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After a Funeral, Before a Test; and Other Stories

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AFTER A FUNERAL, BEFORE A TEST;
AND OTHER STORIES

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in English

by
David Stewart Robinson

Approved by

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Marshall University
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This first major writing accomplishment is dedicated to my little brother. Mike, nearly two decades ago we dreamed of writing books about dinosaurs and spaceships. There aren’t any velociraptors in these pages, but that original imagination is where it all comes from.

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ABSTRACT: *After a Funeral, Before a Test; and Other Stories*

David Stewart Robinson

After a Funeral, Before a Test; and Other Stories is a collection of nine fictional short stories. Their focus is diverse in regard to multiple aspects of creative fiction: subject matter, theme, style, setting and characters. Despite the array of material, one common method was to provide narration that would invite readers to make their own interpretation rather than to present overt, didactic stories. This narrative strategy was accomplished by using fictional concepts of setting, the objective correlative, and literary minimalism. Other elements include surrealism, Hemingway's "iceberg effect," and psychologically complex narrators. Literary influences include F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," Anton Chekhov's "Misery" and Raymond Carver's "Neighbors." Theoretical influences are drawn from Suzanne Ferguson's essay "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form," Charles E. May's essay "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story," and Cynthia Hallett's book *Minimalism and the Short Story*.

Invitations: A Critical Introduction

I

I spent half of 2011's fall semester frantically telling myself that I had made a horrific mistake in choosing to write a thesis as part of my graduate studies. During the previous spring, while I compiled my committee and got all of the necessary paperwork taken care of, it seemed like a great idea: spend six credit hours focused purely on writing. I had claimed fictional creative writing as my focus throughout my work on this degree (throughout my undergraduate years, as well), so producing a volume of work seemed like the appropriate finale.

My original plan was to work on a collection of interwoven stories—a “short story cycle,” to borrow the term used by a handful of critics—which would fit into the magical realism genre. By the start of the fall, I realized that my project wasn't working. The magical elements weren't real enough, and the stories were mostly idea-driven rather than based on well-developed characters. So I put the idea on hold and returned to other independent stories, thinking that I still had plenty of time to develop a short story collection without worrying about things with which I had little experience. If I could stick to styles and elements with which I was familiar, I could get it done.

Things got a little better, but I still struggled with my narration in the sense that my stories were often over-told, and idea-driven plots still plagued them. In retrospect I see that staying in my comfort zone held me back for a while. Improvements only trickled into the writing, but I needed a fire hose to get my work on track for a spring defense. As the semester rushed toward a close, I began to panic; maybe I should've just done comps.

I started the spring term prepared to face the possibility of having to push back my defense, but something changed. Things began coming together. After a meeting with the

director of my committee in February, I left campus feeling for the first time like I would be able to finish what I set out to accomplish. The pages following this introduction are the result of this long process of endless nights, emptied ink cartridges and pillaged reams of paper. However, before I present my fictional work, I'd like to give the reader a premise of where my writing has come from and how my education at Marshall University has shaped it into something entirely different from what I ever thought it would be.

I've loved the art of storytelling since before elementary school. I drew crude pictures of dinosaurs on the pages of my dad's notepads and wrote sentences like, "T-Rex had two fingers" (my mom and older sister made for great line editors). From there, I developed a love for everything grand. My dad read *The Hobbit* to me and my brother when we were young, and from then on I knew I wanted to spend my life telling stories of epic proportions.

When I entered Marshall University, I made English my major and signed up for an intro-level creative writing course. To put it bluntly, my work was less than impressive. Until then, my writing was inspired by science fiction and fantasy films like *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* rather than literary writing. I had a cold surprise when I found out that genre-writing was discouraged in the college environment. But I decided to stick with it, and horizons broadened immediately. My first true learning experience occurred when the instructor came in and, without any preface, read a poem in Spanish. Afterward, he simply said, "Write about what you just heard." Confused, I simply wrote my best attempt at translating the idea behind the poem. When the other students read their responses, however, I learned to open my eyes to writing about different perspectives. Several of my peers wrote about how they had experienced what had happened, and one even took on the instructor's perspective, writing about his amusement upon seeing the panicked looks on his students' faces.

Of course, my writing didn't turn a corner quickly or easily, but my various professors at Marshall, the community-driven discussions in workshops, and the feedback from close friends over winter and summer breaks helped me to develop my writing. As I progressed toward my bachelor's degree, the focus of my stories shifted from grand ideas to more basic issues like setting, character development, dialogue, and general style.

Despite the progress made during my undergraduate years, something was still off with my stories. The writing itself was getting better for the most part, but I still had issues which I couldn't quite figure out how to fix, because I couldn't tell exactly what they were. I just knew something was missing. During my second year of graduate school, though, things finally fell into place, both with the help of one-on-one instruction from the chair of my committee and from the influence of good literature, which, for reasons I'm not entirely sure of, I had never before given the proper amount of consideration in my own writing.

My director showed me how my stories were still primarily idea-driven rather than character driven, and the narration was often too obvious about the way I wanted the story to be read. While I recognized the need for changes to these issues, I felt unsure of how to accomplish them. Eventually, our conversations shifted to the minimalist movement from the late 20th century, and things began to fall into place. Through example I learned the importance of leaving room for the reader to make his or her own interpretations of fiction. That prompted me to consider other works I had been exposed to throughout my studies at Marshall, and I began to realize that texts had been influencing me all along. I just needed to develop those influences further.

In the following pages, I'd like to introduce my collection by demonstrating how various literary influences have impacted my writing and how they make my stories better. I believe I

could write dozens of pages discussing how my stories work. I could talk about Donald Barthelme's surrealism and absurdity and how they inspired the grandiose world of "A Big Promotion." I could talk about Hemingway's dialogue from "Hills Like White Elephants" and how I added a new layer of perspective to the iceberg strategy in my story "Lampshade." However, for the sake of space, I'm going to focus on a thread of elements in my fiction which provide greater longevity to my writing by inviting readers in rather than dictating how they read it.

II

I'd like to begin my analysis of my work by focusing on the development of one of the more basic elements of fiction: setting. I used to think of setting as a strength in my writing, and my exposure to literature has certainly helped me to improve on that strength. I've always been drawn to vivid description that guides the reader toward a stunning mental image. However, I've come to learn that setting can do more than just paint a pretty picture—it can offer opportunities for the reader to engage with the narrative and interpret it.

One such passage that has stuck with me comes from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, when Nick Carraway describes the "valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (Fitzgerald 23). This "gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it" (23) stand out not only because of the beautiful language used to describe them, but also because of the farm metaphor, which allows the reader to interpret the perspective of Nick Carraway. The metaphor works as an anchor in that it establishes a connection between the narrator and the setting; Carraway thinks of the valley as a

“fantastic farm” and a “grotesque garden,” and the perverse correlation between farm—where we hope to find fertility and nourishment—and desolate wasteland provides a startlingly vivid look at the way Carraway thinks of his surroundings.

I believe I accomplished a similar connection between narrator and setting in “Sanitizer.” In this story, the narrator, Holly, endlessly suffers from worry about germs and illnesses. She is convinced that everything around her is contaminated, and she is in constant need of a place of escape. At the beginning of the story, that place is a burial mound located in the park by her hometown. She likes the height because of the increased wind, which she believes cleanses her of the grime accumulating on her skin from the town. Before the conflict sets in, she describes the mound as follows:

According to a plaque at the base, the mound rises fifty-three feet above a small park as flat as a countertop, and from the bench I can survey the town in which I live and work. The city limits of Moundland Point roll out beyond the park and through the river valley like a concrete and glass throw rug and fade away into endless trees. Rolling hills browned by the deep cold of February frame the white sky. A solitary maple stands halfway up the mound by the steps. It’s become something of a friend to me, and I reach up to touch its overhanging branches on every trip to the top. Sometimes I think of her and I as sisters, the mound our pregnant mother. (71)

In this passage I’m attempting to accomplish two things at once. First, I want to provide a vivid description for the reader to be able to picture the view in his or her mind. Second, I want to provide the reader with a way to establish the connection Holly feels with the setting. Making metaphoric references to a “throw rug” and “frame” imply the idea of the town being like a home

or living room. However, her relationship with the town is unstable; she usually doesn't trust it. But, considering the cultural idea that a home is made by the people living in it, Holly thinks of her place of escape in terms of family members—her sister and “pregnant mother.” She fails to consider the grotesque implication of thinking of a burial mound as “pregnant,” but the important issue here is the narrator's point of view and the way she presents the setting: a home populated by the “family” that makes her comfortable.

After I establish Holly's original feelings toward the setting, I attempt to demonstrate how that perception can change. In her essay “Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form,” Suzanne Ferguson explains, “impressionist settings are frequently used metaphorically to substitute for representation of action or analysis” (225). In other words, setting doesn't have to be mere eye candy; it can take a functional role in a story by highlighting issues that the narrator might not be able to adequately communicate otherwise. I use setting in this manner in “Sanitizer” in the way that Holly's perception of the mound changes as her internal state changes. After she cuts her hand on a rusty screw in the first scene, she begins to feel betrayed by her safe place. As the days go on, she feels increasingly dirty, but she doesn't have her normal escape. Control over her emotion breaks down, but I also attempt to demonstrate her internal struggle by the way she notices changes in the setting:

The mound used to be my pregnant mother, but now it's a swollen blister. It needs to be popped so the putrid interior can bleed out and the flat surface of the park can be healed. The maple was once my sister, but now it seems to lean away from the top of the mound like an exhausted skeleton. A halo of dark clouds hovers above, promising rain (and pneumonia). (82)

Obviously, Holly's perception of her former refuge has changed. Pregnancy has been replaced with a blister. Not only does she think of the tree as a "skeleton," but she chooses to think of it as "exhausted," suggesting that she is also worn out from her emotional conflict. While she suggests early in the story that she thinks of the rain as a cleanser when she sits atop the mound, she now worries that the threat of rain also brings the threat of pneumonia. The shift from sunny weather in the beginning to "dark clouds" could also suggest that her grip on emotional stability is darkening. Finally, notice that, although the first scene features her sitting at the top of the mound, her perspective in this scene is from the ground at the foot of the mound. This change in perspective hints at her increasing lack of control; what once empowered her now stands over her with menacing intimidation.

Setting is something I have always valued in my writing, but as I've developed in recent years I've learned to use it for more than just stirring images. As Ferguson points out, "Using representative details for setting and character development go hand in hand with the impressionists' attention to stylistic economy and the foregrounding of style" (226). I believe my use of setting develops my narrative in an economical way by providing implications of internal states and conflicts without taking the time to spell them out for the reader explicitly. This strategy leads me to the next component of my collection I'd like to discuss: the objective correlative.

III

In "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story," Charles E. May explores Anton Chekhov's influences on the modern short story and spends time discussing Chekhov's "Misery." May argues that the story, about an old cab driver whose day-to-day life has been interrupted by the loss of his son, relies on external details rather than internal conflict to communicate the grief

experienced by the protagonist. According to May, Chekhov was interested in the internal state of the cab driver, but recognized that such complex emotion could not adequately be expressed through words in the space allowed in a short story. As a solution, he created the “expression of a complex inner state by presenting selected concrete details rather than by presenting either a parabolic form or by depicting the mind of the character” (May 202). May explains that this idea was a precursor to T.S. Eliot’s “ ‘objective correlative’—a detailed event, description, or characterization that served as a sort of objectification or formula for the emotion sought for” (May 202). In other words, when words aren’t enough to express explicit emotion, much of the conflict in fiction can be represented by details around the characters. These objective details offer the reader a chance to interpret the story without having to blatantly spell things out.

I learned about the concept of the objective correlative in the fall of my first year of graduate studies, and it has since impacted many of my strategies for writing. I believe I have always had, on some level, instances of objective looks at external details that hint at internal states of my characters, but such instances were accidental. However, after learning about the theorized term and seeing examples of it in literature classes, I understood the usefulness of such a strategy.

My first exposure to—and I believe the best example of—the objective correlative can be found in a variety of forms in Ernest Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River.” On the surface, this is an extremely simple story. The protagonist, Nick, gets off a train in a setting charred by fire and backpacks to a river where he can fish for trout. The reader gets detailed descriptions of his actions while fishing, but no obvious conflict shows itself. Finally, Nick considers moving from the river into a swamp for fishing, but decides against it, thinking that “In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure” (Hemingway 180). We only get vague references to Nick’s inner

struggle, such as the notion that he is trying to escape from something: “He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him” (164).

Because the narrator gives us little information about Nick’s past and internal state, the reader is forced to observe external details for clues. If we shift our attention this way, we begin to find objective information everywhere, which can give us insight into Nick’s issues. For instance, at the beginning of the story we find Nick getting off the train in a desolate landscape: “hills of burnt timber” and “the burned-over country” (163). As I demonstrated before, the setting can often reflect the internal state of a character, so perhaps this charred countryside is reflective of Nick’s conflict. In other words, he has been scarred. But the reader can find more clues in this story beyond just setting. External details abound, such as the pack that he carries through the blackened hills. The narrator describes that Nick is “happy” as he begins his trek to the river, but as he adjusts his pack he begins to notice “it was too heavy. It was much too heavy” (164). The distraction of the heavy pack might suggest that Nick feels burdened by something from his past as he attempts to travel into the wilderness.

The narrator also focuses on wildlife, particularly damage done to animals. The first example of this is the grasshoppers Nick catches to use as bait while fishing. He thinks that the fire must have occurred a year prior to his trip, “but the grasshoppers were all black now,” prompting him to wonder “how long they would stay that way” (165). Not only is the setting blackened, but all life in it has still not recovered despite the time that has passed. Nick notices this because he also wonders why he has not lost his scars from whatever it is he is trying to escape. Later in the story, when Nick takes care to wet his hand before touching the trout, he remembers a time when “he had fished crowded streams, with fly fishermen ahead of him and

behind him, Nick had again and again come on dead trout, furry with white fungus, drifted against a rock, or floating belly up in some pool” (176). This memory may explain why he has gone to a desolate location in order to fish; he is afraid of witnessing the damage caused by the carelessness of others. If we can draw that conclusion, we can suggest that he is running from another experience in which he has witnessed the destruction caused by humanity’s carelessness.

I could write page after page on this story because Hemingway uses objective correlatives by the dozen in order to communicate the internal struggle of his character. Whatever emotions Nick is feeling, they are far too complex to explain, so Hemingway focuses on the external details and Nick’s interaction with them in order to make implications at what he is going through. I attempt to employ this same tactic in several of my stories, but here I will focus on “Sand.”

I originally wrote “Sand” as one of my first attempts at writing a researched piece of fiction. I read books on Navajo Sand Paintings and found articles and case studies on modern Navajo culture. I knew that I could relate to Samuel’s struggle to connect with his heritage to a small extent, because just about everyone has felt out of place with family history and beliefs at one point or another. However, I knew that I could never fully grasp the struggle of a people whose way of life is under so much pressure to change as a Native American tribe. So, rather than try to capture what Samuel is going through explicitly, I rely on the idea of objective correlative to simply suggest at the complex emotions he experiences.

“Sand” explores several moments taken from various points of Samuel’s youth. In the early moments of the story, we see him show interest in learning his heritage from his grandfather, a healer in the community. However, as he turns into a teenager and young adult,

his white friend—Christian—begins to influence him more than the history of his people. He discovers alcohol and grows more and more distant from his family’s way of life.

My strategy in this story is to use the objective correlative as Hemingway does in “Big Two-Hearted River.” I want to suggest that, although Samuel falls into the teenage American culture of substance abuse, he still feels like he is missing something by not having a true grasp on his culture and heritage. Again, I did not want to explicitly state this by describing his internal state; as May suggests of Chekhov, I knew that I could only do so much with that. Rather, I included external details to offer mere clues to what Samuel must be experiencing.

One example of the objective correlative in “Sand” can be found in a scene near the middle of the story; Samuel, accompanies his friend Christian to the Four Corners Monument, where the state lines of Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico converge. The narrator reveals that Samuel is aware of the implications of a monument set up to highlight state lines that divide land once belonging to his ancestors, saying “He was Navajo, and an iron plate recognizing the precise convergence of four of the United States had a darker meaning for him in history” (45). However, the narrator also hints that a more personal internal conflict may be occurring when Samuel awkwardly requests that they leave:

“I’m just surprised you’ve never been out here in your whole life. Hell, it’s only about two and a half hours away,” said Christian.

“I know. Crazy,” said Samuel. “You ready to move on?”

“We just got here.”

“Well, it’s not like there’s much to do aside from looking at a metal plate on the ground, is there? We need to get to San Juan before it gets close to dark.”

(45)

Samuel's discomfort and urgency in his desire to leave may suggest that he feels uncomfortable when faced with any kind of dividing line, because he feels divided between the heritage represented by his grandfather and the modern American culture represented by Christian.

The reader learns early in the story that Samuel's grandfather uses sand paintings to heal people. Since the idea of the ceremony is to transfer sickness from a person to the painting, sand must be used so the painting can be easily destroyed. In my research I discovered that a more recent controversy in Navajo culture involves people capturing the aesthetically beautiful essence of these paintings in the form of blankets. Some healers and other members of the tribe consider this art form to be violating a sacred tradition. Because Samuel's conflict also deals with his cultural identity becoming lost in American culture, I placed one of these blankets in his path during an acid trip, and when he stares at it, the figures in it begin to move:

Their white arms extended from their green bodies and reached out to him through the window. They grabbed his face, and he started yelling. He clawed at his eyes, cheeks and mouth, but the spirits were pulling away at him. He felt Mary grab him. But no, it was the spirits, not Mary. They were all grabbing him.

Finally he broke loose and ran across the street. He bumped into another window, but this time, instead of a blanket, he saw himself. His reflection. But he couldn't see himself because the deities had pulled his face away. He was pale and blurred. He was an empty figure. He needed the sand. (50)

Because readers have a brief explanation of the problem inherent in sand painting blankets from Samuel's grandfather, they can recognize the blankets as a symbol for Navajo culture adapting to the larger American culture. When Samuel experiences this symbol "pull his face away,"

making him “pale and blurred,” one can conclude that he is experiencing an internal struggle which is resulting in him losing his identity as a Navajo Youth.

If the sand painting blanket can be seen as an objective correlative representing Samuel’s loss of his cultural identity, the green lizard he attempts to catch throughout his youth objectifies the hope he has to reclaim it. He first notices it when he is six, at the same time that his curiosity about his grandfather’s ceremony peaks. The fact that he chases but always has trouble catching it is reflective of the way he has a hard time grasping how he can hold onto his heritage in the onslaught of American culture. During the scene in which he first chases it, for instance, he has to catch it before Christian can take it from him: “After a while, Samuel found a green one. He shouted that it was his, but Christian wanted it too. They both ran after it, but it proved crafty and difficult to catch. They had fun competing, though” (39). This scene occurs before the conflict involving Christian and substance abuse becomes apparent, but upon reading the story a second time, readers can see how this scene demonstrates Samuel’s struggle to capture his identity.

The competition continues as Samuel turns ten and gets closer to understanding his identity, but Christian still challenges him. Shortly after Samuel learns the meaning of the sand paintings, he tries to explain them to Christian while they look for lizards. The narrator explains, “Even after four years, they had never caught one of the green ones, and they still fought each other for it. Samuel tried to tell Christian that *he* could catch it if Christian wouldn’t fight him so much” (41). This passage makes the correlation between the green lizard and Samuel’s internal struggle to find his identity even clearer by stating that he “could catch it if Christian wouldn’t fight him so much.” Samuel’s friend, while his intentions are innocent, stands in the way of something Samuel is struggling to capture. Although the narrator only explicitly states that

Christian does this with the lizard, the reader can see that he also stands in the way of Samuel's quest for his identity.

Christian's antagonism becomes complete, though, when Samuel is fifteen. Samuel finally catches the lizard, and tells Christian about it at school. He acts uninterested, and changes the subject by bringing Samuel to meet with some older friends, who produce a glass bottle:

"Vodka, meet Sammy. Sammy, meet vodka," said Christian.

Samuel stared.

"It'll be more fun than lizards," said Christian with a grin.

For the rest of the day they found everything funny and laughed a lot.

They got scolded by teachers for their behavior, but they didn't get caught. It *was* more fun than lizards.

When Samuel got home, he let the lizard go. (44)

Here, the narrator doesn't get too overt with the reader; we are just told that Samuel lets the lizard go after he gets drunk for the first time. However, readers can conclude that the introduction of alcohol has caused a shift in Samuel's internal state. The scenes that follow demonstrate the drinking becomes a distraction from his journey to find his cultural identity, to the point that he even loses it (when he has the acid trip after getting drunk).

Finally, after Samuel is out of high school and after the acid trip, he has his last encounter with the lizard while at a national monument featuring the ruins of ancient cliff-dwelling tribes.

On his way back to his vehicle, the reader once again sees the objective correlative:

He walked through the dirt and sand towards his car, but under a tree he came to a stop. A green lizard perched itself on a rock near the tree and tilted its head towards him.

Samuel started to lurch at the lizard, trying to recapture the thing that he had let go when he was fifteen. But he was too drunk, and he fell. The Gatorade bottle landed a few feet ahead of him, staining the sand red.

Slowly, he began to draw a figure in the sand. He finished the head and half of the body, then passed out. (51)

Here the narrator is ambiguous in saying “the thing that he had let go when he was fifteen.” Of course, it could just be referring to the lizard, although one could argue that if it were only referring to the lizard, “the” might not be an appropriate article, considering it obviously cannot be the same lizard, miles away and years later. Rather, the lizard represents Samuel’s internal state; he lost his cultural identity when he started drinking, and now he is trying to reclaim it.

May writes, “the answer for... the modern short story generally, is to find an event that, if expressed ‘properly,’ that is, by the judicious choice of relevant details, will embody the complexity of the inner state” (202). I take this “answer” to be in response to the question of how to adequately communicate complex human emotions in the small amount of space given in a short story. Much is accomplished to this end with the objective correlative, but mere objects aren’t always enough. Sometimes characters actions and dialogue can communicate a lot of depth with few words. With that in mind, I want to shift my focus to minimalism’s influence on my writing.

IV

In *Minimalism and the Short Story*, Cynthia Hallett lays out nine core elements of the minimalist style found in the works of Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, Mary Robison, and others. I won’t spend time elaborating on all of these elements, because I don’t believe my work necessarily demonstrates them exhaustively. However, I do want to focus on some of the

components that I utilized in my work, specifically her third, fifth and seventh elements: “more dialogue than exposition with no evident auctorial intrusion, and little, if any, narratorial intrusion”; “a sense that all ‘action’ either appears to have occurred... just before the story began, or occurs later ‘off-stage,’ that is, not within the moments of the story”; and “a recognition that words are useless, for most things are unsayable” (25). Some critics accuse a style that relies on these tactics of being bland, mundane, and boring. However, the strength of the simplicity and mundaneness comes in the form of stories that readers can relate to by recognizing the struggles of characters on their own terms—in the way they interpret the minimal information given—rather than narration that dictates how a story should be read.

Hallett credits Anton Chekhov as a writer who used minimalist tactics before minimalism became a recognized style. Indeed, if we look at his famous story “Misery” we can see how, even almost a century before the authors we think of as minimalist today, Chekhov used the ideas Hallett lists to give readers a world they can interpret on their own, based on minimal information given to them.

“Misery” focuses on a sledge-driver (cabman) named Iona as he attempts to communicate the recent loss of his son to various passengers and other people he encounters. Ultimately, his attempts fail. His first customer of the night, a military officer, is perhaps his best listener; he at least asks Iona what killed his son. However, after Iona’s answer, the officer is distracted, yelling, “ ‘Drive on! drive on!... We shan’t get there till to-morrow going on like this. Hurry up!’ ” (59) which suggests the officer is more concerned with arriving at his destination than listening to Iona’s problems. His next customers seem to be a trio of drunk young men who are no better than the officer. Just as the officer did, they dismiss Iona and demand that he drive faster when he mentions the death. Before long, one of them strikes Iona in an attempt to speed

him up, “And Iona hears rather than feels a slap on the back of his neck” (61). This numbness could imply to the reader that Iona suffers from too much internal pain at being ignored to care about a physical attack. In the end, the sledge-driver must resort to talking to his mare.

Even in this brief analysis, we can see how Chekhov’s writing relates to Hallett’s minimalist traits. The primary action—the death of Iona’s son—has indeed taken place before the start of the story. Similarly, the story deals with the “unsayable” in a way more obvious than perhaps any other tale; every time Iona begins to talk, he is cut off before he truly communicates his emotion: “He wants to talk properly, with deliberation.... He wants to tell of how his son was taken ill, how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died.... He wants to describe the funeral, and how he went to the hospital to get his son’s clothes” (64). Even if he had succeeded in getting this information out, I would argue that it would still not be adequately expressing the heart-break that gnaws away at him. In stories such as these, abstract words can never do the emotion justice, and perhaps the best way for us to understand Iona’s internal struggle is to simply observe the way that he sits still enough for snow to accumulate on his eyelashes (58).

However, although Chekhov meets a few of Hallett’s criteria for minimalist fiction, one element he fails to demonstrate is her third: little to no narratorial intrusion. In “Misery,” the narrator frequently tells the reader that Iona is lonely and full of misery. Chekhov, to a certain extent, puts his cards on the table for the reader to see. On the other hand, modern minimalist writers such as Raymond Carver often epitomize the idea of limiting narratorial guidance.

In Carver’s story “Neighbors,” we watch Bill and Arlene Miller as they housesit for the couple living across the hall, Jim and Harriet Stone. This story demonstrates several if not all of the minimalist elements set forth by Hallett, including an emphasis on dialogue and a resolution that appears “off-stage.” However, unlike “Misery,” there is clearly a conflict within this story

that the narrator is not willing to explicitly reveal to the reader. One level of this conflict, while never directly stated, is moderately easy to spot; the Millers are stuck in mundane jobs, and the way they escape to the Stones' apartment and lose track of time suggests that they have a desperate need to get away from their own lives. However, a closer look can reveal a deeper conflict. Throughout the six page story, the Millers have sex a total of three times, although Arlene asks Bill, “ ‘What’s gotten into you?’” (10), which could imply that intimacy is not a regular occurrence in their lives. The reader gathers that something about going to the Stones' apartment arouses the Millers. However, when the couple, giddy and flirting, attempts to go into the apartment *together* for the first time, together, they are stopped:

He tried the knob. It was locked. Then she tried the knob. It would not turn. Her lips were parted, and her breathing was hard, expectant. He opened his arms and she moved into them.

“Don’t worry,” he said into her ear. “For God’s sake, don’t worry.”

They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves. (13).

This sudden dramatic language implies that the Millers' problem is greater than simply being locked out of the apartment. Before this event, things were going well for them; they seemed happier with their mini-vacations into the other apartment and they were intimate more than ever. However, being locked out when they attempt to go as a couple for the first time suggests to the reader that the Millers have been suddenly forced to realize that they are unhappy with each other as well as with their lives.

The conflict I just pulled from “Neighbors” is the very essence of minimalism; I can’t argue that this is the only way to read the story, and others can offer their own interpretation as

well. I wanted to accomplish this type of open-ended narration while still tackling the emotional weight of a story like “Misery” in my story “After a Funeral, Before a Test.”

I believe “Funeral” is one of my strongest stories, primarily because of the way it accomplishes Hallett’s aforementioned minimalist traits in ways similar to Chekhov and Carver. The story follows three characters: a middle-aged man named Donald and a young couple, Daniel and Zoe. At the beginning and end of the narrative, we see Donald in his dark and empty home; in the first section he feels as if something is missing, prompting him to leave for the grocery store, and in the last section he returns with carnations. In the middle are two sections, one following Daniel and the other following Zoe. The couple has a list of items to get, but they make references to another item that did not make it on the list. Both young people have individual encounters with Donald, who engages in small talk with them.

Like Iona in “Misery,” Donald feels lonely. The narrator never says so directly, but the fact that he leaves his empty house and begins conversations with whomever he can (Daniel, Zoe, the girl at the deli counter, and perhaps others we do not witness) clearly implies that he longs to communicate. However, unlike the narrator in “Misery,” the narrator in “Funeral” does not explain the reason for Donald’s loneliness. Rather, it operates much like the narrator of “Neighbors” by merely hinting at an even deeper struggle.

The story begins with Donald “wearing a black suit with a loosened bowtie” (24). Since the title indicates that the story occurs “after a funeral,” perhaps readers can immediately gather that Donald has recently lost someone, but, throughout the entire story, they are never told directly whom he has lost. Other clues also imply the idea of loss, such as when he remembers how the cat healed its own wound with its tongue:

Donald assumed it had fought with a stray, and worried that the gash would become infected. That cat used its tongue to clean the wound though, and within two weeks it was a benign scab. Donald wonders if he should feel jealous of the multifunctional nature of the feline tongue, but decides that his own tongue's ability to form words and communicate trumps the bathing and the drinking. The cat finishes its drink and wanders past Donald's leg, arching its back as it presses into his black pants, but he doesn't mind the hairs that cling to him. He can't deny a slight envy of its ability to heal wounds with a few simple licks. (25-26)

This passage reveals two aspects of Donald's internal struggle without explicitly stating them. First, by mentioning Donald's jealousy of the cat's healing capabilities, the narrator indicates that he has his own wounds he wishes to be rid of. Second, by showing how Donald values his own tongue's capabilities, the narrator demonstrates that Donald yearns to talk to someone to express his grief. When Donald begins to consider what is missing from his apartment, the reader can recall this value of communication and realize that Donald simply misses someone to talk to.

The reader may realize that Donald has suffered a loss and needs someone to communicate with, but further investigation is needed to determine what or whom he has lost. Later, in the grocery store, Zoe overhears Donald tell the deli girl a story about his daughter Emily when she was a child. The deli girl is dismissive, saying only, "She sounds cute... So, did you need anything?" (32), just like Iona's passengers in "Misery" when they respond to the news of his son's death by prompting him to drive faster.

Donald then finds Zoe by the flowers. After some small talk, Donald picks up some carnations and mentions that he used to give them to his daughter. A moment later, as Zoe

leaves, she suggests that Donald buy some for his daughter. The final scene shows Donald returning home from the store with the carnations. After placing them in a jar, he enters the living room, finding that “The phone still holds no new messages. Donald gently removes it from the table with his free hand and sets it on the floor. He turns on the reading lamp and rests the jar of flowers next to it” (25). In this scene, the reader can see that, by replacing the phone his daughter bought for him with the flowers he used to buy for her, Donald is choosing to focus on a pleasant memory of his daughter rather than looking at an object which reminds him that he can no longer talk to her.

In “Funeral,” I believe I have told a story with similar emotional depth to Chekhov’s “Misery.” However, as demonstrated above, I accomplish this emotional depth without ever directly telling the reader that Donald is lonely because his daughter has died. Rather, by using the aforementioned minimalist tactics presented by Hallett and demonstrated by Carver, I have provided readers with a story they can read multiple times in order to explore its full meaning.

V

Edgar Allan Poe once wrote that “during the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (61). For much of the short story’s history as a genre, authors have felt the need to explain the meaning behind their fiction. However, modern and contemporary writers have found that readers can have a fuller, more rewarding experience if they are allowed to play a role in determining the meaning of a story. In contrast to Poe’s notion of the controlling writer, Ann Beattie wrote in *Mrs. Nixon* that “writers are dolphins” (112). In other words, writers should invite readers to swim in their fictional worlds. They don’t demand any one interpretation; they only guide. It is my hope that, in the following pages, I have created fictional

worlds from which readers can take their own meaning. By giving such invitations, I hope that they will continue to enjoy these stories time and time again.

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After a Funeral, Before a Test

Donald sits in his armchair, still wearing a black suit with a loosened bowtie. He didn't turn on the lights when he got inside, and until now the darkness had not bothered him. He hears a noise in the kitchen, and even though he knows the sound came from his late wife's cat, he grabs the chain of the reading lamp and introduces light to the room. The grandfather clock—an ancient relic left behind by his mother—ticks its way past seven-fifteen. Still three-quarters of an hour to go until the next chime. Donald wishes the cat would make another noise. He wonders why the quiet bothers him—why the darkness has started to disturb him. He's used to an empty house, because Carolyn lost her fight to cancer over four years ago, when Donald was barely fifty. After her death, it hadn't taken long for him to think of her as a nice thing of the past, and he accepted the inevitability that it had to be him or her to inherit an empty house. He could accept the quiet that came along with it, too. Whenever the silence got to be too much, he would simply drive over to visit his daughter, Emily, spend time with his grandson, talk politics with his son-in-law and enjoy Emily's homemade bread.

Donald finds a loose bit of green fabric on the armchair and picks at it. As he pulls up on the thread, a portion of the arm's cotton skin rises like a tent. He lets it back down and then yanks at it again, which loosens the interwoven fibers and exposes the thin layer of white fluff that cushions the wooden right arm.

Donald looks at the cordless phone next to the reading lamp. It's gray and doesn't blink with new messages. Emily bought it for him when Carolyn passed, saying, "It's the twenty-first century, for God's sake. Everyone's carrying around cellphones with the internet on them and you're still bound to the wall by a coiled wire." He used to be able to pick up the phone, call her, and walk all around the house, talking. It made the quiet easier to ignore.

Carolyn's cat walks around the corner. It looks at Donald, meows and jumps onto the couch adjacent to him. It's a fluffy thing, with long gray fur and a snowy belly. When it leans back to lick itself clean, Donald considers walking over to pick it up and feel some soft warmth against his skin. The attempt would be pointless; the cat has never liked him, and since his wife's death it's been less like a pet and more like the faint crack of an old broken bone.

Donald closes his eyes and rubs the wrinkled skin that sags over them. If Carolyn's cat is the reminder of an old break, then what will be the reminder of a newer fracture, the one that will appear four years from now? He looks at the phone again, still without a blinking red light.

"May need to go to the store," Donald says. The cat looks at him with shimmering eyes. "When was the last time I bought you food, anyway?"

The cat starts to clean itself again.

"Of course, I think the last time I checked you still had half a bag. Do I need to go to the store, then? I want to say that I'm short on something. Maybe milk."

Donald checks the fridge and finds a carton of milk, still fresh and mostly full. He rummages through the rest of his supplies, and finds them adequately stocked: eggs, mayonnaise, horseradish, and pickles. The counter has a bowl full of apples, and none of them are rotting yet. Six slices of white bread, a can of peas and a tin of coffee hide in the cabinet. He grunts and sits on a stool against the wall.

Carolyn's cat trots into the kitchen and stops at its bowl for water. Donald watches it lap at the water, and he thinks about all of the ways it uses its tongue. It cleans its fur and drinks. Once, after it had slipped through the front door and spent a day on the streets, it returned with a wound on its leg. Donald assumed it had fought with a stray, and worried that the gash would become infected. That cat used its tongue to clean the wound though, and within two weeks it

was a benign scab. Donald wonders if he should feel jealous of the multifunctional nature of the feline tongue, but decides that his own tongue's ability to form words and communicate trumps the bathing and the drinking. The cat finishes its drink and wanders past Donald's leg, arching its back as it presses into his black pants, but he doesn't mind the hairs that cling to him. He can't deny a slight envy of its ability to heal wounds with a few simple licks.

"I checked the fridge," he says to the cat. "Nothing missing."

The cat sits on the floor directly in front of Donald. Its tail twitches.

"Still feel like I needed something."

Donald walks to the bathroom in the back of the house and checks the medicine cabinet. He has enough shaving cream, the toothpaste tube is still plump enough for another week, and the aspirin and Maalox will keep him feeling pleasant for a while. As he closes the cabinet, he looks in the mirror and notices that his eyes are no longer red.

When he walks back into the kitchen the clock begins to chime, signaling eight o'clock. He goes to the front door and turns the deadbolt, but once the lock is in place he keeps his grip on it. He turns to find the cat walking down the hall, near the living room. It meows at him and disappears around the corner.

"You don't have much conversation skills, puss."

Donald unlocks the door and checks his pockets for his keys and wallet. He knows he's forgetting something that he needed. He hopes that by going to the store the memory will come to him.

Zoe and Daniel step through the automatic doors of the 10th Street Food Lion grocery store with a small list. To the left they find three lines of carts; two contain normal-sized buggies

and one short line provides smaller options, for people who want to get in and out of the store quickly.

“Grab a small buggy,” says Zoe.

“That’s what I was going for.”

“We only have a few things to get.”

“Right.” Daniel points to the list in Zoe’s hand. “Did you remember to put the beer on there?”

“I doubt *you’d* forget it.”

“I know. Always good to have it there, just in case.”

“The beer in the fridge or the beer on the list?”

“Both.”

She pulls a pen from her jacket pocket and presses the paper against the blue flap designed for seating a child in one of the larger carts. After she jots down “beer” in sloppy letters, Daniel asks for the list. His eyes scan its six contents: Campbell’s tomato soup, crackers, lotion, ginger ale, flowers, and beer.

“Flowers?”

“In case I get bad news and need something pretty to look at.”

“And for good news?”

Zoe takes the list back and stuffs it into her pocket. “Same, I guess.”

“That’s why I have the beer on there.”

Zoe pops the blue flap into its upright position and joins Daniel by their small cart. “Why did you put the kid seat up?” he asks.

Zoe shrugs.

“I also noticed you’re missing something else important on the list.”

“Now *that* I won’t forget.”

“I won’t forget the beer.”

“If you want to write it on the list, go for it.”

Daniel rolls the cart toward the soup aisle. They pass a clearance table full of Valentine’s Day candy. Only a few off-brand chocolates remain; Valentine’s Day was nearly three weeks ago. After they get the soup and crackers, they head for the pharmacy. “I’ll get the lotion. Why don’t you go to the feminine aisle,” says Daniel, saying “feminine” as if it were catching in his throat.

Zoe moves to the next aisle without saying anything, and Daniel ducks into the aisle filled with lotion, conditioner and other products that soften things. As he looks at the varying prices of the bottles, a man in a suit and loosened bowtie passes him and stops at the shaving cream. The two stand in silence for a few moments before the man says, “A fine looking beard you have there, son.”

Daniel looks up from the lotion. “Me? Oh, thanks.” The man smiles at him and Daniel looks back to the cream-colored bottles in front of him.

“When I was your age, a few whiskers were all I could manage. Of course, that all changed, but once it did I found that I preferred a clean-shaven face anyway. My wife liked it that better.”

Daniel picks up a bottle of lotion and looks at the back label.

“I had a bit of a mustache when my daughter was a little girl. She always laughed when I gave her a kiss on the cheek. The hairs tickled her, you know.”

“I bet,” says Daniel. He picks up another bottle of lotion and wonders what’s holding up Zoe. He takes his cellphone from his pocket and sends her a text.

Where are you?

“You want to see some real facial hair, though,” says the man, “you should see my brother. Actually, I have a picture in here somewhere.” He reaches into his back pocket for his wallet, opens it and rummages through a dozen small photos.

Daniel turns his face away and rolls his eyes.

“Here he is. You could almost call him Santa Claus.” The man takes a few steps toward Daniel and holds out the wallet. Daniel takes a glance at the photo of a man who could pass for a decent Santa at a Christmas party, with a reddish complexion and an ample white beard.

“Not as old as you might think. He turned white early.”

“Impressive,” says Daniel.

The man stuffs his wallet back into his pants. “Of course, he died early too. Heart attack.”

Daniel checks his phone. No response from Zoe. He sends another text. *Save me, I’m being trapped by a nursing home escapee.*

Daniel says, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Nothing to worry about, really. It was a while back. Two years now, I think.”

Daniel tosses the lotion into the buggy and walks past the man and the shaving cream.

“You going to school or working?” asks the man.

Daniel slows the cart but keeps moving. “School,” he says.

The man smiles. “Good man. What would you like to be when you grow up?” He chuckles.

Daniel stops the cart. "I'm hoping to get into med school."

"Tough work. Worth it, I'd imagine."

"That's what I'd like to think."

"Where are you trying to go?"

Daniel looks to the end of the aisle. "I'm trying to find my girlfriend."

The man laughs. "I meant med school, son. Where are you trying to go for med school?"

Daniel forces a smile and says, "Sorry. I'm not sure, actually. I still have a few years left of undergrad."

"Uh-huh. And your girlfriend? What's she up to?"

Daniel checks his phone. "Aside from hiding from me, she's going to school too. Journalism."

"Never leave a woman in a grocery store by herself. That's what I've always thought."

"Point taken," says Daniel, although he knows he should be glad Zoe wasn't around for a comment like that. His phone buzzes in his hand.

Cereal aisle.

"Found her."

The man smiles, and Daniel turns right out of the aisle before conversation resumes. He pushes the cart past oral hygiene, cleaning supplies, paper products and pet care before he finds Zoe under the sign for aisle eight. Aside from cereal, the sign also advertises oatmeal, syrup, and baby food. The baby food is at the other end of the shelves. Zoe places a box of Cheerios in the buggy.

"Those weren't on the list, were they?"

“I ended up walking past the aisle and thought I’d take a peek. They’re on sale, so why not?”

“Sure,” says Daniel. He sidles up to her and lowers his voice. “Did you get it?”

Zoe takes a small step back and traces a crack in the tile with her right foot, as if she were drawing a line in the sand on a beach. “No. I got to the aisle and, well, I don’t know. I just didn’t feel up to getting it yet. Can I have the buggy? I don’t really want to carry it around the store. Unless you want to walk with me.”

Daniel reaches into her pocket for the list and plants a kiss on her forehead as he pulls the wadded paper out. “We still need the ginger ale and the beer. I’ll go get those, okay?”

Zoe nods.

“Take the buggy. I can carry the drinks and I’ll meet you at the register.” Zoe nods again, and Daniel squeezes her hand. He says, “And I’ll pay for it all, okay?”

Zoe sighs. “Okay.”

After watching Daniel leave for the beer aisle, Zoe heads back up along the cereal shelves and past the baby food. She leaves the cereal aisle and glances at the ceiling and her eyes follow the line of florescent lights back to the pharmaceutical end of the store where the feminine products wait. The lights are white and harsh and remind her of a doctor’s office, and she feels as if she’s waiting to be called back to be checked on. She thinks of co-pays and doctor bills and turns around to face the produce end of the store. Daniel will take a few minutes to decide on a brand of beer, so she decides to ignore her unlisted need for as long as possible. She pulls the list out of her pocket and remembers the flowers.

The floral section is at the back of the produce wall, near the deli. As Zoe approaches the shelves of bright flowers, she notices an older man with curly gray hair that has obviously seen fuller days. He wears a black suit and is busy talking to the girl working behind the counter. The girl twirls her bangs and looks at the floor, but the man continues to talk. When Zoe reaches the flowers, she hears him describe a fishing trip. The rest of the store is silent, so she can't help but listen to the story as she browses the various roses.

The trip had been with the man's older brother. Zoe also figured out that it had been when the man's daughter was young, or at least young enough to give them a hard time finding a small enough life jacket for her to wear in the canoe. The daughter grew bored, but he insisted that she needed to be protected. He wasn't going to put her in any danger. Eventually they found a jacket at a sporting goods store, and his daughter proved to be a natural at fishing. She caught three perch and even a small mouth bass. Of course, you couldn't expect the little thing to do the dirty work of prying the hook out of the mouths, so he and his brother handled that. Once unhooked, they gave the two smallest fish back to Emily so that she could let them go into the water.

"She sounds cute," says the deli girl. She still has her eyes on the floor and she pulls the strand of hair she had been twirling behind her ear. "So, did you want anything?"

The man is silent for a moment before saying, "No. No, I don't think this is why I came."

The deli girl says, "Oh, I'm sorry, that probably sounded rude."

"Not at all, miss."

"It's just that, I need to get the counters cleaned for closing time."

"Of course. I'm sorry to hold you up."

The deli girl apologizes once more as she turns around.

The man heads away from the deli in Zoe's direction, and she avoids eye contact. She picks up a bundle of roses and smells them. They might be nice to put on the nightstand in her dorm room, but she's not sure about the color. She puts them down and moves to a multi-colored bundle of various types of flowers.

The man steps up to the floral shelves and says, "That's a pretty bunch."

Zoe turns the bundle in her hand. "Yeah. It's so colorful."

"Sure is."

Zoe returns the bundle to its temporary pot and selects another bunch, similar in its variety but with a different array of colors. This one contains blues, greens and whites. "I think I like this one more."

"Very pretty. It makes me think of spring."

"Yeah, me too."

"So what are you doing buying flowers for yourself? Didn't I see you come in with a young man?"

Zoe smiles. "He bought me plenty of flowers last month. I can buy flowers for myself every once in a while, can't I?"

"I suppose you can. I haven't bought any flowers in a while. My wife died several years ago."

Zoe feels her phone buzz in her back pocket but leaves it alone. "You don't always have to buy them *for* someone. Sometimes it's just nice to have color in your room."

"That's true. What's your favorite?"

“Well, to be honest I’ve never really thought about it before, at least not since I was little.” Zoe scans the shelves and finds tulips on the far left. “But I think it was tulips. My dad always bought them for me after my gymnastics competitions.”

“Sounds like a good father.”

“He is.” Her phone buzzes again and she takes her phone out of her pocket. The screen shows two messages from Daniel.

You keep disappearing. Where are you??

Came to the produce aisle, saw you talking to that guy. Don’t wanna get stuck again.

I’ll wait near the registers.

The man takes a bundle of carnations and smiles. “I used to give my daughter these.”

Be there in a sec. Just have to pick up our last item first.

“They’re really pretty,” says Zoe. “I have to go, though. My boyfriend’s waiting for me at the door.”

“Oh, well I don’t want to make you keep him waiting. Tell him I said to keep it up with the beard.”

Zoe laughs. “Sure. Go ahead and buy those carnations for your daughter. I know *I’d* love it if my dad bought me some tulips out of the blue.”

“I may do that.”

Zoe leaves with the flowers and follows the row of florescent lights toward the pharmacy.

Donald shuts his front door behind him and turns the deadbolt. He walks past the living room and into the kitchen, where he pulls a pair of scissors out of a drawer and a large mason jar from one of the lower cabinets. The carnations came with a small packet of flower food taped

around the bottom of the stems. He cuts a corner off of the packet and mixes the contents with some tap water in the jar. After cutting off the bottoms of the stems, he places the red and white flowers in the jar and carries it to the living room.

The phone still holds no new messages. Donald gently removes it from the table with his free hand and sets it on the floor. He turns on the reading lamp and rests the jar of flowers next to it.

Donald steps back and feels his eyes and sinuses burning. He hopes he hasn't gotten a cold from walking to the store and back in the chill of mid-March. He takes off the bowtie and his suit jacket and tosses them onto the couch. The cat rubs past his leg again, leaving silvery hairs on the black fabric that he will soon stow away, deep in a drawer.

Sand

1

Samuel knew that he was supposed to wait outside when his grandfather took someone into his home for a ceremony. His grandfather was a healer—one of the most respected in all of Arizona—but Samuel had only been told by his parents that being a healer meant he helped people when they were in trouble. He gathered elsewhere that being a healer included sand and pictures, but he never understood why everyone forbade him from watching his grandfather work.

One day, just before second grade started, Samuel's grandfather watched him while his parents worked all day. After lunch, two of his grandfather's old friends came over, escorting a woman who looked old, but not as ancient as the three men. She might have been close to Samuel's mother's age, but lines in her face and sadness in her eyes made him think twice.

The visitors sat around a wooden table and exchanged quiet murmurs with Samuel's grandfather, who occasionally glanced at the boy. Samuel had found an old stop watch in the closet next to an empty aquarium, and he just figured out how to use it when the visitors arrived. Now he feigned ignorance and tinkered with it close by, hoping to overhear what the adults said. He didn't manage to catch anything informative before his grandfather walked over with a blank expression. "Samuel," he said, "we need to help this woman in the back room. Will you play outside until we're finished?"

Samuel nodded and went out into the desert heat. The sun beat down on red earth and turned it into a hot stove. He stood on the bottom step of his grandfather's landing with the decrepit house behind him, which his grandfather built long before Samuel was born, his mother told him. In a few places, boards and shingles hung loosely from their original places and the structure's

dark blue paint looked black compared to the brightness of the surrounding desert, but Samuel liked the old place. It had more holes and corners to explore than his own mobile home.

A lot of the holes and corners hid spiders and lizards. The spiders scared him, but he loved to catch the lizards. He placed the stop watch on the step and started it so that he could see how long it took him to find and catch a scaly reptile. He ran around the house, lifting boards and stones, but he only found spiders.

After searching for nearly an hour, Samuel ended up at the back of the house. A sound came through a window and Samuel forgot about lizards. He could hear the woman crying, and dragged a cinder block to the window as quietly as he could. He climbed on top and peeked through the window. He saw the woman sitting in the middle of the room with her back to him. She shook with sobs, and the two old friends worked on something on the ground. Samuel's eyes grew with awe. Colored sand covered his grandfather's floor. Greens, whites, and oranges created an elaborate design, still in progress. Samuel thought a few of the designs looked like cartoon people, only with rectangular bodies and square-shaped heads.

Samuel's grandfather took action, touching the woman's head and, in a swift motion, he swung his hand and placed it at the head of one of the sand figures. The old men started singing softly, and eventually Samuel, too awestruck to worry about subtlety, began to hum along with them. His grandfather noticed, but didn't have to leave his work to tell Samuel to leave immediately. Samuel could tell by the look in his grandfather's eyes that he would soon be in trouble. He ran back to the front of the house and found the stop watch ticking past two hours.

"It's dangerous," his grandfather later said in a deep, stern voice. The old friends had left but the woman was asleep in a spare bedroom across the hall from the sand room.

"Why?"

“Because there is power here, and you are too young.”

Samuel started the second grade at the public elementary school in Window Rock, Arizona. He liked the school because he got to be around so many kids. The building was worn down and beat up, he could tell. Not as much as his grandfather’s house, but it certainly wasn’t as nice as the tourist buildings at the big rock from which the town got its name. There, the reddish-brown cliff stood over a groomed lawn and nice trees kept green by an irrigation system so that visitors could look at the neat hole punched through a rock wall like a window. The buildings with exhibits and information about the history of the region didn’t have graffiti on them and there were no bottles strewn across the grass on Monday mornings. The town officials must have wanted a clean environment for people to learn in.

Samuel didn’t mind the conditions of the school, though. He just wanted to play with other kids. This year, a new kid came to school. His name was Christian, and he was different from most of the kids. Christian was white, as some of the older Navajo boys told Samuel, who only had a vague idea of what that meant. His skin was pale, sure. Samuel could see that. He didn’t quite know what that had to do with how he was supposed to act. Samuel didn’t think that *anyone* really knew, although they all seemed to have an idea that they didn’t like it.

Ultimately, Samuel ignored the misgivings of his peers, and at lunch he sat down with the scrawny kid with short blond hair and clunky glasses. Introductions were brief and formal, as far as child introductions go, and the two agreed to call each other friends.

“Why’d your parents come here?” asked Samuel.

“My dad’s working at the National Monument. I can’t remember what it’s called.”

Samuel ate a potato chip, and while munching said, “It’s probably the Canyon de Chelly. I don’t think it’s very far from here. My grandfather took me there once.”

“Yeah. I went there. It’s cool ’cause there’s a lot of old buildings. Like from Native Americans.” He said “Native Americans” slowly, as if he were concentrating on a multiplication problem.

After a day of learning multiplication and proper English, Christian came over. Samuel’s father still worked into the late evening, but his mother was home cooking dinner and his grandfather sat on the front step, watching the two boys play. Samuel taught Christian how to find lizards under rocks and the boards that hid the mobile base of the trailer. They were luckier than Samuel had been a week before at his grandfather’s house, and soon they chased brown lizards with blue tails all over the sandy dirt that made up Samuel’s yard. After a while, Samuel found a green one. He shouted that it was his, but Christian wanted it too. They both ran after it, but it proved crafty and difficult to catch. They had fun competing, though.

The four of them sat down to dinner and Samuel noticed Christian looking around the house suspiciously. Samuel’s mother had filled it with Navajo paintings and artifacts, and Samuel knew that a few of them almost seemed scary, somehow. He figured Christian must find them even scarier.

The table remained quiet until Samuel’s mother asked, “So how do you like living here, Christian?”

Christian perked up and said, “I like it. I really like red people.”

Samuel’s mother looked startled, and his grandfather cleared his throat. Samuel just felt confused. Red people?

Samuel’s grandfather spoke first. “Why call us red, Christian?”

Christian looked terrified, but Samuel's mother came to his rescue. "It's okay, Dad, he probably doesn't know better. Christian, that's not a nice thing to call someone, that's all."

Christian swallowed hard and Samuel watched his grandfather, who glared at the little white boy with cold eyes.

The day after Christian came over for dinner, Samuel sat on the front step with a cup of juice. He looked at his arm, and back at the juice. His skin wasn't the same color of the juice, so why had Christian called him and his family *red people*? It must be something else, he decided, that made someone a red person. Something other than skin. But what was it?

Suddenly the green lizard from the previous day skipped past him, and he wanted to catch it. But as he got up to run after it, he tripped and fell to the ground, spilling his juice. A minute passed and he still didn't feel like getting up. The sand below him was hot from the sun and felt nice on his cheek. To pass the time, he drew a figure in the sand, just as he had seen his grandfather do a week before. It was only an indentation—a line about the depth of his tiny fingernail. Circle for a head, long sticks for a body, arms and legs. Just an indentation. He liked his figure, but soon realized that the lines were empty, and they needed to be filled with something. He knew this. He looked up and saw the spilled juice. The sand there was stained. One pinch at a time, he carried the red sand over to the empty figure and filled it.

2

Green. White. Orange. Sand.

Samuel turned ten and his grandfather agreed to tell him about the sand ceremony. One Saturday, he went over to the old, dark house and went to the back room where he had seen his

grandfather heal the sobbing woman. On one wall his grandfather had mounted a shelf where he kept bowls full of colored sand. Samuel took a pinch of the pure white sand from one bowl and let it trickle back out like an hourglass. Excitement gripped him. He was going to learn what had been kept distant for so long.

“You are still young, and I will not show you the ceremony. But I will tell you how it works,” his grandfather told him. Then, he told him about how sick people sit in the middle of the floor while he and his assistants create images around them. Paintings of spirits. One healer would chant. He would touch the person where they were sick, and touch the spirit. The sickness would move from the person to the painting.

“Why is it dangerous?” asked Samuel, remembering the scolding he had received four years before.

“Because the sickness is moved into the sand.”

Samuel gasped and took his hand away from the green sand. His grandfather laughed and said, “Not that sand, Samuel. That sand is new and untainted. But once the ceremony is complete, we must destroy the sand in the paintings. That is *why* we use sand, and why we do not use paint on rocks or thread in blankets. It must be easy to destroy, so that the sickness may be destroyed with it.”

Samuel looked at his grandfather in wonder. His grandfather, who could wield the power to destroy sickness.

The next day, Samuel told Christian about the sand while they chased lizards. Even after four years, they had never caught one of the green ones, and they still fought each other for it. Samuel tried to tell Christian that *he* could catch it if Christian wouldn't fight him so much. He

tried to tell Christian that he was the more experienced lizard hunter, and Christian should let him have it. Christian always laughed and said, “Yeah, right.”

When Samuel finished describing the colored sand, Christian said, “Why don’t people just go to the hospital? Wouldn’t that be better than sand?”

Samuel shrugged and said, “He says it works.”

“Well sure he does,” said Christian.

Samuel ignored him and continued searching for the green lizard.

One day in November, Samuel and his grandfather walked down the sidewalk in Window Rock. The air no longer held the heat of summer, and the short, circular trees stood naked along the cracked street. Despite the chill, Samuel couldn’t stop thinking about the ice cream that had been promised in exchanged for doing well on his math test. His grandfather never broke a promise.

On their way back to his grandfather’s truck, Samuel licked his strawberry cone and noticed a blanket hanging in a shop window. He stopped, and it took his grandfather a few steps to notice. “What is it?” his grandfather asked.

“That blanket looks like one of your paintings,” said Samuel, remembering what he had seen the day he peered through the window. He looked up to find an angry look on his grandfather’s face.

“Sometimes, Samuel, traditions change for the sake of making money. Everyone knows that the paintings are toxic, but they say that, when they make the blankets, they make small changes from the original painting to make it better. It does a little, but it is still dangerous.”

Samuel was upset that people would try to change the things that his grandfather did.

“How can you make people stay the same?”

His grandfather smiled and answered, “It is not about keeping everything the same. Some things need to change. But certain things need to be respected and valued, and that is up to you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, because you stand at the water’s edge, Samuel, and you need to be careful not to fall in. You need to stay with the sand.”

“I will,” said Samuel.

His grandfather looked at him and smiled, though Samuel could tell his mind was still on the blanket in the window. Samuel thought he understood what his grandfather meant about the blanket. Perhaps there were important things worth catching and holding onto. He wasn’t so sure, though, about the water’s edge. Why was it up to him to not fall in? Couldn’t his grandfather keep that from happening?

3

Samuel was fifteen when he finally caught the green lizard, but he didn’t have it for long. On Sunday he went to his grandfather’s house to help clear a spot for a garden. His grandfather went inside for water, and Samuel sat down on a stump to rest. He kicked a small rock away, and the movement startled the little reptile into running. The green lizard darted around a tree and Samuel darted past his grandfather’s truck. They were headed for a convergence just past the dry creek bed. Ahead there were no broken-up cinder blocks to run behind, no house to hide underneath. With a firm foot plant in the dried clay, Samuel launched himself and dove like an

athlete sliding into home plate. His hand wrapped around the cool emerald scales. The lizard squirmed in his hand as he sat in disbelief. Before the hour was done, Samuel pulled the old aquarium from the closet where he had found the stop watch, put some sand in the bottom with a dish of water and gave the lizard a new home.

The next day at school, he told Christian about catching the lizard.

“Nice one, Sammy. I’m just surprised you’re still trying to catch lizards.” He looked around and lowered his voice. “I have something *better* for you to catch.”

Samuel knew it was a bad joke, but he didn’t know what it referred to. “Okay, what?”

At lunch, Christian led Sammy behind the school to a group of Juniors. One of them pulled a glass bottle from his bag.

“Vodka, meet Sammy. Sammy, meet vodka,” said Christian.

Samuel stared.

“It’ll be more fun than lizards,” said Christian with a grin.

For the rest of the day they found everything funny and laughed a lot. They got scolded by teachers for their behavior, but they didn’t get caught. It *was* more fun than lizards.

When Samuel got home, he let the lizard go.

When Samuel was eighteen, Christian took him to the Four Corners Monument for the first time. They were on their way to go camping for Samuel’s birthday, and Christian had insisted on making the stop. Red mountains and plateaus stood in the distance with greater nobility than the tiny concrete slab, of which the tourists took pictures. The slab held a plaque over the exact point where Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado met. Samuel stood on the

steps leading up to it and leaned against a rail. Christian squatted over the line and fell back on his hands so that he awkwardly stood like a crab, with a limb in each state. “Check it out, Sammy,” he yelled. “I’m in four different places at once!”

Samuel laughed at his friend. “Yeah, I get it.” There was something that Christian didn’t get, though, and to be honest, Samuel wasn’t even sure he got it himself. He was Navajo, and an iron plate recognizing the precise convergence of four of the United States had a darker meaning for him in history. Or, at least, he felt that it should. Maybe it didn’t. He just knew that if his parents were here, they would say something. Or if his grandfather were here... shit, maybe he didn’t even want to think about that. But he felt that he should say something, he felt it deeper within him. But he didn’t want to. His mouth and his mind didn’t feel the same way as his core, and he decided he didn’t care that much.

“I’m just surprised you’ve never been out here in your whole life. Hell, it’s only about two and a half hours away,” said Christian.

“I know. Crazy,” said Samuel. “You ready to move on?”

“We just got here.”

“Well, it’s not like there’s much to do aside from looking at a metal plate on the ground, is there? We need to get to San Juan before it gets close to dark.”

Christian conceded and they went back to Samuel’s grandfather’s pickup truck, which they had borrowed for the trip. Within a half hour they drove into San Juan National Forest, and Samuel couldn’t remember the last time he had been surrounded by so much green. The red dirt and rocks he knew as home seemed distant and small compared to the tall, blue mountains and dark pine trees.

They set up a tent near the lake and got out their individual fifths of vodka. Samuel liked to chase his with cranberry juice, and Christian made fun of him for it. “Girly,” he called it.

By the time the sun set, Samuel’s head buzzed. When the stars were out at their fullest, his head spun.

Close to midnight, Christian said, “It’s nice to get away from Window Rock, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“I just get tired of looking at all the red dirt. And the roads have all gone to shit, and it’s nothing but beat up pickup trucks and vans. It’s just all so run down.”

Samuel knew that Christian didn’t mean anything offensive by his comments, but he still felt offended. “Fuck you, you’re ignorant.” Saying it felt good, and the hurt vanished with giggles.

“Aw, shut up, Sammy!” shouted Christian, then he laughed stupidly. “I’m not ignorant!”

“Yeah. Like you weren’t ignorant the day you told my family that you liked red people,” replied Samuel, barely finishing his sentence before bursting. When the laughs subsided, he just muttered, “Dumbass.”

“Shit, you’ll never let me live that down. You know, I don’t remember anything else from when I was six. *That’s* how traumatic it was. I thought your grandfather was going to kill me with lasers from his eyes.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” said Samuel.

It was silent for a moment. “I know that your grandfather is a healer, but what does that mean?” asked Christian.

“It means... he heals people, dumbass” said Samuel. He grinned and that turned into another laughing fit for both of them.

“Don’t be ignorant, Sammy!” said Christian, stumbling a bit. “Like, what does he do? What does he do to heal people?”

“He makes sand paintings. They... um, they’re big elaborate drawings of spirits or some shit, using colored sand. You know, Navajo stuff. The healers touch the part of you that’s sick and then touch that same part on the spirit, and it transfers it to the painting. Something like that.”

Christian looked stunned enough to have just seen a UFO. “Sammy, you just blew my mind.”

Samuel thought of the green lizard and how Christian had always tried to take it from him. He remembered how, in those days, what his grandfather did with the paintings had fascinated him even more than they were fascinating his drunk friend now. He swallowed and started to feel guilty for some of his descriptions. Some shit. Navajo stuff. He felt disrespectful. He took another swig.

On Monday Samuel returned the pickup truck to his grandfather. He had hoped to drop it off when he wasn’t around and have Christian pick him up, but his parents demanded that he stay to visit. “You never talk to him anymore,” his mom said. “The least you can do is sit down with him for a bit, especially since he let you use his truck for your trip.”

So Samuel sat with his grandfather in plastic lawn chairs in front of the garden they worked on together three years before. His grandfather tended it well and it flourished with tomatoes, peppers and flowers.

“How was your trip with Christian?” asked his grandfather.

“Fun,” said Samuel. “The forest was really beautiful. He wanted to stop by the Four Corners Monument on the way though. That was kind of boring.”

“How thoughtful of him to take a Navajo friend to a monument that reminds its viewer of the United States’ presence here, even in the middle of a reservation.”

Samuel smiled a little before catching himself. “I thought you might say something like that. I don’t know. I didn’t care too much.” He regretted saying it as it left his mouth, and he could feel his grandfather’s eyes on him. He just dragged his feet through the sand and watched the lines they formed.

“Did you ever know what I wanted your parents to name you?”

Samuel was confused, but relieved at the lack of a scolding for “not caring too much.”
“No, I don’t think so.”

“Tahoma. Water’s edge. You are at the water’s edge, Samuel. I knew you would be, that your whole generation would be. You lean over the edge and are in danger of falling in, and falling in would mean the loss of our heritage.”

Unsure of what to say in response, Samuel just shrugged.

“Have you been drinking, Samuel?”

He shifted uncomfortably.

5

After high school, Christian went to college in Phoenix and Samuel stayed behind in Window Rock to work. They stayed friends, though, and Samuel often went to join Christian on the weekends for house parties. At one of these house parties, in the spring of Christian’s freshman year, Christian introduced Samuel to a girl with blue eyes. With an idiot’s grin, he said, “Since you obviously have a knack for befriending the only white person in a crowd, meet Mary.”

The white-person comment made Samuel flinch a bit. He wasn't sure what it was supposed to mean, but oh well. He looked at the freckled girl and thought she was pretty. "I'm Samuel," he said. She smiled back at him.

Mary was from Phoenix. She had red hair and that was different for Samuel. She told him that he was an Indian and that was different for her. They took a few shots, made out and snuck off to a bathroom. He thought they were there for one thing, but Mary had her own plans. She pulled what looked like a sheet of paper covered with little stickers out of her purse.

"You want a tab, Sammy?" asked Mary.

Samuel considered. "Sure."

She looked at him with a smile that seemed pretty and friendly, but also hinted at genuine worry. Samuel felt like she might be making fun of him. "Are you sure? You have to be in the right mind, you know?"

Samuel decided. "Yeah. Give it to me."

Before long he kept forgetting where he was. He would remember, then forget again, then see Mary's bright hair and remember the bathroom. "Your hair's on fire," he said to her.

She whirled around and almost lost her balance. "What?" she yelled, grabbing her head. "Wha? No it's not, Sammy."

"It's your hair. It's bright."

"Easy there, Sammy, you know? What'd I tell you about being in the right mind?"

The next thing he knew, they were stumbling down an empty, lamp-lit street, jumping over waves crashing towards them in the concrete. He *was* in the right mind, he thought. Then he bumped into a window and noticed a blanket. A sandpainting blanket. It startled him, and he

knew he needed to look away fast, but he didn't. The sharp, squared lines of the deities started to move. Started to walk. Started to face him.

They're toxic. They're sick. Get away.

He couldn't.

Their white arms extended from their green bodies and reached out to him through the window. They grabbed his face, and he started yelling. He clawed at his eyes, cheeks and mouth, but the spirits were pulling away at him. He felt Mary grab him. But no, it was the spirits, not Mary. They were all grabbing him.

Finally he broke loose and ran across the street. He bumped into another window, but this time, instead of a blanket, he saw himself. His reflection. But he couldn't see himself because the deities had pulled his face away. He was pale and blurred. He was an empty figure. He needed the sand. But the sand would mean going to his grandfather.

A few weeks later Samuel was still drunk. He began to be unsure of when he had last been sober. Still reeling from drinking all day with Christian, who was in for spring break, Samuel stood with the tourists in the Canyon de Chelly. Dimly aware that he should not have driven here, he shuffled his feet and kicked around pebbles like a reprimanded child.

The tourists took countless pictures of the ruins of homes carved into the reddish cliffs that towered on both sides of the trail, but Samuel just stared. He stared so intently that he continuously had to double-check his grip on the Gatorade bottle, filled with a valuable mixture of cranberry juice and vodka. He couldn't remember why he had come up to the Canyon in the first place, and it was starting to bother him. The cliff-side ruins were starting to bother him. They were evidence of generations before him.

His cell phone buzzed with a message from Mary. She wouldn't leave him alone. Samuel still thought she was nice and pretty, and every time she tried to get a hold of him his instincts first told him to give her a call. But then the memories would come back. The bad trip in Phoenix. The blanket, the spirits and the trapped sickness. With one final glance at the ruins, he decided he couldn't handle it anymore and walked away. He walked through the dirt and sand towards his car, but under a tree he came to a stop. A green lizard perched itself on a rock near the tree and tilted its head toward him.

Samuel started to lurch at the lizard, trying to recapture the thing that he had let go when he was fifteen. But he was too drunk, and he fell. The Gatorade bottle landed a few feet ahead of him, staining the sand red.

Slowly, he began to draw a figure in the sand. He finished the head and half of the body, then passed out.

Two days later, Samuel knocked on his grandfather's door. "I fell into the water," he said.

"I think," said his grandfather, placing his hand on Samuel's shoulder, "that it is time you saw the ceremony."

A Big Promotion

So I got a promotion the other day, and let me just say that I'm feeling on top of the world right now. But actually, it's a pretty impressive story, so I'll try not to get ahead of myself.

It's ridiculous, you know. I sat in the train one day a while back, on my way into the city, on my way to work, when I looked at the black and gray towers that crowd the horizon and decided that it was all so impressive to behold. And you aren't from this city so I must tell you that it's truly mind-blowing. I sat in the train and I felt a surge of pride at the magnitude of our buildings and the way they pierce the sky so deeply that I think they must tear the clouds and cause them to dump their rain over the streets and windows, day in and day out. It's a very rainy city, you see. I know it isn't literally the skyscrapers that cause the rain. But that's my point. That's why it's so incredible. The buildings are just so tall, and spread out over such a large area, that I feel justified in exaggerating my description.

Of course, they need to be that tall. It's where we make everything. I told this to my daughter, just the other day in fact. Maybe, since you're not from this city, I should tell it to you, too. I guess you probably already know that all basic products in our country come from this city, and perhaps you're even aware that each individual tower is responsible for each individual product. That's why the skyline is so expansive. After all, not only do we have a tower for each product, but we also have a tower for each service. We have banking towers and we have insurance towers and we have educational towers and we have manufacturing towers. Finally, since you've probably seen pictures of the city, at least, I'm sure you already know that different types of towers have different shapes. The banking towers are rhomboids while the educational towers look like triangles if you're looking straight down at them. I work in the cylindrical towers, which signify the manufacturing buildings. The cylindrical towers outnumber the others

a thousand to one, I'd say, and I must *also* say that it feels pretty good to participate in that massive operation in my own small way.

So you probably already know all of this. But maybe you don't know the details. Did you know, for instance, that production progresses *down* the towers? It's pretty genius, if you think about it, because finished products end up at the bottom floor of the towers so they can be shipped right out the front door. I, for instance, *used* to work on the 340th floor of Airplane Tower (again, as of a few days ago I got promoted, so I got to move to a *lower* floor). Airplane Tower is 421 floors total, and above my old floor they do the basic work that *anyone* could do, like bolting together the beams and sheets of metal that form the skeletal body of the planes. With each floor the plane descends to, it gets more additions, like wings and tails and flaps. By the time it gets down to 340 it starts getting detailed components that take a lot of *skill*, concentration and hard work to produce. Before my promotion, I contributed the little blinking red lights that serve as warnings for major problems, such as low fuel or engine fires. Without my old floor, pilots would fly miles into the sky without realizing they have a problem, and then crash and burn without ever even knowing what went wrong.

It was pretty important stuff, but I've moved onto bigger and better things. So let me tell you how that all happened.

Oh, just a quick point: did you know that Airplane Tower is the one of the tallest towers in all of the Manufacturing District, second only, perhaps, to Tower Tower? Just thought you should know that.

Anyway, I think what really got me going was Bring Your Parent to School Day. My spunky little daughter, Amanda, is only six and thus still pretty high up on her education tower, but I think she's a smart little kid, and I have no doubt she'll move lower and lower, all the way

down to the ground floor and graduation, in no time. She'll take after her dad, you know. She told her mother and me that she had to pick just one parent to come to Bring Your Parent to School Day, where I guess we would talk to the kids about our jobs and the importance of working hard. She asked us why she could only choose one. I said that it was probably to save the feelings of children of single parents. How bad would they feel if they didn't have a second parent to bring to a Second Bring Your Parent to Work Day?

My wife said that it was probably to save time. My wife is quick and efficient.

My daughter chose me. Now, I felt a little bad about it. I tried to gauge my wife's reaction, but she kept a tight focus on her work, which she usually brings home from her job in Curtain Tower to finish up on the kitchen table while I cook dinner. She must be busy over there in order to not get finished during the normal work day. She kept a straight face and said, "Okay, honey, I'm sure your dad would love to." Amanda ran out of the room, little blonde pigtails bouncing off of her shoulders, and I checked my wife's expression for signs of jealousy.

I said, "You know, Dearest, I'm sure there's nothing to her picking me over you."

"I know," she said.

I said, "You *do* work in Curtain Tower, though."

"I know," she said.

"It's just that, well, you know, even though you work on a low floor and everything, I think Airplane Tower is more interesting to kids her age. They wouldn't understand a manager's job."

She looked up from her paperwork at me and said, "I know, John. It's not a competition. It had to be just one of us. Honestly I don't think I'd be able to get away long enough, anyway."

And I didn't say this part to her, but hell, planes aren't just more interesting to kids. They're more interesting to *anyone*.

So I requested a morning off from work and went with my daughter to the Educational District. Now, you may not know how the education system works here in the city, but it's divided into schools that specialize in what kind of work the children's parents think they should be getting into. My parents, for instance, grew up knowing the value of true, hard work, so Omnimodus (the corporation that structures the city's whole workforce) encouraged them to send me to the Labor School Tower. It's a short tower, so I was able to move through it quickly. I finished school and graduated when I was twelve, fully ready to contribute to the workforce of our great city. Because of my wife's background as a manager, however, Omnimodus decided that our daughter would best be suited for more office-type work, so they suggested that we send her to the Tower for the Education of Executives and Officials. This tower is higher than the one I graduated from, and Amanda will most likely be at least twenty before she walks out of the first floor with a diploma.

We got off the train in the Educational District, and my daughter walked me to her school. We entered through a door placed neatly at western vertex of the triangular floor plan, and I was immediately impressed by the slick, marble floors and the green plants that almost reached the twenty-foot ceiling. *My* school tower hadn't been this sleek—it must not have had the money. Other kids and their parents shuffled in with us and I saw that most wore fancy suits and polished shoes. For a second I felt underdressed, but of course that only meant that I would seem more relatable to the kids, so I didn't think much of it. All of us parents got signed in at the desk. They gave us nametags and ushered us into the elevators.

I met Amanda's teacher, a cute brunette with a short, plaid skirt and sharp glasses. She introduced herself as Ms. Humphreys, and I thought she acted a bit funny.

"Everything okay, Ms. Humphreys?" I asked after shaking her hand.

She said, "Yes, Mr. Fairley, I just thought Amanda's mother would be coming. That's all."

I smiled at her and told her that my wife was too busy. "That's why it's good to have just *one* Bring Your Parent to School Day, right?" I asked. "That way you have a backup plan."

She laughed. "I guess so," she said.

I told her that I worked in Airplane Tower, so it should be fun for the kids. Her face lit up and she told me to go first, since all of the other parents worked in the more boring managerial positions.

Now, at first the kids *were* impressed by the fact I worked in Airplane Tower. "Oooh, that's the big one!" shouted a little freckled red head boy in the back of the class.

"Yeah, I can see it from my house!"

"Now, kids, don't interrupt Mr. Fairley," said Ms. Humphreys, but I waved her off and grinned at the kids.

"I love airplanes!" shouted a little girl with curly brown hair and glasses that barely stayed on her nose.

"Yeah," said the obnoxious brat (though at that moment I did not yet realize that he was the class bully—"He loves to ruin dreams," my daughter told me later), "but what floor do you work on?" He had cactus-like blond hair and a nose like a warthog.

My smile faded. "I'm getting there, young man, just hold on. Now, kids, did you know that Airplane Tower makes more than—"

“I bet you work on the 1,000th floor, don’t you, old man?”

“Shut up, pig face!” yelled Amanda. Even though I was happy with her reaction, I shot her a warning glance as Ms. Humphreys yelled at the heckler, telling him to be quiet and respect his elders.

After all had quieted down and Ms. Humphreys apologized to me, I continued. “Actually, young man, Airplane Tower isn’t quite that tall. There are 421 floors. And if you must know immediately, I work on the 340th where we make little red lights that, in the finished plane, will let the pilots know if anything is going wrong in the engines or wings or anything else.” The bright eyes of one little boy with a baseball cap widened and I started to smile when cactus-head once again butted in.

“What a loser.”

“James!”

“What? My dad works—” (here Ms. Humphreys continued trying to silence him by repeating his name) “—in the Bank District in the rhomboid towers. On a first floor, too! Even *Flannigan’s* dad works on the 4th floor of Piano Tower. 340th? What a los—”

“That’s enough!” yelled Ms. Humphreys, finally loud enough to silence him. “If you speak up one more time I’m sending you to the office!”

James “cactus-head” Pigface glared at me and I met his gaze. “Actually, James, my coworkers and I do very important work on our floor. Without the blinking red lights, the plane would continue to lower floors and eventually make it out onto a runway where pilots would fly it high into the sky and without our lights they would run out of fuel halfway to their destination without realizing it and they would crash because the blinking red lights wouldn’t alert them to prepare for an emergency landing.”

“I bet you tell that to yourself every night as you cry yourself to sleep wishing you worked—”

Ms. Humphreys cut him off, of course (louder than ever), and walked him to the office. I sat back at the front of the class with the other parents. My seat was next to Flannigan. He nudged me with his elbow and muttered, “What a little prick, right?”

I nodded. Four seats down, *Mr. Pigface* straightened his fancy suit.

Yeah, the kid was a prick. I have to admit, though, it did kind of get to me.

So I gave my daughter a quick kiss goodbye and headed back to the train station. On the ride over to the Manufacturing District, I noticed a series of posters on the walls of the train car. I suppose I had to have seen them before, but I never really gave them a second glance. They showed Avery Cunningham, the CEO of Omnimodus, wearing a hardhat amongst a group of workers and giving a thumbs-up. “Avery Cunningham thanks the hard workers of Omnimodus. Without your hard work, we’d go nowhere!”

I looked out the window and noticed the skyline of the Manufacturing District in the distance. The awe-inspiring buildings stood like dark, noble statues among the gray mist of yet another drizzly day. I felt another little burst of pride. It’s true; I *am* part of the force that makes the company what it is. I *do* work hard. But suddenly I started to wonder if that hard work would take *me* somewhere, and not just the company. Before I could think much further, the train reached my destination and I headed to work.

I approached Airplane Tower in time to see a finished plane towed out of the first floor. I wondered if the little red lights in it were made by me or if they belonged to one of the other five

guys I work with on 340. It was a beautiful 747, and they do have a lot of red lights. I figured that we had all probably contributed to that one.

I craned my neck in order to look up the spine of the tower. Somewhere up there, hidden by clouds, a glass ceiling capped the building to allow what sunlight was available filter down through the building. The finished jet in front of me had come from that top floor, starting out as a simple frame, and had moved through a series of 421 holes and stopped at each floor for one addition or another. The concept of the tower fills me with pride every time I get to see a finished plane leave the building, and at the time I decided to ignore the doubt that had plagued me since the morning at school.

I walked inside and took a moment to enjoy the emptiness of the first floor. Usually, during the morning rush hour, the hallway is crowded with workers waiting for their turn to get on the big elevators. It was 11:30, though, and I had rarely seen the floor so bare. I suppose, during normal hours, only a few people actually work on the first floor.

I stepped into the elevator and felt myself shoot up to 340. The chamber came to an abrupt stop and I moved into the Transition Room, where workers need to swipe ID cards to pass onto their floors (Omnimodus tells us that we shouldn't be walking freely about other floors where we aren't certified, as we may cause distractions to busy workers and damages to the final products). The lock clicked and I walked into 340.

The floor I used to work on is open because it requires so few employees and so little work space. Like all the other floors, the half opposite of the elevators is taken up by a void where the planes can pass through. On 340, the half with the elevators is only populated by a cluster of a few desks, a short stand covered in model lights, a few sets of conveyor belts twisting past the desks and slithering their way to the plane (where mechanical arms grab our lights and

place them where they belong in the product), and my five co-workers. That day, a few of them waved or grunted at me in greeting, and I said “Hey” in response.

I sat down at my desk and began making lights. A ticker in front of me displayed three numbers: the total number of lights I’ve made so far in the day, the total number of lights I’m supposed to make that day, and the total number of lights I’ve made since my first day on the job. I switched on the conveyor belt, which fed through a slot in the wall and carried portions of plastic to me for molding and coloring. The process took roughly ten minutes of work for each light casing. When I grabbed some plastic from the belt, it would stop and wait while I carefully bent and shaped the plastic sample with tools and torches, then used the colorotron (a very complicated device that takes a lot of skill to turn the plastic to just the right shade of red) to finish off my part in the process. I would place my light casing back on the conveyor belt, and my ticker would change two of three numbers.

So I started working, and the ticker started counting.

389,671.

Ten minutes of work.

389,672.

Ten minutes of work.

389,673.

The stand with the model lights alternated blinking certain example colors that the colorotron could possibly create. Omnimodus wanted us to have those examples to periodically compare our work with, and they constantly bathed me in a flood of reds, oranges, yellows and greens. Eventually, it would have a hypnotizing effect on me, and I would get lost in my work.

In this way my days passed pretty quickly, so I guess I can't complain. But, on that day, a rare distraction came up.

389,675.

Ten minutes of work.

389,676.

Ten minutes of work.

389,6—

“One million!” shrieked Frank Sturgill, the oldest man in our group. “One million!”

We all turned our seats around to find him jumping up and down at his desk, holding a red bulb in his right hand.

Next to me, Sam Dutton crossed his arms and yelled, “Calm down, old man—you're going to hurt yourself!”

Sturgill stopped jumping and jabbed the air with his knobby, left middle finger. “Up yours, you bastard, I just made one million!”

Everyone laughed at this. I start to congratulate him when the speakers came on with a pop.

“Attention, workers of Manufacturing Tower Number 365.8,” said a low, almost growling electronic voice, “It has come to our attention that Employee 6019376 has just logged his one millionth unit. Omnimodus Manufacturing, Inc. values the efforts of its members, so congratulations to Employee 6019376 for a long history of distinguished work.”

We waited in silence for a moment. Jim Ernst broke it by saying, “Agreed. Congratulations, Employee 6019... whatever. Feel good about yourself.”

We laughed again, though that time it was closer to a mere chuckle. I don't know about the other guys, but I know mine felt a little forced. Sturgill sat back down to begin on his 1,000,001st light, and I put down my 389,677th. I played through the events of Bring Your Parent to School Day in my mind.

“Employee 9456718, your production has slowed,” said the electronic voice from a small speaker on my desk.

Startled, I spun back around to my work station and hit the button. “Sorry, Omni, just got a bit distracted.”

“Proceed.”

“Daydreaming, Fairley?” Dutton asked, not taking his eyes from his glass.

“Not exactly,” I said as I picked up my next scrap to be molded and colored. “One million. Wow.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dutton look up at me. “I guess,” he said. He hesitated, then added, “are you getting at something?”

“Kind of.”

“Great.”

“Don't be a jackass. I mean, it's just a big number. I've been here nearly twenty years and I'm not even half way to that.”

“And?”

“Kind of depressing.”

Dutton sat quietly for a moment. “I guess.”

“You've been here like twenty-five or so by now, right?”

“Yeah, about that long. I’ve lost track. Keeping count too strictly would be depressing.”

With my molder, which looked something like a tiny lemon juicer, and a small torch I slowly formed my plastic into the proper shape. I tapped a button on the floor with my foot to rev up the colorotron. “Hey, Frank, congratulations on the big number!” I yelled over my shoulder.

Sturgill waved a hand in the air without looking away from his work. “Thanks, Fairley,” he said. “It’s my last exciting number. I certainly doubt I’ll be around longer to see any other landmarks.” His voice was cheery, and I didn’t pick up any sarcasm or self-pity in it. He was genuinely satisfied.

Saying my thoughts out loud before my mind even had the chance to spell them, Dutton muttered, “Now that... is depressing.”

“Yeah, it kind of is.” I switched off the colorotron.

So, you see, it was really a combination of things that caused me to act. It was my daughter choosing me to go to Bring Your Parent to School Day. As much as I hate to give credit to James “cactus-head” Pigface for anything, it was him giving me a hard time in front of my daughter. It was seeing that poster in the train and wondering if I had the potential to do more. It was watching Sturgill break out in hysterics over reaching one million light casings as I worked on my 389,677th. It was all of those things hitting me in one day that caused me to suddenly decide that I didn’t want to work on the 340th floor anymore.

“You got that one pretty quick,” said Dutton, but I had already stood up and grabbed my jacket off of my chair. When he saw this, he asked, “Going somewhere?”

I think at that point I wasn’t even sure what I was doing, but I said, “I guess. I think I’m going to go see about working on a lower floor.”

Dutton dropped his torch and cursed loudly when it burnt his hand. The others turned around to see what was going on. By the time I finished putting on my jacket I'd already passed their desks, headed for the plane that hung by chains and waited to head down to the next level after it acquired the proper amount of red warning bulbs.

“Working on another floor?” shouted Dutton.

“Another floor?” repeated George Wolowinski, who sat to the right of Sturgill. “Fairley, our identification cards only take the elevators to our own specific level. You know that. How will you even get there?”

I kept walking and shouted back, “Does it look like I'm heading to the elevator?” My footsteps echoed throughout the massive room as I left the whirring of conveyor belts and entered the wide open space of gray tile that gave way to the 421-story pit wide enough for a large plane to drop through. The current plane, finished accepting its load of lights from the belt, began to lower slowly to the floor below as I approached it. I hopped on through the gap where a curved door would soon be placed (98th floor, I believe), and the shouts of my former colleagues in warning-light-manufacturing faded. I looked up and saw the distant glass ceiling and hundreds of floors that eventually became so smashed together from my vantage point that I couldn't tell them apart. The miles of thick chains that supported the plane converged at some point I couldn't see clearly. The links moved on toward infinity and I passed through the threshold of the 339th floor.

I don't think I will ever forget the sensation that overwhelmed me as I saw the workplace on 339 for the first time. The floor was packed with at least thirty workers, all bustling frantically with little pieces of metal and plastic on conveyor belts that span the entire room. I figured out immediately, based on the sizes and shapes of the materials they worked with, that

they had to be creating the knobs and switches that belong in the cockpit of the planes. The chaotic noise of all of the machines and voices came together in my ears like a beautiful symphony. The belts wove around each other like the most intricate of spider webs. To say I was awestruck isn't enough. It was as if a master chef had served me a plate of exquisite prime rib after I had spent a life of only knowing white bread.

My mind raced. Can you even imagine working in a place like this? Before, I had thought of myself as important because I made the warning lights. Sure, planes need the lights, but without these knobs and switches, the pilots wouldn't be able to do anything about the problems, even if they were aware of them. Hell, they wouldn't be able to turn on the engines in the first place. I understood immediately that the work on this floor was more important, and I knew that I had to join it.

I hopped off of the plane and onto the white tile (a nice touch) of 339 before the chains stopped moving. I entered the chaos, looking for someone to tell me what to do. Too wrapped up in their jobs, the workers didn't notice me. I could see their resolve in their eyes. The work on this floor must keep people engaged through constant challenge and reward. No matter the commitment, thought, I had to get them to notice me. I tried to yell out, but the chaos drowned out my voice. Finally, I did the only thing I could think of to get their attention. I pulled a plug.

The symphony crashed to a stop and left only some murmurs. After a moment, though, a woman's voice yelled, "What the hell is going on here?"

I waved an arm high above my head. "Sorry, that was me, I just unplugged the belts." All of the workers glared at me, and I tried to ignore my embarrassment. "Yeah, I'm from the 340th floor, and I just came down on the plane. I'm tired of working on the warning lights. I want to work on this floor. Who should I talk to?"

Most of the workers turned toward a woman, who I'm guessing was the one who had shouted, standing near one of the few desks in the room. Even though I could tell she was at least fifty, she looked tall and sharp. Her eyes darted to the right and then back to me. She asked, "You came from the next level up? I don't think you're supposed to do that, sir. And you are definitely not supposed to be interrupting our work by unplugging our conveyor belts. You need to leave immediately."

I yelled, "No, no. I really don't want to. Is there no way to get a job on this level?"

She sighed, rather angrily I thought, and shouted "Back to work!" to everyone else. A worker plugged the power cord back into the belt system and the chaos resumed. The woman stormed over to me, navigating the complex system of conveyor belts and said, "No. All of my new hires come directly from the 1st floor."

"*Your* new hires? What are you, a supervisor?"

"Yes," she said bluntly, crossing her arms.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to seem rude. It's just that, we don't even have a supervisor up there. So, do you have contact with the 1st floor?"

"Yes, and we'll contact them now—"

"Great."

"—to report you for violating protocol."

"What?"

"You have to realize you can't just jump onto the unfinished products and ride them to a different level."

"No one told me I couldn't."

“Why else do you think we have identification cards for the elevators? Once you’re assigned a floor, you’re supposed to stay there. And I don’t think you need a rule book to tell you not to tamper with the equipment. Now come with me.” She grabbed my arm and started pulling me back to her desk.

“Damn, lady, just—”

“You can address me as ‘Ma’am’ or ‘Ms. Walton.’ You may not have a supervisor on your level, but we do on this one.”

I shut my mouth and decided to follow.

We reached her desk and she flipped a switch, turning on a screen, which revealed nothing more than a bright blue line across a still black screen.

“Omni, send security, please.”

The blue line quivered as the familiar electronic voice responded, “Certainly, Ms. Walton.”

The screen went off and I said, “What are you doing, arresting me?”

She said she wasn’t, but she told me that security would take me to be dealt with by an executive. I spent the five minutes it took for my escort to arrive watching the work continue without me.

Two big men got off the elevator, talked to Walton, and guided me back to the elevator. I didn’t think it was necessary to bring two, and, I’ll admit, their overbearing presence scared me a bit. I rode the elevator with them in silence to the first floor. Instead of taking me to an office, they brought me outside to a car and told me to get in the back.

Now, I suppose I messed up my story by telling you in the beginning that I got a promotion. If I hadn't spilled that in the very beginning I could have you at the edge of your seat now. Just let me say that *I* was on the edge of *my* seat, in that car. I had no idea what they planned on doing with me. Were they throwing me in jail? Were they going to "take care" of me, so to speak? Maybe they didn't like people trying to break their system. Maybe they punished anyone who tried to move from one floor to another.

I watched the buildings pass and felt close to tears. All of the pride I had felt when looking at these towers felt like a joke. The company had never valued my work, or anyone else's. To them, I was always just a mule, and a mule that tries to be a horse isn't useful—it just needs to be gotten rid of, or, at the very least, taught a lesson. Ridiculous. The whole scam was ridiculous. It was unfair.

We crossed into the Financial District and I pulled myself out of self-pity. I had no guess as to why they had taken me here. Before long, the car stopped in front of a small park nestled amongst massive banking towers. Trees created a wall of green along the street's sidewalk and provided a border to a path that went deep into the park, although that path curved so that I couldn't see where it led.

One of the security guards said, "Get out and follow that path. Go inside the building and come back here when you're done. We'll be waiting."

It was deliciously cryptic, actually. I shook with simultaneous terror and curiosity. I stepped out into the damp, misty air and walked onto the path. The trees stretched out over the sky, blocking my view of the high towers that shot up to the sky. With nothing above to distract me, I focused on the ground level. Soon I rounded a bend in the path and found a building. As far as I could tell, it only had one floor. It had no external features or extravagant design—it just

looked like a white box with tinted windows and one door that had been dropped by the surrounding towers.

I walked inside and found an interior that completely contrasted the plain white surface. Rich, reddish wood filled the floor with warmth and mounted animals lined the walls. Here and there, a painting or antique weapon added extra elegance. The place smelled of fine cigar smoke. Ahead of me, the hallway extended along a dozen doorways on each side and ended at a room with an open threshold. I could see a man sitting at a desk in that room. He waved his hand at me and shouted, “Come on in, Mr. Fairley!”

I walked through the gauntlet of dead animals and the weapons that killed them and found myself in the office of Avery Cunningham.

Crazy story, right? I had been thinking that they were going to throw me in jail or even kill me, and before you know it I’m standing in front of the CEO of the whole corporation. Believe it or not, he actually turned out to be a nice guy. He asked me some background things—where I’m from, where I went to school, who I married. He asked about my family and what I wanted out of life. Eventually, though, he did get to business. Only then did his massive oak desk, crow-black hair, thick mustache and arrogant cigar become intimidating.

“So why, Mr. Fairley, did you feel the need to stow aboard a plane for a fifteen-foot flight?”

“Well, sir, I didn’t realize it was against the rules.”

He burst into laughter. “Lighten up, it was a joke. You’re not on trial here,” he said. “But no, I guess maybe it isn’t technically against the rules, but I just want to know why the hell you wouldn’t take the elevator instead.”

I told him that our ID cards don’t let us onto other floors.

He said, “True, but you could have asked nicely.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Mr. Fairley, When Ms. Walton called you in I pulled your file, and it shows that you’ve been quite the dedicated worker for a long time. And now you want to move down a level?”

“Yes, sir. I feel like I could reach my full potential on the 339th floor, working on the switches and knobs.”

Cunningham grinned. “Mr. Fairley, Omnimodus Manufacturing values its hardest workers more than anything and always encourages upward mobility—or downward, I suppose you could say.”

He pulled a paper from a drawer and handed it to me, saying that it was a letter instructing Ms. Walton to make room for a position to suit my talents. Stunned, I thanked him profusely. I actually think I might have gotten on his nerves—I probably said thank you at least forty times. I don’t know, though, maybe I’m just being paranoid. He was a really nice guy, after all.

When I told my wife and daughter about the whole ordeal, they were stunned as well. My wife couldn’t believe how fast it had all happened. I guess I can’t believe it either. From now on, I’ll have one less floor to travel. Things will be different. I’ll be at a lower level. I know it’ll still be pretty high, but that’s just because building planes involves a lot of steps. The big promotion proved to me that Omnimodus *does* value me, and while the guys up on 340 can keep working on their blinking red lights, I’ll be working on 339 with a job that *really* matters.

Sanitizer

I've counted the steps, and it takes eighty-seven of them, spiraling to the top of the grassy burial mound, to bring me to the little bench I sit on during every lunch break. Today, though, I find the bench broken, and I feel a spike of fear stab my thoughts as if I've returned home to find the door kicked in and the living room torn apart. Drunk teenagers or perhaps an angry husband escaping his house to vent left the front wooden slat of the bench snapped into two pieces. On the right, the board still clings to the leg of the bench and slants down to the dirt, but the left half lays in the grass like a severed limb. I inch forward and sit on the crippled bench. Broken, yes, but still functional. I breathe a bit easier but still feel tense from the thought of my mound not being the same.

According to a plaque at the base, the mound rises fifty-three feet above a small park as flat as a countertop, and from the bench I can survey the town in which I live and work. The city limits of Moundland Point roll out beyond the park and through the river valley like a concrete and glass throw rug and fade away into endless trees. Rolling hills browned by the deep cold of February frame the white sky. A solitary maple stands halfway up the mound by the steps. It's become something of a friend to me, and I reach up to touch its overhanging branches on every trip to the top. Sometimes I think of her and I as sisters, the mound our pregnant mother.

Up here, I often feel more at home than I do at my own silent, two-bedroom house, tucked away in a quiet circle near the edge of town. Up here I can breathe safely.

Despite the cold and the absence of one board under my legs, I get more comfortable. Frigid wind turns my dark hair, tied back, into a whip that wraps around my face and frequently

catches on my lips. The gusts purge me of the dirty, stagnant air I wallow in day after day in the post office.

Most days, because of the elevation, I'm cleaned by the wind. On occasion, though, the rain washes me (I keep a change of clothes in the car), or the sleet or the roasting sun in August. But regardless of what the weather is like, the mound always holds me up to be cleansed. That's why I come here every work day during my lunch break and sometimes, on particularly bad days, after my shift as well.

My phone interrupts my thoughts with an alarm warning me that my break is over in fifteen minutes. Dread of going back into town ends my peace. I turn off the alarm and survey the gridded streets and humble buildings of Moundland Point, which can often look innocent and endearing. Sometimes, though, especially from up here, I swear I can see a haze lurking from block to block like a malignant fog. It's a haze formed by everyone's breath and car fumes and cigarette smoke. I shudder, reach into my purse and grab a little bottle of alcohol-based hand sanitizer. With my eyes still on the town, I pop the lid open and squeeze the plastic. It sputters and only a few drops splatter onto my open hand. I click it shut and return it to my purse, exchanging it for one of two reserve bottles. A generous portion plops into my palm and I rub the cool jelly over my fingers and wrists. The clean smell of the alcohol floods my nose and I feel tension leave with my sigh.

I lean forward to return the phone to my purse. I attempt to brace myself by grabbing the edge of the bench, but I wrap my hand around the bar that once secured the front slat. Sharp pain cracks my thoughts and I jump back. I find a screw protruding from the bar, bent slightly from the dislodged board. It's red, although more so from rust than my own blood.

I check my hand, which has a small, bloody puncture in the middle. My breath quickens. I had my last tetanus booster two years ago, on May 1st. I'll need another one right away, of course, but at least I have my recent backup to comfort me until I can get to my doctor.

I can feel my heart drumming away in my ears. I should have left when I first saw the broken bench. I grab a spare Band-Aid from my purse and leave the mound quickly. On my way down the steps I give the maple a light touch on one of its bare branches, out of habit. After a cold walk along sidewalks that give a wide berth to the playground (children are so dirty, and watching them pick up handfuls of sand and pebbles makes me shiver), I get in my car and drive into the contaminated streets of Moundland Point.

Fifteen minutes later, I walk into the post office through the back door and say hello to Victor, the old Russian man who works with me as a mail processor. I pull a pair of latex gloves onto my hands with a snap and pick up a letter.

“Nice day out, I hope?” asks Victor. Despite retaining a strong accent from the majority of a life spent in the Eastern Hemisphere, his English is perfectly clear. On slow days, he teaches me how to pull off a convincing imitation.

“Cold and cloudy.”

“Of course. I wonder, then, why you enjoy spending all of your breaks out there?”

He's asked the same question countless times, but I humor him in the hopes of making the conversation brief. I don't want to let my stress show to the point of him asking me questions. “Just to get away from you, I guess. Have you seen Marjorie?”

Victor nods in the direction of the hallway that leads to the front, where I can see my supervisor dealing with a line of customers. I sit down, thinking that I can ask her about going to the doctor when things aren't so busy. I set my hand sanitizer on a nearby counter and grab a

letter sent from Chicago. There are a lot of people in Chicago. A lot of people and a lot of filth. I process it quickly and move on, mentally uttering a quick prayer of thanks for my gloves. Other letters are from smaller towns that I've never heard of. One is from Japan. How long ago was the bird flu scare? Or was that China? I process it and go for a dollop of sanitizer on top of my gloves.

“Do you still like going to the riverfront?” asks Victor.

I look at the ceiling. “No. No, I don't think I've been there for a while.”

I used to go to the small riverfront park, not far from the mound, and sit near the water while I imagined the current washing my dirtiness away to the Atlantic. One day in the summer, I slipped and fell into the water. When I managed to get out I found a leech attached to my arm.

I haven't been to the riverfront since then. I moved on.

I head Marjorie yelling from the front. “Holly, Victor—I need one of you to come up to the counter for a bit. Bryan called in sick.” I hear her footsteps click down the hallway and within a moment she's in the room with us. “Phyllis can come in but her husband has the car, so I'm going to go pick her up. That all right?”

“No problem, we can get it,” says Victor. As soon as she's back to the front he asks, “Would you like to take it, Holly?”

“I was going to ask you that.”

He laughs. “The days may be past when people thought that a Russian handling their mail had to be a Soviet spy, but I think the accent still throws them. Better to have the cute, young American girl face the public, don't you think?”

“Young? I'm thirty-six.”

“Any day now, people,” yells Majorie.

I sigh. “Fine, but *venever vee need to verk* the front again, *you’d* better take it.”

“Don’t overdo the *v*’s, darling. But you’re getting there.”

After grabbing my sanitizer, I walk to the front. I feel a rush of relief when I see no customers waiting in the lobby, only Marjorie.

“Marjorie, I was actually hoping to get to the doctor this afternoon.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No. I cut my hand on a rusty nail at the park, so I was going to get a tetanus shot to be safe.” I show her the bandaged palm.

“It’ll be fine for a few more minutes. Just hold down the fort until I get back, then I’ll let you go. And lose the gloves, Holly. People will think you’re crazy.”

“Okay. You’re going right out to pick her up and you’ll be back?”

“Don’t know where else I’d go.”

A moment later she’s gone and I’m left to silence only interrupted by the soft breath of the heating vents and the distant ruffling of paper from Victor’s work. I wonder what my chances are of Marjorie and Phyllis returning before any customers show up. Anxious, I watch the white clock on the gray wall, eyes twitching to follow every violent little jerk of the second hand.

My hopes are dashed when a man walks in to buy a roll of stamps. Before long, my earlier dream of no customers seems like a joke and people pour in one after another. I smear sanitizer over my hands after each of them, and after three I put another pair of gloves on despite Marjorie’s reservations. A half hour passes with no sign of my coworkers, although the customers do finally begin to slow their onslaught. With the extra time, my thoughts begin to boil with worries about the mound.

Another ten minutes pass, and an eccentric younger woman walks in with a small envelope in hand. My first impression is of rainbow oil slicks in a parking lot puddle. Her dark jeans are covered in swirling purple lines, light blue highlights in her brown hair frame her face and green eyes, and a bright orange pea coat covers a yellow tee shirt.

“Hey there,” she says with a grin. Her voice is quick and high, like a chirping bird.

“Good afternoon, how can I help you?”

“Yeah, I need to drop this in the mail.” She thrusts the letter across the counter as if she’s about to give a vigorous handshake, and I wonder why she didn’t just send it off in a mailbox. I take it, feeling slightly awkward.

“Do I know you?” she asks.

“Excuse me?”

“I just recognize you from some—Oh, I got it. You live in Pendleton Circle, right?”

“Um, yeah, but I don’t think—”

“Yeah, I’m not from around here. Visiting my dad. He lives on that street. He’s pretty sick. That’s actually why I’m here—I’m having to stick around longer than I expected. Had to get my rent check to my landlord back home.”

My heart jumps when she mentions her dad’s illness. I get some sanitizer. For a moment I hate Marjorie for not letting me go to the doctor. I hate Phyllis for not having her own car. I hate Bryan for not coming in, even though he would’ve brought his own sickness with him, had he elected to tough it out. I hate Victor for being pathetically insecure enough about his accent to guilt me into working up here.

The girl is saying something about how she loves walking, even in the cold.

“I’m sorry to hear that. About your dad, I mean.”

“Oh, no worries. I think he’ll wind up fine. Seems to be doing a bit better today, anyway.” She grins again. “Thanks for the condolences, though. What’s your name?”

“Holly.”

“I’m Mae. Nice to meet you. Well, Holly, I need to get back. I guess I might be seeing you around.”

She’s out the door before I have a chance to say anything. Another ten minutes pass with only one customer before Marjorie and Phyllis show up, explaining that traffic had held them up.

After I get my tetanus shot, I need another break on the mound. Doctors’ offices are a breeding ground for germs, and I want to climb my tower again and survey the town from a safe distance. But when I pass the entrance to the riverfront park, just about a mile from the mound’s park, worry creeps up in my throat. I can almost feel it clawing at the back of my tongue and squeezing my windpipe. It feels like a dirty sin. Something that I need to try to conceal from everyone. My car idles at a stop sign and I shift in my seat like an unfaithful Catholic about to make her first confession in years.

I can’t go to the mound yet. I want to, but I can’t. I make a left, away from the park, and notice that the sun has come out since lunch, though it hangs low over the dark border of distant hills. Orange and purple flood Moundland Point in a bath of sherbet, and I think of Mae.

The next day I take advantage of Saturdays like I usually do by making sure the house is sterilized. I pour half of the lemony cleaner into the pail and mix it with scalding water. Lysol, as the label says, kills ninety-nine percent of bacteria, so I need to mop every day after work to keep the left over one percent from multiplying. I spread the steaming solution all over the tile

in the kitchen and bathroom and the fake wood in the hallway, living room and bedroom. I mop myself into a corner by the front door and then wait on the porch for the floors to dry.

While sitting on the porch swing I stare at the bare maple tree in the front yard. I think of the maple on the mound, and I decide to drive over later for a breath of fresh air. My house feels a lot safer than work, but even here I sometimes find myself wanting the elevation of the mound. Up there, the wind feels stronger. I think of the way those breezes make the branches of the maple rattle against each other, and then I remember the protruding screw, probably still coated with my skin and blood cells.

I look down to my bandaged palm. Anxious to make sure the wound is healing but worried to expose it to contaminated air, I quickly peel the bandage back and see the little mark that interrupts the lines on my skin like a teacher's judgmental pen. I dowse the cut in sanitizer, cover it up again and wonder if it looks better or not. It's only been a day, so I guess I shouldn't expect much, but, then again, it's a small cut. Should it be closed up by now? I feel a faint itch near it and I use my middle finger to rub it gently.

My worries take a backseat in my mind when my dad pulls up in a silver car and shuffles out with a closed, black umbrella. A thin sheet of white clouds cover the sky, but not even a drizzle has graced the roads or yards all day long, so I ask him if he expects rain. He walks up the three front steps and tells me that you can never doubt Mother Nature's ability to give you pneumonia, and it's best not to take chances. I crane my neck to look at the sky. The clouds don't look dark enough to hint at rain, but I still tell Dad to come on in. Rain may or may not come with its pneumonia, but either way, the floors ought to be dry by now.

My dad is in his late fifties and has lost all of his rigid stature but none of his thick, black hair. Whenever I see him I worry that I look too much like him, with my own thin nose, pursed

lips, small eyes and dark hair. I argue with myself by claiming that my glasses give sharpness to my pupils that has long since left my dad's. I try to argue with myself by saying that I don't slouch like it's always below freezing, burdened with the weight of a marriage ended by cancer and raising a pre-teen child by myself. I can't deny, however, that sometimes, when I walk by shop windows, I catch myself straightening up like a grade-school kid in front of her principal.

I make tea for the two of us and ask why he decided to stop by.

"Just checking in." He rummages through my medicine cabinets, finds a bottle of vitamins and shakes it. "Getting low."

I nod and wonder if I've taken enough vitamin C to fight off any infection in my hand. When I take the bandage off again to inspect the wound again, my dad asks where I got it. I tell him about the bench. "It's fine," I add. "It itches, just a bit. It's fine."

The wrinkles on his forehead become exaggerated by yet another worry. For a moment, he doesn't say anything, and I can tell he's holding his breath. Finally, he breathes slowly and tells me that I ought to get it looked at. After all, there's no telling what kind of bacteria could have gotten in it, not to mention the possibility of tetanus and lockjaw.

"Are you sure? I washed it, though. First with hand sanitizer then with hydrogen peroxide when I got home. I even went to Dr. Thompson's for a tetanus shot. *He* looked at it."

"That may not have killed everything. And family practice doctors are always saying that things are fine. Don't worry about it, they say. It's nothing to be concerned about, they say. Sometimes little pains do turn out to be something. *You* know that as well as I do."

I check the knob on the stove to make sure I turned the gas all the way off after making the tea.

“If it’s itching, that might be a sign of infection. You should get it looked at again. Preferably at the hospital. Do you still have my insurance card?”

“Yeah, but...” I start, feeling a familiar lump forming in my throat. “I just don’t like going to the hospital.”

“I know.”

“It’s just, since Mom died—”

“I know.”

He doesn’t know, though. He thinks I’m hesitant because of unpleasant memories about my mother dying, but I’m over those. It happened over twenty years ago, and while I certainly don’t like to remember the way she looked at the end—bald, thin, yellow and full of tubes—my fear of the hospital is broader than that. I remember walking out of her room for the last time with my dad and passing death in a dozen forms. I walked by rooms with slow monitor beeps, a janitor attempting to mop up the germs of a hundred sick patients, and a little kid even younger than I connected to an IV. As we walked I drew closer to my dad’s side and tried not to think, but eventually I unwillingly concluded that the hospital was a place of death, not healing.

My dad doesn’t know that since then I’ve driven to the hospital with countless worries to be checked on, only to then turn around for fear of going inside amongst all of that death.

We drink our tea and Dad talks about a recent salmonella outbreak in packaged salads. He can’t remember the brand. He rants that the FDA doesn’t do enough. Best to not eat any salad for a while.

Before he leaves, he encourages me again to get to a doctor for antibiotics. I give him a few minutes to head down the street, then I grab my own keys so I can drive to the mound. When I pull out of my driveway, I can already feel myself begin to relax. I round the bend of

Pendleton Circle and see the stop sign where I will turn right to head to the park and my safe place. A light breeze had been blowing when I got into the car, and I know it will be even stronger on the bench.

Before I can reach the stop sign, though, I remember that the mound betrayed me, just like the riverfront did when I fell in the water and just like the fountain did when I was stung by a bee. After the fountain hurt me, I drove to the store for baking soda and saw the river. I remember imagining what it would be like to let the river wash away the bee sting. When the riverfront failed, I wanted the wind to dry me off, so I found the highest place I could. Now, though, there is nothing in sight.

I stop at the sign, and try to silence the voice in my head screaming that the mound is no longer safe. I put my car in reverse, back up all the way home and run inside. I need to be safe. I need to not think about the mound. Maybe, if I can stop the thoughts I can forget about them by Monday and be able to return to the maple and the bench and all will be ready. I just need to stop the thoughts.

I head back to the kitchen. I open the fridge, pull out a Dole bagged salad, and throw it away.

On Monday, my palm still itches. My dad's worries replay in my head without end, and I say little to Victor. I can feel him occasionally glance at me. Finally he asks, "You're quiet today, Holly. Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine."

He gives up after that. Eventually, I feel stress build up because my latex gloves prevent me from checking on the cut. I look at the clock at 11:16. I would normally feel anxiety lessen

at this point, knowing that my time at the mound is around the corner, but I remember the panic from Saturday and my tension only tightens around my shoulders. I tell myself not to think about it.

“Hey, guys,” says Phyllis, suddenly behind us. I jump. “Would one of you care to watch the front while I step out for a smoke?”

The request is the last thing I need.

“Would you like to take it, Holly?” asks Victor.

“No,” I snap at him. “I told you the other day that you needed to take the next one. I’m not in the mood.”

Awkward silence rests in the room for a moment, but Victor finally says, “Okay. Sure, I didn’t mean to upset you. I’ll do it, Phyllis.”

I close my eyes and try to ignore my guilt. If I can just make it to lunch, I can get to the mound and perhaps get rid of all the anxiety. I still feel the effects of betrayal, but part of me refuses to believe it. That part has a shaky confidence that I will see the mound and all of this worry will leave me.

I do make it to lunch, but when I get there I stop at the base of the steps and feel panic expand inside of me like a balloon filling with rotten milk. Everything looks wrong. The mound used to be my pregnant mother, but now it’s a swollen blister. It needs to be popped so the putrid interior can bleed out and the flat surface of the park can be healed. The maple was once my sister, but now it seems to lean away from the top of the mound like an exhausted skeleton. A halo of dark clouds hovers above, promising rain (and pneumonia). For a second I think I might involuntarily scream, and I finally know for sure that I can’t go to the mound anymore. I take one last glance at the maple before heading to my home and final refuge.

I feel little improvement as I sit on my porch. I know I can't go back to work. I feel guilty enough for having snapped at Victor, who has just as much of a right to want to hide from the public as I do, and I know I my stress may only end up making things worse. I take the hand sanitizer from my purse and squeeze close to a tablespoon of it into my palm. I hardly notice the excess jelly dripping onto my legs.

A strange laugh escapes me that sounds almost like a cough, but in a split second I realize that it isn't a laugh, but a sharp little sob. I bring my right hand up in a fist to my face and bite down on the first knuckle of my pointer finger. I manage to control the sobs but feel a hot tear roll down my face.

"Hey," says a voice to my right.

I wipe my cheek quickly and look up to find Mae on my front step.

She smiles slightly. "You okay?"

I'm sure I look dumbfounded (I am), but mostly I feel embarrassed. I hate to cry in front of anyone, especially a stranger. After checking myself to make sure I won't break into sobs if I open my mouth, I answer with a weak, "Yeah."

She sits down next to me on the swing and I go rigid. When I catch the smell of cigarette smoke, my breathing slows and I force myself to refrain from covering my mouth with my sleeve.

"Sure? I almost just walked on by but then I thought, hey, someone crying on their porch might be having a pretty shitty day." She pauses, then, "Hey, Holly, I bet you're sad because of that band aid on your hand, right?" She nudges my arm.

I don't say anything.

“Um, hey, just kidding around, you know. I’m sure you’ve got something serious going on. I shouldn’t joke.”

I start to laugh. It begins with a light shaking and before long I’m clutching my sides.

“Right, just a joke. Funny stuff,” says Mae.

“Sorry. I’m sorry, but it is. It’s my thumb, in a way.”

Silence for a moment, then, “What’s wrong with it?”

“I cut it on a screw.”

Mae laughs and asks, “What, do you need stitches or something?”

“No, I’m just worried that it’s getting infected.”

“Let me see it.”

I sigh and unwrap the bandage.

Laughing again, Mae grabs my hand to look closer. “That? That’s a *scratch*, Holly. I’ve gotten worse from shaving my legs.”

“Well, it was a rusty screw, though. It could get infected.”

“Did you wash it?”

“Yes, but—”

“It won’t get infected. Okay, there’s a one-in-a-million chance it’ll get infected. Then what? End of the world? No.”

“But—”

“You’re probably gonna drive today, right? Maybe back to work? You know what the chances of you getting killed in a car accident are?”

“No, what?”

“Hell, I don’t know specifics, but a lot higher than the chance of you just losing a hand to an infection from a little scratch.”

After a moment of silence, I say, “I know it’s ridiculous. But I can’t help but think about it. I’ve been like this since I was a kid.”

“So you’re like a hypochondriac or something?”

“I guess you could say that.”

Mae leans back to the swing and says, “Well, shit, go see a doctor, then, if it’ll make you feel better.”

“I already did.”

Mae laughs harder than ever, and when she calms down, she offers a few apologies and straightens up. “You know, Holly, some people have to deal with hospitals and doctors a lot, whether they like it or not, Holly. Try to be thankful you’re not in that situation, at least.”

I watch the branches of the maple in my yard sway gently, and Mae looks out to the street. She plants her feet firmly on the porch and rocks the swing under us. The wind gently runs through my hair and I start to feel better.

Tuesday I’m still feeling better. My palm doesn’t itch, the red line that once marked it replaced by a pale stripe. I secure it with a new bandage. When lunch approaches, I think about the mound. During my break, I go home and mop the floors.

In the afternoon I hear Mae’s voice asking Phyllis for a roll of stamps. I turn, see her down the hallway that leads to the front and give a little wave. She smiles at me and adjusts the gray hat that covers her colored hair. Phyllis hands her the stamps and she pays. I decide to walk up and say hello, but before I can take off my gloves she turns for the door.

“A friend of yours?” asks Victor.

“Yeah. Well, kind of. I only met her a few days ago, but I’ve had a few conversations with her.”

Victor smiles. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you acknowledge anyone coming in before. Good to see you with a friend.”

“Well I don’t think we’re turning out to be kindred spirits or anything. She’s just visiting her dad while he’s sick. I think she said he’s been getting better, so she’ll probably leave soon.” I grimace and turn back to my letters.

By the time I return home I can’t ignore the withdrawal nagging at my skin, which sat cooped up in the recycled air of the post office all day. I feel grimy, like a coal miner leaving his blackened tunnel.

I try to take a shower. I turn the hot water up to the point of being nearly unbearable, wash my skin twice and use my towel as a carpenter would use a sheet of sandpaper. None of it is quite good enough, though, and I finally decide to give the mound another chance. I dress warmly, knowing that I’ll barely catch the end of the day’s light, and walk outside to find Mae wandering past my house on the sidewalk. I shout a greeting to her, and she stops. She’s still wearing the same gray hat that I noticed in the post office earlier. I can now see that she has also gone with a dark, hooded sweatshirt instead of her orange pea coat.

“Out for a late walk, I guess?” I ask her.

“Yeah.” She turns to look back up the street, where I believe her father lives. She sighs, and says, “You know, it’s a nice neighborhood. I’ve just gotten tired of walking it. I’ve walked it too much. There’s not much of a reason to, now.”

I think of the mound and wonder if I might stand a better chance of overcoming my recent fear of it if I have someone like Mae with me. “Actually, I was about to head to the park. Maybe catch a nice sunset.”

Mae looks up, which prompts me to check the sky as well. The clouds of the past several days have thinned, and to the east they’re virtually gone. “Looks like it might be a good one,” she says.

“Would you want to join me?”

She shrugs and walks up my driveway.

For a couple of minutes I’m surprised by complete silence from Mae. Eventually I’m desperate for something to say and I latch on to the first thing that comes to mind. “So I heard you order a full roll of stamps earlier in the post office,” I say, and I force a little giggle. “What, do you have a few more rent checks to send out?”

“No. Good one. Just a stack of letters, though.”

I pull the car up to the sidewalk in front of the park and try to avoid looking at the mound just yet. When I get out of the car, Mae follows. I stop at the edge of the grass and she moves forward. Finally, I bring myself to look at the mound. Instead of menacing clouds hanging overhead like a guillotine blade, I find a smooth gradient of orange to pink to violet. The maple reaches its chilled fingers in an attempt to touch the warmth of the sky. I had worried that it would strike me as it had yesterday, that it would melt me in terror of betrayal, but rather it makes me think of the previous sunset I had watched, on the same day I met Mae. Suddenly all I want is to run up the steps and sit on the bench again. I want to feel the wind.

“Cute playground,” says Mae. “Want to sit on the swings?”

My breath catches. For a second I'm furious with Mae for interrupting my moment of reconciliation with the mound. "Actually, I usually like to sit on the bench at the top."

Mae glances at me and then gives the mound an untrusting look. "I don't know about that. Come on, let's go to the swings. I haven't been on a playground in years." She smiles at me. "Please, Holly? Trust me, after the day I've had, I need to act like a little kid."

I give up and follow her. After all, I can make a quick trip to the top before we leave.

As we walk across the small gravel that comprises the floor of the playground, I cringe and try to focus on the thought of my sanitizer in my purse. If I have to touch any of the playground equipment, that bottle will keep me sane.

Mae plops into one of the black, wooden swings and immediately propels herself back. Keeping my hands in my pocket, I sit down in the next swing carefully enough to avoid having to grab the chains. By the time I'm settled with my feet planted on the ground, Mae is flying nearly even with the top bar of the swing set. I smell faint rust from my chains and hear slight metallic squeaking as Mae's arches strain the links in hers. She takes her hat off and lets it fall to the ground. Her hair flips around in the wind she makes with her own effort. I feel that wind every time she passes. Finally, as the bottom edge of the sun nears the horizon, she slows to a stop.

"Feeling better?" I ask.

She nods, but keeps her eyes on the mound. "You know, Holly, I don't think I like that mound. It seems *off*."

"It does?"

"Yeah. Why make such a huge bump, sticking out of the ground like an ugly zit?" She stands up, walks to her hat and picks it up. She runs her fingers through her blue-highlighted

hair and stuffs the hat into her sweatshirt pocket. “I’d rather a grave just blend in with the rest of the world so you can move on. Wouldn’t you rather just move on?”

I sit in silence and watch the sun submerge itself under the black horizon.

Mae shivers. “Ready to head back to good old Pendleton Circle?”

I look at the mound, longingly, then to Mae. “Sure.”

Summer Sightings

Every day on his way home from the docks, Greg passes an art gallery with a rainbow flag hanging over the open doorway. Rainbow flags are a common item in Provincetown, Massachusetts, but in the five years that Greg has lived here, he has never noticed Barbara change the one above her gallery. Its colors are faded and the fabric has loosened toward the bottom, causing the individual strips of color to flap separately in the sea breeze. Today, though, there isn't much of a breeze. It's hot, even for June, and Greg decides to step into the gallery for a break from the sun and his short walk home, where his wife and son are waiting.

Barbara is Greg's favorite local artist, and her gallery stands out because of her unique presentation—she suspends her best paintings from the high ceiling so that their faces look at the floor and visitors have to strain their necks to see them, as if examining discolored spot on the ceiling. She uses a lot of browns, reds and earthy greens, and Greg enjoys the change of scenery after a day of guiding whale watches, surrounded by blue.

Barbara is a large woman, and when Greg enters the gallery he finds her sitting on a rotating stool like King Kong atop the too-small needle of the Empire State Building. Her back faces him and he can barely see a canvas on the other side of her. She has covered her work mostly in green hues, which blend together like the canopy of a forest. He notices bright red on the brush in her left hand, and he wonders what she plans to do with it. Before he can find out, she turns on the stool with a smile.

"Afternoon, Greg," she says. She grabs a towel and wipes it across her glistening forehead. She has never installed air-conditioning in her gallery, though a handful of fans keep the air circulating. "How was the Bay today?"

"Hot. We saw several humpbacks, though."

“I *do* like humpbacks.” She shakes her head. “I need to get back out there again. It’s been too long.”

Greg nods. “Most people love them. I don’t know if I can imagine you outside of this gallery and in a boat, though. I guess I just forget that you’re not here twenty-four seven.”

Barbara laughs. “Like a kindergartner who thinks his teacher lives at school. I have to say, though, it certainly feels like it some of the time.”

Greg steps in front of a fan. Its breeze raises the hair on his left arm and encourages bumps on his skin.

Barbara says, “You should come to my home sometime for dinner. Bring Beth and little Benny and see what I look like away from paintings.”

“You don’t have paintings at home?”

“Just one, in the hallway. But it’s not even one of mine. A Salvador Dali piece. If I had to look at my own shit all evening and night on top of all day here at the gallery, I’d hate it, I think.”

“Makes sense. I know what you mean, though.”

“Do you have models of whales all over your shelves?”

“No, I mean feeling like you’re here all the time. I don’t think I hardly know anything outside of the tour boat and my house.”

“You’re married and you have a kid,” says Barbara. She chuckles. “Isn’t that how it’s supposed to work?”

Greg sighs and gives a small smile. He picks one of her prints from a table. He points at it and looks at her with a raised eyebrow. “How much?”

“Thirty.”

“So overpriced.”

She turns back to the painting and begins sweeping a red, oily streak across it. “So how *are* Beth and Benny doing?”

“The director at the daycare says he does really well with the other kids.”

“That’s nice. He’s such a well-behaved little boy when he comes in here. You should bring him by soon, though. I don’t think I’ve seen him in at least a year. And Beth?”

“Good. She’s been making it to all of her appointments lately.”

Barbara sets her brush down on the easel. “That’s good to hear. How much longer do you think she’ll need them?”

Greg shrugs. “When she first started she missed more of them. I’m hoping the fact that she’s going regularly now is a good sign.” He keeps his eyes on the prints as he speaks.

“I’m sure it is. Are *you* doing all right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, a little bored, maybe, but it’s fine. Things are busier in the summer, so it’ll keep me going for a while.”

“Uh-huh. Well you remember to come to dinner soon.”

“I’ll remember.”

The next day starts out with faint, hazy fog, but the weatherman promises that the sun will be just as strong out on the beach as it was the day before, although everyone can look for more breezes. Greg sits on his back porch and finishes a bagel. His first tour starts in thirty minutes, and he needs to get going. He thinks about how many whales he’ll see today, and it crosses his mind, as it does every day, that he will never have a chance at estimating how many sightings he’s made.

Greg hates the fact that, as soon as a whale breaks the surface hundreds of yards away, he knows what species it is. Usually, within minutes he can give the passengers the individual names of the whales, which follow routine migratory patterns, based on markings. He has those markings memorized.

Greg remembers a time—long before his master’s and doctorate, long before Ben, long before Beth had insisted on raising their son on the New England coast, where jobs appropriate to his degree were competitive and hard to come by—when he went on whale watching tours as a passenger rather than a guide and had the same expression of wonder on his face as the tourists he sees every day on the boat as an underwater giant breaks the surface. He envies that innocent ignorance.

Ben, four years old and covered in freckles, bursts through the back door. “Bring me a picture, Daddy! Bring me a picture of a great white shark.”

Greg crumples his napkin and gets up. “You bet.”

Greg walks through the house to the front door, where Beth meets him. They kiss lightly. “It’s going to be sunny again. Be sure you wear sunscreen.”

“Don’t you think that’s something I’d know by now?”

Beth shrugs.

“Have a good day,” Greg says. He looks down the hall and sees Ben through the back door, playing with a toy car in the grass. He grabs Beth’s elbow gently and adds with a lowered voice, “Don’t miss it, okay?”

Beth looks at the ground and nods.

“Just making sure.”

By the time Greg walks past Barbara's gallery, the haze has thinned significantly. He waves at her, and she asks him to say hello to the dolphins. When he reaches the dock, the sun shines brightly on his face and he pulls the tube of sunblock from his shirt pocket. He spreads some of the oily substance over his nose and walks onto *Blue Notes*, his regular tour boat. After he says hello to the captain, he clears his throat and prepares for a day full of sightings, explanations, obvious questions and the ceaseless awe on the faces of those who have never seen a dark fluke point to the sky as a whale dives to its safe abyss.

When the whales break the surface of Cape Cod Bay on a normal day, Greg talks through a microphone and speaker system to let the passengers of the ship know important details. This is a finback, he tells them, and informs them that it is among the largest animals in the world—second only to the blue whale. That's a humpback, he says, and explains that they get their common name from the distinct arch they make as they prepare for a deep dive. He usually tells the passengers the individual names of the whales, which are often identifiable via certain markings on their tails or around their blowholes. The passengers' favorite species is typically the humpback, which sometimes travel in pairs or groups. Greg's favorite sighting isn't a whale; he's intrigued by the manta rays, which glide under the blue mask of the ocean like phantoms.

Today is not a normal day, though. After forty-five minutes there have been no sightings, and as a result the passengers get impatient. *Blue Notes* is in the middle of Cape Cod Bay, and Greg stands at the railing of the second level, surveying the horizon for signs of life. He listens to the radio with the hope that it will carry a promising message from other boats, but so far the whales have remained hidden across the Bay. He doesn't have long before the passengers begin to vent their frustration. Tapping the muted microphone like an impatient drummer, he scans the audience. A few give him harsh glances before looking back out to the glaring sea. The

speakers give a thump when the microphone comes on, and he once again offers his reassurance that they are bound to come across something soon.

A younger man in a flannel shirt too warm for the sun comes to Greg's right. Greg nods at him and mutters a greeting.

"I just thought I'd tell you that I'm *positive* that I just saw a spout way out in that direction," says the man. He points off the starboard side of the boat, where Greg had not been looking.

Greg squints and doesn't see anything immediately. "Really?"

"Swear to God."

Greg steadies himself on a pole and leads toward the captain's chair and points in the direction of the young man's sighting. "Henry, take us in that general direction. We might have a lead."

The boat cuts into the waves on the right and Greg hears several passengers being to murmur with hopeful voices.

The young man doesn't return to his seat. "So how long have you been doing this?"

"Guiding tours? This is my sixth summer."

"What's the most exciting thing you've ever seen?"

Greg crosses his arms. "I'm not sure, actually. Well, you can never beat seeing a jumping humpback, I guess. They're always fun to see. Sometimes there are these huge, pink jellyfish that float by. Kind of creepy, but cool in a weird way. I also love pods of dolphins. Once I saw one that had to have been made up of hundreds." He uncrosses his arms and looks down at the water. "I guess it feels comforting, you know? To see that there's a huge community out in the midst of all this empty water."

“I’m Theo, by the way.”

“Greg. Nice to meet you.”

The two shake hands, and Greg asks, “So are you here with friends, or....”

Theo shakes his head. “My boyfriend is in visiting from Hartford, but the rocking horizon got to be a bit much for him, I think. He’s taking a break in the restroom.”

“It’s not for everyone.”

A blast of water shoots into the air and a steel-blue finback slices through the surface about a hundred yards from the boat. Passengers erupt in excitement and most hurry to the rails. Theo smirks and Greg flips the microphone back on to inform the passengers that the whale is the second largest animal in the world and is known for its speed and sleek form.

Greg stops by Barbara’s gallery again on the way home. She is still working on the painting from the day before. The red slash that cuts diagonally through the middle looks like a red gash on green skin; on the edges of the stripe the bright crimson fades into the leafy background but the middle is a deep burgundy. Greg avoids looking at it.

“See any dolphins today?” asks Barbara.

“No, it was a pretty slow one. A finback and a couple of humpbacks.”

Barbara always mentions the dolphins, and Greg thinks of the communities he’s seen out in the waves. Barbara is like those dolphins. She knows everyone in Provincetown.

“Do you know a guy named Theo? Probably low twenties. Kind of on the short side with brown hair and glasses?”

“Yeah, I know Theo. Nice boy. He waits tables and works the bar at Flannigan’s Lobster House on Commercial Street. Always keeps the ice water coming.”

“He was on the boat today and helped me spot a whale during a dry spot. Seemed like a nice kid, though.”

“You needed help from a bartender to spot a whale? Sounds like you’re not cut out for your job.”

Greg chuckles. His phone buzzes in his pocket and he find a message from Beth saying that she’ll be running late returning from the therapy center a few miles away in Orleans. Greg tells Barbara that he needs to pick up Ben from daycare and leaves as she adds another layer of dark red to the middle of her painting.

When Greg and Ben get home, Ben rushes to his toy cars without mentioning the promised picture of a great white. Beth shows up fifteen minutes later and falls to the couch without bothering to take her shoes off, as she usually does.

“How did it go?” asks Greg.

Beth unties her curly blonde hair and rubs her eyes. “Same as always.”

“But you *did* go?”

“Yes, I went.”

“Are you okay?”

“I guess.”

Greg considers joining her on the couch, but ends up only saying, “I’ll take care of dinner, okay?”

“I don’t mind cooking.”

“Well, I’ll get it. Why don’t you take a hot shower or something? You look like you need to relax.”

Ben races in with a toy car and runs it along Beth's leg. Beth runs her hand through his sandy hair and sighs. Ben looks up at her and asks, "Why are you sad, Mommy?"

"I'm not sad, Honey. Just tired. I'm going to go take a shower, so help Daddy with dinner, okay?"

Later in the evening, Greg and Beth sit on their back porch in the softening light while Ben plays with a toy car at the base of a pine tree, running its wheels straight up the trunk as if its pretend driver isn't governed by gravity. Beth reads an issue of *Parenting*. Greg thinks they're doing just fine on their own, but Beth insists that things are far from perfect, and they could definitely stand to get better.

Greg thinks of his recent conversations with Barbara. "What if we went out somewhere?" he asks.

Beth lowers her magazine and looks at Ben. "Tonight?"

"Well, no. Not tonight. But you know, get out of the house. Make some friends. Be a part of the community. That kind of thing."

"I don't know. The *community* is kind of loud and boisterous."

Greg raises an eyebrow at her. "Boisterous?"

"Just so many tourists," says Beth.

"I'm not suggesting we become best friends with some visiting New Yorkers. I mean actually get to *know* the people around us. How is it that we've been living here for over five years and I feel like I don't even know the town? We don't get out enough."

"I'm just worried that all of that will be a bad influence on Ben." She picks up her magazine and buries her face in it. "Can't we just be happy in our little backyard?"

Greg looks at the grass and does feel a distinct feeling of peace when he sees it, especially now, when the setting sun bathes the pine tree, the sand and hedge along the back in gentle orange light like a fireplace. He's known it for years and has raised his son in it. Maybe he should feel more content, but part of him is tired of living like a manta ray.

The next day, *Blue Notes* comes across a balloon floating in the waves. A passenger points it out, and Greg thanks her for spotting it. An assistant grabs a long, hooked pole and the boat slows. When it fails to stop in time, the captain turns sharply, which prompts a man to ask why they need to put so much effort into grabbing a balloon out of the water. Greg explains that the saltwater washes away the paint on balloons so that they become clear. Whales and other species that keep jellyfish and squid on their menu can mistake these floating orbs for food, which can lead to choking or digestion complications. He tells the kids on the ship that they should avoid letting balloons go at birthday parties, because you never know where they'll end up. They've found that balloons can ride the atmosphere's currents from as far away as Michigan, and those currents like to drop them right around the Bay area, where they certainly don't belong.

Before long, a mother humpback and her calf arrive. Greg tells the passengers that humpbacks have some of the more peculiar behaviors of any whale species; they perform spinning jumps out of the water, slap their tails and fins against the water for unknown reasons, and sing louder and more creatively than most whales. Only the males have been recorded singing though. Females are quiet and stick to their young for a year or even longer.

By the time the whales surface again, the mother has repositioned herself between the calf and *Blue Notes*. They're close, and Greg watches her dark eye as she surveys the boat and

him. He wonders if she'll decide to trust him. She rolls, showing a white throat turned neon blue by the saltwater filter, and slaps the surface with her long, wing-like fin. The edge of the splash reaches the boat, eliciting a round of applause from the passengers. Greg smiles and wipes a drop of water from his forehead.

By the last tour of the day, the wind moves layers of low, gray clouds across a white sky, quick enough to make the boat feel slow. The clouds are silent but heavy, like whispers.

Moderate waves chop the Bay and keep passenger counts low. Those who braved the dimming weather are rewarded with the sighting of a substantial pod of dolphins. Greg tells them over the speakers that he estimates there to be several dozen of the energetic animals. They hop through the swells like rabbits in a field.

Greg watches them and thinks of how he hasn't been a member of a community like that since his ring of smokers, who spent hours together every day outside of his college dorm. After his undergraduate degree, he spent his bachelor days absorbed in research and field work for his dissertation on the influence of warming trends on mink whales' habitat range. When he finished, he felt alone, and didn't know how to resume a social life. His parents encouraged him to settle down, so he met Beth and settled.

When the tours end for the day, Greg goes home to enjoy a quiet glass of wine before he has to pick up Ben. Beth is running late again. On his way into the kitchen he sees light shining under the door to the garage. He stops, and the thought of a relaxing drink leaves his mind. The desire for community leaves his mind. He stares at the thin white line of light and can only remember the day that Beth forgot to turn off the car in the garage. He swings the door wide and finds the garage empty. Relief weighs his shoulders down. After turning off the light he decides

to skip the wine, pick up Ben and go get some ice cream. Hopefully Beth will be back by the time he returns, and hopefully she will have a smile, or at least the hint of one.

Beth doesn't smile when she gets home. She takes another shower and Greg makes dinner again. After putting Ben to sleep, she announces that she also feels ready for bed.

"That's not too exciting," says Greg.

"What's with all the need for excitement lately?"

Greg shrugs. "I might call Barbara and see if she wants to go out for a drink. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"You're going out?"

Greg nods. When she starts up the stairs without saying anything, he says, "I won't be late at all." He hears her murmur something before their bedroom door closes. Within five minutes he has his shoes on and his cell phone in hand, and as he walks out the door he reaches Barbara's voicemail. He leaves a message stating that he's heading over to Flannigan's for a couple of beers, and she should come join him.

When he reaches the restaurant, Greg tells the hostess that he's heading for the bar. He spots Theo behind the counter, pouring a martini. Greg finds a stool with an empty one next to it, in case Barbara shows up. He hopes its legs are as strong as the one in the gallery.

Theo drops the martini off with a customer at the end of the bar, then turns to Greg. Theo greets him with a grin and asks what he can do for Greg. Greg orders a beer and some fried oysters. "I wasn't even hungry heading over here, but I can't resist the smell."

"Was it just the beer calling you, then?" asks Theo. The tap is close to Greg's seat, and Theo fills a glass with dark, foamy liquid as they talk.

“I’ve got some beer at home. I just needed to get out, you know?”

Theo laughs. “Sometimes I feel like I’m not at home enough, but I think I get what you’re saying.”

“My wife is giving me a hard time.”

“Shit, that’s not fun.” Theo hands Greg the beer.

Greg takes the frosty glass and takes a sip of the rich, almost caramel-like stout. He realizes he should slow down. “We just have a history, that’s all.”

“Uh-huh.”

Greg thinks of the light under the garage door, but doesn’t get far before Theo tells him to enjoy the beer while he takes care of other customers.

Greg melts into a noisy atmosphere full of old netting and buoys that hang on the walls. As he looks around the room, he notices that Theo is wearing a flannel shirt again, although tonight it makes more sense; outside, cold, Atlantic rain washes the sand from the sidewalks and a chilly breeze makes everyone forget that it’s June.

Despite the busyness, Theo manages to make the occasional stop in front of Greg to chat more. Greg tells him that he knows Barbara, and Theo asks how she’s doing. He tells Greg that he enjoyed the whale watch, even though they didn’t see much. He hadn’t been on one in years and forgot how much he loves being out on the ocean. He might come again soon, although he’ll probably avoid doing it when his boyfriend is in town.

Greg finishes his food and third round. Theo stops by to inform him that he’s going out for a smoke. Greg takes care of the tab and joins him.

Greg hasn’t smoked since the end of his undergraduate degree, and his first drag off of a cigarette provided by Theo hits his lungs hard. Behind him, a window looks into the restaurant,

bustling with people, and in front of him the smoke clouds of the three cigarettes drift away from the safety of the awning and mingle with the rain and each other. He smiles and tells Theo about mink whales.

It's almost midnight before Greg returns home. Beth isn't happy. She asks him two questions—did he go anywhere other than the restaurant and why does he smell like smoke—then retreats into silence. Greg offers short answers. He watches the red second hand of the white clock as it ticks its way toward the morning.

Eventually, Beth asks Greg if he met anyone new. He tells her that Barbara introduced him to a friend of hers—the bartender at the restaurant who stood outside with them while Barbara smoked. Nice kid, asked a lot of questions about whales.

“I'm not going to my appointment on Monday,” says Beth.

Greg stops breathing for a moment and doesn't say anything, but Beth continues before the silence becomes unbearable.

“Those damned things are just pretend. They don't matter. Pretending like it still matters is fake.”

Greg watches the red second hand pass the twelve and leave another minute of another day of another summer behind.

The rain has left behind a fog too thick to even hint at the location of the sun. Provincetown and the Bay are smothered in an ambiguous white that disguises all objects as faceless shapes until Greg is right in front of them. The rainbow flag above Barbara's door looks

like little more than a black sheet of paper, and even when he walks under it the colors are muted.

The whiteout affects the crowd even worse than the earlier day full of choppy waves. Today, the sea might as well be a small lake. There are no swells and no horizon to remind travelers of the distance between them and the closest place of rest.

Greg stands at the rail looking for signs of life, but he knows that the passengers will be depending on pure luck today, unless the fog clears. Before long, he isn't even consciously looking for whales. His eyes stop scanning for spouts in front of and behind them and he focuses on the water itself. It speeds past his vision quick enough to form a blur. With no sky to reflect, it isn't a deep blue. Rather, it mimics the color of steel. After three minutes of staring, it ceases to look like water and begins to make Greg think of a comfortable sheet on a soft bed; he almost feels ready to jump into it and fall asleep. He eventually moves his eyes upward to find a relaxing gradient of deep gray to hazy white. There is no harsh line to separate two worlds.

After twenty minutes, the fog clears enough to make the passengers' reliance on luck becomes less of an obstacle. The horizon is still blurred but farther away now, and a thick layer of white still hides the sun, but Greg is able to spot a geyser of breath off of the starboard side of *Blue Notes*. When they get close he tells the passengers that they have found a mink whale—the smallest of the baleen whales. It glides past the boat and shows off a sleek body tinted green by the sea water. Greg explains that whales' habitats are changing as warming trends shift the locations of their largest menu items. He chuckles into the microphone and points out that he knows this to be true of mink whales, personally, thanks to years he devoted to getting to know them better.

Finally, the whale points its fluke to the sky, signaling a deep dive. Greg is just about to instruct the captain to increase the throttle in order to find greener pastures when another spout goes up on the port side. Greg smiles and tells the passengers that they are finally getting lucky.

Artifacts

Marshall stepped off of the bus for the last time of the year and into the roasting heat of a North Carolina June. Other kids rushed past him. Tyler Mitchell almost knocked him over, yelling about how he intended to start the summer off right: on his *PlayStation*. He heard Joanna Francis and Ashley Thompson make plans to meet in Joanna's yard for sunbathing with spray bottles and issues of *Cosmopolitan* stolen from Ashley's older sister. Marshall wondered what color bathing suits the girls might wear and considered taking a brief walk later in the day, just to see if he could catch a glance. Within a few seconds, Tyler, the girls and the other twelve kids who shared the bus stop with Marshall were several yards ahead of him. He broke into sweats easily and he didn't want to be seen with a drenched shirt, so he took his time. Within a minute he was sweating anyway, but with the other kids increasing their lead, he didn't mind so much. He watched the billowing green of the forest behind the line of houses to his left as their leaves shifted gently with a breeze he didn't feel. He thought that it must be the heat itself causing them to rustle, just like it boiled the air above the concrete in the distance.

Ms. Canfield, Marshall's English teacher, had ended the year by asking students to write about their plans for the summer. After they wrote for twenty minutes, she asked students to share. Other kids in the class would be camping and going to the beach. Alexis Higginbotham was going to Spain with her aunt. Marshall managed to avoid eye contact with Ms. Canfield. He didn't want to be called on to share his plans, which included piano lessons, walking his dog and maybe the occasional paintball trip with Tyler. Marshall seemed to be the only kid without a trip of some kind ahead of him. His mother didn't want to go anywhere—not without his father. The bell rang and Ms. Canfield told them all to enjoy their last summer of innocence. Next year was high school, and things were going to get serious for them.

Marshall walked up his front steps and pulled the key out of his jeans pocket. When he opened the door, his dog greeted him with hungry eyes. It was a chocolate lab named Eisenhower, and despite being eight years old it often became a puppy again when Marshall got home from school. Marshall told him to go outside for a treat. Eisenhower trotted into the grass and sniffed at the flag pole in the middle of the lawn. Marshall wasn't the only one who couldn't feel the breeze in the trees, apparently; the stars and stripes hung stagnant against the silver mast.

Eisenhower returned, and Marshall shut the door, promising a walk after he had a chance to cool down. From the pantry he grabbed a biscuit for the dog and a box of cookies for himself. He ate two, but then thought of Joanna Francis lying out in a bathing suit. He closed the box and told himself that he needed to stop eating so many cookies if he planned on ever talking to Joanna with any dignity. He grabbed the leash from the hook near the front door and told Eisenhower they were going for a walk.

Marshall's neighborhood stretched out like a toppled letter B about a mile long. The spine of the B ran roughly from east to west, with the humps pointed south like an overturned camel. The entrance where the bus dropped off him and Joanna and the others opened on Route 40, toward the bottom of the western camel hump, and Marshall's house was in the Northwestern corner. By the time Marshall passed Joanna's house at the middle of the spine, sweat covered his shirt. He saw no sign of her. He looked up to the second floor window on the right, where he thought her bedroom was, and saw a ceiling fan spinning, but no light was on. He suggested to Eisenhower that she might be taking a nap. Eisenhower seemed impatient and uninterested.

On normal walks with the dog, Marshall usually took the short loop. After deciding against extra cookies, he figured that an extra-long walk might help as well. If he lost some weight by mid-summer, he might be able brave the public pool a few times, where he could have

a chance at seeing Joanna. His dad would be impressed if he trimmed down *and* got a girlfriend while he was overseas.

Marshall had not been to the northeast corner of the neighborhood in years, and he underestimated how long of a walk it took to get there. His shirt was drenched and Eisenhower panted heavily. It occurred to him that walking so far in such heat might actually be dangerous. Didn't people sometimes die from heat strokes?

A cracked driveway led to a house at the northeast corner of the neighborhood. The house was surrounded by a yard that seemed as if it hadn't been mowed since the grass begun to grow months before. A willow tree stood near the street at the base of the cracked driveway, and Marshall sat down in its shade on the curb. Eisenhower collapsed and continued to pant. Marshall watched the dog's ribs expand and contract so quickly they seemed like convulsions. He started to worry. If he tried to head back to soon, could he put Eisenhower in danger? He smacked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Would *he* be in danger? He tried to remember if he had noticed the reading on the window thermometer. He was pretty sure he heard the weather man talking about a heat wave on the news last night, as he and his mother ate dinner in the living room.

Ten minutes past and Eisenhower's breathing had barely relaxed. Marshall looked up at the house behind him. He could barely make out yellow light shining on the walls behind one of the front windows. He tied the leash to the mail box and walked up the driveway to ask for permission to use a phone. He hoped his mother would be home so that she could come give him a ride.

As he approached the door, he began to hear a loud voice. He thought he heard it say something about a bombing run, and he decided that it sounded like a History Channel special, like the ones his dad watched when he was at home.

Marshall rang the doorbell, and almost immediately the door flew open to reveal a tall, skinny man dressed in khaki pants and a corduroy jacket. His head was tan and mostly bald, and he wore small, round glasses that reminded Marshall of goggles.

“Yes?” shouted the man. It was almost like a bark, but not a harsh bark like a drill sergeant. It was more like a startled yelp.

Marshall looked behind the man and saw a living room that looked like a museum. Paintings, maps and old guns hung all over the walls; ferns and small trees stood in the corners and next to cushioned benches. On the wall in the back, Marshall saw the source of the noise he heard outside—an ancient phonograph with a reddish base and bronze horn. It blasted some sort of narrative about a raid in World War II. But perhaps the most striking feature to Marshall was an impressive stone fountain, made of three levels, standing in the middle of the room. Its water gushed nearly to the ceiling.

“Yes?” said the man again. “Are you deaf?”

Marshall wondered how the man wasn’t deaf himself. He finally took his eyes off of the fountain and looked at the man. “I was wondering if I could use your phone.”

“My phone? I *suppose* so. Come in.”

Marshall followed him inside and didn’t bother to close the door. He was overwhelmed with curiosity, but also unnerved by the extreme eccentricity of the whole scene. The man scurried to the phonograph and removed the needle. Marshall breathed in relief and rubbed his ears.

“Right here, by this couch.” The man pointed to the phone on a small end table. It looked as old as everything else in the room.

“Thanks,” said Marshall. He picked up the receiver and dialed his home number on the base. It rang eight times before ending with the voicemail message. Marshall hung up.

“Are you *lost*?”

“No,” said Marshall. He picked the receiver up again and dialed his mother’s cell phone number. “I just walked here from the other side of the neighborhood, and I think it’s too hot for my dog to walk back.”

“I see,” said the man. He raised his eyebrows impossibly high.

Marshall’s mother answered, and he found out that she would be back in twenty minutes to pick him and Eisenhower up. Marshall hung up and asked the man if it would be too much trouble for him and the dog to stay under the willow tree.

“*Certainly not*. In fact, bring the good boy up to my porch, and I’ll bring a dish of water.”

Marshall returned to the road and untied Eisenhower. The dog followed him up to the porch, where the man had just set a bowl of water. Eisenhower drank eagerly.

“My name is Dr. Everett Thurman, by the by. Call me Everett, though.”

“I’m Marshall. This is Eisenhower.”

Everett exploded with laughter. “What an *absurd* name for a dog.”

Marshall felt simultaneously amused and bewildered by the way Everett talked. He sounded almost as if he were trying to pull off an English accent, though the attempt was so terrible Marshall guessed the old man might have simply been from a region he had not heard of.

“You have some weird stuff in your house.”

Everett looked through the window, sighed, and smiled the way Marshall's grandmother would when she told him about the way his grandfather had proposed to her before he boarded the bus that would begin his journey to Vietnam. "Yes, I'm quite proud of my collection. All historical things, you know. Most have to do with past American Wars. Even the fountain belonged to a general who served during Korea."

Marshall's eyes widened. "Do you have stuff from *all* the wars?"

"Most, my boy. Not all, though. I've not found anything worth keeping from the Vietnam debacle."

"What about Iraq?"

Everett crossed his arms. "From *Desert Storm*, yes. I have some Iraqi currency. Not from the *current* invasion, though. I prefer to wait until a war is over to collect from it."

Marshall eyed the gushing water in the fountain. "Hey, do you think I could get—"

"Oh, for the love of—of course. You need some water, too. It's hotter than the *Sahara* out here." Everett rushed back inside and disappeared around a corner. Marshall scanned the walls again and focused on an old rifle. It spanned at least five feet. He wondered how long his dad's rifle was. He knew, of course, the basic differences between the old muzzle-loading relic on the wall and the fully automatic weapons that his father used. He knew how much deadlier they were.

Fifteen minutes later, Marshall sat in his mother's passenger seat and waved at Everett through the window. "Do you know him?" he asked.

"No," said his mother. "You didn't go inside his house, did you?"

"Just for a minute. How else do you think I called you?"

“I thought he might have had a cordless phone. Never go into a stranger’s house, Marshall. I’m serious.”

“He’s our neighbor.”

“That doesn’t matter. Bad people can live anywhere.”

Marshall looked through the window at the passing houses.

She pressed the brake as they reached the stop sign at the middle of the neighborhood.

Marshall looked up at Joanna’s window and saw that the fan was still on. “When’s dad coming home?”

“August. Shouldn’t you know this?”

Marshall adjusted the air conditioner.

Later that evening, Marshall walked to Tyler’s house. Tyler played *Call of Duty* online and yelled cusswords every time he got killed. When the third round ended, Tyler asked if Marshall wanted a turn. Marshall shook his head. “Not any good at it.”

Tyler gave a harsh laugh. “Better get good, sonny. If you want to be a good American boy you need to be ready to answer the call of duty.” The next round started. Within ten seconds, Tyler rounded a corner just in time to be killed by a grenade. “*Shitsticks!*”

“Do you know anything about Everett Thurman?” asked Marshall. “Lives on the back corner of the neighborhood?”

Tyler muttered a few more curse words as he unloaded a clip. “Thurman? Uh... not really—shit—I think he... shit. My dad once called him a ‘kooky vet’ when we drove past his house. Said it’s a wonder he’s not homeless. My mom—*shitsticks!*—yelled at my dad. She said he was being mean.”

Marshall watched Tyler play for two more rounds, then grew bored. As he walked home he thought about the guns in Everett's house and what his mother had said. What did "kooky vet" mean, exactly? Marshall wondered if Everett had ever killed a person in a war—if he actually *was* a vet from a war. Maybe fighting and killing had done things to him. Made him crazy.

Marshall thought about his father's return in August.

On the third full day of summer break, a thick layer of clouds hid the sun. It was humid still, but not as scalding hot as it had been on the day Marshall met Everett. He decided to take Eisenhower on another long walk. On his way to the front door he passed his father's study. He stopped and turned around. Almost a year ago, he had been looking for a sheet of paper to draw on and, even though he wasn't allowed in the room, his search ended in the study. He had seen his father hide a key to the room under the fern in the hallway. Once inside, he opened the top right drawer of his father's desk and found a small revolver hiding under a folder. He shut the drawer immediately, terrified. He just knew that if he picked the weapon up it would go off and he would be in trouble for the rest of his life.

Marshall thought about the rifles in Everett's living room and the rifle that was probably slung around his father's shoulder right now. He thought about what Tyler said: that good American boys need to listen to the call of duty. Tyler was an idiot, and Marshall didn't feel the need to unload digital clips into computer-generated enemies, but he did wonder what it felt like to hold a real firearm.

He pulled the key out from under the fern and let himself into the study. The gun was still in the drawer. With his heart pounding, he picked it up. The cold metal raised goose bumps

on his arm, and he wondered what it would feel like to pull the trigger and send a bullet flying at mind-numbing speeds.

Marshall returned the gun to the drawer and noticed a small box of ammunition. He shut the door, locked it, and hid the key again. He called Eisenhower for a walk.

When they walked past Joanna's house, Marshall looked up to her window and saw her walk by. She tied her hair back in a ponytail. He thought it looked like she wore a bikini top. He smiled and forced himself to move on. By the time they reached Everett's house, Eisenhower was panting. He didn't seem as exhausted as he had the other day, but Marshall still thought he should get the dog some water before turning around. As he ascended the front steps he could hear the phonograph blaring information about the German advance.

Everett answered the door with the same "Yes?" as the day Marshall met him.

"Remember me?"

Everett adjusted his spectacles. "Oh, yes. Need the phone again?"

"No, but could I get another drink of water for Eisenhower?"

Everett erupted in hysterical laughter and turned around without responding to the request. "*Eisenhower!* What a ridiculous name for a dog!" He walked back to the kitchen and returned promptly with a bowl. "I don't mind to share my bountiful supply of tap water, but you should start bringing your own. What if I'm not here?"

"I will, but I also wanted to look at some of your war things, if that's okay."

Everett raised his eyebrows. "War things? I suppose that would be all right." Marshall started to tie the leash to the porch railing, but Everett stopped him. "Who would *I* be to not let a former president in my home?" He laughed again. "So what did you want to see?"

Marshall walked to the fountain and felt the rough cement with his fingertips. He could see coins in the water, but they didn't look like coins he had seen. Everett had still not turned off the phonograph, so Marshall had to speak up. "What's your favorite?"

Everett scratched his head. "I don't believe I've ever been asked that, actually." He turned in circles, pointing to various artifacts and muttering to himself. He stopped at a painting Marshall recognized: one of the people his history teacher referred to as the "*founding fathers*"—was it George Washington?—standing at the front of a boat in a river full of tiny glaciers.

"That one, I guess," said Everett. "Just a reproduction, mind you. But it serves as the standard for all other military honor."

"What's your least favorite?"

Everett took off his glasses and sighed. "Hard-hitting questions, my boy. I'm certain I've *never* been asked that. What makes you wonder all of this?" The phonograph still talked away at full volume. The conversation was almost to the point of shouts.

Marshall shrugged. "Have you ever fought in a battle?"

Everett turned off the phonograph. "Yes."

"What was it like?"

Everett smiled, but it didn't stay on his face for long. He walked to a wall, pausing to scratch Eisenhower behind the ears. He took one of the old rifles down and handed it to Marshall. "Hold this. Careful, now. It's quite valuable."

"It's heavy."

"Heavier than one might think, yes. Now picture yourself in line with hundreds of other boys not much older than yourself. Fifty yards away, a wall of men in red hoists an array of rifles like this one and points them at you. You have to rest the butt of your gun on the ground

and load your weapon. You hear a hundred cracks like an audience of thunder and out of the corner of your eye you see the boys along your line fall to the ground. It's your turn to hoist the rifle, and you see the men in red loading their weapons, just as you had been doing seconds before. Somehow, you have to keep that rifle steady enough to give you just a slightly better chance of surviving the next round. Do you *know* how you make your chances slightly better?"

Marshall knew, but he shook his head.

"You have to *kill* them, because if you don't hit the man in front of you, he might hit you the next time around. Every *reduction* adds to your chances."

Marshall ran his hand along the underside of the rifle's barrel. "But you weren't in battles like that, right?"

"No. Not exactly, no."

That night Marshall and his mother ate dinner in the living room while they watched the news. During the first commercial break, Marshall asked his mother what they would do when his father returned.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She held her fork full of mashed potatoes suspended in midair, as if she was too shocked by the question to continue eating. Marshall didn't understand what made the question shocking.

"Do you think things will be different?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Just answer my question, Mom."

His mother returned her uneaten bite of potatoes to the plate. “I can’t imagine things being any different, Marshall. He’s still going to be your dad, you know. He’s just been away for a while.”

Marshall ate a bite of chicken.

“Do you think we should do something different? Go on a trip or something?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think he’ll probably just want to spend time at home.”

They sat in silence for a moment. The news came back with a story about tornados in the Midwest. “Is Dad a good shot?” asked Marshall.

“What?”

“Like with a gun. Is he good at aiming?”

“I’ve never watched him shoot, but probably. He’s good at everything he does, really.”

Marshall tried to remember the one time he had gone to the shooting range with his dad. He had been about nine, and he couldn’t remember if his dad hit the targets or if his shots went wide and into the dirt behind the paper with black rings.

Rain finally came a week after school let out. The gray sky swelled with its heat until thunder popped the blister to unleash a downpour.

The storm woke Marshall up mid-morning, and he lay in bed thinking about Everett and his father. He wondered what Everett had done, and he tried to guess in which war he had done it. He had wanted to ask if he had killed anyone, but he worried that such a question would have gone too far.

His mother always changed the channel if the news focused on skirmishes in the Middle East while they ate dinner in front of the television, but he saw enough to gather that the war was a violent one. He felt sure that his father would have to kill an enemy at some point. He didn't know how someone could pull the trigger of a gun when it was pointed at someone. Did it change you? He felt that it had changed Everett—that it had made him hold on to relics of war and listen to the dry, monotonous descriptions of something he had experienced in a darker, more vivid way. He worried that his father would do the same, or something like it, and wondered if he would ever open his study drawer and look at his pistol the same way.

When he walked downstairs, Marshall found Eisenhower waiting at the door.

“Not today, boy. It's raining too hard.” He walked to the pantry and grabbed a biscuit for the dog. He left the cookies.

Marshall opened the front closet and found a thin jacket and an umbrella. After making sure the front door was locked, he retrieved the key from the fern and slipped into the study. He found the gun where he left it. He turned it over in his hands, but made sure to keep the barrel facing the window. He looked into the cylinder and found the chambers he could see were empty. He opened the box of shells and grabbed one. He put the gun and the bullet in separate pockets of the jacket and left for Everett's house.

Everett greeted him and asked about Eisenhower.

“He doesn't like the rain,” said Marshall.

“It's a shame. I bought some dog biscuits to have on hand when you two stop by. Be sure to bring him soon, then.”

“I will.”

“So what brings you, my boy? I trust there is enough water falling from the *sky* and dripping down your *forehead* to keep your thirst quenched.”

Marshall smiled. “No, I don’t need a drink.” He pointed to an old revolver hanging near the rifle he had held the other day. “I had just noticed that pistol the other day when you showed me the rifle, and I was wondering if you could show it to me, too.”

Everett’s eyebrows went up like the panicked hands of surrounded criminals. “My, you *are* curious about firearms, aren’t you?”

Marshall nodded.

Everett looked him over, still with the eyebrows raised.

“My dad’s in Iraq,” said Marshall. “I just wanted to know some stuff about guns when he gets back.”

“Ah,” said Everett. “A veteran’s boy, are you? *Good* man.” He retrieved the revolver from the wall and handed it to Marshall. Marshall ran his hands over the cold metal. The barrel was longer than the one on his father’s pistol.

“Always heavier than you expect, aren’t they?” asked Everett.

Marshall nodded. “How do you open it to put bullets in?”

Everett demonstrated, and Marshall thanked him for the lesson. He said that he needed to get back for lunch. When he couldn’t see Everett’s house anymore, he ducked into the woods.

The rain pattered over his head on the fabric of the umbrella. Thunder was frequent and loud. He hoped that, if he went far enough into the forest, any sound would be masked by the storm. Even if someone did hear, he figured he could run back to the house and return the weapon to its drawer quickly enough to be unnoticed by any neighbors curious enough to venture out into the storm.

Marshall felt moist leaves under him like a soggy carpet and rain slid off of the leaves of saplings quickly, as if they were already too saturated from the preceding days' humidity to accept more water. He came to a ravine. It was moderately steep, and he had to keep a sharp eye on his footing. Eventually he reached a point where he needed his hands to steady himself. He closed the umbrella and tossed it to the ground. He steadied himself on small trees and climbed down to the bottom. His dad always left a salt block where the base of the two hills met so that he could take Marshall and sneak over the crest of the hill in the hopes of seeing deer. Today there were no deer.

Rain dripped over Marshall's eyes. He wanted to get back and dry off. He hated the idea of getting a cold so early in the summer, especially when he had to focus on walking more, in order to feel better about talking to Joanna.

Marshall pulled the revolver from his jacket pocket and opened the cylinder as Everett had demonstrated. He retrieved the single round from the other pocket and slipped it into a chamber. He closed the cylinder, pulled back the hammer and raised the barrel. He grimaced and began to pull the trigger. The hammer clicked against the firing pin twice as it found empty chambers. On the third try, the barrel exploded with a ferocity he could not have imagined.

The bullet buried itself into the dirt.

Marshall returned home with an empty gun.

Kingdom

It didn't take long for Tabitha Maxwell, sitting by her daughter's hospital bedside, to begin to see things moving in the shadows. The things weren't exactly figures or even shapes. There were no imps running in circles with pitchforks. Rather, the shadows under the bed and behind the door looked like black bed sheets stretched thin across a mattress, with fingers poking from the other side and moving in streaks across the surface, like swift ripples made on a pond by water bugs. Tabitha knew that she shouldn't see movement in shadows under beds like a child, but there were more pressing issues than her own sanity. It was when she heard voices coming from the shadows that she began to feel afraid for her own mind. Hearing the voices forced her to think about what happened, so that she could perhaps figure out why they pestered her. When did she start to lose control?

After some thought on the matter, Tabitha determined that she could only remember one moment from the accident two nights before: she stood on the freeway shoulder next to the cop who told her that the situation didn't look good, but that they were using a hydraulic claw to pry open her husband's smashed SUV to pull her family out and get them to the hospital. Tabitha could sense his tension, and she figured that he stood waiting to hold her back. Maybe he thought that she stood on the verge of running to the scene of the crash. She could have told him that he didn't have to, though, because she could see the back of the vehicle poking out from behind the fire truck and knew that she didn't want to see the rest of that mangled pile of metal and glass. She didn't want to face whatever she might find. She turned away and looked at the skeletal trees that bordered the highway. Flashing blue and red lights covered the branches and trunks, like sloppy paint from the brush of an avant-garde artist, but the effect also cast long shadows on the ground, where anything could hide.

In the hospital room, Tabitha couldn't remember how she ended up by the cop's side. She couldn't remember the explanation of how the wreck occurred or how she had reacted when they told her that her six-year-old daughter was unresponsive and her husband, Stewart, had been killed on impact. She only remembered the shadows.

During the following twenty-four hours in the hospital, her parents, sister and in-laws poured in and smothered her in sobbing hugs. As she mechanically responded, she tried to catch up to everything that had happened. She only became more lost and frayed. She found herself checking her phone for texts from Stewart saying that he was on his way to be with her and their daughter, who lay silent, lost in a coma. For a while, she made a game out of guessing how many times she would check her phone in an hour. After an hour and a half (she pulled her phone out six times), the indifference implied by making bets about the situation struck her like a splash of frigid water. A few spattering sobs escaped her then, but after a moment her mind went numb yet again.

During the second night, Tabitha finally slept in a chair by the bed that held her daughter and dreamt that things moved in the shadows behind red and blue trees and laughed. It was the next morning that Tabitha awoke to find the movement in the shadows under Olivia's bed for the first time. She got up to let some light in the room and shake the nightmares. Upon opening the curtains she found that the night still clung to the sky with a compassionless gray. The room brightened only slightly, and shadows still hung underneath Olivia's bed. Tabitha returned to the chair.

The hospital room was neither hot nor cold. It was an unpleasant in-between, a no man's land of temperature where Tabitha couldn't tell if she should be shivering or sweating. Despite the thermostat's best efforts to create a pleasant seventy-one degree atmosphere, sitting

comfortably wouldn't work. She could feel the numbing confusion giving way to a chaotic panic, and so she perched on the edge of her misleadingly cushioned chair at her six-year-old daughter's bedside, ready to pounce up to either grab a nurse for a blanket or run to the bathroom and dash cold water in her face. Either way, it would be nice to get out and pretend that this wasn't happening. Get out and find more light.

But of course, she couldn't do that. The reality of the situation was as overbearing as the shadows under the bed.

We'll take her, they promised, like they had in the dreams.

Quiet, Tabitha told herself.

She wasn't ready for this responsibility. Lately, Stewart had been the star parent. He had been the one telling Olivia her bedtime stories and driving her to school. He packed her lunch and cooked most of her dinners. She, meanwhile, trapped herself behind stacks of papers at her accounting firm. She worked late constantly. The distance growing between her and Olivia hadn't grabbed her full attention, though, until early in the night of the crash.

A local theatre group had put on a production of *Rapunzel*. Olivia was in the midst of a princess phase, and Stewart thrilled her all week with hints and preview stories. Olivia made Tabitha promise that she would come, too. And Tabitha did go, although she had to work late at the firm and met her husband and daughter at the playhouse. She barely made it on time. When she did arrive, she found Olivia, dressed up in a blue dress and tiara, sitting in the aisle seat with Stewart next to her. Tabitha found a seat saved to Stewart's left. She sat down and noticed another young family two rows ahead. The man sat on the left, the woman on the right, and the two children comfortably in between.

After the play, Tabitha and her family walked to their separate cars. “Livvie, would you like to ride back with me tonight?” asked Tabitha.

“No, Daddy has to finish the story.”

“The story?”

“*Rapunzel!*”

“But we just saw *Rapunzel*.”

Stewart smiled and adjusted his glasses. “I gave her a sort of prequel on the way over and promised I’d tell ‘Part Three’ on the way home.”

“I could tell a story,” said Tabitha.

“*You* couldn’t tell a story, Mommy,” said Olivia, giggling.

“Oh, I bet she could,” said Stewart.

“Yeah, I could tell you about how the prince got kidnapped by the *evil* witch’s sister and Rapunzel had to go rescue *him*.”

“The prince can’t get kidnapped, Mommy. Princesses don’t rescue princes.”

“Yeah, Mommy,” said Stewart. “Don’t forget the rules set forth for us by Disney.” He grinned.

Tabitha conceded and got in her car alone. After leaving the parking lot, she turned on the radio and flipped through the four radio stations programmed on her dial. Three were on a commercial break, and one played a song she had no interest in. She figured Stewart’s story wouldn’t be done by the time they pulled into the driveway, and decided that she wouldn’t be missed if she took a five minute detour for a cup of coffee to stay awake in a quiet car.

Tabitha’s memory faded from that point on, and only filled her mind with shadows. With some forced courage, she looked at Olivia’s sleeping face. It was pale and blemished by purple

bruises and cuts, but there were shadows there, too. Even through the mask of her daughter's unrelenting sleep, Tabitha could see dark, creeping fingers of exhaustion and fear. The emotionless light from the ceiling didn't help fight them as they began to whisper again in Tabitha's increasingly frayed mind. Instead of fighting the shadows, the fluorescent rods only offered a white that accented the pale turquoise walls and soft pink sheets so that they looked dead, and under them Olivia's face appeared cold and stiff. Tabitha reached to her left and flipped on the little lamp that stood on Olivia's nightstand. Yellow light filled the room like a gust of warm air. The shadows left the girl's face, but they still waited under the bed.

A nurse entered, muttered a greeting, and went to work checking various instruments. Tabitha watched him closely, trying to make something out of the way he glanced back and forth between her daughter and the IV. Did *he* see anything unusual about her face? Did he see shadows there? He stood on the opposite side of her bed, and Tabitha watched his feet. She felt like the darkness would begin to move at any moment. "How is she?" she asked to distract herself.

She's as good as ours, the shadows answered whispered in her mind with a sound like tearing paper. Tabitha flinched, but held herself together when the nurse made no indication that he heard the threat.

"She's hanging in there," said the nurse.

Too busy assuring herself that the voices were only a manifestation of her stress, Tabitha hardly noticed the answer.

"It's quiet in here," said the nurse. "Would you like for me to turn the TV on for you?"

Tabitha only gave a small, "Hm." The nurse turned on the power, and instantly the room filled with flickering blue and white light. It accented shadows on Olivia, just like the sirens on

the tree-covered hillside. Tabitha felt her breathing pick up speed. Suddenly the whole world seemed to move too quickly—too much chaos surrounded her sleeping daughter and Tabitha was sure that everything would continue on in fast-forward as the shadows kept her daughter imprisoned as if she were a time-capsule.

The nurse started to speak, but Tabitha cut him off. “I’ll be right back. I need some air.”

Tabitha put her hazard lights on and stepped onto the cold concrete of the highway shoulder. Racing traffic frequently emphasized the January wind that whipped her hair. The sun napped behind clouds pregnant with snow. No shadows hid underneath the trees. Careful to avoid looking at the ground for fear of finding remnant debris from the wreck, she walked down the bank and up the hill where the shadows had hid from flashing lights behind trees two nights before. She kicked the leaves around and found no evidence of malevolent beings. Her frantic mind finally began to slow, though she worried her grip on it was fleeting.

Facing the highway, she sat back on the leaves. She laughed, finding it funny that she had been frayed to the point of thinking that *shadows* threatened to take her daughter, for a moment, at least. Her giggles subsided, though, and tears followed with burning her eyes and conscience. Thanks to her irrational weakness, she had left her daughter alone in the hospital. Even now, she didn’t know what she would do when she returned. What *could* she do?

The thought of Stewart being no longer able to support and complement her in parenting hit her gut like a low punch. He was gone. As those words rung through her mind, not with the malicious whispers of the shadows, but in her own voice, she let her tears unload in full sobs.

The release lasted a while and eventually she found herself lying on the leaves watching the clouds give birth to snow. She still had the frantic panic at bay, but an exhausted daze

replaced it. She was aware of her duty to return to her daughter, but the question still gnawed at her: how could she handle it? Rescuing is daddy's job. Princesses aren't rescuers.

She pushed off the doubt by focusing on the branches above her. The wind blew at them, and they reached to each other with friendly gestures. Tabitha thought how long it had been since she had enjoyed the woods. She and her sister used to play in them all the time. She smiled, remembering their games that usually involved using sticks as swords to fight off dragons.

Tabitha and her sister, Grace, had a recurring game they played in the woods when they were in late elementary school. Tabitha played as Anna, the valiant princess of the ocean kingdom. Grace acted as Penelope, Princess Anna's loyal bodyguard. On frequent occasion, however, it was Penelope that needed rescuing. On one the first warm day of March, the girls had been playing in the back yard near the woods when make-believe dragons took Grace prisoner and flew her back to the dragon lair to surely be devoured. Anna was a valiant princess, though, and she wasted no time in tearing into the forest after her faithful bodyguard.

Anna caught up with Penelope in a clearing a few hundred yards into the trees. Anna brandished her sword (a whittled branch) and charged the dragons. They flew away from her first attack, and she used the opportunity to free Penelope from her bonds.

"Thank you, My Lady!" yelled Penelope. To a casual passerby, she would have sounded comical in her attempt to speak with a dramatic "medieval" voice, but Anna had insisted on it, just like she had insisted that "Penelope's" long blonde hair be braided elegantly.

"Of course, my dear Penelope. But watch out, it's coming back," said Anna.

"It is, and it's bringing its friends! A red dragon, and I think a blue one too."

“Fates be *damned!*” Anna exclaimed. Penelope grimaced. She (Grace) didn’t like curse words. Anna (Tabitha) was only just learning how to use them, so she only yelled, “To the trees! To the castle!”

They ran to the edge of the clearing. At the first tree, they stopped to look back. The dragons were closer, they decided. Anna thrust her sword into the air, prepared to yell some taunt. The sword, however, was stopped short, as was her breath in mid-inhale. She and Penelope looked up to see what had gotten in the way.

A hanging beehive.

“Run, Grace!” yelled Tabitha, because she was no longer Anna, and Grace was no longer Penelope. Now they were two nine-year-old girls with holes in their jeans, grass stains on their shirts, and dirt and sweat on their faces, and they ran through the forest with agility that suggested they knew it as well as their own homes.

Trees flicked past them, still without their crowns, still skeletal. Leaves kicked up behind them and pebbles skidded ahead. Tabitha still had the three-foot carved sapling in her hand, and she whirled it around in an attempt to fight off the following bees. It hit little else than her own brown hair, untied and bouncing in the wind. In spite of her panic at the thought of swarms of angry stingers close behind, Tabitha laughed. Their plight seemed funny, and deep down she felt very free. It was a feeling that she didn’t truly appreciate or even fully acknowledge as a child, but as an adult she would always crave it: the feeling of being able to dash through the woods without fear of falling or smacking into a tree and breaking something. It heightened as they came to the crest of a steep hill and went bounding down—falling more than running now, so that they used gravity instead of fighting it. They slid down on the wet leaves and came to the bottom. At that point Grace did fall, but she lurched to her feet again before Tabitha could even

slow to help her. They leapt over a small creek, ducked under a downed tree, and started up the next hill. Now it was Tabitha's turn to fall, but when she did she began laughing too hard to get back up. Grace stopped and turned, hesitant and scanning for bees. Satisfied but still cautious, she took a few steps toward her fallen sister.

“What's so funny?” she asked, sparing a little giggle of her own.

“Bees are...” started Tabitha, struggling to keep her voice together, “Why are bees... why are they so much scarier than dragons?”

“Because they're real,” replied Grace with a strong, matter-of-fact tone, but the sternness gave way to more giggles as she held her hand out for Tabitha to take.

Tabitha sat up, her hair messy with twigs and bits of leaves. She stopped laughing and managed a deep breath. For the first time since she had plunged into the woods after Grace, she allowed herself to enjoy the first day of spring warm enough to permit playing outside. It was a gray, cloudy afternoon, muffled, and the creaks of branches and occasional snaps of twigs spoke to her like a natural Morse code. A brief rainy mist passed through, kissing her forehead lightly. The forest was glad to have them back.

Tabitha had just stood up when they heard something thrashing in the leaves. She wrinkled her brow slightly as Grace gasped.

“Is it a bear?” asked Grace with an urgent voice that teetered between whispering and merely mouthing the words.

“Don't be stupid, Grace, there aren't any bears around here. Probably a deer,” Tabitha answered, but she knew that wasn't true. It was too clumsy for a deer. Then she heard a crash and a little yell. A boy's yell. “Oh, give me a break,” she muttered as she dropped her stick to

the ground. At the crest of the next hill, frantically trying to get to his feet about fifty feet away, was their next door neighbor, Vincent.

“What are you doing out here, Vincent?” Tabitha asked. She hated trespassers.

“*Shhhh!*” he shrieked. Until then Tabitha didn’t realize someone could actually *shriek* that noise. “We have to run the other way!” he whispered hoarsely.

Vincent was only six, but had already been prescribed massive spectacles, a twist of fate that had not been met well in elementary school. Tabitha didn’t hate him though; in fact she sometimes played hide-and-seek with him when Grace couldn’t come out. But now he was testing her patience. He tore up the leafy carpet of her forest. “What is it?” she asked him.

“It’s Kenneth,” he said. He had finally reached them, and Tabitha was about to yell at him when she noticed his swollen and bloodied lower lip, tear-streaked cheeks, and a cracked right lens. Sudden realization came to her. Kenneth was the neighborhood bully—one of the worst ones at school actually. He was a third-grader.

“Did he beat you up?” Grace asked. Kenneth was big for his age, and Tabitha figured Grace knew as well as she did that he wouldn’t hesitate to rough up a couple of girls, older or not.

Vincent nodded and said with a cracked voice, “He broke my glasses, and he’s still chasing me.”

As if on cue, Tabitha heard more leaf-trampling in the distance. It was clumsier than Vincent’s had been, and it was getting louder quickly. Feeling anger both at an oaf that would beat up a poor little kid like Vincent and at the sound of more damage being done to her forest, Tabitha walked back to her carved stick.

“What are you doing, Tabitha? You know that’s not a real sword, right?” asked Grace with a voice that was slightly aquiver. Tabitha ignored her and came back to Vincent’s side. Kenneth was nearly on them, and Tabitha stepped between him and Vincent.

“Get out of my—” the bully started.

“What do you want?” Tabitha said flatly.

Tabitha thought for a moment that Kenneth seemed startled, but if he was, he quickly regained his composure. “I want the little four-eyed dweeb. He kicked me in the shin.”

“Was that before or after you broke his glasses and busted his lip?” said Tabitha. She hoped she sounded cool but she figured a little shakiness was probably evident.

Kenneth’s eyes darkened as if a shadow had passed over him but only affected two spots on his face. Tabitha shivered and wondered what might be behind those shadows.

“Watch your dumb mouth, bitch.”

A few thoughts darted through Tabitha’s mind in as many seconds. She heard plenty of cursing at school from older kids, and had even used some of it, experimentally, amongst her friends. But she had never taken it directly like this. It infuriated her. She didn’t fight her way through dragons and bees to deal with the likes of Kenneth. Forgetting her fear, she screamed without even thinking, “*Fuck you! He’s just a kid so pick on someone your own size you asshole!*”

Everyone gasped, including Kenneth. A little gust of wind blew through the branches overhead, rattling them. The forest was laughing

Kenneth was the first to recover. He shoved Tabitha backwards, almost knocking her off balance. She managed to get a foot behind herself. In a move that was equal parts reactionary and planned (why, after all, had she grabbed the stick in the first place?) she swung her pretend

sword in a sideways arch that ended at the left side of Kenneth's head. He cried out, stumbled to his right, and tripped over an exposed root. He reacted fast though, and was quickly moving to get back up. "You—" he started, but didn't finish. He turned around in time to see Tabitha charging at him. He took off at a desperate running-crawl.

Tabitha slowed while yelling after him, "These are *my* woods, Kenneth, so stay the *fuck* out!"

She stared after him until he disappeared over the hill.

Tabitha grabbed a handful of leaves. The light dusting of snow drifted off of them and onto the dirt. She let them fall back down and ran a hand through her hair. There were leaves and twigs there, too. She got up, mentally thanked the forest for the escape, and walked back to the highway. When she neared her car she thought she saw something glint on the concrete from sunlight. Debris? Something moved in the shadows under the car, and Tabitha hurried to her door. Once inside, she gripped the steering wheel.

Once she returned to the hospital room, Tabitha immediately turned the television off to rid the walls of the flickering light. The nurse must've turned the lamp off, too, so Tabitha turned it on for the warmth of yellow light. She sat down and grasped Olivia's hand. Her stomach flipped inside of her when no response came, but it was only reflex.

The shadows moved in the corner of her eye.

This is my daughter, so stay the fuck out, she told them. They were silent.

"Olivia, I'm going to tell you that story now, okay?" Tabitha squeezed her daughter's hand.

Breezes

It wasn't long after her mother's death that Andrea, barely two months into high school, began noticing increased activity in her already overactive imagination. She used to daydream voluntarily, such as when she would watch a make-believe man run and dodge trees and other obstacles alongside her mother's car while Andrea rode in the passenger seat with her head against the glass. She used to imagine that the birds on the feeder in the front yard gossiped about her when she wasn't looking, but when she stepped outside they fled out of embarrassment. But in late September things began to pop up in her mind's eye uninvited. Like the time she and her little brother walked out of the neighborhood to the bus stop and she caught a glimpse of a figure standing behind them on the road. When she double-checked, the follower was gone, and for once she felt glad to see the usual group of students waiting ahead for their bus. Sometimes she couldn't help picturing buildings she walked into as dead and abandoned, with black windows and cracked doors.

One day she told her father about the visions before leaving for school. When she said "visions," she thought it sounded like too much. She *knew* it was only in her imagination.

Her father pushed toaster pastries down to be heated for her little brother and sister and rubbed his eyes. "It's fine, honey. Don't worry about it."

Andrea kept quiet, because she knew her father was busy. He had a lot to take care of, after all. She continued to think about it instead. It had to be fine. If she looked out the window over the sink and saw someone standing in the trees for a split second, she could convince herself that it wasn't real. But what if it didn't go away?

"Are you sure?" she said. "What if I'm...."

"What if you're what?"

“What if I’m going, like, crazy or something?”

Her father laughed. “I sure as hell hope not. Come on now, get your daydreaming under control. You’re getting too old for this.”

Andrea gave one abrupt nod and Callie, Andrea’s four-year-old sister, came running in with her shoes.

“Will you get those on her so I can take her to daycare?” said her father. He walked into the hallway, adding, “I need to send some e-mails.”

Andrea dropped her backpack and stooped to tie Callie’s shoes. The little girl didn’t move throughout the whole procedure, and when Andrea finished she found Callie staring at her own left shoe, which emptied its two strings on the floor like the tongues of tired dogs.

“Got your lunch in there?” asked Andrea.

Callie lifted up her Disney princess box, and Andrea took it for inspection. She found four cookies, a baggie full of chips and a juice box. She sighed. “Do I have to do *everything*?” She pulled bread and peanut butter out and threw together a sandwich before her father returned to the kitchen.

“Are we still going to Nana’s tonight?” asked Andrea.

“Yeah, I just got the e-mail. Gotta go to that conference in Pittsburgh overnight. She’ll pick you up from school. You’ll be fine with the kids, though, right? You’ll have Nana to help you and everything.”

Andrea shrugged and handed Callie her updated lunch box.

When Andrea and Michael, her six-year old brother, walked to the bus stop, Andrea tried not to think about anonymous figures walking behind them, but the light fog only encouraged her

imagination. She wanted to think about birds, but she couldn't hear any. Finally, she heard the voices of other students waiting at the bus stop, and she redirected her focus on them by making guesses at what jobs she might get today. Recently all of the freshman boys and a few of their pretty female counterparts had grown fond of calling half of the girls in the class—Andrea included—“flat as a flake.” That was mild, though, because it wasn't so specialized to her. When it came to Andrea, they more specific ideas, like calling her “maestro” when she hummed quietly to herself, or “schizo” for when she sometimes talked to herself in front of her locker. She could handle most of it, as long as they refrained from using the particularly vulgar ones when her little brother was around, like when they asked if she had a dick (she kept her hair almost as short as a lot of the boys) and if it was as big as her *miraculous* brain (she was a year younger than most of her classmates because of quick advancement).

One time a classmate told her that if she kept up her craziness, her father would smoke himself into getting cancer just like her mother had. She kicked him in the balls and shoved him to the floor when he dropped to his knees. She would have kept going had one of the boy's friends not restrained her. She ignored thoughts saying she should be thankful for the boy's intervention, or else she might not have gotten away with only a short suspension. After that, the insults subsided for a few days, but high school freshmen have short memories. At least there hadn't been any more comments about her mother.

Andrea hated Geometry with Mr. Thompson, who had been a friend of her mother's since high school, because Mr. Thompson explained the world in terms of measurements and binding rules that had been determined at the start of reality without anyone's consent. She loved Mr.

Thompson, though, because he always asked her how she was doing on Mondays and Fridays when she walked past his door before first period.

Today was Friday, but she wanted to say more than, “Everything’s fine,” when she passed Mr. Thompson’s room. She waited at the corner until the crowds of students thinned enough for her to feel comfortable talking to him, and barely made it to his door before he turned to start his calculus class with the seniors.

“How are you today, Andrea?” he asked with a smile.

“Good. Well, maybe not so good.”

Mr. Thompson had begun to turn on his heel, but stopped with his hand on the doorjamb.

“Do you ever see things out of the corner of your eye?” asked Andrea.

Mr. Thompson smiled. “Well, right now I see rows of lockers, I guess.”

“I mean things that *aren’t* there,” said Andrea. She glanced around the hallway and only found a few students, all out of hearing range.

The math teacher’s smile faded, but he didn’t look like her classmates did when they were about to call her crazy. “What kind of things?”

Andrea shrugged. “Anything. People, sometimes just shapes or movement, I guess.”

The bell rang, but Mr. Thompson only took his hand off of the doorjamb. He placed it under his chin and looked at her thoughtfully. Andrea thought of the way her father had rubbed his eyes when she brought up her “visions” earlier. “Does it scare you? The things you see, I mean. Do they usually scare you?”

“No. Well, maybe a little. Sometimes. Mostly it just startles me.”

Shouts came from the classroom behind Mr. Thompson. He turned to yell for silence and then faced Andrea again. “Sorry, I need to get in there, and you need to get to class.”

Andrea's shoulders sagged.

"But listen, I wouldn't worry about it. Talk to the school counselor if it keeps bothering you. But you've been through a lot lately."

Mr. Thompson paused, and Andrea wondered how *he* was dealing with her mother's death. Everyone knew it was coming—she withered away slowly because of her own habits and spent her final weeks in a hospital room which Andrea always thought was too brightly lit. Sometimes Andrea wondered if she would rather have come home from school to the shocking news of a car crash or some freak accident. Would such a shock have rocked her world too much? Would it have affected her father, Mr. Thompson and her siblings in a worse way than what *did* happen? Or would it have been better to leave things to the sudden whims of the same forces that make up geometric laws?

"You're having to grow up too fast, I think, and it's causing a lot of stress. You always have had quite the imagination, anyway."

Andrea looked at the floor.

"But you'll be fine. Try to relax. Play your mandolin. Music's the best for calming down."

He went into his classroom and left Andrea to worry about spending a night without her father. At least her mandolin was in her locker and not at home. She could take it to Nana's to have as backup.

Nana picked up the three children from school and after a short drive they reached her house in a quiet neighborhood outside of the town limits. Andrea's family lived in a cramped subdivision on the other side of town, where windows on the sides of houses peered into each other and the faint smell of the power plant a few miles away was always present.

Nana's yard spread out over a few acres and was dotted by several large trees. The sun had come out since the fog of the morning, and now a steady but soft breeze moved through the hanging orange lake of foliage like a ripple. The house itself had old charm, with tall windows, a porch with a swing and ancient, chipped paint. The only blemish in the whole scene was a broken wind chime that hung above a window on the right side of the house. But even the damaged instrument added to the familiarity of the scene—it had hung limp like that for as long as Andrea could remember.

Nana had lived in the house for over half of a century, and Andrea's mother had grown up there. The wake had been held in the house, and Andrea couldn't shake the memory of resting against her father on the couch and soaking his suit coat in tears. He placed one arm placed loosely around her shoulders, and when she looked up at him he always only stared blankly at the opposite wall.

Michael interrupted the memory by shouting that he wanted to play with his dinosaurs on the swing set in the front yard.

"You go ahead," said Nana. Her voice seemed shakier every week. "Andrea, stay out and watch them both while I get dinner in the oven, if you would. It'll be ready in twenty minutes, I think."

Andrea looked down at Callie, who held onto Nana's skirt as tightly as she had on the day of the wake, when Andrea had demanded what was left of her father's attention and Michael kept running up to his room and slamming the door for no reason. "Want to go swing, Callie?" asked Andrea.

Callie slowly released her grip on Nana and wandered after Michael, who had already torn off to the swings with his plastic Tyrannosaurus rex and Triceratops.

“Thanks, dear, you do such a good job with them.”

Andrea crossed her arms and watched the children make it to the swing set. Nana wandered inside, and Andrea eventually caught up to place Callie in a swing. She gave the little girl one tiny push, but Callie didn't provide any of her own effort and quickly slowed to a faint rocking. Michael, meanwhile, mashed the back of the Triceratops into the mouth of the T-rex, but quickly turned the herbivore around and rammed its spikes into the belly of the predator. His cycle of violence repeated itself several times before Andrea finally tore her eyes away. She looked up at the old house and watched the ripples of the breeze play with the light on the side of the house—a soothing spectacle of evening shadows and afternoon light that warmed her mind, despite the cool air that glided across her skinny (or scrawny, as a lot of the kids at school would say) pale arms and through her coffee-colored hair. The place was ancient, even eerie. Without knowing why, she gradually began to picture it at night, with no light in the windows. In her mind's eye, all of the trees in the yard lost their leaves—became dead. One of the windows was broken. Beyond it, a shadowy figure quickly ducked behind a tattered curtain.

Stop it.

Andrea exhaled sharply and mentally scolded her vivid imagination. Those were childish thoughts. Despite her rationality and self-rebukes, though, the image of the house, old and abandoned, was frozen in her mind.

She grabbed her mandolin case from Nana's car on the driveway and brought it to the porch, where she would still be able to watch the kids play on the swing set. She sat on the chipped wooden swing, which moved gently back and forth under her weight. Unlike the broken set on the other side of the house, clinking wind chimes hung above her, still intact, and in the breezes they rang a gentle but eerie music. She pulled her mahogany colored mandolin out of

the case and steadied it against her side. She rested her fingers across the strings to make an E chord, and she played it. The sharp, high sound of the mandolin strings resonated with the wind chimes.

Andrea had only started to play the tiny instrument a year before, when her family first moved to the area. Since her father's new job seemed to have the potential for permanency, her parents decided to place the kids in the public schools. When things got rough with the other students almost immediately, she frequently came home with her face swollen red with tears. One day, she walked up the front steps and her mother, sitting on a lawn chair with a half-smoked Marlboro, asked what was the matter. Andrea broke down again and told her about the names and the jokes about her short hair.

"It's middle school, sweetie," said her mother. "It's our fault. If you started on time I bet you'd be fine. But not coming in until the 8th grade—and a year young by the way—makes you an easy target."

Andrea's crying only got worse.

"Listen, Andi, you've gotta ignore them. If you're different, take some pride in it. Eventually you'll learn that standing out is better than sinking in."

Andrea decided she wanted to play an instrument so that she *could* stand out, and since her classmates had done such a fine job of separating her, she wanted to keep it that way. Be separated, be different. Everyone knows how to play the guitar or the piano, so she chose the mandolin.

The breeze slowed and the wind chimes quieted. Andrea glided her pick across her home chord of E once more and let the notes ring out through the breezy air. The wind chimes continued to play, but she decided to stop. She breathed in deeply, and caught the smell of

chicken potpie coming from the screen door and Nana's kitchen. Andrea stowed her mandolin in its case and told her siblings to come in for dinner.

They sat around the table and Andrea immediately noticed a fifth bowl had been placed at the foot of the table. The chair behind it sat empty.

"You sounded pwetty," said Callie.

"Yes, Andrea, beautiful," said Nana. She kept her eyes on the fifth bowl.

Andrea smiled. She looked at the bowl in front of her and said, "This looks wonderful, Nana. It's been so long since I've had your potpie."

Nana was silent for several moments, but finally shifted her gaze to Andrea. "Oh, well thank you, Sweetheart. I always love making it for you children."

Michael dropped his spoon beside Andrea. "It's too hot!" he shouted.

"Michael, be nice!" said Andrea.

Nana said nothing.

"Just give it a minute," said Andrea. "Open up the crust a bit more."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. The potpie was delicious, as always, but Andrea couldn't focus on anything but Nana, who was barely eating. The old woman stared at the bowl with the empty seat behind it. Why had she put out a fifth bowl? Andrea decided that perhaps her grandmother had lost track of how many guests she would have. Maybe she was embarrassed by her slip.

Andrea was nearly finished with her pot pie, and had just begun to study Callie playing with her pie crust when Nana asked in a cracked voice, "Oh, why won't she ever eat?"

A chill passed over Andrea. Michael stopped chewing next to her, but he did not swallow, and Callie looked up suspiciously from her pie crust. A tear rolled down Nana's cheek.

“Why won’t *who* eat, Nana?” Andrea asked.

“Natalie.”

“Nana, who’s Natalie?” asked Callie, innocent and curious.

Michael finally swallowed his mouthful.

“Oh my,” said Nana, eyeing each of her grandchildren, “I didn’t introduce you all, did I? The shy girl sitting next to Callie there is Natalie. She won’t eat though. Why won’t she eat?”

Andrea’s chills deepened. Callie stared at the chair and Michael opened his mouth to say something, but Andrea stopped him. “It’s okay, Nana. Natalie... Natalie probably isn’t hungry.”

Andrea thought she heard some distant part of the house creak and groan. The image of the house abandoned at night resurfaced and the place felt haunted.

Stop it. Act your age.

But Andrea couldn’t shake the thought that someone other than herself was seeing things. Her ability to listen to Mr. Thompson and convince herself that her stress was taking over her imagination dwindled. Was Nana also responding to stress or perhaps age? Andrea didn’t think that mere imagination could prompt someone to make an extra serving of dinner for someone who wasn’t there. Was she actually seeing someone?

“Michael, Callie: take your dishes to the kitchen and go watch T.V. while I help Nana,” said Andrea.

“Why?” asked Michael.

“Just do it, Michael,” said Andrea. “You need to go to bed soon.”

“You can’t tell me what to do, Andi!” shouted Michael. He looked down to the table, then mumbled, “You’re not my mom.”

A lump caught in Andrea's throat and tears shot into her eyes. She blinked them back and glared at Michael. "Now," she ordered.

Michael grabbed his bowl and left with Callie close behind.

"I'm sorry, darling," said Nana. "That was a terrible thing for your brother to say."

"It's okay, Nana. It... It's not the first time it's happened."

"I know it's hard Andrea, but you are an incredible young woman. Your father is very blessed to have you." Nana smiled and put her wrinkled hand on Andrea's.

Andrea wiped her eyes and Nana looked back at the empty chair.

Andrea followed Nana's gaze and asked, "Are *you* okay?"

"Oh yes, dear, I'm fine," said Nana distractedly. "Sometimes it's a little lonely around here, but I'm managing." She gave Andrea a weak smile. "Would you be a help to your old grandmother and put Natalie's food in the fridge? She may want it later."

Andrea swallowed and wondered if she should confront Nana about this mysterious girl she was seeing. She managed to convince herself that this girl was Nana's way of coping with loneliness, like an only child with an imaginary friend.

Andrea stood up and walked to the foot of the table. She slowed as she got close, and tried desperately not to imagine a pale little girl sitting in the chair.

Stop it! You're not a child anymore!

She clenched the bowl in her hands and hurried to the kitchen where Nana had started on the dishes. She opened one of the wooden cabinets and grabbed some aluminum foil to wrap up the potpie. After she closed the refrigerator door, she let her desire to know what was going on take over.

"Nana, where did Natalie come from?"

Nana stopped rinsing dishes and thought for a moment. “You know, sweetheart, I’m not sure. She’s been here for a couple of weeks now. She’s very quiet, you know. Doesn’t do much more than just wander around the house.”

Andrea shivered and started to dry the washed dishes. When she returned the last cup to the cabinet, she said, “Nana, I’m going to go check on Michael and Callie.”

“Of course, Andrea. Tell Natalie to get to bed too, please. I’ll be up shortly.”

Andrea found her siblings sitting in the floor in front of the television, watching a McDonald’s commercial. The blankets on their bunk bed were untouched. “Bedtime, guys,” said Andrea.

“But *Jurassic Park* is on,” said Michael from the top bunk bed.

Andrea crossed her arms. “Who said you could watch that? Especially with her?”

“I did.”

“And since when is that enough?”

“Since Dad doesn’t care what—”

“I don’t care about what Dad doesn’t care about.” She turned the T.V. off. “Did any of that scare you, Callie?” she asked.

Callie shook her head.

“Nothing happened yet, anyway. They’re still in the Jeeps.”

“So you were just going to turn it off when something *did* start happening?”

Michael nodded.

“Whatever. I’m tired of arguing with you. Now go brush your teeth or I’ll start making *sure* Dad cares when he gets home.”

Michael left the room and slammed the door.

“Is Michael mad?” asked Callie. She climbed into the bottom bunk bed.

“He’ll be fine. Did *you* brush your teeth?”

“Yes,” said Callie, staring solemnly at the bottom of the bunk bed above her.

“Did you say your prayers?”

Callie nodded.

Andrea stayed awake for a couple more hours doing homework in her bed. Michael and Callie slept quietly, and the geometry problems and English exercises helped keep her mind at ease. Still, she closed the door, to be safe. Of course, a door would not keep a ghost out, but still...

Stop it. It’s not a ghost.

She closed her books. She had to stop thinking like this. Nana was old and lonely, so it wasn’t bizarre for her to start seeing things, right? Andrea had to keep her head straight. What good would it be for Michael and Callie if they saw her as scared like them—like a child? She was the woman in the family now, and she had to act like it.

She glanced under the bed, just to be safe.

What would Mom think?

Tears came to her eyes yet again, and she rested her head on the pillow as she tried to force out all thoughts of both her ghosts and her mother.

The door crept open. The small lamp in the hall tried to fill the doorway, and Andrea’s heart stopped. The silhouette of a small girl interrupted the light like a cold black hole.

The girl inched towards Andrea's bed. She was pale, just as Andrea had pictured her all night. Andrea trembled and her mouth opened as she tried to yell for Nana. The little girl reached the bed side and frosty white eyes gazed down.

"Andrea," the ghost whispered.

Andrea tried to close her eyes, but she could not.

"Andrea."

Go away.

"Andrea."

No words would come. She was too tired. She couldn't move.

"Andrea." The whispering became harsher.

Stop. Go away.

The ghost placed an icy hand on Andrea's arm and said, "Andwea!"

Andrea snapped awake. She gasped. Callie stood by her bedside, looking terrified.

Andrea swallowed hard. The door beyond Callie remained firmly shut.

"What's wrong, Sweetie?" she asked when she caught her breath.

"Ghosts are at the window."

The dream was not over. Andrea could hear tapping on the glass.

"Go get Nana, Andi," said Michael. He huddled up in the corner of his bunk farthest from the window.

Andrea stared at the blinded window, trying hard not to show her terror. Nana. Yes. She wanted to go get Nana. She threw the blanket off of her. She was getting out of bed when she hesitated.

You're the woman in the family now.

There was a sudden forceful tap on the window. She imagined opening the blinds and seeing a crazed, mutated spirit of a man gazing back at her.

There's nothing out there.

Andrea approached the window. She grabbed the pull string.

“Andwea, no!” cried Callie.

“Andi, just get Nana,” said Michael.

“There... There's nothing out there,” said Andrea.

“Don't open the blinds, or they'll be able to see us!” said Michael desperately. “Get Nana!”

What would Mr. Thompson think? What would Mom think?

With a sudden burst of confidence, Andrea yanked the pull string.

Michael pulled the covers over his head and Callie buried her face in Andrea's side.

The tapping stopped as Andrea peered outside. She could now hear the breeze blowing outside in the night. A silver cylinder swung from the right and hit the window with a loud tap. Andrea jumped, and she could feel Callie's grip tighten on her leg. But there it was. Not a ghost. A broken wind chime.

“See?” she said, pulling apart from her younger sister. “It's only that silly wind chime.” Michael eased the covers down and Callie held Andrea's arm as Andrea opened the window. She lifted the guilty wind chime off of its hook on the outside wall and tossed it to the ground. “No more wind chimes, no more ghosts,” she said as she looked at both of her younger siblings. “Go back to sleep. I'll watch the door and the window. Don't worry.”

“Thanks,” said Michael sheepishly.

Callie squeezed her tightly and went back to her bed.

Andrea watched her siblings get settled, then got back under her own blanket and looked at the door. This time, as she drifted away to dreams, it stayed shut.

Lampshade

Abigail sat in Mother's lap in the apartment basement and watched the soft yellow light, barely bright enough to fill the cramped room, swing gently from its anchor in the ceiling. A tall woman with blonde hair had bumped into it, causing the bulb to illuminate the room with a rocking motion that caught crickets off guard and left shadows under rusty fold-up chairs and an old wooden table. The room was full of people other than Abigail's parents and the tall woman who bumped the light. They all clustered together and whispered, like they were telling each other secrets. Abigail didn't like secrets. Yesterday, her friend Cynthia from pre-school had whispered something into a boy's ear, which prompted him to point at Abigail and laugh. Abigail never found out what Cynthia told him. She didn't talk to Cynthia anymore. She decided she didn't need friends. Father could take her to the zoo, where she looked at big cats, and Mother could make cookies with her. She also had Mr. Carrot, her stuffed bunny. At least, she usually had him. While her parents had been packing boxes in the kitchen she played with him on her lap. Suddenly Father had grabbed her and they all ran down the stairs. Abigail asked him why they weren't taking the elevator, and he only said, "Because we need to hurry, Baby. Just hold on." Abigail wished she had Mr. Carrot, because he helped her feel better in dark rooms like this.

Abigail watched an older boy across the room. He stood near a shovel propped up against the wall, and he continuously inched closer to it. She didn't think he realized it, and she thought it would be funny when he finally bumped into it and knocked it over. He finally did, and she giggled. When it hit the floor it clattered, and everyone in the room jumped. The darkness was silent for a moment. An old woman with fluffy, white hair whimpered, and a man

with big arms ran his hands slowly through his bristly hair as he grated his teeth. After a moment, everyone started to whisper again.

“Do you think this will do any good?” said Mother to Father. Abigail looked up at her and saw that she gazed at the floor instead of looking at Father, who sat in a chair facing them. She didn’t like the look in Mother’s eyes; they seemed to be looking at something far away when the floor was only a few feet in beneath her. It suddenly made Abigail feel like she would fall off of Mother’s lap and never stop falling. She held on tightly to Mother’s blue shirt.

“I don’t know,” said Father. He sat hunched over, with his elbows resting on his knees. “We’re really not that far down.”

Mother blinked and a tear dashed halfway down her face before stopping suddenly on her left cheek.

Abigail gripped tighter. “Mommy, I left Mr. Carrot at home.”

Mother turned away and dried her face. “It’s okay, honey, Mr. Carrot is fine.” She sniffed, and turned back to Father. “Should we try to go somewhere else?”

“Probably no time. I don’t know,” said Father

“I don’t like it down here,” said Mother

“We can talk about something.”

“That won’t work.”

“We’ll talk about something else.”

“It won’t—”

“Abby, what should we do tomorrow?”

“Don’t, Jack,” said Mother.

Abigail felt glad that Father had talked to her instead of fighting with Mother. She smiled. “I wanna go to the zoo.”

“Well, we could go to the Central Park Zoo. That’s not too far. You want to see a bear?”

“Jack...”

Abigail tucked her face into Mother’s shirt, but grinned. “Bears are scary.”

“Naw, they’re not too bad. In fact, one of my best friends in kindergarten was a bear. His name was Bart.”

“Bart the bear?”

“Yes, Bart the bear.”

“But bears *eat* people.”

“Nope. Bart’s *favorite* food was a bowl of Cheerios.”

The little girl giggled. “I want Mr. Carrot to come too.”

Father smiled and said that Mr. Carrot could come, but Abigail didn’t think he felt like smiling. His mouth look tired.

The door opened with a metallic squeak and another group of people came in. Something hissed and crackled.

“Hey, you have a radio?” asked one of the secret-tellers.

“Yes, but we’re having a hard time finding anything.”

“Here, let me see,” said the teenager who had toppled the shovel.

“I’m good with electronics and stuff,” said a woman sitting at the table.

Abigail felt better now that the new group had broken up everyone’s secret-telling groups. Everyone in the room gathered around the man with the radio. Abigail wanted to join them, and she squirmed in Mother’s lap. Mother only gripped her tighter, but Abigail could see

that she also looked at the radio group longingly. Father continued to tell her about Bart's eating habits.

Suddenly the static from the radio cleared, though only in spurts. Everyone in the room suddenly sounded angry, and they hushed and shushed one another urgently. The radio waves blurted, "We are reporting that Boston... please stay indoors..." The scattered speech lasted fewer than ten seconds before it once again drowned in static.

"Boston?" shouted someone in the room. "What about Boston? My parents live in Boston."

A man in a New York Yankee cap sighed and squeezed the shoulder of the teenage boy, who stood next to him with his jaw slightly ajar.

"Boston," Abigail said to herself. She knew she had heard about Boston recently. She thought a moment, and then asked, "Daddy, what's Boston?"

"We talked about this yesterday, Abigail. Boston's a city up North, on the same—"

With a harsh sound almost like a shout, someone in the room started sobbing. Abigail looked around with wide eyes, looking for the source of the distress. Mother began to bounce her knee, but Abigail had figured out long ago that such bouncing was only meant to distract her from crying. She wasn't sure if she should start crying, so she looked at Mother, who looked around the room as frantically as Abigail had.

"Why is that lady crying, Mommy?"

"I don't... I don't know. Let's not worry about her right now though, okay?"

Abigail continued to survey the entire room, stopping her eyes at each distraught face. She finally felt like crying, and she plunged her face into Mother's chest. "I want Mr. Carrot, Mommy."

Father looked at Mother. She cried harder when she saw tears in Father's eyes, too.

"Abby," he said, "where is Mr. Carrot? Where did you leave him?"

Mother started to shake her head.

Abigail wiped her eyes. "On my bed."

The man shifted to the edge of his seat, leaned over, and tightened a shoelace.

"Don't, Jack. Don't leave us down here."

"Mary—"

"Don't."

"Is Daddy leaving us?"

"No, Honey, I won't let him."

"She wants her rabbit, Mary."

"That's hardly important right now."

"I think it is. I'll be back down in five minutes"

"Well, we'll come with you then."

"I want to go, Daddy, I don't like it down here."

"No, both of you, you should stay down—"

"Jack. Abigail doesn't want to be down here anymore. Neither do I. Even if it means we're up there when—"

"Okay. Okay."

Abigail watched Mother look at Father with hard eyes, the polar opposite of what they had been only a few moments before, as if something had jarred her back into awareness. She no longer seemed to be looking at something distant. She shook her head slowly. "I don't think this basement is going to do us—" her breath hitched. "Do us any good."

“Okay.”

“Come on, Honey, let’s go get Mr. Carrot.”

The three of them stood up from their chairs and walked past what had now become one solid group of people surrounding the table with the radio. Father opened the door.

The muscular man with bristly hair turned around at the click of the door. “Jack, where the hell are you all going?”

“Upstairs, Marty.”

“What are you, insane?”

“We have to get Abby’s stuffed rabbit.”

There was no response, only a stupefied look. Finally, “That’s enough, Jack. Get back in here and shut the door.”

Mother picked her up and began to carry her up the stairs as Father shut the door behind them. They reached the first landing where a large window looked out on the evening street. Abigail saw a chaos she had never known to be possible. Cars sat in the middle of the street with doors left hanging open. People hurried along the sidewalks and even through the streets, their arms full of belongings. A few just ran, empty-handed.

Abigail pressed her cheek against Mother’s neck and saw her parents squeeze hands.

“We may not have much time,” said Mother.

“Here, let me take her.” Father grabbed her and propped her on his hip. They quickened their pace. Footsteps echoed through the stairwell like bells in a clock tower, and when they finally reached the fifth floor, the loud clack of the door was like a bell tower.

The hall stretched long and empty ahead of them, a long strip of red carpet bordered on both sides by white lights not much brighter than the swinging bulb in the basement. Between

each light was a door as black as the shadows under the fold-up chairs. Behind one of those doors was Abigail's home, and when they came to it, they found it partially open. In their hurry to get down to the basement, Father had not even closed up their apartment. He opened it all the way.

Inside, boxes were stacked along the walls that lead to the split between the living room and the kitchen. A few were still open, revealing green foam peanuts and half-submerged books, pictures, and kitchen supplies. Abigail forced herself free of Father's grip and dashed to her room. She found Mr. Carrot on the bed. He looked at her with beat-up eyes and she hugged him. His coarse fur was scratchy against her cheek.

Abigail ran to join her parents in the living room, where large windows overlooked the South end of the park. The sun had set recently so that the city still bathed in a soft, pink-orange light. Silhouetted buildings stretched along the horizon of trees like a black picket fence speckled with yellow stars. There were fewer of those yellow stars than there usually were. Abigail watched Mother rest a hand on the bookshelf to her right. She brushed against something, and she looked down. There her fingers pinned down a white, unsealed envelope. She picked it up and slid its contents out, just enough to be read.

"What are those, Mommy?"

"They're plane tickets, Honey."

Mother looked out the window with that distance in her eyes, but wrapped her left arm around Abigail as she collided with Mother's hip. "You found Mr. Carrot?"

Abigail nodded.

"That's good. I'm glad."

Father slipped his right arm around Mother's waist and rested his left hand on Abigail's head.

"Should we go back down?" asked Mother.

Father didn't answer. He took the envelope from her hand.

"Is it just me," she said, "or does the sky seem too bright to the North?"

"North," Abigail said to herself. "Daddy, that's where Boston is."

"Yes it is, Abby," he said, smiling. He tousled her hair.

Mother blinked and tears fell down her face, on both sides this time. She nodded toward the bright spot in the North and asked, "There was never any escaping it, was there?"

Father tossed the envelope to the floor and wiped his own eyes. "No, I guess not."

The three of them stood together for a few minutes, watching the sky grow dark.

A bright yellow light clicked on above the city. It didn't sway back and forth, but rather rolled in on itself. For a moment, there were no more shadows.