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## The Animal Lives of People

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The Animal Lives of People

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theater and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

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## The Gator Gallery

Uncle Roberto insisted that, in order to get the job, John study for and pass an exam about alligators. Details mattered when it came to dealing with tourists. Halfway between Tampa and Gainesville, families driving interstate 75 would encounter a billboard that read “**See Live Gators. 13 Foot**”. When they complained that the only thirteen-foot alligator on the property sat stuffed and unnaturally posed in the parking lot, Roberto would hold a photo of the billboard and point to the period.

John’s wife, Maribel, made flash cards which his twin sons, Esteban and Ernesto, held in front of his face. At what nest temperature will the hatchlings all become female? How long is the typical death roll? What is the estimated population of alligators in the state of Florida? John got some right and others wrong, yet the boys reacted with the same enthusiasm at every answer.

“Great, Papa.”

“This job is gonna be so cool.”

The whole thing, him taking an exam to moonlight at Maribel’s uncle’s circus-worthy sideshow of a tourist business, struck John as the opposite of cool. He already worked full time as an independent landscaper, a job profitable enough to cover their bills and groceries. However, he’d promised to get a second job in order to get Maribel to come home this last time. Her “Latin Fire,” which had pleased him so much when they were dating twelve years ago—when adventurous days often ended in scary fights followed by thrilling sex—made her prone to threats, not the hollow kind but the followed-up-on kind. She’d load suitcases and John’s sons into her car once or twice a year. This last fight coincided with an extended trip up north that Uncle Roberto was planning. Roberto needed a manager he could trust in his absence; Maribel

wanted college funds for the boys.

The Gator Gallery consisted of an acre of white gravel and three cement buildings, two of which housed alligators. Roberto had built these two himself by slathering wet cement between hardened cinder blocks. Instead of floors, Roberto had installed tanks with elevated wooden walkways in between. Visitors walked straight through and looked down at two- or three-foot gators floating in clear water.

John took his exam in the third building, the gift shop. Shelving stocked with alligator parts surrounded him, claws attached to sticks for back-scratching and shellacked heads with gaping jaws. “Don’t you need permits for this stuff, Roberto?” John asked. “Aren’t gators endangered or something?” Roberto sat behind the cash register making notes. The last visitors had left minutes ago, and dusk sent purple light through the single gift-shop window. This light complimented Roberto, making him seem taller, his mustache fuller.

“Pass the exam, *sobriño*. Then ask questions.”

On the night that John passed his alligator exam, Maribel cooked *pollo* with mole sauce and fried plantains. John recognized the meal for what it was: a symbolic, thank-you, I-love-you, I-won’t-leave-again-now-that-you’ve-got-this-job gesture. The sauce, a brown puree of chilies, nuts, fruits and vegetables, was a particular favorite of John’s. They sat around the table and passed the dishes.

“Boys,” Maribel said, “aren’t you proud of your Papa?” They nodded. “You must study as hard as he did for your own exams, and pray about them.”

Esteban said, “Yes, ma’am,” at the same time Ernesto said, “Can we help you feed the gators, Papa?”

“Oh, no,” Maribel said, “Those lizards will eat you. Best not to go near them.”

John chewed and wondered if the alligators would like mole sauce on their chicken or if they would consider it a distraction.

\*

In the weeks before Roberto left, John’s job consisted of throwing meat into the center of the tanks when the crowds swelled. Kids like to see the animals “do tricks.” The gators snapped and hissed. Maribel couldn’t even listen to a description, let alone come down to watch.

“It’s so primitive,” she said. The boys clamored for the permission Maribel would never grant. “They’d kill you as soon as look at you.”

John didn’t want the boys there either, but not because he didn’t want them close to the alligators. He didn’t want the boys close to the people gawking at the alligators. These visitors complained about the pungent and meaty smell in the gator houses. Wasn’t there some way to sanitize? Their clothes tended not to match, and their ludicrous headwear often sported ears, tails and duck bills. At least once a day, John fished a video or digital camera out of the tanks. Although he’d never admit it to Maribel or Roberto, John got great self-satisfaction from correcting parents who answered their kids’ questions about gators with made-up bullshit. The visitors just didn’t seem to have any real appreciation for the muscled reptiles swimming below their feet.

“You could improve those tanks with some vegetation,” John told Roberto one night after closing.

“Plants will block the view,” Roberto said. “Gators will hide so no one could see them.”

True. John tried again: “How about some educational signs? I could make them. I’ll get

the boys to help.”

“People can buy books in the gift shop.”

That night John complained to Maribel. They sat on their back porch, sharing the single Marlboro Light they smoked each day. Maribel said, “Those things are big lizards. Big dinosaurs. They don’t have feelings. They’re fine.”

John inhaled and handed the cigarette to Maribel. “What about all your hocus pocus about respect and culture and stuff? My boys have girly names because you wanted to do right by ancestors we never met.” No matter how many times Maribel explained that Esteban and Ernesto were names for men, John couldn’t forgive the feminine flare he heard in their pronunciations.

“Big lizards aren’t our people. Plus, lots of boy names start with E.” She popped her eyes. “Edwin. Edgar.”

John thought of gator eyes protruding above the water line. He took back the cigarette and countered, “Esther. Edwina.”

“Earl,” Maribel said, standing. “Eliot. Erik.” She pinched the back of his thigh, which got John out of his chair.

“Emily,” he said, taking a step toward her, “Eunice.”

Maribel ran around, playing, and John gave chase. He let her lap their small yard twice before catching her and pulling her to the ground on top of him. He rolled her and tickled. She screamed, “Elizabeth,” as soon as she caught some breath in between laughing fits. The boys had woken and watched from the porch, standing near the smoldering cigarette.

“Who’s Elizabeth?” Esteban asked. “Are we having a sister?”

They noticed the boys for the first time and got up, John feeling flushed, Maribel still laughing.

“I don’t think so,” John said and led them back to bed. He wished they had stayed asleep.

John brought up the issue once more that evening when he and Maribel got under the covers. While she snuggled against him, he said, “Roberto’s just not doing right by those gators, baby. He could do more than he does. Those people that come are idiots.”

“Just collect your check, monkey. Lord willing, our boys are going to college.”

\*

The next Friday Roberto said, “I need you to work tonight. Meet me in the rear parking lot at eleven.”

“Are we going to clean the tanks?” John asked. “I can do that right after closing. Be done by eight-thirty.”

“No.”

“But Maribel and the kids won’t like to be alone that late.”

“Be here at eleven,” Roberto said, turning and walking back to his office, signaling the end of negotiations.

When John called Maribel, she was less than pleased. She’d wanted to work on their tax returns that night. “You’re the one who wants me at this job,” he said sharply. At eleven, John walked through one of the gator buildings and got his first look at alligators after dark. They were changed. They moved with purpose instead of floating aimlessly. They increased the speed of their movements, undulating their tails with enough power to create small waves. They looked less like logs atop the water and more like torpedoes under it.



“They know,” Roberto said from the rear doorway.

“They know what?”

Instead of answering, Roberto walked to his truck. John followed and saw a children’s plastic pool filled with water and resting in the truck bed.

“What are we doing?” John said.

“Scheduled release.”

John perceived Roberto’s brevity as an invitation to keep his questions to himself. Roberto would tell him what he wanted to and nothing more.

Back in the concrete building, Roberto waded into a tank. To John, Roberto’s khaki pants looked as thin and unprotective as wet newspaper. Roberto’s fingers seemed snackable. “You crazy?” John said, letting out the one question that mattered.

“They’re in more danger than I am. They could hurt themselves struggling.” Roberto caught one from behind in a swift move. He held it with both hands, spreading his fleshy, snack-sized fingers around the skull to ensure its mouth stayed shut. He caught its tail under his armpit. “You see?” Roberto said.

John nodded.

“Get another one.”

When two gators floated in the children’s pool, Roberto got in the truck and left the passenger door open for John. They rolled down the windows as Roberto drove out of the parking lot, and John smelled a hint of the salty ocean a hundred-and-fifty miles away mix with the dirt funk of the gators. He found himself unable to stop watching the gators in the back. The

water sloshed in the pool, and the gators sloshed with it like plastic toys in a child's bath.

Roberto drove toward one of the few undeveloped, swampy areas nearby, and the sounds outside the truck window altered and amplified. The car engines, cell phones and radios faded. Instead, frogs croaked, birds called, and tree branches moved against each other in the light wind.

Roberto slowed on a dirt road that ran along the obviously named Wet River. Another truck approached. Instead of pulling to the side and letting it pass as John expected, Roberto stopped and blocked its path. The headlights of each vehicle beamed into each other. A short, uniformed woman got out of the other cab, and Roberto rolled down the window.

"We're busted," John said quietly to Roberto.

"Evening," the woman said, standing next to the open window.

Roberto ignored John and said, "Hey, Beth."

"Who is this?" Beth said.

"My nephew, John. He's been working for me. I'm thinking about going North for a few months. Thought he could do the releases while I'm gone."

John sat still, hoping Beth believed this information was not news to him.

"You trust him?" she said. John would feel better if he could tell Beth's temperament by the color of her hair, but it was swept up under her cap. A patch on her uniform read "Florida Fish and Wildlife Service."

"I brought him," Roberto said.

John figured out that he was meant to watch. Beth and Roberto worked with the silent, practiced movements of seasoned thieves. Beth stepped up into the truck bed. She did everything first. First out of her car. First to talk. First to step up. No holding on.

The cab of the truck blocked most of the light, yet John could see the gators moving around trying to find more space in their small pool. They looked like shadows on dark water, like the sea monsters Maribel thought they were.

Beth grabbed one, both of her small hands around the back of its head just like Roberto had shown him. It thrashed, and the other one became agitated. Beth caught the tail under her arm, which settled both gators. John's heart out-hammered the rhythmic calls of the hidden amphibians surrounding them in the trees.

As Beth released her gator into the water, throwing gently but confidently before backing away, a single splash followed by immediate silence, John imagined the stunning freedom the gator must be realizing. From the animal's perspective, the actions of his captors must seem so arbitrary. Why keep it captive for three years only to release it on this random night?

Maribel would have an answer for such a question. More often than John would like, she talked about God, especially to the boys. They should thank God and pray to God. More frustratingly, she would attribute the fruits of John's labor to God. If the boys made it to college, Maribel would downplay John's fourteen-hour work days in favor of God's munificence. As best as John could tell, however, God dispensed his mercy arbitrarily.

Roberto threw his own alligator into the river, the sound of which refocused John's attention on the moment. John thought a blessing for the gator. May your nests stay above 90 degrees so your offspring will be male. May your prey be oblivious. May the sun shine when your blood moves too slowly. May your death rolls work quickly and not require much energy. He stood in between the trucks, amazed, until Roberto told him to come the Christ on.

On the ride home, Roberto provided an explanation. He had gotten to know Beth as she made routine checks on The Gator Gallery. She came with swagger, resenting both the duty and Roberto's business, but softened when she observed that Roberto's animals were exceptionally cared for. Roberto and Beth began to drink dark beers together. The state government had no fucking clue, according to Beth, about the status of gator populations. The state government had no fucking clue, according to Roberto, about regulating business that relied on animals. The two made plans for the first release.

"If you are so worried about the alligators," John asked, "why don't you make a better facility? I told you I would help. Me and the boys."

Tourists didn't want to visit establishments that focused on animals. Establishments that focused on the animals would be thick with vegetation, hiding spots, and wide physical separations between the ticket-buyers and the attractions. Tourists wanted animal attractions that put their line-of-sight at the highest priority. By doing this, Roberto ensured his business stayed profitable. He bought his offensive souvenirs from a Seminole who managed wildlife in sustainable ways, shellacking only the heads of gators fatally wounded, dead of old age, or condemned to die by city nuisance ordinances.

"Does Maribel know about this?" John asked.

"No."

"You don't want the word to get out that you are a good guy?"

"God knows I am. That's enough."

\*

As Roberto readied to leave for his trip North, Maribel insisted John ask for a raise. "You'll have

so much more responsibility,” she said. “You need to be paid more. He can’t take advantage of us just because we’re family.”

Roberto had already offered a raise, but John walked right through this door Maribel had cracked open. “Well, I will have to stay after midnight some nights. That’s how long it takes to prepare the bank deposit.”

“See?” she said, circling her arms around him, “Roberto couldn’t trust just anyone with the bank deposit.”

Roberto left instructions that one gator should be released during the month of his trip. John met Beth at the same spot and tossed an alligator into the river. His pulse raced so fast that John couldn’t feel the diastolic downbeat, just the intense systolic. He felt could do anything. He could lift Roberto’s truck in one hand and Beth’s in another. He could jump into the river after the gator and pull it back out only to throw it in again. He could rename his boys Peter and Craig. He could create a new universe in three days, half the original time. He could reverse nature, caging the tourists for the alligators to watch. He could stop Maribel from leaving when her temper fired.

Beth never broke his reverie but seemed caught up in her own, as if she were on the same euphoric drug.

“What are you thinking?” John asked her.

“I joined the Air Force out of high school. They made me a paratrooper. When you hear your sergeant say go, you take two steps without thinking, and you’re in open air. You’re moving but you feel like you’re suspended. You feel like the laws of the world have been suspended.”

\*

“Why does it take until midnight to prepare the bank deposit?” Maribel asked one evening as she cooked eggs and the boys sat in front of the television like stones. Beth had been coming by as John closed the gift shop. Together, they went to the gator buildings to lock up and stood on the wooden walkways, making observations about the animals. He and Beth weren’t interested in each other, only the gators, but even John could guess what Maribel would conclude if she had driven by and seen them. John spoke deliberately slowly the way a drunk drives deliberately slowly.

“I’ve got to match up every receipt,” he said. “If it’s off even one penny, I’ve got to start over.”

“You could bring that work home. I feel bad for you working so much. Up so early and asleep so late. We could count the receipts together at the table. I’ll run the calculator. Teach the boys about money.”

John shifted on his feet, pocketed his hands. “I can do it. I don’t need help.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I do,” John said with more edge than he’d planned.

Maribel focused on stirring the eggs, “You hiding something, monkey? You wish I wore a uniform?”

As a rule, John didn’t trust his wife’s capacity for discretion, but he saw he had no choice. “Meet me up there at eleven tonight,” he said. He looked at the stones in front of the television and added, “Bring the boys.”

\*

They sat four across on the only seat in the truck, parents sandwiching kids. Esteban rode with his legs open to accommodate the gear shift. They drove outside the city limits and onto the dirt roads not talking. Maribel had tried to talk when John caught the gator from the tank at The Gator Gallery. She asked, “What the hell are you doing?” and “You realize the boys are here?”. John let her questions float over his head as he waded into the tanks to catch an animal. He released it into the plastic pool, already filled and waiting in the back of the truck. John tuned the radio to the local jazz station because he thought the animal might like it. The window between the bed and the cab of the truck had a sliding panel that John opened. He was secretly disappointed that neither of his boys looked back.

When they got to the meeting spot, Beth waited. John had called her in Maribel’s presence to tell her about the release in coded language. John stayed in the truck and rolled down his window just like Roberto had done the first time he brought a stranger.

“What’s this?” Beth said.

“They needed to come with me tonight,” John said.

Beth didn’t react as she had before. She took a step back and said, “It’s too many. Too many witnesses.” She put a hand over the patch on her uniform.

“I can’t take them back. Another hour of riding would be too hard on the gator.”

Maribel spoke. “We won’t say a word. My boys won’t say a word.”

John smiled at Maribel. Beth got back in her truck and drove away, leaving the family alone with itself.

“Why did she leave, Papa?” Ernesto asked, perhaps, John thought, emboldened by his mother’s faith in him.

Instead of making him nervous, Beth's departure made John feel more in control. Beth had been an equal, if not a superior, in their previous releases. Now, all living beings that surrounded him – his wife, his sons, the alligator – were dependent on him. For the second time that night, he ignored questions, much as Roberto had ignored his. "Get out" he said.

They followed him to the back of the truck and waited. John looked at Maribel. Shadows cast by the trees kept him from seeing her eyes. "You've got to do it," he said to her.

"Papa, no," Ernesto said.

"Papa, me," Esteban said.

"Go to the glove box and get the flashlight," he said, pushing the shoulder of one boy, not exactly sure which one. John stayed focused on Maribel who seemed just as focused on him.

"I'm sorry, monkey," she said, "I shouldn't have accused you. I should have known you wouldn't . . ."

"You must do it," John said, not letting her finish. He stepped up into the truck bed and held his hand down for her. She grasped it and came up awkwardly, almost pitching herself over the side. John steadied her, then helped the boys up at the same time, one in each hand.

"Hold the light," he said only to Esteban, but the boys held it with four hands. They captured the gator's head in the circle of light. Its eyes became cherries.

"You must grab it quickly," John said, "Both hands around the head. If you go slow, it'll snap."

Maribel started to cry, which John could hear but not see. "I'm so sorry, John. Please don't make me."

John reached out for her hand and found it. "You'll like it. It will make you understand



things, things about yourself and things about you and me.”

Maribel’s first and second tries at grabbing the gator’s head yielded nothing but wet hands. She moved timidly and pulled her hands back as soon as they touched the thick ridges on the gator’s skin. The gator circled in the pool, making Maribel’s task harder, but the boys followed it with the light.

“You’ve got to do this,” John said. He moved behind her and curled around her body. He layered his arms over her arms like a man teaching his wife to bat a ball. “Count to three,” he said.

On this try, Maribel caught the animal and screamed. John thought briefly of the attention her scream could attract but decided not to stifle her. The boys were transfixed. John clapped to get them to move.

“Get down,” he said. “Jump and keep the light on your mother.”

Maribel’s actions became urgent and focused despite her screaming. She jumped down from the truck with no hands, wobbled a little, but finally balanced herself. John jumped last. The boys already lead their mother to the water with the light. The gator in Maribel’s hands barely moved. It must be tired by now, John thought. In a few steps, the small party stood at the edge of the river. Without looking at anyone, Maribel asked, “What now?”

Esteban answered, “You know.”

## Study of a Blouse

Normally I would not respond to such a flyer, but I had seen the woman who tacked it up. It read: “Test your boundaries. Volunteers needed for an experimental study that requires courage and an adventurous spirit.” When she walked out of the university mail room, I smelled orange and chocolate in her wake. The image of her in a long, loose skirt with only ankles exposed as she stood on tip-toe to reach the open spot on the board wouldn’t leave my mind. Most of the guys in the computer lab go for women who show lots of skin. I like a woman covered, so that when I take her clothes off, it feels like something has actually changed. A literature Ph.D. who heard me say this called me a Victorian. I sent a message to the email address on the flyer and got a reply asking me to meet at Planet Falafel for lunch the next day.

Before she graduated, the only female student in the computer science department tried to help me devise a theory about why I had trouble keeping girlfriends. She said, “Women are practical, Jason. It’s not that they are embarrassed to have hooked up with you, but you aren’t long-term material. Why waste the time?”

“I *want* to be long-term. I’d be glad to be a monogamer.”

“Monogamer isn’t a word. Monogamist is a word.”

“Besides, once I finish this degree, my salary will be plenty to raise a family on. Women love that. Is it the nice-guy thing? Am I too nice?”

“That’s a cliché.”

“I thought the cliché was the guy not calling. I’m calling. Why aren’t they calling back?”

“You’re just not long-term,” she said.

When the time came to meet the woman from the mailroom, I opened the door, walked

into the tang of Middle Eastern spices, and got my second look at Suzanne, although it took me a while to decide that, yes, this was the same woman. She sat at a small beige table in the corner and was dressed like a prostitute on an HBO special. An oval cut-out just below the neckline of her black dress displayed yogurt-white skin. Her exaggerated makeup looked like a mask. Her wavy, brown hair flowed long, but a crease midway down suggested a recent ponytail.

“Jason Cunningham?” she asked, rising and stretching out her hand.

I wanted to put her at ease. I smiled and made full contact on the shake. I wanted to give her permission to wash her face in the bathroom.

“Hi. Yes. It’s me.”

“I’m Suzanne Feffermill. Thank you for meeting me.” She shuffled papers, pushing some across the table at me before I even sat.

“If you want to participate in the study, you’ll need to sign a release form. The university is very particular about studies involving human subjects.”

“Okay,” I said and signed. I could read her like a line of code. Nervous. Uncomfortable. Ready to be aggressive if necessary. Wanting to provoke. I hoped by not being provoked, she’d let me see the unkempt, covered, earthy-looking woman from the mailroom again. She had not ordered any falafel, but I wanted to see her with it crumbling down her chin.

“Don’t you want to know what you have to do first?” Suzanne asked.

“I trust you.”

“Of course you would.” She twitched in her dress and rubbed her eyes absently, smearing shadow.

Suzanne studied Psych, and she explained her doctoral dissertation as examining

invisible gender barriers and the consequences of penetrating them. My participation would entail wearing specified items in public places and keeping a journal recording my thoughts and feelings as well as the reactions of people around me. I made her talk with me at great length on the subject. Her theory stated that as long as women did not try to pass themselves off as male, they were free to appropriate markers of masculinity, such as neckties or suspenders, without facing social consequences. I, theoretically, could not do the same. For example, if I wore a ponytail high on my head instead of low and flat against my neck, those I encountered would “correct” my behavior with negative reinforcement. I ordered a round of coffee while she spoke.

“You see, masculinity still equals power. When women use masculine symbology, they are acquiring power. Like Madonna.” I looked at her and raised an eyebrow. She continued, “Madonna wears suits and work boots but never lets anyone mistake her gender.” I nodded. “But when men use feminine symbols, they are perceived as giving up power, which their peers won’t tolerate.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, sipping slowly without breaking eye contact.

Suzanne paused for the first time in half an hour and then hit me with this: “You know, most men who’ve listened to all this only want to get laid.”

Ouch, but I wanted more than just that. I brought the coffee back to my lips to buy time. “Can you use that as part of your research?” I asked.

Bull’s eye. She softened and smiled. Then I talked for a while.

\*

I was to send her my measurements, including wrist and ring size, and meet her in one week for my first assignment. Things between us were to remain strictly professional. Any lack of

professionalism or variation from established methodology could contaminate the study. But during that week, I thought a lot about Suzanne and not a lot about the study, so when I went back to Falafel Planet, I forgot we were being professional.

“Hey,” I said, sitting down. She was writing, and before she even looked up, I laid my hand on her forearm. She pulled back. I pulled back. “Sorry,” I said, “I’m just excited to get started.”

“Well, I’ve got your first item,” she said. She pulled a wristwatch out of her bag and laid it between us. The thin, pink band supported a dime-sized watch face surrounded by what could only be cubic zirconium. I felt a queasiness similar to when my sixth-grade science teacher set a frog, a scalpel and stick pins in front of me.

“What do you feel?” Suzanne said.

I answered “interested” too quickly, and she proceeded to impress me, really impress me, for the first time.

In the tone of a professor, she said, “Your facial features and body language are inconsistent with interest, Mr. Cunningham. Interest is usually signaled by an opening of the eyes and mouth. One often loses awareness of one’s body and reaches out without thinking.” She looked at me pointedly. “Your body language is closed. Eyes and mouth are narrower than normal. Both hands are below the table. You’re even holding your breath a little.”

I kept my silence and kept my eyes on the watch. I was acutely aware that I was blowing it, but I couldn’t force myself to loosen my body language.

“If you can’t handle this, you need to tell me now.” I could hear her frustration. She had thought I was open-minded, but, no, I was typical. “Tell me now,” she said, “So I can give this to

one of the other subjects.”

That woke me up. I said, “There’s other guys?”

“Of course. A study conducted with a single subject would have no validity.”

I picked up the watch and laid it across my wrist but didn’t fasten the clasp. “I’m fine,” I said. “I was just a little surprised is all.”

“Jason,” she said in her normal voice, “Any reaction you have is perfectly fine. I’m not expecting anything, and I won’t be disappointed by anything. I’ll never reveal your name in the study, so no one can ever know it was you. But, you’ve gotta be honest with me or we’re wasting our time. So, what are you feeling?”

Around us, plates and glasses and silver clicked against each other and the tables. That noise, plus the many conversations going on at other tables, made it unlikely that anyone could hear us. All the same, I paused and cocked my head, checking for eavesdroppers. When I felt convinced, I said, “Interested,” and this time she didn’t accuse me of lying. “I mean, you told me I would be wearing women’s stuff, but I imagined things no one would see, like underwear or pajamas. Or, maybe I was thinking it would be more androgynous stuff and less like what a sorority pledge would wear.”

She couldn’t have paid more than ten bucks for the watch. I rubbed it between my thumb and fingers, feeling its glossy cheapness. For the first time in Suzanne’s company, something other than Suzanne held my attention.

“People will think I’m gay,” I said.

“I expect them to,” she said.

“I don’t want them to, because I’m not.” My saying this prompted Suzanne to reach for

her notebook and also seemed to magically summon the waitress who asked from just behind my shoulder if we needed anything else. I dropped the watch on the table and said no thanks.

\*

The next morning, I stood in the bathroom looking in the mirror. I chose a blue, long-sleeved shirt after considering other colors. No one could see the watch through the cuffs of my enamel-white shirt, but the white called attention to the pink when I moved my arms, pulling the cuff back. My pink shirt camouflaged the watch as I hoped, but the idea that someone might think I had tried to “match” creeped me out again. I settled on blue as a kind of counterbalance.

On the drive to campus, I made notes for Suzanne at stoplights. *Decisions seem more complex*, I wrote. *Everything I own matches everything else I own, so normally I only have to decide clean or not clean. This is more like a system, and every part has to work in order for the whole system to work.*

I almost wrecked from looking at my wrist. I kept my hands at ten and two on the steering wheel for the first time in years to better see the watch. The watch turned me on, but not in and of itself, only as a symbol of Suzanne. She had picked it for me, given to me, embedded it with expectations. It meant that she had to see me again.

When I told Suzanne that people would think I was gay when they saw the watch, I had really been worried that I would feel whatever it is that gay men feel. But I didn't. I felt like the straightest man on earth. My thoughts of Suzanne were so incessant that I couldn't, for a moment, forget that I was a man who wanted a woman. The whole day passed with me taking out my notebook every fifteen minutes for a new thought.

At our next meeting, our third meeting, Suzanne said, “I love this observation about

becoming even more aware of your heterosexuality. It's really brilliant." This time we had ordered food before we talked about the study. She looked more like the sexy woman I'd seen tacking up the flyer: less makeup, hair pulled back so I could see the olive color of her eyes, a long skirt to her ankles and a loose top. The messy way she ate her little balls of crushed chic peas enchanted me.

"Gender digression reinforces sexuality rather than confusing it," she said, "Gender as an orienteering device. We have to figure out gender before we can move forward."

"When a baby's born, everyone asks boy or girl before they ask if it's healthy," I said.

"Would you mind adding that observation to your notebook?" she asked. She pushed the book across the table with a touch of seduction, a small shoulder dip.

Over the next weeks, I wore earrings, a headband, a hairclip that wouldn't stay put, socks with lace fringe, shoelaces with tiny dots, a broach, and a thin, faux alligator-skin belt. It took the guys in the lab until the shoelaces to ask me about my accessories. When I told them I was doing it all to better my chances with this girl I was after, they were duly impressed. When I recapped the conversation for Suzanne, I told her I intentionally exploited the guys' assumptions about male behavior, and Suzanne was duly impressed.

\*

"This is the last item. The culmination," Suzanne said. At my suggestion, we had upgraded our cuisine and sat across from each other at a mid-priced Italian place. I ordered red wine and poured two glasses without asking her if she wanted any. I kept my tone normal and hoped she wouldn't notice we were on a date.

She took a shopping bag from underneath the table and set it between us. It had become



our ritual: setting the items between us on a table. Recording my reaction to the item was essential, and Suzanne always had her notebook out, ready to write. Like opening presents at a birthday party, the correct reaction was more important than the gift. I got dramatic. I stuck my hand in the bag without looking and said, “It feels silky.” I moved my hand around like I was stirring dishwater in a sink. Suzanne noted all this. To get her to look up from the notebook and back at me, I pulled out the item in a quick motion.

She broke protocol and provided the answer when I failed to register the item: “It’s a blouse. I bought you a blouse.”

I found the shoulders of the garment and held them out. I saw a floral pattern on a green background, a scooped neck, and a scalloped hem at the waist. Two months ago, “scooped” and “scalloped” were words I applied to food, not clothes.

“You’re kidding,” I said, not acting. She had to be kidding. A pink watch and a few hairclips were one thing, but a blouse? If I got into trouble, I could get rid of the other stuff quickly. I couldn’t just whip off my shirt, hold it in a ball behind my back, and hope no one noticed. Suzanne hadn’t even kissed me yet. “You are kidding.”

She seemed to know she crossed a line. She drank from her wine glass and said, “Jason, I know I’m asking a lot.”

“Yeah, you are,” I said quickly, cutting into her speech.

“This will probably make you pretty uncomfortable, but please don’t back out. You are the only subject I could go this far with.”

We held this conversation through the opaque fabric of the blouse, which I had yet to put down. I needed to hide my body language and facial expression. She was asking the absurd, but I

couldn't risk losing my advantage over the other subjects, competitors for Suzanne. I wanted to be the one she went far with. Not putting the blouse down became incredibly awkward, but I still held it up.

"I think you're the only one who takes the study seriously and who actually cares about the study. Please do this for me. Please."

I set the blouse down and did what a girl would do. "Will you excuse me?" I said, "I'll be right back."

I went to the men's bathroom and stood at the sink. A recorded voice taught me Italian phrases. "I want to buy an apple," it said, "*Volo comprare una mela.*" Presumably, I was meant to repeat what I heard while urinating.

Was I willing to balk at this final task? I looked in the mirror and tried to muster outrage at being asked to humiliate myself in increasingly visible ways without getting anything in return. I couldn't. It wasn't just that I had put so much time into her. It was that for all her hufflepuff about gender, Suzanne was as feminine as women come. Her writing had big loops and swirls. She preferred to listen and let me talk. She was fit but not physical. Her own body language often demurred to mine, letting me set the pace at which we walked, for example. She had long hair and wore skirts. When she relaxed, she became girlish. When she stressed, she became even more girlish.

When I returned to the table, I said, "This is the last thing?"

"The last thing."

"Okay, I'll wear it."

She clasped her hands. I had left the blouse on the table, and she put it back into the bag

and whisked the bag under the table as if I might change my mind if I continued to look at it. She toyed with her napkin, and the silence between us spread. Someone watching the table would have thought us a couple in a fight. I stayed quiet.

“Jason?” she said.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to follow through.”

“I believe you.”

Dinner stayed awkward, so we skipped dessert and coffee. The dynamic between us had changed, which was fine with me. Now the object instead of the desirer, I let Suzanne stay uncomfortably appreciative in the face of my generosity and open-mindedness.

Our separate cars were parked side-by-side in the parking lot. As I opened my door, she said, “When are you going to wear it?” The soft lamplight haloed her.

“Tomorrow.”

“Why don’t you come over to my house after? I could cook, and we could take extensive notes. I owe you a nice thank you.”

“Isn’t that a violation of methodology?” I asked.

She paused and blushed a little. Technically, I was right. “The study’ll be officially over tomorrow. It’s the last time.”

“Sounds good,” I said, getting into the car as casually as I could pretend to.

“I’ll email you directions,” she said. I nodded and drove off.

\*

By six o’clock in the evening on the last day nothing had happened. Of course, I had been writing in my journal about how alternately ridiculous and ludicrous I felt, but the people around

me weren't reacting. I stopped at a new convenience store for coffee, but no one looked at me for more than a second or two. One of the lab guys said, "Nice shirt, dude," but treated me like he always did. An obese woman in the cafeteria said, "That's a woman's blouse," from across the hot bar, then kept on serving herself.

That was it. As I left my cubical on campus, I felt deflated. I headed to the parking lot, desperate for someone to accost me. Even though Suzanne didn't know it yet, the power shift from last night's dinner was fading. I intended to make tonight's dinner an official date, and I knew she'd let me, but not if nothing happened. If wearing the shirt didn't cause hardship, how could I claim martyrdom? How could I lord my sacrifices over her? By now Suzanne wanted to go out with me, but I knew she needed a reason. She needed to be able to say she went on our first date because of all the hard work I had done.

At six forty-five, I knocked on Suzanne's apartment door, sweaty and breathless. I had run around her apartment complex for fifteen minutes to work up the appearance of physical exertion. She opened the door looking like somebody's wife. An apron covered her long skirt, and she clutched a wooden spoon in one hand.

"What happened?" she said. I walked past her into the small living room. It smelled of spaghetti sauce. "Jason, why do you look like that?"

The blouse had become slicked to my skin. "Something great happened," I said. "You aren't going to believe it."

She ran out of the room and came back with her notebook. She nodded at me. I couldn't sit. I paced while telling her the lie I had practiced in the car on the way over, "They called me a faggot. They threatened me."

“Start at the beginning,” she said, “Tell me everything you remember.”

I took a breath. “I was walking to my car. I was upset because all day nobody had thought the shirt was a big deal. I felt like all our work was for nothing if nobody cared that a man wore a woman’s blouse.”

She wasn’t writing. She watched me like I was on stage.

“I left work and started walking to my car. The parking lot is a good five blocks from the building, and there’s always people walking around, so I didn’t pay attention to who was near me.”

“Uh-huh.”

I knelt down in front of her. “Then I heard these guys behind me. They called me names. ‘Faggot’ and ‘pussy’ but mostly faggot. One of them pushed my shoulder. I ran to see if they would chase, and they did. I was quicker, though, and got to my car. I rolled up the windows and locked the doors. They beat on the hood and yelled at me.” I reached out to grasp Suzanne’s forearm the way I had at our second meeting. “They told me to catch AIDS and die.”

“This is wonderful,” she said. She dropped out of her chair and knelt next to me.

“I know, I know,” I said. I stood back up and walked again. The adrenaline in my blood, which I hoped she mistook as evidence of the incident, compelled me to move. I walked around the three rooms of her apartment as if I lived there. She got back into her chair and made notes.

“I’ve never felt so threatened,” I said. “I mean, in high school I had this one friend who would start fights that I’d have to finish, but it was always a drunk thing. Nobody ever got more than a black eye. But these guys were stone sober and meant to break my bones.”

“You must have been so scared,” she said. She said that not with the tone of a researcher

addressing a subject but with the tone of a concerned girlfriend. Her tone pulled me out of my head and made me realize I was standing in front of Suzanne's bed. It had been made with satin sheets. She had put satin sheets on her bed. She had planned for sex. I walked into the living room and stood in front of her, looking down.

"I wasn't scared," I said, "I was excited. The whole time it was happening, I was thinking how it proved everything that you've been saying all this time about how women are perceived and how men have stricter gender rules."

"Exactly," she said with the passion of someone who feels like she's really being heard.

We made love while standing up. I fished in her long, loose clothes before taking them off. She took everything off me but the blouse. I must have looked like something from a racy, post-modern photography exhibit. A sweaty man, naked except for a woman's shirt, penis sticking straight out beneath a pretty scalloped hem, like the perch on a hand-painted birdhouse. The shirt functioned like a seal between us, gluing our chests together.

Afterwards, we ate spaghetti in the kitchen.

"How long have you wanted to do that?" she asked. "Since our first lunch?"

I took her questions as permission for complete honesty. I shouldn't have. "Since I saw you putting up flyers."

"You saw me?" she said with a high incredulity in her voice. "That's why you responded? Because you saw me?" Her face fell with real disappointment.

"Yeah," I said quietly. I wish I could have lied again, but after our love-making finished, the tension of the first lie began to tightly knot my insides. The climax of her dissertation would be fabricated. As a researcher myself, I understood the magnitude of my betrayal. She leaned

back in her chair and sulked a little bit. Her eyes wandered off of me for the first time since I'd knocked on her door that night. I kept thinking of ways to make it better but not doing them.

After a few long moments, Suzanne rescued me.

“It’s okay.” She wound some spaghetti on a fork. “Anyone who went through what you went through tonight is special. I know you care about the integrity of the study and the work.”

She pierced a meatball with the tines of the fork and held it out for me in a gesture I took as a conciliatory peace offering. I opened my mouth. Instead of confessing, I ate from the fork. Suzanne smiled a beautiful, happy smile while I chewed. I swallowed too quickly. The spaghetti traveled down my throat in a lump, choking me.

## **An Unobstructed Look**

Egypt's pyramids rose from the sand not twenty feet in front of me, but I couldn't look. My wife, Sabrina, had warned me that the vendors would swarm around a tall, white man, assuming him to be a wealthy European or American. Heated negotiations and hard sells were normal. "Just play it cool, Jon. Don't make any scenes," she said this morning as we got ready in the only bedroom of her relatives' apartment. Our eight-month old son, Jaden, lay on his back on the uncarpeted floor with a rolled-up towel under his head. Sabrina dressed both of us, giving me one of her cousin's shirts, a black button-down with a ridiculous pattern of large white flowers, and putting Jaden in a navy, long-sleeved onesie and matching cotton pants.

"Won't he be hot in that?" I said. I scratched at my new mustache. A few weeks before we flew to Cairo to visit her relatives, Sabrina asked me to grow one, claiming it would help me blend in. I'd rather keep the neat simplicity of a clean shave and a close haircut. We argued about it. I finally relented because, as Sabrina said, we won't take another trip like this for a long, long while. At home in Tampa, Sabrina doesn't work to stay home and take care of Jaden. The Coast Guard pays our rent and gives me enough salary to cover groceries, gas and diapers. We can't save much. A couple thousand dollars inheritance from my grandmother funded this trip. Grandma's not likely to die again.

"He'll be fine," she said. "He looks good."

But Jaden didn't look so good to me right then. The eleven-hour flight the day before had left him too tired to be comfortable. He spent most of the night restless, and, by default, so had I. His skin flushed in a patchy pattern. Sabrina meant that he looks good in his outfit. He looks like a baby whose parents have plenty of money to take care of him.



She picked him up and walked out to the other room where her Uncle Homdy, Aunt Soha and cousin Walead had slept on the floor so the visiting American family could have the bedroom. They all spoke in animated Arabic, none of which I could follow.

“Walead is going to take us,” Sabrina called to me in English. “We’re ready when you are.”

The dusty car had no seat belts or child safety seats. I insisted that Sabrina sit in the back-seat with Jaden and hold him close. He wiggled, unhappy, in her arms. In the driver’s seat, Walead ignored me in a friendly way. I took him for a realist. We weren’t going to understand each other, so why bother? The driving went slowly, for which I felt grateful. Our chances of wrecking seemed great, but at this speed the impact would be small. Lanes, traffic signals, and governing rules seemed to concern neither Walead nor the five-wide pack of cars pushing along a two-lane highway in stops and starts. All the drivers honked their horns. All of them. The cars reminded me of the hundreds of sparrows that land at dusk on the live oak in our apartment complex’s courtyard, squawking as they jockey for branch position. I turned around to look at Jaden in the back seat. The sounds drew his attention, and he wobbled his head to look out one window and then the other. The jiggling produced some spit-up. Sabrina talked with Walead in Arabic and didn’t notice.

Already past age thirty, I had not been looking for, or even wanting, a baby and a wife. But when I got them, in that order, I locked on, as we say in the Guard. I focused on making the family work. During her pregnancy, Sabrina brought home library books about birthing and raising a baby. I read them all. Sometimes Sabrina would accuse me of paying more attention to the books than to the real-live pregnant woman lying in bed next to me. That was a fair

accusation. Sabrina tended to make me nervous with her protruding eyes and jittery manner, which I'd somehow failed to register on the night we meet in a military bar.

When Jaden was born, his looks favored me. His skin was pale rather than Egyptian olive. At eight months, his eyes still held their birth-blue. His hair curled silken, not kinky. From the library books, I knew that Jaden's coloring and features could change significantly any time in his first year, but for now, seeing myself reflected in miniature made me go insane for Jaden with an intensity I could never have predicted, even with my locked-on focus. No matter what I did, however, I couldn't come close to feeling that intensity for Jaden's mother. I suspected that she reciprocated my lukewarm emotion. What she liked was having a tall, white, American serviceman for a husband and a baby that matched like a loveseat to a sofa.

Out Walead's car window, I watched the crappy apartment buildings that dominated Cairo's skyline. Crappier, even, than what the Coast Guard paid for back in the States. They stood thirty or forty stories tall in varying shades of off-white and beige. Laundry hung from most of the balconies, and I guessed it had been washed in sinks or bathtubs. I looked up and saw satellite dishes by the thousands positioned on the rooftops. The buildings could have been the thick stalks of dead flowers, the dishes their dusty petals.

As the car turned onto a large bridge, leaving Cairo proper for its biggest suburb of Giza, Sabrina said, excitedly, "Jaden, this is Nile."

"He won't remember." I crushed her fun and immediately regretted it. She switched back to talking to Walead.

Across the Nile, I watched the apartments become even more depressing. The construction material changed from concrete to a reddish, mud-based mixture. Most of the

buildings stood asymmetrically, with their top floors unfinished and their rebar exposed. Men driving donkey carts filled with melons, dark and ovalish or light and circular, encroached on the road. Garbage smothered the banks and floated in clusters on the surface of the Nile tributaries along the roadside. I saw a man wading in the chest-high water, for what profit I couldn't guess.

"These people need a Guard," I said aloud.

"What, they need to be Americans?" Sabrina returned this answer with a pace and topspin that suggested she'd been waiting in the backseat for a chance to hit something at me.

Walead cut his eyes at me in interest. Certainly, he'd understood my wife's tone. How would I respond? I checked the rearview and saw the spit-up drying to a paste in the corner of Jaden's mouth. His eyelids dropped closed and reopened in the manner of someone who wants to sleep but can't.

"No. No. I don't mean that. I just mean, they need someone to get them organized. Look at the river. It's disgusting. They need someone to organize a clean-up day."

"That's the government's problem. Not the people's."

"That's what I mean. We're saying the same thing. The government needs to get its people organized."

"We never say the same thing," Sabrina said more quietly.

"Sabrina," I started, but Walead turned the car into the parking lot of the pyramids.

Sabrina's manner changed. "We're here! Look Jaden, we're here." I looked, but large tour buses blocked the view. "Jon, don't forget what I told you. Just stay calm, say no firmly, and don't make a scene. I'll hold Jaden."

As soon as I stepped out of the car, the vendors swarmed me. They dressed in light colors

and smelled tangy. In my face they pushed strings of postcards, white Ali Baba head covers, cat figurines, Sphinx T-shirts, and Scarab beetle magnets. They talked over each other, naming prices. I felt disoriented and threatened. I fought the instincts the Coast Guard's basic training had instilled in me. I didn't deliver a first strike from my center of gravity. Instead, I yelled in my best drill-sergeant voice the word Sabrina and Walead had taught me: "*La-a*," with a particular emphasis on the final 'ah.' Sabrina said that the second 'a' changed "no" to something like "hell fucking no."

The circle of men around me got quiet. Without the movement of their negotiating mouths and their souvenir-waving hands, I could see their faces clearly. They seemed normal, with dark but intelligent eyes. They looked like Jaden's Egyptian cousins and uncles I'd been meeting. They looked at me like I was stupid. I realized the complete and total lack of danger I was in, and I felt stupid. When I glanced back at Sabrina holding our baby, she shook her head at me. Most of the time, Sabrina and I couldn't talk, couldn't communicate, couldn't figure each other out. I considered right then a perfect example. I could have used an encouraging smile or a Hoo Rah or something.

The circle dissipated, moving on to better prospects, and I took a deep breath. Sabrina came up to me. Walead hung back by the car, talking to white-uniformed, automatic-weapon toting guards. So Egypt did have a service.

"What do you think?" she said.

"They're too aggressive." Jaden held his hands out to me, and I took him from Sabrina.

"About the pyramids."

"Oh, right. The pyramids."

“Go get closer,” she said. “You’ve got to stand next to those bricks to see how big they are.” She held out her hands to take the baby back. I didn’t see any other men with infants, but I liked the weight of him in my arms. I carried Jaden toward the pyramid in front of us. Even in my arms, he still wouldn’t calm. He squirmed and drooled and made noises like a puppy. His diaper felt heavy.

We weren’t quite at the pyramid’s base when another vendor, a boy about ten-years-old, approached us. I shifted Jaden to my hip, jutting it out like I’d seen Sabrina do, so Jaden would be as far away from this boy as I could get him. The boy had a deformity. His left hand was a lumpy mess. He used his right to press a miniature pyramid set wrapped in cellophane against my solar plexus. It felt like a finger.

“Five Euro,” he said.

“No,” I said, forgetting the single Arabic word I knew.

“Five Dollar.”

This boy would apparently accept any currency. “*La*,” I said, looking down at the miniature pyramids against my chest. Jaden looked too and reached out a wet, drool-covered hand to touch. The boy smiled at Jaden, and then at me. The boy used his free hand, the one with the fingernails in the wrong places, to gesture at his own face.

“I like you mustache,” he said.

“My wife’s idea.” The boy looked at me with confusion. I didn’t explain. The pyramids on my chest made me edgy. I wanted them off.

“I like you baby,” he said and reached his free hand toward Jaden, who seemed delighted. I panicked. The Coast Guard teaches recruits to visualize possible dangerous scenarios before

they come to pass. The boy's mangled hand stroking Jaden's soft, puffy skin flashed in my mind a second before it happened. I took my own free hand and shoved the boy away. He yelled something in Arabic, and I became the center of too much attention.

Walead and the guards came running from the parking lot. Adult vendors, the ones from before plus more, also came. Sabrina, too, and a few white tourists, cameras at the ready. Sweating from the bright morning sun, I felt a layer of moisture all over my skin. I worried Jaden would drop from my slippery hands. I visualized the possible outcome of this new scene – the push of Jaden into Sabrina's arms, the run to car, and the bullets in my back. **Headline: Off-Duty American Serviceman Shot In Shadow of Pyramids, Wife and Infant Survive.** The actual scene played out much more benignly, with Sabrina making horrified Arabic apologies on my behalf and the guards harassing the deformed boy more than me. Jaden got the most upset and started crying.

“Let's go,” Sabrina said.

“I thought you wanted to ride a camel.”

“You're not even looking at the pyramids. Walead will tell my aunt and uncle that you don't care about my heritage. And Jaden's.” Sabrina looked down at her feet in a gesture I recognized. She wanted me to come closer, speak softly to her down-turned face and reassure her. I liked the gesture, secretly, because it hid her buggy, omniscient eyes from me.

“Let's go,” I said, choosing to fuss with my still-crying son rather than step into her. “I'm hungry and so is Jaden.”

Walead drove us to a restaurant in Giza called Christo's. I immediately took Jaden to an inner courtyard to settle him down. I walked in circles under trees I didn't recognize and cooed at

Jaden while gently bouncing him. “It’s okay,” I said. “You’re okay. Your mom is selfish, but I love you.” Saying these things to Jaden, as I sometimes did, made me feel both guilty and better. I worried he would remember them on a subconscious level, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. I had tried.

Jaden calmed to a few grunts and gurgles, so I took him to the bathroom to wash his face. A man standing near the sinks surprised me when I opened the door. He wanted to help. He handed me toilet paper. He stood too close to me. Jaden watched the man intently, and I found myself imagining scenarios again. When I turned to leave, the man took a step even closer into me. I brushed past him, my heart beating a little faster.

A woman sat outside the dining room entrance near a brick oven firing fresh pita bread. I paused there to catch my breath. With a gesture, she encouraged me to sample the bread. I leaned down, balancing Jaden carefully, and took a small pita from her basket. The taste was warm and comforting. The woman smiled at Jaden. I didn’t want to make the same mistake I’d made with the boy vendor, so when she stood to touch his face, I let her. But when I started into the restaurant, she took a step into me just like the man in the bathroom. She couldn’t want Jaden, could she?

I ran the few steps into the dining room and sat down at a long table, breathing hard, next to Sabrina with Jaden on my lap. My jiggling him had gotten him fussy again. “Where’d you go?” she asked.

“Bathroom.”

“Did you tip?”

Tip. Of course, tip. I felt stupid again. Sabrina looked at me and read my face. The ever-

watchful Walead smiled at the exchange.

“Jaden needs to nurse,” I said.

“After we eat. I need calories. Then we can go up on the roof.”

More baskets of pita bread lined the table interspersed with plates of feta cheese, chunked tomatoes, ground sesame seeds, olives, capers and a lumpy yogurt mixed with a green herb. Jaden reached for the plates, but I pushed them back.

“A taste won’t hurt,” Sabrina said without looking at me.

“His system’s already jangled. The doctor said to introduce solid foods slowly.”

“This is the food of his people.”

That pissed me off. Sabrina was born in the US. She’d visited these relatives exactly twice before in her life, once, like Jaden, when she was too young to remember anything.

“Enough,” I said strongly. Walead looked at me with what I felt sure was appreciation.

Soon waiters brought out larger platters of food and dipped portions onto everyone’s plates with metal tongs. I ate spiced rice, calamari, mealy shrimp, and a sea bass with its head and tail in tact. I sucked down a Stella, an Egyptian beer, and ordered another for me and one for Walead.

“He won’t drink it,” Sabrina said.

“Why not?”

“He’s Muslim. Muslims don’t drink.”

“So why do they serve beer?”

“For American tourists.”

I had no choice to finish mine and Walead’s. When Sabrina was ready to nurse, I carried



my fourth Stella to the roof. Sabrina held the baby on the stairs, and Walead followed us up. More tables and chairs lined the roof to provide open air seating. A few colored swaths of cloth were tied to poles to make shade. Walead disappeared into a couch in the corner. Sabrina retreated to another corner and pulled a light blanket out of her large bag to cover her shoulder and breast. At home I could put down a six-pack and feel nothing. Standing on Christo's roof and lifting the fresh beer to my lips, I realized I had a decent buzz. Maybe it came on quickly from the exhaustion of the flight. More likely, it was the kind of buzz that comes on because I want it to. Either way, it lifted my spirits. I walked to the railing and took my first serious, unobstructed look at Egypt's pyramids. They stood at a distance now, three tan triangles. I knew that centuries ago, limestone covered the tip of each pyramid and fiercely refracted the sun. Now, the limestone was mostly chipped away. I thought about how dominant the pyramids would seem in the landscape before tall apartment buildings blocked the view. Back when their height remained unchallenged and they could still flash sharp sun into your eyes from miles away, I figured even I would have humbled before them.

“*Shisha?*” Walead said to my back.

I turned to look at him. He stood taller than me and had a short haircut that didn't mask glimpses of his scalp through thinning hair. He smiled at me. The corners of his small mouth upturned in exaggerated proportion, making it look like a smile drawn by a cartoonist.

“*Shisha* what?” I said.

Walead held his hand out to gesture towards the couch in the corner. I glanced over at Sabrina who was still busy with Jaden. Then I followed Walead to the low couch and sunk into it. A small man with a turban approached us. He asked me a question in Arabic. Walead

answered, and the small man left. A few long minutes passed during which I worked on my beer. The small man returned and set a three-foot tall smoking pipe in front of me. Mostly silver with ornate dip-and-curl embellishments, the pipe featured a long red tube capped by a mouthpiece the size of my forearm.

Walead gestured his hand at me to say “go on.”

I thought for a moment about Jaden. Who knew what hallucinogens Egyptians smoke. I probably should avoid making my head any fuzzier. Then I thought about the events of the morning and leaned in to hit what had to be the coolest bong I’d ever seen. I put the mouthpiece to my mouth and pulled in a mild tobacco flavored with apples. I tasted the fruit on my tongue while the smoke expanded my lungs. When I blew it all out in thick stream, Walead laughed at me. I watched him work his own pipe. He took a series of small puffs that he released into the air as soon as they entered his mouth.

“I’m ready to go,” Sabrina said. She’d appeared over my shoulders.

Walead looked at me for direction.

“Let’s go.” As I stood, I felt nausea wave through me. Jaden seemed comfortable in his mother’s arms. He had that slightly sedated look he often does after he nurses. I thought better of trying to hold him.

An hour’s worth of traffic later, I sat on a mat in the main room of the relatives’ apartment, feeling as ill as I ever had. When you enlist, the Coast Guard jacks you up with immunizations and other stuff I try not to think about. A nurse comes into the med exam room carrying a tray of a dozen syringes and stabs them into your arm one by one. Two hours later, you’re in your bunk, the room spinning and the guys calling you a pussy. I felt like that.

Walead and Uncle Homdy sat near me, taking some pleasure, I thought, at my *Shisha* experience. Sabrina and Aunt Soha stood on the other side of the room, near the counter and plastic cooler that served as a kitchen, trying to calm Jaden. He was overwrought. He screamed and screamed, his face so red that all the blood in his body must have risen to it. The women patted his back and whispered in his ear. I wondered if Sabrina whispered that he shouldn't worry, that his Daddy didn't mean to be so selfish by getting too drunk to take care of him. The men acted as if nothing was happening. They smoked cigarettes that clouded the air while I sat in sickened exile on my mat, unable to understand anybody's words, unable to comfort and protect my son who soundtracked my anguish with cries.

This scene continued for two excruciating hours, and I couldn't visualize my way out of it. At some point the men went out and came back with two chickens, which they slaughtered in the bathtub. The sharp, coppery smell of blood challenged the rotten brandy smell of cigarettes for dominance. I thought Sabrina should take Jaden outside to get him into fresh air, but night was falling. Who knew how safe Egyptian streets were.

A few times I tried to help. I'd stand near the women in the kitchen and make feeble suggestions: "Change his clothes. Get him out of that outfit," and "Maybe a bath."

Sabrina answered me coldly, as if my bad buzz had upset Jaden more than this half-way-around-the-world trip. During training, the Coast Guard had prepared me for torture while simultaneously telling me that my kidnap in a foreign country was highly unlikely. I realized this was my foreign-kidnap-torture moment. Jaden's cries pained me as badly as any enemy combatant who might strap me to a chair and pour oil down my throat.

Uncle Homdy must have had enough. Up until that point, he acted as if no one were in

the apartment with him but Walead. Finally, he said something sharp in Arabic to the women. I imagine it was something like, “Shut that baby up.” Aunt Soha became visibly nervous. The hijab she wore over her hair forced her face in high relief. I watched her eyes dart from her husband to Jaden. Her skin color paled a bit. She whispered quietly to Sabrina, and then Sabrina turned her big eyes to me. We held each other’s gaze for a moment, and I read her message: something’s about to happen; don’t make a scene.

Uncle Homdy and Walead went back to ignoring the women and my screaming son. I kept watch. When I saw Aunt Soha tap a few drops of a clear liquid into Jaden’s bottle, I forced myself to stand. I fought nausea again, but this time it came from fear rather than Egyptian smoke. The kitchen was only a few steps, but by the time I got there, Sabrina and Aunt Soha had forced the nipple into Jaden’s mouth. He wasn’t sucking yet, just screaming around the plastic tip.

“What’s that?” I said.

“Medicine.”

“What medicine?”

I could feel everyone watching Sabrina and me. I’d crossed a boundary. She was trying to push me back across the line. “Aspirin,” she said.

“We’ve got liquid aspirin in the diaper bag. It’s supposed to be pink.”

“Just go sit back down.”

Then I realized I heard silence. Sabrina turned to make sure I got a full view of Jaden sucking on the bottle. Too late for me.

Within twenty minutes, Jaden slept. I skipped the chicken dinner and carried him into the

bedroom. We slept together.

When I woke, I could see sunlight through the window. Sabrina wasn't in the room. I rolled over to check Jaden's diaper. It was loaded with diarrhea. It had not been changed all night. "Wake up buddy," I said. He didn't wake. "Come on, Jaden. Let's get you clean." He didn't wake. I felt his face, hot as an oven burner. I pulled my hand back. I switched into auto-mode, visualizing my actions before carrying them out.

The water in the bathtub ran tepid, not nearly cold enough. One weak air conditioning unit, propped in the window, was responsible for cooling both rooms. Holding Jaden in front of it would do nothing. I had the irrational thought of putting him into a freezer for a few moments, and I might have done it if there had been a freezer in the apartment.

"Sabrina," I yelled. "Get in here and translate." She didn't come quickly enough. "Sabrina," I screamed, "Get in here." I felt her presence in the door but didn't turn to look at her.

"What's wrong?" she said sleepily, still wearing her pajamas. The relatives crowded the doorway, blocking out most of the light. Jaden lay, eyes closed and fully dressed, in the water. I stripped him, throwing the nasty and wet-solid diaper into a corner of the room.

"Where's the hospital?" I said.

I heard bustle elsewhere in the apartment and then footsteps back to the bathroom. Soha said something to Sabrina. Sabrina reached out and handed me a glass of cloudy water. "Aunt Soha says to give him this." I knocked the glass from her hand. It broke against the wall and splattered.

"No more shit that I don't know what it is." I caught another look of appreciation from Walead. "Where's the hospital?"

“We’ll need a taxi.”

Homdy and Walead squeezed into the small cab with us. Jaden garbled some sounds during the ride but did not break his fever with sweat. His eyes, when briefly open, looked glassy. I lived and died with Jaden’s every breath. In my mind, I swore against this trip, Egypt, the overcrowded apartment, the relatives and my wife. She tried to get me to meet her damned eyes and comfort her. She stroked the baby’s arm. As usual, I gave her nothing.

On a per-square-foot basis, the hospital proved as crowded as the relatives’ apartment. Its constructional quality ranked only slightly higher. In the lobby, Sabrina said, “We have to wait.”

“This is an emergency,” I yelled to Sabrina and to the clerk whose words she translated.

“So are all these.” Sabrina pointed to the families clumped and clustered about. Sabrina, Walead and Homdy looked at me, as they seemed to have done the entire trip. I saw myself through their eyes: a foreign species to be watched, an unpredictable exotic. I put my hand on the baby’s forehead. Hot. Too hot. I looked around the room and tried to visualize the answer. People smoked and talked loudly, even in here. I fought claustrophobia. I felt oppressed, honest-to-god, third-world-country oppressed. My son’s health teetered, and I couldn’t even access the meager resources that surrounded me. I kept scanning the room to avoid the three pairs of eyes waiting for my action. A coke machine sat in a corner. I fished in my pocket for the clump of change that had been collecting there over the past two days. I poured it into Walead’s cupped hands and pointed to the machine.

“A drink?” Sabrina said, “You’re having a soda?”

I still locked her out. Walead returned and handed me the can. It was cold. I thanked God, quickly, for the American imperialism that protestors held up signs about outside the base and

began to roll the can across Jaden's forehead. Sabrina caught on. She grabbed some change and bought another Coke. I unwrapped the blanket I'd covered Jaden with so she could roll her can across his chest. I stayed focused on Jaden's head, the casing for his still-developing and close-to-boiling brain. We worked together, quietly. When the cans warmed, Walead and Homdy bought more without prompting. By the time Jaden's name was called, a small army of cans soldiered around our feet, and Jaden had broken a light sweat.

Back in the exam room, a doctor who seemed competent but overworked explained, through Sabrina, that Jaden's immune system had been stressed and weakened. I trembled as I attempted to control my rage. What I whispered to Jaden in the restaurant courtyard had been right. Sabrina was selfish. She cared more about appearances than her baby. What kind of mother brings an eight-month-old across the world to a smoky, shit-hole apartment? Who forces her husband to grow a mustache he doesn't want? I couldn't look at her.

The doctor wanted to put Jaden on an IV drip, but he only had one available and another family also had a young child in need. Would we be willing to share?

"Do we have a choice?" I asked, and the doctor immediately shook his head as if he sensed the nature of my question.

The two families crowded into one, small room. Four adults related to Jaden. Four adults related to the other sick boy. The boys, looking vulnerable, lay at the head and foot of the single cot. A nurse came in, and, apparently judging Jaden to be the most dire, created an IV port in his arm and began the drip. The other family watched the medicine their boy needed enter Jaden's arm. I watched the other family, angrily, greedily, resenting their upcoming turn. Nobody spoke.

Throughout the day, we held vigil as the nurse came in hourly and moved the drip from

one boy's arm to the other, replacing only the needle with a new one. I felt grateful for that. I didn't want to think about diseases the real Egyptian boy might pass to my son. My body felt stiff and pained. When I stretched or rocked from foot to foot, more needles seemed to pierce my muscles and internal organs. Sabrina and I took turns holding Jaden when the other boy had the drip.

By nightfall, I could tell that Jaden was better. His sweat had dried, and after I'd wiped him down with a cool cloth, he hadn't reheated. His mother held him by the window, and a soft moonlight gave me a clear look at them both. Jaden sighed and reached his hand out for his mother's breast, a habit he had from nursing. Sabrina's eyes, downcast on my son, seemed as normal to me as any woman's. And in that moment, I could see that her fears and desires were not selfish but as normal as any woman's.

The nurse came in and said something. Sabrina translated for me: "He's better. Both boys are better. She says they'll need another round, but they'll be okay." Sabrina laid Jaden on the cot for the nurse to begin the IV transfer. Jaden opened his eyes. They ranged unfocused. Sabrina stroked his hair across his forehead until he closed them again.

Walead and Homdy talked quietly to each other. In English, I said to them, "Thanks for staying with us all day. It meant a lot." Homdy answered me in Arabic. Sabrina was too focused on Jaden to translate, but I felt like I understood. I nodded, and they left the room, to get food and coffee for themselves, I hoped. Soon Jaden's breathing evened out into a sleeping rhythm, and Sabrina came over to where I stood. She turned her back towards me, and we faced the other family, still tending their own child. When she leaned into me, I accepted the weight of her.



## The Turtle's Leash

We left at night. Eleven hours in the car would get us from New Jersey to South Carolina, a state, my friends had assured me, where people actually flew the rebel flag and married their cousins at church with the preacher's blessing. I had a grandmother it was time I met, my mother said. I slept most of the ride down, which is what I do when I'm nervous, though I tell my mother I'm just tired.

When I woke, the sun was up, the car was off and my mother was gone. We were here. I looked around and saw three trailers decreasing in size like nesting dolls, a double-wide, a single-wide, and a camper. A satellite dish, round as a hot tub, was pole-mounted in the middle of the sandy yard. I got out of the car. I couldn't see another house or even a paved road. Our car was parked closest to the camper, so I walked up a set of unattached, wooden steps and opened the door.

"There's our girl," Mom said in a voice too glad to see me. She rolled her eyes at me and head-nodded toward my grandmother. In my peripheral vision, I could see the woman standing near a corner, but I stalled introducing myself for a few seconds by scanning the room, literally one room. A bed against one wall and two chairs in the middle. Two pictures of flowers that looked cut from a magazine were thumbtacked right into the camper's plastic walls. When my eyes got to my grandmother at her stove, I freaked a bit more than I should have. She reached her arms out, but I pulled back like a toddler, not like a high-schooler who knows better.

My grandmother receded into herself like she meant to get smaller to fit her house better. Her osteoporotic back, curved into a question mark, kept her head from bumping the low roof. I couldn't see lips, only skin curled over teeth and gums. Her lips had pulled back into her mouth.

I couldn't even pretend to be willing to kiss that mouth.

"She's scared," my grandmother said.

"She's tired," Mom said.

"Yeah, I'm tired. Sorry." I sat in the only open chair, leaving my grandmother nowhere to sit. For whatever reason, I had the impression she was already sitting when I came in.

"Long drive to country relatives," my grandmother said.

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We were to stay in the single-wide because I had an aunt and two cousins living in the double. Mom let me drive the car from in front of the camper to in front of the single. I carried our bags inside but couldn't bring myself to put them in the bedrooms or go back to the camper. I sat down on top of the bags and listened to the trailer make sounds. I could hear wind, not just against the windows but against the walls. Occasional scratching sounds came from beneath the floor like small animals were nesting in the underpinning. When I walked, my footsteps sounded across the entire floor. After what had to be an hour, I heard someone approaching.

"You stuck up?" a boy's voice said through the door. He didn't have to open the door to be heard.

"No," I said, not moving.

"Come on, then. Let's get to the woods."

The older cousin was Jimmy. The younger was Corneal, but just call him Scooter, Jimmy said. They gave me an open can of soda called Cheerwine. They had obviously been drinking from it because red syrup rimmed the corners of their mouths, giving them clowns' smiles. Back at school, when new guys came, my girls and I did what we called taking a temperature. We just

checked a few things to gauge how hot or cold the guy was. We checked nails (trim and no engine dust), split ends (none), shoes (clean), corners of the eyes (attended to), and hands (moisturized, not cut up). My cousins would have scaled worse than grease monkeys. They were dirt monkeys, the kind of boys who were too busy being boys to take a bath.

But Jimmy and Scooter negotiated the woods like they were born in it. Tree branches clawed at me with every step, but I didn't turn back. They led me around for a long time, often claiming a creek was just ahead, but they probably just wanted to test me.

We found the turtle before noon. It was big as a dinner plate, but the cousins didn't hesitate to pick it up. "You shouldn't do that," I said, "It could have rabies."

"These things don't get rabies," Jimmy said. "Only bats and mammals."

I stared at him for knowing the word mammals. Then the turtle peed, a yellow stream that fell long and loud between it and the ground. Scooter laughed, and though I could feel a few drops hitting the toes of my canvas sneakers, I laughed too. It had never occurred to me that turtles would pee.

"Let's take it to Maw Maw," Jimmy said.

Maw Maw, as Jimmy called my grandmother, was frying something. When Scooter opened the door, the burnt-grease smell flowed out and covered me like un-dammed water. I could almost feel it soaking through my cloths and hair and skin. I might have retched, but the cousins weren't reacting to the smell. They charged right in, Jimmy straight-arming the turtle out from his body. Mom sat on her same chair reading, which I didn't take to be a good sign. She and her own mother had already finished talking after not seeing each other, I thought, for fifteen years.

“Lookit,” Jimmy said loudly, eyes fixed on his prize.

“You mean to throw it in the pot?” my grandmother said. She didn’t turn, perhaps because it would have taken her a long time. This was the closest I’d stood to her since we got here. Her back fascinated me. It was hard to believe she couldn’t just straighten up. When Mom told me to straighten up, I could. But if we set the turtle on Maw Maw’s back, it wouldn’t fall off, like setting it on a table.

“Hell, no. We mean to keep it.”

“Keep it outside then. Dinner’ll be ready shortly.”

I looked at my mother. She mouthed “lunch” back at me.

Outside, we examined the turtle as good as any veterinarian could. I knew because I thought about going pre-vet in college, but I’d never been this close to anything other than a dog or cat or fish or hamster. The turtle had pulled every appendage it could into its shell when we picked it up, so we looked at the head and legs from the side. Its underside was yellowish and smooth, like a rock touched by a lot of people. All three of us stroked the top of the shell, dark and lumpy, as if the turtle could feel our petting. I kept my hand on the turtle’s back even though Jimmy and Scooter’s fingers sometimes brushed mine.

“Let’s name it,” I said.

“Scooter,” Scooter said. His first word that day.

Mom came to the door and called us in. “Leave the animal outside,” she said.

“We can’t. He’ll run away,” I said.

“It’s a turtle, honey. They barely move. Use your reasoning skills.” Mom’s stress showed in the tone of her voice. This visit wasn’t going well, and I should have been easier on

her, but I didn't want to leave the turtle. I brushed past her into the grease-clouded camper. The cousins followed me like allies.

We ate chicken from Styrofoam plates, kids cross-legged on the floor, mom sitting in a chair, grandmother folded in a chair. The cousins and I kept cutting looks at each other. When we were close to done, my grandmother said, "Y'all get a critter, feel like kin now." I didn't like that. I'd slipped into thinking that these people were regular, and she saw it.

We had left the turtle by the wooden steps, but it was gone when we got out.

"Spread out," Jimmy said.

We combed the yard, Scooter yelling "Scooter" as if the turtle would answer.

I found it, proof enough that the turtle preferred me. "Here," I yelled. I picked it up while it retracted its legs and head back under its shell. My grandmother had come out onto her wooden steps and stood smoking a pipe.

"Bring it here," she said, louder than I would have guessed she could. I brought her the turtle. She sat on the step, pre-bent over, and held the turtle between the insteps of her feet. She reached into a pocket sewn onto the front of her dress and brought out a screwdriver. Scooter smiled like he knew what was coming, but I couldn't figure it out. What was the screwdriver for? Then she put the pointy end against the turtle's shell and started to twist. I screamed. I screamed with enough something's-really-wrong to bring my mother outside. Flecks of the turtle's shell collected like sawdust.

"What's going on?" Mom said.

"Kids are playing with a critter," my grandmother said. "Kids are acting like kids."

Mom leaned far over to get a look, then said, real casual-like, "You leashing the turtle?"

“You want anything you love to stay near you, you got to tied it up or pen it. I can tell you that.”

At that comment, Mom turned and went back into the camper. I watched horrified, certain that my grandmother meant to kill the turtle and put it in her fry-pot. She screwed two holes into the its shell near its neck, one on each side. The turtle didn't make a sound or bleed. It just stayed retracted. Jimmy wore a smirk through the whole procedure and kept looking at me to make the point that see, I was, in fact, spoiled. When she told him to, Jimmy 'fetched' her a string. My grandmother threaded the string through the two holes, tied off the end, and handed it me, making a shape with her imploded mouth that could or could not have been a smile.

“How'd you do that?” I asked, even though I had watched from start to finish.

“Cutting a turtle shell a bit at certain points don't hurt the animal. Now it can't get away from you anymore.” Then she left us outside.

We tied the turtle to a tree, set out a bowl of water and a leaf of lettuce, and waited. I followed the boys' leads and lay flat on my belly. If someone had told me eight hours ago that I'd press myself against this sandy yard surrounding three trailers, I wouldn't have believed it. I rested my chin on the back of my hands to get eye level with the turtle, which was still pulling itself tightly under its shell. I expected the turtle to get weak and tired after having two holes screwed into it, but thirty minutes later, it still hadn't relaxed. I cut looks at Jimmy and Scooter, who were getting fidgety.

“It can't go no where,” Jimmy said. “Let's walk to the creek. It'll be out by the time we get back.”

“You go. I need to stay.”

Without any more convincing than that, they left me. I kept watch for the next three days. I ran inside only to pee, get a plate of food or sleep for a few hours. I could tell Mom was less than thrilled with me. She gave me looks from behind the book she read all weekend. However, she didn't seem to be talking to her own mother much, so I didn't feel bad about pretending not to see her looks. I ran right back outside and lay down next to the turtle. The water and lettuce remained untouched. I eventually realized that we hadn't given it what it wanted. What it wanted grew in the woods somewhere, well beyond the leash's length.

By the day Mom and I were leaving, the turtle sat dead at the end of its string. Jimmy and Scooter were nowhere to be seen, off in the woods, bored with me, missing the goodbye. My grandmother stood on her wooden steps, wearing the same dress she'd worn all weekend and watching Mom pack our suitcases into the trunk. A breeze blew the turtle's new rotten smell, like garbage left in the sun, into my face. I turned my head from it and, unintentionally, met my grandmother's eye. I wanted to cry. She could tell that I'd chosen to keep the turtle leashed, that I'd liked killing the turtle, just so I could stroke its head and legs when it got too tired to hold them in anymore.

## The Subscribers

Harold Trahern, professor emeritus of Library Sciences, made this speech to his wife Virginia: “A collection must be valued not only for its scope but also for its integrity. Preservation cannot be an afterthought or a secondary concern. Any materials steward who attempts to prioritize scope over preservation exhibits the same blasphemous and flawed thinking as the rhetorician who discusses style as if it may be divorce from content. Of course, naysayers will claim that computers nullify questions of preservation. However, an electronic file offers none of the scholarly historicity available when a researcher holds an original publication in his hands.”

Harold stood behind the Formica countertop in their kitchen as if it were a lectern. The kitchen lacked a wall and opened directly into the living room to give the impression of plentiful space. Virginia sat on one of the dining room chairs she had reupholstered herself and listened. She perceived this listening as generosity on her part, a gentle stroke of her retired husband’s ego. She would have clasped a pencil in a note-taking posture, but Harold would accuse her of mocking. Behind the Formica, Harold seemed to be winding down a bit. He took a long pause and examined the magazine in his hands. Virginia seized her opportunity.

“What, exactly, is the problem dear?” she said.

“They’re getting torn when he stuffs them in the box.” Harold held up a copy of *CityView* magazine as evidence for his claim. Harold considered *CityView* regional fluff, profiles of socialite charity luncheons and ‘features’ on local business that also purchased advertisements, but essential regional fluff. A chunk had been ripped out of the bottom left corner of the cover,



compromising the integrity of the magazine's fold. Further loose handling would certainly prove ruinous.

"I'm sure the mailman doesn't mean to cause damage," Virginia said.

"Of course not. That's not what I implied. But regardless of his intentions, the outcome is the same."

Virginia shifted her eyes' gaze from Harold to the floor and softened the tone of her voice to say, "Perhaps the problem is the sheer number of them."

Indignant, Harold gathered up *CityView* with the dozen other periodicals from that day's mail and headed toward his office upstairs. He took the stairs too quickly, and when his balance teetered, his hands, occupied as they were, could not reach for the steadying rails. He tumbled down while the periodicals flew about.

Virginia came at once at the sound. "Oh, Harold." He laid across the bottom few steps, a little awkwardly but seemingly no more than flustered. Virginia saw no bones cracked and protruding through his cotton pants. She checked.

"I'm fine," Harold said. "Just fine."

Virginia set to picking up the scattered periodicals, knowing Harold's would prefer that to her offering him an arm up. They walked up the stairs together, Harold still regaining his wits, Virginia clutching Harold's treasure.

Virginia sighed when they walked into the room Harold used as an office. Architecturally, the room's was intended to serve as a master bedroom. But the largest room in their house, connected to a bathroom with a dual-sink vanity, was Harold's domain alone. Virginia looked at the piles of magazines scandalizing the plush carpet. Harold looked too and

saw the same piles as evidence of imagination and potential. From above, the stacks, arranged in clusters with alleys in between, resembled buildings. On occasion, Harold permitted his mind to (briefly) imagine himself the constructor of a world in which each building held inspiring knowledge and resources, an urban literary planner, a visionary.

“You sit,” Virginia said, although the floor had little unoccupied space for sitting. “Tell me where they go.”

Harold conceded, a gesture he perceived as an act of kindness towards his wife, a gentle stroke of her care-giving ego. Plus, the fall had unnerved him. He leaned against a wall rather than sat. “Read me the titles, and skim the tables of contents in case anything needs our immediate attention.” In this way, they commenced the business of sorting together.

“*Mother Jones*,” Virginia said, “Most of this is about the president.”

Harold pointed. “In the corner. Politics and social issues.”

“*National Geographic*. The cover story’s about China.”

“Middle of the room. Travel and global culture.”

“*Martha Stewart Living*,” Virginia read. She looked at Harold. “*Martha Stewart Living*? That’s a woman’s magazine.” She flipped the glossy pages, which made a light slapping sound. “These articles are about scrap-booking and cookie making.”

“Home economics,” Harold said. “A perfectly legitimate field of study. More importantly, if I remember correctly, that’s the last issue in the volume. Get the twine so we can tie the volume together, but make sure the issues are chronological.” Speaking more to himself than his wife, Harold added: “Sending the volume out for binding would be so much better, but it’s cost prohibitive.”

Virginia did as Harold requested, getting the twine from an office-supply box located in the walk-in closet she was denied the pleasure of hanging her clothes in. But as she checked the chronology of *Martha Stewart Livings*, she issued Harold a challenge, more direct than any she ever had. “I just don’t get this, Harold. I know you miss the university, but do we really need to live in a guest room and tie up our fixed income on women’s magazines we could read at the public library?”

Harold launched a defense of his collection in the academese he used when feeling insecure, defensive or upset. Virginia had heard such language before.

“Please, Harold, in English.”

Harold thought instead of answering. The desire that drove Harold to maintain a library-quality collection, if only on the scale of a small, county library, was for completeness. The knowledge that he had accumulated every issue in a volume and should he want to reference some material, no missing issue could thwart him produced the secure and sated feeling he remembered from his teaching days. For an older, retired man to cultivate such feelings was natural, Harold thought. He looked at his wife, working amongst his piles in a room he knew she wanted but let him have. As she aged, the crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes became more pronounced, but to Harold, these seemed more like flourishes, a peacock’s dramatic feathers calling attention to its inherent beauty. He determined to try and finally explain his desire to Virginia, considering how much she had endured his pursuit of this agenda and considering how much he truly loved her.

“Why don’t we go out to dinner?” he said.

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“So it’s like the last stitch on a needlepoint canvas?” Virginia asked Harold. They were on the desert course, a single plate of tiramisu and two forks between them.

“Precisely.”

The waitress approached and removed the bottle of white wine they had ordered from its iced bucket, topping off both their glasses. If they appreciated the service attention, Harold and Virginia didn’t acknowledge it, so rapt were they in their conversation.

“I need one final point of clarification.” Virginia said. “How do you find them all? Everybody knows *Reader’s Digest*, but you’ve got subscriptions to the most obscure things.”

“Marketing lists.”

“You buy marketing lists?”

“No. The companies do. Magazines and journals can be a difficult way to make a living. The big ones do okay, but the small ones struggle to make profits. In addition to selling their magazines, they sell the names of their subscribers in a big list to other magazines, so new magazines have a target audience to mail their subscription cards to.”

“I fear you must be on a great number of those lists.” Virginia said this with a playful light in her eye that reminded Harold of her youth. He fed her a last bite of the not-too-sweet desert, paid the check, and took her home to make spoons in their guest-room bed.

When Virginia woke the next morning, she rolled to face Harold and said in a sleepy voice, “Why don’t we rent you a post office box?” Harold squeezed her tightly.

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Virginia offered to drive each day and pick up the mail from the post-office box. Harold would

have preferred to do so himself but perceived the great rewards available in such a small concession. She left around 2:30 each day and returned half an hour later with a plastic grocery bag filled with magazines and journals. The edges remained unturned.

A week into her new schedule, Virginia pulled a copy of *Food & Wine* out of the bag during traffic-light boredom. She flipped some pages, mostly in the back, and found advertisements enticing readers to join cheese-, wine- and chocolate-of-the-month clubs. She made a startling realization: Harold was limiting his potential. If a degree of satisfaction could be gained from collecting reading materials, how much larger a degree could be gained by these other types of subscriptions? The driver behind Virginia was obliged to use his horn to call the green light to her attention.

“A living library,” Harold said, upon hearing Virginia’s realization. “My god, what an intellectual leap you’ve made. No one’s doing anything like this anywhere.” His mind began to sort out the potential problems. “Storing a wine collection might be possible, but how could I store cheese? A year’s worth of cheese? It would mold or take over the refrigerator.”

“No. No.” Virginia paced the room as she explained the plan to Harold. “We would have to consume the products and record our impressions in a journal. We could have a separate journal for each type of product. Then, when the journal’s pages are full, we tie it closed and shelve it categorically. If anyone ever asks us what a particular cheese is like, we may simply reference the journal.”

The plan pleased immensely. They determined to start with the cheese. Harold lamented only a bit at the lack of postage-paid subscription cards to drop in the mail. One had to call these

new types of companies and offer one's credit card number to be enrolled, but Virginia helpfully offered to make the calls.

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Tilsit was their first selection from the cheese club, and they made an aspiring production of the tasting. Coming home from the post office on the day the package arrived, Virginia stopped by the druggist's and purchased a lined composition notebook like the kind she used as a school girl. She felt positively giddy with the recharge this collaboration had jolted into her marriage. Why should she not buy youthful things?

They let the package sit on the dining room table, the better to savor it. They found themselves fetching items that required them to walk back and forth by the table. Once, as they crossed paths, Harold gave Virginia a light pat on the bum.

When evening fell, they lit candles and set places with the good linen and china. They dressed for the occasion, Harold in a shirt that buttoned and the sport coat he'd worn to the first meeting of every class he'd ever taught, Virginia in a green dress she hoped might compliment the cheese's color, which the pamphlet had described as "buttery yellow."

Harold used a box cutter to slice open the package in a decisive way Virginia found to be very masculine. She sat and opened the notebook, pen poised to record Harold's dictation. But Harold surprised her by pulling the pen from her hand and setting it down.

"This was your idea, my dove," he said. "Your impressions are as important as mine."

Virginia smiled and rose from her chair. The two of them stood around the table as those who hold court stand at the reading of verdicts. Extensive packaging surrounded the cheese, which one might expect considering the monthly fee, and Harold had to wrestle a bit with the

packing tape and parchment paper. Virginia took pleasure in the delay. Virginia took pleasure in so much these days.

“It has holes,” she said, somewhat startled, and reached for the notebook despite Harold’s earlier admonition. “But not like Swiss.”

“And not round,” Harold said, adopting the observational, comparative mind of a field scientist. “Write: ‘Oblong’ in the notes.”

Virginia did, along with many other observations from the tasting, like “springy texture,” “spicy undertones,” and “creamy.” She found the diction of cheese-tasting came easily to her. They purposefully filled one page with notes, stopping at the bottom and marking the date at the top. The whole process was so satisfying to each, they made more spoons in their guest-room bed.

\*

After three months of cheese club, new solicitations began to arrive in their post office box, to most of which Harold and Virginia were amenable. Virginia marveled at the power of the marketing lists. Their disposable income could cover the cost of subscriptions to a wine club, which seemed a natural pairing for the cheese, and a cookie club. They also made line adjustments to their budget to accommodate unexpected types of clubs, like a barbeque sauce club and a necktie club, the latter of which Harold especially liked because, as non-perishable goods, he could make notes about neckties *and* arrange them in his guest-room closet by color and pattern. Virginia bought an additional tie rack for him and more composition notebooks for herself.

Their subscriptions resulted in such an inundation of additional solicitations that Harold

and Virginia were forced to dismiss the greater percentage, lest their retirement income be lost in the project. Harold considered canceling some subscriptions to print magazines, which now seemed old fashioned somehow, but found himself unable. So they slid the “Join Now” flyers in the waste bin with as few glances as possible until Harold came across one that proved too promising to ignore.

That night after a chocolate tasting, a brand they found to have too much milk unhappily diluting the natural bitter of the nibs, Harold took the new solicitation out of his pocket and handed it to Virginia, who had a bit of chocolate on her teeth. She smiled at him slyly, for she had begun to equate these monthly clubs with intimacy and warmed at virtually any new proposal. When she did drop her eyes to the paper, her color drained and then returned in a rush. “We couldn’t,” she said.

“We must.”

The paper read:

## **WEAPON OF THE MONTH CLUB**

The Constitution obliges all Americans to arm and protect themselves. A subscription to our club allows you a safe and fun way to meet that obligation. Each month we’ll mail you a quality crafted, top-of-the-line weapon along with a DVD of



handling, operating, cleaning and storage instructions.

You'll receive a wide range of weaponry:  
firearms, blades, clubs, and martial arts and other exotics.

Background checks required. Ammunition not included.

"But the expense," Virginia protested.

"I could cancel some magazines for this." Virginia raised her eyes in doubt. "I could. I know I've tried before, but this time I will. I can think of at least three magazines about guns and shooting. What will I need them for now that I'll be shooting myself? The whole premise behind this living library dictates that we stop reading about subjects and start experiencing them."

Virginia, hesitancy in check, agreed.

Two weeks later, they stood in the back yard, an open box at their feet, Chinese Throwing Stars in their hands. Virginia's initial reservations had returned. The day's weather seemed incongruent with their enterprise. The sun shown brightly and with confidence, but the air remained slightly cool, a perfect summer day minus the discomfort of perspiration. Virginia thought that Mother Nature should make her weather less conducive to violent acts. She remarked on the day and made the impotent suggestion of starting a notebook that records the weather. Harold saw the suggestion for what it was and said, "Don't be afraid, my dove. We've watched the DVD."

Harold had assigned Virginia the pet name "dove" when they bought this house. Common ground doves occupied the neighborhood like tenants. They nested in every back yard

and perched on every roof's peak to sound their morning calls. Virginia had quickly made a priority of planting additional horticultural cover and setting out feeders, making the potentially controversial claim that the birds had as much right to the land as they. Harold had transformed this claim into an endearment.

For Chinese Star practice, Harold tacked a paper target to a tree across the lawn. As instructed, he paced fifteen steps back from the target. Harold tried to form the grip they'd seen on the television screen: thumb and pointer spread wide, fingers pinching the center for ideal rotation. Virginia commented that the Chinese Stars could be ornamental if hung from strings.

"These aren't decoration," Harold said, making a show of positioning his feet. "These are our American duty." He forgot to release on the first propulsion of his arm. On the second, he released, and the star went low and wide, nowhere near the target. A sound rose from the bush that the weapon's inaccurate and amateur trajectory had targeted. Virginia investigated and found a dead dove.

"Oh, Harold. We've made a terrible mistake."

Harold stood behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder. If Virginia had turned to look at him, she would have seen a war waging amongst his facial features. Clearly upset, he struggled not to appear so. Virginia went into the house and came out with an empty shoe box and some paper towels. The bird's blood, splashed about the ground and the star, darkened from reddish to brown. The small volume of blood surprised Virginia; something that makes such a compelling noise, owl-like to the untrained ear, should need more blood with which to make it. Without intending the implications of her actions, she rose and went to her notebook to record the observation before it escaped her.

“Quite right,” Harold said. Virginia’s action eased his inner turmoil. Preserving the moment in a notebook would give it meaning. He bent at the knee and pulled some feathers from the bird. They didn’t want to be pulled. Two strong yanks were required for the plucking. “Tape these in.”

The feather plucking horrified Virginia, violence layered on top of violence, the desecration of a dead body. “No.” She set down her pen. “This notebook is finished. This club is finished.”

“Dove . . .,” Harold started, paused, and then re-endearred her, “Angel, we must continue. You know we must. We’ve canceled other subscriptions to start this one. How can we leave the book blank? This bird’s life must be in service of something.” Virginia was shaking her head but also making eye contact with Harold. He said, “We’ll be more careful in the future. We will.”

Virginia knew enough to know that her argument was lost, that canceling was out of Harold’s consideration. She picked up her pen and asked Harold what other notes about the experience he would like to record. She did not contribute any more of her own impressions, and Harold, not wanting to press too adamantly, let her write just his. That evening, when Harold came to the room where they slept after arranging and rearranging the upstairs piles, Virginia lay turned with her back to him and her eyes closed.

\*

As Harold had promised, more care was taken with subsequent weaponry. They went to firing ranges for both handguns and crossbows. The low-grade explosives were detonated in a vacant concrete lot, meticulously swept and scanned for any life forms, in the company of a hired professional. To Harold’s great excitement, the margin of the Weapon’s Club notebook had been

ever-so-slightly singed on that day. The very adversity inherent in this club convinced Harold that continuation and completion weren't just pleasurable emotions to be sought but life principles of religious proportion. For Virginia, each murder-free weapon 'tasting' alkalized a portion of her acidic dislike of the weapon club, but her earlier feelings of partnership and collaboration with Harold dissipated like smoke from a fired gun. She now found the most mundane moments of their life the most pleasurable. She relished the grocery shopping and the laundry folding. And so it was unfortunate when Harold noticed the flyer wedged in their front door before Virginia upon a return trip from the pharmacy. It read:

### PARTY OF THE MONTH CLUB

Like to live on the edge? Like to experience all that life has to offer?

Not afraid to see your subscriptions through to the end?

We've got the club for you!

Once a month, a party will arrive at your door:

one escort carrying one recreational drug.

Variety is not just the spice of life, it's the life of the party.

Call Eddie: 555-1212 for details.

"No." They stood at the door examining the flyer. Virginia set the plastic grocery bags down to make her hands available for gesture. She could see by his quietness that Harold's interest had been captured. "Something's wrong with that, Harold. Look, it's handwritten. It's not even typed or printed on glossy paper. Someone just took a pen and wrote on scrap paper."

“We use simple pen and paper for our notebooks. It doesn’t mean we’re not credible.”

Virginia raised the volume of her voice. “That’s not an appropriate analogy, Harold. We’re not a company trying to sell things.” In her peripheral vision, Virginia caught the movement of curtains in a neighbor’s house. They must look quite a sight – huddled over a paper at their front door, grocery bags scattered around their feet, she practically screaming his name in an attempt to get through. She felt no shame, however, for the spectacle. Quite the opposite. She felt that this moment represented a boundary, a line invisible to the naked eye but real enough on a map, and if she didn’t stop Harold from stepping across, she would have to follow him into a dangerous and destructive landscape. Virginia continued her argument: “This wasn’t even sent to us through the mail. Look. No postmark, no stamp. And look at that line about subscriptions. That’s not right. Some person who knows about the clubs, someone who’s bought the marketing lists, has walked up to our front door and just stuck this flyer here.”

Harold began collecting the grocery bags. As much as she wished Harold to be acting out of some chivalrous consideration for her, she realized he meant to get inside and use the phone. “*This isn’t a real subscription,*” she yelled at his back as he walked through the front door and down the hall.

\*

On the phone, Eddie said the first party would be Friday night and they should have five hundred dollars cash to give the escort when she left. The party would last sixty minutes. Virginia and Harold spoke of little else in the two days between the phone call and Friday night, which made for long silences punctuated by inane comments like: “Be sure to have a pen with plenty of ink. We may need to increase our note-taking quota to two pages.” In the face of his inquiries and

reminders, Virginia assured Harold that she would be adequately prepared in the categories of attire, atmosphere and materials. With each assurance, she willed Harold to realize his own lunacy. They made a face-off of the preparations, each behaving as if there were nothing relevant to discuss but the most trivial of considerations.

On Thursday night, Cranberry Macadamia Rounds and Toffee Butter Nut Tassies arrived from the cookie club, and an awkward and perfunctory-feeling tasting was held. The pairing of sweet and savory in the Rounds created a pleasant, but not particularly impressive, effect. A butter flavor positively dominated the Tassies. After Virginia had dated and closed the cookie notebook, Harold suggested that they preserve the extras and set them out on a plate for their impending guest, who may like a refreshment of her own. Virginia complimented him, stiffly, on his forethought.

\*

“What time is this escort meant to arrive?” Virginia asked. She and Harold had been sitting on separate sofas in their living room, dressed appropriately enough for church, since seven that evening. The time approached eleven. The composition notebook, a pen, and the plate of cookies rested literally and symbolically on the coffee table.

“I thought eight. I thought he said eight on the phone. We must note the time she arrives to be sure we get the entire sixty minutes.”

“We must also note the number of minutes she is late,” Virginia said.

After twenty-seven more minutes, the doorbell rang. Precedence dictated that Virginia should open the door, but she made clear with her eyes that Harold would have to usher in his

guest. She could hear the door opening, some conversation, and the steps of Harold escorting the escort down the hall.

“Virginia, may I present Lesley, who prefers to be called Glitter.” Harold bowed. The formality of the introduction for a person named Glitter struck Virginia as ludicrous. She laughed out loud.

“Fuck you, lady,” Glitter said. She stood apart from Harold with her hands straight down at her sides.

“No, you poor dear. It’s not you. It’s him. I’m laughing at him.” Virginia settled herself down, ignoring the angry look Harold flashed her. “Please sit down.”

Glitter had dark hair, pale skin, and, Virginia thought, deliberately unattractive makeup. She wore an outfit so unlike anything Virginia had ever seen, Virginia thought it must have been sewn by a costumer rather than bought off a store rack. Oval-shaped holes had been cut from the fabric in unlikely locations – shoulders, thighs and back. Virginia thought of the holes in Tilsit cheese and her laughter started anew, watering her eyes and inhibiting her breath.

“I’m not a poor dear,” Glitter said, and Virginia admired the feistiness in her.

“Of course you’re not.”

Glitter narrowed her heavily shadowed eyes at Virginia. “You laugh like you’re already on something,” Glitter said. “You don’t need what I got.”

“Yes I do, dear. What do you have?”

Harold stayed quiet as the women sized each other up. He received a glance and a slight nod of the head from Virginia. He caught her meaning, picked up the composition book and started writing notes.

“Just pot,” Glitter said. “Eddie wanted me to start you on ice, get you hooked, but I said hell no. I don’t know if you can handle your shit, and I ain’t babysitting two geezers while they flip out.”

“Good point,” Virginia said.

“Yes. Very well argued,” Harold agreed. “So, should we imbibe? You’ll have to show us the procedures.”

“You people talk funny.”

“We do,” Virginia said. “But we have cookies for you. Would you like some?”

“Not before. After.”

Glitter pulled an already-rolled joint out from her cigarette pack and lit the end. Harold and Virginia took their cues from her, sucking long and holding the smoke. They shot each other glances that contained elements of fear and excitement, plus a good deal of residual anger. Virginia still felt incredulous at the lengths to which Harold had taken the living library project. Harold resented the way Virginia had domineered this interaction and forced him into the role of scribe.

After they smoked the joint down to a roach, Glitter worked on the cookies, revealing her unsophisticated tastes with a preference for the overly buttery Tassies. Virginia opened her mouth to speak but became fascinated with the gluey texture of her own saliva. She spent several minutes opening and closing her mouth. The conversational void pained Harold as awkward, so he tried to think of something to say. Every sentence he formulated sounded ridiculous in his mind, too ridiculous to pronounce out loud. Glitter continued to work the cookies. Harold referenced his notes for ideas and finally came up with, “Who’s Eddie?”



Glitter snapped her head towards him. “How do you know about Eddie?”

“You mentioned him. You said Eddied wanted to start us on ice.”

“Oh, right.” She went back to eating. With a full mouth, she said, “Eddie’s my boyfriend. He’s been watching you at the post office, seen how much dough you waste on all kinds of crazy shit.”

“I knew it,” Virginia said, righteously. “I knew this wasn’t a real club.” She got up from the sofa, grasped Harold’s shoulder and started to shake. “How could you be so stupid? This isn’t even real.”

“Oh, it’s for real,” Glitter said, brushing the crumbs off her fingers and onto the carpet. “Time for part two. Let’s go to the bedroom.”

Virginia and Harold froze. Even Harold had never believed in the flyer’s implied promise of intercourse. Yet Glitter’s bedroom suggestion was so ludicrous, they followed her as she walked down the hall and into the room where they slept, never thinking to question how she knew the room’s location and purpose.

Glitter lay on the bed. “What are you into?”

“Not much,” Virginia answered with a casualness that belied the question’s taboo. “We usually just cuddle.”

“Yes,” Harold added quickly. “We cuddle.”

“Let’s cuddle, then,” Glitter said, patting the bed next to her with a thin, pale hand.

For the first time since Glitter arrived, Harold addressed Virginia directly. “Should we, my dove?” Virginia did not mistake the significance of his choice of endearment. “This is your call,” he said. “We can stop now and not complete this.”

The strange feelings from smoking had not left her, but coming from Harold, these words grounded her again. These were the words she'd needed. He was willing to deny himself the pleasure of completing this living library experiment for her. She was more important.

"Let's not stop," Virginia said, but before they could even get on the bed with Glitter, a crash came from behind them in the hallway.

Harold rushed out of the room with Virginia right behind him. A young man in ripped jeans stood in the hall, the kind of kid who might have sat in the back row of Harold's class. At his feet were the broken glass shards of a vase. Virginia ran past the boy into the living room. Harold could make no sense of why the boy was there or why Virginia had left him and run. "Who are you?" Harold asked.

"Dammit, Eddie," Glitter yelled from the bedroom. "I didn't even have a chance to distract them."

Eddie pulled a knife on Harold. "Where's the money, old man? I know you got enough for all the crap that comes in the mail. I been upstairs. There's nothing up there but piles of paper."

"You didn't touch them, did you?" Harold asked in alarm.

Before Eddie could answer, a Chinese Star whizzed down the hallway, missing both men and lodging itself in the wall like a dart. Glitter stepped into the hallway in time to see Virginia approach with another star at the ready. Virginia's eyes looked wild and red. "I'm a martial arts expert," she said. "I've been trained by masters. I'll throw this into the back of your skull before you even come close to my husband with that knife."

"Holy shit," Glitter said. "These geezers are for real."

“Yeah,” Virginia said, her eyes flashing. “We’re for real.”

Harold was so impressed with his wife that he raised his hands to clap at her performance. “Bravo,” he called down the hallway.

Emboldened, Virginia yelled, “Get out of here. We’re done with you.”

Everyone looked at Eddie and waited. “What about the five hundred?” he said. “I told you five hundred on the phone.”

“I did agree to those terms, Dove,” Harold said to Virginia.

Virginia’s arm felt tired, her fingers cramped around the star. She worked not to reveal the weakness. “Five hundred, then. No more.”

Harold pulled out the stack of twenty-dollar bills he’d placed in his pocket. Glitter grabbed it and headed for the front door. Eddie followed, telling Glitter to hand over the money. When they were out, Harold and Virginia held their poses for a few more seconds before relaxing back into safety. They approached each other in the hall and hugged.

“Let’s make notes,” Harold said, his mouth pressed into Virginia’s hair so that his breath blew into it as he talked.

“For Christ’s sake, Harold. No more.”

“Okay. For tonight, no more.”

\*

In the morning, Harold woke first. Virginia lay beside him, still wearing her church-worthy dress. Their adrenaline and their cannabis highs had crashed simultaneously last night, exhausting them. They laid across their bed to rest momentarily and never got up.

Harold strode towards the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. Shortly, Virginia was awake.

She pulled her dress over her head and wrapped herself in a thick, full bathrobe. She followed the smell of good coffee, recently shipped to them from Nicaragua. Once she reached the kitchen, Harold handed her the cup he had poured for her. She said, a little shyly, testing Harold's waters, "I see the evidence from our escapade is still scattered about."

"Yes. Some caulk and touch-up paint will fix the hole in the wall. I never realized you had such an arm."

Virginia blushed at the compliment. Then a thought occurred to her that made her heart pound out of nervousness. "Do you think they'll come back?" she asked. "Try to get more money out of us?" She speculated that she could not easily replicate last night's bravado.

"I don't think so," Harold said. He seemed so handsome to her this morning. "But we should call a locksmith just in case."

"Yes. Let's do." They sipped their coffee in silence for a few moments. Virginia resisted her temptation to describe the flavor notes and subtext of the brew. Instead, she said, "Perhaps we should buy a Polaroid camera. Take some shots of the star still in the wall and of the crumbs all over the living room. We could tape them in a notebook."

"I think she left the last bit of her marijuana cigarette on the coffee table." Harold wondered if he might be tempted to smoke it again. He'd always heard that one could get hooked on drugs quite easily. But after a brief, internal self-examination, he realized that, no, no desire for more existed in him.

Virginia broke his small reverie. "Your colleagues would never believe what you've done for the sake of scholarship."

"What we've done," Harold said.

## Today's Truth

Today:

To keep myself from repeating yesterday, I go to the Knoxville Zoo. The teen behind the ticket window processes my transaction without looking up from the day planner she's highlighting. I approve. No record of my face. No judgment for a thirty-year-old woman, dressed in oversized jeans and a double-X shirt, alone. No pretense that it matters whether I have a great day or not.

"You'll get your map inside," she says when I ask for it. She's got better things to do.

I walk a few short steps to the showpiece of the Knoxville Zoo: Black Bear Falls. The exhibit walls rise up at least three stories and purposefully resemble dark, ridged mountains. I crawl into a large, fake, plastic log which lets me covertly watch the bears through plexiglass. Two bears nap, one in a tree and one on grass near the waterfall. I crouch uncomfortably. This log is meant for children, and soon a few of them come in; the volume of their uncontrolled voices drives me out.

A grandmother and her grandson, I assume, stand in front of the larger plexiglass window that provides main viewing into the exhibit. The boy, maybe six, is pressed to the wall, hands smearing it with oil, nose mashed, breath leaving hot steam circles. He's practically licking it. I'm disgusted. Perhaps Grandma is too because she tries to distract him. "Look, Charlie. Look at these pictures and signs." Her attempt strikes me as lame, but Charlie turns to look at the "pictures and signs." I look over their shoulders.

One sign reads, *Orange Peels. Peanut Butter. Potato Chips. Some of the Most Dangerous Things Known to Bears.* This grandmother wears maroon lipstick so thick and so precisely drawn

that I doubt she has real lips. She leans down and puts her suspicious lips next to her grandson's ear. "Look at that Charlie. Eating oranges makes bears sick. I never knew that."

Oranges make bears sick? Try: bears get used to the sweet taste of human food, lose their fear of humans, then get "put down" as "nuisances." The bottom of the sign clearly reads "Garbage Kills Bears." Anyone who's driven any East Tennessee highway has seen that slogan on the bumper sticker of about a gabillion cars. I burn to tell Charlie that the real lesson is to pack out your garbage from the woods, but Charlie's already absorbed the misinformation. He nods his head earnestly.

\*

Yesterday:

"We can talk about it now," my best friend, Alex, says to me over the phone. It's mid-morning, and I'm still in bed. Her phone call didn't wake me. I'd just been lying there, masturbating lazily without direction or intent.

"Praise the Lord," I say. She skims over my invocation like a waterbug well accustomed to slippery surfaces.

"I'm officially out of the first trimester. Chances are much smaller that I'll miscarry in the second."

I wish my phone had a cord to twist. My role is to provide excited support. It's tough. It would be easier if I could bend something out of shape while I provided it.

"Congratulations," I say. We both pause. She's waiting for more. "That's really great. You must be so relieved."

“Not really. I knew all along this one would stick. I could just tell, you know? Must be a mother’s instinct.”

“So, why couldn’t we tell people about it?” I regret asking this as soon as I do.

Her answer comes a little too quickly, as if she’s anticipated the question, pre-planned her justification. “Just for Evan’s sake, and my mom’s, and everyone else’s. They all get so disappointed and don’t know how to act around me.”

“You’re going to be so good at this.”

“Yeah.”

\*

Today:

After bears comes elephants. Personally, I endorse their value system – the huger and the wrinklier the better. We could drown the country’s plastic surgeons if we believed this. Tonka, an old and regionally-famous zoo matriarch, stands closest to me, rocking and casually bringing hay to her mouth. I smell the elephant smell, grassy and happily dirty. I take a notebook out of my bag and note what she’s doing. Tonka shits. I note that. I sketch the rips and chinks in her ear in case I ever need to identify her outside this exhibit. In my mind, I tell her to keep her chin up, her head high, her spirits lifted, her pride strong.

A family approaches the exhibit. Despite a fence large enough to encircle a two-story home, the boy and girl stand right next to me. The parents hang back with their infant in a rented stroller shaped like a dolphin. The kids begin to scream the obvious: “Look, Mom, elephants!” “They’re big!” “She’s eating!”

Then the boy corrects his sister, “No. These are all boys. Only boys have tusks.”

I wish for feminist nun chucks with which to deal blows. I look at the parents, who are my age or even younger, and will them to correct the child. I will them not to scar the younger sister by allowing her older brother to use “only” and “boys” in a sentence. The mom giggles and says, “Look. He’s dancing.”

\*

Yesterday:

After the phone call, I lay in bed for another hour thinking of Alex and the bun in her oven. I suppose the metaphor’s popular because of the associations with growth and expansion, but it doesn’t really work. When she first found out she had conceived again, before she banned any mention, I drove the four hours to her house, and we spent the weekend online researching how to prevent miscarriages. The fetuses in photos I saw resembled cave salamanders clinging to wet walls.

I get out of bed and, without showering, drive to the West Town Mall. I cruise by a few stores to seem like a legitimate shopper but don’t go in any. On this summer weekday, school kids fill the mall, presumably the only safe environment in which parents could drop them off. They roam in packs governed by animalistic rules: safety in numbers, blend in, keep watchful, gather as much as you can.

At the food court I approach the counter of Cookie Company, where I make of show of being undecided. I pace the glass display cases and read the little placards describing the baked goods. Sweets, mostly. Nothing that would qualify as a bun from an oven. A clerk in a red shirt and red visor waits for me to make up my mind. “I’ll take three of these things,” I say, pointing to the Double Doozies. “To go.” I hope that by pretending to contemplate the choices, by calling



the Double Doozies “things” as if they were unfamiliar to me, and by requesting a to go bag, the clerk might think I am shopping for a waiting family rather than myself. Certainly, I ordered enough for an entire family. Just one “Double Doozie” is made of two bun-sized chocolate chip cookies sandwiching an inch and a half of buttercream frosting. A literal sugar hamburger.

The kind of people who say “Oh, I’ll never be able to eat all that” when a waiter sets an Americanized portion of red velvet or double fudge cake on their tables don’t get invited to my house much. When someone sets a dessert the size of an entrée in front of me, I’m gonna get it down. When the sugar starts to cloy and close my throat, I take a sip of my drink and keep going. Does a heroine addict get to complain about the pain of the needle breaking the skin? Can a crack ho whine to her pimp about burned finger tips?

“Anything else?” the clerk asks.

“A large Coke.”

\*

Today:

The people watching the meerkats don’t get the concept of a look-out. Meerkats live in mobs, a nominal designation I adore, and take turns pulling hour-long shifts on watch duty. The mob generally stays underground listening for warnings from the look-out perched on a mound or fallen branch. It strikes me as serious work. A serious responsibility. Miss an approaching predator or sound the alarm seconds too late, and you’ll be responsible for the deaths of your family members. I contract my sphincter as parents and kids talk overly-loud about the cuteness of the look-out.

I'm about to turn and leave yet another exhibit in disgust when I notice a family of women, three adults and two children. I decide that the adults are sisters and the children are sisters. They gather around the exhibit sign.

"How do you say it, Mama?" one girl asks.

Mama stares at the sign. Of no one in particular, she asks, "Can I have a minute?" Her voice is muffled as if an apple is stuffed in her mouth. I realize that Mama is deaf. She doesn't look deaf, but then again, deaf people rarely do. Looking at the older women, aunts to the girls, it seems, she muffles, "Can you tell?" Neither can help because, apparently, they're not the kind of women who know how to sign. The family stands lost.

The daughters become bored waiting for the answer and move over to the glass. Mama stays at the sign. The daughters want the look-out's attention and tap on the glass. Not stopping your kids from tapping on glass is the original sin of the zoological park. Their mother can't hear the taps, of course, yet I'm enraged at her for not teaching her children to respect the sanctity of the animals' environment.

I contemplate my choices. I could pronounce the word meerkat for the deaf woman, gesture to her children, and gently say that tapping scares animals. I could mispronounce meerkat and swat at her kids' hands. I could use my bulk to crowd them out of the window. Or I could keep watching this deaf-family drama as if they were animals behind glass.

\*

Yesterday:

The sugar I've ingested, enough to fill a vat, produces an effect similar to cocaine or meth or any other drug I've never tried. Who needs to? My brain releases the serotonin required to make me

high whenever I eat three Double Doozies and drink a Coke; I'm basically coked. To process the wheelbarrow of sugar I've just engulfed, all the systems of my body work double-time.

Circulatory, respiratory, digestive and urinary by necessity. Endocrine, nervous, lymphatic, reproductive, and immune by default. Only muscular and skeletal get a break because I basically stop moving. I eat it all in the car ride home and head right back to bed to flick my bean with purpose and fall asleep. This is the point, of course: loss of consciousness. It's the only way I know to shut down the brain I carry around in my head, a brain which never lets me simply look at elephants and meerkats enjoy the simple pleasure of their existence.

My drugs knock me out. When I wake from my sugar nap, my heart pounds and my veins throb. They work double-time to clean my sugar-infested blood, work which will take most of the evening to complete. I can't endure it, so I head to the store for Bud Light. I buy twelve 24-ounce cans which the clerk calls "tall boys" and I call "womyn of size." I crack one open in the car ride home. It makes me feel superior to have an open container, but I'm not enough of a true rebel to take a sip. I wait until I'm in the garage to lift the stiff, metal can to my lips. I sit in the car in the garage. The car's off. No carbon monoxide poisoning for me. I would never commit suicide, but Alex did once say to me, "You might as well, the way you eat. You're taking a longer time to do it, but you're killing yourself all the same." I refused to have this conversation and banned her from bringing it up again.

\*

Today:

I'm in front of the chimps and am miraculously alone. This miracle cannot be overstated, tantamount as it is to the miracle of birth. Avoiding people in a zoo means sticking to birds.

Spending long, slow minutes in the aviaries. Watching owls and Temminick's Taragons. Forget being alone with the large mammals; it's out of the question.

But here I am, alone at the chimps, no sound of approaching feet on the walkway, so I intend to take a good long look at my evolutionary cousins. I see only one. We occupy the same air, woman-to-woman. Like the bear exhibit, Chimp Falls is well funded. A donor's name, one of those women who takes not only her husband's last name but also his first, is engraved on a gold plaque. My chimp sits on a rock at the top of a twenty-foot water fall, arms and legs crossed in a pose that would signify sadness if a human struck it. I want her to touch the water because I want to touch the water. She doesn't. Her attention is drawn by three chimps cresting the hill in the back of the exhibit and walking closer on feet and knuckles. I self congratulate, presuming that by standing quietly and a few feet back from the glass, I've made the animals more comfortable.

My chimp goes to meet the others, and I become obsessed with her ass. It's furless, unlike the rest of her body. Twice she stops her movement and sits on her thick cushion, a leathery throw pillow sewn onto her bottom. Her anus is not a hole but a slit big enough to mail an envelope. I wonder if she likes it. I'm hardly aware of my own ass. She must be constantly aware of hers. Then I wonder if she could be pregnant. Perhaps a cave salamander clings to the walls of her uterus. The thought of my best friend growing her salamander into a baby and pushing it around zoos on weekdays stuns me.

I begin to feel encroached upon even though no one is approaching. But they might. Moms might push dolphin-shaped strollers to this exhibit at any moment. Kids will come and scream about the chimps in voices loud enough to drive them out of view. Should this come to pass, I don't believe I can endure it. I've got no beer, so I must leave.

\*

Yesterday:

Sugar acts quickly in the blood. Beer is much slower. Hours into the drinking, I sit in front of the TV and contemplate my own fertility. Imagining my body's interior decline is a favorite pastime. I visualize my non-regenerating eggs, wasting and withering, pickling in beer, flaming out in the sugar rushes.

I've watched eight episodes strung together in a marathon of "Birth Day," a show on a health channel that chronicles real-life labors and deliveries. After so much beer and TV, I feel like a woman who's labored but delivered stillborn. I get up and rinse out the empty women-of-size cans, placing them in the recycling bin, because that's what a sober person would do. I resolve to look at the sky more often and go outside. Night has fallen, and the sky looks smooth, uncluttered by stars, which means it's polluted and my asthma will be aggravated.

I walk to the neighborhood's community pool, punch in my gate code, and dip my feet.

\*

Today:

I can't bear to stay long near my favorite animals: the turtles. Turtle Bog sits right next to Kid's Cove, which bubbles and festers with human children like toxic toads in a malevolent witch's broth. Watching the herds of younger children communicate with language-less sounds and mark territories to defend, cruelly, against each other makes me think of the mall's slightly more civilized packs. The mall makes me think of Double Doozies and the perfect numbness they deliver. My resolve weakens. Alex will birth one of these toxic toads, and I might never.

I force myself to move on to the river otters. The Kid's Cove playground pulls the little animals and their parents as if they were metal and it a magnet, so I get another moment alone. The otter exhibit is mostly water with a small island in the middle. The glass cuts the water so visitors can simultaneously view the animals above and below the water line. Before I can stop myself, I'm thinking about the otters' cute-and-cuddly factor. Damn if I don't commit the second most evil sin of a zoological park: wishing I could have one for a pet. Damn being flawed. Damn being human.

I stand quietly and still and struggle within my own brain like a fish in a net. My mind forces to consciousness the positive moments I filtered out of this day. Early in the day, a child ran his soft hands over the backs of my knees as if I were part of the fence around the lion exhibit. This child's touch on such a sensitive and rarely-touched part of me felt primal and exhilarating. Around lunch, a zoo educator winked at me when a girl said that rhinos use their horns to kill their prey before correcting her: "Rhinos are grass eaters. Look at that mouth like a lawn mower." Plus, I hadn't eaten and drunk myself into a coma.

A family approaches the river otters and forces me out of my head. One dad, one mom, one two-year-old in a stroller. They look through the glass and see nothing. The parents need to point the animal out for the kid to get interested. I know where the river otters hide. I debate, then speak my first words of the day: "They're in the hollow log on the island."

Nobody looks at me. Dad finds them and says, "Look Zach, look up there." He points where I told him they were. Nobody looks at me some more.

\*

Yesterday:

I stand up on the top step of the pool, submerged to my ankles. My socks and sneakers are off my feet and strewn poolside. The water must be cool, but I can't really tell. I contemplate jumping in, clothes and all. Alex's cave salamander is submerged in water; perhaps I should be too. The drunken truth, of course, is my ravaging disappointment that Alex's salamander clung to its wall long enough to live into the second trimester, to become the baby I will never make. Suddenly, I want to be sober. I want the sugar and the beer out of my system so I can think clearly about this problem. I jump.

The splash sounds large even to my ears, even underwater. I've misjudged the depth, and my hands hit the bottom, sharply bending my wrists in a way that will hurt tomorrow. The surprise propels me to the surface, which I break for air. A neighbor whose face I can't see stands on his porch. "Pool hours are over," he yells.

"I'm not having a baby," I answer. He goes back inside his house.

I swim for a while, but the water does not provide the awakening, the rebirth I want. I'm tired now and still drunk. I climb out the steps and walk back to my house, not on the sidewalks but down the middle of the street. My clothes hang heavily on me like the lead vest my doctor covers me with to x-ray my useless insides. I can hear cicadas, frogs and a train whistle. I breathe deeply, accepting the pollution. I'm too drunk to feel it. I resolve that tomorrow I will do something, anything, I will endure any truth, to reverse the one I lived today.

## **The Birth of My Son or Daughter**

My mother and I sat on her wrap-around porch wearing loose sundresses and drinking lemonade. I knew such a benign scene, family members enjoying lightly-sugared lemon water and projecting a unified aesthetic, gave my mother great satisfaction. I would have preferred blue jeans and top-shelf margaritas, but in my eighth month of pregnancy, I needed loose clothing, non-alcoholic drinks, and my mother's support.

“What a lovely day,” Mom said, lifting her glass to her lips for a sip.

I hadn't noticed the day. Temperate weather didn't call my attention the way inclement weather did. I looked out toward the horizon, but rows of houses obscured the vanishing line.

“A perfect day,” Mom said, resting her glass back on the tray. “So, did you learn anything today?”

She referred to my sonogram appointment earlier that morning. “Looks good. Looks healthy,” I said.

“Anything poking out?”

A few months ago I had refused the sonogramist's offer to tell me the baby's sex. This refusal frustrated my mother. How was she supposed to plan? How much green and yellow could an anticipatory grandmother buy? I had refused again this morning. To me, something seemed jinxed about knowing the baby's sex and naming it before the birth, as my mother wanted to help me do. More importantly, her intense curiosity about the sex disproportionately matched her lack of curiosity about the postcards I'd been receiving. This pissed me off and firmed my resolve to not find out and to not tell her what she wanted to know.



I reached down towards the purse at my feet. My belly stopped my waist from bending, and the best I could do was grasp the handles by twisting to the side. I tossed the bag at my mother. It thudded near her feet, and she looked up at me as if I had tossed a small dwarf at her. She straightened her posture and said, “Yes? Can I help you with something?”

“I got another postcard today. It’s in the side pocket. She mailed it from Auckland. From New Zealand.”

Two years of saving bought me a trinity of chances at artificial insemination. My mother asked what was wrong with a husband. Nothing, really, I said, not stooping to point out that she’d left hers decades ago. I just didn’t want to wait. The first insemination failed. The second took. I still paid thirty-five dollars a month to freezer-store the sperm meant for the third try. The day I conceived the baby, legs spread in metal stirrups, the first postcard came. Every day since, except Sundays when the mail didn’t run, I got another. My sister Nigela, dead for fourteen years, was mailing them.

Mom did not make a move for the purse. It covered half of one of her feet, and she let it. “What’s the picture of?” she asked. Her tone of voice stayed an even chipper, not unlike June Cleaver’s, as if we were discussing a postcard Nigela mailed from a honeymoon or European backpacking trek.

“Fuck the picture, Mom. Ask me what it said.” I raised my own lemonade to my lips, giving her the chance to plan her response. She hadn’t looked at me for several minutes. I looked continuously at her.

“You’ve got quite a collage for the baby’s room, I imagine.”

That my mother was genuinely happy made me crazy. If some eavesdropper heard this exchange, he or she might incorrectly assign the moral righteousness of this conversation to me. *I was dealing with issues. She was evading.*

Not so.

I was baiting, and she was rising above. I was trying to interject anger and discomfort. She was enjoying the perfect day and her daughter's company. Her surviving daughter's company.

Nigela died in a hospital bed, tubes snaking from her body, when we were both twelve. We were identical twins: Nigela and Pamela. I watched the death, but it wasn't anything special to see. Nigela had lain in that bed, flattened by leukemia, for weeks. Truthfully, I could only tell she was dead because the machines in her room changed the tone and frequency of their noises. Otherwise, she looked the same as she had five minutes ago and five hours ago. Bald. Sunken eyes. Translucent skin. No movement.

When Nigela was diagnosed, the community-minded people who gather around the family of a terminally ill child saw me as a blessing. "You'll be able to skip donor screenings. You've got a perfect match!" When Nigela died, I became a curse. The people stopped talking to me, but I overheard them anyway. "The memory will never fade. Every time that poor woman looks at Pamela, she'll think about Nigela. The wound will never heal."

But after a few months of standard-issue grieving, my mother began to perk up. She worked in her garden and brewed tea from her own herbs. She made "dates" with me for indoor ice-skating and movies with stupidly salty, insanely buttery popcorn. Her skin, which had taken

on a pallor not unlike Nigela's, returned to a pinkish opaque, hiding the veins that had been showing in her arms.

In those days, I spent much of my time looking in the mirror for Nigela's face and listening to adults talk as they sat on couches in our living room or whispered in hallways. Mom had been put on a sort of phone tree, and a different woman was responsible for calling her every night to make sure she was "okay, seeing as how she doesn't have a man and all."

One night, I heard her say this into the phone: "I'm not going to dwell on the past. I've got one daughter left, and I'm going to spend every moment I can with her. My glass is half full."

I never forgave her this optimism, which she lived whole-heartedly. How dare she use such a trite metaphor to explain her half-alive, half-dead daughters? I'm the water in the glass, and Nigela's already been drunk? Carcinogenic lemons into goddamn lemonade? I thought Nigela deserved nothing more than the miserable bereaved. Sobbing refusals to get out of bed. I imagined myself bringing toast and juice into my mother's bedroom only to have her fling it at the wall in despair at the sight of my face, identical to Nigela's. When my mother got happy, I perceived staying angry and sad as my solemn obligation. Nigela deserved it. In the fourteen years since her death, only this pregnancy pushed some joy through the cocoon I had sealed.

The salt in the wound of these mother-daughter dynamics was Mom's tendency to be right. It was a perfect day, and I did have quite a collage for the baby's room. Two hundred and fifty two cards, each picturing a landmark from a different spot on the globe.

"Take it out, Mom, and look at what it says."

She sighed and rolled her eyes toward me, as if about to indulge a child, but her smile was kind. She pulled the bag toward her lap, fished around too long, and finally pulled out the postcard. “Oh! Look at that beach. Those trees must be quite something to sit under,” she said. I tried to bend and fiddle with the hem of my dress, as I had a habit to do pre-pregnancy, but settled for tugging at the elbows. No sense in rushing her. Did no good.

She smiled and, without a doubt, started to imagine herself sitting under those trees, a drink pulpy with fresh fruit in her hand. Did she imagine Nigela on that beach?

Finally, she turned the postcard over and read aloud, “The baby’s no good. They mixed up the sperm.”

I started talking all in a rush, repeating the same things I’d said the day before and the day before that: “It’s got to be from her. At first I thought it was a prank, but how can it be? You were the only one who knew that I’d gone to the doctor that day. Plus, every card is postmarked in the country on the front. They’ve all got foreign stamps. If someone had collected a bunch of cards and was mailing them every day, they’d all have US stamps and postmarks. How could anyone travel that fast? Every day a new city. One or two countries a week.” I started to get breathless. The baby had taken up so much space below my ribcage that I couldn’t expand my lungs to full capacity anymore. I kept talking anyway, huffing between sentences. “Plus, look at the handwriting. It’s mine. Exactly mine. Who else would have identical handwriting? And the way they come. One per day. Even if you mail one letter a day, they don’t arrive in the same order. I tried it, Mom. I went to the post office and mailed myself an envelope a day for five days. Three arrived on the same day and the others came two days later. Who could control the mail like that?”

My mother listened carefully to me. Too carefully. So carefully that the point seemed not to actually listen but to convince me that she was listening. She didn't blink. I strong-armed the chair to hoist myself up. "Sweetie, don't leave. I'm listening."

"You aren't hearing, Mom." I bent at the knees the way movers do to protect their backs and picked up my purse. My mom didn't reach out to touch me.

"Honey, my hormones were crazy when I was in your condition. I believed all sorts of things. I believed that if I took a warm bath, I'd boil you girls. I showered cold for three months."

"*Nigela is sending me postcards from the grave,*" I screamed at her from the porch steps. My face reddened, and I felt spittle on my chin. I knew it couldn't look pretty. This brought her out of her chair and to my side.

"Pamela," she said, catching my attention with my name, "I think someone's playing a horrible trick on you. Let's just focus on the new baby. You are bringing new life into the world. This baby's going to give us something to be grateful for."

I left. In the car, the baby wedged a foot into a corner of my internal organs. I explained to the baby, as best I could, that it wasn't about him or her. I just needed Mom to admit the postcards were creepy and weird, even if they were a trick. I needed her to feel sad and confused by them like I did. I stopped by the office supply store on the way home and bought ten boxes of thumbtacks and several cork bulletin boards. In my condo, I had staged the nursery in the bedroom across from mine. At Mom's suggestion, the crib lined the wall furthest from the window to keep the baby from the sun. We'd painted the walls lavender. I leveled and hung the bulletin boards on the last unoccupied wall in the room. I stayed up past midnight, tacking the

postcards one by one to the boards and telling the baby what little I knew about Venetian gondoliers, the Egyptian Sphinx, the Howler monkeys of Costa Rica and other national symbols.

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At the next day's mail run, I waited by the gangbox. My condo association included two hundred units, so to save the mail carrier time, our boxes were grouped together down the street, and called, charmingly, a gangbox. It still took the carrier, a woman with two-tone hair and smoker's wrinkles, twenty minutes to stuff all the individual boxes. I stood by, holding the underside of my belly with my palms and singing a made-up lullaby.

The moment she was done, I inserted my key into the box, opened the small door, and pulled out a flyer for air conditioning services, a light bill, an Explanation of Benefits from my last doctor's visit, and a postcard from Chile. I held the card out for the mail carrier, who was loading the empty trays into the hatchback of her car.

"Where did this come from?" I asked.

She pulled her head out of her car and took me in. Pregnant lady with unwashed hair in a long dress.

"What's the return address say?" she asked.

"There is none. Isn't it illegal to send mail without a return address?"

She looked at me again, and then, apparently figuring she was in for a talk, pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her front shirt pocket. I looked pointedly at my belly. She lit up anyway.

"It's not illegal, just discouraged."

"How do I find out who is sending these? Where are they from?"

She took a long draw and blew the smoke of her noise. It made my nose tickle.

“You’re due soon,” she said. “He’ll come back to get a look at the kid. They always want to know if it’s really theirs.”

I looked at her, not registering. I couldn’t connect her response to my question, and I could feel my anger rise. The doctor had said that the baby feels what I feel. If that’s true, the baby’s been getting angry at least once a day for its whole life. Right now the baby was angry at the she-mail carrier. I raised my voice, like I had with Mom, to make the point: “*I want to know where these are coming from.*”

The mail carrier was done with me. She flicked her cigarette into the grass and opened the driver side door. “He’ll come back,” she said as she got in and shut it.

“How do you know the baby’s a boy?” I screamed. “Why don’t you toss butts where your kids live?” I was talking to her car bumper by now, following her as she backed out of the parking spot and into the road. By the time she turned out of the neighborhood and left my field of vision, my face felt merlot-red.

\*

No one can ignore two hundred and fifty plus warnings. The daily change in the postcard’s picture seemed to emphasize the lack of change in the message. Something was wrong with the baby. The sperm got mixed up, so the baby wasn’t right. I sat at my small kitchen table and wondered what Nigela wanted me to do. I sipped decaffeinated Earl Gray.

Maybe she wanted me to abort. But in the first trimester when an abortion was possible, I didn’t actually believe the cards came from her. Like Mom, I figured some crackpot had gone cruel. In the second trimester, when I started to believe, I asked the doctor to run any and every test my insurance would pay for. Sonograms and amniotic fluid revealed a healthy fetus. Plus,

something had been wrong with Nigela. She'd been predisposed to cancer even when her identical twin wasn't. What's worse? Down's syndrome? The baby's a little slow and has wide-set eyes? I could handle that. In the third trimester, I began to think this wasn't about the baby at all. This was about Nigela.

When we were born, my mother gave Nigela the better name. Everyone's heard of Pamela; it's familiar. No one's heard of Nigela. A person with that name must be exotic and interesting, someone to get to know. Our names were so similar, three syllables each and three sequence letters in common, yet they also had three distinct letters and different accent syllables. My name, with its emphasis on the first syllable, could be shortened into boring Pam. Nigela, accent on the second, could be nothing but Nigela. Like everything else, terminal illness suited her uniqueness. Cards and flowers. Visits from newspaper reporters. Banners bearing her name hung over thresholds. Even in the healthy days between her birth day and getting sick, Nigela always had the edge that I didn't, despite our identicalness. In the face of our identicalness. In the face of our identical faces. Who describes one identical twin as unique?

Both the geographical proximity of the cards and my due date became closer. The cards moved up through Central America, then to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, the Florida Keys, then on to Florida proper and the southern states. I thought of vultures circling a carcass and sharks surrounding a wounded fish that leaked blood into the water. These were false images, I told myself. I'd seen sharks that didn't circle.

The only man my mother dated during our childhood, for six months, organized a trip to Orlando. Theme parks on him. Day three was Sea World, and Nigela and I loved it. We planned



careers in marine biology and vowed to never drive speed boats through manatee-occupied waters.

“Shark Encounter,” Nigela said, looking at a map of the park. “Let’s do the Shark Encounter next.”

To get to the indoor aquarium holding the large sharks, we had to walk over a small bridge covering an open pool of water. White gravel covered the pool’s bottom and contrasted with the darkly colored sharks swimming the edges. There were at least two dozen, each about a foot long. We froze on the bridge, fascinated.

“Sharks are beautiful,” Nigela said. “Look how smooth.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They are definitely the smoothest things we’ve seen today.”

I can’t remember exactly how old we were on this Sea World trip. At times, my memory places us tiny, around six, and at other times, I remember us as older, nine or ten, but Nigela would have been diagnosed by then. Perhaps her cancer of the blood already existed on this day. Perhaps not.

I do remember exactly what she was wearing because her outfit was about to get all wet. Mom had never dressed us alike. We weren’t dolls, she would say, although I often wished to be wearing exactly what Nigela did, as if that might combat the gaping differences I saw between us. Nigela had matched red corduroy pants with a pink T-shirt bearing a strawberry. A red bow tied back her hair.

“Want a closer look at the sharks?” Mom’s date asked.

We answered yes and Mom answered no at the same time.

“It’s okay, Jean. They aren’t that heavy. I can hold them.”

He started with Nigela, of course, slipping his hands under her armpits and pulling her off the ground. I saw her wince. She hiked her legs over the low railing on the bridge and dangled above the water. Truthfully, she wasn't any closer to the sharks than she had been on the bridge. In fact, she probably had a harder time seeing because she needed to look straight down, which she did for the ten seconds before she slipped out of the date's grasp and into the pool.

The fuss became monumental. Everyone standing around the pool gasped at the splash. A uniformed teenager rescued Nigela, and park officials brought us to the "employee only" area for interviews. Nigela was given a free stuffed Shamu doll before we were all ejected from the park. I held her hand. The next day's newspaper even ran a story about the man who dropped his daughter into a shark tank and how the daughter came out of her near-death episode unscathed.

I hadn't gotten nervous the whole time because it was Nigela and she would be alright. I kept my eyes steady on the pool and saw what really happened: Nigela stood for a minute in water not even knee deep while the baby sharks scattered as far from her as the tank would allow. She didn't touch anything except cold water.

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My water had to be broken by the doctor. I was hoping for a public place, something dramatic that would make the people around me yell, "Call for an ambulance. This lady's having a baby." No such luck. Contractions started one evening after dinner, and when I called my mom, she suggested I take a shower.

"You don't know when you'll get to take another," she said. "By the time you're done, I'll be over."

It seemed so mundane, but I took the shower, and, of course, she was right. I felt grateful for it later. She used her key to let herself into my condo while I tried to shimmy into elephantine underpants. One lesson learned by families with terminally ill members is that modesty wastes two precious resources: energy and time. Mom walked right up to me, grabbed the elastic waist band, and pulled my panties up.

“How far apart?” she asked as she worked.

“Far — more than ten minutes,” I said. “We’ve got time.”

“How bad on a scale of one to ten?”

“I’d like to think seven, but I’m guessing four.” That made her smile, and she spared me any comparisons to her own birthing experience times two. I remembered again how she’d always been a pretty good mom. Then I called my doctor who said to come in at seven minutes apart. Mom packed the small suitcase that I’d thus far avoided and herded me into the car at eight minutes.

“Let’s check the mail on the way out,” I said. That seemed to actually, genuinely piss her off. No polite annoyance. I could tell because she responded not with words but with the silent gesture of raised eyebrows. Her neck colored. “Come on — I felt too tired to waddle up there today,” I argued. A contraction built pain in my uterus while I pretended otherwise. “You told me to do regular stuff, to take a shower.”

She put the car in reverse and drove to the gangbox. I clutched my mailbox key and worked to get leverage enough to hoist myself out of the car. “Honestly,” I heard Mom say to the back of my head. She pulled the key out of my hand and hopped out of the car with the mobility

of the un-pregnant. When she came back, she tossed the mail at me, I think more forcefully than she intended, and quickly bent to pick it up from the floorboard.

Today's postcard was mailed from Chattanooga, a city about three hours away for a lead-foot. I spent too much time examining the Chattanooga aquarium pictured on the card's front with its red brick exterior and triangular glass roof.

"Well, read it since you made me get it," Mom said. She drove carefully, signals on well before turns, double mirror checks before lane changes.

I flipped it over and read aloud: "Today's the day. Give it away without looking at it." I sat back in my seat, lightly stunned like a recently-slapped hysteric. This card had a new message after so many days of the same. Mom, while keeping her eyes on the road, pulled the card from my hand and ripped it. I didn't protest. The card had an anesthetizing effect on me, and as my contractions came during the ride and the seven more hours of hospital-bed labor, I didn't protest them either. I didn't whine or cry or ask for drugs or theatrically curse the anonymous donor who'd done this to me. When the pain came, I just felt it the same way I had been working, for so many years, to feel the pain of Nigela's death.

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"We should have a party," Mom said. Nigela and I sat on rockers on the porch. We were ten. Nigela would die in about two years, but on that day and for the past few months, she'd been doing well.

"What? A remission party?" Nigela said, rolling her eyes.

"No," Mom said, although her quick answer made me think she'd envisioned exactly that. "A birthday party."

“Our birthday has been over for two months,” I said. “We won’t be eleven for almost a whole ‘nother year.” I rocked my chair hard.

“Yeah,” Nigela said. “Wouldn’t be smart to assume I’ll make it to eleven.”

“Nigela,” Mom snapped. I laughed. Before Nigela died, I never really thought she would. Nigela and I made fun of her cancer daily. It seemed so stupid, so arbitrary, so much like bullshit, for which my own identical, healthy existence provided proof. Even when Nigela lay in hospital beds, we treated it like an elaborate hoax she had managed to pull on all the adults while only she and I knew the secret.

“Well, we *don’t* know,” Nigela said with a false earnestness that kept me stifling giggles. “Dr. Nye said to treat every day of remission like I’ll relapse tomorrow.”

“Exactly,” Mom said, avoiding the bait. “That’s why we need a party.” She looked at me, Nigela’s willing shadow. “We need two parties. Two girls and two parties. We’ll party all weekend, once on Saturday and again on Sunday. It’ll be like a festival.”

That idea was interesting enough to calm me down. Mom went into the house, came out with a pen and notebook, and sat down on the wooden planks of the porch so that Nigela and I looked down on her from our high-backed rockers. She took dictation about color schemes and game preferences. Nigela dropped her cancer act and specified a horse motif with parrots as a back up. I matched purple with green. Nigela preferred Sprite to 7-Up. My cake should be anything but carrot.

On Sunday, six days later, the three of us sat in folding chairs in the living room. A dozen other unoccupied chairs surrounded us. Purple and green balloons and streamers littered the room, and a chocolate sheet-cake iced with the words *You Are Special Pamela* slowly dried out

on a corner table. Nigela's party on Saturday had been a true celebration – a noisy chaos of friends that bestowed the blessing all terminally ill people covet: complete distraction. I went most of her day without even thinking the word remission, let alone the word cancer. The next day, no one had come back for my half of the festival.

“It's not about you,” Mom said. “This is my mistake. My fault. I should have known people would be too tired to come back a second day.” I could see her own exhaustion. She'd let us sleep on the coach while she took down all Nigela's blue and gold in exchange for my colors. She'd baked a new cake. Dark half-moons hung below her eyes. I looked over at Nigela. She looked just a little tired but also blissed out with a small smile and shining eyes, no doubt with memories of her day. She caught me looking.

“Oh, yeah, Pam. It's not about you. It's just that I went first. If you took Saturday, then nobody would come back for me.”

“Fuck you,” I said, shocking them both but not myself. I'd thought those words many times before. “You would have never let me have Saturday. I'm always going to be Sunday whether you are in remission or not.” I got out of my chair and headed for the stairs. I turned around and kicked my chair over so that it made a hollow metal clang against the floor.

After half an hour of pacing my room, I felt sick in my stomach, like I had drunk something bitter and sour. I cried for a while. I washed my face and waited a just a little longer until the redness faded from my cheeks, and then I walked back downstairs.

Nigela and my mom were dancing in a type of mime, without music. I saw two paper plates on the seats of their chairs with used forks and cake crumbs on them. They had cut me a piece of cake and placed it on my chair. They hadn't turned on the music for my sake.

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Late in the night of my labor, after midnight, a nurse came in, fingered my cervix, and told me I was dilated enough to push. I could take a minute to gather myself, if I wanted, and call her back when I felt ready. I wanted the minute.

“Mom,” I said. She stood right at my bedside, though I called to her as if she were down the hallway. The sky had gone dark, and the only lights came from glowing machines monitoring my contractions and the baby’s heart rate. I had asked the staff to turn off the overhead fluorescents. I’d asked them, back then, to turn the lights off for Nigela but was told the doctors needed to see properly, even though they only checked on her for a few minutes every couple of hours.

“Who do you think is sending the cards?” I asked her. I felt tired and jittery and unsure about most things, including whether I wanted to push out the boy or girl inside of me.

“Now’s not the time,” she said.

“Now is exactly the time. I need to know.”

“Shit, Pamela.” Her genuine anger flashed again. “You are about to have a baby. Focus on that.”

I thought if I needed her a bit more, she might actually tell me something, but my mother’s moment of weakness timed exactly with my own. I could no longer give my attention to anything but the massive pressure, a leaden watermelon, forcing itself down on my pelvis. I started to push, and Mom rang for the nurse.

“Wait, wait,” the nurse said, running in as I strained. “You’ve got to wait until you are contracting or you’ll just push yourself a bunch of hemorrhoids.” I got the hang of it — when to

push and how to hold my own knees — and did “just fine” as the nurses kept telling me. After five long contractions and count-to-ten pushes, I asked my mom how it was going. She stood just below my knee and watched the whole thing.

“Beautiful, Pamela,” she said, her voice shaky enough to make me look at her face and see eyes wet with joyful tears. “Your vagina looks just like a fruit. A beautiful, red pomegranate.” I laughed, which made me lose my breath, which in turn made me refocus.

The trick to birthing a baby is getting out the head and shoulders. That’s all I had to do. My OB/GYN slipped into the room at the last moment as the other three-fourths of my child slipped out of me in a big, wet gush. Then the baby was there in the room with me, and I could see him. I called my son Cory.

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For the three days of my hospital stay, I had everyone who walked into my room, medical personnel as well as laymen and laywomen, check the baby eyelash to toenail. At my insistence, we went for weekly check-ups after our discharge. His pediatrician finally had to sit me down at the big desk, meant for intimidation, to explain that insurance would shortly start rejecting so many claims filed on behalf of a healthy child.

That last card from Chattanooga really was the last card. I taped its halves together and thumb-tacked it to Cory’s wall, making the collection complete. As Cory learned to focus his eyes, he would be focusing on a collage of postcards prophesying his demise, but that didn’t frighten me. Never once during my pregnancy or his birth did I consider following the cards’ advice. I always knew I’d look at my son. I’d keep him and sit by his bed side through any horrific malady inherited through a sperm mix-up, or inherited from his deceased aunt Nigela.



I asked Mom about the cards only once more when we had Cory's half-year-old birthday party. It was just the three of us; we didn't send out invitations. We didn't need any party guests. She made the baby two cakes, one to taste and one to play with, neither carrot.

"Maybe Nigela sent them," she said, trying to answer me in earnest for the first time.

"You think so? How could she?"

"I don't know." Cory sat on her lap, blue and pink frosting dotting his face, hands, and onesie as if a painter had flicked loaded brushes at him. She paused and said thoughtfully, "No, Nigela couldn't have."

"So who did?"

"I don't know."

"Mom, there's got to be an answer. Why did these things come to me?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. I looked at her, incredulous, and prepared to launch into a retort. She stopped me before I could start. "It just doesn't matter because we can't know the answer." She paused again and then said something she clearly didn't want to. "We can't know why Nigela died and you lived. We can only know certain, very specific things. A lot of those things are terrible, heartbreaking things." A great relief washed over me just to hear my mother acknowledge that heartache existed in her world. Mom moved Cory closer to his two cakes, so he could mash a hand back into each. Looking at him, she said, "But some aren't."

## **Vita**

Emily Dziuban was born in Orlando, Florida and received her B.A. in English from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. She completed an M.A. in English from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.