empty cage, Haylie copped up. She had put his body in her time capsule a couple days earlier after she noticed he wasn't alive anymore.

"Haylie," Mom said. "Some things aren't meant to be saved. Things don't last forever."

Everyone was so busy trying to find an empty shoe box and some tongs that no one objected when I offered to take care of the hamster. I expected Squeaker's hair to be duller somehow, but it was the opposite. He felt slick to the touch, like everything inside him was finally loose. Both of his eyes were gone, like a black outlet. I imagined plugging him in and turning him back on again.

By the time the ceremonious trashcan burial had taken place, it was nearly lunch. The death cemented my plans of missing the first half of school that day. There was a test in geometry that morning that I knew I was going to fail. It didn't make sense that something could undergo a "transformation," but somehow stay the same. That was the trick of isometrics, my teacher had explained. He blabbed on and on

about translations, rotations, reflections—but he never seemed to consider the actual meanings of these words in the real world.

That afternoon, while the rest of the high school was at an assembly, I took an old Styrofoam globe from my history room to use as the shell for the egg capsule. It easily fit underneath my baggy sweatshirt until I got it to the parking lot. By the time I got back to the old gym, Danny Armstrong was almost done with his speech. He was up for school president against Gloria Lopez. "Let's start spring semester off with a big bang," he finished, thrusting one finger up into the air—and he wasn't just talking about the beginning of the universe. Everyone knew he had fingered Turner under the table in Biology class after dissecting a pig fetus last year. It was Danny who earned the nickname Fetus Fucker, not Turner, but every time she heard anyone call him that it made her wince.

I found Turner after the assembly. We hadn't been close when she was with Danny, but since the fingering incident we had become friends. "Where were you?" she hissed at me.

"Sorry," I said.

Missy was right behind Turner. "That was not even cool," Missy said, "that was sexual harassment." She said the word harassment like basement.

"Screw Danny," I said. "You have Jason now. He's hella cool."

"I don't even care," Turner said. "And you know what? I don't even care." And she could afford not to care. She had long brown hair and baby-bright lips. When people first started noticing us hanging out together, someone started a poll at school to see who had better boobs, Cassie Hamlin or Turner Fischer. Turner had perky grade AA breasts. I had fat grade B ones. She won hands down. The only thing Turner had going against her was that she was friends with me.

"You shouldn't care," Missy said.

"I don't," Turner answered.

At home, I took out and lined up my acrylics. I plunged the brush in black and started in the middle of the globe, in the ocean, somewhere between London and Canada. I didn't know what I was painting at first, maybe a boat, but soon it became clear that the dot I had made was actually a pupil. Dark hair, a mom-cut, or a boy-cut, but the rest of her was feminine. She had realistic skin, with patchy spots and tiny spider veins the color of fire beneath her eyes and on the tip of her nose. I even gave her a yellow raw-edged brain stem in the midst of other chopped nerves and arteries where her neck was cut-off. She still looked alive, though she couldn't have been too far away from death. Dad knocked on the door as I was blowing on the back of her head to help dry the paint.

"Wow," Dad said. "Will you look at that?"

"She's done," I said.

"Should we name her Egg Head?"

We decided to use raspberry jelly instead of apricot so that if she did split, at least it would seem realistic. Dad cut a hole in the back of the Styrofoam with a sharp serrated knife. He tied several rubber bands together—making a cradle to suspend the egg—and attached these to the sides of her head, between her ears, with some wire he found in the kennel. After securing the egg, we began to load the globe with jelly. Three jars of jam later, Egg Head was filled. We couldn't even see the white egg in the center anymore, just the red thick warmth of the jelly and the dark flecking of seeds.

"I guess they'll have to trust us that it's in there," Dad said.

"What would be the point if it weren't?" I asked.

"I'll make some room in the refrigerator. We wouldn't want her to spoil overnight."

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The temperature dropped suddenly the morning of the egg competition, low for November. Dad was already at the kennel by the time I came downstairs. Haylie was working on the Sunday paper, cutting out a large picture of people in space suits playing baseball on a small dirt baseball-diamond. The picture had a caption over it that said "Asbestos: Are Your Children Safe?" Mom was dusting her neck with powder in her reflection from the fridge. She straightened herself when she saw me, pulling at the hem of her fitted shirt.

"You better start getting ready," Mom said. "The car is covered in ice." I went up to my bedroom and put on a pair of silk pajamas that were too small before slipping on my jeans. I located a plain long-sleeve and my extra-large black hoodie. I even took care to put on several coats of mascara and layers of lip-gloss.

I went to find Dad at the kennel, to make sure we wouldn't be late. Since it was so cold out, he had to board the dogs inside for the day so the little ones didn't get sick. While he finished up, I went to check on Chance in the back of the kennel, in the quarantine area, where we kept the "sick" dogs. Chance was what Dad called all the strays that came into the kennel weak and starving. If they made it, they got a real name, like Romulus or Cato or Max.

Dad had picked up Chance without a collar on from a nearby country road. Now she would become a permanent resident, like the other dogs whose owners never came looking for them. Chance was pacing back and forth in her four-by-six dog run. Her coat wasn't like the other dogs' coats. Hers was not oily and slick. Hers did not tear-up with water as if she were covered in Gortex. Chance's hair was dry and falling out in chunks. She was what my dad called neurotic, but what I considered sane. She recognized the situation for what it was: no getting out, no matter how many whines or whinnies or whimpers.

I popped her gate open while the other dogs increased their efforts for attention, their heads jerking in the air with each bark. In the play-yard, Chance went for the old car-tire first. She was the only dog who I had ever seen lift the tire completely off the ground. The way she swayed the tire back and forth between her bulky Rottie jaws made me think of two lovers slow-dancing.

"Okay," Dad said. "I just need to grab a blanket for Wally the Collie, then we're out of here."

"What about Chance?" I asked. "Does she get a blanket?"

"Oh crap," Dad said. "I forgot to clean the quarantine area. Will you take this and quickly hose out her run. I noticed some urine in there earlier."

My hand started to stiffen around the hose within the first minute of spraying the two puddles of oozing urine, neon green on the gray cement. The metal nozzle actually felt warmer than the cold air, but I knew that this was just a trick that frigid water could sometimes play on numb skin. It was so cold out that tiny frozen sheaths began to form around the bottom on the chain-link fence, which the scattered water inadvertently splashed up on.

But by the time we all left for the competition, the sun was up and squinting through the clouds. I rolled down my window to hear the soft tickle of ice blooming into water. Egg Head rested face-forward, securely in my lap.

It was obvious when we pulled up, before we had even parked the car, that most of the contestants in the competition were from the local elementary schools. One girl even had on a blue North Davis Dolphins shirt, which I hadn't seen anyone sport since Teresa, who wore that shirt several times a week in fourth grade. My friends used to ask Teresa to play tether ball with us during recess and then tell me to hit the ball as hard as I could. All of the other girls' arms wobbled like jump-rope compared to mine. Then one day Teresa didn't show up to class. Ms. Dillon explained

that she died in the middle of the night because she had a tumor in her brain. I considered how different things could've been if her tumor hadn't been invisible to us. I thought about how unfair it was that something so destructive could remain underground like that, only surfacing once it was too late to make things right.

The eggs were to be dropped off the tallest structure in town, the parking garage above the movie theater. A huge tarp with giant concentric rings had been laid out on the spit-stained sidewalk below. The middle circle said "Chicken's Eye" instead of "Bull's Eye," which I found slightly unsettling.

"You go ahead," Dad said, pointing to the stairs. "We'll all be watching from down below."

"What happens if the egg breaks?" Haylie asked.

"It won't," Dad said. "Not ours. Ours is going to survive."

"It's just an egg, though," Mom said. "It's not a real baby chicken, Haylie. It's not like we're really saving anything."

"Of course we are. We're saving the egg. Hell, when we're done, we can take Egg Head home and all have breakfast together, eggs and toast with jam," Dad said.

"Ew," I said.

"I agree, I'm not eating anything that's been inside of that," Mom said, pointing to Egg Head.

"No," Dad said. "You wouldn't want to get messy, would you?"

"I don't want Egg Head to fall apart," Haylie said.

"I'm going now," I said.

"Should I kiss her for good luck?" Dad asked.

Most of the egg-droppers had already congregated on the top level by the time I got up there. It was really getting warm now, more typical of early November. I wished I hadn't worn the pajamas and long-sleeve, though I also didn't want to take

anything off. I cradled Egg Head in my arm and got in line so the judges could appraise my capsule before all the devastation set in. The kid behind me had an egg wrapped in a condom. He kept bragging about his capsule's title: Safe Sex.

"What's this?" the judge asked when it was finally my turn.

"Her name is Egg Head." The kid behind me started laughing.

"Yikes. Is she dead?" the judge asked.

"Not yet," I said.

The judge picked Egg Head up and set her on a scale. She rotated her thoughtfully in her hands. Then she made a few notes in her book and wished us good luck.

From the edge of the building, we see the target directly beneath us. All around, there are the pixels of heads. Some people look up at us; some people look down at the target. I see either a flat head of hair or an upturned face, like the street has become a dark fountain filled with coins. Heads or tails, I say to myself.

"What's amatter?" the boy behind me asks. "Chicken?"

"Ha ha," I say. "Funny."

I can spot Mom and Dad and Haylie even from way up here. Dad has the camera poised, and Mom is cupping her hands around her mouth, yelling, but I can't hear a word she says. Haylie stands between them, swiveling her head back and forth, looking from Mom to Dad from Mom to Dad. I take one last look at Egg Head before she makes the jump. She looks calm, solid in her decision.

I feel like I'm rising from my body, though it's really just that Egg Head is moving farther and farther away, rushing towards the ground. I hear nothing for a moment, like when the kennel suddenly goes silent. What an egg-drop would look like to others if they someday found a picture of such an event preserved in a safe: grainy

white ovals touching down softly; blurry orange and clear globs on the sidewalk; not-to-scale humans, sweating, cheering and laughing.

Haylie slides from the crowd and runs towards the "Chicken's Eye." Mom makes a break for her, but Haylie slips between the adults easily. Dad keeps his hands on the camera, ignorant of the threat approaching his daughter. Egg Head is headed right for the center of the target, falling fast and straight towards Haylie's open, protecting arms. I imagine the head busting open, the muffled sound of skull, the sizzle of breath, and I understand now why Haylie wants to save it. But Mom yanks at Haylie's arm just as Egg Head hits the ground at their feet. The globe shatters. Little balls of styro-fuzz fly up like stars exiled from the galaxy. Jelly spatters all over their clothes. Oooooooo, the crowd says. Everything looks broken, but people clap anyway, obliviously.

Wives' Tales

"It's probably no big deal," Robert said.

"Our fence looks like it has the beginnings of a wallpaper border of baby frogs plastered to it. Except those frogs are real. Danny used your high capacity stapler to impale them there. How is that not a big deal?" Ann asked.

"He's probably just taking after his old pops," Robert said, patting his own chest. Then he quickly added, "I'm sure he'll grow up to be a surgeon or something. It's obvious he has the tolerance for it."

"I think we should ground him," Ann said.

"Don't overreact, okay? He was probably just bored. But I'll talk to him tomorrow, okay? I'll spend some time with him—just me and him—if that would make you feel better."

Ann nodded her head. Robert had always treated Danny like he was his real son. Except Ann always got the feeling that he went easier on Danny than he did on their younger son, Reeve. As if he was trying to make up for the fact that he wasn't Danny's biological father.

"Now come here," Robert said. "I want to *saturate* you with kisses?"

"What?" Ann asked.

"What?" Robert said, smiling.

Saturation was one of the words on the list. And the other night, Robert had dropped another word at dinner: Manipulation. Ann had started the diary as a joke. She wanted to see what it was like to be one of those wives who wrote poetry on the side. She titled her first poem "Words That Turn Me On." And now, Robert was awkwardly plunging these words into everyday conversation. Clearly he had read her diary behind her back. She wished she had titled the poem "Words That Turn Me On In Certain Contexts."

"How can you think about sex? Can't you hear them out there?" Ann asked.

"I barely notice them," Robert said.

The frogs in the nearby fishpond—where Danny had no doubt collected his prey—kept up a steady low-loud rhythm as soon as the sun went down. Their yard backed up to the pond that the subdivision had eloquently named the Blue Lagoon. But really, it was just a mucky frog-breeding crap-hole.

Robert had insisted on buying a home within a gated community. Only the brochures had called it a protected retreat, as if everyone living here were endangered animals that needed a particular environment to survive. It was one of the priciest places in the area. The developers had even planted tropical flowers and trees all around the grounds, to give off the "aroma of paradise."

"But you know what I'm talking about," Ann said. "They're like a band of burping boys."

"The frogs never bothered you before," Robert said.

"Besides," Ann said. "That pond smells like duck shit."

"Maybe the ducks will eat all your frogs," Robert said.

"Goodnight," Ann said, climbing into bed. That was what goodnight meant to them now. It wasn't a well-wishing anymore, but like an announcement, or a warning.

"Goodnight," Robert said, sealing the silence.

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Ann first found out about her son's unusual interest in critters years ago, when Danny was in kindergarten. It was shortly after she had married Robert, and she had figured at the time that Danny was just expressing the "boy" side of himself now that he had a male influence in his life. The kindergarten teacher had called Ann in for a conference. She told her that she was concerned about Danny's recent behavior. He had been stomping on bugs and carrying them around in his pocket all day.

"Isn't it normal for boys to like bugs?" Ann had asked.

"It's bothering the other children," Ms. Megan said. "He lines up the dead bugs on the snack table."

Ms. Megan pulled out a sample of one of Danny's victims from the drawer in her desk. "You can see how this would be disturbing to the classroom environment," she said.

Ann had been pregnant with Reeve at that time, and the deceased yellow insect on Ms. Megan's desk reminded her of the ultrasound photos of her fetus. When she got home from the conference, she shared this observation with Robert.

"Honey," he had said, "Darwin already discussed the idea of embryology in his theory of evolution. But," he added, "if our son turns out to be some type of beetle, than you obviously had an affair."

Back then, Ann had thought that she could find healthy outlets to satisfy her son's curiosity. She bought him books about insects. She learned about metamorphosis: nymphal, larval, and pupal stages. Coleopterans, Endopterguta, thoraxes, and abdomens. She learned that insects were cold-blooded and backboneless.

She even found chocolates at the grocery store that came with a little card picturing a creepy-crawly on one side and cool facts on the other that Danny could take to school for snack time.

But all the bug paraphernalia made Danny even more obsessed. He began collecting bugs in jars after school. Sometimes Danny would even cut out shapes from different colors of crepe paper and glue them to the glass, as if it was a piece of art. Ann imagined what it would look like from the inside of those jars: rolling fields of yellow corn, golden-brown hillsides, and roasted auburn dirt, but really it would all be an illusion, like the church Ann's Mom used to take her to as a girl. From the outside, the church was a plain building with an ugly flat roof, but the inside felt like an entirely different place. The floors were a deep red color like a clear pond on the brink of night. A big stained-glass window on the back wall shattered the room with color.

"That's what all good scientists do," Robert had said. "They collect samples."

"He's five," Ann said. "He's not a scientist."

"They're observers by nature," Robert said. "Besides, even I sprinkled salt on a few slugs when I was his age."

But Danny collected the bugs in a jar, put them by his bed, and watched them for days. At first the bugs would investigate their new surroundings, then they would tire, become still. This was their pattern, Ambition, Resignation, Ambition. And then Danny would release their crisp dead bodies back into the yard, like he was setting them free.

And Danny's fascination didn't stop there. When he was seven, he began relentlessly begging for a hissing cockroach. He had seen them at the science center and wanted one as a pet. Ann thought it sounded disgusting, but lots of people kept filthy animals as pets. A bug didn't sound as bad as a rat, for example.

Danny had proven that he was responsible enough to take care of a pet by making his bed every morning for a week (except for the two times that he had wet the sheets). Ann took him down to the pet store as she had promised, but when they got there, and she saw what a hissing cockroach was, she backed out on her side of the deal. These were huge glistening cockroaches, not like a normal bug. And you could smell their bitter odor from across the aisle. When the store clerk went to pick one up, so Danny could hold it, the cockroach let out a scorching sound like burning hair.

"Absolutely not," Ann had said.

"But you said I could," Danny said. He started to well his hands up into little fists. When he got angry, he used to tuck his thumbs inside his clenched fingers and leave them that way for days, rendering him incapable of opening doors or holding hands. It would take him hours to eat, since holding a fork or a cup without fingers was a serious challenge.

"Perhaps something else?" the store clerk said.

They ended up leaving with two kittens, one for each of the boys.

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Ann went out back early the next morning, before anyone else in the house was awake. She ran her fingertips across the staples left protruding from the fence. She had told Danny that the frogs better be gone when she woke up, but now their absence somehow startled her. She had heard the whine of the outdoor faucet running through the walls last night. Did he water-blast those frogs until they were nothing? Did they slide down the fence and hopple back towards the pond, never for a second forgetting the direction they came from?

When Ann went back inside, Danny was sitting in the living room, watching the Magic School Bus. It was better than those violent computer games that Ann had

heard other mothers complaining about, but it seemed wrong somehow that at thirteen he still watched little kid cartoons.

"Turn it to the news," Ann said.

"The news is depressing," Danny said.

"Come on," Ann said. "Time to get ready for school. And you need to come straight home after classes today."

"Oh," Danny said, "right, I'm grounded."

"You're not grounded," Ann said. "Your father just wants to spend some time with you."

"Right," Danny said. "So I'm not grounded, but I'm not allowed to go anywhere."

"Don't be smart," Ann said.

"Me?" Danny said. "I'm the stupid one in this family, remember?"

"I never said that," Ann said. "I only said that you made a stupid choice. It's not right what you did yesterday."

"Dad said he dissected animals in college all the time."

"That was for medical reasons. So he could learn to help people. What you did was just a waste."

"What's going on down here?" Robert asked. "Is someone grumpy?"

Ann raised her eyebrows at Danny, waiting for him to answer.

"He's not talking to me, Mom," Danny said.

"Honey?" Robert asked. "You okay?"

"Of course, Robert. I'm just having a conversation with my son," Ann answered.

"Reeve is still asleep," Robert said.

"Didn't you wake him up?" Ann asked. "He's going to be late for school."

"He still has an hour before school starts," Robert said. "I thought with all the soccer practices lately, he could use the extra sleep."

"Easy for you to say," Ann said. "You don't have to drive them to school."

Ann always dropped off both of the kids on her way to work. She didn't really have to work, but after being a single mother for five years, something in her changed. She needed to work, even if it was at a busy-bee job. She spent most of her time at a desk with a tape-recorder, wearing headphones, zipping between rewind and fast forward, listening for slight pacing changes in conversations in an obscure language. Her boss told her that it worked better this way, if she didn't know what the people on the tapes were saying, because the words wouldn't distract her. It was straining at first, always being on the verge of understanding, but also freeing.

In fact, that same feeling was what had pulled her towards Danny's dad in the first place. She met him one winter up in White Fish, Montana. She was working at the ski resort, trying to forget about all her friends going away to college. Chad had stolen a jacket from the shop she worked in. She didn't catch him though, until she was out in the woods one day behind her apartment. Chad had made himself a camp in the snow. Ann couldn't understand why someone would choose to live alone outside in the winter. It didn't occur to her at the time that he might not want anyone to find him. That first time she saw him, Chad was crouched over a gas stove, trying to warm his hands, wearing the high-end yellow jacket that had gone missing from the store the day before. At the time, Ann had assumed that he had needed it, not wanted it, which seemed like a big difference.

"Don't," Reeve said. Danny had picked off a bundle of baby bananas that were growing next to the car and was throwing them one at a time at his brother.

Bananas growing in Northern California didn't seem right to Ann, but Richard explained that if you planted enough tropical vegetation, you could actually change the

ecosystem in a way. He was convinced that their neighborhood was cooler, but also more humid, than the rest of the valley.

"Here monkey," Danny said to Reeve. "Eat a banana."

"You eat a banana," Reeve said.

Danny looked at his little brother and gave him sarcastic sad eyes and blew him a kiss before launching another banana through the air.

Ann wanted to protect Reeve, but reprimanding the boys in any way always caused them to join forces, so Ann walked ahead as if she didn't hear Reeve's exasperated pleas.

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Danny was only nine when his cat died. He was playing out back on his own. When he came inside, he said that Mama wouldn't wake up. Let her rest, Ann had said. Mama Bitty had recently given birth to a litter of four kittens. The next morning, Ann went out back and saw Mama Bitty on the bottom of the pool, wavering beneath the surface.

It was unclear what had happened. But Robert insisted that it was probably his fault. He had probably accidentally kicked her cat toy into the pool, when he was cleaning the yard last week. Mama Bitty must've seen her toy floating around and unintentionally jumped into the pool.

For educational reasons, Robert decided to show Danny how to skin the cat. Reeve was only four then, too young, Robert had said, to see something like that. Robert borrowed a knife from the kitchen and called it his scalpel.

"Don't worry," he told Danny, "we won't hurt her because she's already dead."

Danny placed his hand over Robert's latex glove as the knife made smooth slides down the cat's body. Blood slowly strung down onto the newspapers spread

below, like one of Danny's marble paintings that he had brought home from school. They had a small burial then, for what remained of her body.

Ann had begged Robert to take the kittens somewhere, anywhere. She couldn't bear the idea of finding them on the bottom of the pool too.

"How would that happen?" Robert had asked. "Mama Bitty was a freak accident."

"Maybe not," Ann had said. "Danny was out there with her the day before."

"Jesus Christ," Robert said. "You think our son killed his own pet. Why would he do that?"

"He told me that she was dead, but I didn't believe him."

"When?" Robert asked.

Ann could tell that her husband didn't believe her, but he agreed to take the kittens into work with him. He told her that he didn't want to put the extra stress of caring for them on her anyway. And the nurses in his office could feed and nurture them. He was in the baby business, after all.

Robert loved being an OB/GYN because he got to be around pregnant ladies all day. Ann was sure that Robert was originally attracted to her because she had already given birth. He used to lightly trace his fingers over the stretch marks on her stomach in bed. When Ann got pregnant with Reeve, he was overjoyed.

Ann's second pregnancy was so much different than her first. Ann hadn't even known she was pregnant with Danny until two months in. She had told the doctor that she had been drinking and smoking, but he told her to try not to worry. What was done was done. Besides, he had said, babies are like cockroaches. They are much more resilient than people think. Ann nodded, wishing that he were wrong, that somehow she could just lose the baby.

With Reeve, Robert read Ann every book on pregnancy like they were bedtime stories. He made sure she bought the most expensive prenatal vitamins. He even insisted on accompanying her to the grocery store so that she wouldn't have to lift any heavy bags. These are peaches, these are nectarines, these are grapes, kale, kohlrabi, Italian plums, he'd tell the cashier. He made Ann eat things she had never even heard of, for a balanced diet, he would say. We don't want our son to be a picky eater, do we?

Robert persistently rummaged through the R section of the baby name book. How about Regan, he would say, or maybe Roger. He constantly referred to Ann in the plural. How are we feeling? he would ask her. *Danny* and I are fine, Ann had answered once, but Robert didn't get the hint. Robert even brought up male breastfeeding once. He told her that males could produce breast milk if the baby sucked long enough. How long is long enough? Ann had wanted know.

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When Ann got home from work, Danny's bike was thrown in the driveway, forcing her to brake suddenly. It was an idiotically small bike for a seventh-grader. The frame was fit for a three-year-old. She thought for a moment how easily her SUV could glide over it. Then she held up her hand over the horn and pretended to honk several times.

Robert was already home, showered, and in a fresh new pair of blue scrubs, which he also used as pajamas. "How come you're home so early?" Ann asked Robert.

"Janine offered to finish my shift," he said. "I gave her a free exam today so she owed me." Janine was Robert's business partner. She was six months pregnant with her first child. "Did you *generate* any interesting reports at work today?" Robert asked.

Generate was definitely not one of the words on the list. He must've mixed it up with something else. Gyrate, perhaps?

"You gave Janine an exam? Doesn't that seem unprofessional?" Ann asked, turning to dig out some chicken from the freezer.

"Free healthcare, I guess," Robert said. "It's one of the perks of being a doctor."

He reached around Ann and cupped her stomach in his palms. His fingertips inched under the top of her slacks. Ann closed the freezer door and wiggled away towards the microwave.

"What?" Robert asked.

"You were just looking at Janine's body, Robert. You were touching it with your hands."

"That's my job," Robert said. "Besides, I barely even notice that a woman is attached at the other end."

Ann knew that it was his job. And she knew how good he was at it too. Just last year he was listed in the business section of the newspaper as one of the area's top doctors. And Ann could imagine how secure Janine must've felt knowing that Robert was going to be there to deliver her baby. Ann had felt the same way when Reeve was born. Robert had insisted on delivering his own son, even though some of the other doctors advised him not to. But who could Ann trust more than him? he had asked her.

Reeve's birth was concise, clean almost. This time Ann wasn't asked if she wanted to cut the umbilical cord herself. Robert snipped it quickly and stored it safely in a white container to preserve Reeve's stem cells. Once his son was in the hands of a nurse, Robert returned to Ann for the afterbirth. He caught the placenta in a stainless-steel dish, inspected it carefully with his gloves, and slid it into a clear double zip-lock bag.

Ann and the baby were released that night. Robert had already convinced her not to circumcise Reeve. Ann thought her sons should be the same, but Robert assured

her that most doctors didn't circumcise their own boys anymore, and he saw no reason for Reeve to be unnecessarily maimed.

Ann took the thawed chicken out of the microwave and began dipping it in cream and breadcrumbs. "Did you talk to Danny yet?" Ann asked.

"Not yet. He's been up in his room since I got home. But I picked up something that I think he's really going to like."

Robert pulled out a bubble-lined envelope from his briefcase. He dumped out three pill-shaped blobs wrapped in foil. Some note cards with bone charts for mice, voles and shrews, slipped out onto the counter.

"What the hell is this?" Ann asked.

"Owl pellets," Robert said. "I figured it would be something Danny and I could enjoy together. It demystifies the anatomy of death, only these mice have already been killed by natural causes. No harm, no foul," Robert said.

"This is your idea of helping Danny?" Ann asked. "You would never do something like this to Reeve."

"Reeve wouldn't be interested," Robert said. "Just like I would never ask Danny to play soccer. Besides, these are just a couple of owl pellets. I found them downtown in the nature store." Robert scooped up the pellets and started heading for the back door.

"Where are you going?" Ann asked.

Robert placed the pellets outside under the tree, so that he and Danny could find them in their natural state. They collected them with lab gloves and brought the grey cocoons to the kitchen table. Robert got out some wooden skewers to dissect them with.

"Biggest skull wins," Robert said before breaking into his pellet.

"You're on," Danny said.

The pellets looked dry from the outside, mummified almost, but once they broke them open, Ann saw that the hair was dark and oily on the inside. They also smelled more once they had opened them up, dank, not like a dead animal exactly, but like the spiny smell of decomposition. The insides of the pellets were like a puzzle, all the ingredients to make a rodent: hair, bones, clavicles, pelvises, scapulas, fibulas, and tibias, femurs, even bony rows of teeth. Ann watched over Danny's shoulder as he carefully picked the matted fur out of the crevices of a skull with the tip of his skewer.

"Look at this one," Danny said.

"She's a beaut," Robert said. "Must belong to a shrew."

The skull that Robert found was long and narrow. It had a hole in the top of it. As he fussed out the hair stuffed inside, an orange and black beetle scrambled up and out of the jaw. Robert threw the skull on the ground.

"Where did that come from?" Robert asked.

But Danny couldn't stop laughing long enough to answer.

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It was Robert's idea to save Ann's placenta after she gave birth to Reeve. He wanted to bury it in the backyard beneath a tree. He said that it would be a Life Symbol and give Reeve something to grow with. But the placenta had remained on the bottom shelf of their freezer for nearly five years. It did look like frozen strawberries, didn't it? Ann had tried to ignore it. Then one day, she came downstairs and found Danny watching cartoons eating a bowl of melted ice cream topped with his brother's bright red melted placenta.

She slapped the bowl out of his hands, letting the contents spill over the carpet. Danny looked shocked and helpless. His hands were still upturned and cupped from holding the bowl.

"How could you Danny!" Ann had yelled.

“What’d I do?” Danny asked.

“Do you know where that came from? That came from my body.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Danny said.

“Don’t say fuck,” Ann said.

“It was just a snack,” Danny said.

“You’re grounded,” Ann said.

Only after Danny had sauntered up to his room did Ann see the bottle of strawberry syrup on the counter. She didn’t remember buying it, but maybe it was one of the things Robert had gotten to spoil the kids with. She checked for the placenta in the freezer. It was still in there, buried by a pile of Hungry Man dinners. The lumpy red bag was nearly white now because of freezer burn. Ann tossed it in the outdoor trash to get rid of it once and for all.

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That night after dinner, Ann went to the grocery store to get some milk for breakfast the next morning. The school had sent home a notice last month about how important it was for kids to eat breakfast. Brain food, they had called it. Since then, Ann had tried to make her kids eat something healthy, like wheat bread or fruit, but they both insisted on eating sugary cereals like Cinnamon Toast Crunch and Fruity Pebbles.

She tried to hurry in the store, but her eyes felt flexible somehow and she couldn’t tell the small differences between things. Is this the milk she normally bought? Ann didn’t remember that pink cow being there before.

The darkness felt superficial when she left for home, as if instead of night, the sun was eclipsed only temporarily. Just before Ann turned onto her street, she saw something in the road. A possum maybe. But it looked more like one of those black trash bags with the yellow handles. She felt the car jolt when she passed over it. There

must've been something in the bag, she thought. Like a baby. The bump felt about the size of a baby.

When she got home, the house was dark, except for Danny's window. But Danny wasn't in his room when Ann peeked in. She found him sitting at the foot of his sleeping brother's bed, petting Reeve's cat, Tussle, who was stretched out on the covers between her youngest son's legs. Ann listened for the sound of breathing, like she used to do when Danny was an infant.

"Danny?" she whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he said. He turned towards her. Danny had eyes that looked right where they wanted to, just like his father's. His hair was blonde too, like Chad's. Ann had tried to dye it once when he was about two years old. She had wanted his hair to match hers. She was, after all, his only parent at that time. The fact that her child didn't even look like her felt like a betrayal. But Danny's toddler hair was so thin and fine that the dye somehow leaked into his skin and singed his scalp. She couldn't take him out of the house for weeks. "Reeve looks different when he sleeps," Danny said.

Ann looked down at her younger son's bleached face. He looked smaller than she had remembered. He was still a little boy.

"Here kitty," Danny said.

"No," Ann said. "I won't let you."

"I want the cat to sleep in my room tonight," Danny said.

"Don't steal from the sleeping," Ann said. "Or else their spirits will haunt you in your dreams."

"That's just an old wives' tale," Danny said.

"I'm warning you," Ann said. She waited in Reeve's room until Danny left and went back to his own bed.

She found Robert still awake too, lying in the dark. “What took so long?” he asked.

“I hit someone again,” Ann said.

“Ann,” he said.

“We have to go back, to make sure.”

“Look at this logically, Ann. You know you didn’t hit anything. You never have. It was just another pothole in the road.”

“There are no potholes,” Ann said.

“Then it was a grate,” Robert said. “Tomorrow you’ll wake up and know you didn’t hit anything. You just have to tell yourself that tonight. You’ll start to feel better tomorrow. You always do.”

Parallel Protocols

Everyone on the base had a part to play.

Pauline was ironing and starching Richard's khakis when the air-raid siren went off. It screeched across the base like a strong wind. She set the iron down carefully, leaving her husband's pants half stiff half relaxed. Her first job during a drill was to collect her children.

She found her son Will inside already, slumped across the couch, watching the Dinah Shore Show. The base got reception for one English speaking channel and even that played only episodes that were a few years old, from the late 50's and early 60's. Her daughters Patty and Linda were out back looking for geckos, their favorite activity since moving to Puerto Rico. But as soon as the girls heard the siren, they ran into the house, their white and red go-go boots click-clacking across the Terrazzo tile.

"It's just a drill," Will said.

"You can never be sure," Pauline said. An Air Force base was a dangerous place by nature. "We need to secure the house."

"Against bad guys?" Linda asked.

"Turn off the TV," Pauline said to Will. Power was a problem on the island. Richard had once told Pauline that they didn't even bother electronically testing the missiles in the mornings since that was when the rest of the island was just waking up, switching on their lights or firing up hot plates. He said that you could actually watch the power meter plummet at around seven a.m. On Christmas, the military turned off half of the base's power in the morning and the other half in the evening, so everyone wouldn't overwhelm the system by trying to cook their turkeys or hams at the same time. During an emergency like this, everyone on the base was instructed to turn off all their lights and TVs, so that the military had access to optimum power.

"Ah man," Will said, sighing. "What a hang-up."

"Hurry," Pauline said. "I need you to help me shut all the louvers."

"What do I do?" Patty asked.

"You watch your sister," Pauline said. "And take those lizards off her ears." Patty and Linda often clipped geckos onto their ears to pretend they were wearing long, dangly earrings. They would pinch the lizards' necks until their mouths opened wide. Then they let their jaws clamp down onto their earlobes. The geckos would hang there for minutes, even when the girls shook their heads back and forth.

Patty and Linda had been begging for real pierced ears since they had moved to the island. When they had lived off-base, the first six months, the pleading had been especially bad because all of their Puerto Rican friends had earrings. But even after moving out of Isabela and onto the base a few months ago, the girls had kept up a consistent schedule of begging, mentioning it whenever they were headed to town, as if in anticipation of their bare ears amongst the other girls' jeweled ones.

Patty put her hand around Linda's wrist.

"Don't," Linda whined.

"Mom told me to watch you," Patty said. "I need to hold your hand."

"You're hurting me," Linda said.

"I'm taking care of you," Patty said.

Was this the closest her kids could come to affection?

"Cool it," Pauline said. "Everyone."

Pauline pressed the louvers shut as tightly as possible. They didn't have real windows in Puerto Rico. Just wide fiberglass slats that managed to keep the light out, but let in most everything else, especially the stifling weather. The heat here was brimming, not dry and stretched-out as it had been in California.

Once the house was dark, Pauline stumbled to the back and front doors to make sure they were bolted shut. When they had first moved in, the doors didn't have any locks. But Richard installed makeshift latches from the two old trunks that Pauline had inherited from her grandma.

"There," Pauline said.

"Now what?" Will asked.

The siren was still ricocheting through the house, amping through Pauline's body, making her feel antsy.

"Now we wait," Pauline said. "And stay calm."

Staying calm had become Pauline's MO, especially since moving to Puerto Rico. The unpredictability of her life—where and when and how long she would live in any given place—had become predictable. Even unfamiliar situations felt familiar, like just last week, when Linda had nearly gotten bit by a tarantula. Pauline had found her daughter sitting straight-up in the middle of the yard, her face collapsed into silent sobbing. She had skimmed her fingers across her daughter's thigh, trying to detect punctures or swelling, things she assumed tarantulas left behind. She knew that if they had still lived off-base, her neighbors would've been there to help her. But now she didn't know who lived next door and doubted that they knew anything about deadly

spider bites. It was an emergency, and it was up to her fix it, and yet she didn't know what to do.

It turned out to be a false alarm; the spider had visited Linda's leg, but didn't bite. Even still, Richard had come home that night ready to scorch the tarantula tunnels. Pauline tried to imagine oversized spiders living right there beneath her feet in a type of parallel world. Did they have a kitchen? Did they make their beds in the morning after they got up? Did they run errands during the day?

Richard had ordered Will to get the gasoline from the shed. Then he systematically searched out the yard, occasionally bending over to jam a pencil from his pocket into the ground. When he was done, three pencils stuck up like blushing soldiers in beige uniforms, arms straight at their sides.

Richard proceeded to pour gasoline down each marked hole. He wadded up three balls of newspaper and scratched a match against the side of the house on a section of exposed cinderblock. He told Pauline to take the kids inside, in case the tarantulas came out crazy. Fire slowly gnawed around the edges of the paper globes until a blaze took hold. Flames hiccupped out of each hole. Glowing bits of paper fizzled around Richard's head. When a burning spider finally scrambled out from the tunnel, Richard had yelled out *snap, crackle, pop* like a madman.

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"I'm really really really really bored," Linda said.

"Pipe down," Pauline said. "See how good your brother and sister are being?"

Patty had stuck a flashlight underneath her armpit and was reading one of her books. Will had taken out his marbles and was sorting through them. It was one of the things he collected.

Collections were popular in the military. Pauline collected pins and square-dance badges. She even had one for square-dancing on an elevator. Richard collected

coins. Puerto Rico was a coin collector's paradise. Money mostly stayed on the island. Not much of it got circulated back into the States, which meant you could find rare and old coins in the handful of change any vendor gave back to you. Sometimes, in town, Pauline would trade in a few dollars for a variety of change so Richard could sift through it at home. The girls collected things too. Patty liked mood rings. Linda liked to get cuts of ribbon from the sewing store. It was nice for the kids to have something they could keep looking for no matter where they lived.

"Want to hear a joke?" Linda asked.

"No," Patty and Will answered.

"How did the octopus catch the thief?" Linda asked. "He had an inkling!"

"That doesn't even make sense," Will said.

"Okay, okay," Pauline said. "Everybody needs to calm down."

"I don't want to be calm," Linda said. "I want to do something."

Pauline's mother had said the same thing thirteen years ago when she found out her daughter was pregnant with an airman's baby. She told Pauline that she *wanted to do something, anything* to help her, but there was nothing she could do. Pauline's mother knew all about military life. She had been born into it. But she had also worked hard to get out, running away to New York City when she was only sixteen. Now Pauline was going to marry back into the system. The reversal of history.

Pauline's grandma had immigrated to America from Italy. She met a naval officer the day her ship docked. Pauline's grandma always told her it was love at first sight. The second sight didn't look so good though—but by then it was too late. They were already married. They couldn't even talk to each other for nearly a year, until her grandma learned English. Pauline got her name from her grandma. She got her hair from her too, cool black blades that could barely hold a curl. It only made sense that

she inherited all her grandma's mistakes in life also, at least that was what Pauline's mother had said.

A month after Pauline got pregnant, she and Richard were married in a church with big chandeliers, like upside-down jellyfish. Richard kept a straight face during their vows. Do you love me, eighteen-year-old Pauline wanted to ask, but instead she followed protocol and repeated after the priest.

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"Mom?" Linda asked.

"What?" Pauline said.

"Mom?" Linda asked again.

"What?" Pauline said.

"Shhhhhh," Patty said. "I'm trying to read."

Pauline made her way to the kitchen. She spotted the white letters on the cereal box in the cabinet. "Here," she said, handing Linda a handful of Trix. "You can keep yourself busy with these."

Linda clasped the cereal in her sweaty palms. She checked each piece over thoroughly, trying to figure out which fruit it resembled, before popping it into her mouth. The bananas she guessed easily and quickly. Their shape gave them away, even in the dark.

"Do you hear something?" Patty asked.

"You mean that siren that won't flake-off?" Will asked.

"Someone's knocking on our door," Patty said.

"Daddy?" Linda asked.

"No. Your father is busy doing important things," Pauline said, though she had no idea what kinds of things he would be doing during an air-raid drill. Perhaps he was

practicing loading missiles onto planes. Or perhaps all the men were eating fried cake and hanging around at the Officer's Club.

"You kids keep doing what you're doing. I'll get it. Don't budge."

The streets were absolutely deserted when Pauline opened the door. She had never seen a place look so empty, almost as if a bomb had gone off and nobody survived. Except for the man standing in front of her. He was dressed in uniform. He looked vaguely familiar, like Richard, maybe, when he was younger, like all the men Pauline and her friends used to flirt with out at the bars when they were in high school. She thought of that question her girlfriends used to ask each other in grade school: What if you were stranded with just one person on an island. Who would you want that person to be?

"Sir?" Pauline asked.

"Who is it Mom?" Will called.

When Pauline's eyes adjusted to the piercing light, she was able to focus in on the man better. Bright red blood leached into his hair. A dark stain spidered through his shirt, quivering at his chest.

"What happened?" Pauline asked. "Are you okay?"

"Wow," Will said, coming to stand beside his mom at the door. "Check it out. I thought this was a drill."

"Help me get him into the house," Pauline said.

Pauline tried to remember what Richard had once told her about these drills. They would be realistic, but not real. But they could be real, in some similar situation, and that was the point.

"We need some light in here, Patty," Pauline said.

Patty opened the louvers in the front of the house. The wild, blank light punctured the front room.

“What happened to him?” Linda asked, once they had the man lying down on the cool tile. His eyes were closed now, but his breathing was steady. It seemed as if he had passed out.

“He’s hurt,” Pauline said. “We need to help him.”

“But why is he bleeding?” Linda asked.

“This is like a movie, okay?” Pauline said. “Pretend you’re an actress in a movie. This isn’t real. There’s nothing to be afraid of sweetie.”

Pauline kneeled over the man. She began unbuttoning his shirt, to assess the chest wound. Pauline put her hand in the center of the blood, trying to feel around for any cuts or gashes.

“Go get some bandages,” Pauline said, and when no one moved, she added, “from the safety kit under my bed.” Patty ran off down the hallway, a trail of sun slowly sucking up the barefoot smudges behind her.

The kids quietly watched as Pauline began to wrap gauze around the man’s head injury like she had seen done on soap operas. Anytime anyone had a head injury, they would wrap gauze around his head, even if he wasn’t bleeding. It always seemed to help.

“You don’t need to mummify him,” Will said.

“Should we go get help?” Patty asked.

“Of course not,” Pauline said. “Nobody is allowed outside when the siren’s going off.”

But even if the siren wasn’t going off, where could they possibly go? Pauline was rarely allowed to leave the base since the move, unless she was with Richard. Sometimes she would catch the Publicos into town, to buy cheap liquor. But the base supplied everything a family could need. The commissary even carried local food: cheese, milk, pork, beef. Sometimes the kids complained about the taste of the food,

especially the milk, since Pauline had switched to one hundred percent powder. But she would tell the kids that the cows in Puerto Rico ate sugarcane, which seeped into the dairy and meat and that would always quiet their complaints because they loved chewing on sugarcane themselves.

"He sure looks real," Linda said.

The man smiled, momentarily breaking out of character. He kept his eyes closed, but the sudden change in his facial expression was enough to make the girls gasp and laugh.

Linda crouched over his body and began sniffing. "He smells real too," she said, trying to get another smile.

"Tell him a story, Mom," Patty said. "To make him feel better."

"No," Pauline said. "No stories."

Richard had promised that the base would be safer than living in Isabela. Pauline didn't want to move again. She liked living in town. She didn't feel lonely there, with the ocean's raspy company and their friendly neighbors. She was tired of yanking the children around from place to place. Will hadn't even unpacked his baseball equipment since they had arrived here from the States. When Pauline had asked him about it, he asked her, *what's the point*? He would just have to box it up again.

In town, the houses were colorful, like an assortment of paint samples. Everything on the base was the same bland color. This base was like any other base. It had two movie theaters, a BX, a commissary, an Officer's Club, two swimming pools, a golf course, a bowling alley, and a school. Every day at five p.m. sharp, they played "Taps." If you happened to be within the vicinity of a flag during this time, you were expected to stop, salute, and remain still until the flag had been lowered for the night. No matter where they moved, everything stayed the same. Pauline often wondered

how the same place could exist in so many different locations at once. They could be reassigned to the goddamn moon and nothing would change.

But Richard insisted that it was change that Pauline was afraid of. She feared something new in every place. Snow in New York. Bugs in Georgia. Earthquakes in California.

Lately Richard had even accused Pauline of being afraid to have another baby. She hadn't gotten pregnant in the last six years, which convinced Richard that her negativity, and not their lack of sex, was somehow preventing her from conceiving.

"Should we get him some water?" Patty asked.

"Are you thirsty?" Linda asked the man. "Do you want some Trix?" She still had some of her snack bundled up in her hand. Her fingers bled yellow and orange from the dye.

The man lay unresponsive. He didn't smile anymore. He was playing his part.

The bandages Pauline had applied to his wounds were already saturated with red. Somehow, fluids seemed to continue to leak out of him.

"Shouldn't we do something?" Will asked.

"I don't know what to do," Pauline said.

Pauline bent down close to the man's lips, to listen for his breath. She lifted his head in her hands and felt the small rock muscles in the back of his neck shudder. Her own neck prickled with that feeling you get in your whole body when you stretch, that feeling of soaring and sinking simultaneously. Her grandma must've felt that way, traveling across the Atlantic Ocean, not knowing what was making her sick, the swelling water or the realization that nobody was going to protect her in America. The man slowly opened his eyes. His blue irises were cartoonishly marked with confused stars. Pauline was face-to-face with him now, so close she could see the tiny red veins

that stitched across the white parts of his eyes. Follow protocol, Pauline thought, just follow protocol.

Anyone Is Company

Jared was dead. Pete found him cold in his crib when we woke up. His mouth opened in a pucker, exposing the swollen white nursing blister on the inside of his lip. I picked him up and brought him to my breast. The creases of his body were all un-creased. His death was fresh. There was a tight squeaky settling, like wind rubbing branches against branches, inside my brain. I listened to what my baby told me.

He told me: that he felt what I felt. That he remembered the fireflies in Ohio and my grandma sitting on the steps of her back porch. That he remembered the time when I was twelve, laying the cushion of my chest on the large, pumping heart of Death Valley. The feeling of being too old when you're still young. The patterns of light when you're among them. He remembered coloring pictures on the plane, on the way to my grandma's funeral, where I watched out the window as the people below became nothing more than the shapes of L's and O's and T's. There, I discovered black and white crayons, together, make gray. My grandmother's hands, having nothing left to hold onto but themselves, were gray.

I was floating when the police first arrived. Pete hugged me, dropping his weight down into my body, and I was able to hover close enough to the ground to tell

them what had happened. Nothing had happened. They couldn't see, why couldn't they see, what I saw.

When did I last see my son alive? the police wanted to know.

Nine the night before.

Was it unusual for him to sleep through the night without waking?

Yes. He nurses every couple hours.

Did I wake up to check on him ever?

No. I put him down at nine. I fell asleep and he never woke me up. He cries at night when he gets hungry. I always hear him.

Did I hear my husband get out of bed at any point in the night?

Pete was sleeping on the couch.

Did my husband usually sleep on the couch?

Since the baby, yes, he slept there better sometimes.

Have I been under any unusual stress lately?

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Later, how could I know when, the door cracked open and Pete slipped his head in and we looked at each other. Are you asleep, he asked.

I'm awake, I said.

Pete, not fully in or out of the room, opened the door wider. He was wearing his red long-sleeve, crescents of sweat darkening his armpits. He said, your mother is here.

My mother was here. I had been waiting in bed, not knowing if I could deal with her guilt. Jared was three weeks old and she hadn't gotten the chance to come see him yet. She would see him now though, with his hands cupped together over his belly. His little beer belly, Pete had called it. She would see him in his box, a box so small that I could carry it under one arm.

But when my mother came in, she was calm and kissing. She had dealt with death. Her mother, when I was seven. My father, when I was too young to even go to the funeral. She came in and sat next to me on the bed. She didn't ask any questions.

She said, it's just bad luck, sweets. Nothing to blame but bad luck. Now it's a big old fucking gorgeous day and we're going out.

I'm down to the core, I said.

I know, she said.

We sat outside on the front steps together. I listened to the insects work to stay alive as mom talked about me when I was a baby. The dry evening throbbed in my throat. Street lights blossomed one at a time around us as the sun went down. One lamp across the street flickered like a moth caught between the rise of the last heat off the pavement and the drop of darkness.

You had to stay in the hospital for a few days because you wouldn't nurse, mom said. I could tell you weren't well, she continued. Lord, you were so small and yellow, your face red, your fingernails, blue.

She exhaled her words out between sighs of smoke and she seemed somehow more honest than me. Growing up, I had hated her smoking and loud personality, knowing for sure that she was the way she was because it hurt too much to be herself. I had hated the way she called me turd-bird and hated that I hadn't ever whispered this endearment to Jared.

You were premature, see, mom was saying.

There were lots of people out in our neighborhood starting to head in for the night. I closed my eyes and listened to the parents point up at the sky, their child's glazy eyes following the path of their finger towards the almost full moon. I felt something so close over my head, so close that I couldn't tell if it was the moon or a helicopter or my mother.

Look what time it is, mother said, scotch o'clock.

The worst part of death, mom went on during dinner, is how food tastes.

Just three weeks ago, our friends were bringing over groceries and goodies in exchange for a peek at the baby. They would ask to hold him and lift him to their nose and secretly, softly, smell the top of his head, like choosing a cantaloupe at the grocery store.

Pete looked pale and puffy, but also, for the first time in his life, relieved that my mother was here. He ate slowly and drank even slower. Mom had made us all drinks, strong drinks, saying that we deserved them.

What is this drink, Pete asked.

I call it the Black Bile, mom said.

Strong, I said.

It will give us all some peace of mind, mom said.

A piece of my mind.

I felt soaked that night in the shower, the brandy running down inside me, mixing with the milk in my breasts. I let the warm water pulse on my chest, multiple streams of milk needling out from each nipple.

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When Pete went back to work, I went back to work. I found flowers on my desk, dusty-yellow roses and baby's breath. I can't explain it other than I felt normal. So fucking normal and when I saw the stack of papers needing to be filed, I filed them, my fingers walking over Johnson, Kirkwood, Nunez. The phone rang and my hand picked it up and brought it to my ear. I said J. L. Rutherford's office? And I listened, mmhmm, mmhmm, I said, while my pencil ticked out notes.

Mother called at noon and told me she was coming up for lunch.

What about your work? I asked.

I've been taking some time off.

What does that mean? I asked.

I got crap-canned. That little bastard. He used to work in the film department until they caught him sneaking peeks at customers' photos. So they make him shift leader of the cashier department, and he gives all his friends the day shifts and sticks me with the friggin' night shifts, less than twenty hours a week.

So you quit then? I asked, but I could tell that I didn't care.

The least they could've done is lay me off, mom answered.

I can't go to lunch, I said. There's a lot to do here.

How about I come up for dinner tonight, she said.

It turned out mother never came to dinner. By late afternoon I guessed that she'd already settled down into a comfortable dimness. Pete worked late and I fell asleep early. I woke up on top of the covers with Pete stiffly lying next to me. He also hadn't bothered to undress and I felt like mom and dad dolls in a dollhouse who have only one outfit. From our bedroom window I heard voices, angry maybe, coming from our neighbor's house.

A woman, who I recognized as one of Mrs. Wiley's caretakers, stood out on the driveway, wide-eyeing words to a man. This man, who must've been her boyfriend, shook his head back and forth, but so slightly that it looked more like a tremble. Ballistic, the word whistled softly in my mouth. It was one of my mother's words. I had asked her once what dad was like when she was in one of her bad moods because I wanted to hear her say something mean, something hurtful. Your father was ballistic, wasn't he? she had said.

Headlights caught the woman and man for a moment and they both stood there like tin statues until the light passed. It was just the paper boy delivering the Bee. I felt the thud of four a.m. No one was up but the three of us. The neighborhood was still

washed in pre-morning grey-blues. I could tell by the way the girl's body leaned and how she kept looking from the house to the street that she was debating whether to stay or go, whether or not to leave Mrs. Wiley. I watched as the girl and her boyfriend squeezed into his small car parked on the street and drove away without their headlights on.

I spent the rest of the morning lying in bed thinking about the incident that I had witnessed. I wondered if Mrs. Wiley would be okay all alone, but she must've been used to solitude. I wondered about the man and woman too. By the time Pete woke up the whole scene seemed like something I had made up. I told him about it to try to make it real again.

Something just didn't seem right, I said to Pete as he showered.

He circled his hands through his soapy chest hair.

I asked, do you think I should do anything?

I don't know what you could do, he said.

I thought about calling Mrs. Wiley's son. I used to talk to him on occasion when he would come to visit his mother. She had other children too. But after Mr. Wiley died a couple years ago, everyone stopped visiting except for Tom. The last time I saw him he told me, leaning on his car door out front of Mrs. Wiley's house, how hard it was getting. His own mother didn't even recognize him anymore. She lived a double life, half her time spent in her childhood, half her time spent in the moments of the present. Half the time she couldn't take care of herself anymore than a child could, she couldn't fix herself meals or rationalize, and half the time she behaved like a disrespected adult, cursing her caretakers as overbearing and condescending. Tom had told me that she had refused to live in a home.

Common Gardens is supposed to be nice, I had suggested.

No, she won't even consider it, he had said.

And why should she? Mr. Wiley had made a small fortune in the sheet metal industry. At least she wasn't a financial burden on her children. And that house was what she had now. Think about what it would be like to try to make sense of your present life, having only a memory of its earliest beginnings. How could she understand where she was, how she became who she was, so much older and worn-out than that little girl.

That was about a year before, and her son hadn't shown up since. Just a parade of caretakers. I imagined this kind of abandonment from Mrs. Wiley's point of view and realized that to her, everyone is a stranger and anyone is company. But still, just last week, I had seen Mrs. Wiley snipping snails off her walkway with her cane. When she saw me, she steadied herself and waved to me with her other hand.

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Every once in a while someone at work or on the telephone would ask me, how are you doing, placing emphasis on the you. Janice actually gave me a raise at work, explaining that she realized how valuable I was once I was gone, but I knew that it was the only thing she could think of to do. I was replaceable, wasn't I? Every weekend felt like a long silence. And during the weeknights, when Pete worked late, I turned on all the lights in the house for company.

It had been weeks since I had seen Mrs. Wiley now. And that woman caretaker was gone for good. I hadn't seen her since that night on the driveway. The other caretakers, an older pastel-faced woman with dark short curly hair, a tall wispy man who kept his eyes on the ground, a younger woman who brought her daughter by the hand, continued to criss-cross in and out of her house all day. I had paid close attention, but everything seemed more or less normal. But then, yesterday, there was a cop. I passed him in my car on my way to work. He was turning onto our street. I tried not to think about what it could mean. I tried not to think about the last time I saw

those blue lights pulsing in our driveway. Cops drive all around the city, after all, for all different kinds of reasons.

But the next day, in the Bee, a police blotter announced a robbery on Sunder Drive, my street. An unspecified resident on Sunder Drive noticed the absence of some jewelry and antiques. It didn't say the exact address, but Mrs. Wiley was the type of person who had valuables like jewelry and antiques. I'd seen them, in her home, years ago when I house-sat for her and her husband. I pulled the record I had been keeping out of my purse and studied it. I had recorded license plates. I had listened in the night for more noises. I had casually walked by Mrs. Wiley's house each day on my way to the mailboxes, trying to see past my own reflection in her windows. I looked for lights at night, trying to figure where in the big white house Mrs. Wiley might be lying. But the lights were never consistent.

If Mrs. Wiley was on her last leg, the caretakers would have to call her children and tell them to come say goodbye. If she was sick, she would be at the hospital. But if she was already gone, the caretakers could do what they wanted, stealing her stuff, claiming insurance money, living in her house.

I decided to go down to my mother's the next day when I realized I hadn't heard from her since she failed to make it up for dinner four weeks before. Pete said he would take the opportunity to get ahead at work. We always planned that someday I would come work for him to ease his load. I didn't become a paralegal to marry a lawyer, but I've never been surprised that it worked out that way. I also wasn't one of those paralegals who aspired to someday become a lawyer. I was the kind who went to a tech school to escape the bars, where my mother usually worked in her younger days. After a couple years at my job, I met Pete, who was working on a case with my boss Janice. He was older. He had his own practice. He biked to meetings and arrived at the office cinnamon-sweaty and glowing.

Mother lived about an hour south in Stockton. The long grasses split and frayed on the sides of I-5 from brief early morning freezes.

Oh Katie, she said, when I stepped into her house, you've lost all the weight.

All the baby weight was what she meant. It had been nearly five months now since I gave birth. But the extra cushions of fat around my hips, at the tops of my thighs, and in my breasts, had steadily dribbled away, like helium from a balloon, since Jared had passed away.

What's with the gourds, I asked.

Decorating. I got them during Joann's harvest sale. I work there now, part-time. I'm the Fabric Guru.

I sat back on the couch. Pete never felt comfortable here, I could tell, his face too shiny against the dull sound of the window air-conditioners or space heaters, depending on the season. It was by far one of the better places mother had lived though, a brick two-bedroom with a grassy yard. She always explained to visitors, including Pete, how she managed to buy it before the market went all ape ten years ago.

Well, where's Peter? mom asked.

Working. Where's Harold, I asked. She'd been spending time with a man named Harold for the past couple months. She met him playing cards at a senior citizen center.

My friend Harold?

Yes, your friend, I said.

Oh you know. Probably watching the game or something.

What's that smell? I asked.

I'm cooking your favorite for dinner.

Yeah, I said, what's my favorite? And I got the feeling that whatever she said really was my favorite dinner.

Chili, with cornbread, she answered.

It smells like bacon, I said.

That's because I put bacon in the chili.

We played hangman while we ate. I chose words like elephant, square, and lifejacket. Mom chose words like saga and gritty. It's time for my zing word, she said.

Just tell me it, I said.

Of course not.

She made eight slashes and then drew the hook for the man to hang on.

A, I guessed.

She drew a head.

Then I said E, I, O, U, and Y.

She wrote down the E in the fourth slot and then drew a body, two arms, and a leg.

See, she said. By the time you guess all the vowels you only have one leg left.

J, I said.

No, she said, as she drew in the last leg then set the pencil down.

What was the word? I asked.

You'll have to try to get it next time.

After dinner, mom still ended up with half a stockpot of chili. She insisted that I took some home, saying I needed it more than her. We sat together for a while in the living room, until she drowsed off in front of the TV. I couldn't find any containers with lids so I filled up a large Ziploc with chili, smothered a check for two hundred down into her purse, and locked the door on my way out.

When I got home, Mrs. Wiley's house was a dark compound streaked with brownish-yellow streetlamp light. My house was dark too, and I didn't flip on any lights on my way up to the bedroom. Jared's room had become just the baby's room again, which is what we always called it, even before I was pregnant. It had become cluttered again too: our old curtains, which Pete changed last month when I complained that the house was too dark, piled in the center of the floor; the record player, which was too bulky to fit in the living room, squatted on top of the dresser; the top half of the desk, the hutch, which Pete took off to clear up some space on his desk, was in there too, lying upside down.

Pete wasn't home yet, so I went back to the kitchen window to look out at Mrs. Wiley's house. She was in there, maybe even awake, wishing she could turn on a light to think clearer. It didn't matter how much she paid her caretakers. They were not there for her when she really needed them.

I pulled down the metal key box from the bar cabinet. We had a huge collection of unidentified keys that we were too afraid to throw away because we knew they opened something, even if we didn't know exactly what. Mrs. Wiley's key was labeled though, her name written in clean cursive. I tapped my front door shut and made my way over to her house. If her caretakers answered, I would say that I didn't seem to have any electricity, have they lost power too? But after three light knocks, no muffled sounds of movement, I tried her door. It was locked.

The key only fit half-way into the deadbolt, and it was sturdy and resistant when I tried to twist it. But the key slid into the door handle smoothly. I turned it to the left half a circle, like I was resetting a watch, pulling back the hours one by one.

Inside, two staircases rose up to the left and right of me. I chose the right one, remembering that the master bedroom was on the east side of the house facing the park. I could've called out. Something like, hello? Mrs. Wiley, it's your neighbor,

Kate, are you here? But I didn't want my voice in her house. If I ended up needing to call 911, I decided that I would go back home first. The first room I passed was not a bedroom, but possibly an old office, jumbled just like our extra room, piles of newspapers, old broken-down boxes, second room, what I thought would be the master, was bare, single-bed, third room, Mrs. Wiley, her pale hair loose on the pillow. The electric blue weight of her breath pulled down on her chest. She was alive.

She was awake too, and she clicked her silver motorized eyes towards me. Her room was the only part of the house that had any sort of odor at all. It smelled like hot raisins and sawdust—vaguely like the eco-diapers that Pete's parents had bought for Jared. Mrs. Wiley could see me, it was darker than the front rooms of the house, but she could see me.

She said, I've been thinking about a glass of milk.

You would like one? I almost asked, but her eyes were already closed.

I didn't want to turn on any lights. I didn't want to pull open her bright empty fridge. But there was no one in the house besides me and her. In fact, it looked like Mrs. Wiley's room was the only part that anyone had been in for years. It was small relative to the other rooms, like maybe it was supposed to be a large storage room. A single high window looked out into the tops of her pines. I reached for a stack of picture frames turned facedown on a shelf, but pulled back when I saw how dusty they were.

They must be pictures of her family, I thought, pictures she now found upsetting and confusing. I had pictures like that too. My grandma bending down towards me, I'm bare-chested beneath turquoise overalls, half-smiling for the camera. I believe it's me, but I don't know it's me. My mom said that I visited grandma in Ohio twice, once in the summer when I was three and once when she died. It was incredible how many people died from unknown causes. They might say old age, or

bad heart, or SIDS, but these were just excuses. What they meant to say was that it takes too much strength.

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I decided in the end to leave a glass of milk on her nightstand. Mrs. Wiley didn't open her eyes, but she seemed to acknowledge, by a slight pause in her breathing, that I was there. I went back over to my own house to get the milk though. Maybe Mrs. Wiley wasn't supposed to have any, and maybe the caretakers would wonder how that glass got there, but I poured the milk into an old cup of ours, a straggler from my mother's cabinet that had somehow made it to our home, and I brought it to her. I noticed the blanket tucked in tight under the mattress, cocooning Mrs. Wiley's body, but I resisted the urge to free it.

I waited up late that night until I heard a car pull into Mrs. Wiley's driveway. Pete had already come home by then. He undressed quietly, thinking that I was already asleep. He lay down with his back to me. Bits of fog still clung onto his hair and I watched them slowly disappear while he fell asleep. He'd be out of bed when I woke up the next morning, so neither one of us would have to face the option of sex. It'd go on like this for months, until one drizzly morning, a few weeks after Mrs. Wiley's house had sold, he said, do you want to try? Then he asked, Kate, are you listening to me?

See this face, I said, keeping my eyes shut. This is the face of a person listening.

I think we should, Pete said.

Obviously, I said. Then, I asked, do you think we'd have any luck?

Pete said, I don't believe in luck, only in life.