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Snap

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Snap

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, Theatre, and Communication Arts

Creative Writing

by

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Abstract

The term 'snap' can be defined as breaking under tension as well as a sudden sharp noise. Both definitions lend themselves to the content of this short story collection and its theme of self-realization (the awakening from an illusionary self-identity or ego).

Snap is a progression of stories that revolves around waking up. Novels such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, and Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* have all examined the issue of finding identity through a breaking of the protagonist. In each case, the protagonists come to a point where they completely separate themselves from their identity, and thus are able to see themselves from a new perspective.

Snap further explores the issue of finding identity. However, unlike many postmodern predecessors it tries to give answers. The collection reveals that while we are individuals engaged in an internal struggle we are also connected to one another.

Fiction; Short Story; Writing; Collection; Identity; Self-realization; Awakening

36 Chambers

We've been telling stories on rooftops. Paige brings the pillows. I carry the blankets. We make a bed on the flat concrete and talk for hours. Paige says she's house-sitting. I don't know if I believe her. In the last week we've gone to three different rooftops all of which were suspect. Secretly, I think they are the homes of ex-lover's and she's made copies of the front door key.

Tonight, a canopy of clouds drizzles. We pull the sheets over our heads to hide. Even though it's dark in our catacomb I can still see her eyes mirroring me watching her. "A boy became a heroin addict because of me," she says. "At least that's what he told everyone." Her legs intertwine with mine and I can feel her pajamas against my skin. "He started shooting drugs because I wouldn't sleep with him. Then a year later I told him he should stop. So, he went to rehab. He thought if he cleaned up I'd fall for him." Her hair is a mess of black strands crisscrossing her nose. I'm thinking what animal she might be if she wasn't a girl.

"I smell meat," I say. "Are they barbecuing next door?" She pounces on me and claws my side. Of course they're grilling, she tells me. The neighbors are well known cannibals. At night they go from roof to roof searching for couples lying under sheets. I ask her if she could eat someone's arm. She answers yes. I try to pull away from her but she's straddling me and holding down my wrists. I suppose I could eat someone too. It's the chopping up of the body that would be the difficult part. "You chop up chicken," she says. "What's the difference?"

We rearrange our bodies. I pull her hands around my waist. She locks the arch of her foot with mine. I tell her about a town I lived in when I was thirteen. How it was so small that they named the main street Front Street because it only had buildings on one side. I tell her how I used to walk that street, like all the other kids my age, hoping that someone with a car would pick me up and take me to the gravel pits where the party always seemed to be going on during the weekends. I tell her about the middle-aged man who pulled up alongside me and asked me if I wanted a ride and how I was stupid enough to get in his truck.

He told me he had a motel room up the road. "There's a pink bellied girl there. She'll jump your bones if I tell her." He had a scar on his forehead. I thought the indentation looked like a closed eye. At the stoplight he turned towards me and I swear I saw that eye blink at me.

I told him I didn't have any money except the twelve dollars my mom had given me earlier. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll pay you." His feet worked the gears with a certain finesse and his hand glided over the steering wheel like he was caressing skin. At the Shell Station he told me to wait while he ran in and bought some beer. I told him I would, but as soon as he passed by the register I jumped out of the cab and bolted up the street. I didn't stop until I found some kids my age sitting on the curb, sucking down bottles of pop.

Paige leans her head back to see if I'm lying. Her legs are woven between mine again and her hand is on my shoulder. "You were thirteen?" she asks. I nod. "When I was that age," she says, "I used to hang out with a boy like you. He started doing hard drugs because I wouldn't love him." "You told me that ten minutes ago." "You never let me finish." I drag my fingers down her back and tell her to go on. "He left the country in the end. Whispered in my ear that I was a cunt and then I never saw him again. People say he killed himself because of me. I think he's out there lurking somewhere."

Like Paige, I've been haunted. A friend shot herself in the head when I was thirteen and her ghost has been stalking me ever since. A couple of years ago I tried to piece things together by writing poetry. I have a tendency to confuse memory with events that haven't happened yet and I thought if I could write the perfect poem about her death all

would become clear and her ghost would leave me alone. But my scribbled words didn't seem to help. After a while I became so obsessed with the idea of being haunted that I had to leave the town where we'd grown up together.

I sold everything I owned, caught a freighter across the Atlantic, and moved into a cheap hotel in a violent part of Perpignan, France. I say violent because nine months before I arrived a man had been beaten to death, in public, around the corner from my new place. His death started riots and fire bombings; the neighborhood never really recovered from this.

I spent my days writing poetry in cafes. I probably pissed off a lot of waiters because I'd order one espresso in the early hours and then sit there until noon before ordering another one. I didn't care. I was creating art.

One night, I was talking about it with an artist friend named Solomon. (His name was actually Bo, I found out years later.) We were drunk and hiding in the entrance to the tunnels under the city. Earlier I'd attacked a guy and beat him with a scooter chain. So we were waiting out the ride home until we thought the police had cleared out. Sitting there I tried to explain my problem, how everything I wrote ended up being about me instead of about her.

He grunted. "There are only thirty-six *chambre* not forty-two." "No, no," I said, "*Je pense* forty-two." "No," he said, "Only thirty-six." We were groggy and cold, but he took his sketch book from his back pocket and began drawing a tower surrounded by thirty-six windows. "You remember Ron?" he asked. Of course I did. I'd recently attended his wedding. "Well, before Ron got married he worked in a prison. They put him up in a tower where he could see everything." Solomon moved the pencil in quick motions. A fence here, a loop of barbed wire there. "If an inmate stepped out of line Ron would yell at him over the intercom. 'Get your ass on this side of the yellow line,' or 'Get on the ground before I shoot you.' He enjoyed directing their lives, telling them what they could do."

Solomon flipped to a clean sheet and began drawing a concrete table. "When a riot broke out he was the first guard the inmates went for. They pulled him out of his tower, sat him up on a table, and handed him a steel pipe. 'Break your knee cap,' one of them said. Ron answered with petty threats and ordered them to stand down. 'Break

it or we'll shank you in the neck.' He started pleading with them, but nothing changed their minds. Slowly, he realized he didn't have a choice. As the noon sun beat down he held the pipe above his head and then swung. His leg snapped under the weight. Part of the bone ripped through his pants. 'Good,' one of them said. 'Now your elbow.'

Solomon drew out the event on the page adding in each broken limb as he described it. Finally I cut in and asked him what this had to do with my poems and creating art. "Everything." He turned the page back to the picture of the prison with the thirty-six cells. "Ron couldn't reflect their truth. He filtered what he saw through his own fear." "How do you know that?" I asked. "Look, there's the tower and there are thirty-six chambers around it." "No," I said, "there are only seventeen." I reached over and tried to smudge part of the drawing, but even as I did so I knew Solomon was right.

A couple of weeks from now I'll talk to my brother about it. We'll be at an old age home waiting for our grandmother to die. A number of tubes and wires will shove food and water into her body. I'll think that someone should pull the plug, but her Alzheimer's will be so bad that she won't know who I am or what I'm trying to get at when I ask her if she'd just rather die.

My brother will tell me that they are already planning the memorial service even though she's hasn't croaked yet, and that our dad wants me to read a poem. I'll tell him I think it's strange that they want me to do it. Not because I have a relatively small connection with Grams, but because I'm not the gifted one.

"It's funny all of us going to art school," I'll say. "I'm doing creative writing, Jasmine is working on ceramics, Elizabeth is studying ballet, and dad just started taking classes at a photography school." We'll stroll down a long pristine hallway towards the exit for a smoke. "I mean think about it. When you were a kid you could play piano after a couple of lessons. You started painting and drawing without anyone telling you what to do. You're the one with the gift. You're the one they should be asking to read this poem, but you gave up on saving the world a long time ago."

He'll stop and look at me. I'll fumble through my pockets and take out a cigarette for us to share. "You want to know how I save the world?" he'll ask. I won't really want

to know, but I'll nod. "Through my son," he'll say. "I try to be a good dad. And I hope one day he'll grow up and make this place better."

I'll take a long pull on the cigarette and pass it to my brother. I'll know what he is trying to say, but I'll also know that what he's talking about doesn't apply to me. I'll know that every relationship that has come my way I've quickly sabotaged.

The last girlfriend I can remember is Mittie, an English girl, with a thick northern accent. We've lived together in Granada, Spain for almost three years. She's the girl I should marry. She knows four languages fluently, doesn't mind translating my poems, and is stunning.

"You need to get a fucking job," she says, one evening, "and move us somewhere decent." "We live in the Albaicín," I say, taking a pull from my bottle. "Lorca lived here. What more could anyone want?" "Fuck Lorca," she says, "You'll never be Lorca. Your writing's shit." "My work is shit?" I ask. "I'm shit?" I eye her from across the table. She is still yelling but I can't hear her. As her mouth forms vulgarities I take my beer bottle and empty it over her head. She becomes still. I move my stare from the shock on her face to the past, to a pub where we first met in Perpignan. My gaze lingers on figures leaning into the bar before peering into the future, to a café where I'll have dinner with her and her new boyfriend. He'll be a bit jealous but it'll be uncalled for. She will have given up on me a long time ago.

Step back, out of my Spanish apartment, past the fountain in the cobblestone courtyard, to a time when I stumbled out of the Mumbai airport with a bandage on my forehead. It was around midnight, and the world was raw. I felt the fear in my gut as I stepped into the taxi. I could disappear here, I thought, and no one would ever know. It was as if there was no barrier between me and the world, like the veil had been peeled away and I could finally see. The taxi barreled down the road and I knew I could reach out and touch anything or anyone and they could reach in and grab me by the throat.

The driver asked me all the usual questions. Where I was from? Was this my first time in Mumbai? Did I need anything, anything at all? "You can buy everything in India: girls, hashish, a new liver. Everything is for sale." I told him I just wanted to get

to my hotel and pass out. I wasn't feeling so well. "Yes, of course," he said. "It can wait until tomorrow. I'll come by in the morning." The car pulled in front of a darkened building and came to a stop. He peered at me in the rearview mirror.

The next morning he was waiting for me in front of my hotel. He had a large wad of *paan* in his mouth and was using the sidewalk as a spittoon. "Where do you want to go today?" I didn't know what to say. I hadn't expected him to be there. Actually, I had, but I guess I hoped he wouldn't keep his promise. "You must be hungry," he said. "I know a place." He led me a couple of blocks down the street and into a dark cafe. We sat in a booth with a fan spinning only inches above our heads. He rattled off something to the waiter and soon the table was filled with an assortment of dishes. "So, why did you come to India?" he asked. "What are you looking for?" I tried to explain that I was a writer and I had come simply to do research for a book of esoteric poetry I was writing. He took a glob of *palak* sauce and mixed it with rice. "No," he reiterated, "what are you looking for?" I stared at him perplexed.

"Let me tell you a story and maybe you'll understand." He broke off a piece of chapati and shoved it in his mouth. "I was born on New Year's Day. But I never liked sharing my birthday. I wanted a separate day, one where my family only celebrated my birth. So, I had it changed. It cost a lot of money, but now my birthday is on the fourteenth of January." I took a sip of the milk tea sitting in front of me and nodded my head. "Anything is possible here," he said. "That's why I ask what you search for."

I thought about the question. I thought about buying someone else's liver. I thought about buying lungs and a new stomach, one that was better acclimated to spicy food. I thought about buying a new nose, and mouth, and eyes. My forehead itched. I reached up to the bandage and scratched. Maybe it could work in reverse. I could sell off pieces of myself, a toe, a pinky, my hands. Maybe when I flew back home I would do it in ziplock bags, and each freezer bag would contain a different piece of me. Thirty-six plastic bags, to be precise.

"Tell me," he said, "what happened to your head? The bandage?"

I glanced up at the fan blades chopping the air and then I looked him in the face and began to lie. I told him about a speed boat accident that had happened off the coast of Crete and how I'd jumped from the boat before it smashed against a rocky cliff.

I told him about the nurse at the hospital and how she didn't speak English, but somehow we had communicated through our eyes. I wove my tale through the air with tiny threads until he smiled and signaled, with a wobble of his head, that everything I was saying was true.

Paige and I are parading down the street. It's raining again and we're drunk. I tell her I feel like we're being followed, that an apparition is hovering behind us. She peers over her shoulder down the unlit street. "It's like being stalked by an ex-girlfriend," I say.

We park ourselves on metal stools in front of a taco cart. The rain pours off the awning onto my back, into her hair. The drops slide down her face like falling freckles. "Tell me a story," I say. "Is that tongue?" she asks, pointing to the grill. We've become accustomed to eating mouth parts: gum lines and lips, probably because we've never kissed. The cook tosses the meat on a wooden block and chops it into tiny bits. "Tell me about the future," I say. She stands high on her stool and calls over the glass counter top, "*Cuatro gringas con lengua por favor.*" Minutes later a plate filled with tacos and grilled onions appears in front of us. We gorge ourselves on meat and sip ginger-laced mescal from plastic tumblers.

"In the future," she begins, "you'll be on your way to Bucerias. And you'll meet a witch on the bus. It'll be an old bus. Not one of those fancy newer ones. She'll sit down right next to you and a few hours later you'll find yourself back at her house. You won't know how you got there, just that you can't leave. During brief periods of lucidity you'll try to escape. But every time she finds you sneaking out a window or scaling down the south wall she'll wave a chicken bone in front of your nose and you'll forget all about leaving." Paige pulls her hood over her head. Her nose looks crooked, but her eyes are dazzling. I can't help but shift around in my seat and place my hand on the bare skin between the top of her boots and the hem of her dress.

"Then one night she'll strip you naked and lay you on the kitchen table. You'll hear an incantation as she hovers above you sharpening a boning knife. She'll surround you with ointments and herbs, cracked stones, and insect carcasses. They'll be in jars and bowls all around your head and torso. She'll apply a chalk white powder to your forehead and chest, to the bottom of your feet and palms. Right when the

ointment starts to work on your nervous system she'll bring the knife down and carve into the place between your eyes, right above your nose. You'll try to scream, but it will get caught in your throat. She'll ask, 'what's wrong? Now you can see.'

Beef sizzles. The cleaver hacks against the wooden block. My fingers paw the plate for more tongue. "Listen to me," she says, "I'm telling you your future."

Step backwards off the metal stool, into the street, down the road, and find me at a wedding reception. It's held at an estate in the middle of winter. A night wedding in the snow. Solomon sits across from me. It's our first time meeting. A heat lamp towering above him casts a warm glow down on his pasty face. His suit is a size too large and hangs off his slight frame. I don't know if he's a friend of the bride or groom. I'm not even sure about myself. All I know is that we've been placed in the farthest seats from the bridal table. From our position on the lawn the bride and groom are blurry black and white forms.

Two stubby glasses of whiskey arrive. I hold mine up to toast. "I'll kill you Ron," Solomon says, staring past me at the groom. "Do you hear me Ron? I'll fucking kill you." His voice becomes louder. I'm starting to understand why they put us as far away as possible. We can't even hear the best man's speech from here. Solomon slugs back his whiskey and snorts a laugh. "I gave them an oil painting of them together as a wedding gift," he tells me. I've seen the painting he's talking about. Forms bleed together in violent sexual acts. Circles and lines connect the fragmented figures like nooses and nails. "That *puta* said it was beautiful," he says, nodding at the bride. "What the fuck does she know?" I lean back in my chair, and give him a look like I don't know what he's talking about. "I'll fucking kill you Ron." He flings his arm back smacking the heat lamp. It topples over and hisses in the snow. He studies the heater for a second and then crosses his legs and props his feet on the metal hood.

"One day, he'll see," Solomon says. "He'll see he's married a whore." He rubs his palms together and then holds them out towards the heater. "You watch that slut will screw him over." I sip my whiskey while pointing at his legs. "I think your pants are on fire." He looks down at the smoke and then springs out of his chair. Flames move up the side of his leg. He hops from one foot to the other as if he can step out of his

clothes. "Look at me Ron," he yells. "I see you." His eyes are wide like a camera lens. "I see you, Ron. You're sitting in the thirty-third chamber."

Two years from now I'll call my brother from a phone booth at a bus station. He won't pick up the first few times. I'll run out of pesos after three messages. And I'll have to buy a pack of cigarettes in order to get more change. On the fourth call, he'll pick up and say, "Stop ringing my phone." I'll try to sound normal, but my words will be shaky. "Hey brother-man." I'll pack the Marlboro box against a red plaster wall. "You woke up the baby," he'll say. "It's going to take me hours to get her back to sleep." "Use the whiskey trick," I'll tell him. "Pour a bit of Jim Beam on your finger and run it along her gum line." "Why are you calling me?" The voice coming from the bus station intercom will announce that the bus for Bucerias is now ready to board. "*Subido por favor a línea amarilla.*" I'll glance across the street at the taco stand. Its bright bare bulbs a beacon for travelers.

"How was the funeral?" I'll ask. My brother will be sitting on the edge of his bed with a baby tucked against his chest. "What funeral, Grandma's? That was over a year ago." A sigh will come from the bottom of my chest, cross thousands of miles of cable, and echo in his ear. "Describe it to me."

He'll be silent for a moment and then begin. "All the grandkids were pallbearers. Lindsey had to take your spot." "Who?" "Lindsey, our cousin." "The pregnant one?" "Yeah, she was pregnant at the funeral. She had her baby a couple of months ago." I'll hear my brother's second child in the background squealing. I'll know I should feel bad for waking her, but I won't. "The whole time I was carrying the coffin," my brother will continue, "I was scared she was going to drop it. You've seen her. She's only seventeen and not very big." I'll pop a smoke in my mouth and light it. "I never cried," I'll tell him. "I still haven't." I'll hear my brother's wife in the background whispering, "Tell him not to call here anymore." I'll listen to my brother whisper back, "Go to sleep. I'll take care of the baby." I'll hear myself whisper, "I don't know if I can cry."

I pat my pockets, searching for the last time I saw Mittie. We were at the Granada airport. I'd double parked out front. "When is the next plane to Sheffield?" I ask the

man behind the desk. "I'm not going to England," she says. "Well," I say, "you can't stay here." I turn back to the man behind the desk. "One ticket to Sheffield." He clicks a few keys and then smiles. "*¿efectivo o crédito?*"

A long line snakes up to the check-in desk. I clutch her ticket in one hand and push the luggage cart with the other. "You can't make me leave." She has on her red dress, a small tight number that shouldn't be allowed out of our bedroom. I take one last peek at her half-exposed chest and then waddle a few steps closer to the counter. She isn't wearing a bra, probably hasn't bothered to put on panties either. I used to find this ease of access exciting. Shoving her into the bedroom and tearing off the one piece of clothing between me and her. But I haven't done anything like that in a long time. I push the cart an inch and take a deep breath.

"I know about her," she says, smirking. "I read your diary." She doesn't have any idea I've known about her browsing through my journal since the first time I stepped out of the shower last year and saw it out of place. I push the cart up to the counter and load the luggage onto the scale. "Who is she?" she asks. "When did you meet her?" "Just give him your ID." She pulls a face like a spoiled child who has the upper hand on her parents. I take her purse off the cart and rummage around until I find her EU card. "I told you I'm not getting on this plane." The man behind the counter looks from me to her. I hand him the ID and wait.

At the security check I give her the boarding pass. She tries not to take it, but I force it into her hand. "I met someone too," she says, lingering in front of the corral entrance. "He wants me to move in with him." I look towards the double doors trying to see if my car has been towed yet. "We didn't have sex. He's really persistent too." I believe her. We've spent less and less time in the apartment together. She's always out under the pretext of teaching English to students. Sometimes she goes out at 10 o'clock at night to instruct them. "I need to get going," I say. Her face sinks as the reality of the situation finally sets in. "You're going to her?" she asks.

"There isn't anyone," I say.

"I read your dairy. You talk about her all the time. Paige this. Paige that. You even use her name in your fucking stories." Her dress hangs off her limp shoulders like a wilted flower. "Does she know you obsess about her?" I should tell her the truth.

Things might be easier that way. If she knew Paige was only in my head, an idealized woman I search for. If she knew I'd named her Paige because it was the name of a girl who killed herself when I was thirteen. If she knew she might forgive me for my fictitious infidelity. But I don't say anything. I take her by the wrist and guide her through the corral up to the metal detector.

After she passes through security, and collects her purse, I leave. There isn't any lingering stare. I don't call to her, or wave, or smile. I walk outside, get in the rental van, and drive towards Perpignan. I drive and drive until my arms are shaking and I can't do it any more.

In Mumbai I let the taxi driver do the driving. Sometimes I sit in the front seat all afternoon while he picks up fares and drives them across the city. I've learned that he tells foreigners, like me, that his name is Bobbish but amongst the other cab drivers he is always greeted as Kuma. I never ask why. I figure the less I know the better. A couple of times he gets calls on his cell phone. The ring tone, a Hindi version of "Dancing Queen," makes me want to punch out a car tail-light. Immediately he turns the cab around and drives me to my hotel. "It's too hot," he tells me. "You should stay inside where it's cool. I'll come by later." Sometimes he comes back in the evening, other times I am left to my own devices. I usually drink a couple of beers after dinner and then I wander the streets sneaking peeks through doorways and windows, trying to piece together what I see. Sacks of red powders, aluminum trinkets, men wearing loose-fitting kurtas.

I make arrangements with the driver to take me to an ashram a couple of hours outside of the city. It is said that the guru who runs the place prescribes group sex to those practitioners who are ill. I intend to present myself as a journalist and interview him. The only other thing I needed to do is get an HIV test in order to be allowed on the premises.

As the taxi driver cruises down the windy road I sip on a King's pilsner in the backseat. A high alcohol content could ruin the blood test, I think. I keep on sucking back the formaldehyde flavored beer anyway. I stocked up before we left but the heat has gotten the best of most of my supply. Feeling each of the bottles, by my feet, I

come to the conclusion that we will have to stop to replenish soon. “Did you get me the syringes?” I ask him. He pops open the glove compartment and hands me a paper bag. “These are new?” I ask. He assured me they are. They’re not wrapped in anything, he tells me, because the clinic buys them in bulk. I scratch the tattered bandage on my forehead and stare out the window. It’s ten in the morning but the field seems dark. Day and night have combined into one.

“This guru you’re going to see,” he says. “He can’t help you.” I look from the field to the rearview mirror. His eyes pop from the mirror as if his head is leaning out of the glass towards me. “All these holy men and ashrams are fakes,” he continues, “It’s for money.” He’s probably right. Over the last few weeks I haven’t met anyone remarkable. Memorable, yes. But a real guru, no. In a stony enclave north of Mumbai I met with a man who told his followers to cuddle dolls. It was difficult not to laugh when I arrived. Sitting on the floor were all these middle-aged men hugging stuffed animals to their chests. They did this all nonchalantly, carrying on conversations and drinking coffee while clutching furry giraffes and elephants.

“Let me tell you a story,” the driver says. “When I was a boy we had a man come to the house, asking for alms. He said he was a holy man traveling through the south. To prove his worthiness he took a long sword from his belt and held it up. I remember it being a sunny day. Very bright in the courtyard. We all made a circle around him. Then he tilted his head back and slid the end of the sword into his mouth. Slowly, with both hands, he fed the blade into his throat.” The open fields end, replaced by banyan trees twisting their branches above the road. The bark gleams white as if it is bathed in moonlight.

“I’d never seen anything like it,” he continues. “We all gasped when the sword was fully down his throat. He held it there for almost a minute before he started to pull it out. When it was half-way removed a loud squawk came from above us. We all looked up to see a vulture landing on the top of one of the columns. Even the holy man turned his head and looked. I don’t think any of us had ever seen a vulture before. When we turned our attention back to the holy man, blood was gurgling in his mouth. He fell to the ground grabbing at his throat. The vulture swooped down and started pecking at his cheek as he died.” The driver ends his story with a nostalgic sigh. I guzzle the rest of

my King's in one pull and cough. "Stop up here." I point through the darkness to a roadside stand. "I think I know who can help you," he says. "Beer, now," I say. "There's a man in Mumbai who can tell you who you need to speak to." I toss my empty bottle out the window. It shatters into pieces. "Here," I say, "stop here."

The first night I kissed Paige she vomited. We'd snuck away from a banquet and gone up to the roof. I was a bit drunk and tripped over a turret. As I fell our mouths collided. After she'd pulled away she heaved on the brick floor. I chastised myself while crawling over to the skylight. Stupid. Just destroy everything. Sabotage it. Piss on it. I laid on window and peered down at the long table below the chandelier.

We'd been invited by the host earlier in the week. I say we, but it was really Paige who'd gotten the invitation. That's not to say that the host didn't show an interest in me. When we arrived he patted me on the shoulder and said, "*Enchanté*." His fingers slid down my bicep and squeezed. "All the guests are excited to meet a poet. They have a certain taste for men with your disposition."

Paige crawls onto the glass beside me. "When I was thirteen," she says, "my teacher died." She lay on her stomach, hands propping up her chin. "They found her on the floor with the refrigerator door open and a bag of spilled tomatoes. She used to tutor me in English. I'd meet her three times a week in the library. The last time I saw her she gave me a hug and told me to have a good life. She wasn't one for hugging or saying things like that. To tell you the truth I can't think of a reason why she did it that time." From up here the banquet table looks smaller, disproportionate to the guests. I wonder what they are gnawing on. Arm, legs, feet: Pieces of someone.

"Someone called and told me that she'd died. I don't remember who. Probably a girl from school. But I didn't listen. I went to the library at 3:30 anyway. I sat at the table we always sat at and waited. I sat there until the library closed and the janitor told me I had to leave." The host of the banquet raises his glass. A bit of wine splashes out and stains his shirt cuff. I listen for his toast, but I can't hear anything. And then I glance at his plate and see an ear battered and fried, smothered with satay sauce. My stomach shrinks. My lungs have trouble pulling in air. Paige pushes me on my back and sits on top of me. "There's probably toothpaste," I say, "in the bathroom

downstairs.” She slugs me in the chest. I hear a loud crack. The glass beneath us breaks into a web. Time slows as we fall through the skylight towards the center of the table below. She grabs hold of me, locking her arms around my back. I find myself clutching her as we descend.

Our host holds up his knife and announces to his guests, “I hope the main course will be a delight to everyone.” Then he carves open our sides. All the guests pluck forkfuls of entrails out.

A couple of months after Ron's wedding Solomon moved into a hotel in Perpignan, directly across the street from my place. It wasn't actually a hotel at all. It used to be, but after the fires it was renovated to a sort of massive group house with thirty-six rooms. From my roof I could see all their windows. Lucky for them, I couldn't see through the opaque glass.

Of course, with thirty or so people things had quickly gone from newly renovated to disgusting. Rats scurried through the heaps of dirty dishes and trash. The cleaning lady had long since refused to set foot inside the kitchen and after a while most of the tenants hid inside their rooms rather than face the smell.

One morning, after I hadn't seen Solomon in a couple weeks, I went looking for him. A heavy-set man holding a rag to his nose let me in. I climbed the stairs following the thumping of Italian disco. At the end of the hall, I heard the shuffling of slippers coming from behind Solomon's door. He was in there. He had to be. Most likely sitting on a wooden stool shoving pieces of chocolate in his mouth, wishing he'd never given up smoking.

I banged on his door. The shuffling of feet stopped. The music stopped. I knocked again. “Open up.” The silence coming from inside sounded like a mute screaming. “Do it. Open the door.” The bolts turned and his eye peered out of the space between door and doorframe. “Ron's dead,” he said, “died two days ago.” “Be serious.” I kicked the bottom of the door with my boot, smacking the wood against his cheek.

The cork floor was covered with about an inch of water. Here and there were towels rolled into long tubes and strategically placed. Mosquitoes fluttered across the

pool and up to the rafters. From what I could tell they'd been feeding on Solomon for days. His arms and face were raw with red bite marks. I swatted my hands around trying to shoo them into the hall, but it was no use. "The stench," he said, pointing to the corridor. He pulled me inside, flung the door closed, and shoved a towel into the gap.

Candles burned in each of the corners. The odor of beeswax wafted through the air. "Here sit." He took a wooden stool and scooted it through the water towards me. I disregarded the offer and stepped closer to the far wall where close to fifteen paintings were tacked up. From the crinkled edges it appeared the pictures had been finished for a while, but the humidity in the room had kept them from drying.

Solomon sat down on the stool and started applying lotion to his mosquito wounds. I splashed through the water and held a candle up to the first images. Up close I made out a woman's face. I moved the flame from one picture to the next. Her ass in the air, beads hanging out. Her leg behind her head while sucking someone off. Her skirt hiked-up as if begging for her thighs to be slapped.

"That bitch stabbed Ron in the stomach," Solomon said. "What are you talking about?" "Ron's wife, she took a fork and stabbed him." I moved from one painting to the next taking in the past and the future all at once. "Are you listening to me?" he asked. "Ron's dead." I was listening. I just didn't care. So, what if Ron had died, he'd never done anything interesting in his life. Ron and his wife were the epitome of boredom. They lounged around the pool at her father's estate discussing what type of cocktails they should order with brunch. They were ugly. Not like this. I reached up and ran my fingers along the edge of the lavender ass. The painting wasn't wet at all. He'd painted them to look unfinished.

"Can I borrow a suit?" he asked. "For what?" "I have to go to the funeral." "You barely knew him." I slumped down on the edge of his bed and watched Solomon cross his legs and rock forward in his seat. He wasn't even related to Ron, but he was going to go kneel by a coffin with all those white lilies stinking up the place. I kicked the surface of the water with my heel splashing a water mark half-way up the wall. "Can you loan me one of these paintings?"

The taxi driver took me to see Mustaffa, a bearded man with a red turban adorning his head. I'd grown progressively disoriented over the last few weeks. Memories melded with breakfast. Fantasies with lunch. If it were not for the taxi driver I wouldn't have known when to eat or drink. I'd begun to feel extremely isolated. Even with all the hands reaching through the car windows and all those faces bleeding together like a night eclipse, I was alone.

I hadn't bathed in days. My teeth were black from not brushing, my feet stained from exhaust fumes. I had the overwhelming sensation that if I cleaned myself I would wash away the lingering ghost. I might forget her. The taxi driver refused to take me to see Mustaffa until I'd soaped up. He ordered one of the women at the hotel to heat up buckets of water and take them up to the bathroom on my floor. I tried to tell him that I didn't want to take a shower, but he didn't listen. He led me to the bathroom and wouldn't let me leave until I'd poured the water over me.

By the time I met Mustaffa, I was thoroughly clean. I was so clean I could feel my skin, the way it stretched over my muscles and tendons as if nailed to my bones. I tried not to move too much as the man served us tea from a copper pot. "He wants to help you," the taxi driver said. "He knows a woman who can close your wound." I absentmindedly scratched the withered bandage on my forehead. "How much?" I asked. "10,000 rupees." "Just to introduce us?" I started calculating the exchange rate and then stopped. It didn't matter. The procedure was necessary. "Has he seen this woman help others like me?"

The driver flicked his tongue; a local dialect erupted from his mouth. Mustaffa answered in a slow dry voice. "He says he's seen her do to others what's been done to you." The sun seemed to shift behind the wooden shutters like the high beams of a moving car. Maybe it was headlights. I couldn't say. Distinguishing between those objects painted with light had become difficult. "She opens people?" I asked. The driver rattled off something to Mustaffa and then turned back to me. "He wants to know how this happened to you." I didn't want to answer. The story didn't make sense. I couldn't even tell it to myself without acting like it hadn't happened yet. "Tell it to him," the driver said, "or he will not help you."

My eyelids shut. I stepped backwards through my memory. "Later tonight," I said. "I'll go looking for the cafe where I used to write in the Saint-Jacques quarter of Perpignan. I'll leave here feeling nostalgic and I'll believe if I can look in the window and see the table where I used to write every day that I'll be filled with a blue flash of insight. While I'm maneuvering the streets I'll hear gypsy jazz. Around the corner I'll find twenty or so people dressed in costumes, webbed frog's feet, masks with stork-like beaks, colorful circus pants with polka-dot hats. Some will be playing trombones, but most will be holding cups of wine. I'll ask the closest one what they're celebrating. 'The corner,' he'll say. I'll understand they are celebrating the anniversary of the murder that happened on this corner. Someone will fill my glass with wine. I'll hop around to the music. It'll seem like I'm fitting in, like I'm one of them. When my lips are completely stained purple the crowd will circle around me like vultures. A boy will pick up a brick from the road and toss it at me. They'll each follow suit, smashing bricks against my body. A frail woman will heave a stone above her head and break it against my temple. I'll fall to the ground. Blood will trickle down my forehead. From my cobblestone bed I'll stare up at the apparitions. They'll stare down at me with a knowingness that can't be denied."

I opened my eyes and looked across the table. Mustaffa massaged the chin under his beard. Carefully, I undid the tape. The gauze fell down in a spiral. I leaned forward so he could see.

A couple of weeks from now I'll sit on the roof of the apartment building where my brother lives. We'll have lawn chairs set up and a sixer between us. He'll pop the top off his second beer and clear his throat. "I always thought you'd be the first to have a kid. You and Mittie have been together so long. I expected you'd ring me one night and tell me I'm an uncle." I'll pull myself up and step close to the roof's edge. I'll look over at the eight-story office building across the way. Its windows will mirror my brother and me. "Any news on Grams?" I'll ask. "Still, the same," he'll say. "It's too bad you have to fly back before the memorial service." I'll still not understand how they can have a memorial service before she dies. I'll ask myself, will she be attending? Will she sit in at her own funeral and listen to my father read the poem I've written? "Can you sit

down?" my brother will ask. "Not good to be by the edge of the roof after a couple of beers." I'll stand there a while longer, turning over the idea of being able to see into all those windows at the same time.

"You ever think about things that happened in the past?" I'll ask, "But instead of thinking about them as having already happening you think about them as in the future?" He'll twitch his nose and smile. "I'm like that with my son. I can't believe I'm actually a father sometimes. When I talk about it I act like it hasn't happened yet." "Does the wife think that's weird?" "Nah, it's just me unable to fathom that this is my life. She understands that I'm in constant awe of our son." I'll know the feeling. Not of being a father. The one that feels like unspeakable sadness slicing through your abdomen.

I'll remember feeling it for the first time when I found out my friend had committed suicide. I'll recall sitting on the curb with some kids drinking pop.

It was a warm summer night. The train had just rattled past leaving an echo and a trail of smoke behind. We sat on the sidewalk with our shoes in the dirt. "Have you seen Paige," I asked. They all looked at each other and then back at me.

"No one's told you?" one of them asked.

"What? Did she say something about me?" I'd been trying to gauge her feelings for weeks. We'd been friends as long as I could remember, but that summer I'd started noticing a difference in her. When she'd poke me in the ribs, after she'd scored a basket, I'd wonder if that meant something more or if she'd ask me to walk with her home I'd question if I should try to kiss her at the door. Sometimes she'd stand close to me, so close I could smell her perfume. Then she'd laugh, like "you idiot, why don't you ever try."

They were quiet now, most of them averting their eyes. Finally, one of them blurted out, "She's dead."

"I just saw her," I said, "at the pool three days ago."

"She killed herself yesterday with her daddy's shotgun."

I looked out across Front Street, across the train tracks. The red lights of the brothel flickered in the distance. Me and Paige had joked that we'd sneak in there one night. Her mom worked the bar but would never allow either of us to see what it looked like inside. I got to my feet with the intention of marching across the tracks and banging

away on the door until her mom came out. But I didn't do it. I sensed that Paige was out there and I walked down Front Street towards the desert to search for her. When I reached the plateau overlooking the dry lake I called out her name and listened for an answer. There was nothing, not even an echo. My stomach ached like I'd swallowed too much. I wanted to cut my belly open so the pain could pour out.

I'll remember it years later, that swishing back and forth of rage, how angry I'd been that she'd left me. My brother will be oblivious. He'll hold up his beer and say, "Cheers." I'll clink my bottle against his. "When you get back to Europe," he'll say, "you'll have to get working on that family." I'll agree even though I already have plans to break up with Mittie and move back to Perpignan when I get home.

Mittie finds me in the hospital with my arm in a sling, leg in a cast, and a large bandage wrapped around my head. "What the fuck were you thinking?" she asks. "Getting drunk and then wandering around the gypsy quarter by yourself." I try to sit up but pain shoots down my spine and keeps me flat on my back. "A guy died on that corner. You're lucky they didn't kill you." She sits down on the bed and smooths my hair back. She tells me that two days ago, after I left the airport and she got on the plane, that she started hyperventilating. She tells me that they had to delay the flight while she lay across three seats with an oxygen mask attached to her mouth. She admits that when she finally got to London she skipped out on her connecting flight to Sheffield and walked around Stansted for thirty-six hours. "I wouldn't have known what to do if Solomon hadn't called me. I might have stayed there for weeks if he hadn't told me that you'd been assaulted by a mob."

Rain pelts the windows. The dark clouds try to block the afternoon sun, but it slips through glistening wet panes. "My grandmother's dead," I say, "She died a couple of days after I flew back from the states." "I know," she says. "Your brother called me last week. I was waiting for you to say something but you never did." Her hand squeezes mine. Bile collects in the back of my throat. "I didn't tell him we broke up," she says. I take my hand away and set it on my stomach. There it sits like a foreign object, unattached to the rest of me.

After a while I fall asleep and dream of India, of a woman wearing a white burka. When I open my eyes it's night. I find Mittie standing in the doorway reading by the hallway light. "You don't have to stay," I say. She closes her book and sets it on the floor. I squint through the darkness trying to make out the title, and if it's a book I bought for her. "It's Lorca," she says. "You've had it by the toilet so long I've probably read it five times." How can she like his work, I think, but not mine? I've spent the last five years trying to emulate his style. But I already know the answer. His poetry is a violent act. It moves past himself and scrapes away the sheltering sky. His poetry has intent.

She waltzes over to me, pulls back the sheets, and pushes up my hospital gown. "Don't think I do this for all my ex-boyfriends." I lie still as she gets onto the bed and places her knees on either side of me. Pain squeezes my muscles. I bite my lip. She holds the hem of her dress up to her belly. I wish I could see this from across the room. Me sprawled out with an IV in my arm. Her ass moving up and down. I make a mental note to remember it that way. So that when I'm lonely and mentally categorizing my pornographic material I can view us together from a distance, separated by a stretch of floor and a wide angle lens.

The taxi driver guides me through a maze of corridors barely wide enough to fit my body through. I smell the disease spilling from dark doorways and see the outline of children lying on the floor inside. We pass a boy leading a girl by the hand. He can't be more than eleven or twelve, but his pupils are pink pricks. The girl stumbles into me. When she looks up I mouth the name 'Paige'. "Not much farther," the driver says. "Just around this corner."

At the end of the corridor the driver smacks his palm on a door made of sheet metal. A young boy slides it open and leads us inside. Mustaffa stands by an open window with his back to us. He closes the shutters and turns around. "Let me introduce you." He gestures to a woman sitting on an elevated platform across the room. She's covered from head to toe with a burka. As I step closer I see her eyes. A woman of about twenty, I think, with a vermilion smudge on her temple.

She holds out painted hands. I kneel on the floor and take them in mine. "I can not close what you yourself have opened. You chose to see and there is no going back once you have chosen this path." Another charlatan. At least she'll be good material for my book. "Silence," she says. I bend my head and study the dusty floor. "You wish to close your eye because you can't take what you see. But what you see is not the true nature of things. It is affected by your anger. Everything you reflect is tainted." I nod. I've read an assortment of New Age books too. "You act amused. As if this is the life you've been dealt and there is nothing to be done. But it is your fault that you have never known anything else. You have let your rage overwhelm you and now it eats pieces of you every day." She lets go of my hands and fall onto my back. It feels as if her *will* has pushed me away. "The worst part is that you are aware of this, but you do nothing about it. You live inside this body like a parasite."

Mustaffa and the taxi driver each grab one of my arms and drag me out of the place. I let my head lean back on the end of my neck as they pull me through the corridors towards the street. It might rain, I think, and that rain might sting.

The taxi driver shoves me in the backseat, and then jostles around to the other side of the car. I lay there like a pile of gangrenous meat, stitched together with twine. Above me the ceiling is dotted with red specs of paint. 1, 17, 32. I count and recount, until they blur into a single point.

Paige and I have been telling stories on rooftops. We've been tucked in for hours, the sheets up to our necks, hospital pillows under our heads. I wiggle my toes to make sure that they are still there. "What frightens you?" she asks. "I don't want to die alone," I say. The sky looks closer tonight, close enough to reach out and take a handful of stars and chew them in my mouth. "I have a story for you," she says. "It's about a boy who was addicted to heroin and wanted me to fall in love with him." "You told me that one already." "But you never let me finish." My legs sink into the concrete below me. My head falls farther into goose down. "Years later, after he left, I saw him again. He was different. I could feel it as soon as he looked into me. His heart had changed." "Did you finally sleep with him?" "No, we held hands."

The rain drizzles, wetting my face, the drops feel like tears sliding down to the tip of my nose. I can't say what they're doing there, just that they're there. I stick out my tongue and taste salt.

The right side of the bed is empty. I pull back the sheets and push myself up. On the edge of the roof I peer down at the city, at the pedestrians walking down the sidewalk, at the hotel across the way with the thirty-six windows. As my eyes adjust I notice that behind the glass there are people. They're watching me, watch them. Waiting for me to begin.

I tell them about a girl. How the last time I saw her was through a chainlink fence. How she reached through the woven metal, wrapped her pinky around mine, and made me swear I'd never listen to New Kids On The Block. How I made a promise and then watched her walk across a vacant lot for the last time.

I collect my words in a fishing net. They pull it in while nodding their heads, signaling that everything I've told them is true.

The Killing Fields

“At first she thought it was smoke, but there weren't any flames. Then she heard a high-pitched buzzing, and the dark cloud started flying in her direction. Her guide heard it too, but he didn't say anything. He just ran down the trail to the shack at the bottom of the ravine and slammed the door shut. She beat her fists against the metal, but he wouldn't open up.”

The candlelight reflects off Riley's shaved scalp as he pauses his story long enough to slouch farther down in the corner of the tearoom. Alison arches her thin eyebrows. She's heard the legend before, but last time it was set in Thailand instead of Cambodia. Turning her gaze to Carson she realizes the tale is new for him. His elbows sit on the edge of the short-legged table and he leans forward, waiting for more.

“The cloud was getting closer,” Riley continues. “So the girl screamed, 'What the hell is that?' From behind the metal door she heard the guide say, 'Mosquito. They smell you.' The skeeters blew down the ravine and as the girl shrieked the swarm ate her alive.” Riley takes a pull from a bottle of Angkor and lets out a burp. “Moral of the story, don't go trekking if you're on the rag.”

He adds in a misogynistic detail Alison doesn't care for. She whacks the table with the palm of her hand. “Oh come on. Mosquitoes don't go after girls on their period.”

“Are you bleeding?” Riley asks, his round moon face tightening into a pensive stare.

"That's none of your business."

"We could all get attacked because of you, and it's none of my business?"

"Leave her alone," Carson mutters.

Everyone turns in the direction of the waiter. Riley holds up his empty beer and shakes the bottle. The waiter steps across the tearoom, carefully avoiding the various overflowing pots used to collect the water leaking in through the roof. "Yes, please?" he asks, his white teeth glowing in the dimness.

Soon, they all have a fresh drink in front of them. Alison's eyes move down from the windowless back wall to the tabletop tagged with carved signatures. She studies the green sprig curving through the bottom of her glass like a serpent caught in a drunk's intestine.

"I can't sit here," she says.

Carson and Riley sigh. Riley's moan sounds tainted with the inflection of, Oh My God! Carson's is more sleepy as if the subject she's about to broach is a heavy weight on his eyelids.

"What's your problem? He could be in real trouble."

"He's a backpacker like us," Riley says. "They skip out all the time. That's the glory of it." He holds his arms up wide above his head. "Freedom baby, nothing to tie you down. Go anywhere, anytime."

"He's your friend too. I can't believe you're not even a little worried."

"Don't give me that. If me or Carson disappeared you wouldn't be tracking us down. It's just 'cause you gave it up to the frog that you give a damn." She disregards his childish pantomime of a man slapping a girl on the butt. A week ago she might have said something. When he told her, "Damn girl, you got child bearing hips," she left the tea room in a huff. When he cornered her in the bar and asked her, "Wanna mate?" she shoved him out of her face. But tonight she's too preoccupied to get upset. She wobbles to her feet and stumbles out through the low-arching doorway.

"Come back here," Riley shouts after her. "I promise I'll be nice. We'll do it family style."

It's close to midnight. She can't do anything this late. Still, she knows that sitting around listening to Riley will only make her more upset. It's been fifty-six hours, she

thinks, and no one seems to care. Benoit could be in serious trouble. As she unlocks the door to her guestroom she pictures ether, duct tape, and an oxy-acetylene torch.

The rain beats a rhythm against the sheet metal roof. She opens her eyes to the dawn light and sees a mosquito feasting on her wrist. With a solid smack it becomes a red splotch. He could have come home in the middle of the night. Maybe he's in his room right now with cuts and burns. She throws on a pair of damp shorts, puts her hair up in a ponytail, and slides her feet into flip-flops.

The rain comes down harder. She hugs the wall as she scurries up the balcony. Before she gets to his door she can see the shiny gold lock hanging from the latch. She loaned it to him the first week they met. Holding it in her hand she reads the words, "True Value Hardware," inscribed in the metal. It feels strange to find something so normal, yet so out of place. It has only been four months since she left the States, but already her new world has become familiar, and her old home, the one in Michigan, where the shiny new lock came from, seems odd. Here she sleeps in a room with a sagging ceiling and piles of white plaster-shavings in the corners. Here she showers in a narrow booth that has exposed electrical wires dangling from the ceiling. Here she lives in a village that stands on ten foot stilts above a lake.

The storm has gone from annoying to an all-out drenching shower. With precise steps she makes her way along the slick wooden planks holding her Louis Vuitton bag over her head. (It's stained with enough water marks that she no longer cares.) As she turns the corner she slams straight into a man's chest. It's Carson. He holds out an oversized umbrella to help protect her from the downpour. "Why don't you just buy one of these?"

"Because they're a rip off. They only cost twenty baht to make, but they try and charge eighty."

"What's that like, two bucks?"

"It's the principle. I don't like being taken advantage of." She stares up into Carson's face. Something comforting peeks out from behind his eyes, and she can't understand how he can be best friends with a guy like Riley.

"Where you off to?" he asks.

"I'm going to the police station in the city to file a missing persons report."

"You need company?" A black cloud hovers in the distance. And although she hates to admit it, having a man with her will make things ten times easier.

They meander down the walkway, their wet arms brushing against each other. There isn't a rickshaw to be found when they reach the road. Carson leaves her with the umbrella and disappears inside the local dive, a bar that looks like something a group of ten-year-old boys built from junkyard scraps. Alison wonders why the place hasn't blown over with all the rain. The blue tarp roof is tied down with heavy twine, but as gusts of wind shoot through the entrance, it balloons up.

Peering through the doorway she sees a man hunched over, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. He looks up, meeting her eyes. She tries on a smile. He doesn't return it. He just sits there inhaling and watching her. It isn't the first time she's been met with such behavior. Everywhere she goes she feels their curious stares. Sometimes they approach her and ask for money, but usually they look through her as if she's a ghost. She pinches the skin between her thumb and index finger when Carson comes out behind a slight man with long black hair.

"Sorry it took so long. He wouldn't leave without finishing his *choum*."

"How much is he charging?"

"Hundred and fifty baht."

"He better not take us to his brother's friend's jewelry shop then. I want to go straight there."

"Don't worry," Carson tells her, climbing into the rickshaw. "Everything's closed for the monsoon."

With a forceful thrust of the driver's legs they're off. The road looks like a river. Alison clutches the side of the cart as they splash through the gutter into the current. The rickshaw has a canvas top attached to shield its occupants, but it does little good. The rain comes at them from every direction.

"Riley's going to be pissed we didn't bring him," Carson says, pulling her attention from the rice paddies where green stems poke out of the water. "He loves checking out stuff like this. You can't get him to look at a ruin or temple, but tell him you're going to see a supermarket that has a sarcophagus next to the frozen food and he's all over it."

"I would have asked him to come if he didn't insist on talking like a serial rapist."

Carson turns his head, his voice almost lost in the downpour. "He used to say that same shit to my ex-girlfriend. I don't know if he was jealous or thought it was going to get him somewhere, but finally one day I popped him one. Hit him square in the nose. He wouldn't talk to me for months. Called me a pussy-whipped-bastard."

The rickshaw turns down a larger road. They're getting closer to the city. She can smell it. The stench of rotting fish and garbage heaps mingles with the scent of fresh rainwater.

"But the day that girl dumped me," Carson continues, "he was right there for me. I'd been living with her for two years and one day she moved out and right into her sociology professor's house. They're married now. But, Riley was on my doorstep that afternoon with a sixer and a quart of wild turkey." The cart swings up through an alley, pushing its way through the brown stream carrying plastic bottles and other indiscernible trash. "Anyway," he says, pulling at an unraveling thread, "You know if Benoit's in jail, we'll have to pay a bribe to get him out."

"I was just going to tell them he was missing."

"Well, it's possible he got picked up on New Year's. They could have planted some drugs on him. And now they're just waiting for someone to figure out what happened and pay the bribe to get him out."

The idea of paying off the police makes her grimace. "How much do you think they'll want?"

"A thousand, maybe two thousand baht. We'll have to barter."

For a moment she has the horrific thought, "What is Benoit worth?" Her throat contracts, breath turning spastic. Things are getting icky. Carson offers her a bottle of water and she drains half of it.

What worries her isn't that Benoit might be in jail. What makes her shutter is that maybe she doesn't know Benoit at all. No, she's sure she does. They were together on New Year's. She didn't lose him until after midnight when he went to order drinks. And even then, she'd watched him from afar in the jumble of the crowd. His wide smile had been visible above the locals until a group of German tourists came in. She can still

picture it vividly. That last glimpse of his face. It's frozen in her head, grainy, like a black and white photograph on the side of a milk carton.

The rickshaw comes to a halt in front of the police station. A sign over the entrance reads, "Police Office—Technique and Solving." In the front room is a heavysset older man, a black beret with a gold insignia plopped on his head. Colorful pins clutter the left breast pocket of his uniform. With a commanding voice, he calls to them from behind the solid metal desk. Alison glances at Carson as if he can understand Khmer. He seems as baffled as her, but musters up the words, "Speak English?"

A young officer, who has been standing down the hall, approaches. The semi-automatic weapon slung over his shoulder clicks against a set of keys attached to his belt, "Yes please, sit." He motions to some foldout chairs in front of the desk. "How can we help?"

Alison follows his instructions. Carson stands behind her, his hands resting on the back of the chair.

"Our friend went missing," she says, taking a digital camera from her purse and handing it to the older policemen. "That's Benoit. We last saw him New Year's Eve."

The older officer studies the picture while the young one translates what she's said. When the older one has had his fill he passes the camera to the younger one and rattles off a paragraph in a rough voice. The younger one nods his head and then turns back to Alison. "He would like to know what is the problem?"

"Do you have our friend here?" Carson asks.

The younger one looks perplexed, but translates the accusation anyway. As the older one shouts, bits of spit fly out of his mouth and the young officer blushed. "He say there are no tourist here."

"We haven't seen our friend in three days," Alison says. "Can I file a missing persons report?" She relates the last part slowly, enunciating every syllable.

The older officer smirks, and then strangely enough responds in English. "Your friend go party, no? He use drug?" He walks his fingers across the desk. "He go."

She shakes her head. "He doesn't use drugs. Something happened. He disappeared."

Carson walks his fingers across the desk, and then opens the tips of his fingers like a magician and says, "Poof. Gone."

Alison sets her hand on Carson's. "Is there a form we can fill out? A document for missing people?"

The young policeman's eyes hold hers for a moment, and she knows there is nothing he can do. "Many foreign tourists go to parties," he explains. "Many of them take drugs. We cannot look for them all. You should search for your friend at the hospital."

She hadn't thought of it before, but it makes sense. If something horrible has happened to Benoit, then they would have taken him to the emergency room. "Can you call the hospital for me?"

The younger officer picks up the hand piece of an antique black phone and spins the dial with his finger. When the line connects, his demeanor changes. No longer is he the calm translator. He shouts into the receiver. She wonders about the weapon slung over his shoulder. She bets it could unload five rounds into someone's chest in a second. Maybe he, or someone like him, shot Benoit full of bullets and tossed his body in the lake.

"I am sorry," the young officer says, hanging up. "There are no foreign tourists in the hospital." She stands, and then remembers she has no signal on her cell phone. "Could I try calling my friend from your phone?"

"Yes." The young officer turns the clunky contraption so that the rotary dial faces her.

The line hisses and cracks. She bites her lip. Carson set his hands on her shoulders. She eases back against his touch. The phone rings three, four, eight times before she hangs up.

The odor of simmering coconut milk permeates the street. The rickshaw driver shouts to a man as he pedals past a *khao phoune* stand. Alison focuses on two naked kids splashing each other in the gutter. She wants to be angry, but their joyous high-pitched screams chisel away at the stone forming in her chest. For a second she

wishes she were home, lying on a lawn-chair in her parent's backyard, contemplating whether she should take a dip in the pool or get ten more minutes of sun.

The rickshaw driver turns down a narrow alley where trickles of black smoke rise from road-side grills and disappear into the rain. "Those cops made me think," Carson says. "What if someone slipped him some *yaa baa*. Like a couple of years ago there was this girl who they found washed up on some island. She had no idea how she got there. One minute she'd been dancing and the next she woke up two days later in a canoe on the beach. She had third-degree burns from the sun."

"That's just a legend." She's heard the story before at a guesthouse in Ban Xang Hai. However, the guy in Thailand said the girl had drunk *Lao Lao*. When she'd awoken, she found she'd been kidnapped. They kept her in a bamboo cage and fed her *Lao Lao* for weeks. At the end of the month they held an auction and the girl was sold to a German businessman for two thousand Euros.

A cold wave sweeps over her skin. What if Benoit becomes one of these stories? She's heard so many. One guy in Viet Nam told her about a backpacker who'd been attacked by sea snakes while swimming late at night. Their grip around his waist was so strong that when he pulled himself out of the ocean he was paralyzed. Another man in Laos had a story about a family of tourists who'd gone to an island and adopted a baby panda. One night, years later, the panda went room to room ripping apart each member of the family. The police found the animal covered in blood, chewing on an arm. She tries to shake it off. This isn't a second hand legend. Benoit is a real person, one she's been intimate with.

They'd met two weeks ago. It had been particularly wet. The storm had come down from the sky as if angels were standing on clouds dousing the Earth with warm buckets of bath water. By the time she'd gotten to the guesthouse, her clothes and pack had been completely soaked. She sat on the edge of the single bed, trying to figure out how to get dry. She was about to peel off her clothes and try the rough surface of her mosquito net against her skin when a knock shook the flimsy door. "What?" she shouted. Almost every guesthouse or hostel she'd stayed at had come with a shady owner. They'd beat on her door all day until she set them straight. "Does madam need a mineral water?" "Does madam need help working the TV?"

“Does madam need a serviette?”

She swung the door open violently, expecting to see the short man she'd just paid, all teeth and lips. Instead, she found a tall white guy with a scruffy beard. “I see you covered in water when you arrive.” He held out a towel to her. When she didn't respond he asked, “You speak English, no?”

“I'm American,” she said, taking the gift.

“You will be happy then. There are two other Americans staying here.” The lines that had creased her forehead disappeared. “We're taking one drink in the bar now if you are interested.”

“I need to dry off, but yeah, that sounds cool.”

When he'd gone she dug through her backpack until she found a colorful sarong wrapped in a plastic bag. It was supposed to be a souvenir for her mother, but she wore it to the tea room that evening.

Over the next two weeks, she and Benoit hid out in bars together. She learned all the necessary details. He sucked at pool but was a master at Connect Four. He was a journalist but had given up his job in Paris because he wanted to spend a year traveling. After a heavy night of drinking, she discovered other things. His mother had died when he was a child. There was a hint of sadness in his smile. A small birthmark stained his hairless chest.

As the rickshaw came to a halt in front of the village on stilts, she decided Benoit wasn't going to become a legend she'd tell other backpackers. They had had a real connection. He'd whispered words to her before she'd fallen asleep.

The path towards the village is slick with mud. Riley and Carson wear shoes that are better equipped for the trail. Alison loses her footing in the dense muck. The rain feels like hail on her bare skin. She swats at her arms as if the drops are purposefully seeking out her body in the sticky air.

“So, the cops were searching my hut for hash,” Riley says, continuing the monologue he'd begun when they left the guesthouse. “They looked through every hiding place they could think of. I was freaking out because the guy in charge kept

telling me, 'You have drugs. We know. You go Klong Dan.' And that's like this crazy Thai prison. When he started looking up at the ceiling, I almost wet myself."

"Do you know where we're going?" Alison asks. "We've been walking for like an hour."

"The owner of the guesthouse told me this trail runs right into the village."

"We must be getting close," Carson says. "Those cows have to belong to someone." He points to the cattle grazing in the nearby field.

Alison gazes through the palm leaves, past the livestock, to a setting sun that breaks through the clouds and streams down over a stone structure. Red and yellow flags flap under its eaves. It must be a monastery, she thinks. Mike would have liked it. She pictures herself kneeling in front of a monk, her ex-boyfriend beside her. The thought makes her want to sneeze as if his musky cologne slipped out of her head and up her nose.

Nine months ago, Mike asked her to come on the trip, and although she'd planned to work for her father's company over the summer, she agreed. Travel had never been on her agenda. As the departure date got closer she began waking up in the middle of the night, sweat dribbling off her forehead. She told herself not to worry. Mike wouldn't let anything bad happen.

When they broke up two months before the trip, Mike refunded his ticket. She removed her belongings from their shared apartment, depositing them in her parent's house, and boarded a plane. Her parents didn't try to stop her. "It's good you left him," her father said. "What kind of job was that kid going to get with a theology degree?" She didn't argue, or explain that it was Mike who had left her. All she wanted was to get away. To prove she could.

She blinks twice, as if shutting her eyes quickly will make the monastery disappear, but when she cracks her eyelids, it's still there, taunting her. Screw Mike, he would have been philosophizing about Buddhist crap the whole trip. Her foot slips, and she grabs onto a branch to stop her fall.

"Anyways, I was telling you about Thailand," Riley continues. "So, the cops were all over me. They must have gotten some kind of tip because they were sure I had something. I started really sweating it because, like I was saying, one of the cops was

looking at the ceiling. But then I realized he was checking out the ceiling because there was this noise coming from the roof. It was the typical canvas kind. Soon everyone was looking. We could see a shadow. And then, I kid you not, the cloth tore open and this monkey fell into the hut, my stick of hash right next to him. Before anyone realized what happened, the monkey grabbed my hash and skipped out the front door.”

It's growing hazy when the trail leads them over a ridge. The tunnel of strangler fig trees opens up, revealing a clearing with over a dozen huts. A woman sits on the ground in front of an open fire, a child sucking on her breast. When she sees them approaching, she yells at the other villagers. Soon people emerge from the dim interiors of the huts.

“*Sues'day*,” Riley calls out with his arms up in what looks like some kind of tribal greeting. “We're looking for a friend.”

The villagers respond with dead pan stares. Riley takes Alison's camera over to a member of their audience and shows him the digital picture. The man looks at the camera screen, but doesn't say anything. Just then, a short man, dressed in western clothes, trots up.

“You look for friend?” The short man strokes the black hairs protruding from his chin. “You find. I am very good friend. Very good guide.”

“No, we're looking for this man.” Riley points at the camera screen.

The tour guide scrutinizes the photo for some time and then nods. “Come.” The man walks off, still holding the camera. “My wife make tea.” Riley and Carson rush after him with Alison close behind.

“We don't want tea or a tour,” Alison calls out, trying to keep up with the pace of the guide. “We're searching for our friend.”

“Good tea, my wife make.”

They have no choice. The guide is going to take them somewhere and will undoubtedly expect payment for his trouble. They fall into a single file line as he leads the way down a narrow trail. Soon, they come out into another clearing. On one side of the field stands a makeshift structure pieced together with bamboo and sheet metal. On the opposite end there appears to be a hill covered in trash. Alison can't be sure in the dying light, but it looks like the local dump.

Inside the hut, a woman sits on the ground, sheets of newspaper covered with pieces of black metal spread around her folded legs. She works a rag over the one in her hand. The guide rattles something off to his wife, all the while motioning for the backpackers to have a seat around a short-legged table.

“Sit. Have tea.”

Riley flops down on the ground. “C’mon,” he says, “Cop a squat.”

Alison ignores his suggestion. Her eyes fix on the items hanging from the many hooks. Carson notices them at the same time. His jaw becomes unhinged. There, on display, is a barrage of weapons. The collection includes menacing trinkets of all shapes and sizes.

“Is this some sort of militia hideout?” Carson asks.

“No, it’s a killing field,” Riley tells them. “The Aussie told me there was one up here.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard about these places.” Carson steps up to a wooden workbench to get a closer look. “They executed all these women and children and buried them here.”

Alison’s legs wobble at the idea that she is standing on a mass grave. The sensation drips its way down to her feet. She steadies herself on Carson’s shoulder. “What’s with all these weapons?”

Riley lets a laugh rip from his gut. “That’s tourism, baby. No one wanted the land, so people like our friend here set up shooting ranges.”

Carson takes a handgun from the rack and turns it over in his palm.

“You like?” The guide comes up behind them wielding a grin. “This MAS. French use World War II.”

Carson turns around and holds it up with both hands. Alison steps back. It’s not that guns make her uneasy. Her father keeps a small arsenal in the garage. It’s more that she’s always hated that guns gives the bearer undue power and he or she can play with that power, like God.

“This same gun your friend shoot,” the guide says.

“What?” Alison asks.

“Man on camera shoot this gun. He tell you he like.”

"When did he come here?"

"Gun in good condition. My wife clean." The guide gestures to the woman collecting pieces of dung to make a fire. "I give good price. One American dollar per bullet."

"The man on the camera, when did he shoot this gun?" Alison motions to the camera and then to the pistol.

"That good deal. Other place charge two American dollar."

"I don't want to shoot anything."

"Okay, you say price."

"Well," Riley says, "if you're not going to shoot one, I sure as hell am. But not that piss-ant one. I want to try that AK-47." Riley's voice feels like a lesion in her ear, one that festers and oozes puss. She has the overwhelming urge to grab the gun out of Carson's hands and remove Riley's face.

"Look at that one," Carson says. "It's some kind of missile launcher."

"That B40 rocket-propelled grenade. Two hundred American dollars."

"To shoot it one time?" Riley asks.

"Include goat."

Carson eyes glass over. "You can blow up a goat?"

"Goat, dog, anything-you-want."

"I've heard you can blow up a cow," Riley adds. "How much does that cost?"

The guide counts out figures on his fingers and then says, "Four hundred."

"I can do a goat for two, but a cow is double?"

"There are many people in Cambodia. They no like kill cow."

"Ah, now you're just toying with me. I bet you blow up cows all the time."

"No, no, I no toy."

Alison crosses her arms, her eyes moving between the haggling crew and the exit. "We're supposed to be up here looking for Benoit, not bartering for a cow."

Riley covers a yawn with his hand before joining Carson by the weapon rack.

"Fine," she shouts, "if you're not going to help, then I'll go find him myself."

"I'm sick and tired of hearing about Frenchy," Riley says, picking up a Webley Revolver.

"You know, I used to think you put on this fake persona and underneath you were alright, but I was wrong. You really are a prick."

"A prick? Woman, you don't even know." Riley nods his chin towards Carson.
"Why don't you tell her who the real prick is."

"Tell me what?" Her eyes pierce the space between them, but her words are feeble.

Carson wraps his arms around his chest as if the air in the hut has suddenly gotten nippy.

"Go on, talk. I can't take another day of her whining."

Carson's bent head shifts like he's chewing on the inside of his cheek. "Benoit's not missing. His girlfriend flew in late New Year's Eve. They're staying in a hotel in the city."

"But the lock's still on the door."

"The room's empty, babe," Riley says. "Frenchy played you."

She feels nauseous and dizzy as if coming off a powerful drug. She backs away from them. "You spent all day with me. You even went to the police station. That whole time, you knew?"

"It wasn't like that. He told us to keep it a secret."

"Did you think playing the sympathetic friend would get me into bed?"

"I was going to tell you."

"When? After you fucked me?"

"Pretty much," Riley interrupts.

Their faces disgust her. She has an overwhelming urge to grab one of the assault rifles off the rack and open fire on their genitalia. Instead, she pushes past them and snatches a chrome Mark XIX Desert Eagle off the rack. It weighs heavily in her hand.

"You want to try?" the guide asks.

Constrained hiccups explode in her mouth. She marches across the dark field until she is square with the garbage heap in the distance. Of course he wasn't missing.

This wasn't a legend. Kidnappers weren't holding him for ransom. A yeti hadn't eaten him alive.

Her muscles are taut. The gun feels like an extension of her arm. Of course he has a girlfriend. No one is that close to a sibling. No one talks to their sister on the phone every other night. She squeezes the trigger. The crack of the handgun rings in her ear as the force of the Desert Eagle pushes her back.

Riley and Carson stand silhouetted in the light of the hut. She wonders if Riley is right about mosquitoes being attracted to menstruation. No, she thinks, I've been bitten for the last three days straight and I'm over a week late. She closes her eyes and listens for their hum, the shrill fluctuating screech of mosquitoes. She wishes there were a swarm in the distance, one that would feed on her heartsickness. There is nothing. Only quiet. Her eyes open wide, and the flash of the gun ignites her face as she unloads the clip in the darkness.

The Tea Party

Maya's been tap dancing on tombstones. The metal reverberates through the cemetery, bouncing off the mausoleums, ricocheting off the stone walls. She says granite doesn't sound like concrete; it rings like a gun shot. I can't tell the difference, but I agree because she's my daughter, and what sort of father would tell his thirteen-year-old that all he can think of when he sees her tap dancing is her mother swinging around a stripper pole.

"I wish I could dig up one of these graves," she says, "I don't have any human bones." She's been collecting dead animals since her sixth birthday. At first she kept them in her closet, but over the years they seem to have spilled out into the rest of the house. Now, I find them all over the place. A bird spine in the silverware drawer. A chicken foot in the laundry detergent. A snake head by my toothbrush.

"I found a human skull one time with all its teeth." She clicks her shoes. I peer over my shoulder, wondering if anyone is watching. "My stupid teacher said I had to leave it where I'd found it. I don't know why. I mean, we were on a field trip learning about fossils and that was the coolest one. It was inside a ribcage. Like a cow had ate someone's head, right before it died."

"We should go before they lock us in." The dying sun says it's getting close to six. I'm not sure when the groundskeeper closes the gate, but I assume they don't stay open past dark.

"Do you think he was murdered?"

“Who?”

“The man whose skull I found.” She arches her feet so that she's on tiptoes, and holds up her hand. I pick myself up, and spin her as fast as I can. Her pleated skirt sweeps up like the ruffle of a tutu.

“What's the worst thing you've ever done?” she asks, as we sit down across from each other on the warm stone.

“That's a secret,” I say.

She pokes me in the arm. “Tell me.”

I suppose we've all done bad things: stolen gum from gas stations, lied to lovers, told ourselves things happened a different way to make ourselves feel better about the truth. But my secret has to do with Maya and I don't think I'm ready to tell it yet. “Ask me when you're older.” I wrap my arms around my knees and rock for a bit.

“Come on, talk.” She opens her eyes as wide as she can and I can't stop from laughing. “Pretend I'm the ghost who lives underground in the catacombs. You can tell a ghost anything.” I look past her across the meadows and fields, past rusted pickup trucks, and deserts full of cattle carcass, to a table set with an almost full bottle of Maker's Mark and a short glass of ice.

I've been sipping whisky and listening to a song on repeat. It's an old country ballad about a man who has just come back to tell his wife he's leaving her, but when he comes home he finds that she's not there to say goodbye to. It reminds me of an ex-girlfriend and for a moment I wonder about time travel.

This afternoon, when the shop was slow, my boss said he thought temporal displacement was real. “Daniel, you've got to believe me, the government's got one of those gadgets in the basement of the Pentagon.” I'm not into conspiracy theories myself, but I do like the idea of going back and changing things. I could visit myself as a ten-year-old and tell him not to throw the burning toaster out the window because it will end up scorching the side of the house. I could go back to yesterday and tell myself not to stutter ‘hello,’ and stare at the floor, when the cute girl comes in to buy veal cutlets. I could go forward in time, maybe after the apocalypse, when the ocean level has risen, and live on an island where the Appalachians used to be.

If I could sneak into the basement of the White House, I mean the Pentagon, I'd find a gadget humming like a guitar amp with a lot of glowing buttons. I'd hold it in my palm, dial the date back five years to April 5th 2005 expecting to end up in Greenpoint, and suddenly I'd look around and I'd be in Bryant Park on December 24th 2004. That's right. I'm sure with my luck the damn thing wouldn't work properly.

I'd slap the device a couple of times, but it'd be no use. I'd be in the wrong place and time.

Snowflakes drift down through the branches of the London Plane trees, adding to the already white ground. My younger-self trudges through it with his back hunched as if the oversized headphone covering his ears are weighing him down. Eighteen-years-old and so full of anxiety that pimples still gather on his chin. I straighten my posture and follow at a safe distance. I don't think he'd recognize me. I've lost eighty pounds since then. But I don't want to risk giving him a heart attack.

He shuffles up to the skate rental counter and says, "Ten and a half." My ex-girlfriend, Angie, stands behind the register and I can't help gawking at her. She's got a black ribbon around her neck and tangled hair up in two pony tails. I'd forgotten what she looked like at seventeen, before the bleach blond pixie cut. My younger-self keeps his eyes pointed at the floor, while sliding the exact change onto the counter. He can't see it, but when Angie turns around she twitches her nose and smiles like she knows why he's come in there to rent skates every day for the past two weeks.

Outside, I lean against the rink railing, while my younger-self flounders across the ice. I can't believe I put myself through that. Did I really think I could become a pro hockey player when I couldn't even skate? As he falls and his face slides across the rink, I turn away and go in search of the bench I need to be sitting on in about ten minutes.

Soon my younger-self takes a seat on the bench across from me. He's debating whether to ride the train back to Greenpoint or go up to Rockefeller Center to see the tree. My family is Polish/Jewish so there's not much point in going home. We don't even celebrate Hanukah. I glance down the sidewalk, looking for Angie. She should be

coming along any minute. I swing my head back and eye my younger-self. His belly pushes out a Marilyn Manson t-shirt.

“What!” he yells at me, throwing his hands in the air like some wannabe gangster. “I’m not some male prostitute if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I was just leaving.” I stand and start in the direction of the subway. In the distance I see Angie walking out of the skate rental depot. She’s about to go introduce herself to my younger-self. They’ll take the subway up to Rockefeller Center, and talk until the last train bound for Brooklyn shoots through the subway tunnel.

The long planks of the boardwalk are speckled with sand and glare. The rumble of the Cyclone, charging down metal tracks, makes the seagulls squawk and fly in a circle. The beach goes parade past us with their tattoos and flabby arms. With a large hand I clutch Maya’s tiny fingers and guide her towards the beach. She’s only six this time around. Plastic sandals adorn her toes and an inflated tube masks her one-piece swimsuit.

We splash through the break, and wade into the water. With her inter-tube Maya looks like a buoy bobbing on the surface. I lie back next to her, and stare up at the hazy sun. “Tell me a story,” she says.

All I know are the theories my boss tells me when the butcher shop is slow: Stories about the pyramids being garages for spaceships. Tales of Mongolian terrorists infiltrating the Vatican. But I think it over and then begin.

“Once there was a little girl who would come visit her dad after school. He’d tear off an oversized piece of butcher paper, and she’d spend all afternoon drawing on it. She’d create stick figure people, cows, birds, mice, birds eating mice, mice eating birds. You name it, and she’d draw it. Then one day she drew herself. The crayon lines started to glow, and suddenly she was sucked into the picture. You see the crayons her dad had given her were magic crayons. He hadn’t know that when he’d bought them, but when he saw his daughter disappear he figured it out. Quickly, he picked up a crayon and sketched a horse for his daughter to escape on.”

I peer over at Maya floating in the waves. She seems to be listening, although she’s splashing water in my face.

“Meanwhile, the little girl found herself in a desert of bones, a graveyard of horses. She wandered around trying to figure out how to get home, until one of the skeletons pushed itself off the ground and trotted over. He bent his head so the girl could get on. Her father watched as she rode off to the edge of the paper and disappeared, leaving behind the crayon world forever.”

As I say, “The end,” I have a sensation that I'm lying. I picture a carcass drawn with crayon, much like the ones that hang from hooks in the freezer lock. I see Maya climbing the red lines, the bone ladder. Tiny hands pulling her up the graying flesh into the animal's rib cage.

When the water laps over my ears the world becomes muted. I stare up at the cloudless sky, thinking of a different place, a different time.

Half a bottle of whiskey stands on the kitchen table. A glass filled with tap water and booze sits nearby. I should stop digging through memories. There's a Polish festival parading down the street. I should go and watch the half-naked dancers with peacock feathers springing from their headdresses. I should stroll up the street until I find that girl with the knit hat, who came into the butcher store yesterday. I should. I should. But I don't. I slouch farther down in the plastic chair, clutching a cordless phone. What time is it in California? Four or Five? I dial her number and listen to the ringing.

The answering machine springs to life delivering her voice to me.

“Angie it's me. I need to talk to you. Please pick up. I know you don't work at the club on Sundays.”

“She's not here right now.” It's Brent. I'd recognize that squeaky vegan voice anywhere. “You can't call here anymore. Okay?” He pauses letting his words sink in like some kind of new age guru. “At some point you have to let her go. It's been five years.”

“It's just. I need to talk to her.”

“As far as you're concerned Angie no longer exists. She's dead to you. Now I'm going to hang up and you're not going to bother us again. Okay?”

The single scream of a projectile hisses in the distance. An explosion of red sparks radiates against my window. I finish my glass of whiskey, wander over to the sink, and add more water for another.

I appear in front of the Boulevard Tavern in Greenpoint. Behind the glass of the newspaper vending machine, the front page of the paper reads March 5th 2005. I smack the time gadget, but it's no use. I've been sent to the wrong moment again. Across the street I see my younger-self waltzing up the street with dried blood on his doc martens. Gristle stains cover the front of his Nine Inch Nails t-shirt. He's got his head up and he's whistling.

I follow him inside a Polish deli, and pull up a chair at a corner table. He sits between my grandma and grandpa, across from my parents. They seem to have already ordered. Bowls of steaming food fill all the gaps between the glasses and silverware.

"If it's a girl," my mother says, "we should name her Maya after your great-grandma."

My younger-self spoons sauerkraut and sausages onto his plate. Then roasted potatoes and boiled chicken. "I'll have to ask Angie."

"You can't wait until the last minute," my mom says, "You need to be prepared."

"We got the news this morning." My younger-self bites off half of a kosher dill. "We still have months to figure everything out."

"Are you looking into other lines of work?" my dad asks. "It's going to be hard to raise a family on seven bucks an hour."

My younger-self rolls his eyes and stuffs his face with a helping of pierogi while I order a veggie sandwich.

All through lunch I cringe as I watch him eat: A fourth sausage, another helping of potatoes, more golabki. I want to stomp over there, grab the spoon out of his hand, and yell, "Look tubby, it took me two years to work off all the fat you're ingesting," but I stay put.

After an hour of picking at my sandwich and sipping seltzer water, I follow my younger-self down to McCarren Park. The sun beams down, melting the frost on the

grass. I wish I'd worn a jacket. Children climb metal ladders and shoot down the other side. My younger-self takes a seat on a bench next to the playground. Nearby a group of mothers huddle around a table with Styrofoam cups of coffee. While I muse about the dead winter trees and the gray sky, a little girl barrels into my younger-self. She's the size of a cannon ball, dressed in a puffy pink coat and matching hat. One of the mothers pulls the child away saying, "Sorry about that." She laughs, but as she turns away I see a look on her face, one that shouts, "What are you doing sitting by this playground you freakin pervert?"

"I just found out I'm going to be a father," my younger-self blurts out.

"Well, congratulations."

Soon, my younger-self is sipping coffee with the other moms. One offers him a piece of strudel. He doesn't turn it down.

"I like the name Maya," a middle-aged mom says. "Doesn't it mean dream?"

My younger-self smiles. He feels accepted. He feels like he's a part of something bigger than himself.

Port Authority bustles with rush hour commuters. Maya stands in front of the bus station contemplating the glass doors. She's taller this time, around fifteen-years-old, with effervescent-green eyes. A red suitcase sits by her ankle. I run across the street dodging taxis and rickshaws. She isn't surprised to see me. It's almost as if she has been waiting there for me to stop her from leaving.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't belong here."

The delinquents and vagrants size us up from the corner. Their glares point at my back pocket. How much am I carrying? Is there anything worthwhile in the suitcase? I pull Maya down the street, past the XXX bars, to a less populated area.

"Why do you want to leave?"

She shrugs. "Everything's wrong."

I take her by the hand and lead her around the corner. The buildings fall away, replaced by an entrance to a tangled forest. A teddy bear salutes us as we move the branches aside and step onto a path of white pebbles. He guides us down the windy

trail. The nettles brush against his fur and tear a hole in his shoulder. Pieces of stuffing flutter about us like warm snow.

In the center is a clearing where a blanket has been spread over the red dirt. A pot of tea is situated next to glass cups. The teddy bear bids us to sit so that he can teach us how to play hearts. The afternoon passes slowly. Something is holding Maya back. Her laughter is forced and every so often I notice her scanning the trees for escape.

"Tell me about mamma," she says.

"Your mother, she's a star now."

"Have I seen her in magazines or on the telly?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Tell me how you met."

"Your mother and me met by an ice skating rink. She was an aspiring actress and I was working at the butcher shop."

"What plays was she in?"

"All sorts. She liked to do Shakespeare, especially *A Mid Summer's Night Dream*."

"And you helped her memorize her lines."

"Yes, in our studio apartment. It had a little window overlooking the street and we had a red love seat that folded out into a bed."

"We used to do laundry at a shop two blocks away. It was warmer in the laundrymat than our apartment so we sometimes washed our clothes twice a week to stay warm. We'd spend hours under the florescent lights practicing her lines and then we'd tote the clothes back to the apartment. Your mom would lie down on the bed and wait for me to spill the warm clothes over her."

"Tell me about Los Angeles. Tell me about where she lives."

"Well, it's hot all year around and your mother lives near the beach."

"Do you wish you lived there too?"

"Sometimes."

"Can we go and visit?"

"Maybe one day."

The best part about time zones is it allows someone in Brooklyn to call someone in California at ten o'clock at night. If I was calling from the west coast she wouldn't answer. It'd be too late. But right about now she's sitting around the house, alone, while Brent works the ticket booth at the multiplex. I can't help chuckling to myself as the phone rings a fourth time. Maybe it's the whiskey. Maybe it's the re-run sitcom playing on the television.

"Angie?"

"Who is this?"

"I was just thinking about the day you told me, and I needed to get the memory right. We were lying amongst the crumpled sheets and the space heater made our bed glow orange."

"I'm not going to talk about this again."

"And I pressed my lips to your belly and whispered 'I love you.' And then you said?"

"Stop, just stop it. You know we can't change anything and even if I could—"

"And then you said, 'If I have a daughter she'll grow up and hate me. She'll know that I brought her into this world, this vile place.'"

The shower was running and you told me you were going to get an abortion in the morning. Then I waited for you to stand under the water so that you couldn't hear my sobs. So you wouldn't think that I agreed. So that you would believe I was strong.

Before you had dried yourself I put together all the loose change that had descended to the bottom of the nightstand drawer and went down to the corner store to buy a bottle of pink champagne. The rest of the afternoon we ballroom danced on the bed, and passed the bottle back and forth. Our shirts became soaked from the overflowing bubbles, but we didn't care. I covered the bed in champagne and we threw ourselves on it as if we were jumping into a bubble bath.

And... And we celebrated it." I said the words into the receiver, but the line had long since changed from silence to a dial tone.

Maya has locked herself in a little cedar box. The interior has a coved ceiling and floor, so there are no shadows or edges, only a white void. She curls into a fetal position. The light illuminates her from all sides giving the impression that she's floating. I peer through the golden latch and whisper, "Wake up."

Black lipstick covers her mouth. Smudged black eyeliner circles her eyes. She opens one, but quickly closes it.

"Where's the key?" I ask. "Why are you doing this?"

"No one wants me."

"I do."

"You just keep me around because you like pretending I'm something else."

"You're my daughter."

"No, I'm a ghost trapped inside you."

The box sits on a table between an ink well and a stack of books. I lean back glaring at the latch. There must be some way to get her to open up.

Finally, I say, "Let's go see your mother."

I hear her stirring inside.

Soon, we are barreling down a dirt road between piles of bones and chains. Maya drives. I sit on the passenger side. It didn't take long to teach her how to work the clutch and now we are rolling along. For the first time since she was a little girl she seems excited. I half expect her to pull over, bounce out of the cab, and tap dance on one of the red rocks that springs out of the desert graveyard.

"I knew this would snap you out of it," I say.

"How long will it take to get there?"

"Not too long."

"Good. She'll help me."

I peer at her and wonder what she has in mind. I'd pictured a loving reunion. The three of us walking hand and hand down the coast. But I don't think that's what Maya is thinking.

"Angie will help me escape," she says. "She's done it before."

I reach over with my foot and slam my boot down on the brakes. The truck fishtails, and skids to a stop. "What are you talking about?"

She looks down at the steering wheel. Her fingers scratch at the hem of her skirt. "You're not going to let me go, are you?"

I appear in my old bed. Angie's velvet dress and platform shoes lie in a heap on the floor. The shower is running. I hear the front door unlock. "The Duck has arrived." It's me, I think. I've gone to the liquor store and picked up a bottle of the cheapest champagne behind the counter. Scanning the room, I try to find a place to hide before my younger-self walks in. The fire escape, no. Under the bed, no. I dart into the closet and swing the door shut behind me. Through the slats I see Angie with a towel around her head, strutting out in a cloud of steam.

"Did you hear me?" my younger-self yells. "I got champagne." He marches into the bedroom holding a bottle and two plastic tumblers with crinkly straws sticking out over the edge.

Angie has put on pajama bottoms and one of my blood-stained t-shirts. "You sure know how to sweep a girl off her feet." She stands up in the center of the bed and takes one of the tumblers.

My younger-self kicks off his boots and jumps up next to her. They clink plastic and giggle through straws.

Time to set things straight, I think. This is the moment you've been waiting for. I burst out of the closet and point a finger at my younger-self. "Tell her."

They both scamper to the farthest corner of the bed. My younger-self fumbles about until his hand finds a shoe on the floor.

"Tell her you were sobbing while she was in the shower. Beg her not to abort our child."

He flings the shoe in my direction. It crashes against the wall behind me.

"Help," Angie screams, "rapist."

I put my hands up and tell them to settle down, but my younger-self looks like he's about to try and tackle me. I know because that's the only move I've got.

"Let me explain." Maybe it's because my voice sounds familiar, or because I look like an older brother, but they seem to calm down for a second. "Angie, half-an-hour

ago, you told Daniel that you wanted an abortion. But the thing is Daniel doesn't want one. He's just too scared to tell you."

They glance at one another and then back at me.

"You've been spying on us?" Angie asks.

"Daniel, talk to her. Don't be such a pussy."

He looks down at his hands. I know what he's thinking. He doesn't want to lose Angie, and he has this idea that keeping his mouth shut will make her respect him. When he finally does look up at her, and opens his mouth, she cuts him short. "I know you want to keep the kid," she says. "But I really don't care. It's my decision and I'm getting rid of it." She stalks into the bathroom and starts powdering her face. My younger-self stares at her through the bathroom doorway, and then he meanders across the bedroom and pushes past me.

I stand there studying the bed, the champagne bottle gurgling out pink foamy liquid onto the comforter.

Maya darts through the woods to a spring that catches the melted snow cascading down the mountain. She sits on moss-covered rocks next to the water. At first it seems that she's contemplating her reflection. But soon I see her tying a boulder to her ankle. She lifts the rock above her head and plunges into the spring. Under the surface, her body convulses as bubbles float up out of her mouth.

I set her wilted body on the stones and wrap a wool blanket around her arms. Her face only shows scorn when she opens her eyes. I try to coax her out of her misery and make her giggle like the little girl she once was. She shivers in the sunlight. "Stop saving me."

"But you have to live."

She sticks her lower lip out like a pouting child, although she's far past sixteen. We sit in silence for a long time. The sun dives behind the cliffs. The moss becomes wet and cold. The trees bend their branches down like gaunt twisted arms. I don't want to admit it, but I know she's right. I'm only making things worse by keeping her alive. I've already started rupturing real memories. If I keep at it I'll have nothing left that I

want to remember from the past. My younger-self will wander around a forest of skeletons and grave markers.

"I'll end it," I tell her. "But first we need to have one last tea party."

The forest falls away as if a giant ax has come out of the sky and turned the world into splinters. I find myself on top of a building, wearing a tuxedo with tails. The roof is set for a grand festival, a circus of fanfare and celebration. All Maya's dolls have come to say farewell. Small Japanese lanterns light our gathering, washing us in shades of red and gold. A long Egyptian rug embroidered with tiny pieces of mirror lies across the concrete floor. Saucers and cups clutter the rug and in the center a steaming pot of hot chocolate sits next to my almost depleted bottle of whiskey.

Maya emerges into the moonlight wearing a white silk dress that chokes her neck with a band of pearls. A diamond tiara finishes her ensemble, offsetting the platinum blond wig she has pinned over her brown locks.

The teddy bear throws up a handful of confetti. The stuffed mouse takes out a deck of cards and prepares for a game of speed. Our mugs clink together in a toast, her sipping chocolate, me whiskey. For a moment we laugh at the absurdity of the glittering paper swimming in our glasses.

"What is death like?" she asks, her pupils flickering as if she's courting her own words.

"I suppose it's like being asleep."

"Do you have dreams?"

"Yes, the grandest dreams you can think of." I try to finish my statement but I can't.

She holds up a silver revolver. "Will you help me now?"

I finger the weapon, testing its weight. It feels real in my palm. "No, I can't."

"But you promised. One last tea party and you'd let me go."

"I will, but not like that."

I pull her to my chest and lift the bottle over her shoulder to my mouth. The whiskey burns my tongue, dribbles down her back. I have to do it but not with a pistol. I can't remember her like a piece of lifeless meat. If she is going to die it must be a moment of transcendence, a romantic moment where she drifts away.

I put the revolver aside and tell her to lie down. Then my large ringmaster hands clutch her throat and the pearl necklace breaks under my grasp, beads tumbling onto the rug. The dolls hiss at me. The teddy bear kicks me in the leg while the china doll scratches my arm. With a grand sweep of my hand they fall away and I go back to my business.

Maya doesn't struggle. She lies motionless watching me with porcelain eyes. As I squeeze the life out of her, I see a faint smile appear on her mouth, the type cats have when they're sleeping on the edge of a sofa.

Slowly she begins to dissolve, becomes a blurred vision, a mendacious memory. I find myself sitting at my kitchen table with an empty bottle of Maker's Mark and a glass of melted ice. The phone sits in my lap. I set it aside and go to the window. Below, the parade is passing by.

I run downstairs and start up the sidewalk, looking for a gap where I can stand and watch. The crowd sings along to a Polish folk song blaring from a float. Children with tiny American flags run up and down the street. At the corner I find a space between a woman in a red knit hat and a man who's swaying with a plastic cup of beer in his hand.

"You work down at the butcher shop."

I glance over at the woman with black strands falling out of her hat. "Do I smell like meat?"

She laughs, her nose twitching as if she's trying to decide which type of smile to give me.

"I'm Daniel."

Her mitten covered hand holds mine, and it feels like I'm time traveling. I check over my shoulder to make sure an older version of myself isn't watching me from down the street. But there's no one there. It's only me and her.

Snap

"When I heard the phone ring, I had the strange sensation that something bad was about to happen."

"Do you often have premonitions?"

"I've been asthmatic since I was nine."

"That's not what I asked."

"This was the first instance that I can remember."

"What did you think was going to happen?"

"Can't really say. I just knew it was going to be bad."

"And did something happen?"

"Yeah, it did."

"I want you to go back to that moment. Can you do that for me?"

I'm working in the kitchen of Lucy's Roadside Grill. A little league team came in twenty minutes ago and they all wanted cheeseburgers. Sharon is peeking through the order-up window as if I can make meat cook faster. "If you're in such a hurry," I yell, "get back here and make the side salads."

"Stop messing with me Clyde. I told you I had an appointment at two."

"I'm sure the hair salon will wait five minutes."

She stomps around and through the double doors and starts tossing handfuls of lettuce on the plates. Tom strolls out of his office, eyes Sharon, and then struts up to me.

“Joanna down at the prison just called.” He leans against the stainless steel workstation behind me. “They want us to cook Daryl Kückmann’s last meal.”

“As in his last meal ever?”

“Yeah, he requested us.”

“What did he order?”

“He wants whatever we have on special Friday night.”

“That’s usually fish and fries.”

“I told her that. She said, ‘Have the cook bring it over with a bottle of root beer.’”

My breaths become short and I hold my hand against my chest. “They want me to deliver it to the prison?”

“Well, that was part of his request. He asked for the cook to bring it personally so he could thank him. I assumed that’d be you.”

I pat myself down in search of my inhaler as my lungs start collapsing

“Have you seen my medicine?” I ask, rushing towards the office.

Tom is right on my heels asking if I’m okay, while Sharon shouts, “Who’s going to finish these burgers?”

The shelves in the office stretch floor to ceiling. There is everything from tubs of flour to oversized cans of green beans. Stuffed between the nooks and crannies are countless personal items: green cards, hairnets, the keys to my truck. I spot my inhaler up high between the tins of jalapeños and the bottles of ranch dressing. Tom bumbles up a step ladder and tosses it down to me.

My lungs feel like the inside of the freezer lock as I breathe in the medicine. For a few seconds I just stand there focusing on the plastic device.

“Breathe, breathe.” Tom places one hand on my shoulder and with the second he tries to force the inhaler back in my mouth.

“No, it’s fine,” I say, swatting him away

He brings over a folding chair. The metal squeaks under my weight. A half-empty bottle of water sits on the corner of the desk. He unscrews the top and hands it to me. I tell him I'm fine as I remove my toque and smooth back my hair.

"You grew up here in Blythe, right?"

"Yep, graduated Palo Verde High."

"Do you think something from your past triggered the attack?"

"I think it was just knowing that I was in charge of making a man his last meal that did it. I mean, it's not every day you get asked to cook for a mass-murderer."

"Nothing ever happen when you were younger? Can you think of a particular stressful event?"

"Well, there was an incident during the junior high talent day."

"Can you go back to that memory for me?"

The whole school is sitting on the wooden bleachers in the gym. I'm in the front row. Daryl stands center court wearing a black suit and bow-tie. He just finished a trick where he made a coin disappear. "For my last trick," he says, stepping closer. "I'm going to hypnotize you." A couple of teachers sitting off to the side start to chuckle. He glares at them and then continues.

"I'm going to start at the number five and count backwards. When I say 'one,' you will be completely under my power." He takes a pocket watch from his vest and holds it out by a long chain. Slowly, he begins to sway it to the ticking of the clock on the wall above the basketball hoop. "I want you to imagine you are at the top of a staircase. This watch is the light at the bottom." Everyone looks around, checking to see if their friends are going to follow Daryl's instructions.

"Five. You are standing at the top of the stairs looking down. At the bottom is a bright light. As you step down the stairs towards it you begin to feel lighter."

The watch sways. My eyes follow. I'm close enough that I can see my distorted self in the silver plating. "Four. Each step you take brings you closer and closer to the light and you begin to feel lighter and lighter."

“Three. The heavy weight of your body has lifted. You feel as light as a feather. You no longer have to walk or step. Instead you float down. As you get closer the light gets bigger and stronger. You begin to feel very tired.”

“Two. The last step is right in front of you. When you float off the staircase into the light you will be weightless and under my power. You will not wake up until I snap my fingers.”

“One.”

“Do you remember what happened next?”

“I don't know. I opened my eyes and the gym had cleared out. The show must have just ended because I could hear people hollering in the hallway.”

“What did you think happened?”

“I was prone to doze off back then, especially in math and geography. I figured I'd fallen asleep.”

“Do you know what happened while you were hypnotized?”

“You know, I never thought to ask. Since I didn't remember anything I figured nothing had gone down. Even years later, when I heard the gossip, it still never occurred to me that I'd really been hypnotized.”

“What kind of gossip?”

“There were lots of rumors. Like my friend Elizabeth works down at the prison and she told me a story about one of the inmates getting hypnotized and running around the cell like a chicken. And then Margret, the waitress down at Rosie's, told me one of the guards had been put into a trance and made to do push-ups until the muscles in his arms tore. I figured it wasn't true, but who knows.”

“So, eventually you started believing you'd been hypnotized.”

“Well yeah. At first it seemed impossible. It would have meant I'd been hypnotized for fifteen years. But after I went out to the Kückmann ranch I started getting the feeling it might be true.”

“I'd like you to revisit that moment.”

I'm standing in front of a flat roofed house in the middle of salt flats. A couple of fence posts jut out of the hard ground. The electrical line lies in a coiled heap by the front door. Next to it a pipe gushes water, creating a muddy moat around the house. I step up to the door and knock. Footsteps resonating like walnuts being snapped open, echo behind the door. "Who's there?"

"Mrs. Kückmann," I say, cocking my head towards the screen. "It's Clyde from Lucy's Roadside Grill."

"You one of them reporters?"

"No ma'am."

"I ain't answering no more questions. So you might as well just get."

"I'm not a reporter."

The door creaks open. A frail old woman peers through the screen. "You a vacuum salesman? Cause I'll tell you right now I don't need one. I don't got no electricity out here."

"Can I come inside?"

Her grey eyes move left to right across my frame, and then she turns around and hobbles down the hall. "Suit yourself," she calls out over her shoulder. "In, out, I'm not buying nothing."

I ease the screen back and step into the entryway. The same cracking noise comes from underneath my boots. I light my Zippo, expecting to see dead leaves. Instead, I find the damp concrete covered in snails. I jump back when I notice I'm eye level with a large orange slug.

Mrs. Kückmann sits hunched over in the living room. All the curtains are drawn and the stench of mildew permeates the room. I have the vague sensation of tiny bacteria crawling up my nose and spawning inside my brain.

"What'd you say your name was?"

"Clyde, I'm a cook at Lucy's Grill."

"I know the place."

"I came down here because I've been asked to make Daryl's last meal." My weight shifts from one foot to the other. "Did he like anything in particular when he was growing up? A favorite food or something?"

Her lips tremble as she wraps her arms around herself. "They're going to kill my boy?"

"Ma'am," I say. "I'm sorry about Daryl. He was a good kid from what I remember."

"That's true. Daryl always was a good boy." She begins slowly rocking in her seat. "They say he wasn't but I know he was."

I shove my hands in my pockets and nod.

"Always helped his mama. You know they don't put that in the papers. They just make up all these lies about him. He didn't kill nobody. Everyone knows that. Them people killed themselves."

"I couldn't say."

"They're all just jealous. That's all."

"Jealous?" I ask.

"People get scared when someone speaks the truth."

My eyes bounce from the old woman, to the antique bureau, to a cylinder desk. There is something odd about the room although I can't put my finger on it. Maybe it's just me knowing that some bad memories live in this place.

"He was an ordained minister," she continues. "Gave a mighty fine service."

"I didn't know that."

"There's a picture of him in his robes around here somewhere." She slowly stands and shuffles across the room. "Have a look."

I join her by a dusty woodstove and watch as she flips through a stack of photos.

"Here's one from a trip to Yosemite."

The glossy print reveals a teenage Daryl sitting at a picnic table. I strain my eyes trying to make out what they are eating, but besides a bag of Doritos I can't tell what anything is.

"This is when he graduated."

She holds out a second photo. I take one glance at Daryl in his cap and gown and am already bored of this game. I move my attention to the box of kindling next to the woodstove. On top of a pile of twigs are snippets of newspaper articles about Daryl's involvement in the murders. The headlines read, "Twelve Women and Seven

Men Found Dead,” “Cult Leader Kills Followers,” and “Hypnotist Convicted of Mass Murder”

“Here’s the one,” she says, shoving another photo under my nose. “This was taken about five years ago.”

Daryl stands in a candid pose wearing the robes of a priest. “He gave a good service that day,” she says. “Talked about humility and being there for your neighbor.” Her eyes are wet. I take the photo from her shaking hand and lead her back to the couch. “He says he doesn’t want me to be there in the end.” She crosses her arms over her chest and slowly begins rocking again. “He doesn’t want his mama to see him die in that place.”

“It’s probably better that way.” I hold up my hand to console her and then let it drop to my side.

“When you see him Friday will you tell him something for me?” The deep crevices across her forehead seem to open up. I feel like I might fall into those trenches and stop breathing.

“I don’t really know. I’m just delivering his dinner to him.”

“Please, promise me you’ll talk to him. Tell him I’ll be right outside the prison when he dies. Tell him I’ll be in my car praying for him when he goes.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” I hand the photo back to her and am about to leave when I see movement coming from an old aquarium. There, behind the TV, is a large tank. I step closer and peer through the glass. Inside, hundreds of slugs slithered over each other.

“That was Daryl’s aquarium,” she says. “I never had the heart to get rid of his pets.”

Between the slugs I see a pocket watch that looks like the one he used in his magic show. I reach into the tank, pull it out, and hold it up in front of me. It catches the light slipping in between the curtains.

“So, seeing the watch made you realize you had been hypnotized?”

“It was more like everything came together in that moment. Like I’d had all the pieces, but hadn’t put them in place until then. The newspaper articles, the watch, the

talent show, it all made me think there was some kind of bomb inside me that could be activated with a phrase. I might be walking down the street and someone might say, 'Chocolate milkshake,' and I'd start barking like a dog."

"Did anything like that ever happen to you?"

"No, but I was worried that it would. That whole week while I was trying to decide what to cook I had at least one asthma attack a day."

"Why didn't you just cook the special?"

"Because I'd become obsessed with cooking the right meal. I spent my own money on all kinds of different ingredients and stayed in the kitchen after we'd closed trying everything in my arsenal from filet mignon to seafood bisque. But nothing seemed to work. Tom found me around midnight the night before the execution and I had something cooking on just about every burner in the kitchen. He told me to head on home and get some sleep. But I wasn't going anywhere. I wanted..."

"You wanted what?"

"I can't remember."

"I would like you to return to that moment. Go back in your mind."

I'm hovering over the stove. Risotto simmers in a pot. Pungent lemon wafts off scallops. Italian flat bread bakes in the oven. On the counter is a crate of supplies I picked up earlier at Martha's Market. At the bottom I find two pigs' feet. I fish them out and place one on the chopping block. A bowl of oil and rosemary sits nearby. I dip my hand in the mixture and then I begin massaging the gristle.

The roll of aluminum foil has run out. I go back to Tom's office to get a replacement. I scan the shelves, but there doesn't seem to be a new one anywhere. I climb up the ladder to get a better view of the top shelf. Behind the sacks of flour I spot a metal box. The type concession stands use to store change. Inside are various documents and photos. I pull one out. It shows a younger Tom and Sharon standing next to Daryl Kückmann.

I can taste my heartbeat in the back of my throat. I climb down the ladder and go back into the kitchen. Tom is studying the various pots I have going on the stove. "Late night snack?" he asks, patting his stomach.

I start wheezing. My hand clutches my chest.

"You okay?"

I hold up the photo.

His lips form a straight line. "It's not polite to go through people's things."

"How do you know Daryl Kückmann?"

He leans back against the counter and massages his temples. "I wouldn't say I knew him like a friend, but I did spend some time with him a few years back."

"Were you and Sharon part of his cult?"

"That was a long time ago."

The walls in my peripheral vision are black. I peer down a narrow tunnel with Tom standing at the end. "For how long?" I stammer.

"About nine months." His words sound odd, like he's whispering to me from the bottom of a huge cauldron.

"Why didn't you tell me when the order came in?"

"Maybe because it's nobody's business."

The redness in his face looks like it might swell up and drip out his eyes. I back away, my breaths coming out in quick spurts.

He loosens his tie and pulls at his collar. "Just calm down, Clyde. Don't have another attack on me."

The black tunnel of my vision spirals inward. I feel like I might sink to the floor at any moment. "Did he ever hypnotize you with a watch?" I ask.

"I don't have an urge to kill myself if that's what you're asking."

"I'm not asking that."

"What are you getting at then?"

I want to say I'm getting at the idea that I've been hypnotized for fifteen years and I only realized it a couple of days ago. "I guess I'm asking how you broke his spell?"

He fiddles with his earlobe. I grab onto the edge of the counter and try to breathe steady.

"I don't know how you break his spell. I was never able to. But I was smarter than the others, so he kept me alive."

There isn't any air in the room. I reach into my breast pocket, but my inhaler is missing.

Tom pulls a pocket watch out. It looks exactly like Daryl's. I bring my hands to my chest and gasp for air. The inhaler sits next to the crate on the counter. I jumble around the counter, grab the medicine, and bring it to my mouth.

"I bought this mail order," he says, flipping the watch over in his palm and brings it close to my eyes. "Read the back." At the bottom engraved in miniscule letters are the words Bunny.in.a.Hat TM. "Anyone can buy one. They sell them in the ads at the back of comic books. But the power isn't in the watch. It's in how you use it."

I can barely see. The black tunnel surrounds me and I feel like I'm being pulled under.

"I'm going to count backwards from five," he says, "and when I reach one you'll submit your *will* to me."

I suck in a cloud of medicine as Tom dangles the watch by its chain in front of me.

"Five, you are staring at a bright glowing ball. It's as bright as the sun."

I peer into the watch and see my twisted reflection.

"Do you know what your boss did to you?"

"Not really. All I remember is I heard a cracking sound like my ears were popping. I started coughing into my hand. When I looked down at my palm I found a black glob."

"Did you remember what had happened before the hypnotism?"

"No, nothing. When I came to he had his hand on my back and he was telling me to breathe."

"What came after that?"

"The next day Tom called me into his office a couple of hours before the food had to be delivered."

"I'd like you to go back to that memory?"

I'm pacing the freezer lock, looking for ideas of what to cook for Daryl. I hear Tom yelling from his office, "Come in here for a sec." I mosey on through the doorway. He's sitting behind his desk with his feet propped up on a box. "The prison just called me. They need the food at 9:30 instead of 10:00."

"I still haven't decided what to cook him."

"Make him the special." He picks up a pen and starts tapping it against the desk. "What was it today, meatloaf?"

"Chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes."

"There you go. Throw it in a Styrofoam box and drive it over there."

"It just doesn't feel right for a last meal."

"Then make him what *feels* right."

"I don't know him well enough to do that."

"For Christ sake, it needs to be ready soon. Stop doddling around and get busy."

I look from Tom to the travel agency calendar he has tacked up on the wall behind him. The picture for October shows the Parisian cityscape with the Eiffel Tower in the background. And then it hits me. I know exactly what I should make for Daryl's last meal. I march back into the kitchen and start mincing garlic.

"So, you cooked the food, and then what?"

"I packed it up, tossed in a bottle of root beer, and stepped out the back. I remember feeling good, almost great. Deciding what to cook had lifted a great weight off my shoulders and it felt like things were going to be different. Like I was going to finally get the nerve up to ask the girl who works down at the Bank of America out and she might say, 'yes.' Like I didn't need my inhaler any more. Like I might start going to the gym and lose a few pounds. Of course, it was probably all bull, but that's the sensation I had as I drove my truck down the dark highway."

"I'd like you to move forward in time to the moment when you arrived at the prison. Can you do that for me?"

A guard is escorting me down a long white corridor. He's about the same size as me and sniffs the air as if he's trying to get a whiff of what I've got in the bag. "What's for dinner?" he asks.

"Escargot."

He snorts a laugh. "Isn't that like snails?"

"That's exactly what it is."

The guard pulls a set of keys from his belt and unlocks a metal door. There sitting on the edge of a bed is Daryl, clean shaven, in a black suit, with pomade slick hair.

"Your food's here," the guard says.

"Lucy's Roadside Grill?" he asks.

I hold up the bag to confirm.

"Just set it over there," he says, pointing to the stainless steel table across from him.

"Brought you that bottle of root beer," I tell him as I step into the cell and set his food down. "Hope you like Barq's."

"As a matter of fact I do."

I turn to face him. I want to say something profound, a sort of blessing, but now that the time has come all I can say is, "You're mother wants you to know she'll be outside praying for you when it happens."

"You know my mother?" He peers up at me as if he's puzzled.

"Well, not really. But you and I did go to school together."

"Of course!" He stands up.

The guard comes forward.

I freeze.

"It's cool," Daryl says, backing up. "I just wanted to shake the man's hand."

The guard glances at me and then back at Daryl. "Make it quick."

"It's good to meet you," I say, holding out my right mitt.

"Likewise," he answers, giving it a good shake.

"I hope you enjoy your meal."

"I'm sure I will."

His grip tightens and he pulls me towards him. "You were the first," he whispers. His fingers snap next to my ear.

I stand there paralyzed, watching Daryl elbow the guard in the jaw. The guard tries to fight back, but Daryl headbutts him and the guard drops to the floor.

"Put on his uniform," Daryl says.

I slid on the guard's brown pants and button up his dark green shirt. A key ring jingles on my belt.

"You're going to escort me down the hall and out the employee exit."

He turns the mattress on his bed over. The underside has a hole in it. He reaches in and pulls out shackles. I bind them to his feet and wrists.

We make our way down the corridor. He leads the way. I follow. "Don't look up into the cameras," he says. "Keep your face bent towards the ground." At the end of the corridor is a door. He tells me to unlock it. I do.

In the employee parking lot we find a station wagon idling. Daryl's mother sits behind the wheel. Daryl pulls up the backseat cushions. Underneath is a compartment large enough for him to lie down in. He tells me to replace the cushions and then go to my truck, take off my uniform, and drive home. He'll meet me there.

As I pull up into my driveway I peer out the window at the neighborhood windows glowing TV blue.

"Do you remember what happened next?"

"It's all a blank."

"Good. Now that we have passed through all the memories of the last week I want you to forget them. I want you to forget Tom requesting you to make me my last meal. I want you to forget visiting my mother. I want you to forget this session we've just had tonight. When I snap my fingers you will awaken here in your own living room, feeling rested. You'll no longer have anxiety attacks when you think of me. You'll have no memory of ever being hypnotized by me. If someone tries to take you back to any of these memories you will feel a shooting pain in your skull."

"Can I ask a favor?"

"What did you have in mind?"

“Can you make it so I’ll go ask the girl down at the bank out?”

“When you wake up you’ll go to the Bank of America and ask the teller on a date.”

“Thank you, Daryl.”

“You’re just lucky my mother is in the other room, otherwise I would have made you kill yourself.”

“I always thought you were a standup guy.”

“Five, you are standing at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Your legs and arms feel heavy.

Four, you trudge up the stairs and with each step you feel more grounded and connected to the earth.

Three, you see a door at the top of the stairs. When you get to it you will be completely grounded and feel like your old self.

Two, you climb to the top of the stairs, open the door, and step through.

One.”

800 Rupees

Smoke rose off the burning trash piles, covering the streets in a white haze. Through the fog Bobbish plodded along. He wasn't worried that he would lose his footing and fall into the meter deep ditch that lined the street. For the past five years he'd walked from his house to the bus stop and he knew every crevice and stone before they met his foot. Even though he couldn't completely see Mr. Jayaraman he could smell the hot *chau* he was selling across the road from his cart. Up ahead he could make out the silhouette of Mrs. Lobo's sturdy frame mopping down her storefront with a rag held steady by her big toe. No, there was nothing unusual happening that morning, nothing except for the holy man who appeared without warning in front of him.

Bobbish jumped back and in the process fell, twisting his ankle. The *sadhu* looked down at him with wild eyes, the type brought on by enlightenment or starvation. He bent his knees and pushed out his toes so that he stood hunched and bowlegged. The metal trinkets that adorned his ochre-colored garments jingled as he grabbed a whip from his hip. With a long sweeping motion he cracked it against the dirt. The boy scrambled off the ground and tried to back away, but pain shot down from his ankle to his foot making even the slightest retreat unbearable.

"*Besaum*—Blessing?" The question came out of the *sadhu's* mouth along with a spray of spit that land on Bobbish's cheek. "Lord Shiva blesses all who worship him with sincerity." The *sadhu* cracked the whip a second time to emphasize his point.

The boy reached into the pockets of his shorts and fingered the few coins he had. He didn't want to give even one rupee away, but the intense stare of the holy man reminded him of what his mother would think if he passed up this opportunity. She was a devout Hindu. Every morning and evening she would light sticks of incense and guide their smoke in a circle over a shrine to Lord Vishnu which hung on the wall of their hut. She wouldn't be happy if she knew he'd passed by a holy man without being blessed.

With a wobble of his head, Bobbish acknowledged the man's presence. The *sadhu* lowered himself closer to the ground by bending his knees. In one quick motion the boy fished a rupee out and set it in the shrine the holy man carried on his head. As soon as the coin clinked against the tray the *sadhu* reached over with his thumb and placed three horizontal vermilion marks on Bobbish's forehead. The deal was done. Bobbish picked his school bag off the ground and hobbled towards the bus stop. As quickly as the holy man had appeared he vanished into the smoke, only leaving behind the sound of his voice. "Come get your blessings. Lord Shiva always finds ways to protect the righteous."

The bus stop wasn't marked, but everyone knew that the utility pole in front of Prabhu's samosa stall was the only place in Chaudi that the bus driver would pause long enough to let children board. The boy stumbled up to the stall and took a seat on the ground so he could check his injury. Long scrapes went from his foot all the way to his knee. A bruise had already formed above his sandal. As he tried to wipe away the red dust Mr. Prabhu came up behind him with a toothbrush in one hand and a beaker of water in the other. "What happened to you?" he asked, between vigorous bouts of brushing.

"Nothing," Bobbish answered, averting his eyes. Mr. Prabhu was an old family friend and would often come by the house bringing what he called *extra* chapattis. The boy liked him well enough but didn't want to burden him with his troubles.

"Let's have a look." Mr. Prabhu spit the white foam into the gutter, gargled water from the tin cup, and then knelled down next to Bobbish. "Yaar," he said, peering at the boy's ankle, "I have just the thing for that." He disappeared into his living quarters behind the stall. When he came back, a few minutes later, he was holding a roll of gauze and a saucer filled with turmeric paste. Rapidly he covered the injury with the

bright orange remedy and then he began wrapping the spongy cloth around the boy's leg. "I see you met our new holy man." He wobbled his head smiling.

"Why does he carry around a whip?"

"Who knows? Maybe he was a horse trainer in a past life."

More likely a monkey trainer, Bobbish thought, he walks bowlegged like a red faced baboon. "I liked the old holy man better."

"He's still around here somewhere." Bobbish and Mr. Prabhu exchanged knowing looks but didn't say what they were thinking. They knew exactly where the old holy man was. He had set up shop in front of a store that sold locally distilled liquor near the crossroads. All day he would sit there pouring *fenny* down his throat. Often he would complain about his eyes failing, but no one gave him sympathy. It was common knowledge that the booze was made with anti-freeze which would slowly make anyone who drank it go blind.

Mr. Prabhu shoved the end of the gauze under a fold in the bandage to hold it in place. "Just in time for your bus." He pointed to the silver and purple vehicle plowing around the bend. Bobbish thanked him and struggled to his feet as the bus screeched to a halt in front of them. The jubilant cheers of children poured out of the windows. Mr. Prabhu waved at the kids while he helped the boy board. When Bobbish had made it up to the second step the door slammed shut and the driver sped down the street toward the palm forest.

The aisles were packed with children all dressed in the same uniform: Charcoal shorts or skirts and white shirts or blouses. Bobbish made his way to the back following the distinct sound of hip-hop music. Two girls sitting to his left glanced up at him and then just as quickly turned away and began giggling. He smoothed down his grey polyester tie and tried not to show that he was having trouble walking through the crowd of children. In the back seat, a skinny kid named Semi stood holding a phone above his head. An Eminem song cracked and hissed, trying to find a way out of the tiny speaker which was turned up to full volume.

"It's my new cell phone," Semi yelled to no one in particular as he sat down and then stood up every time the lyrics said, *Will the real Slim Shady please stand up.*

Stolen phone, Bobbish thought. He wasn't sure but he figured the only way anyone could own such a luxury was because they had a knack for 'borrowing' things. Semi seemed just the type to do it. His older brother slaved over the *tandoor* at a beach hotel, the type of hotel where foreign tourists left their electronic devices lying around. Every Monday morning Semi seemed to have a new fantastic tale about his visits to the resort and a new gadget to prove it. Last week it had been about him and his friend Ram strolling up and down the beach fighting off half-naked woman until they finally succumbed to two English girls. He offered up one sparkling sapphire earring as proof.

"Don't be jealous," Semi called out, "just because your momma can't afford to buy you an iPhone." Bobbish looked over his shoulder. Was Semi talking to him?

"What's he need a phone for?" Ram shouted from where he was sitting next to Semi. "He doesn't have no one to call."

Bobbish stopped trying to struggle down the aisle to a place less crowded and just stood there trying to think of a cutting rebuttal. If he'd been alone with the two boys he probably would have just slunk away, but seeing as there was a crowd of kids watching he had to say something. Finally, he yelled the best response he could come up with. "That song's two years old."

"Yeah, but it's still good," Semi said, almost in a whisper. He seemed to be taken off-guard by the comment. Bobbish used the opportunity to avert his eyes from Semi and Ram with the hope that they would find someone else to ridicule. But he would have no such luck that morning. The bus came to a screeching halt and ten new kids jumped aboard. They pushed and shoved trying to make room for themselves. Bobbish was forced to hobble down the aisle towards the back. When everyone was resettled he was so close to Ram that he could have reached over and gouged him in the eye.

Palm leaves thrashed against the windows as they roared on. Bobbish stared out the window past the blur of trees to the water buffalos grazing in the field.

"What'd you get attacked by your mom's lipstick?" Ram pointed at the red marks on the boy's forehead. "Look at that. He's got lipstick all over his face."

"It's a *tilak*."

“Not like one I’ve ever seen.” Semi joined in chuckling so hard that he had to stop and gasp for air.

“A holy man gave it to me.”

“Well, you should tell him you want your money back.”

“Yaar, there’s even some on his chin.” Semi leaned over Ram to examine the boy’s face. “No, that’s *mirsang* from his breakfast.” They both burst into a new fit of laughter. Bobbish turned towards the back window wishing he could somehow open it up and jump out, but there was no escape. He was stuck next to these two *fuscaws* until the bus arrived at school.

The harassment wasn’t new. Ram and Semi had been picking on younger kids as far back as he could remember. The difference was that it didn’t usually happen to him. The only reason he could come up with was that he had seen Ram working his family’s roadside juice stall. Saturday morning Bobbish’s mother had asked him to accompany her so she would have a strong pair of arms to help her carry the salted fish and rice she planned to buy. On the walk back from town they had happened upon the refreshment stand. Bobbish’s mother offered to buy him a sugary treat. When he saw that Ram was the one pushing the stalks of sugar cane through the gears of the machine he told her he didn’t want one. “Of course you do,” she insisted. Before he could protest further Ram was handing him his drink with a sneer.

The bus pulled off the road and into the schoolyard. A cloud of dust blew past the windows. Bobbish followed the line of children slowly disembarking. Eventually he emerged onto the dirt playground and stood to the side waiting for the air to clear. If he had been able to see through the red cloud he would have looked upon a lone stucco building with a thatch roof. He would have seen white bits of plaster along the perimeter of the building and a rusted drain pipe. He would have noticed all these things because on Friday afternoons he would help Mr. Amma, the groundskeeper, patch the pock marks with plaster and repaint them.

These weekly endeavors to try and make the facade respectable did little good. The school had been built over fifty years ago and the building contractors had used cheap materials. At one point the front door’s hinges had rusted off and educational funds were so scarce that the only thing Mr. Amma could do was attach it to the opening

with a bit of twine. There wasn't much worth stealing in the school anyway and everything worthwhile was kept locked in Sister Harrington's office.

"You're so fat you can't even walk right," Semi said, while Ram waddled down the bus steps.

"Shut up."

"Hurry up hippo-belly, or I won't give you any."

Bobbish inched back until he felt the aluminum side of the bus against his shoulders. Please let them not see me. Please make me invisible. His prayers were answered. Semi and Ram passed by him without a second glance. He heaved a sigh and sat down against the tire to retie his bandage.

"How'd you get it?" Ram asked Semi as they strutted towards the rear of the bus.

"The guy by my house sold it to me. I told him it was for my grandma. He knows she's always walking around chewing it."

What were they talking about? He tried to act like he didn't care as he pulled the gauze taunt around his ankle, but he couldn't help but be intrigued. Peering under the bus he saw Semi and Ram's sandals. They were directly behind the vehicle where Sister Harrington and the other two teachers couldn't see them.

"What do you do with it?" Ram asked.

"You just put it between your lip and teeth and then you spit a lot." He could hear Semi fumbling through his pockets, but he couldn't see what he was trying to get out. Maybe if he crept up a little closer he could look around the side. No, he didn't dare. Whatever they were doing wasn't allowed and he was sure they'd rough him up if they saw him. He tucked the end of the gauze under like he'd seen Mr. Prabhu do and was just about to try and get to his feet when he saw a wad of bank notes fall on the ground between Semi and Ram's feet. There must have been more than 500 rupees. He held his breath as Semi reached down to collect the bills.

"*Melelo*—Shit ass," Semi shouted, "that kid's spying on us."

Run, Bobbish thought. His legs tried to follow the order, but as soon as they did he felt pain stabbing his ankle. He fell to the ground holding his foot as Ram and Semi hustled around the corner.

"*Tuj mainch zogod!*—Motherfucker!" Ram yelled as soon as he saw the boy.

"Gotte bee puddi kartha—I'm going to crush your balls," Semi added.

Bobbish's eyes grew wide but he was in too much pain to even consider trying to get away. If Semi hadn't grabbed him by the collar and raised him off the ground he probably would have sat there until Sister Harrington had found him.

"You like spying on people?" Semi asked. "I'll show you what happens when people spy."

"I didn't mean to. I didn't see anything. I was sitting here because of my foot." Semi took a brief moment to glance down at the bandage. "I think I broke it."

"What'd you see?"

"Nothing. I just heard you say you have to spit a lot."

Then, for whatever reason, Semi lessened his grip. Maybe he believed the boy. Or maybe the idea of punching a kid with a hurt foot didn't sit well with him. When he began to speak again his words were wet and slick. "You're not going to tell anyone are you?"

"About what?"

"Exactly, there's nothing to tell."

"I swear I didn't see what you were doing."

Semi put his arm over Bobbish's shoulder and helped him struggle towards the back of the bus. "How old are you?" His words were as smooth as ghee.

"Ten, but I'll be eleven in two weeks."

"Right, see we're a little older than you." Semi propped the boy up against the rear of the bus. "Me and Ram are twelve."

"I know. You're in the grade above me."

"Well, the thing with being younger is you don't always know the rules." He looked over at Ram who gave a nod of agreement. "Sometimes you think it's right to go tell on someone when it really isn't."

"I wouldn't do that," Bobbish blurted out.

"See you're older than I thought. You do know the rules." He patted Bobbish on the shoulder. "You think we should let him have some?" he asked Ram.

"If he knows the rules, why not?"

They both solemnly scrutinized the boy. He knew he had better say something quick. “*Coop boreh*—It’s cool. Give me some.”

Ram held in a chuckle as he took a ball of newspaper from his front pocket and unrolled it. Inside were two stuffed betel leaves.

“*Paan*,” Bobbish announced in delight.

“This is different,” Ram told him. “It’s not sweet *paan*. It’s got tobacco in it.” Ram took one piece and held out the newspaper with the other

“What’re we supposed to do?” Semi asked. “There’s only one more.”

“Split it,” Ram mumbled, as he stuffed the *paan* between his cheek and gum.

Semi took the triangular packet and tore it down the center. One half he put in his own mouth and the other he offered to Bobbish. After a moment’s hesitation, Bobbish took the piece and placed it behind his lower lip. Instantly powdered tobacco and spices spilled out of the betel leaf and filled his mouth. He thought he might gag.

“You have to spit,” Ram told them as red juice flew from the corner of his mouth. Semi took his advice and spit the whole thing out of his mouth and then dragged his finger along his gum line until he’d gotten rid of the excess tobacco. Ram shook his head in disgust. “Last time I give you anything.”

Splat, splat, splat, the dirt was starting to look as if a mini cloud was firing down localized raindrops. Bobbish’s face began to droop. “I feel dizzy.”

“Yeah, feels good doesn’t it.”

“Not really.”

The tobacco juice had leaked down Bobbish’s throat. He felt his stomach churn. There was nothing he could do to stop it. He leaned over and vomited. As he did the school bus’s engine vibrated to life. A few seconds later the driver thrust it into gear and sped away. Suddenly, the three of them were standing in the open with red pool of evidence all around them. Bobbish gazed across the schoolyard at the other children jumping and skipping around the older boys playing cricket. Not far away he spotted Sister Harrington. Ram quickly disposed of his *paan*, right before she caught sight of them and called out their names. “Ramakant, Sameer, Bobbish, come with me.”

Bobbish bowed his head and trudged across the yard with Ram and Semi on either side of him. Sister Harrington led them into the school and down the hall towards her office.

“Don’t forget the rules,” Semi told him.

“Yeah, only babies tell on people,” Ram added.

“What was that?” Sister Harrington asked, spinning around on the balls of her feet to face them.

“Nothing,” Ram mumbled.

“I don’t want to hear you speaking in Konkani. When you’re in school you will use proper English.” Even when she was stern with them it was difficult to feel any anger. Sister Harrington glowed with an unmistakable pious aura. Her navy habit only added to the effect making her skin whiter. It was amazing that she never seemed to sweat even in the days before the monsoon when temperatures were at their hottest. At first Bobbish had imagined that she had a miniature fan hidden under her robes, but then one day he caught her removing her veil and the pins that held her hair up. Her blond locks were wet and the sweat that she had kept trapped under a plastic headpiece poured down her face. He never spied on her again and tried to forget what he’d seen. He liked her better as a perfectly angelic being.

They continued down the hall, stopping only briefly while the sister tended to a shrine to Jesus whose chain of marigold flowers had slipped out of place. When they had reached the end of the corridor the three boys waited while she unlocked the door to her office. The interior was sparse. Besides the government issued desk there was a small cot, where she slept, along with a file cabinet and a steel bookshelf. The walls were falling apart just like outside. A small pile of white rubble had been swept to the corner and was awaiting its daily removal. In the center of the room a single bare bulb hung from exposed wires. It was rarely used. The power trickled through the lines in such small doses that the sister would have had more luck lighting the place with a jar of lightning bugs. Instead she used the paraffin candle that stood half melted on the windowsill.

Carefully, she removed stacks of papers and folders from one of the desk drawers and set them aside. There was no rush to her actions. She moved with grace

and a discerning quality that made time unimportant. Bobbish noted that the morning assembly was about to begin and all the kids would be waiting for Sister Harrington to appear, but instead she had to deal with them and the consequences for chewing *paan*. Finally, as Semi began to tap his foot impatiently and Ram started swaying with anxiety the sister found what she was looking for, a small metal box.

“This way.” She held the box to her chest and headed towards the back door at the end of the hall. The reluctant three sluggishly followed. Were they going to have to clean the toilets? That was the obvious choice and the usual punishment for such infractions. Bobbish looked from Semi to Ram, angry that they had gotten him in trouble. If he’d just stayed away from them none of this would be happening. Besides the atrocious smell that he, being the youngest, would have to endure, he was upset about missing the morning assembly. He enjoyed the ritual of singing with his classmates and the pep talk Sister Harrington gave every Monday. When she spoke it felt like she was speaking directly to him. Sometimes he wished his classmates would dissolve into the humid air and he could be left alone with her.

She led them down the steps into a concrete courtyard where nine boys were conversing in hushed tones. Sister Harrington pointed to a yellow line in the center of the handball court. “Everyone please sit.” All the kids followed her directions, slumping on the ground in the customary manner. Bobbish sat cross-legged in the center of the group happy to be away from Semi and Ram who found spots as far from the middle as possible. Looking side to side he tried to figure out why they had all been called upon to gather there. Everyone was from a different grade, ranging from nine to thirteen years old. Then it came to him. They were all volunteers who helped Mr. Amma every Friday to repair the school. Even Semi and Ram had volunteered because they’d rather hangout with each other around the school than go home where their parents would put them to work.

Sister Harrington held out the metal box towards them and opened it. “There were 800 rupees of donated money in here Friday morning. It was supposed to be used to buy prizes for the track meet next week, but it seems to have gone missing.” Bobbish looked from the empty box to Semi. It suddenly became clear where the wad of banknotes, which had fallen out of Semi’s pocket, had come from. “Last Friday, all of

you were here painting the school. One of you must have taken that opportunity to steal this money. Now, I'm going to go start the morning assembly and I want you to sit here and think about what you've done. When I come back one of you will return the money.” With that she banged the metal box shut, and spun around. Everyone watched as she walked through a small corridor towards the outdoor amphitheater.

Bobbish had never seen the sister angry, but the way she slammed the box shut revealed an internal fury that seemed to have unconsciously slipped through. In fact, he couldn't remember her ever showing any signs of anger during the six years she'd worked there. She was too pious to speak in rage, too sacred an icon. The entire school had changed the day she'd left her home in Suffolk and come to the village of Chaudi. Before the school had been an unruly place where students came and went as they pleased, talked all throughout class, and refused to follow the teachers' instructions. But Sister Harrington's mere presence had changed all that. Everyone felt so guilty misbehaving in front of her that without saying a single word she had single-handedly placed everything in order.

As soon as the Sister was out of earshot the buzz of accusations erupted. Bobbish could hear three or four conversations going on at once. “Who would do such a thing?” asked a kid who was wearing thick rimmed glasses. “Did you see a vagrant on the grounds?” another questioned. “It's easy to climb in her window. It could have been anyone,” stated a third. Many of the kids stood and began doing their own investigation by wandering group to group, trying to ascertain who the guilty culprit was. Bobbish stayed silent and didn't move from his place on the yellow line. He could feel Semi glaring at him and when he didn't turn his head to meet the vicious stare Semi marched over and squatted next to him.

“You remember the rules, right?” Semi asked while nudging Bobbish with his elbow. “You're not going to go and tell on me are you?” The boy felt adrenaline pumping through his arms. His hands tightened into tiny balls of flesh. He imagined grabbing Semi by the back of the neck and shoving his face into concrete. The sound of a cracking skull rang out in his head. But he did no such thing. There were rules to be followed, Sister Harrington's rules as well as the schoolyard's rules.

"I don't *gozali marunc*—tattle." Bobbish's face seethed with resentment. His tiny fists shook in his lap.

Semi peered at him puzzled for a second before regaining his bullying composure. "You better not talk." He used Bobbish's shoulder to lever himself to his feet and then motioned for Ram to follow him to a different conversation. Bobbish didn't move, only listened as Semi made sure none of the other kids thought it was him. "It's a shame we're all going to get in trouble," Semi told the kid in glasses, "especially when none of us did it."

"I can't believe we're all going to get punished," Ram said to another kid. "What kind of school is this?"

"We shouldn't get disciplined," Semi declared to a third kid. "All we were doing was painting the walls."

Semi continued inciting the other students to believe that they were all being unjustly accused until Sister Harrington came around the corner and said in a solemn tone, "I left you here to ponder your misgivings and you're all talking?" They each bowed their heads not wishing to be the one to make eye-contact and have to be the spokesperson for all twelve. "Come over here and sit down."

Perspiration leaked down Bobbish's neck. Semi's lies flowed through his veins. The cool breeze that blew through the trees and down against his face felt like a wet palm smacking his temple. Out of all the boys sitting on the yellow line he was the first to look up and meet Sister Harrington's eyes.

"Now, I want whoever stole the money to come forward," she said.

"But I was all the way on the other side of the building," one kid told her. "I couldn't have taken it."

"None of us was by your window," another added.

"Lying is a sin just as bad as stealing." She slowly turned her head holding each of them with a sympathetic stare. "Does anyone want to say something?" When no one responded her shoulders sagged. "I suppose we'll have to try something else then." She turned and walked sluggishly inside the building, her back bent like his mother's when the weight of his baby sister, wrapped against her chest, took its toll.

As soon as she was gone the crowd went into an uproar.

"It's not fair."

"We shouldn't get punished."

"What kind of school is this?"

Bobbish studied each of their faces. They whined and moaned about the reprimand they were sure to get, but none of them cared that the money had been stolen from Sister Harrington.

"Whoever did it should say something." His tongue was dry and his mouth quivered, but everyone turned towards him when he stood and spoke. "It's not right stealing that money." He searched all of their faces trying not to make it evident that he was talking directly to Semi. "I mean what if one of us won the track meet and then there was no prize."

Semi peered back at him through the slits of his eyelids. Bobbish could tell he was livid, but there was something else there, something that looked like fear. He was about to make a second plead when he noticed that everyone had moved their attention to the figure behind him.

Bobbish turned to find Sister Harrington standing in the doorway. In her right hand she held a two-foot-long cane. The dragoon stem was wrapped in a leather grip at one end while the opposite end was split so that the longitudinal fibers could inflict more damage. "Please stand," she said in a voice barely above a whisper as she descended the three steps and crossed the courtyard towards them.

"But I didn't do it," the kid who wore glasses whimpered.

"Stand, now!" Her words came out sharp and the boys immediately complied. "I'm going to ask you for the last time. Whoever stole the money please come forward and confess."

Everyone seemed intent on keeping mum. The only sounds in the air were the oohs and ahhs of the other children watching some captivating performance on stage at the morning assembly.

Sister Harrington lifted the cane, and then in a long sweeping motion she brought it down on her left hand. She shuddered briefly as the severed fibers bounced against her knuckles, but she didn't cry out or reveal an expression of pain. Instead, she lifted up the cane allowing the children to see the red welt forming on the back of her hand.

Bobbish watched the spectacle too disorientated to breathe. He knew that the cane was used quite frequently in other schools. A different headmaster probably wouldn't have gone through the trouble of asking them if they'd done it. He would have brought out the switch immediately and punished each student that he thought might have been the culprit. It was surprising that Sister Harrington even owned such a brutal device, let alone would use it.

The cane came down a second time. Bobbish cringed. The fibers had broken skin and a small trickle of blood was oozing from the wound. Sister Harrington stared past them, holding out her hand but not looking at the injury. She held the switch up above her head and waited two beats. When none of the boys responded she brought it down a third time. A muffled squeal broke through the Sister's lips. Bobbish glanced at Semi. Why wasn't he stopping her? All he had to do was say the words. But he could tell Semi was in just as much shock as he was. His eyes were glued to the welts forming on the nun's hand.

"Pater noster, qui es in caelis. Sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua. Sicut in caelo, et in terra." The cane punctuated 'nomen,' and 'terra,' with piercing blows.

"Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie. Et dimitte nobis debita nostra."

"Wait, wait!" The switch was high above her head, ready to slice the skin, but she froze when Bobbish yelled. "Look we'll all take the punishment. Just please stop."

"Thank you Bobbish," she said looking down into his face. "But I can't stop until the person who stole the money confesses." Her eyes glistened and her cheeks were wet although Bobbish hadn't seen a single tear.

"I'll give you some money." He reached into his pocket and pulled out all he had, twelve rupee in change. "We'll all put in money." He checked the other boys for agreement. The kids standing on either side of him were nodding their heads vigorously. But Semi didn't say anything. He kept opening his mouth as if on the verge of speaking, but then closed it again.

"I will continue until the person who stole the money comes forward." She waited for a moment and then raised the cane above her extended fingers. The switch came down swiftly; the blow brought more blood to the surface. The edges of the fibers were

now stained. When the cane moved through the air it was a blur of light green and dark red. Bobbish held his hand over his mouth as a shiver broke over his body. He'd tried to stop her. The only other possibility was to tell on Semi. But he'd vowed not to do that.

The sister's eyes were like panes of glass. She looked past them at a point above their heads. "*Sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem.*" The prayer became a mumble, a series of inaudible words. Bobbish bent his head and looked at the ground. He watched the shadow of her arm bringing the cane down, but he didn't move his eyes up to see the damage. "*Et ne nos inducas in tentationem. Sed libera nos a Malo.*" The collision of fiber and skin quickened. The cane came down a seventh and eighth time. The sound of the dragoon fibers cutting through the air echoed in his ear. He wanted to block it out by covering his face with his arms, but couldn't find it in him to move any of his limbs. The ninth and tenth blows came without a beat of hesitation. By the time he heard the crack of the cane for the eleventh time his face was soaked in tears.

"I did it." Semi's voice was so quiet that he had to say it again for Sister Harrington to hear him. "It was me." He pulled the wad of rupees out of his pocket and set it on the concrete in front of him. Sister Harrington lowered the switch and for the first time looked at her wounds. The blood poured out over the welts and littered the concrete with small drops.

"Give it here."

Semi picked up the notes and handed them to Sister Harrington. His cheeks drooped as he did so. In the distance the children who had gathered for the morning assembly began to sing.

"Thank you Sameer. You can all go join your classmates in the outdoor amphitheater now." Sister Harrington turned away from them and marched up the steps towards her office. Bobbish didn't move. He just watched her. The back of her habit was spotted dark blue in places where her skin had perspired.

"Why didn't you stop her sooner?" one boy asked, when she was gone.

Semi's face had turned bright red. "I didn't think she'd keep going."

"You just let her cane herself," another kid said.

“How was I supposed to know?”

“You let her take your punishment.”

The crowd wore their hostility in furrowed creases across their foreheads. Semi backed away from them, his eyes flitting back and forth in their sockets as the mob slowly encircled him. “You shouldn’t have let her do that,” Ram told him, bringing his fist down into his friend’s shoulder. The others followed suit, slugging him in the gut and ripping off pieces of his school uniform.

Bobbish listened to the sounds of knuckles pounding and Semi’s rhythmic whimpering. Without thinking he rushed towards Semi and thrust his knuckles into the boy’s chest. Semi sputtered a cough and fell forward onto the ground. But Bobbish didn’t stop. He started kicking Semi in the ribs until the pain of his ankle was so unbearable he couldn’t lift his foot.

The sun beat down harshly on the dirt playground as he slumped away from Semi’s withered body. The palm forest that surrounded the school was a vibrant green against the cloudless sky. Off in the distance he could hear his classmates at the assembly singing about salt and fish and chapattis. He reached up with the back of his hand and wiped the holy marks off his forehead. They spread across his fingers in bright vermilion.

Parasite

Sergio can taste the scent of the air in the café, swish its heaviness around in his mouth. It's a humid soup of dead marine life slipping off the ocean's surface mixing with the decay of a dog's corpse. He gulps it back like there's a promise hidden beneath, like a rolled betel leaf is dripping sugar down his throat.

Above him a steel fan rattles in its cage. The blades look sharp enough to slice off a pinky. For a moment Sergio pictures Louise, the woman across the table from him, with a rag wrapped around her hand while a group of busboys flutters about searching for ice to preserve her digit. Pascal, the man sitting next to her, would enjoy that. Not the dismemberment, just the sound of Louise's voice without all the proper subtleties that come with a Southern England accent.

Sergio's chest presses against the table's edge as he reaches down between his legs and takes sketchpad from a plastic bag. The fourth member of their party, the man squeezed in the vinyl-padded booth next to him, tries to conceal the bulge beneath his floral shirt by covering it with his elbow. He's new to the group. Appeared in the hotel lobby that afternoon. Even though he's American he seems nice enough. The only odd part about him is his face. Purple bruises highlight his jaw and bandages obscure his nose and left eye. It doesn't look startling, just a bit mysterious.

"Do you mind if I ask what happened to you?" Louise asks him.

The American scratches the three-day shadow on his neck. "Oh, you mean the bandages. Sometimes I forget what I must look like. I really have to get these changed. They're starting to get rank."

Pascal tilts his head as if he's an expert in such matters and nods. "It is easy to get infection here. You should change them soon."

"The truth is," the American says, leaning in, "I haven't looked at it yet. I'm too scared to take them off."

"They must have told you something at the hospital," Louise counters.

"Yeah, they told me they put in eight stitches, six on my forehead, and two on my nose. But who knows what kind of job they did. It was a little clinic in the middle of nowhere."

Louise draws in her pudgy cheeks, pursing her lips. "I got food poisoning on my last trip and had to go to a place like that."

Sergio half listens to Louise. He's already heard the story countless times. It's mostly about the broken air-conditioner that was in her room. It malfunctioned for her entire two-day stay, pulling in the smog from the street like a fan. Across the table Pascal is studying one of the beer bottles, possibly reading the label. For a moment Sergio imagines that he's a microscopic insect, a mosquito so tiny that he's smaller than a piece of dust. He flies through the clutter of glasses and bottles and into Pascal's ear. Once he's inside the man's skull he sinks his teeth into the grey membrane, and a bitter taste explodes in his mouth as he hears Pascal's internal monologue. "What's he doing with her? Today they drove out to Chowpatty Beach and tomorrow they're taking a day trip to an island." Through Pascal's eyes Sergio sees his own face, shiny cheeks like a young boy, pupils glistening with hope.

The flavor of Pascal's envy stings. Sergio charges out the Frenchman's nasal passage leaving a trail of blood and mucous. Pascal hadn't been like that when they first met. He hadn't turned sulky until a couple of weeks ago in Udaipur. They were at the City Palace viewing the Maharana's furniture collection. A jewel-studded glass sofa stood in the center of the room and two Indian boys were sitting on it holding hands. They paid little attention to the security guard or the other tourists wandering past.

Sergio introduced himself and asked if he could do a sketch. They laughed at first but eventually allowed him to draw them.

Sergio squatted on the marble floor and set a pouch of pens and pencils next to his foot. Pascal stalked out of the room without saying a word. Hours later, Sergio found him on the terrace of the room they shared. His clothes were scattered about and he was lying nude on a sun chair, fluffing a stick of hash. "Did you show them some new tricks?" Pascal asked. "Take them somewhere special to suck you off?"

Pink light had colored the rooftops and the dying sun had looked like a diamond resting on the Aravalli peaks. As Sergio stared across the city the air stung his eyes. The boys he'd met that afternoon didn't attach any stigmas to their affection. How could they? Homosexuality wasn't forbidden in India. It didn't exist. "They were beautiful," he told Pascal, "like a charcoal drawing, still smoldering."

Louise takes a bottle of water from her purse, wipes the top with her shirtsleeve, and then pours it into a plastic cup she's already set on the table. "So, how'd you end up in the hospital?" she asks. "What happened?"

The American slides deeper into his seat, the hem of his shirt catching on the vinyl. Before he can push it down Sergio glimpses a handgun. "I was on my way to visit the Ganges with this Australian guy I'd met at my guest house. It was our last night in town and we both wanted to see the Kabir Ghat, so even though it was getting late we ventured out. I don't know if you've been to Varanasi, but they still have the old rickshaws there, the ones that don't have an engine and are entirely moved by pedaling. The Australian guy said, 'Let's hire two and race them. You tell your driver you'll give him a hundred rupees if he can beat the other driver to the river, and I'll tell my guy the same thing.'

So, we crossed the road. He got in one, and I got in the other. Before I knew it his guy was pedaling off. I yelled back at mine, 'Kabir Ghat! You get there before him and I'll give you a hundred rupee tip.' I don't know how much English he knew, but he seemed to know the word 'tip' and what he had to do to get it. The next thing you know, we're right alongside the Australian guy at a stop light. I could tell my friend had the advantage. His driver was much younger and his legs were these muscular tubes. My guy was leaner and kind of old. But my guy was also sneaky. He didn't wait for the

light to change. As soon as he saw a gap in traffic he sped across the intersection leaving the Australian behind. I checked over my shoulder. The other cart was trying to use the same tactic but had gotten stuck behind a couple of cows.”

Sergio listens while adding shading to the curves of his drawing. Earlier, he had invited the American to dinner. The others would never have walked up to a stranger even if it was obvious that he was a foreigner traveling like themselves. But for Sergio, making friends has always been a way to survive. If it were not for his ability to approach people, he would be buried in an unmarked grave by now.

A year ago he was living in a small village in Nigeria. As always, he tried to adapt to the local customs. He slept on the dirt floor of his hut, conversed as best he could, and ate whatever was offered him. One day he was washing his clothes in the river when he noticed a refraction of light coming from the water. He reached in and retrieved a diamond the size of his thumb.

That evening he traveled to a jewelry broker in Kaduna. He had decided he wanted to sell the gem and buy a boat. But the broker told him he could never afford to buy such an expensive jewel. Stuck with the diamond Sergio returned to the village and hid his treasure in the ground under his hut.

Within a week a man stalked up to Sergio as he sat sketching in the morning sun. The man wore a red dashiki and a sneer.

“You have something for Abalunam,” he said.

“I don’t have any naira,” Sergio told him. “I am poor like you.”

“Don’t lie to Abalunam.”

Sergio tried to explain that he didn't have any money. He pointed to the various holes and tears in his shirt.

The man snorted like a hippopotamus coming up for air, and then slammed his head into the center of Sergio’s forehead. A trickle of blood slipped from Sergio’s nose and his body wobbled.

“Don’t try to pretend. Abalunam knows you. Abalunam is going to borrow a gun and when he comes back you better give him what he wants.”

Sergio felt the contours of his face, the way his nose now slanted to the right. He took a piece of paper and tried to sop up the blood. He'd been planning on sketching

the Lugard Bridge in Kaduna that day, but he decided it was a better idea to pack his belongings and leave. Luckily, the small village was prone to gossip. When word got out that the pale, skinny, Italian boy was facing death, the locals banded together and came up with a plan. Many of them had relatives in different parts of the state. They set up a route to the port in Lagos. Sergio traveled by night and spent each day hiding in a different relative's hut until he reached safety.

Thinking about it he doubts Pascal or Louise would ever aid him like the villagers did. They didn't think like that. They both wanted something in return.

A waiter dances up the narrow aisle to the table carrying a tray of *masala papodams* and two Kingfishers. Sergio reluctantly pulls his notebook back to make room for the new bottles. Everyone else seems too intent on hearing the American's story to notice the waiter popping off the metal tops and filling two glasses. But that's how they always act. Even when the skin is torn back to expose the tendons underneath, they can't see it. They cover themselves in an illusion of being elsewhere. Well, maybe not the man with the bandages. He seems to have allowed the world to touch him violently.

"The driver kept pedaling," the American continues. "His little legs pumping the gears. The river was only a few more blocks, but he didn't slow down. Then, out of nowhere, I heard the Australian yell, 'We got you now!' They must have taken side streets because the traffic was thick behind us and suddenly they were rushing up. I shouted back, 'You got nothing.'

There really was no telling who would win. The next intersection was insane. Eight different streets spilled into the circle. I didn't know how it worked or what the rules were. All that mattered was that the drivers seemed to know. We sped towards the roundabout. My driver maneuvered into the hectic circle. That's when I saw the milk truck. It was coming in from the right, off the expressway ramp. There was no way we would pass him at our present speed. I yelled at my driver, 'Truck!' But he kept pedaling. His little legs pumped the gears up, down, up, down. 'Truck!' I screamed. And I pointed at the vehicle barreling towards us, but he must not have seen it or not known what I was talking about. His little legs just kept going."

"He drove straight into the truck?" Louise asks.

“Well, the truck slowed down as much as it could, but it still hit us with enough force to topple over the rickshaw. I rolled out of it and into the middle of the street. The driver did the same. But his fall was a lot worse than mine. We found out later he had broken his arm. Luckily, the Australian guy stopped his rickshaw and helped me and my driver into his cart. We all drove to the clinic together.”

Sergio can tell Louise is quite taken by the story. Her mouth still hangs open from the gasp she let out only moments ago. He pictures himself as a hookworm larva and floats his way across the table to her lips. From there it's a straight shot to the back of her throat, where he tunnels his way through the soft flesh until he sees her memories.

Sergio envisions Louise on the veranda of an expensive hotel. She's stuffing pieces of croissant in her mouth and following them with sips of milk tea. A pashmina shawl is draped over her chest and shoulders, hiding any kind of flesh as is the local custom for women in the state of Maharashtra.

When she's finished her breakfast, Sergio follows her to the entrance of the hotel and perches on the shoulder of the concierge. “Where would you like to go madam? I will call for you a taxi?”

“I'm going for a walk,” she tells him.

“This neighborhood is not for tourists.”

“I only want to go around the block, see what's here.” Her head bends down as if she's a bull and means to plow her horns through his gut.

The concierge steps aside. “Whatever pleases you, madam.”

Out on the street, Sergio observes Louise as she wanders down a red dirt road past ramshackle huts. At the corner a cloud of steam pours out of the hood of a taxi. The driver is yelling at the owner of a second car, whose fender lies crumpled in the road.

Louise struts up to a stall and asks for a pack of Gold Flack cigarettes. While she's rummaging through her bag for a bill a small crowd surrounds her. They don't say anything. They just make a circle around her and watch. She searches the stall for anything else she can buy as if the crowd will dissipate if she lingers longer. But no one seems to have any intention of leaving. The children, who have been hiding behind

their mothers' saris, come forward with outstretched hands. One of them tugs on Louise's shawl, trying to get her attention. When Louise doesn't look down, the little girl pulls harder. The shawl falls to the ground, leaving Louise's fatty white arms and neckline exposed. Frantically, she picks up the wrap and then runs full speed back towards the hotel.

When she's gone, Sergio floats down to the counter. She's left her cigarettes there, and he knows she has no intention of coming back for them.

"That's a beautiful ring," the American says, pointing to the diamond cluster on Louise's finger.

Louise holds her hand to her mouth. Her cheeks redden. "It's a duplicate," she whispers. "I left the real one back home."

"I'm starving," the American says, patting his stomach. "Should we order?"

Pascal signals to the waiter to bring over menus. "It may not look so good in here, but they have the best curries in Colaba."

"I'd better be heading back." Louise stands, forcing Pascal to get up and let her out of the booth. "Tomorrow I'm getting up early to go see Elephant Island."

"I hear it's very nice," the American says. "One of these days I'll have to go and investigate."

Sergio wants to know what the American is thinking, but he's a hard man to discern. One thing is certain. The American didn't get his bandages in Varanasi. Sergio is sure of that. In the hotel lobby early that afternoon Sergio saw the American's suitcase, and on the handle was a baggage tag that read, "Mallam Aminu Kano International Airport, Nigeria."

What's he hiding? Sergio thinks. Why's he lying? He feels himself becoming smaller, until he's tiny enough to thread a needle. Wasp wings grow out of his shoulder blades and as he beats them, he zips across the table and lands on the American's shirt. His stinger breaks through the cotton and plunges into the American's heart. First its colors: vibrant hues of yellow and green. Then its sounds: the squawk of a car horn, the metal echo of afternoon rainwater trickling down a gutter. Sergio finds himself on a street corner in Kaduna. Across the street the American is slipping into a café.

Sergio flies through traffic, slips through the entrance right before the saloon doors shut, and lands on the top of a beer can. A waitress waltzes up to the table, her complexion light against her red dress. Sergio can hear the American think, “Back home, in Ann Arbor, they’d probably mistake her for a Mexican.”

The American orders jollof rice with king prawns for the first course, and it’s made with such perfection that he orders it for the second course as well. The waitress laughs, but brings him another plate and more cassava chips. The lunch crowd soon thins out, and it’s obvious the waitress is hoping to close up for a few hours before the dinner rush, but the American doesn’t take her hints. He downs a tall boy of Gulder and starts on a second. Sergio can hear his thoughts, hear him trying to decide what to say. “What’s your name?” Do you live around here?”

The waitress marches over to remove the dishes. The American slinks down in his chair and asks, “What do you think about swinging by my hotel tonight?” She giggles. He stares at her through drunken eyes. She backs away and ducks into the kitchen. He leaves what he owes on the table.

Sergio can feel eyes burrowing into his back. He peeks over his shoulder and is surprised to find Louise standing in the aisle like a big boulder, clutching her handbag to her chest. The waiters maneuver around her with such agility and ease she probably has no idea how much room she is taking up.

“Isn’t someone going to walk me back to the hotel?” Louise asks, her shoe tapping against the floor. Sergio looks from Louise to the other two. The American has his nose buried in his menu and Pascal has done the same.

She set her hand on Sergio’s shoulder. “You wouldn’t mind taking me back to the hotel would you? I want to get to bed early.”

“Could you wait ten minutes? I want to finish the drawing.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to draw tomorrow. We’ll be on the island all day.”

“I can walk with you.” Both Louise and Sergio turn toward Pascal. “It is only a few minutes to the *hôtel*.”

“You are sure?” Sergio asks. “You said you wanted dinner.”

Yes, he is sure. Before anyone can say anything further he wrangles his way out of the booth. Sergio takes the opportunity to move to the other side of the table.

"You get those stitches cleaned up," Louise tells the American. "I'm sure they don't look as bad as you think."

"Oh, I will. There must be a pharmacy near the hotel where I can get supplies."

There is a second round of goodbyes and then Pascal leads Louise down the aisle and out the front door.

"God, I need a drink," the American says. "I don't know about you but that woman was getting to me."

"Who, Louise?"

"Yeah, I mean I'm already drinking a beer, but sitting with her made me want to order something stronger. She's just so proper about everything."

"She can be a little, how do you say, *oppressive*."

The American snaps his fingers at the closest waiter. Soon a glass appears along with a bowl of ice, limes, a short bottle of tonic, and a liter of gin.

"Oppressive is a nice way to put it," the American says. "She needs to get the stick out of her ass and have a good time."

Sergio glances at the bottle of booze and then goes back to adding minute details to his drawing. "You know why he walks her home?" Sergio says, his stare intent on his sketchbook. "He thinks I have the sex with her."

"Are you having *the* sex?" the American asks, chuckling.

"She does not want the sex. She wants me to be her tour guide. That is why she comes to Mumbai three times and never sees Elephant Island. She has too much fear to go alone."

"What do you get out of it?"

"The same thing I get from Pascal. She buys lunch for me, and if I was not staying with Pascal she would pay to rent a room for me." Sergio stops drawing and sits back scrutinizing his sketch for a moment. It's the American with his bandages removed, his eyes heavy and difficult to discern. Sergio looks up checking his work against his subject. It's hard to tell whether he's drawn the man or his mask, but he sets his pencils aside and closes the sketchpad. "You are a good teller of history."

“What, the thing about the rickshaw?”

“Yes, you have everyone listening. I think some people at the next table you have listening.”

“You know that was all bullshit. I’ve never even been to Varanasi. I read about it in a guidebook on my plane ride over here. The truth is I got these injuries all on my own. Last week I flew from Nigeria to Italy, and while I was in Rome, I rubbed up against the wrong person. You know how it is?” The American nods at Sergio like they share a secret. “Things went wrong and before I knew it we were rolling around on the concrete.”

“So you had your ass kicked?”

The American erupts in laughter. “Yeah, I guess you could say that. I had the upper hand at first, but eventually he got control and all I could do was hang on by trying to keep him in a headlock. In the end I was on my back in the gutter and he was standing over me. I figured it was over so I’d just lay there for a while catching my breath. But I was wrong about that. He hissed at some buddies across the street and suddenly I was looking up into four faces. One of them shouted something to the others, but I had no idea what they were saying. It sounded like French. Then a boot came down, blocking out my vision. I closed my eyes as one of them went to work on my ribs. It felt like another one was kicking me in the shoulder. There was nothing I could do but try and cover my face.”

The American shrugs and then takes a sip of his cocktail. Sergio moves his attention to a man sitting in the adjacent booth. He’s ripping pieces of chicken *tikka* from a skewer and shoving them in his mouth. Between every bite he licks the red grease off his thumb and forefinger.

“After they were done with me, I got myself together and started down the street. I hadn’t gone more than half a block before I bumped into a bouncer in front of a club. He asked me what had happened. I told him ‘*Va bene*—all good’ and tried to walk past him.

But he stepped in front of me and said, ‘No, *va bene*. You have blood on your face.’

I reached up to touch the warm ooze coming from my forehead.

‘You need to go to the hospital.’ Of course he told me all this in Italian. But I assumed that was what he was saying. Again I tried to walk past him, but he was a big guy. The next thing I know he’s man-handling me into the club. Once inside he sets me on a stool by the bar and starts asking me questions. ‘Who did this?’ ‘Are they still around?’ ‘Where did it happen?’ Surprisingly, I understood most of his Italian, or at least I thought I did. I told them as best I could with a lot of gestures that four guys had robbed me and I thought they had gone down the street in the opposite direction.

‘Were they *Italiano*?’ he asked. By this point a small gathering of customers and bartenders were hovering around us to listen.

‘No, they weren’t Italian,’ I told them. They all sighed with relief.

‘What did they look like?’ he wanted to know.

I hesitated and then finally told him that I thought they were from Senegal because they spoke French.

‘What?’ In his hand he was holding a cell phone and I thought he might break it from clutching it so hard. ‘They were niggers?’

‘No,’ I tried to explain, ‘they were black, *nero*.’

But he wasn’t having it. Once again he asked me, ‘They were niggers?’

I shook my head, ‘No, black, *nero*, from Senegal.’

He looked down at the phone and I realized that he wasn’t going to call an ambulance until I gave him the answer he wanted. I could feel the blood sliding down and dripping off my chin. I reached up to try and stop it. When I brought my hand away it was completely red.

‘Who did this?’ he said, pointing to my face.

That’s when I told him, ‘They were niggers.’

Sergio shakes his head as if he has just swum up through the American’s intestine and surfaced in his stomach. He notices the subdued chatter coming from the tables around him and the *tikka* stains on their mouths.

‘I’m starving,’ the American says. ‘Should we wait for Pascal or just order?’

‘I do not think Pascal will come back.’

‘Really? He made it sound like he would.’

“He has taken half-an-hour. I think he goes to bed.”

“You want anything?”

“I have only a little money for a week.”

“Suit yourself.” The American holds up his hand. The waiter pivots around two intoxicated businessmen who are standing in the aisle and trots up to the table smiling.

“Yes please?”

“Butter chicken, plain rice, and more tonic.”

The American settles into his seat, sipping the edge of his glass while patting the bulge under his shirt. “You know in my line of work I hear a lot of stories. Some of them turn out to be true, others not so much. But there’s one that has always intrigued me. It’s about a young Italian kid who was traveling through Nigeria and happened to find a diamond. Have you heard this story?”

The waiter sets plates and silverware in front of each of them, and a basket of garlic roti in the center of the table. The American tears off a piece of roti and tosses it in his mouth. “There’s no way for me to know if the story is true or not, but I have to tell you, I won’t be leaving until I’m satisfied with your answer. I’ve spent too much time tracking you from Rome to Kaduna to here to give up easily.” He sets the handgun on the table and covers it with a cloth napkin. “So, you can either give me the diamond or we can spend the next few days figuring out if you’re telling the truth or not.”

Beads of sweat drip down Sergio’s forehead. The fan breeze blows down pushing the perspiration into his eyes. “I don’t have this diamond. Look at my clothes. Look at my arms.” Sergio holds up his bicep to show how the skin hangs off the bone like a dryer sheet. “Would I live on boiled eggs and chapati if I had a diamond?”

Two copper serving bowls appear. The American spoons rice onto his plate and then heaps chicken and sauce on top. “Maybe you don’t know what it’s worth. Or maybe you haven’t found a buyer for it yet.”

Sergio thinks back to a year ago, before he left Kaduna. It had rained for days and the river had flooded the farm lands and filled small ravines. Over half of the year’s crops had been destroyed and many of the people who lived around him had talked of the starvation that would come in the following months. He thinks back to how the elders of the village arranged safe passage for him and how he gave them the diamond

before he left. They had said they didn't want it at first. "It will only bring misfortune."
But they had reluctantly taken it in the end.

"Make this easy," the American says, "and just tell me where it is."

Sergio sits there as if his tongue has been cut out.

The American slurps down the last gulp of the gin and tonic in his glass and sets his hand on top of the napkin concealing his gun. The grin on his face is gone, replaced by a thin line of chapped lips.

"You probably think we are the same," Sergio finally says. "We both use other people to survive. But I think it is not true. I am not the same as you."

Sergio stares past the American's gauze mask. The bandages no longer obscure his view. And as the pale skin peels back, leaving tissue and muscle exposed, he locks eyes with the man beneath.

Meniscus

From the bottom of the pool, Michael watched his gym class gather. Through the water they looked like a rippling surface of red swimsuits and white skin. Frogs got it easy, he thought. They can't drown. They can breathe under water. His lips curled up as an air bulb escaped his nose. Above him the class's gestures were becoming more frantic. Some of their faces were contorting into cartoonish shapes as if they were hysterically screaming or laughing about the fact that he might die.

Below the surface things were different. He could hear the sirens' song. It was silent and loud and pulsed through his body. His vision became cloudy as if the music was pulling him further towards the deep end. Mr. Hobbs said we evolved. We mutated. But one day we might get our primitive abilities back. Through the dimness he saw his gym teacher plunge into the pool and swim towards him. We have to get them back. Can't have frogs taking over the world when the polar caps melt. Then all became black. He felt the smack of the water as he was pushed up. The siren song was replaced by an ambulance wailing in the distance and coach yelling, "Who let the epileptic kid in my class?"

Later, the ruffling of his pillow brought him back to consciousness. He forced his hardened lashes open to find a girl's breasts inches from his nose. Their eyes locked as she stepped back. "Your pillow," she squeaked. From what he could tell she wasn't much older than he was although her striped uniform made her appear professional.

He tried to sit up but the room was moving. What's up with my pillow? Did she do something to it? He could still taste chlorine. It stung his throat when he tried to speak. Who are you? Before he could vocalize his questions the girl backed out of the room and slipped down the hall. Michael's head fell back onto the pillow.

He looked up at the long IV which stretched from his hand to a metal crane above him. Beyond that was a discolored ceiling and vent. Sacred Heart, he thought, the ghetto hospital. He knew the place well. Over the years he'd spent quite a bit of time in its waiting room. The one doctor on staff, Mr. Fields, acted like they were old friends and would always try to give him a high five. Michael wasn't too crazy about the high five or the low five or any other form of hand slapping, but he hadn't figured out a way to avoid it yet.

Mom is around here somewhere, he thought, giving the room a once over. Probably trying to get Doctor Fields into bed. The idea made him want to puke. She was always trying to flirt with someone, anyone, as long as they had a job and often even if they didn't. It was so embarrassing to watch. She'd glide her hand up their arm to their shoulder and squeeze. They'd half-smile and make up some excuse about being late. Michael didn't blame them. The tanning booths and smoking had made his mom's face as worn and creviced as the burgundy pleather purse she'd been totting around for the last fifteen years.

"Shouldn't he have woken up by now?"

The machine measuring Michael's heartbeat began beeping rapidly as his mother's voice drifted in from the corridor. He shuddered, realizing that he was attached to the machine. It was measuring his life. Don't do it again. You just woke up. The self-coaching only seemed to shorten the time between beeps. He felt around under the covers until he found the wire attached to his chest. Just relax. Think about daisies or something. That's what the doctor said.

"Give him time," a second voice said. He recognized it as belonging to Nurse Ellis, a big woman with flabby arms and tight jeans. "A few more seconds in that pool and he might not have made it."

"But it's almost been two days." His mother was getting closer. It sounded like she was standing right outside the room. "Dr. Fields said he'd be up by now."

“Don’t you worry. He’ll be up and running around soon enough. He just needs his rest.”

“That’s what you all keep telling me, but you don’t understand. Michael’s a sick boy. Him and water just don’t get on. That’s why he had that spell.”

The machine spiked.

Water doesn’t scare me, he thought. I used to swim all the time.

It was true. He wasn’t fearful of water; he was only apprehensive about what it might do to his body. Before his first seizure his relationship with pools had been very different. From an early age he had been enamored with being wet. His mother used to say that as a baby he would cry his head off until she filled up the sink and placed him in a warm bath. Michael had been a little shark, a goldfish, a piranha kicking his legs and biting at the plastic toys that got in his way.

This all changed the day he slumped down on the wet concrete and started convulsing. After that his mother no longer allowed him to attend his weekly swimming lessons. He was a sick little boy. He couldn’t be trusted to hang on to the side of the pool and kick his feet. Little Michael might have another fit and what would the swim teacher think then.

To remind him that he shouldn’t go near water his mother sewed him a navy blue armband. Every morning she would fasten it securely to his sleeve before he went to school. It was little more than a small patch of cloth like a Boy Scout might wear but Michael hated the thing. As soon as he’d step out of the house he’d go through the long process of removing all the pins so he could take it off. However, after several months he got careless. One day he completely forgot about it and accidentally showed up at the bus stop with it still pinned to his shirt.

The rumors started immediately. Some gossiped that he wore it because his father had died—always adding that his mother was now most likely a prostitute. Others said that he’d been arrested by the police for smoking weed and he wasn’t allowed to take off the band for over a year. Still, it wasn’t until Michael overheard some kids gossiping in the bathroom that he decided to openly wear the armband all the time. While he had stood in one of the stalls, Pete Thompson had related the story to some younger boys. “You know how every year Mr. Hobbs makes the sixth graders do that

experiment with fruit flies? Well, one year a South America vampire fly got mixed up with the bunch. When Mr. Hobbs handed out the little cups to each group the vampire fly got loose and bit pus face on the neck. And you know when those guys bite you, you automatically get infected. But the worst part is that you don't know it for years. Then one day it wakes up. You could be at school, playing football, or just sitting on the toilet. Who knows? But you feel it in your stomach like you're going to chuck. And then suddenly baby flies hatch and crawl out your mouth."

Even though the story wasn't particularly flattering Michael smiled and hugged the hospital pillow. It was better to be a weed smoking vampire fly host than a sick little boy. The beeps coming from the machine slowed to a normal rhythm as he drifted off to sleep.

When he woke for the second time the hospital windows were dark and his mother was snoring. He arched his neck and sniffed. The smell of fries was in the air. His stomach growled as he thought of quarter pounders with cheese and a side of crispy chicken nuggets.

"Do you want a chocolate?" A silhouetted figure stood in the doorway. Even though it was only the dark outline of a person he knew it was the candy striper from earlier.

"Yeah, sure." The words came out husky and dry.

"Here," she said producing a thin mint from her apron and holding it out at arm's length. "I've got a whole bag if you want more."

Michael leaned half out-of-bed to retrieve it. "Good lookin' out," he mumbled as the sweetness caressed his tongue and slowly rolled down his throat.

"Your mom's really worried about you." The candy striper backed up a step and shoved her hands in the front pocket of her apron. "She's been pacing the hall all afternoon."

"That's just how she is." He beckoned to the girl to come closer, but she didn't move. Instead she peered at the floor and swept her foot in a semicircle across it.

"Are you really that sick?" she asked.

"It's not like I'm gonna die. Certain things just make me have seizures."

“Like what?”

“Come over here. I don’t want to wake my mom up.”

His eyes had started to adjust. The corners of the room were more rigid now. When the girl approached him he began to make out certain features. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail making her face seem perfectly symmetrical. Well, almost perfectly symmetrical. Her left eye, he thought. It’s lower than the other. She’s a freakish nurse girl.

“What makes you have seizures?” she asked inching her way closer to him.

“Water.”

She stopped when she was about a foot away. “If you know you have seizure in water, then why’d you jump in the pool?”

“How’d you know about the pool?”

“The whole school knows. That’s all everyone’s talked about for the last two days.”

“Oh, do we go to the same school?” He tried to cross his arms, but the various tubes and wires made it difficult

“Duh, there’s only one school in town.”

“There’s also that Montessori school.”

“Whatever, we have the same English class.”

The headlights of a passing car shined through the window. For a moment her face was fully lit. Michael jerked away. “You’re Nympho Natalie!”

She stepped back and her nose flared.

“Sorry... I didn’t recognize you.” He gulped, wishing he could swallow the words he’d just said.

From her apron she produced a pair of thick-rimmed spectacles and shoved them on her nose. “Is that better?”

“It just sort of slipped out. I didn’t mean to call you that.”

“At least they don’t call me Mike the Kike.”

“What?” He tried to sit up. But nausea forced him to stay on his back. “I’ve heard pus face, but never that.”

“Well, that’s what they call you.”

"But I'm not even Jewish."

She snorted a laugh. "The story I heard was that your dad died in a concentration camp and you wear that armband because that's what the Nazis used to make the Jews wear."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"I don't know," she said taking the glasses off and shoving them back in her apron. "Everyone seems to believe it. When you had that seizure in the pool they all said it was because Jews have smaller lungs than real people."

"That's stupid. I'm not even Jewish and I know that's not true."

A sniffing sound came from the corner where his mother sat sleeping. The machine began beeping at an accelerated rate. Michael breathed deep, trying to slow his heart, but it was no use. Happy place. Think of a happy place. Think of frogs having sex. The beeping was becoming quicker every second. Amphibians boning. Turtles dreaming. He glanced from his mother to Natalie and then reached under the covers and tore the plug from his chest.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she shouted, reaching for the discarded wires.

"Going to the lounge."

"What? You can't do that!" She held up the plug and pointed at his chest. "Put these back on."

"No way."

"You're going to get me in trouble."

Michael sat up and pulled the IV out of his hand. The world was still a little wobbly but not as bad as before. He tested the floor with his big toe as if it were a hot bath. When he was sure he could manage it he slid off the bed and hobbled towards the doorway. Natalie grabbed his arm and steadied him.

"I'm fine," he said pushing her away.

"Well you're walking like a drunk."

"How would you know?"

The corridor was much brighter than the room. Michael squinted, making out the front desk at the far end. He'd been in that hall many times, but it felt different stumbling out into it on his own. Cold air shot down from a vent making his gown flutter up. It's a

dress, he thought. I'm wearing a stupid green dress. He held down the hem and made his way up the hall. Around the corner he found two doorways. One led to a communal bathroom and the other to a small room with a faded pink couch and a TV mounted on the wall.

"You should really go back to bed," Natalie said following him into the lounge.

"You're totally falling all over the place."

He slumped down in the seat and rested his head against the cushion. "Is there anything to eat?"

"No, there's only one other patient, Mrs. McClurg, and her daughter brings in her dinner."

"What kind of hospital is this?"

"I don't know. The normal kind."

"You don't even feed the patients."

"Wake up your mom if you're so hungry."

That was the last thing he wanted to do. The chewing out he expected to get was going to be far worse than an empty stomach. It would probably be worse than the time she'd found out he'd turned her oversized purse into a tadpole habitat.

Natalie sat down next to him on the edge of the sofa and adjusted her skirt over her knees. "If the nurse comes back and finds you out of bed you're going to get us both in trouble."

"Can I have another chocolate?"

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"I'll give you a chocolate if you go back to bed."

"K."

She offered him the bag of sweets. Michael took one out and devoured it. He wasn't usually a fan of candy, but his stomach was so empty it hurt.

"Okay," she said standing. "Let's go."

"No way."

"That was the deal."

"No deal."

"Fine, you stay," she said, waltzing towards the exit. "But you better tell them I tried to stop you."

"Whatever."

"Hey," she said, turning and chucking the bag in his face. "Don't get me in trouble."

"What's your problem?"

"What's my problem?" She shook her head as she stomped into the corridor.

Michael coughed into his fist while saying, "herpes chick," under his breathe.

She stopped and immediately spun around. "You act like you're so cool." Her finger punctuated her statement as she poked the air. "But you don't have any friends either."

"I have friends."

"Like who?" She marched back into the lounge and stood in front of him with arms crossed.

"Like..." He popped another chocolate in his mouth and started rummaging through the bag for a fourth. "Like Christina Westman."

"Who, the new girl?"

"Yeah, we're friends."

"She moved here three weeks ago."

"So."

Michael stopped munching on the candy and studied the plastic bag. I just got this from gonorrhea girl. I'm contaminated.

"Just watch," Natalie continued. "As soon as she hears the rumors she won't be talking to you any more. She'll know you're just a liar."

"She already does."

"See I was right."

Leaning forward, he propped his elbows on his knees. "Like a week ago I told her I was on the swim team. But then a few days later we had gym together and it was the swimming block. She was all excited. I guess they didn't have swimming for gym at her old school. So, I jumped in the pool because I didn't want her to know I was lying."

His cheeks sank as if admitting the truth had knocked the wind out of his face. "Now you can go tell all your little friends."

"No one's that interested in your love life."

"I'm just saying if I hear someone talking about it I'll know it was you."

She rolled her eyes and glanced towards the clock on the far wall. He shoved another sweet in his mouth and acted like he hadn't noticed.

"I'm going," she said, backing towards the door. "But, just so you know, if Nurse Ellis finds you in here when she comes off break she's going to flip."

"Yeah, you told me like a million times."

Hangin' with Nympho Natalie, he thought as she disappeared around the corner. That's so sick. But as soon as the idea spawned in his head he felt bad. She's actually kind of cool. Freak, but cool. Too bad people make up all those rumors about her.

While Michael had been condemned for his armband Natalie had been ostracized because of her loose morals. The story went that she used to baby-sit the neighbor's five-year-old. One night she was caught having sex with the kid's father. Of course no one knew which neighbor this had happened with. Some speculated that it was not just one case but many. "She's a baby-sitting slut," Tommy Millsworth had said. "If you're still a virgin by the end of eighth grade you can always do her in the dugout."

Sitting there Michael remembered how gross he had found the whole idea: Natalie, a baseball diamond, his armband. Now, the image had changed. Instead of a dusty bench, and grunting, he pictured them together underwater. They'd float to the bottom and mime a conversation. Her hair would float above her like a perfume ad. The silence would close in on them and keep them safe.

He pushed himself off the couch and staggered across the hall to the bathroom. It was larger than he'd expected. Two tubs, partitioned by a plastic curtain, lined the far wall. A row of sinks and standup urinals were installed on the other side. The sterile smell of bleach wafted off the tiles and made him cough. Water's not the problem, he thought, pulling up his gown and relieved himself in one of the toilets. The doctor said it had nothing to do with water.

When he was six, Dr Fields had sat him and his mom down and explained epilepsy. "Being in a pool doesn't cause your seizures. It's all in your head. You see, your brain has these little messengers. Sometimes when you get all worked up those messengers get really excited. So, when you start getting angry or upset you need to think about something soothing: a field of flowers, or some mountains, anything to make you feel calm." Both Michael and his mom had nodded, but when they were alone in the parking lot she told him, "I don't care what he said. You best not go around no water."

Just do it, he thought. Fill up the bath and get in. He let the hospital gown fall back down and turned towards the tubs. They suddenly seemed as vast as swimming pools. Just get in for like a minute. You can try to do it longer next time. He traipsed over, placed the plastic stopper in the drain, and turned on the faucet. Water rushed out and crashed against the porcelain. Like a guppy thrown in a new tank Michael immediately started searching for a safe place. But there were none. It was just him and the noise of running water. His palms pressed hard against the cool tile. Think of a song. Metallica, Eminem, anything. Hakuna Matata, what a wonderful phrase. No not that. Not Disney. Hakuna Matata, ain't no passing craze.

A cloud of steam smacked his face. He shivered. Hakuna Matata, it means no worries for the rest of your days. Cautiously, he crept up to the tub, swung his right leg over the side, and then his left. His hospital gown began to darken as he sat down. Hakuna Matata, means you can sit in a tub. Hakuna Matata means you can do it without screwin' up. Nervously, he started to laugh.

"What are you doing?" Natalie's voice rang out behind him. Instead of spinning around he stretched out his legs and rested his shoulders against the back of the tub.

"Nothing," he said.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I've just got a song in my head." Think of something nice. Think of the Eiffel Tower. Hakuna Matata, they don't take baths in France. Hakuna Matata, the girls don't wear underpants.

"Are you trying to get me in trouble?" Natalie strolled to the far end of the tub, turned off the tap, and fixed her eyes on him. She didn't look too happy about his

impromptu bath. Her mouth was slightly open, poised to yell, but then her expression softened. "You're shaking."

"No I'm not."

"You're whole body is."

Michael lowered his eyes and studied the water's surface. The way it trembled made it appear like a pond during a storm. The meniscus is broken, he thought. Or at least that's what Mr. Hobbs, his science teacher, would have said. "Look at the test tube," Hobbs had told them. "Look what happens to the meniscus when you put the vial over a Bunsen burner. The agitation changes it."

"Your face is so pale," Natalie continued. "I mean it's usually pale, but not like this."

He wrapped his arms around his knees and pulled them to his chest. "I've never taken a bath alone before."

"You can't be serious."

"My mom won't let me. She thinks I'll have an episode." It had started after the first time he'd had a seizure and had turned into a weekly ritual. Every Sunday afternoon his mother would sit on the toilet and chain-smoke Marlboro lights while he tried to get clean. Fourteen years old, he thought, and I still lose it without mom in the room.

"What are you doing taking a bath then?"

"I don't know." He focused his stare on the far wall, on the pristine white tile. Natalie sighed as she took off her shoes and set them in the corner. "You totally owe me," she said turning the water back on and stepping into the tub. "My mom's going to freak when she sees my uniform is all wet."

"What are you doing?"

Water splashed up the side as Natalie's butt thudded against the bottom.

"Making sure you don't spaz out."

"My mom doesn't sit in the bath with me," he said chuckling. "She just stays in the room."

"You could have said so before I got in."

His chuckles changed to an all-out roar. "Look at your clothes."

"Don't laugh at me." She smacked the surface of the water sending a wave towards his face.

"Hey no splashing," he said, flicking water back.

"You started it." She snorted and giggled.

"No really," Michael said holding his stomach, "I think I'm going to puke."

"You deserve to after eating all my candy."

All the anxiety he'd been feeling seemed to have decided to congregate in his belly. It was now spinning in unison like a synchronized swim team. He leaned over the side and coughed. A black glob spilled out of his mouth and splattered against the floor.

"That's so gross," she said.

"I told you I felt sick." He wiped his lips with the back of his hand trying to get rid of the lingering taste of fear.

"You better mop that up when you're done."

"No way," he said. "You're the one that works here."

"I volunteer."

"Same thing."

"No, it's not."

He made a pillow with his arms on the rim of the tub and rested his head against it. Hakuna Matata, what a wonderful phrase. Hakuna Matata, I'm in the bath with Natalie.

"What are you humming?" she asked.

"I told you I've got a song stuck in my head, an earworm."

"Yeah, but you didn't tell me which one."

"Hakuna Matata," he said, shoving his nose into the arm pillow.

"The Lion King song?"

"It's because my mom's always playing it in the car."

"Sure, I bet you own the movie."

"Yeah," he mumbled. "I bet you screwed the movie."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Her whole face flushed as she sat up straight in the tub.

“Nothing.”

“Come on, I’d like to know.”

“It’s only a rumor.”

“Oh really.”

“It’s just....” Michael pressed his nose deeper into the crook of his arm.

“Everyone says you had sex while babysitting.”

She didn’t answer at first. She just sat there with her hands positioned on the sides of the tub as if she was debating whether or not to get out. “It’s not exactly a rumor,” she finally said. “It’s true. I had sex with the dad of the kid I was babysitting.”

“Really?” Michael’s mouth hung open as he studied her. “Why would you do something like that?”

“I don’t know,” she said turning off the tap and crossing her arms. “I guess I just wanted to. When I used to baby-sit I felt like I was playing house and when he kissed me it seemed like a normal part of the game.”

“But kissing is a lot different from... you know.”

“From fucking?”

“Yeah.”

Her lips crinkled into a smirk. “It’s not that big a deal you know. We only did it once.”

“I guess.”

“You’ll understand when you have sex.”

He wanted to defend himself, but he didn’t know what to say. Instead, he just sat there in the lukewarm water and watched her. The white and pink striped dress was soaking wet. It hung off her frame like a wrinkled American flag.

“I have a frog collection,” he said for no apparent reason.

“Huh?”

“I keep them in an aquarium.”

“Okay.” She started to giggle.

“No really, there’s like twenty of them.”

“Do they have names?”

“They’re all named after kids at school.” He leaned forward and described the frogs with his hands. “Like there’s a fat one with droopy eyes I call Pete.”

“You can tell them apart?”

“Easy, they all look different.”

“I had a turtle.” She pulled her dress over her knees and locked her arms around her legs.

“Really?”

“He died when I was like five.”

“How?”

Waves of water swished across the surface as she rocked back and forth. “My parents said he was old, but I think he drowned.”

“That’s impossible,” he said grabbing her hand so she’d stop moving. “Turtles can live underwater.”

“He was floating upside down on the bottom of the aquarium when I found him.”

“You sure he wasn’t sleeping?” he asked, noticing for the first time that he was holding her hand. “Turtles can hibernate for months.”

“Where’s Mikey?” Both Natalie and Michael froze as the voice of his mother came from down the hall. “Did you move him?”

“He’s not in his bed?” Nurse Ellis asked.

“I wouldn’t be talking to you if he was.”

“We’re totally busted,” Natalie whispered. “You better tell them it was your idea.”

“He couldn’t have gone far,” Nurse Ellis said, “Did you check the bathroom?”

“Michael, can you hear me?” His mother’s voice sounded like a screeching bird circling the tub. “You better stop playing around and answer me.”

Natalie’s eyes bulged and her mouth formed the words, “Help!” At first Michael thought it was because his mother was looking for them, but he soon realized it was because he was shaking so violently that the water in the tub was sloshing back and forth and over the sides. It’s happening, he thought. I’m losing it. Happy place, think happy place.

In the distance the soft melody of the sirens’ song began to play. The subdued notes pleaded with him to fall deep into the blackness. Hakuna Matata, what a

wonderful phrase. Hakuna Matata, in the bath with Natalie. His head slipped under the water. Through the rippling surface he saw Natalie reaching towards him. The white light radiated behind her, forming a silhouette. As he plunged into unconsciousness he made a promise that when he woke up he'd take her swimming.

La Nieve Sangrienta

Beer-flavored sweat perfumes the hot air blowing through the vents. Guillermo wipes the perspiration from his temple with the back of his hand. A sheepish grin forms under his moustache as he fumbles with the car's air-conditioning knob. "There's a ravine right over those mountains," he says, trying to divert his passengers' attention from the sauna-like atmosphere. "They say Saint Toribio guided the first illegal immigrants to the U.S. through there."

Sarah follows Guillermo's finger to a spot on the horizon. She nods recognition although it's impossible to see now that the sun has ducked behind the mountains.

The doctor, who is sitting in the back seat, doesn't give Guillermo the courtesy of looking. He moves his cell phone in a slow circle, searching for a signal.

"It's dangerous to take that route to the states," Guillermo continues, while flipping every switch on the AC console, "but my mother was very religious and she refused to travel any other way." Heat blows down, warming his toes. A blast of mariachi music blares through the speakers. Guillermo keeps pushing buttons with his pudgy fingers until he notices, two seconds too late, that a dog is sprawled out across the road.

Sarah grips the door handle. "Watch out!"

The car fishtails and smacks into the animal.

Guillermo steps out of the vehicle into a cloud of dust. A sigh works its way out of his throat as he pushes the stiff corpse into the ditch. Poor guy, he thinks, probably

died a few days ago. He can feel Sarah watching him through the windshield, but he takes his time. He tries to think of something good like a prayer. Nothing comes to mind.

“Don’t worry,” he says, slamming the Chevy door shut, “it’s not much farther.”

“The hotel restaurant would have been fine,” Sarah says. “I don’t see why you needed to drive us across the border.”

“You’ll understand when you taste the food. You can’t get anything like it in Texas.” Try and show these people a little culture and all they do is bitch. I bet neither one of them has ever tasted Mexican that wasn’t cooked in a Taco Bell.

He presses the gas. Tires grip gravel. The smell of a coming storm rolls through the vents as they barrel down the road towards a group of flat-roofed adobes.

Guillermo moves his line of sight from Sarah to the rearview mirror. A fly is trying to provoke the doctor by landing on the back of his hand, but the physician won’t give the insect the satisfaction of a slap. Instead he shakes his wrist every so often, forcing the fly to move. Bastard’s the same with people. Acts like they don’t exist until they get the picture and kick rocks.

“Anyway,” Guillermo continues, “I was telling you about the ravine.” He smiles wide, but no one seems to notice. “It took my mother twice as long to cross the border because she was pregnant with me. I was overdue by two days but my mother refused to give birth. Even after her water broke she kept marching. She told my father, ‘I’m having this baby *en el norte*....’”

“Can we not talk?” Sarah asks. “I think I feel a migraine coming on.”

“Sure,” he says, keeping his gaze on the dirt road ahead, “no problem.”

The pungent odor of pork lard thickens the air. Bare bulbs hang from the restaurant's ceiling. Guillermo takes a seat at a large table in the back room although there are plenty of empty tables in the front. Absentmindedly he gazes at the menu while his guests wash their hands in the bathroom. His fourth beer of the evening sits in front of him. Under normal circumstances he doesn’t drink, but tonight’s a special occasion. The doctor and Sarah have flown in to tell him that the multi-million dollar contract he has been working on for the last seven years is being terminated. Of

course, the two don't know that he has already gotten word from his own sources, one of the privileges of being ex-military.

That lying slut, he thinks. She didn't even warn me. Didn't have the decency to hint that I might be out of a job. After all they'd been through, he'd expected that much. She probably knew weeks ago that they were pulling the plug but she didn't even call. When we first met she would have. We were close then. At least he thought so.

Two years ago, he'd flown up to Washington, DC for a party. Between the flutes of bubbly and the passing trays of hors d'oeuvre he'd spied her long legs for the first time. His eyes had worked their way up her thighs, across her breasts, until he had reached her shoulder length blond hair. Then with a saunter, much like a handicapped peacock, he had made his way through the crowd and introduced himself.

"I'm DSI's corporate liaison," he told her, holding out his hand. "I believe you're the only one working on the test I haven't met."

"I'm actually not on the test," she answered.

"Just crashing the party?"

"No, I came with a friend." She pointed to a young man mingling with some officers.

Guillermo nodded all the while picturing Sarah without her skirt, without her blouse. "You know it's my first time in Georgetown, and I have no idea where to go after this little soiree."

"The monuments are always nice at night, and it's fairly safe in that area." She strained her dimples, cutting a smile into her angular cheeks.

"Is it far from here?"

"No, not really."

"Would you mind showing me? I'm used to smaller towns. I get so lost in the city."

She hesitated.

He imagined her bra and panties falling on the floor of his hotel room.

The cab dropped them in front of the Vietnam Memorial. Dim lights ignited the names of fallen soldiers. They strolled down a path that led them to the Potomac River.

In the pale light, Guillermo noticed a cherry blossom stuck in her hair. He reached over to remove it. She allowed his hand to linger on her shoulder.

“Why isn’t someone as attractive as you working on my test?”

“To tell you the truth, I did apply.”

“They didn’t give you the job? What were they thinking?”

“Too many people with seniority. I was lucky they even looked at my resume.”

“That’s just crazy. I might have to talk with them. Tell them they can’t discriminate against beautiful women.” His hand slid down her shoulder to the small of her back. She shivered. At the time he had thought it was because of the cold wind blowing across the river. He even offered her his sport coat. Now, thinking back, he realizes she had shivered because she was disgusted. His touch had nauseated her.

He lets his eyes half-close so that the memory melds with the heat wavering above the plate of chiles rellenos in the center of the table. Don’t let them see weakness, he tells himself. They’ll laugh in your face. He puts on a grin and looks up when he hears the bathroom door swing open.

The doctor takes a seat, removes a packet of antibacterial wipes from his inside-pocket, and begins cleaning each of his fingers individually.

“I ordered us an appetizer,” Guillermo says.

“It’s not too spicy, I hope.”

“No, they look intimidating, but they’re mild enough.”

Sarah walks out of the bathroom exactly two minutes later. Guillermo stands and pulls her chair back. She glances at him briefly and then turns her attention to the far wall. “What a lovely mural.” She points at the tiny painted flowers which seem to grow out of the cracks in the plaster.

“It’s part of a legend,” Guillermo says. “The locals say those flowers only bloom in December. They call them *La Nieve Sangrienta*, or bloody snow, because they’re white with tiny red spots.” Guillermo eases forward in his chair and adjusts his belly over his belt buckle. “Of course, it’s only an old wives’ tale,” he explains. “No botanist has ever actually come down here and found one.” He takes a sip from his beer and scrutinizes his audience. They seem to have calmed down now that they are out of the

car. I give them five minutes before they start bitching again. “Still, there is one story about it that is so tragic that everyone believes the flower exists after they hear it.”

The doctor cuts a small portion from the poblano closest to him and places it on his tongue. Smacking his lips together he says, “They’re not spicy at all.”

“Just wait, in about thirty seconds you’ll feel it.” Guillermo spears a pickled carrot with his knife and pops it in his mouth. “I love these little guys. We’re only twenty miles across the border, but you can taste the difference.”

Sarah primly leans forward with knife and fork in each hand and carefully slices open a chile, exposing its insides.

“Would you like to hear the legend?” Guillermo asks. “It’s not a long story.”

“Can you order us a bottle of water?” Sarah asks. “I don’t trust what’s in that jug.” She indicates the glass pitcher with her fork.

Guillermo snaps at the waiter. “*Una botella de agua.*” The waiter, who has been sitting on a stool behind the bar, hops up and begins rummaging around for the dusty bottle of Evian under the counter.

“So the legend of Benita and Salvador,” Guillermo continues, “let’s see if I remember it correctly. Benita was from a small village like this one. In her day she was quite a little heartthrob. By the age of fifteen she was already turning the heads of just about every boy in town. One of these was Salvador, a very poor farm worker....”

“Your water, sir.” The waiter holds out the bottle as if it is a vintage wine. Guillermo hesitates, studies the water, and then swats at the fly that is circling the table.

“*¡Abrélo ya!*—Just open it! I’m trying to talk here.” With a flutter of his hand he motions towards the two ceramic mugs in front of his companions. “Now where was I?”

“Salvador,” the doctor says.

“Ah yes, he was in love with Benita. Anyway, one day he asked her to walk with him after dinner. She laughed in his face. ‘Why would I want to walk anywhere with you? You’re always covered in dirt or pig *mierda*. I can smell you from ten feet away.’ Salvador’s heart sank. He didn’t realize that hidden behind her laughter was a faint spark of affection.”

“This doesn’t taste like Evian,” the doctor says. “It’s sweeter, like there’s sugar in it.” For the love of God, what was this man’s problem? If it were not for the booze

coursing through Guillermo's veins, he would have lost it and told the doctor to shut his pie-hole. It was his last night wining and dining on the company bill. When he told his superiors on Monday that the contract was officially null and void they were going to fire him. At least the doctor could give him the decency of listening to one damn story.

"Seriously Guillermo," Sarah adds, "I don't know why you thought bringing us here was a good idea."

"I thought you'd enjoy something a little different," Guillermo says between guzzles of his beer. "This town has a lot of history and tradition." If he could just finish this bottle and one more he thought he could stand being around these two. He just needed to properly buffer himself.

"I suppose it does have a certain charm," Sarah says as she sits back and crosses her legs, "although I'd be scared to see what their kitchen looks like."

Her thighs have always been so pale, he thinks. Whiter than milk. His focus moves down to her knee. There's a large tear in her nylons that he's sure is fresh. I didn't see it in the car. Did it happen after we got here? It's the type of snag someone would get from... but that's impossible. Unless... unless the doctor helped her rip it? Guillermo toys with the idea for a moment. Is the old doc slipping her the salami? Is the bi-focal bastard getting busy? It might be possible. She does spend most of her weekends on business trips with him.

"Another Dos Equis," Guillermo hollers, his face reddening.

"I don't know if that's the best idea," the doctor says, "you're our ride back to the hotel."

"I'll be fine. That's one thing about Mexican food. You can't get drunk if you eat it."

"I beg to differ. If anything, all the starch will make you even drowsier."

"Please Guillermo." Sarah reaches across the table and pats his wrist. "You really should take it easy on the beer."

He must seem pathetic for her to touch him. He can't remember the last time her hand came that close to his. Actually he can. It was the night she slapped him.

After the first round of tests he'd found her in the military lab. Everyone else had long since gone home, but she was still hunched over a database checking the

statistics. He hadn't notice anything out of the ordinary at first, but when she turned and looked up at him her cheeks were wet. "Why are you still here?" she stammered, "I told you I'd phone you as soon as I had the results." The sound of her voice brought the cages to life. Monkeys sprang up, grabbed at the bars, and called to them.

"Are you all right?" he asked. The question broke the dam behind her eyes. He leaned down and hugged her.

"I didn't know it was going to be like that." Her words were muffled, caught in his shirt. "I've worked on other tests, but nothing like this." He pulled her out of her chair and tucked his arms around her waist. His caress was meant to be soothing, but when he tried to kiss her neck she pushed him away and mumbled, "What're you doing?"

He knew they'd agreed to keep their relationship a secret, but no one was watching. And even if they were, it wouldn't matter now. She'd been promoted to chief analyst over six months ago. The tests were almost over. In a couple of months the Army would put in their order and Sarah would move into his house in Corpus Christi. He leaned in to kiss her and was met with a hand across his face. Pain drizzled out his nose in a red stream. For the first time in years, he tasted bile in the back of his throat as the animals jeered and rattled their cages.

The thought lingers on his tongue, and makes him queasy. She never cared about you, he thinks. She used you. He jerks his hand into the air and signals the waiter. "*¡Qué me da otra cerveza!*—Give me another beer!"

The waiter trots over with a fresh bottle. Guillermo takes a long swig and then wipes his mouth. "I'll call a taxi for us if I get too drunk."

The doctor removes his napkin from his lap and places it next to his plate. "Well, we better get down to business." He scratches his chin as if he is trying to think of the best way to begin. "The final results of the test were tallied last week. The numbers showed that there was an 81.13% success rate."

"81.13%!" Guillermo tries to sound surprised, but he finds it difficult. The percentage has been running through his head for the last two weeks.

"With such a high margin of error the army has come to the conclusion that the weapon is impractical. They've decided that they can't go through with the contract."

"It's just too high," Sarah adds. "If it was 97% or even 95% we could, but not at 81%."

Guillermo slicks back his hair with a sweaty palm. "So, that's it. You're not going to consider a second round?"

"The army's not willing to pay for another test," the doctor says, taking off his glasses and fishing around in his coat pocket for a handkerchief. "It's just costing too much. I tried to explain to my superiors that this is like any other chemical agent, that it takes years to perfect, but they're not willing to spend another \$80,000 to test it."

Guillermo locks eyes with the doctor, but he doesn't need to scrutinize him to know he's lying. The army could care less about \$80,000. They spend millions on weapons tests annually. It's loose change to them. The general, who supervises the doctor, makes decisions solely on recommendation. If the doctor tells him, 'Let's buy this biological weapon,' then he does. But the doctor didn't recommend it or even another round of tests. He closed the door on the contract.

"You know how I got this job?" Guillermo looks from the doctor to the fly that has landed on the physician's mug. "I told DSI, there are a lot of people with sales experience out there, but not many of them who can stomach selling what you're dealing. I told them, I used to be in the Army and I've seen what bio-weapons can do. I've watched mothers drown their babies so they didn't have to feel the effects of the gas. You're not going to find another man who can sell this stuff without puking all over his brand new tie, so you better hire me."

"I'm sure you'll go on to sell other weapons," the doctor says.

"I doubt it. Monday morning, when I give DSI the news, it'll all be over for me."

The doctor shakes his head as he brushes the dead fly off the table. "If you're trying to change my mind you're too late. I've already submitted my report for review."

"I'm not telling you this to try and sway you to do something. I don't want your sympathy. I'm just saying it's over. I'm leaving the US. There's nothing for me in America anymore."

"That's a crazy idea," Sarah says. "I'm sure in a week you'll have a new assignment."

For a moment he thinks he sees compassion, but he quickly realizes he's reading her wrong. It's not compassion. It's relief reflecting in those baby blues. She doesn't care that he's losing his job. She wants him gone. Once he's out of the picture she won't be reminded that she screwed her way up the ladder. Once he's gone, she'll never have to look at him again. He knows he shouldn't feel surprised by this. It's not new information. She made it quite clear how she felt a couple of weeks ago.

It was on a Sunday, around midnight. He had been lurking in the hotel lobby for over an hour before he got the nerve to take the elevator up. Then, when he finally rapped on her door, she didn't even answer. "Sarah, it's me." He waited a good thirty seconds and then knocked again.

"Go away Guillermo." Her voice sounded tired and faint through the wooden barrier.

"I need to talk to you." He glanced from the door to the ring resting in his open palm.

"I'll be in the lab at 7:00 AM."

"Please, just open the door. It's important."

The door swung back, chain lock still in place. Half an eye stared out. "There's nothing I can do. The results are final. I can't change them."

"Just take the lock off so I can talk to you." What did she mean she wouldn't change the stats? Who cared about that? Couldn't she see he'd come to profess his love?

"Go home. I'll speak to you in the morning." She closed the door and turned the deadbolt.

Guillermo held the ring up and studied the diamond. His stomach had been filled with anticipation after asking his father for the ring, but now it felt as if she'd scraped away at the lining with a dull knife. He closed his fist, and tightened his grip until the ring cut a gash in his palm.

"I'm not here about the test," he said through the door, "I'm here... I need to see you."

He heard her feet shuffle across the carpet. And then the clank of the lock. The door swung open. She stood there biting the top of her lower lip. "Look, get it in your head. There's nothing between us."

He glanced from her face to the place where her nightgown ended.

"Don't check me out."

"I wasn't."

"Just go." Her words were forceful although her mouth trembled. "I want you to leave."

He took a step towards the elevator and then stopped. "You just did it to get the job, didn't you?"

"What?"

"You had sex with me to get promoted?"

Her foot swished back and forth across the carpet in front of her.

"Answer the question."

She peered at him through slitted eyelids. He swore he saw her lips curve into smile right before she slammed the door.

He stood there and listened to the sound of the bathroom sink as she washed her face. He listened to the rustling of sheets as she slid back into bed. He listened until he heard the click of the nightstand lamp turning off.

The memory doesn't sit well with him. He places his beer on the table and gropes around in his pocket until he feels the ring. He's been meaning to give it back to his father, but he hasn't gotten up the nerve. Maybe next week or the week after. Maybe never. Maybe he'll go out back behind the restaurant later and bury it. He lets it fall from his fingers and goes back to drinking.

"Can you call us a cab?" the doctor asks the waiter. "We're ready to leave."

"*Qué?*"

"Taxi, you call?" The doctor holds his left hand to his ear as if it is a telephone.

"*Bueno, sí. ¡Qué besa mis huevos!*"

"What did he say?" The doctor swivels around in his chair to Guillermo who is trying to conceal a grin.

"He says that he would be happy to call a cab for you."

“Good,” the doctor says, nodding at the waiter, “*bueno*.”

Guillermo checks the clock on the far wall. Less than half an hour, he thinks. We've been sitting in this restaurant for less than thirty minutes, and he wants to leave. He fires me, humps my girlfriend, and doesn't even want to eat one last meal with me? The idea makes him chuckle. His guests stare at him as he holds his belly and laughs to himself. “Anyway, I was telling you how Salvador was in love with Benita but she didn't feel the same way. Now, Salvador was very upset when Benita told him he smelled like the pigs. So, that night he wandered into the desert. He didn't have anywhere in particular he wanted to go, but he thought the night air would clear his head. It was a full moon and very easy to see. After a while he stumbled on *La Nieve Sangrienta*. He stopped in his tracks. It was the most beautiful flower he'd ever seen. He plucked it out of the ground and breathed in its sweet odor. It was the perfect gift for Benita. She would have to fall in love with him when she saw it.”

“Is the driver going to be able to drive us all the way to the hotel,” Sarah interrupts, “or are we going to have to switch cars at the border?” Guillermo swirls the remains of the beer at the bottom of his bottle. Would these two ever stop nagging about cabs?

“It's going to be fine,” the doctor replies, “we're close enough that....” The doctor tries to finish what he is saying but suddenly he is overcome with a coughing fit.

Sarah grabs the Evian bottle and fills a mug with water. “Here, drink this.” She holds the cup up while patting the doctor on the back.

“It's this damn hole-in-the-wall food,” he yells between violent coughs. “Who knows what condition their kitchen's in?” The doctor removes his hand from his mouth to reveal it is covered in specs of blood.

Sarah drops the mug. The ceramic cup cracks and water floods the tablecloth.

“Look what you did to him!” she shouts at the waiter, who is emerging from the kitchen with their entrées. “You have to cook stuff in a sanitary environment.” Her anger turns from the waiter to Guillermo. “You knew we'd get food poisoning. Your stomach is used to this ethnic food but you knew we'd get sick.”

“*La Nieve Sangrienta*,” Guillermo continues as if nothing is amiss, “has never been discovered by biologists because it lets off a toxic fume when it blooms. Anyone who is around it too long will die.”

The doctor’s coughs cover the white tablecloth with tiny red dots. Sarah leans over him and pats his back. “Salvador didn’t know the flower was poisonous and neither did Benita. When he gave it to her he said, ‘*Te traigo el regalo del amor*. I bring you a gift of my love.’ She felt her heart melt when she saw him holding the flower. Leaning out her bedroom window, she gave him a kiss. It was the last kiss either of them would ever have. By morning they were both dead. The townspeople discovered Salvador five yards from the house, collapsed on the ground, and Benita was found lying in her bed still clutching the flower.”

Sarah covers her mouth as she coughs. When she removes her hand she finds a wet residue on her palm. It’s red. “What did you do to us?”

“You don’t have to worry,” Guillermo answers. “There is only an 81.13% chance that you will die.”

“You put it in... in our food?”

“Of course not,” he says, pointing to the ceramic cups. “I coated the inside of your mugs with it.” The doctor slips off his chair and gasps for air, but only finds blood in his windpipe.

“How could you do this?” Sarah’s coughs speed up, but Guillermo pays little attention. He has already seen what the chemical agent can do numerous times. When the doctor tested it on mice, Guillermo watched as the rodents squirmed in their skin before hacking out their insides. The monkeys were even worse. One ripped open his own throat in an effort to try and breathe. Guillermo knows far too well that the weapon works.

The Letter

The thread of my account begins in May 2010, the year I graduated from Brooklyn College. My mother had bought me a Eurorail pass and a plane ticket as a commencement present. The idea was that I would spend the summer backpacking through Western Europe. It was a good time to leave. My father had been pushing me to get a job as an accountant or a broker, but I wasn't ready for the plunge. I flew to Paris hoping to put off life after college as long as possible.

However, a week later, when I arrived in Biarritz, I was attacked outside the train station. Thieves accosted me with a steel pipe. When I came to, my backpack and money belt, which had close to two thousand euros in it, were missing. I reached down, felt my waist, and sighed with relief. I'd hid a hundred euros in my boxersshorts and the little bastards hadn't thought to look there.

With a bloody temple and a ringing in my ear, I made my way to the hostel. The whole trip was ruined. I'd have to call up the airline and change my ticket. I sank into the bunk feeling sorry for myself. I knew this was the only time I'd get a chance to see Europe and spend a summer writing. No, I thought, I'm not leaving yet. I'll stay until my money runs out. If I camp in the Pyrenees and don't eat too much I can probably make it a couple of weeks.

The next morning, in the hostel's lounge, I talked to another traveler about my plan. He was a scraggly kiwi, who'd been backpacking for over a year. "If you're going trekking you should check out this place in the mountains." He leaned towards me like

he was about to reveal a secret. "Off the main trail, there's an old man who has a distillery in his house. He sells absinthe. And not the fake stuff. He makes his with wormwood."

"I'm not a big drinker," I told him.

"It ain't about the booze. This stuff makes you see things."

I nodded as if I was interested, but really the idea made me queasy. I'd drank twenty-one shots for my birthday the year before and my friends had been forced to take me to the hospital where the doctor pumped my stomach. After that I'd steered clear of alcohol and had only drunk moderately at weddings and funerals.

Later that afternoon, I started up the mountain, and within a few hours I was completely lost. I had taken a small path, which according to my map was a shortcut, and had ended up coming out into a clearing with more trees and rocks on the other side. I turned northeast and started composing a telegram in my head. "Lost in the mountains, stop. Somewhere on the French/ Spanish border, stop." I'd send it to my dad and he'd write back, "Why did you go to France anyway? Just a bunch of pansy-asses eating cheese there."

When the sun started to set, I came upon a small house. It looked like it might be one of the *gites* they had in the mountains for hikers. I strolled up thinking I'd cook up some dinner and try finding my way in the morning. However, when I got closer I saw smoke trickling from the chimney, and before I knew it an old man burst through the front door wielding a shotgun.

"*Que faites vous ici?*" he asked.

I didn't understand French very well, so I held up my hands and said, "It's all right. Don't shoot."

"*C'est une propriété privée!*"

I racked my brain, trying to recall the French I'd learned in high school. "Lost," I shouted. "Me *perdu*."

He eyed me for a second and then lowered the shotgun. I plucked the map from my back pocket, and inched towards him. "You show me where I am?"

He looked the map over, turned it clockwise a couple of times, and then gestured for me to follow him inside.

We sat on wooden chairs at a table. The floor seemed to slant as if the building could slide down the mountain at any moment. While he laid a *Michelin Guide* down on the table top and moved his finger along a white line, I studied the far wall where a huge copper machine belched and spat.

He must have noticed me looking because he said, "*Vous aimeriez gouter?*" Without waiting for a response he wandered over to a tap, filled two tall beakers, and brought them back.

He held up his glass, said, "*Santé*," and drank.

I did the same, followed by a coughing spasm.

"*Nous sommes ici.*" He pointed to a place on the map. I leaned over the table and tried to figure out which direction would get me back to the main trail, but the lines were smearing together. No matter how hard I squinted and tried to focus, I couldn't see straight. The room started spinning like I was riding an un-greased carousel. The floorboards creaked under my chair, and I toppled out of my seat. I looked up at the potbellied still. In the copper reflection I saw my father. He was standing alone, watching me from behind bars.

You see I've never really known my father aside from his letters. He went to prison before I turned one. My mother always said he was trouble. Held-up convenience stores when they were dating, and got it in his head to rob a bank when he found out I was about to be born. While my mother was searching for sales on cribs, my father was staking out Capital One Bank.

When I turned thirteen, my mom drove me upstate to meet my father. I saw him, for the first time, behind a pane of glass. I'd seen photos, but the man sitting with a phone pressed to his ear looked nothing like the pictures. This man had a shaved head and a long grey go-tee. My name was tattooed on his right forearm.

"Did you bring your pops a box of tailors?" he asked.

I peered through the thick pane. I didn't know what he was talking about.

"Cigarettes, did you bring any?"

I shook my head.

"Shit, I told your mom to send up a carton with you." He looked to the side as if he was about to hack a loogie, but then stopped himself and turned back to me. "I'm

going to get out of here soon you know. Just watch. I've got an appeal in June. There's this guy named Chico up in here, studies law, and he says they screwed up when they sentenced me. Didn't follow procedure. This time next month I'll be taking you to a baseball game." He pointed at me through the glass. "You like baseball don't you? Sure you do. All kids like baseball. We'll get box seats. You watch, when I get out we'll be rolling places in style."

He was talking and I should have been listening, but all I could think of was, I'm going to look like this man in twenty years. His skin was pockmarked and the lines on his forehead stayed creased even when he smiled.

"Now, I know you probably think your old man is cool, but don't go getting it in your head that prison is the place to be. This isn't a life anyone wants. You better go to college and get a straight job. If I hear you're getting into trouble I'll bust out of here and give you an earful."

"Okay," I said.

He put his palm up to the window and waited for me to do the same. I reached up to touch my father's hand, while trying to pretend there wasn't a glass case around him.

The reflection in the potbellied still faded. I turned away, and looked up at the old man hovering over me. "*Buvez ceci!*" He held out a refilled tumbler of absinthe. I drank.

The next morning, I woke up to the sun streaming in through the holes in the wall. My head lay on a pillow, my legs on a cot. I can't say how the old man had gotten me to bed. He must have dragged me by my arms.

I found him in the living room filling plastic Fanta bottles from the still.

He gestured at the nine bottles lined up in a row against the wall, and then at me. "*Vous voulez en acheter?*"

I pointed at myself and then at him, saying, "*Merci beaucoup*, for letting me stay."

We went on in this fashion using gestures and broken language until I ended up with all nine bottles being handed to me and him asking me to fork over fifty euros.

I must have been an interesting sight as I hiked off. Green alcohol-filled Fanta bottles were strapped to every conceivable surface of my backpack. I suppose it didn't matter. There wasn't anyone else hiking around. The only sounds came from the fallen leaves cracking under my boots.

By mid-afternoon my feet were tired and I felt dehydrated. I sat down against a tree, and searched through my bag for water. The bottle seemed to be missing. It must have fallen out at some point. Without thinking I unscrewed one of the green bottles and took a swig. The liquid burned, but at least it cleared the dust from my throat. The second pull went down easier and I could taste the faint orange Fanta residue as the liquor fell over my tongue. By the third gulp, it didn't burn at all, and I felt slumber coming on.

When I woke, it was black except for the flicker of flames coming from nearby. I sat up, adjusting my eyes. When my pupils began to focus, I noted the barrel of a gun pressed against my neck. Staring past my assailant I saw a group of men huddled around a fire in the mouth of a cave. Slowly, it became clear I'd stumbled on something that might be detrimental to my health.

I did the only thing I could think of. I held up a bottle of absinthe and offered the gunman a sip. He laughed and grunted something to the men behind him before he lowered his weapon and took a swallow.

When he realized I didn't speak Spanish, French, or Basque he led me over to the cave and introduced me to his nephew, Manu, who spoke some English. As we passed the plastic bottle around I learned that the man, who'd woken me up with the gun was named Vasquez, the leader of a militant Basque separatist group. They were hiding out in the mountains, readying themselves for the war that would free the Basque Country from nationalist Spain.

I only half listened. Vasquez's ideas were of the oldest type, fabricated from the stories he'd been reared on in his village. The type of propaganda only boys and the innocent find true. My gaze kept wandering to Manu. The moment we had been introduced I'd stopped breathing, and every time I glanced in his direction I felt faint.

"Why do you come to Basque Country?" Manu asked, translating for his uncle.

I'd been interrogated about why I was travelling through Europe by everyone I'd met for the last week and I'd always lied. I told them it was because I wanted to see the art and culture, but the truth was I needed to get away from the reins of my father.

"I want to be a writer," I told them.

"You write books?"

"I haven't written any yet. I've only studied literature at university."

"But you say you are a writer, no?"

I didn't want to disappoint them so I finally said, "Yes, I am."

The effect of the absinthe was making it difficult to see. Vasquez's face had changed from a bearded man to something akin to a muskrat. I glanced around the circle. They all had morphed into rodents, muskrats with AK-47s across their laps. I moved my stare to the fire and looked into the flames. There I saw my father sitting in a cell, hand cupping his chin, nose pointed at the floor.

The last time I'd met with him was a month after I'd graduated high school. He'd been moved to Attica, a higher security prison. I didn't ask why. New tattoos crawled over his skin, a black widow on his neck, a spider web on his elbow.

"Three more months," he said. "Three more and I'm out of here. I've got a parole hearing in September and you know those people will let me out." This time we were sitting across from each other at a metal table. I passed him two packs of smokes I'd brought with me.

"That girl in the photo you sent was smoking. She your girl? You know I used to get my fair share of women. Well, before I met your mom. But you probably knew that. You knew your dad got laid by a different girl every weekend, didn't you? Blonds, brunettes, even a Chinese chick one time."

I nodded my head. The woman in the photo was my English teacher, and I didn't have a girlfriend, but there was no way I was telling him that.

"Your mom also sent me a picture. It's the one where you're in your cap and gown. I showed it to everyone. Told them you were my kid, and going to college next year. They asked me what you were studying. Business, I said. My kid's going to wear a suit and make bank."

"I haven't been accepted anywhere yet."

"You will. I'm not worried about that. You applied to places, right? Of course you did. What am I saying? Your mom told me you applied to four different schools."

I took a deep breath. "Dad, I want to study writing and literature."

"Yeah, sure, study it all. Learn everything you can. Business, finance, literature."

"You don't understand."

"Of course I do. You don't want to pigeonhole yourself. You want to be able to do it all. Why rely on someone else when you can do it yourself, right?"

"No, you don't get it. I want to be a writer."

He stopped talking and looked at me. Then he opened one of the packs of Camels and took out a smoke. "No boy of mine is going to turn out a punk." He punctuated his statement by jabbing the air with his cigarette. "What am I supposed to tell people, my kid's a fag? I don't think so. No, you'll choke it up and do right by your dad."

I got up from the table, went over to the guard, and asked him to buzz me out. As the door clicked open I peered over my shoulder. My father was sitting there, his back to me, a trail of smoke spiralling out of his cigarette.

Looking up from the fire, I blinked, and tried to see things sober. Some of the men had fallen asleep. Others were passing the bottle and chatting. Only Vasquez and Manu were looking at me.

"We've been speaking," Manu said. "My uncle would be pleased if you would stay and write about our group and the Basque Country."

I said I would even though I knew I didn't have a choice.

They held me captive in the back of the cave. A long chain ran from the wall to a shackle around my ankle. There was something familiar about the stone room. It felt as if I had returned to where life began. The enclave's walls were the background for a cathartic fire that had once born a creature we all search for.

When the men were outside shooting their guns at the sky Manu came to me in secret. His sea-green eyes peered out from under a hood. While he spoke, I couldn't help becoming lost in the deep pools before me.

"I would like to go somewhere like New York," he said. "I have never left Spain."

I lay in a heap on the floor looking up at him. They'd been feeding me sips of absinthe every hour and the shadows behind him seemed to dance like two silhouettes locked in an embrace, moving from one side to the other.

"What's stopping you?" I asked. "Just get on a plane and fly there."

I glanced at the raw flesh where the shackle was locked to my ankle. They'd only chained me up for a day but it felt like I had been held captive for years.

"My uncle would never let me."

"It's your decision, not his. I mean, my father didn't want me to go to Europe, but I went anyway."

He slumped against the wall next to me. "It does not matter. Wherever I go I will still be me."

I sat up and looked him square in the face. "But a new place can help you change. It will let you break your ties to your uncle and become who you want to be."

"I used to think that was true. When I was a boy there was a creek near my house. I would build boats from newspaper and then run along the bank while they sailed on the current. I thought I wanted to escape like the boat. I thought I wanted to sail out to the sea. But then one day my uncle took me to the ocean and I saw things different."

When we arrived, the beach was deserted. I ran barefoot in the sand. I had never seen anything like those waves. I skipped through the surf amazed by the roar of it. And then a wave crashed onto the beach and I was tossed on my back. I felt the water pulling me. I grabbed onto the sand, but the grains slipped through my fingers. A second wave came down and the sea dragged me under even further. Beneath the ocean it was dark and cold. It wasn't like I'd imagined when I'd chased after my paper boats.

I woke up on the beach. My uncle was leaning over me and yelling about being careful. 'There's an undertow,' he said. I tried to reach up and put my arms around his neck. I wanted him to carry me. But he scowled and stalked off."

Manu kicked the dust on the stone floor. The fire ignited the particles like specks of gold. I reached into the dust cloud and felt the miniature worlds collapsing against my hand, the tiny bodies detonating against my skin.

By the end of four days, the men had taken to me. Many of them slapped me on the back when we sipped absinthe. I tried to talk Vasquez into releasing me by telling him that if he took off the chains I could begin writing a manuscript which displayed his heroism. It would be a tribute to their cause, a lesson in patriotic propaganda. The world would read my book and for the first time people would come to understand the plight of the Basque. Still, even as I told him this, my mind wandered. I daydreamed about ways to murder Vasquez. One plan had me stealing an assault rifle and shooting him in the chest. Another had me challenging him to a duel, facing off with knives. A third had me twisting my chain around his neck and choking him.

When everyone had fallen asleep, Manu came to me in the dark. The fire had long since gone out and I could barely see the outline of his form next to me. He slumped down and wrapped his arm across my shoulders like a shawl.

"I am to be married soon," he said. "But I do not have love for my fiancée."

"How did you meet?" I asked.

"We've always known each other. She is my cousin."

"But when did you become engaged?"

"My father made the decision I would marry her when I was fifteen." He fiddled with his earlobe for a second and then scratched his chin. "It is a long story. I think too long for you to want to hear."

"Tell it. I want to know everything."

Even though I couldn't see his face in the dark I knew he was grinning. "My father and uncle joined the Basque Nationalist Party when they were younger. But after a few months they decided the party was not radical enough. They wanted to start a revolution and free us from Spain, so they made their own group. On the weekends they would meet in the caves of the Pyrenees. There they trained with weapons and talked of the best way to attack. My uncle wanted to wait until they had more men and then mount a large attack. My father wanted smaller things like bombs in the sewer, or an assassination.

When they couldn't come to an agreement, my father took half the men to Madrid. The six of them lived in an apartment. During the next month they searched for

all the things to build a bomb. Then one morning there was an explosion in the apartment. My father had to be carried to a safe-house on the outskirts of the city. He may have lived if they had taken him to a hospital, but he would have gone to prison when the police understood he had caused the explosion.

My uncle travelled to Madrid and found my father lying in a basement that smelled like rotting flesh. My father told him, 'You have to take care of Manu. Make sure he is safe and marries the right woman.' My uncle said, 'He will marry my daughter.' My father agreed, and then he died."

Manu tucked his head against the curve of my neck. With his mouth near my ear I heard him whisper, "I can do nothing. My uncle says I will marry my cousin in August."

On the seventh night Manu kissed me. Somewhere between the sixth and eighth bottle I found his lips pressed against mine. I reached up to pull back his hood, but it was only long hair hiding his face in the dark. His eyes caught the fire light, and I understood it was his spell keeping me captive, nothing else.

He lay down behind me and I felt his heart beating through our clothes and into my back. I studied the shadows moving along the walls. Some were fighting, others copulating in odd positions, but most were standing there stagnant as if they'd forgotten how to see. I thought about the coming weeks, when I'd be torn from the cave and find myself in Brooklyn again.

The first thing I would do was send off a postcard to my father. I already knew what he'd write back. He'd say, "What the hell are you doing wasting your time over there? Get your head right." He'd add at the end of the letter that he's paroling soon. "Break out the champagne! I'm coming home!" I'd try to tell him I'm planning on spending the next year writing a novel. He'd send me a letter saying, "Stop acting like a punk. Stop knocking around and start programing. Find a job your dad can be proud of." In the end I'd start scribbling down pages without his consent because I'd want to impress a certain man. And I'd keep writing until I had the longest love letter ever.

I glanced from the shadows to Manu. He sounded like he might be sleeping. I nudged him in the ribs with my elbow. "Is it normal to marry your cousin in Spain?"

He licked his lips as if slowly waking from a dream. "She is not related to me through blood. My aunt could not have children, so they adopted a baby from the orphanage."

"The people in your village won't think it's strange?"

"Everyone talks about everything to everyone, but for me and my cousin they will say it is a blessing." His hand curled around mine, and for a moment the darkness seemed less heavy.

"Let me explain," he said. "When my cousin was younger she was friends with two boys. They always played together. People joked that you could not tear them apart. But as the years passed, they all grew older, and the boys started to become jealous of each other. If my cousin took one of them to the field and they tried to ride the cows, the other one would pout. If she took the other one grasshopper hunting, the first one would be depressed. After a while it became impossible for them to all be in the same place together. Finally, the two boys told her to meet them after dinner in the field behind the well. They wanted her to choose.

When she arrived they were sitting on a short stone wall waiting for her. They asked her to pick the one she loved. She told them she did not love either of them and if she had to choose she chose to not see them both ever again. The two boys looked at each other, and then stomped across the grass. The first one ripped off her dress and then the second one threw her on the ground. They took turns. One held her down while the other forced himself upon her.

When she tried to tell people what had happened, no one believed her. The boys said she was a whore and she would lay with anyone who asked. Not even her father, my uncle, believed her. When he passed through the village he bowed his head in shame.

Later, he agreed to betroth her to me, his brother's son. He believed no man in our village would ever marry his daughter because of what had happened. But it was not true. Eventually my cousin did find a boy who loved her. But she cannot marry him because she is promised to me."

Manu sighed. I felt his stomach press against my back and his hand tightened around mine. Then his voice cut through the quiet one last time. "You must murder my uncle, so she and I can be free."

I heard myself mumble, "Yes."

At dawn I found Manu gone and my shackle unlocked. Outside the cave, Vasquez lay sprawled out across the dirt, snoring. I had half a bottle of absinthe left and I knew he wouldn't turn it down. I crept up to his sleeping body and poured the alcohol into his throat. He tried to spit it out, but I kept spilling the liquid over his lips until he began to choke. When the bottle was empty, and his mouth overflowing, I covered his lips and nose with my hand, and waited for him to die. I studied the lines on his forehead, the pockmarks on his cheeks, and for a moment I swore I was staring at my father. I pressed down harder on his face, while holding his squirming body in place with my knee.

What did he know? I thought. Why did I care what he wanted me to do? I wanted something different. Vasquez's hands swatted at me and his feet kicked at the ground. "You're not my keeper," I said. With all my strength I held him down and kept his mouth full of booze until he lay still.

I struggled to my feet and called out, "Manu."

There was no answer.

I hiked in a spiral through the forest searching, but found no trace of him. He hadn't left a footprint.

Modern Alchemy

He drove in silence. No radio. Just the purr of the engine. Outside, white alkaline dusted the ground like a perpetual snow. Fence posts laid long shadows that stretched towards the black hills in the distance. Loose stones smacked against the carriage. The '53 Mercury rocked side to side. He shoved his boot against the brake pedal when he reached the intersection and sat there for a moment. East, west, he didn't know what either might hold or where he might stay when he got there. In front of him a steer's skull was mounted on a fence post. He had the overwhelming sensation that it knew a lot more than he did. He waited there for a while as if it might tell him which way to go. After some time he stopped waiting for a sign and drove west.

A hundred miles down the road, he pulled into a gas station. As he fueled up, a woman in high heels clicked her way across the pavement towards him. Her scarlet dress and upswept hair stood out against the barren backdrop. For a moment he questioned whether she was real.

"I need a ride to Seattle?" she said, setting a red suitcase next to his truck. "I've been stuck here all morning. Please say you're going that way."

Up close, her dress looked like it had been dyed by a child. Some patches of the cloth were a pale rose, while others stood out as bright pink. Her sandals, which had made such an impressive sound as she walked, were frayed and falling to pieces.

"You got gas money?" he asked.

"Yeah...well no." She scratched behind her ear, and glanced down at the lone suitcase by her ankle. "I don't have my credit card or any cash on me."

"Someone make off with your purse?"

"No, nothing like that. I didn't bring it with me because I'm on a pilgrimage."

Jackson jiggled the nozzle and set it back on the pump. Then he turned and looked her square in the face. Smudged makeup painted circles around her eyes. She lowered her head as if she knew there were dry tear marks on her cheeks.

"It might sound crazy," she said, "but I'm supposed to be traveling from Illinois to Washington State without any money or cards."

"You need to get up to I-90," he said. "This road's headed southwest."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me." New tears were already forming. She tried to collect them with her long nails before they fell. "I don't know what to do. I told the center I'd be there by tonight. If I'm not there they might give away my place to someone else."

A paper towel dispenser hung next to the gas pump. Jackson tugged on the lever, ripped a piece free, and handed it to her. She sniffled and brushed the maverick bits of hair out of her face. Chestnut red, he thought, maybe she dyed it too.

As they joined the traffic heading west she introduced herself as Clair. He nodded while keeping his attention on the road. The asphalt stretched on in front of them for miles, but his stare never wavered.

"Where are you from?" she asked, settling into her corner of the cab.

"Dakota."

"That's not far from here." She crossed her legs, then uncrossed them, and then crossed them again. "I live in Chicago. Well, I used to. Not anymore. But originally I'm from Moline. It's in the north-west corner of Illinois. You know where I mean? It's one of the Quad Cities."

He shook his head.

"There's four towns. Davenport, Rock Island, Bettendorf, and Moline. They're all on the Mississippi so it's pretty green. Lots of trees."

They'd entered prairie country. Brown blades of grass covered the low rolling hills. Long legged sandpipers meandered through the marshes. The woman waved her arm in a wide gesture to signify the difference in the land. "What about you?" she asked. "Where you headed to?"

"Los Angeles."

"Really? That's going to be nice. Sunny every day and the ocean right there."

Her voice kept on like a late-night infomercial. He turned his head in her direction, and tried to think of the best way to tell her to shut up. Nothing came to mind.

"You're probably wondering about the dress," she said rubbing the hem between her fingers. "I know it looks horrible."

The dress interested him about as much as the insects crashing into the windshield, but he kept it to himself.

"This dress used to be one of my favorites. It's Chanel. But I had to dye it and all my other clothes before I could go on my pilgrimage. It wasn't as hard as you'd think. The tough part has been getting rid of these shoes." She uncoiled the laces around her ankles and held her sandals up so he could see. "They said I'm not allowed to bring any luxury things to the center. That means I have to give these away."

A highway patrol car passed going the opposite direction. Jackson watched it in the rearview mirror until it became a blurry dot in the distance.

"You're not a big talker are you?" She leaned against the passenger side window, resting her forehead against the glass. "I have to learn to be more like that soon. When I get to the center I have to take a vow of silence for thirty days."

"You could try practicing."

"What?" She swung around. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, I just thought it might be a good idea to try being quiet seeing as you're going to have to do it for a month."

"Fine, I can take a hint." She pulled her dress down over her knees and crossed her arms. "I just thought that the time might go faster if we talked, but I can shut up."

He didn't say anything for a few minutes. The silence sat between them like a heavyset third passenger. "I've been living by myself for the past few months," he said. "I'm not used to talking."

She kept her head turned to the window.

"Tell me about this center. What do they do there?"

"It's an Ashram in the mountains." Her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"How'd you hear about it?"

"You really want to know?"

"I'm asking aren't I?"

She turned and rested her knee on the seat between them. "It all started a year ago. I was living in Chicago, working for a company called Lawrence and Lewis. They do public relations. And I realized one day that this is my life. I'm twenty-nine years old. I work for a company that I can't stand. My fiancé is banging his therapist behind my back. Don't ask how I knew that. And I live in a tiny apartment two blocks from a park where people get shot every other day. I was like, this blows."

She talked with her hands, gesturing in various directions. For a moment Jackson pictured them sitting on a sofa in her apartment. Things would be different. He'd be the one out of place in his Wrangler jeans and checkered work shirt.

A knot formed in his throat as he noted a car in the rearview. He jerked around and peered through the back window. There on the horizon was the same white dot from earlier, but this time it was pursing them. He shoved his heel against the gas pedal. The speedometer jumped from 60 to 75. A green exit sign for the town of Bill flew past. He bore right at a tremendous speed.

"Slow down!" she yelled, as they barreled down the off-ramp.

Jackson twisted the steering wheel right and then left, trying to stop the pickup from fishtailing out of control and over the embankment. Brakes screeched. Clair braced herself against the dashboard as they skidded under the overpass.

The truck rocked to a stop and the engine died. They sat there for a second as a cloud of exhaust fumes flew over the cab.

"I'm getting out," she said, sliding to the far corner of the seat and gripping the door handle.

He didn't answer or move. He just sat there listening for the sound of tires speeding across the road above them.

Dry heat poured into the cab as she shoved the door open and stepped out on to the running board. "Thanks for bringing me this far." She waited there, half in the cab, as if she wanted him to tell her she could leave. "I'd still be sitting outside of Lusk if it wasn't for you." Fear staggered her words, but she stayed put.

The sound of the patrol car echoed off the concrete ducts and diminished into the distance. Jackson pried his fingers off the wheel and cracked his neck. "Sorry about that."

"Well, thanks again." She scurried to the back of the truck, reached over the tailgate, and grabbed her luggage.

Jackson twisted the key in the ignition. The starter went click. Glancing up, he saw she was standing in the passenger side doorway again, this time holding a book. "I can't leave without giving you this." She handed him the paperback and backed up a step. "It'll help you find your way."

He flipped through the pages like a stack of cards and then tossed it on the seat next to him.

"No," she said, grabbing the book and holding it out to him again. "You can't just throw it away like that. You have to promise me you'll read it."

"I can't promise anything." He stared straight ahead watching three yellow birds dipping their curved bills in a pool by the road.

"It's helped me so much. I'm sure that whatever trouble you're in it'll be a comfort."

"I'm not in any trouble." He turned the key a second time. Click.

"Then why are you hiding from the police?"

He opened the choke valve, tapped his toe on the gas twice, and tried again. The engine turned but didn't catch. Soon the smell of fuel filled his nose. "Flooded," he said, smacking the wheel. A headache was coming on. He sat back and worked the tips of fingers in a circle on his forehead.

"If that trooper had pulled me over we would have been stuck here until tomorrow." She'd been slowly shrinking away from the pickup, but she froze as soon as he started talking. "He would have run my ID. Once he'd read my history he would have impounded my truck and hauled me down to the station. Then I'd have to sit in a

cell while he called around to all the other counties to see if I had any outstanding warrants. Once he'd figured out I was clean it'd be around nine at night and I'd be stuck staying in some dirt motel until the impound office opened up the next morning. After a long night of bad TV, I'd go down to that office and they'd charge me for keeping the vehicle on their lot overnight and probably slap me with some traffic violation that I'd have to pay on the spot." He clicked the key in the ignition and listened to the engine turn. It sputtered for about thirty seconds before it caught and roared to life.

"If you want to get a ride with someone else I won't think nothing of it. But I do need to get moving now."

Her dress fluttered in the light wind. She clutched the book to her breast like a child might cling to a blanket in the middle of a thunderstorm. "Are you dangerous?"

"I doubt it." He placed the truck in gear.

She hopped back in the cab and slammed the door shut.

They drove down a small road headed north for a good thirty minutes before she spoke up again. "You said the cop would find your history. What's on your record?"

Jackson could barely hear her voice over the wind shooting through the crack above the window. He leaned his ear in her direction.

"What'd you get in trouble for?" she shouted.

"Cooking speed," he yelled back. "I used to make methamphetamines."

"What?"

"I made drugs."

"Oh, how'd they catch you?"

He rolled up the window and the cab became quiet again. "I suppose it was the explosion that clued them in. The whole place blew up." He reached under his collar and itched his skin as if the memory was a rash that kept spreading.

They drove all evening. Soon the landscape became mountainous. Evergreens towered over the road enclosing them. Here and there the truck's headlights flashed on the eyes of an animal, but mostly they only revealed the next fifteen yards of asphalt.

"What are you going to do in LA?" Her voice came out of the dark. He squinted to see her expression, but without any dashboard lights he could only make out the shadow of her figure.

"I don't know," he said. "I figured I'd look around for an auto shop, try and get a job fixing cars."

"Is that your thing? You like working on old cars?"

"No, it's just what I'm good at."

"Does it make you happy?"

"What's with all the questions?"

"They say you should do what you love." He could not see her mouth or eyes and her voice sounded strange, disembodied. For a moment he chewed over the idea that she might be someone else. There could be any number of people in the seat next to him. Only the fact that he'd picked up a girl in a red dress told him it wasn't his father or brother or someone he'd never met before. What if he'd fallen asleep somewhere back a hundred miles and forgotten all about it? The girl could have slipped out and someone else might have slipped in.

"I think we better park for the night," he told her. "I can't drive much further."

"We're in the middle of nowhere."

"You want a turn at the wheel?" He maneuvered the truck onto the shoulder and pulled the hand brake out from below the dash. "Can you work a clutch?"

"I don't even have a license."

"Well, I guess we'll be staying here then." He killed the engine and reached under the seat to retrieve his bedding. "I've got an extra blanket. You can bundle up in here and I'll take the back." He handed her a thick wool cover and pulled an army-green, slipknot bag out for himself.

"There's animals out there."

"None of them will bother with me."

He tossed the bedding in the back of the truck and crawled in. With all the jumbled sounds coming from the cab he imagined she was doing the same. But he was wrong. A few seconds after he'd gotten comfortable she placed her blanket next to his and pulled it around herself.

"It feels safer out here," she said, turning on her side so that her back was to him. He crossed his arms over his chest and closed his eyes.

In the morning he awoke to find her gone. He peered through the gray light for a sign of her. A light frost covered the pickup and the ground around it. Not far away he saw a series of frozen footprints leading into the woods. He jumped over the side of the pickup and followed the trail. About fifty yards into the forest the land evened out into a plateau. He found her kneeling on the edge of a large rock overlooking a chasm. She kept perfectly still, her back as straight as a board and her chin even with the horizon. He crunched his way over the frozen moss in a large circle so as not to disturb her. Then he sat and waited for a long time. She would breathe in, hold it, and then exhale. Soon, he found himself imitating her. The bones holding his lungs in place began to ache with each new breath. He held his hand to his chest as if his rib cage might crack. She used me like a pillow, he thought. Last night she slept on me. A vague recollection of running his fingers through her long hair flashed through his head and he smiled.

"It's so beautiful here," she called over to him. "I could live right here and never get tired of the view."

He stood and shook out his pant leg. "Ready to head off?"

"Sure, I'm starving." She strolled across the rock in her bare feet. Her sandals she'd abandoned on the rock where she'd been sitting. "I always get hungry after clarification."

"Is that what you call it?"

"Yeah." She stumbled over a root jutting out of the stones. He caught her shoulder and steadied her. "The exercise I was doing gives you insight. It makes things clear."

"How does it work?"

"Well, you sit down with a question. You have to have a specific question formulated in your head otherwise the answers won't make any sense. Then you have to clear some space. You have to get rid of your emotional garbage. You breathe in through the top of your head and then exhale pushing the emotional junk out of your chest."

They came around the side of the truck and got in. Once the engine had turned over a couple of times it caught. Cold air shot through the heating vents and across their laps. Jackson steered the pickup out onto the road and set out at a cautious speed of 30 mph. "What was your question this morning?" he asked.

"It was something I shouldn't have asked."

"You didn't like the answer you got?"

"No, it wasn't like that. I asked something personal about the future."

"And you're not supposed to ask about that?"

"You can. It's just hard to understand the answer. Everything gets muddled up."

The engine began to warm. Its heat poured through the vents and onto their legs. Jackson tapped out a rhythm on the steering wheel while the girl sat with her knees pressed against the dash. "So, what was your question?"

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

"Oh, that's how it works."

"I'm not making this up. They say you're supposed to wait at least three months before you talk to anyone about a vision you had."

"Who's *they*?"

"I'm not supposed to say their names."

"I don't follow."

"I can't use names because names..." She glanced towards the ceiling of the cab as if she might find the answer inscribed in the metal frame. "It's difficult to explain it to someone who has no background in any of this."

"Sounds a bit like you don't know why."

"Look, if you read the book and did some of the exercises you'd start to understand. A lot of questions I had at the beginning were answered through clarifying."

Jackson snorted a laugh. "You still haven't told me what your question was."

"I told you I have to wait three months before I can talk about it."

"You said you couldn't tell me the vision. There wasn't nothing in there about telling me the question."

She shook her head and turned towards the window.

He shrugged and kept driving.

After some time she said, "I asked if I would ever have a baby."

"And what did it tell you?"

She let out a sharp laugh and covered her mouth. "It's not like a Magic 8 Ball that tells you yes or no. The answer comes in pictures and colors."

"What'd you see then?"

"I can't say."

"It didn't work."

"It worked." She sat up straight and placed her knee on the seat between them. "I saw a girl brushing a boy's hair."

"Was one of them your kid?"

"Stop asking me about it. I already told you more than I should have."

He didn't press her. It wasn't that he didn't care to know. He figured she'd tell him when she was ready. After a while she did just that.

"The vision didn't make any sense," she said scratching behind her ear. "When I watched the girl and boy I didn't get the feeling either one of them were mine. I had this overwhelming sense of fear and got goosebumps. I knew something very bad had happened to the boy and they were running away from it."

"Did you see anything else?"

"No, I felt you watching me, and I didn't want you to have to wait, so I opened my eyes."

They reached a precipice where the sky seemed to hang on the edge of the cliff. Jackson slowed the truck to a crawl and looked over the valley covered in mist. She was right in saying it was the type of view you could never get tired of. Being above the clouds was like being part of something eternal.

"You don't believe in any of this," she said. "It probably sounds like some kind of joke."

"I believe you saw what you did, but no, I'm not the type to go around believing in things. I like to know things."

"My fiancé was like that. I tried to get him into doing the exercises but he said they didn't work for him. Like we used to have group meetings at my apartment where we'd all sit in a circle and clarify. One time I asked him what he thought after everyone

had left. He said he couldn't focus. The hippy chick sitting across from him wasn't wearing any underwear. Can you believe that? We're all trying to cleanse ourselves and he's looking up some girl's skirt." She crossed her arms and pressed her back hard into the vinyl seat. "All I know is you'll have a hard life without any kind of faith."

"That's probably true." He rubbed the bridge of his nose as if he had something more to say, but if he did he kept it to himself.

By evening they had reached the road that led up to the center. A large sign indicated they were entering the Hibiscus Ranch/ Rose Fellowship Center. Below it a smaller sign read, "Private Property." Jackson shifted into first and started up the ungraded road.

Ten minutes later he turned into a parking lot and pulled up next to an old shed. "Thanks for the ride," she said. "I'm sorry I can't give you more than this." She indicated the book on the seat between them and then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

A tall man in a red robe came around the side of the building. He held up his hand and gave them a wave. She creaked open the door and waved back.

"Glad you could make it," he called over. "We were getting worried you'd gotten lost."

She grabbed her suitcase out of the back of the truck and hustled towards the man.

"I'm so sorry," she told him. "Getting here..."

"Shhh." The man placed a finger to her lips. "Your vow of silence began the moment you stepped onto the property."

Jackson sat with his hand on the ignition and his foot on the clutch, watching them through the murky windshield. He could probably make it to Oregon in a couple of hours. If he stopped for coffee he could make it all the way down to California by morning. But he knew he wasn't going anywhere. His hands fell away from the keys and he shoved the door open. Then he picked up the book from the seat next to him and strolled towards the man with his hand outstretched.

"I'm Peter," the man said. "You must be Mark, Clair's fiancé. We weren't sure if you were coming."

Clair's eyes widened as the two men shook hands.

"I'm very pleased you're here," Peter said. "I think you're going to bring something new to the group." He turned around and started in the direction of a stone path. "Follow me."

Two hundred yards up from the parking lot they came to a cluster of buildings. Most of them were one-story structures, with black slate roofs and light cedar walls that were not yet treated for weather. In the distance Jackson spied a two-story round building with a dome.

"That's the pavilion," Peter said. "We do most of our meetings and clarifying in there." He led them through a doorway and then down a narrow corridor to a small room. Two futon mattresses lay on either side, and an ornate rug took up the center. High up on the back wall, four candles burned on a long rectangular windowsill.

"Usually we don't mix the sexes," Peter told them, "but since your fiancé is new to all this we thought he'd be more comfortable sharing a space with you." He pointed to a small shelf between the beds. "There's two sets of robes there and towels. The communal washroom is down the hall. After you've settled in, I'd go straight to bed. Morning clarification is at 5AM in the pavilion."

Jackson nodded.

Clair appeared on the verge of speaking, but held her breath.

"I'll see you both in the morning." Peter backed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

"This isn't funny." Clair kept her voice low, but it did little to hide the venom. "You have to go. If they find out you're not Mark, they'll kick me out."

Jackson put his finger to his lips, and mouthed the words, "Vow of silence."

"You're going to ruin everything for me." She paced the length of the carpet, her hands fluttering at her sides like a lost hummingbird. "Go tell them there's been a mix up and you're leaving."

He laid down on the futon near the far wall, and placed his hands behind his head. The thumping of her pacing the room reverberated across the floor and up through the mattress.

“I'm serious. I've gone through a lot to get here. I've given up everything. You can't come along and screw it up. Are you listening? Open your eyes.”

He woke the next morning to a door slamming shut. Peering through the dim light he found Clair's bed empty. On tip-toe he looked through the window. Outside figures were crossing a courtyard, filing into the pavilion. He took one of the red robes from the shelf, pulled it on over his head, and slipped out of the room to join the others.

The cold cut through the thin material. A droning chant seeped out of the building. Jackson followed a man across the courtyard and inside. The interior looked similar to a theater in the round. Three wooden levels—like wide bleachers—circled a small platform at the bottom. Practitioners kneeled on each of the levels, a candle burning between every third person. Jackson took a seat on the topmost level, and tucked his legs underneath himself.

In the middle of the room a cast-iron fire pit radiated dry heat. Peter was kneeling next to it, serenity leaking down his face in a film of sweat. “Today we have two new friends with us,” he called out to the crowd, “Mark and Clair. Please send them righteous thoughts while you are clarifying.” He moved his gaze slowly across the group, beaming a smile.

“I would like to try a new exercise this morning,” he continued. “I want you to focus on an object. Think of something simple like a hairpin. Imagine the metal that was used to create the hairpin being excavated from a mountain. Watch the metal being formed with a hammer and anvil. Think of that object and all the stages it goes through before it ends up in someone's hair. Think of all the people who have handled the object, how they worked separately and as a group.”

Jackson glanced down the row. Clair sat some ten people away with her eyes shut and her hands clasped together in front of her abdomen. He tried to mimic her by sitting up straight and visualizing a hairpin in his mind. He watched miners with pickaxes grinding away at the walls of a tunnel. He pictured a factory bellowing steam, hundreds of hairpins shipping out in crates. He tried to imagine a girl purchasing the pins at a shop, but before she materialized the heat pouring out of the fire pit made him drowsy, and he fell asleep.

When he came to, most of the room had cleared except for a few people standing in groups chatting. Next to the fire pit he saw Clair speaking with Peter. She gestured in his direction and then Peter trudged up the levels to Jackson.

“Clair tells me there's been a mix up.” He took a seat, his legs hanging over the edge. “She says you're not her fiancé.”

Jackson looked towards the exit and then down at the floor.

“You can speak,” Peter continued, “I think we're past vows of silence.”

Jackson rubbed the back of his neck, but the knot that had formed there only seemed to grow larger. “I'll pay you for the night. How much do I owe you?”

“This isn't a hotel. We don't have like a nightly rate.”

“How about thirty dollars?” He reached for his wallet and then realized he'd left it in the room.

“Look,” Peter said, “I'm not trying to make you feel anxious about the whole thing. I'm more interested to know why you did it. Was it just because you needed a place to stay or are you actually interested in clarifying?”

“My wallet's in the room.” Jackson got to his feet, smoothed out the robe over his legs, and stepped down in the direction of the door.

“Hold on a second.”

“I'll leave some cash on the bed and be on my way.”

“Wait.” Peter pushed himself up and marched down to meet him. “Listen to me for a second. I don't know your story, or why you ended up here, but I don't believe in accidents.” He paused, and breathed in as if he'd forgotten his words and was searching for a lost language. “What I'm trying to say is I need someone to paint the buildings. Would you be interested? We can't pay you, but we can give you a place to sleep and hot meals.”

“Do I have to wear this robe?”

Peter placed a hand over his mouth and chuckled. “No, of course not. You can wear regular clothes.”

There were plenty of supplies in the shed by the parking lot. Jackson grabbed a couple cans of Behr Premium Plus, Home Depot's finest, and hauled them up the path

to the first building. Dipping a brush in the paint, he estimated that applying the first coat to all the buildings would take over two months. It didn't bother him. The alternative was sleeping in a junky motel in downtown L.A. until he found work. He ran the bristles down the cedar, watching the wood suck in the dark brown. Up and then down, down and then up. The work wasn't like cooking crystal where being alert and meticulous was necessary, and with each brush stroke he found himself paying less attention to the job and more attention to his surroundings. Soon, the knot in his neck unwound and fell away.

When the sun began to set behind the trees, Peter strolled up. "You must have done this before," he said, patting Jackson on the back.

"Me and my brother painted our dad's shed one summer."

"It looks good, but it's time to pack it in. We're having evening meal in half-an-hour."

After dinner, Jackson went back to the room. Clair lay on her bed reading a book by candle light. She peered over the top when he walked in, and then turned over so that her back was to him. He flopped down on top of the covers and fell asleep immediately.

In the morning, he skipped the pavilion clarification and went straight down to the shed to get the supplies. By 10 AM he'd finished the first coat on two sides of one of the buildings, and had started on the third. As he used a screwdriver to pry open a new can Clair marched up.

"They've assigned me to work with you."

"What happened to your vow of silence?"

"If you don't have to do it, I don't see why I should."

He picked up a second brush and handed it to her. They painted without speaking for some time. At first her hand jerked the brush over the panels, but soon she gave in to the movement and the brush glided up and down.

"I didn't tell them you were a felon," she said without looking up from her work, "or that you spent time in prison."

"It's probably better that way."

"How long were you in there anyway?"

"Five years."

"It must have been scary."

He stepped down a couple of panels, trying to hint that he didn't want to speak about it. But she didn't give in. After a short lull in the conversation she moved down until she was right next to him. "Did something happen to you when you were in there? Is that why you don't like to talk?"

"I got through my term without incident."

She leaned her elbow against a panel. "You should try clarifying sometime. You could push all that bottled up negativity out of you."

He let his arm fall by his side. Drops of paint splashed against the ground. "I'd rather not push anything out. It's fine right where it is."

"Suit yourself."

She went back to painting, this time humming an old Patsy Cline song, while swaying on the balls of her heels.

He tried to continue working, but each new note made him want to smack her across the cheek with the brush. Finally he whipped around spraying the side of the building with brown specs. "If I tell you, will you go paint somewhere else for a while?" He sounded like he was chastising a spoiled child.

She giggled like one and then nodded her head.

"About six years ago, I was living in my family's house. Outback, my dad had an old tool shed he hardly ever stepped foot in. So I set up my gear in there and started making batches of meth about twice a month. No one in my family knew what I was up to, only my friends. They started calling me the Alchemist.

One day my younger brother needed to borrow some tools to fix his truck. He went out to the shed and when he opened the door he must have knocked over the tin of phosphorous. I can't be sure, but it's the only thing that makes sense. The phosphorous must have spilled and the friction made it catch fire. My brother tried to snuff out the flames with a blanket, but before he could get the fire out the jars of acetone got warm and exploded. Blew the roof right off the place." Jackson set his brush on the lid of the can and crossed his arms.

"We took him to the local clinic," he continued. "He had third degree burns. Most of his clothes had melted into his skin. But the clinic was too small to give him proper treatment. They radioed for a transport to bring him out to county. Somewhere between Pine Ridge and the hospital he died." Jackson trailed off, his eyes pointed at the sky as if he could see a helicopter carrying his brother in the distance.

She took him by the hand and led him to a flat piece of ground under a tree. Pine needles dug through his jeans when he sat down across from her.

"I want you to close your eyes and visualize the last time you saw your brother. Then hold that memory while you take a deep breath. When you can't hold your breath a second longer push the memory out through your solar plexus."

"I don't want to forget. I want this pain to stay with me."

"Believe me, this won't get rid of the pain. But acknowledging the moment and moving it through your body will let you begin to forgive yourself."

He nodded his head and then closed his eyes and pictured his brother in the back room of the clinic. The boy was shivering like he was lying on the floor of a freezer lock. He tried to speak, but the words got caught in his throat. Jackson leaned down, put his ear close to his brother's mouth, and listened. "I want you to have the Mercury," his brother said.

Jackson breathed in deep and visualized the doctors wheeling his brother out of the clinic.

And then he exhaled.

In the evening they retired to their separate beds, her reading by candle light, him watching the shadows dancing on the ceiling. The scent of beeswax filled his nose and he could hear an owl calling from the forest. She set her book on the floor, and blew out the candle next to her bed. He waited in the dark for a while, and then crawled onto the mattress beside her. She rested her head on his chest while he placed his hand on the small of her back. They lay there in the silence.

Vita

Nathan Feuerberg writes short stories, novels, and plays. He received a Bachelor of Arts from The American University of Rome, and a Master of Science in Creative Writing from The University of Edinburgh. His fiction has appeared in a variety of literary journals including *SOL Literary Magazine*, *Shortbread*, and the *Rio Grande Review*. His plays have been performed in England, France, and Italy. *Snap* is his debut short story collection. Currently, he lives in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.