

Fall 12-18-2015

Exit, Promising

Stephanie Doyle

University of New Orleans, sdoyle3@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Doyle, Stephanie, "Exit, Promising" (2015). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 2066.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2066>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Exit, Promising

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
Creative Writing

by

Stephanie Doyle

B University of California, Los Angeles, 2010

December 2015

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my thesis committee for taking time out of their schedules to read. Thanks to my birth family for experiences, good and bad, that made me who I am today. Thanks to my work family, most especially Hannah for reading all my stories and for sandwiches, and Liz for late night advice and always caring enough to schedule for all of our lives. Thanks to Johnny White's (Miss Lulu, Bob, Rebecca, Natalie, Puge, and Mike), Parkview (Darkwater, Bunchie), and Bean Gallery for allowing me spaces to work. Thanks to my loverman, Luke Vincent, for putting up with me. I could not have done it without you.

Table of Contents

Escape Hatch.....	1
Gerald on an Above Average Day	29
Exit, Promising	46
Welcome	63
Found Things	70
Root of Negative One	85
Kept.....	91
Vita.....	107

Escape Hatch

My car strains over the last hill to my parents' house. I stroke the car's dash, comforting and encouraging it. The sun has gone down, and I don't want to be stuck walking the last mile. The last half-mile. The last-quarter mile.

The house comes into view. I could drive right by, straight into town, but nothing's open anymore. The sun set hours ago. It'd just be Gas Station Eddie open as long as he feels like being there, and maybe the same four regulars in the Harley bar, hanging out with Jill the bartender and getting the occasional free round.

This place is wide-open spaces but the house feels hedged by trees. Four years ago my mother ripped out the cherry orchard from behind our house, but not these giants, the oaks and the elms and the maples. Even so, without the orchard, the ground looks stripped and scarred. The television flashes in the downstairs window. I pull under the most gnarled and spreading oak

and cut the engine. With no radio and no engine, the silence feels invasive. My hands lie still on the steering wheel and I watch the front door. I'm waiting for my mother to come greet me, waiting for her to break first.

The exterior light flicks on. It's my father who opens the door, puts his hands in his pockets, and walks the hundred feet or so to my car. His mustache glows faintly silver in the moonlight and the lenses of his glasses are dark.

I open the door and rotate on the seat so that my feet are on the ground, but I don't take the keys out of the ignition or stand up. The car dings in protest. My breath hangs heavy, too warm in the early winter air.

"Hey kid," he says. He'd probably hug me if I'd get out of the car, but I don't. "Coming in?"

"Maybe. How bad?"

He shrugs and jerks his chin towards the house. "She's fine."

"Fine?"

"You know." He shrugs. "She'll be fine."

I groan. "Right."

He walks to the trunk and starts unloading.

I twist back into the car and lay my head onto the steering wheel. "I'm not staying," I say.

My father unloads bag after bag onto the lawn, stacking them by size.

"Fine," I say. I pull my keys from the ignition and trudge across the lawn, not wanting to reinventory all that's left of my adult life as it's organized into piles that can be shoved into the closets of the house I swore I'd never live in again. Swore loudly and dramatically, actually.

Instead of heading for the back door, I stop at my father's tool shed and stash spot. Without bothering to turn on the shed's light, I grab one of my dad's emergency bottles of Scotch. I consider getting drunk on the back porch and then bursting through the back door to force her hand, but instead I climb on top of the shed, step onto the roof of the kitchen addition, and crawl in through my bedroom window.

Artisan cupcakes. That's how they'd gotten me. I could be anything I wanted they said. Not my mother, but my father certainly and all those encouraging people at the high school. So I went to pastry school and I tried to make an artisan cupcake business worthy of the Food Network.

You know who buys artisan cupcakes? Suburbanites. Rich people too, but there are fewer rich people. So those of us who fail to get a cooking show sell to middle-class mothers with knock-off Chanel bags and big sunglasses and three kids born at perfect four-year intervals which means that they will only have one child in college at once. Or to the office manager who's trying to make their team building exercise *the thing* that people talk about over the water cooler for more than just the next week. Or the young Barbie-and-Ken couple trying to make their wedding the best wedding *ever* with the most unique details that all their frat bros and sorority sisters will be jealous of. And all those suburbanites became suburbanites by caring about and worrying about and fretting about money.

And it wouldn't matter who it is, there would always be someone breathing down my neck, trying to get me to make something *more* unique, like maybe a pixelated Mario cake made out of tiny cupcakes. Or to get it there by Friday, yes this Friday, and to start delivering because

their business will almost certainly become regular customers if I do, and even though it means I had to buy a van and hire some kid to watch the counter so I could make the deliveries, it should mean building a client base, right? Or to cut my price by just a little and then just a little bit more because a wedding cake really should count as a bulk order because of the two hundred person guest list and the cost of a wedding cake, it's just flour and sugar after all, and on top of that they only want cupcakes and one small cake for the bride and groom. How hard is that? And every new business takes statistically five to seven years to get successful, but in the meantime my days run from five a.m. to seven p.m. with no weekends and usually some poor excuse for dinner or maybe I forget to eat at all. Soon there's no more world outside of kids' birthday parties and office parties and shiny weddings and artisan cupcakes.

And then I start to believe that these people are normal, that they might even care about me, about buying local and being loyal customers. That's when I would cut prices because they have a point. Because the pastry school just assumed I would find a business sense, and most suburbanites are greedy. And that's when I go bankrupt, because in the old economy, they gave out loans like they gave out condoms on a college campus. And my rent is high and my utilities are high and Facebook doesn't bring in that much in revenue, no matter how much time I spend "self-promoting" or just aimlessly scrolling, half expecting the universe to intervene if I could just sort through all the information and find something, something. And the only investors I have, apart from myself by way of the bank, are my sister, her husband, and my parents. And I live above my shop, so when I lose my place, I lose it all: home, bakery, savings, self-respect.

And when I close, the soccer moms are all so sad because they just loved my cupcakes: guess what. It doesn't pay my back rent. Well, this is the economy now, and doing other people

favors never made anyone rich. They wish they could help. They really do. Everyone's tightening their belts now.

So I sell it all, everything I can back to the people who took it in the first place and it's all discounted, lucky them, and I watch as they cart off everything from my pastry kitchen flash racks to the sectional I got right after school, the one with cushions so big they swallowed me whole and a fold-out bed that I could use for guests. My first adult purchase, the one that meant I wasn't moving anymore, that I finally, finally had a home of my own. I use the money to pay not nearly enough back to my sister and her husband, and there's some but not much leftover for my parents. I spend my last dollar at the gas station on the way home, shorting the gas tank so I can afford a coffee too.

Through the window and one step in the dark, I trip over what feels like a microwave plugged in under the window and fall onto my bed. Rubbing my shin and hopping, I make it to the other side of the room and turn on the light. I put the Scotch on top of the dresser and limp back to examine my attacker.

A white box sits on the other side of the room, skewed out from the wall that it had been plugged into and strewn into the side of my double bed. Another one of the things sits, more orderly, in the corner to my left and on the other side of the dresser. "It's a HEPA filter," my mother says. "They both are."

She startled me, but I don't let her see it. "Well hi, Mom. Good to see you." I turn towards her and consider a peace-making hug, but she's still in the hallway. Her hair is pulled

away from her face, though normally she'd have let it out of her twist by now. "Hello, Anna. I didn't see you come in." She steps into the room.

I glance towards the Scotch that's sitting a mere foot from her head, but she seems not to have noticed yet. Mother doesn't approve of drinking, especially not on weekdays.

She nods towards the filter. "It's supposed to help with the air, you know. Because of the cigarette addiction you have."

"I don't smoke in the house, I actually –"

She holds up her right hand.

"Mom, I'm a grown –"

She shakes her head, once, firmly.

I sigh and sit on the bed. She's thin, my mother, but from this angle she looms like Lenin's statue.

"I just wanted you to know that based on a pack-per-day calculations, you can save \$4,550 a year if you quit smoking."

I look at my lap. I expected something. I tell myself I expected something and I knew it wouldn't be normal, so this doesn't matter at all.

"Not to mention the down-the-line healthcare costs. I think you could use that money right now." She pivots, starting to pull the door closed, but sees the Scotch. "*Hm*," she says with force. She slams the door and stomps down the stairs, each step a little quieter than the last.

It's really not long before a fair amount of Scotch is gone. I still can't sleep. I sit on the floor, back against the bed frame, the bed blocking me from view should someone enter through the door without knocking. I consider my cigarettes on the windowsill slightly above my head,

but I can't bring myself to smoke one out of the cracked window. My mother could be anywhere, waiting for an opportunity for a spectacular lecture. I shiver.

I tell myself it's because it's cold outside. The cold seeps through the wavy glass windowpanes. I sit in the radiating, icy air like the opposite of sunbathing. There's one of those storms brewing, a line of clouds grazing the tops of the trees, the first real snowstorm of the season. The kind of storm that immerses houses in wind and sleet or snow and ice, and if you're dumb enough to be driving, you just have to trust that the road is still there. Cold enough that any sane household would have turned the heat up higher than sixty-five degrees – but not my mother, no. It saves seventeen dollars a month in energy costs. And we're all tightening our belts now. Just my luck I'd be here for it.

When we were kids, my sister Christine and I would watch my father from this window, our breath making fog circles that we had to clean off with Windex when our mom found us. Dad would cut wood in the summer sometimes, and spend hours outside when the winter was so cold it made my bones ache. Collecting branches, shoveling the already clean walk. Knocking down icicles with ever-increasing quixotic zeal.

The storm wind kicks over the trees like a tantrum. I try to pull my blanket off the bed, but it's too firmly tucked under the mattress, so I get up in sections, bracing myself with an arm out and sliding my legs under me, reaching with the other hand to grab the footboard of the bed, pushing with my back against the mattress.

I run my hands over the walls looking for a leak, over my collection of once-awesome posters: Tears for Fears, George Michael, Bruce Springsteen, Genesis. I was retro in the nineties. Genesis flutters slightly. The poster is brighter than it should be. Phil Collins is backlit. Phil Collins feels warm.

I pull the tacks out and the light strengthens, unfiltered, shining out like a spotlight from a palm-sized hole yawning in my bedroom wall. I glance at the window. The stars are blacked out and the clouds are gray and purple and black. They're so thick that it could be day or night. I am too afraid to put my eye to the shining hole, too afraid this is the mental break that my mother has been waiting for ever since I "failed at all aspects of my adult life." But I can smell orange blossoms, and it is enough to give me a twinge of hope. I put the poster back up.

"Anna!"

I roll over and look at the sky. It's not light yet, but that could be the blackout curtains I hung before bed yesterday. Either way, no. I am not awake.

"Anna!"

A few minutes pass. I think I'm safe.

My door bangs open. A small body hits me in the back.

"Aunt Anna!"

Sighing, I turn over, glad I wore pants to bed last night. The tiny missile is my niece, Sarah.

Sarah burrows into the blankets at my side. "Aunt Anna. Mom said, come wake you up. Did you know it's snowing? It's a snow day. I don't have to go to school." I shift so that I'm not crushing Sarah and she tosses the blankets exuberantly behind her, exposing my feet to the cold. Under the blankets, Sarah sneezes.

"Ew," I say, as my side is covered in a fine mist of germs.

“Sorry,” Sarah says. “I got a cold. I keep forgetting: ‘Sneeze into your arm to keep the germs from doing harm!!’” She shrieks this like a battle cry. I wince. “Mom says Grandma tried to yell up but you didn’t hear.”

“I heard her,” I say.

Sarah stands on the bed, pulling the blankets completely off of me. A line of snot drips from her nostril. “Grandma wants you to come eat breakfast.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll be down in a minute.” A headache starts behind my right eye and spreads to my temple.

“Let’s go!” Sarah says, jumping off the bed onto the floor. I wince at the thump, both because of the headache and because I’m sure my mother is going to burst in and yell at me for treating her home with “such casual disregard.”

“You go ahead,” I say. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“I want to wait for you,” she says.

I sigh. “I’ll be right down,” I say. “Please go.”

“No, I want to wait!” Sarah’s eyebrows furrow.

I consider picking her up and placing her outside the door, but decide against it. I’d probably get in trouble for “upsetting the baby,” or something equally ridiculous.

When I turn around, Sarah’s sitting on my bed and regarding me seriously. “Tell me a secret.” She holds out her palm like she’s demanding a toll.

“Um, what kind of secret?” I stand up and rummage through the closet. My backpack is in there but not my bag with the slippers. Actually, I can’t remember if I sold my slippers or not.

“The most secret secret you have,” she says. “This is how Alaura became my best friend but she has a boyfriend now so,” her nose wrinkles, “I need a new one.”

“Okay,” I say. I glance around the room, trying to find a suitable secret to tell a five-year-old. I point to Phil Collins. “Bet you’ll never guess what’s behind there. If you can see it too, then it can be our secret.” I smile just a bit. It was a dream, but it’d be fun to pretend with Sarah. I’d need to have something to do for the time I’d be here, and I can only apply to so many jobs. *All work and no play*, as they say.

She nods seriously. She walks over and pulls the bottom edge of the poster, peeking up so she can see the wall from beneath. She gasps. I feel a twinge. “Did you break the wall?” She looks at me with the kind of respect you get on the playground for stealing the monitor’s whistle. “That’s bad. Mommy would yell at me if I did. Let me see for real.”

I walk over. The hole is there, but it’s dark now. I lift her up so she’s on eye level.

“Weird,” she says, pressing her eye to the hole.

“What?” My heart thumps.

“There’s stars and stuff in the wall.” She pulls her head back, puts her hand through. She pulls it out and tries again. “It’s not even cold.”

I put her back on the floor. I push four fingers through. My hand won’t fit through like Sarah’s can. I can’t get over the *warmth* – not when it’s so cold outside and in the house. “Huh,” I say. I put my eye to the hole. “Woah.” I sit down. I saw it too, the stars and the moon half-again as big as ours is supposed to be right now. I couldn’t make out the ground, but there was enough sky and enough warm to make me want to jump through to the other side, come what may.

Sarah walks up to me and squishes my cheeks together with her hands. “This is a *good* secret, Aunt Anna.” She grins like we’ve won the big prize at the carnival.

In the kitchen, I don't sit, first going to the mudroom to hang up the old bomber jacket that I brought with me, despite my mother's threats to "burn the smelly old thing if it ever crosses the threshold again." From her seat next to Christine, Sarah winks at me in a really obvious, little kid way, then picks up her open picture book. My mother does not look up from the stove as I enter, but when I come back to the table Christine stands and hugs me. "Welcome back, big sister," she says, settling back next to Sarah.

"Good morning," I say. "When did you trade in your kid in for the supersize version?" I stand there, not sure where I'm going to be least in the way.

"Oh," my mother says. "I thought you were never getting up. Do you know it's nine-thirty already?"

"No. No, I didn't. Mostly because my alarm was set for ten, and I was asleep."

"So we sat in the house, all that cold, cold, wet day," reads Sarah.

My mother sniffs, opens her mouth to say more. Christine, rushing, says, "How're things? It's been a while." She smiles at me across the table.

"Not that long," I say.

"Three years is a long time to most of us," my mother says.

I decide to ignore this, but I feel more visible while standing, so I slide into the seat on Sarah's other side.

"And I said, 'How I wish we had something to do!'" reads Sarah.

"So, Christine," I say. "What do kids these days do on snow days? I need a refresher."

"Well," she glances away from Sarah's book, "I was going to take Sarah sledding, but it's still snowing. Mom thinks it might be a bad idea with Sarah's cold."

I shrug. “It’ll probably be fine. I mean, we used to have some pretty epic snow battles, even when it was snowing and below zero. We can just wrap her up really well and –”

“So all we could do was to sit! sit! sit! sit!” Sarah punctuates each “sit” by shouting gleefully and bouncing up and down in her chair.

“I, personally, don’t think it’s a great idea to court pneumonia in a young child with asthma,” my mother says to me, raising her voice over Sarah and approaching with scrambled eggs, sausage, and toast.

“Mom, please,” says Christine, clearing away Sarah’s book.

“I’m not done!” Sarah says.

My mother slides eggs onto Sarah’s plate. “You know there’s no reading at the table, sweetie. You can finish after breakfast.” She serves Christine and herself, then drops the serving plate onto a trivet in front of me. Apparently, I am supposed to serve myself. “And I was hoping for some help around the house. That is, if you weren’t going to look for a job today?” Her grandma voice is much nicer than her mother voice.

“I just woke up. I haven’t had time to make any plans yet.” I try very hard to sound reasonable.

“Yes, yes. You have always been good at procrastinating, haven’t you?” In her chair, she seems to drop anchor, grow roots. Her face is a studied, bland expression that she saves for when she’s really trying to wound. “Is this how you ran your business too?”

“Mom!” Christine says.

Christine and I exchange a look. I shake my head slightly. *It could be worse*, I think at Christine. What she said wasn’t so bad, it was just the wind-up, the searching for the worst thing she could say that sucks.

My mother makes that same *hm* noise that she accompanies with just a slight straightening of her spine. I desperately wish my father were here instead of out plowing the neighbors' driveways. Then my mother would say, "Hank, you tell her." And my father would say something non-committal that I could easily ignore, and my mother would give him a thundercloud face that never bodes well, but she would stop talking, just for a while, just so we could all eat and pretend that it was okay for a minute or an hour or as long as we could all stand it.

Instead she says, "So silly of me, of course. That is why you are nearly thirty and living at home."

"You're *thirty*?" Sarah's eyes are huge.

"No!" I shout. Twenty-seven is so much different than thirty.

Sarah turns to her mother. "Mommy, how old are you? And how much older is Aunt Anna?"

Christine ignores Sarah's questions. "Can you two talk about this later, not in front of Sarah?" I hate when she pleads.

Sarah is tugging on Christine's sleeve saying, "Mom, mom, mom, mom." Christine is shushing her, which only makes more noise. And I am sitting very still, trying to remember that I am too old to be petulant.

"This is between myself and—" my mother starts.

I don't wait to hear the end. Under cover of the child chaos, I grab four sausages and a piece of toast from the serving plate and bolt.

"Anna!" my mother says.

But I am already at the back door, grabbing my jacket. My scarf, hat, and gloves are in the pockets, primed for a quick get-away. I blow out the back door and run for the trees, for my tree, the gnarled and ancient oak tree. The Saturn sits there, the easiest leg up in the world. I grab a blanket from the trunk so that I wouldn't have to go back inside for as long as possible, maybe never if I can stand it.

When I was a child I wanted to grow up to be a pilot. At first it was just because of my grandpa's old bomber jacket, a relic of his Air Force days. It smelled pleasantly dirty, leathery. I have vague memories of his large, gruff hands putting Band-Aids on my kid-knees when my mother wouldn't, telling me stories of his dead wife, my grandmother, and her wild ways, the way my mother couldn't stand her mess and adventure and that the house was never clean and meals were never on time. My memories of him smell like the cold snap in the outside air and tobacco smoke, and feel like they were always in the woods, always running and laughing.

When he died and I was eight, I wore the jacket over the outfit my mother chose for the funeral and smelled the lapels and decided to never take it off. I'd sit in a refrigerator box, the corner of the red play-palace tower, the crook of a tree branch. My oak tree outside was the best place, because it was tall and the leaves were too thick for my mother to see into the limbs in summer. I'd make gunshot noises and fight the bad guys. Christine was usually near, playing below at something mild, like coloring or dolls. I could never understand how she wasn't bored stiff.

Later it was about flying away. I used the jacket to supplement my teenage wardrobe, jeans and baggy shirts and kickass boots. My friends complimented me with words like “vintage” and “androgynous.” My mother told me I looked dirty and low-class and butch. My sister made me a collage from beauty magazines. Neither response felt right but at least Christine tried.

My mother would stroke Christine’s shiny brown hair and buy her skirts and cardigan sets and tell Christine that she was sweet and lovely, that Mother wished Anna would spend as much time on her appearance. Christine would look at me from under her lashes, unsure of which way to jump. “Thank god you got it right the second time,” I told my mother when I was a teenager, old enough to be angry and think that was enough to get by. “Thank goodness,” my mother said quietly, turning away. Christine would keep her head down and accept it all, all the clothes she didn’t really like, and all the praise for being in cheer and dance and student government, and all the affection my mother denied me for not being the daughter she wanted. Quietly, in the dark after our mother had gone to bed and we were sitting on the roof looking at the stars, Christine would tell me I was the smart one and the strong one, and I’d be the one to get out, and when I did make it, she’d tell our mother “I told you so” every day that I couldn’t.

It’s only been a few minutes before Christine comes after me, maybe a half hour. It’s cold though, and if I weren’t so angry I’d be a lot colder.

“Here.” She offers me another blanket. “Still your favorite place to hide, huh?”

“I’m not hiding. I’m planning my escape. And since when do you climb trees?”

“Since I realized it’s not that high,” she says.

I squint at the horizon. It’s been a while since I sat here, and the landscape I knew so well has grown more houses and lost more trees.

Christine says, “Sarah says you climbed the tree as gracefully as a squirrel, but I told her you used to be better and that you cheated by using the Saturn.”

I think she’s trying to make a joke. “Ha,” I say, half-heartedly.

We sit for a few moments, and I open half of the blanket to her. She slides under and close to my side. We sit shoulder to shoulder.

“I’m sorry, you know?” I say. “About the business. I tried. I really...”

She lets the words hang there for a while. “I know.”

A pile of snow thumps to the ground, somewhere in the distance. The sun has started beating its way out of the clouds.

“I’m sorry about mom,” she says.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know but.” She scratches her nose, letting the cold under the blanket. “I’m just sorry, okay? I can’t get her to stop anymore. She’s getting more herself with age.”

I grin crookedly.

“She finally has a real thing to get mad about with you leaving and then the business and all,” Christine says.

I recoil, taking the blanket with me. “That’s not fair,” I say.

“I know!” She’s pulling at her own fingers, one, the next, the next, the last. She switches hands. “That’s not what I’m trying to say. I’m glad you’re home. But I don’t want you to be home, you know? I wish it could have.” She clears her throat. “I wish you could have won.”

We sit in the tree for a few more moments. I'm about to try to navigate us out of this awkward when my sister starts to climb to the ground. She has a kid now, I know. She can't stay with me like we used to, when I wanted her to sit with me but she was afraid so we made a pulley system to send notes up and down the tree. Sarah wants to know if she can read *The Cat in the Hat* again and if it's warm enough to sled now, and my mother doesn't want to know anything, because she was right all along.

"If you want," I say when she's on the ground, "I can watch Sarah if you need a break. We'll play upstairs in the house or something until it stops snowing."

She smiles up at me. "That'd be good. I could finally put the laundry away. Or maybe just take a shit without worry that Sarah will kill the cat."

This time I laugh for real. "Okay," I say. I climb down and we walk back to the house together. I make an effort not to tread through my earlier path, stamping designs in the snow that cover the whole yard and drifting away from and then back towards my sister again.

After recovering from the why-is-mom-leaving tantrum, Sarah is actually reasonably pleased with playing with me as an alternative. "Grandma, we are going to play in Aunt Anna's room!" she calls. "It's a secret!"

My mother tousles her hair. "Well, you better have fun," she says to Sarah. To me she says, "Shout if you need help."

"You're not even leaving the house, Mother. Did you want to call another babysitter, one each for me and Sarah?"

My mother ignores me and turns away.

Sarah grabs my hand and pulls me up the stairs. She's made up a song, "Aun-tie Ann-nie smells of fan-nie," but that's as far as she gets before dissolving into giggles. I laugh too.

"Butts," I say. We laugh some more.

We sit on the floor of my room, next to the window, looking at the hole. "Okay," I say. "How are we going to get in there?"

Sarah, so distractible downstairs, now has her eyes fixed on the wall. "We need tools."

"Good point," I say. "Watch this." I climb out the window and down to my father's shed. When I look back up at the roof, Sarah's got her head out the window. I put my finger to my lips in a *shhh* gesture and she ducks back in.

I grab a flat head screwdriver for Sarah and a hammer for me, reasoning that it can't be that hard to chip through wall plaster. Also, the kid shouldn't have the heavy one, right?

"Here," I say, huffing slightly from the climb and handing Sarah the screwdriver. "Hold this."

"What are we gonna do?" She glances over her shoulder like we're in a spy movie.

"Let's make it bigger," I say. "I'll use this one." I hold up the hammer.

"Okay," she says. She puts the tip of the screwdriver on the edge of the hole, and I swing the hammer.

"*Anna.*" My mother's voice. I half turn, forgetting that I have the hammer in my hand. One second too late, I see that Sarah hasn't moved. The hammer smashes into her tiny hand.

There's one moment of silence where I think maybe I saw it wrong. Then she screams. The screwdriver drops to the floor.

"Oh my god, oh my god." I grab her hand, but she pulls it away.

“No no no,” she says and the words are half a wail. She runs to my mother.

“Let me see here, baby,” my mother says.

“It was an accident,” I say. “Sarah, honey, I’m sorry.”

Sarah screams louder. My mother reaches down and scoops up Sarah and they leave the room.

I follow them out to the car and watch my mother seat Sarah in her booster seat. Sarah holds her hand to her chest, but she lets my mother see it. One of her hands is swelling. Her fingers seem to be the right shape.

“An accident,” I say.

“Come on baby,” my mother says, scooping up some snow in a kitchen towel and handing it to Sarah. “Let’s go to the hospital.”

She closes the door behind her. “Accident,” I say to the yard.

My mother decides to stay at Christine’s house that night. Sarah’s hand is broken in two places, the second and third metacarpal.

“I’m sorry,” I tell Christine when I call. “It was stupid, it was an accident.”

“What were you – I mean really Anna what the fuck.”

“I know,” I say. “Is she –?”

“She’s going to be fine.”

I was going to say *mad at me* but I don’t want to correct Christine. “Can I come see her? Apologize?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. Just,” she sighs. “Just call me tomorrow. She’ll be fine.”

And then I feel worse because she was offering me something, any kind of hope. “I’m sorry,” I say.

Perhaps this is what desperation looks like. It’s the middle night. My father is asleep. He forgives me and I don’t have a clue why.

I am composing a note, a note to entice a whole other world into wanting me. The hole isn’t as bright now, but there’s weak light coming through so maybe their days and nights are different than ours. I don’t know but I can’t stay here. I can’t.

Hi,

I don’t know if you’re there, or if you even read or speak English. But my name is Anna. I live close to you all. Well, I don’t know if close is the right word, but it’s really not far for me. It’s just so, so different here.

Anyway, I guess I want to immigrate to your country and I don’t know how to do it. I’m not useless. I can cook and I’m pretty good at math and building things. I’m resilient and I can talk to lots of different kinds of people. Or maybe I could be your ambassador with my world, now that you know we exist. I’m getting too far ahead of myself. What I’m saying is that I’m not afraid to work hard, and I don’t need everyone to like me right away.

If you want, I can bring some stuff with me. I don’t want to be a problem, and maybe we have technology that could help you all. Just tell me what you need and I can bring it. I don’t want to be a problem, I just want to start over.

Sincerely,

Anna

I shove the note through and it’s done. It’s day over there. I can almost imagine a white piece of paper falling, catching light and being thrown on a breeze. I fold myself into bed, and

it's so late. I can't sleep again, but I feel like maybe, soon, I might be able to never see anyone again and I could maybe forget enough to sleep if I weren't here, anywhere on this planet, anywhere I could bother them ever again.

I wake up to the sound of a several heavy objects hitting the floor near my head, and she's there. The room smells like dust and chemicals. She drops an electric sander onto my pillow and I sit straight up. I turn on my cell phone screen – it's three in the morning.

“Mom, what are you doing?” I shout.

It's obvious, but I can't bring myself to believe it. She's fixing the drywall patch in the hole already. Why is she doing this? Can't she see what's in the hole? I briefly consider stopping her, but she already threw a power tool at me.

“I can't believe I have a *adult daughter* –” The words get equal, venomous weight. “–who thinks it's responsible to get a *five-year-old* –” She splatters drywall cement all over the patch “–to help her *punch holes* in my wall.”

“It's not like that. You don't know what you're doing.” Her hair is disheveled. I stand, wanting to reach out to grab a handful of it, to pull her away from the wall and claw the drywall cement out with my bare hands.

She swivels around fast, like she's going to strike me. I recoil. “Oh yes.” Her voice is cold and calm, “I do. And it is *only* because of your father and your sister that you aren't out of this house on your ear.” She fumbles with the drywall cement, unable to get the tool into the bucket. “You are lucky that child is going to be all right, or so help me.” She stops and throws

the tool. It splats mess on the floor and onto my feet. “You are lucky. Never forget that.” She collects the tools but leaves the messes. “Clean that up.”

I wait until I hear her go down the stairs and then outside. I look out the window. I see her drop all the tools in the shed, turn the light off, and lock it. I wait until I hear her bedroom door close, then throw on the nearest pair of jeans and my jacket. The only shoes I can find are flip-flops. I put them on anyway and clamber out the window and onto the roof. I drop down into the snow, falling onto my hip and shoulder, not caring if I hurt myself. I jiggle the shed’s door back and forth, my toes freezing in the snow. The door is locked. *Maybe, maybe*, I think, and run over to my car, maybe I have tools in the hatchback. Nothing.

I glance over my shoulder, up, around, behind. The only thing that might work – there’s a branch that fell from the oak tree. I grab it and climb back into the house as fast as I can.

“Okay,” I say. “Okay, it can’t –” I push the branch into the drywall putty, trying to get at the seams of the patch. The cement squashes around and the branch scrapes and I manage to press the patch in to the wall a little bit, but not by much. I throw the branch on the floor, not caring about the noise. My toes sting as they regain feeling. I dig my fingernails at the edges of the patch, picking and peeling and I can barely get through but it doesn’t matter. I pull back some of the tape and it’s gone. The light’s gone. It’s gone and my fingertips are bleeding and I can’t get it back.

Weeks pass. The day after my mother’s nighttime visit, I covered the mess I made of my mother’s wall with Phil Collins, and when she stuck her head in the next day all she did was

check the floor to make sure I'd cleaned up the drywall cement. I'd gone into town the next day under the guise of getting a job application and picked up the things I needed to fix the wall. Fifty dollars on my credit card that I couldn't pay off was worth not having to explain.

Now I smile and nod and agree with my mother. I apply to jobs that I know I'm unqualified for. I clean the house to her satisfaction. I tidy the yard alongside my father, who slips me twenties when my mother isn't watching. "Go have some fun sometime," he says, not looking at me in the face. I don't. I wake up when my mother wants and watch *Jeopardy* before bed. I don't eat much. I apologize to my sister in my mother's hearing, and apologize to my mother, and apologize to Sarah, and apologize and apologize and apologize.

It's two and a half weeks before Sarah and Christine come over for breakfast. My sister checks her watch and asks me to look after Sarah for a bit. "Mom, you'll be here the whole time, right?" she asks my mother. I don't even twitch.

Sarah sits on the kitchen floor next to me. Supposedly we are coloring but Sarah's more acting out the picture as she creates it. The cast on her other hand is bright green and covered in purple smiley faces that she demanded as payment from me for the accident. My mother is in the next room, organizing the china cabinet, polishing the glasses and the silver. She sticks her head in about every ten minutes, just in case Sarah gets hurt and there isn't a Band-aid big enough to fix it.

"And then I open the box and there's a bunch of gold and jewels and stuff in it and a crown. And even though I killed the dragon I don't want to take it cuz it was sort of an accident so it's not fair. So I close it back up and and— draw a treasure map!" She flourishes a bright blue crayon, squiggling around the dragon in the picture that is currently six colors and bleeding rainbows from a sword wound.

A shaft of sunlight beats down on my arm. I shift to my left, splay my fingers out again, and color in another chunk of horse. I'm coloring it green, a petty rebellion. Later I'm going to hang my picture on the fridge and my mother will comment about how someone needs to teach that child about acceptable colors for horses. She'll smile though, and that will be night and day different than if she knew I colored the horse green.

Sarah's gone quiet, and I look up. She's holding her hands as if there's an invisible ball in the between them. As I watch, she snaps them shut, cracks them at the thumbs and peers inside.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Shh!" she whispers in that too-loud kid whisper and doesn't look at me. "I'm catching the sun sprites."

"What sun sprites?"

"The tiny ones. They twist around in there and you can only see them once a day at lunchtime cuz the sun is strong. My teacher told me. Ms. Vicky says if you catch one, you can ask it for a wish and it has to give it to you or else it's got to be your servant forever."

I look at the sunlight, look hard. Dust motes swirl, prismatic. I can just make out the sprites. Maybe there's a way out of this after all. One that doesn't include an office job and apologies and a guilt so big I don't know where to put it. That doesn't include weeks and months and years waiting for my mother to get dementia or die, so that she'll forget or maybe forgive me. So that everyone in this family will see me as something other than what I am now, a cautionary tale for Sarah. Anna, the one that breaks things and sometimes people. The one that fails.

Sarah is deeply focused, the focus I've only seen her demonstrate when she's in pursuit of magic. She doesn't turn her head. She squints into the window, face upturned towards the sun.

"Do you see them? You have to be quiet or they'll go away."

"Yes," I whisper back. I mimic her movements, trying to catch one too.

Gerald on an Above Average Day

Gerald was officially a stock boy at Deano's Supermarket, which had been owned by his parents for twenty-three years. Deano's employees referred to him as their manager. On an average day, Gerald came to work before the sun was up and folded in half to get through the door. The ceilings in the store were tall enough that he could stand up straight if he liked, though Gerald slouched anyway. The doors were the main problem, and the slightly shorter drop ceilings in the store's office and the employee break room. Gerald had to crouch down to his locker and pinch his two fingers together to manage the tiny latch, at which point he slung his backpack into the locker. His first order of business was always to check that the liquor cage was still locked and that the stock of Old Grand-dad whisky was just as he left it the night before. Some days he had to restock before the rest of the staff arrived and that put him behind on the rest of the store. In a town this small, everyone knew his father's drink of choice, after all, and Gerald didn't want people to know more than they already did about his father's drinking.

The nice thing about Gerald was that he could carry multiple pallets of cans with ease. His father had sold the forklift when Gerald turned twelve and it became clear that Gerald was not done growing, even though he had reached eight feet tall already. “Ger, my boy,” his father said. “You can save this place some money, earn your keep for all the groceries you eat, ha ha ha!” But the five thousand or so his father had gotten from the sale went to a shiny, complete, set of Titleists and the store coped, though not well, the economy being what it was. In those days, Gerald went straight from school to the store, though his father always let Gerald do his homework in the office before he started stocking or checking out or whatever needed to be done. It was the one courtesy his father had never denied him, and when Gerald was frustrated or angry or felt his father used Gerald only in the ways convenient to the store and to make his own life more convenient, Gerald remembered those quiet moments in the office, at the desk his father had helped him build and raise to the appropriate height each time he grew, when his father would poke his head in and make sure Gerald’s math homework was going well.

The thing was, though, Gerald was about fourteen feet now and through no fault of his own, his body was in the way of customers when he tried to stock. In order to save his neck and his back, he sat, legs folded, in the direct center of each aisle, and swiveled his body this way for the tomatoes, back for the Great Northerns, down for the green beans. He had been doing it so long he could stock with his eyes closed, but he had to go slow anyway so that he didn’t accidentally crush or drop a can. Even though the aisles were a bit wider than normal aisles, Gerald had to sit

with his knees pulled up. No one could get down the aisle when he was stocking, so Gerald always stocked early and prayed it was enough for the day.

The supermarket was a small store though, and sometimes everyone wanted the same thing, especially if it was on sale. “Gerald, we’re out of canned sliced potatoes in aisle three,” Tina crackled over the loud speaker. Gerald was in the back office, rearranging the pallets so that the use-first items were on top of the stacks and at the front of the storage space. He shook his head and smiled ruefully. Strictly speaking, Tina shouldn’t have said that over the loudspeaker, but Tina had only worked at Deano’s for two months. She had hair the color of wheat and also freckles. Gerald liked to make her laugh because it sounded like summer, like August really, warm and free and a little crazy.

Gerald had sort of accidentally hired her. Miss Darla was retiring and he did need a new cashier, but he had meant to do more than one interview and he meant to hire someone with some grocery experience. Someone that would impress his father, so that his father would know the store was in good hands with Gerald, if he wanted to take an official break for a while. But Tina had worn a black blazer that was just a tad big, like it used to fit better when she had three squares a day, and she sounded so hopeful.

“I just moved to town,” she said. “I didn’t, really, have a plan, but I just took a chance.”

Gerald nodded so much it felt like his neck turned to rubber. He wanted to be able to do that too, take a chance. He cleared his throat. “When, when can you start?”

It took him a month to get up the courage to talk to her about anything other than work. Even now, he practiced his jokes in a whisper two, three times before he passed her on the way out and finally delivered them. Tina was quick to laugh. She was average sized and pleasantly round and Gerald sometimes dreamt of picnics with her.

Gerald rolled his neck and twisted his torso, preparing to go out and stock in the middle of the five-thirty rush. It was a small town, so it wasn't like people didn't know him. But they still couldn't help looking at him, and sometimes they saw that Gerald saw them looking and they talked to him in that how's-your-mama kind of way, as if they'd always talked to him and always been kind. Still, it was better than the road trip people. The adults looked and looked away and looked again, and their kids looked and stared.

Sighing, Gerald ducked through the doorway with a fresh pallet of canned sliced potatoes held on one palm like a tray of drinks, slumped through the store, and set up the "Aisle closed – stocking in progress," signs that he had made out of the extra "Caution – Wet floor" signs. He was extra careful not to explode the canned sliced potatoes in his haste, especially since Tina could see him if she leaned forward over her conveyer belt.

His father used to be delighted about Gerald's size. "Ger, my boy! Largest son in the world. You're my big little boy. You'll make us rich and famous. Everyone will come to Deano's from miles around!" He said this often, blustered it really, with ice cubes clinking in his rocks glass, when Gerald was still only slightly more than average-sized. Gerald's father was always talking about being rich and famous, and two-bit towns and bigger houses and country clubs. He widened the aisles and made a banner: "Come see Gerald, true and biological son of Mark and Louise! We fed him: He GREW. *DEANO'S FOR ALL OF YOUR FOOD-I-ARY NEEDS.*" He trotted Gerald out for radio interviews and once shot a commercial. The kids at school called him Rockstar Gerry, and later Freakshow Gerry. Gerald's mother, who was just below average sized

(about 5'2) would just smile sadly and hug as much of Gerald as she could wrap her arms around.

Over the years, his father blustered less about profits and more about loss. Loss of space when Gerald had to sit in the middle of the aisles and no one could get by, how about he comes in early from now on? Loss of stock when Gerald was too hasty or the tiny little jars would slip through his fingers, why can't he be more careful? Loss of customers who thought Gerald was just a little too big, and what was he eating to make him grow so large? His father worked less and complained more, and Gerald worked more and spoke less.

It took Gerald a long time to realize that he didn't like being called Ger. It was a winter day, he remembered. Gerald was in aisle seven, one before the produce, and he was fifteen years old and ten and a half feet tall. His body ached because it was winter and the pressure kept changing and his bones had stretched far too much that year. On top of that, he was crouched down trying to get to the back of the bottom shelf to move the cans of baby food forward. After flailing his forearm on the shelf for a moment, Gerald realized that the only way he could get them was to lie face down on the floor. He lowered himself slowly, his lower back and knees crackling and cramping. The salt from the roads that people tracked in smelled like a dirty beach.

His father must have come up then, and he didn't even bother to suppress the mocking chuckle. "Ger, my boy, that's some good effort there. Maybe we need to get an extra short person to do the bottom shelves. We'll give you a new title and everything. We'll make you the top shelf specialist and him the floor level specialist."

Gerald closed his eyes, as if closing his eyes would block out the sound of his father's uproarious laughter. He thought, "'Ger,' it's such a small name. I'm so big. It's not big enough for me. And why did he name me Gerald if he was always going to call me something else?"

Today, Gerald was a just little tired of it all. It was the day after the big canned sliced potato sale. He was late waking up, so the sun was up when he hunched in the door. Thankfully, Miss Cindy had opened the store. But when Gerald checked the liquor cage, several bottles of the Old Granddad were missing, which meant that his father had clearly made a pit stop at some point, and Gerald couldn't be sure of when since his father hadn't come home the night before. Some of the early morning oldies were already in the store, coupons in hand. Gerald tiredly set the pallets in aisle five. Mrs. Tenny and Mrs. Groundle saw Gerald and pattered through all their other shopping. Then they parked their shopping carts on either side of the end cap with macaroni and cheese stacked into a pyramid, apparently waiting for Gerald to finish with the canned olives.

Gerald tried to make himself smaller. The Groundle was the well-known dispatcher of the town gossip tree. She masqueraded as an old-biddy, but god-help-us-all she had been the first of the oldies to understand the true power of the cell phone. She learned to use the camera within the first week of having one, and her ability to caption things reflected the expert wit of a political cartoonist. Citizens of their town both respected and feared The Groundle.

"Mrs. Tenny, how is your arthritis?" Mrs. Groundle asked, by way of leading in to talking about her own high blood pressure. She eyed Gerald's progress, following each can of olives with her eyes.

Mrs. Tenny made a valiant effort to get her words out. "Oh it's getting—"

Mrs. Groundle said, "Because you know, don't you, that it's just so important for us to stay *active*. That's what Dr. Holden says when I go see him, he says, 'Mrs. Groundle, you are so

lucky with your high blood pressure because even though it's *high* it's only *moderately* high and it could be so much *worse*.' And I, I just tell him, of course, it's still so *burdensome*, though I *try* don't I to stay *positive* and all." Mrs. Groundle smiled brightly at Mrs. Tenny, who was nodding and periodically *hming* in sympathy.

Mrs. Tenny nodded once more, eyed Mrs. Groundle, then said, "Yes, it's a bit hard—"

"And you know, it does *help* so that my grandchildren *visit*. Just makes me remember what it's all *for*, you know, really *for*. I am just so *lucky* that even though my son saw fit to leave me here, he still *visits*. And how are your grandchildren, Mrs. Tenny? They are, what, six and ten now?"

Mrs. Tenny catapulted her words out as Mrs. Groundle finished the last syllable. "No they're sixteen and twenty. They're coming—"

"Oh that's just *lovely* dear, just *lovely*." Mrs. Groundle rotated her stocky bulk and beamed at Gerald. "And how are *you* Gerald, honey? Done growing yet?" She and Mrs. Tenny tittered at the little joke.

Gerald's cheeks reddened and he swallowed against his dry mouth. "I'm done growing, Mrs. Groundle. I was twenty-three last week."

His birthday had been uneventful. Gerald's mother had gotten him more shirts, pants, underwear, and socks and even a pair of gloves from the special order tailor in China, the same as last year and the year before. Gerald understood, even though he was a little disappointed. It's expensive to be oversized, and his mother was trying to save him some money. Gerald had confided to her that he wanted to move out, and they were both looking for a place with tall enough ceilings that he could be comfortable. His father had said, "I let you live in my house for

free. Here's to another year. Happy birthday, Ger, my boy!" He barked a laugh and rattled his Old Grand-dad for a refill.

"Well, happy birth—" started Mrs. Tenny.

"Yes, happy *birthday*, dear," said Mrs. Groundle. "Are you done with aisle four now?" She went to try to nose her cart around Gerald's foot, hitting his pinky toe in the process.

Gerald winced. "Of course." He considered pointing out that she had just smashed his toe, but knowing Mrs. Groundle she'd just get huffy and demand a discount for discourtesy, at which point she'd send a mass text to all of her friends warning that "that freak boy's feet" something or another "always in the way of the olives." Then his mother would have to hear about it, and Gerald tried to shield his mother from the gossip about himself as much as possible. It just made her sad. Gerald picked up the empty pallets and put them under his arm, then headed to the back room to work on orders for the store.

Gerald worked on paperwork until one o'clock. It was his most favorite part of the job, the paperwork. Even though he had to handwrite everything (computer keyboards were infuriatingly small), Gerald was good at balancing the books, at knowing what was needed. On good days, he could actually hold the contents of an entire aisle in his head until he got back to the office to get the pallets for the next aisle. His father had never found a reason to shake his head and tug his beard over Gerald's paperwork.

Not that Gerald's father was in the store that often any more anyway. He left things to Gerald during the day, and then asked Gerald a million questions when Gerald was finally home at night. Gerald usually had done everything wrong, in his father's estimation, but for some reason that wasn't enough incentive to wake up sometime before noon and perhaps not begin drinking bourbon until at least six.

“Hey Gerald,” Tina said from somewhere in the void over his left shoulder.

Gerald shot to his feet, almost hitting his head on the ceiling, and dropped his pen. It was a large pen, one that most people would buy as a novelty, but it fit Gerald’s hand. Accordingly, to Gerald it sounded like the hollow thud when he dropped a trash bag full of empty bottles into the store’s dumpster. Tina seemed not to notice.

“Oh, uh, um.” Gerald paused. He cleared his throat. “Hi.”

Tina smiled. “Getting a lot done?”

“Just, you know, paperwork.” Gerald held up the partially filled out papers as proof. He dropped one. Gerald’s eyes slid to the floor, then back to Tina. Did she see? He shouldn’t go for it. He should just wait until she’s gone. What if he bent to get it and he couldn’t get his stupid sausage fingers to pick up the tiny paper and he just did that, fumbled at the ground, until she took pity on him? Her shift was starting right? What time was it? Was she early? Should he say something now?

Tina bent to get the paper and held it out to him. “Looks like it.” Tina smiled brighter, then laughed uncomfortably as she continued to hold the paper and Gerald didn’t reach for it. After a few more excruciating moments, Gerald grabbed it. Tina glanced towards her locker.

I am more boring than her locker, Gerald thought. She *wants* to get to work because I am so boring. Gerald scrolled through his recent life, searching for anything that he could tell Tina.

“I got gloves,” he said. “For my birthday, I mean.”

“Cool,” said Tina. “I mean, I like gloves. What kind of gloves were they?”

“Just normal gloves,” said Gerald.

Tina shrugged and looked away. “Oh,” she said.

“I mean, gloves are just hard to come by, you know, because of my hands.” Gerald held up his hands. “They don’t make my size. When I was a kid, my dad used to tell my mom not to spend the money because they’d just break or I’d grow out of them, so I had to wear socks on my hands. Some of the kids called me Sock Boy Smelly Hands.” Gerald trailed off the last word. He hadn’t meant to tell Tina that.

“That’s mean,” Tina said. “I’m sorry they were mean.” Tina reached up to touch his arm.

Gerald didn’t look at her. “Thanks,” he said. “It was a long time ago. It’s not a big deal or anything. Not anymore, you know.”

They didn’t talk for a minute. Gerald’s arm burned where Tina’s hand was. Should he put his hand over her hand? Should he move away?

“Okay, well.” Tina hesitated a moment longer and patted Gerald’s arm, then tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “See you around. I mean, in the store. See you around the store.”

“Sure, yeah,” Gerald said. He kept standing as she put her bag in the locker, stooped but stiff, at attention until Tina left the room. She breezed past him on the way out with a small, quizzical smile. Her scent, which was something like grapefruit, lingered in the air after she was gone. Gerald sank into the loveseat he had saved from the curb and raised with old pallets. After a moment, he picked up his overlarge pen and stared at it in his overlarge hand. He set the paperwork back onto the top of his desk with the built-in magnifying glass and resumed filling things out, adding things up, and ordering food.

It was approximately 3:05 when Gerald heard the disturbance. There was a murmuring coming through the doors first, which Gerald attributed to the sale on the first blackberries of the season. And then Tina over the loudspeaker: “Um, Gerald? Can you – can you come to the front? There’s, I mean, your father is here.”

Gerald wouldn't have hurried for his father, except that Tina sounded so flustered. Tina was usually sure, even when she was wrong. And, he had just talked to her about the whole loudspeaker thing yesterday and she had totally understood.

Gerald took hurried steps to the front of the store, for once grateful that his legs were so long and he walked so much more quickly than other people. His father was sitting at the end of register three, and he wasn't wearing pants. The store had clearly learned that his father was a boxers' man. Gerald learned that his father was capable of a wide array of guttural vocal noises. He sounded like a chimpanzee trying to speak English. Gerald glanced around the store, confirming that there definitely was an audience and that there was nowhere he could get his back to a wall and fade away. And even if he wanted to, he couldn't because they were in the store and he was in charge. And even if he tried, his father would still be there, not wearing pants and making noises, and there was definitely no way to keep this from the Groundle, and therefore his mother.

Gerald examined his father's position. His father looked like the center of a bully circle. Gerald's memory flashed, of kids pushing him forward, back, forward, back in the middle of a circle of laughing, blurry faces. His mother wiping his torn knees and his wet cheeks with a cool washcloth. "You did right, Gerald," she was saying. "You shouldn't use your size as an equalizer for cruelty."

Ms. Cindy, who had been working Deano's as long as his father, was attempting to communicate with the beast: "Hey there, Mark. You know me, it's Cindy, Cindy LaFleur. First person you hired, way back when." Miss Cindy approached his father with a paper bag lined with a plastic bag, arms held as far in front of her body as she could manage. No one wants to clean up the boss's vomit, after all. Not off the floor and especially not off of their clothes.

“Hiya Cindy,” said his father without looking up. He was pushing on his kneecaps and pinching the skin. “Did you know that if you pinch your skin and it doesn’t go back to normal then you’re dehydrated? Me, I’m fiiiine. I’m so hyde – hyder – ated.”

Gerald still watched, wanting to do something, anything, but still stuck on the pants thing. While his father had long ago gone from casual to serious drinker, he definitely wore pants in public 100% of the time before today. Unless he wore shorts. Gerald’s brain ran through his memories of his father, in public, in pants and shorts, from childhood to now. Gerald shook his head in two short jerks, like he was ridding himself of particularly persistent flies. Enough. He stepped forward. “Hey, hey, Dad,” Gerald said.

His father lolled against the register, and attempted to tilt his head upward. He battled with gravity: third time was the charm and he was looking at Gerald. “Hi there, Ger. Ger, my boy. My big huge giant huge son.”

“Dad, I’m going to take you home now.” Gerald sat next to his father and attempted to slide his too-big hand behind his back.

“Huge, giant...” His father started speaking in a high nasal voice and bouncing his head side to side, sarcastic, ““What are you feeding him? What are you feeding that boy? What are you feeding him that he’s so big?””

Gerald could feel his father’s entire back, both shoulder blades and spine in the middle, and suddenly it occurred to him how fragile his father was, how Gerald could probably lift the man bodily and maybe even accidentally drop him and see him explode, like that time with the imported truffle oil on aisle twelve when he was seventeen. His father had made Gerald pay for every jar, and Gerald wasn’t allowed to use his employee discount. “Fourteen dollars a jar!

Fourteen!” his father had shouted while Gerald mopped up and tried to turn invisible.

“Fourteen!”

“C’mon Dad,” Gerald said quietly. Everyone in the store had their cell phones out and pointed at them. Mrs. Groundle, at the returns counter with a bushel of broccoli, was making shocked exclamations (“*I never!* It’s so indecent! And I’m missing my stories for this.”).

Gerald’s face was probably the color of ripe tomatoes, the uncanned kind.

“Don’t wanna go home. This is my store. I can be here if I wanna.” He squinted at Gerald sidelong, which was probably intended to be intimidating.

“Dad, you didn’t drive here did you?” Gerald tweezered his father’s shoulder, gently gently, and lifted him to his feet. Once he was up, Gerald put a hand on each of his father’s shoulders.

“Get off. I’m happy *here*.” His father attempted to push away from Gerald and fell over. “Think you’re so big,” he shouted into the floor. “Think you’re a big man, think you’re so *tough*. I’m still your *father*, and you’re still GER.”

A cool feeling ran down Gerald’s spine. He hadn’t felt calm like this before, calm in his bones. He stood up, straight as he was able. His cowlick brushed the drop ceilings, but he found for the first time, that he could stand up straight. Well, reasonably straight.

“Dad,” Gerald said. “We’re going home. I’m not driving because your car is too small, and you’re not driving because you are way, way too drunk to be driving. Which means that we are walking. Pull yourself together. I’ll help you.”

There was a beat of silence in which the crowd waited for his father to resist, to make more of a scene. His father’s face, furrowed before, crumpled. He started to flop into a sitting position. Gerald helped him to his feet.

“Miss Cindy, can you watch the store please?” Gerald said, and then glanced around, looking for Tina, hoping she wasn’t horrified. And there she was, still behind her register, not looking at his father at all, not snapping pictures with her cell phone. She was looking at Gerald. He couldn’t read her face, couldn’t tell what she thought, but at least she was looking at him, not clicking cell phone pictures or craning her neck like he was a mountain, seeing his torso instead of his face.

Triumph was a new, heady feeling for Gerald. He considered throwing his father over his shoulder, like an errant toddler. Instead, he gripped his father more firmly, for once not worried that he might be squeezing too tight. “And I hate being called ‘Ger.’”

It was exactly .78 miles to his home from the store. On his own, even when he was walking slow and enjoying the weather, Gerald could walk it in twenty minutes. With his sack-of-potatoes father, they were only almost home and it had been an hour.

“You’re, you’re-- ” His father said, but had to stop to concentrate on his feet.

“I’m what?” Gerald said, resisting the urge to lift his father over the non-obstacle, a pebble.

“You’re drunk,” his father said.

“No.”

“No. I mean. I’m drunk. And you’re big.” His father nodded, then tripped.

Gerald was silent. He wasn’t sure why his father was telling him this now, as he was pretty sure he’d been big for a long time.

“You’re big. You’re TOO BIG. Can’t take ya to golfing cuz ya can’t step on the greens. Can’t take you to the batting cages cuz ya can’t get in the door. Can’t put ya in football cuz you’re too afraid a hurting somebody. Ya pansy candy ass...”

Gerald tried to care about what his father was saying, but there was nothing, no feeling of fear or respect to anchor that care to. He considered leaving his father. He rested his hand on the bark of the old tree that he’d claimed for himself, since, as a child, he was the only one who could reach high enough to climb it.

“I can’t, I. You don’t need me. You were man-sized before you were five. I didn’t get a son, a baby boy. Got Freakshow Ger and no son.”

Gerald looked back at the store, ahead to the house. He could see the house now: his father would probably be fine. He would make it. Gerald’s mother came outside, her phone in hand, and took one step out onto the stoop. Gerald stayed where he was. His father stumbled along, unsteady steps, mumbling about not having a son, not ever having a son. Gerald lifted his hand to his mother and turned around.

Gerald wondered how he could have had a father if his father had never had a son.

Gerald expected the calm feeling to wear off by the time he got back to the store, but then, nothing had been normal today. He took a breath and prepared to deal with the customers. Mrs. Groundle received a very special manager’s discount of 20% and was allowed to exchange her broccoli for cauliflower, even though she had clearly already eaten some of the broccoli, as long as she promised to delete all of the cell phone photos she had taken. Anyone with a child got a

candy bar of their choice and twenty-five dollars off. Cindy got the rest of the day off.

Tomorrow, too.

“You can go too, if you want,” Gerald said to Tina. “I might just close the store. Or do the register myself.” Gerald wasn’t sure if he could do the whole store by himself, but then again, he didn’t know if there would even be any business to do after his father’s pantsless appearance.

“We could both go you know,” Tina said. “I mean, not that I need to. I don’t have anything special to do. I mean, I know that you hate those tiny little buttons and it’s been a long day, and we – I mean not that you –”

“You’re right,” Gerald said, too quickly. He had to cut her off before she could break that “we” into two separate things, the “you” and the “I.” Also, because Tina seemed like she probably needed to take a breath. Gerald knew that feeling.

“What?” Tina said.

“Do you want to grab some sandwiches from the deli? Or, do you want me to – that is, could, should, we both – leave?” Gerald felt a little dizzy. He should have practiced. Should he say that he was going to pay for the sandwiches from the deli, or at least not ring them in? Was that considered stealing? Were sandwiches from the deli too lame? Could he still play it off like he was trying to buy her a free sandwich, not trying to ask her out? “Uh,” Gerald said. “I –”

Tina signed out of her register and came out from behind the counter. “We could go to the park,” Tina said. “With the sandwiches, I mean.”

“That sounds – great,” he said, watching her fold up her uniform vest and pin her name tag to it, the same way she did every day before she put it back in her locker, and deliberately did not ask the several questions he now had about what her acceptance meant. “I’ll write the closed sign if you make the sandwiches.”

Tina was smiling at him in that dangerous way, with the sincerity that had gotten her a job and with the openness that made Gerald forget he was oversized. “Deal,” she said.

Exit, Promising

Camilla was so sick of the road being the same that she could scream. Someone had busted out their passenger-side window at the last overnight stop and there'd been nowhere to fix it yet. It'd been two lanes and country since they passed Forth Worth and the whole place smelled like cow shit. Of course, it was Tommy's bright idea to take the I-10 route from Tennessee, saying they'd miss Vegas traffic and see more states on the way to L.A. It had sounded great at the time, like an adventure on the way to finally moving to Hollywood. Instead, they'd spent nearly the whole time in Texas, and it felt like Texas would never, ever end. Tommy had been pretending to sleep for the last ten miles because he knew it was his turn to drive.

She pulled off at an exit promising gas stations, but it turned out to be one of those trucker complexes with the gas station glaring across at the bar and the shitty motel.

Camilla slammed the truck door on her way into the bar. Tommy sat up, saw Camilla was leaving him, and took his time getting out of the truck to make some kind of point, probably.

Camilla ignored him. Bars were her natural habitat, and she knew how to work them. “I’d like two shots of Jameson and two of whatever pilsner you’ve got on tap. You can put it all on Mr. Moneybags’ tab here.” She jerked her head towards Tommy, who was trailing behind her. She took one of the shots, then picked up one of the beers and walked to the bathroom.

The stalls didn’t have doors, so she barricaded the bathroom with the trashcan and took her time. Washed her hands, took off her shirt, and splashed her armpits. Reapplied her makeup. Breathed free for a second, with her eyes closed, and no probability of Tommy barging in and finding her vulnerable. That was the thing that made being with Tommy bearable: she was in charge and he didn’t know her weaknesses.

She came out ten or so minutes later. Tommy had stolen her second round. “Did you forget that you’re supposed to be driving soon?” she said in his ear, arms snake-draped around his shoulders.

Tommy tilted his head back and licked the side of her face. “What are you worried about? Don’t I always take care of it?”

“Gross.” Camilla swiped at her cheek. “Can you not?” She sat on the cracked vinyl barstool and directed her attention to the bartender. She ordered two more shots and leaned over them.

Today was her dad’s birthday. Well, her stepdad. Craig had been more than all right. He found her mom because he was a paraplegic wanting to get his life back. Camilla was twelve. Craig had done her the courtesy of not talking to her like an adult, but not talking to her like a child either. He was even uncomfortable that Terry had Camilla sit in bars all night, waiting for anyone willing to fork over \$100. Craig would insist on meeting Terry other places. Apparently old Terry’d been able to work it out because he became a regular. Fell in love with her mother

like they did sometimes. When he'd asked Terry to marry him, she'd said yes. Craig had disability and a settlement from the wreck that had taken his legs. He didn't want to change Terry too much, liked her kid. Best offer she was going to get, as she'd put it when she told Camilla.

Craig's decentness turned into fatherly affection, which didn't bother Terry until Camilla hit puberty. "Must be nice," Terry would spit at her when Craig wasn't around. "At your age I was pregnant. Must be nice to have it so *easy*. Nice not to have to deal with real problems like the rest of us." It was worse when Craig would side with Camilla during Terry-tantrums.

Camilla stuck it out as long as she could. Craig gave her the truck for her sixteenth birthday, and she started waitressing at the greasy spoon in the next town over. Gave up fighting with Terry at seventeen and moved into her truck. Saved up for a while and then found an apartment where the landlord didn't care as long as the rent was paid. Nothing fancy, but it was clean, and she had a bed and enough money left over to get a cell phone. She knew Craig was probably worried, but not worried enough to track her down. So Terry won again.

Tommy was talking, and he was too drunk to stop. "So, we're headed out to Cali." Not that the potbelly had asked. "My dad has a sweet house that he uses for work and vacation and whatever. We're gonna crash there, then I'm gonna write my screenplay. Dad said he'd buy me a car if I ever make it out there."

That was the other thing that she and Tommy had. Camilla was done with backwoods Tennessee, done with relying on people, and she had plans. Los Angeles was one of those places

where you could break in, be pretty for a living. Look at Kim Kardashian, that chic had been the pretty assistant of a professional rich girl who had *paid* to get pretty. Now Kim was some kind of star with a rapper husband. Proof: all you needed in L.A. was an in, and Tommy was going to be hers. Hell, Terry was nothing if not an acting teacher.

Tommy finished his beer. He reached for Camilla's spare, and she slapped his hand. He flapped his hand at the bartender for another. "It's gonna be big. Sort of like a superhero movie, but serious, you know? Like with actual good writing. I swear, this is the problem with Hollywood these days. They just play the same stuff over and over. It's like, every time I'm in a movie, I can like, predict what's going to happen you know?"

The potbelly said, voice gravelly, "So how are you gonna get 'em to read your stuff?"

Tommy nodded liked a goddamn bobblehead. "Good question, good question. Well, I got connections, you know." He paused for dramatic effect, like he always paused for dramatic effect. "You know, my dad, he knows people."

The potbelly turned his head towards Tommy, interest peaked. They always fell for that damn line. "Is he in the mob?"

Camilla choked on her beer and then started coughing.

Tommy ignored her. "Nah. My dad's famous, you know. He was a singer, a country singer. 'Woman Behind This Man'?" Tommy waited for recognition and didn't get any. Usually that name was like a Golden Ticket. At least, that's how it had worked every time so far. They'd ask him about if his mom had actually 'stood behind that man' and how long that had lasted 'with Hollywood and all.' Which was their way of saying: did your mom know about that pretty little blonde before the tabloids did?

"Or 'Indian Summer in Mississippi'? 'Honky Tonk All Week'?"

“I’m really more of a metal guy,” he said.

“No? ‘Burnout’?”

“Oh yeah,” the guy said, turning back to his beer. “I think I heard that one.”

“Yeah, well,” Tommy said, his voice regaining confidence. “Yeah, he was really big in the early 90s. Huge. He still tours actually.”

The guy just grunted. “Cool,” he said to his beer, turning away.

Tommy sat for a second before turning to Camilla. “So,” he said, too loud. “Are we staying here tonight, then?”

“What’re my other options?” Camilla said. The whiskey had hit her brain just right. She was bubbly, but cautious still, which was good, with Tommy. Sometimes his temper led to bar fights and that was just plain obnoxious.

“You driving,” he said.

“Staying then,” Camilla said.

An hour or two later, Camilla made up a thing about a stomachache so that Tommy would leave the bar. It wasn’t even that late, but he was drunk enough that he’d started referring to the bartender as “Tilly old girl” in an affected English accent. He grumbled when paying the tab, but he did it anyway. “You could probably pay for something, you know,” he told Camilla. When he went to the bathroom, she crossed out the tip and doubled it. Trustfund Tommy wouldn’t notice anyway.

Tommy puked in the parking lot. Camilla walked over to Tommy, took his card out of his pocket, and walked to the reception desk. Apparently Terry had prepared her for something in life. And that life was roadside bars, and no passenger window, and Tommy the asshole, and his

one damn joke. That's what she was prepared for. Frayed knot. *Thanks a lot, Terry*, Camilla thought.

The lady behind the desk was kind enough to give her a ground floor room when Camilla explained what was going on. Camilla walked over to the room, propped the door, and went back for Tommy.

He was sitting on the ground next to the truck, his head leaned back and eyes closed. He had managed to avoid sitting in his own vomit, thank god.

"Come on," Camilla said. She threw his deadweight arm over her shoulder. "Up. I can't do this alone."

"You're not my mom," Tommy said. He could have been joking or maybe apologizing.

"Get up, or you'll wake up dead."

"Can't wake up dead."

"Up, smartass."

Camilla leaned Tommy onto the truck. "Hold that," she said, hooking his arm over the truck bed. She reached in the passenger side window and grabbed her backpack. The rest of her and Tommy's stuff was locked in the tailgate toolbox, the most useful gift Craig had ever given her, besides her truck.

"Cami, why you." Tommy took a clumsy step around the vomit towards the hotel room. He seemed to be looking at the side of her head, because he was breathing directly into her ear.

"You are the nicest when I'm drunk."

"Thanks."

"Not. I mean, no. I mean, why?"

Camilla thought of the nights when she and Terry had to hoist whatever drunk had said yes and then Terry rustling around in their pockets beforehand. “Where is it – where is it?” Terry had sounded desperate then, something that Camilla had hung onto later, when she herself was desperate, trying to understand whether or not Terry gave a shit about her. At least her mother had tried for her.

Camilla didn’t forget the similar nights when she had had to haul in drunk Terry, and when she had to plead and scold Terry into walking because she couldn’t carry Terry’s weight, and the cabinets were empty and the lights were off. Camilla couldn’t do it all, she had learned early, but if she didn’t do everything, then certainly no one else would.

“Lots of practice.” Camilla dropped him onto the bed and folded the comforter over him. “Don’t piss yourself.”

Camilla dropped her backpack onto the other bed and sat down. Tommy mumbled some half-words into the mattress, then turned his head.

“Knew you weren’t like her,” Tommy said.

“What? Who?” Camilla was too tired and too drunk to play guessing games with passed out Tommy.

“Like you know,” Tommy gestured ineffectually with one hand, bouncing it on the bed. “Like they all said, your mom and stuff.”

“Tommy,” Camilla said, quietly. This was a new line of bullshit from him. “You really fucking *don’t* want to go down this road with me.” She wasn’t Terry and she would never be Terry. Terry had no idea about boundaries, no exit plan. Camilla wouldn’t be in this shithole relationship doing the same song and dance with Tommy forever, and once she was free of him, she was never, ever going back.

“Mom said she wasn’t worth... All they all said you were probably—” Tommy yawned and passed out midsentence.

Camilla remembered the cold way his mother had treated her, had just assumed she’d been that cold since the media shit. *Way to keep that one in your back pocket asshole*, she thought. She found herself standing over Tommy’s bed, leaning on the headboard. She considered hitting Tommy on the head with something heavy, just to see if he’d remember in the morning. Waited a second to make sure that she wasn’t going to. “Fuck it,” Camilla mumbled. She grabbed the room key and a jacket and left, not sure where she was going or if she was coming back.

This was one of those towns that had been dry too long. The grass is always the first to turn brown, but even the trees looked like they would light if you accidentally threw your cigarette butt too close. Camilla found an open field behind an abandoned shopping mall where she couldn’t see cars or people or anything to do with moving. She stomped around the grass, trying to make every blade lie flat. It wasn’t like she didn’t know they all knew, and it wasn’t like she didn’t know the gossip. Part of the reason she left. It was just that Tommy, of all people, should get it. She didn’t expect much of him, but that was one of the things.

In the dark, the whole place turned to high relief, catching the light or hiding it. Making new shapes that just didn’t exist in the daytime. A place like this, Camilla could see stars from horizon to horizon. There was barely any moon and it was still bright enough to see. Camilla chose a star and followed it for a while. The quiet helped her brain slow down, and eventually

her feet slowed too. She sat on the ground with her back against a scrubby little tree, listening to the interstate in the distance.

It was a while before her phone rang. Since it was too late for anyone else to call her, she assumed it was Tommy and picked up.

“Hey, baby.” It wasn’t Tommy.

Camilla’s stomach dropped out. “Terry?” For a flash of a second, Camilla was the kid again, the one who couldn’t keep her mother at bay. Worried about what crazy shit Terry was going to pull and how she was going to survive it.

“Or mom, either way.” Terry giggled lightly, like they’d talked at some point in two years.

“What do you want?”

“Oh, baby, I just have the best news! I just couldn’t wait to tell you. You’re just the first person I wanted to tell, after Craig.”

Camilla waited. One of the stars was winking now. She focused on it, and on keeping her breaths in regular time. It was never good to show any weakness to Terry.

“You’re not even going to ask? Come on, hon. For me.”

“What, Terry. What is your news?”

“Craig and I are having a baby!” Terry squealed. That woman was almost forty and still squealing. “Isn’t it just the best birthday present for Craig ever?” Camilla couldn’t tell whether to believe her or not. Terry was laying it on pretty thick.

“That’s just great, Terry. And how do you really feel?”

Terry's voice lost the false glimmer. "Well, of course, I'm not excited about ruining my body again. And I certainly wasn't sure that I wanted to go through another eighteen years of raising a – well – another you. But Craig wants this. Said it was a deal-breaker."

"Don't worry Terry. You only had seventeen years of me." Camilla let that hang there for a minute, swallowed against her head reeling. A sibling. She had wanted one when she was little, just one person who would see Terry the way that Camilla saw Terry. "Should you be drinking?"

"Oh, it's early still baby. And they say, really, that you can drink in moderation. A few glasses of wine won't hurt."

"Congrats, Terry." Camilla sounded like she had eaten rotten fruit. "Tell Craig I said congrats." It was just like Terry. Camilla would get a sibling, but not a sibling that she could know, and Terry would get a whole new family. Craig would get a whole new family, and Camilla would be a memory, the starter child. Defective. Better luck next time.

"Thanks, honey. So when are you coming over? Do you want to throw the shower? I'm due in September, and it seems so far away, but it's only seven months really!"

Camilla held the phone away from her face and glared at it. Same old Terry. And, this was one of those moments, Camilla knew, that Terry would tell everyone for years to come. Or, she would tell people half of it. Terry didn't tell people about Camilla as a child, waiting in the bars, about the long periods of silence and the times where there were only lima beans and peanut butter in the cabinets, and she didn't tell people about Camilla as a teenager, Terry pouring bleach over her daughter's entire wardrobe, about cutting off half of Camilla's hair in her sleep so that the ends were jagged and the only thing for it was a pixie cut.

Terry did tell people about the straight As despite Camilla's "issues with teachers," and the surprise shopping spree because Camilla had "just gained a little bit, you know," and taking Camilla to that fancy salon in the next town over, where Terry summoned some real crocodile tears while the hairdresser tried to fix the ragged mess on Camilla's head. Terry told people enough parts of the truth that meant Camilla was spoiled, and Terry, though clearly not a saint, was doing her best. Terry had turned it around, and Camilla wasn't letting her mother's mistakes be in the past.

"Oh, Terry!" Camilla affected her mother's high-pitched, girlish voice, but not enough that Terry would know that she was being made fun of. "Terry, I just *so* forgot to tell you. I'm moving. I'm halfway there now."

"Moving where?" There it was. There was that edge that Camilla had been waiting for. The one that showed up when Terry wasn't getting what she wanted.

"L.A."

Terry laughed longer than was necessary. "Oh, you're serious. Well, *of course*, you of all people will make it, hon. You're just the best at all that, schmoozing and whatnot. And you're so pretty. I'm sure you'll make it, out of all those girls that go out there."

"Well, bless your heart, Terry. Thanks so much." Camilla waited. Terry would crack sooner.

"Look, Camilla." Her mother's voice had lost any girlish anything, any pretense of excitement. "So the real reason I'm calling is that Craig just keeps bugging me and bugging me to apologize to you, especially because I'm pregnant. He thinks it wasn't very nice of me to get mad about the truck, to let you move out, and all that stuff. He wants us to start over, wants to

make sure all that is behind me. So since you are clearly not going to come be a part of this family, can you just call him and tell him I called you?”

So maybe Terry had been right all those years, to be wary of the way that Craig responded to having a kid. Something had clearly changed in the Terry/Craig power dynamic. Maybe being a father gave him the strength to see through Terry’s bullshit. Camilla hoped so, at least for the sibling she’d probably never meet.

“Well, I just don’t know about that Terry. Did you tell him everything else?”

“Everywhat else?”

“Sure, Terry. Sure.”

“Look, can you just call him? Tell him it’s fine.”

“I don’t know, Terry. See, I just didn’t hear an apology in there.”

Terry didn’t answer for a while. “Well. Sorry.”

“That didn’t sound very sincere, Terry.”

“That’s all I got, hon. You know what I always say. The past is the past. We have to let it go.”

“Maybe I will call him, tell him all the shit you put me through.”

“You wouldn’t. You wouldn’t do that to me –” Terry choked to a stop. “You wouldn’t do that to Craig, to the baby.”

Camilla contemplated her position here. Despite years of taking care of drunk Terry, years of making her own breakfast and washing her own clothes, years of taking Terry’s guilty presents and *knowing* what that meant about keeping secrets, Terry had never really been this vulnerable. Or at least, she had never tipped her hand and Camilla hadn’t known how to fight

back. Camilla hadn't been ready, hadn't had anything but Terry, hadn't had a way out. Now, Terry had something to lose, and she knew it too.

"Okay, here's the deal Terry. Things have been tough. Real tough. And the way I see it, that's your fault."

Terry started to speak.

"I'm not done." Camilla sucked in a huge breath and blew it out. "I think I'm owed damages. Emotional whatever. Distress. So here's what you're going to do. You're going to get off the phone and wire me five grand." Camilla had saved, but L.A. was an expensive town. Maybe this way she could ditch Tommy, just leave him in that hotel room to figure out his own shit and she'd find some other connections when she got there. Be a bartender or something in the meantime.

Terry spluttered. "You think I just have five grand sitting around, collecting dust?"

"Yes."

Silence. "Fine. But it's too late. There isn't any place open."

"Lucky you. There's a Wal-Mart two towns back from me and I know they have those fancy online transfers these days. You go ahead and get on your computer, and you just send the money. I'll wait at the Wal-Mart 'till they open. When I get it, I'll call Craig and tell him all of this is behind us." Camilla hung up on her and missed, for once, the beautiful snap shut of a flip phone that would have lent to the finality of that move.

Camilla hadn't felt this exhilarated since they had crossed out of Tennessee's border. Five grand. And a big ol' fuck you Terry.

She bounced back to the hotel room. Tommy wasn't awake. Camilla stared at the side of his head, his open mouth, the line of drool that connected his cheek to the pillow. He'd managed

to piss the bed. Fucking idiot. That's what Tommy was, a fucking dumbass with a rich daddy and a nice enough mom, one who cared who he dated and didn't want bad shit to happen to him, who he never talked about because he was too proud of his rich famous cheater dad. Fuck Tommy and fuck Terry. Camilla didn't need their shit anymore. She grabbed the keys to the truck and her backpack, then went to Wal-Mart to wait for it to open.

Terry had actually followed through, for once. The money was there when the store opened, and Camilla's account exceeded eight grand for the first time in her life. Not that Tommy knew shit about her money. None of his business. She wasn't going to get rich by spending her own money, and now that money would come in handy. Camilla smiled at the image of Tommy waking up in the hotel room in a pool of his own piss and then not being able to leave wherever-the-fuck in Texas they were without calling his mom for advice. She picked up a burner phone with a data plan for when Tommy realized what she'd done and cut off her phone.

She was so happy that she hugged the cashier, who proceeded to call security. Camilla was asked firmly to leave. She sat on the tailgate of the truck, swinging her feet like a kid and drinking a Coke. Fuck Terry. Maybe she wouldn't even call Craig. Her phone rang.

This time she checked the caller i.d. "Hi, Tommy."

"Where are you?"

"I drove to the Wal-Mart."

"Oh." He waited. She gave no explanation. "Okay, well, I was just sort of, worried."

“Hm,” said Camilla. She was thinking about L.A., figuring out the best plan to make an in. Bartender might be a good gig money-wise, but did she need to be out in the clubs at night to meet the right people?

“Are you okay?”

“I’m great!”

“Okay,” Tommy said. He sounded unsure. “So, uh. Do you want to get breakfast or something before we hit the road? I sort of, had to wash my pants so they’re going to be drying for a minute.”

The thought of Tommy’s pants slung over the towel bar, probably washed with hotel shampoo and dripping all over the floor, infuriated her. Camilla laughed. “Look, I have to go.” She hung up and went around to the driver’s side. She was ready to go, just go.

It was a half hour back to the Ramada. Camilla tapped the steering wheel, sang loudly with the radio. There were only country stations out here, only ever fucking country her whole life.

The song ended and the deejay did that yelling country twang thing that was supposed to make you like them. Camilla was about to change the station when she tuned into what the guy was saying.

“Tommy Lee Riggins, folks! Calling into our studio, right now, from his ranch in Kentucky. Big news this morning, Tommy Lee. *The Voice* announced that you’ll be one of their judges in the upcoming season. And congratulations to ya, sir!”

“Well, thanks, thanks,” Tommy Lee’s voice sounded like it was in a tunnel. The radio fuzzed and then cleared. “It’s a huge honor, and stepping into big shoes. Blake Shelton did a great job, and I uh, just hope to do so well. The wife and kids were excited, you know, because they watch every week.”

Camilla hadn’t realized that Tommy had siblings. Or, half siblings, because this was wife number two. The blonde, shiny country singer.

Tommy Lee was saying, “My oldest, you know, he’s just starting third grade. Learning to sing himself. He’s getting pretty good, too. We might have another Riggins star.” He chuckled.

Camilla flipped the radio station. Everything else was only static, so she shut the damn thing off. She did not need to feel bad for trustfund Tommy with a deadbeat dad. Did not need to feel sympathy that he was such an afterthought that his dad didn’t even remember to include him.

The Ramada was one more exit. Tommy called her phone. Camilla let it ring through to voicemail.

She didn’t owe him anything. They had a deal: he would pay and she would come with and put up with his shit and whatever. She held up her end. Camilla watched the rumble strips for a minute, keeping the road in her peripheral vision. Fucking Tommy. She didn’t owe him anything. She didn’t owe anybody anything.

She exited the freeway sharply and turned right to the Ramada, then picked up her phone and called Tommy. “I’ll be there in five minutes,” Camilla said. “No breakfast. And you’re driving. I need to sleep.”

Twenty miles down the road and Tommy was still asking her questions about her night, her morning. Camilla was trying to fall asleep and he kept *talking*. Complaining that his pants weren't going to dry all day stashed in a plastic bag in the bed of the truck, what if they blew out of the bed and onto the freeway? Wanting to know what they'd do with the truck when they got to L.A., did they really need two cars, both of them? Wanting to talk about his screenplay, his dad, was she excited to meet him after all this time, she was the only girl he'd ever introduced to his dad. "Cami are you listening?" he asked, probably for the second time. She was too numb after that night, too surprised that she was here and Tommy was too. She had had it, her out, however temporary, and she'd given it up for dumbass Tommy. Surprised that, after all, she was just as dumb as Terry, even if she was a better person.

Tommy gave up and turned on the radio, and of course, this deejay was talking about the Voice announcement of Tommy Lee Riggins as the new judge. Tommy turned to her, eyes shining. "I should call him, want to switch drivers for a minute?"

Camilla couldn't help it, she laughed. She could feel that the laugh was wrong, the wrong pitch, the wrong length of time. Felt the lump at the back of her throat for dumbass Tommy and for herself too. She took her feet off the dash. She pulled her hair loose of its ponytail, shoved her whole damn head out the window.

Welcome

The preacher bowed his head over the naked ground, which was dark and flat. He spake.

“Dearly Befriended,

We have gathered here today to discuss our happiness or lack thereof with the current order of life, these things being equal: we are born, we live, we die, in some approximation thereof and with some order, so says the Word. Let’s all join hands and fondle ourselves, contemplating the existence of existence. Let’s all remember that here on this day in sometime before we were alive or something to that effect, lots of people died and then somehow, we few, we miracle number of 1.6 billion people took their places to use all the resources and breathe all the air and have all the babies and argue over petty imaginary lay lines, by which we used to be divided, calling ourselves names and making distinctions when frankly-my-dears we are all one in the search for the Light. And we know better now. To procreation. To frisson. To the mission.” He paused for breath. “Amen. Awomen. Apeople.”

The Community collectively responded: “Apeople.”

The preacher stepped down from the raised earth. They pulled up all the stones and thrown them in the ritual pebbling and stoning, then stacked them to one side. They broke fast with bread and cheese, because the vegetarians couldn’t abide flesh and so they all became vegetarians. Tomorrow they would plant grass, they agreed, now that they had eradicated the obstacles for the plow.

One child, to one side of the main body, took one seed and pushed it furtively into the ground. With a glance over each shoulder, the child spilled a precious mouthful of water into the dirt, then followed the adults.

The Place was not desert. There moisture in the soil, and stones. There was a stubby but lush bush that liked to grow at regular intervals, much like a mile marker. There weren’t dust storms. Lazy breezes rarely turned into winds. Droopy clouds didn’t have the energy to expel lightning, or the voice to boom thunder. All in all, the land was bored.

It was said that every so often, if the people were good and the land was good, a certain flower pushed its way to the surface when darkness fell. It sprouted, bloomed, and died by morning.

The flower was called by various names. Practical, descriptive names like “Night flower” and “Star’s light.” Abstract, still accurate names like “Daemon” and “Zen.” Nonsensical, sentimental names like “Jesus” and “Lucifer.” The Communities called this the search for the Light. The Wanderers called this the Quest.

The flower had exactly nine petals and its center was perfectly round. It could be any color, any height, but it glowed. The light was so bright that everyone throughout the scattered corners of the Place *should* see it. Most felt it. A few saw it. Some couldn't do either.

It was said that the good were chosen to be at the site of the bloom, or that the flower could seek out the good. Translations varied, and so it was unclear whether the flower should move or the people should. Added to this: it was difficult to judge distance in the Place, especially because no one knew how big the Place was in total. It was an ever-expanding horizon, and only the bushes told you how far you had gone. At night, you couldn't see the bushes but for a gloomy oblong shadow, slightly less dark than the sky, somewhere more than an arm's span away but closer than the horizon.

It is in this context that we meet our young heroes. They are walking. They have no idea that, if, or why they are heroes. One of them might be a woman. The man, He knows what He is; the maybe-woman, S?he does not see how it is relevant. They all came from the same bones anyway, and besides, He always blamed this other Her. S?he refused to inherit His baggage, especially since S?he did have to carry her own. S?he saw no reason to carry Hers as well.

"Can we just stop for a second, one second?" He is whining, but S?he understands. It has been so long since they had anything to walk towards. Mostly they've just been walking away.

Still, S?he is snappish. "Where?"

"There is a tree."

"Where?"

“There.” He points into the distance, where just centered beneath the sun, is a dot.

“That’s not a tree.” S?he has been fooled before. S?he knows better now.

“How do you know?”

“It’s moving.”

And certainly, with the sun as their guide, they could see that the tiny dot slipped to the left. And not in that hazy mirage sort of way. It stretched and compressed, as if it may have many orchestrated pieces.

“Well, let’s head for that anyway. It’s been a long time since – ”

S?he nodded, cutting him off.

He hitched his backpack forward, thumbs in the straps.

S?he shifted her own backpack to the front of her body. “Here,” S?he said. S?he handed him a hunk of quail and a few locusts.

Anyone could see: they were hungry, and they were tired, existentially, that is. They walked on. The addition of a short-term destination gave them purpose, for a time at least.

Everyone wanted to be near to the flower when and while it fleetingly bloomed. It was supposed to be ecstatic, divine, erotic. It was supposed to be the moment that defined a life, and then the story that you tell your grandchildren.

Theories abounded, but there were rarely people who cared to argue, even to blithely discuss differences. Differences were seen as a sign that you were in the wrong Place, and since there was so much Place, you may as well find some other Place. The people in the same Place

became Communities, and the Communities became one farflung congregationbody, one spreading hivemind. Differences sickened their organism, reduced their ability to function as one unquestioning apparatus.

And so, not part of the Communities, some individuals chose to be Wanderers, in groups or alone. They drifted through the Place, hoping to be *there* when it happened. Some called the Wanderers crazy, because didn't you have just as much opportunity to see the flower if you stayed right where you were all your life? And out in the Place walking anywhere, differences were less apparent than similarities.

No one knew where it would happen. No one knew when. The Wanders wandered and the Communities prayed, and they all hoped.

The Community was called together early. That could only mean one thing.

The preacher stood in their midst, forgoing his traditional raised earth, arms outstretched:

“Dearly Befriended,

We have learned once again that we missed it again. The farflung reaches of ourselves, that is to say, our extended-bodycongregation, have confirmed that the glow came over the land, and we were not there. We did not See. That is to say, our planning and praying and practices did not amount to anything because we have not been supportive enough limb to our bodycongregation, and thusly we must redo, reconsider, respawn by rejoining the earth and relieving the resources for the next best body in this particular Place which will be here in t minus t seconds multiplied by the urgency of life. We no longer have this urgency. We are not

able to See and so we are not able to be. To you dearly befriended, and to me, let us drink fast our salvation. To existence. To hindrance. To deliverance.” He drank deeply from a goblet he had pulled from the sacred box marked “Break Glass In Case of Emergency.” He spoke once more, haltingly, his syllables drifting into airy expulsions. “Amen. Awomen. Apeople.”

The Community responded: “Apeople.”

The goblet was passed and one by one they fell, smiling at the warmth that grew from their hearts outward. Struggle in the Place was only ever struggle, and the only worth of anything was to See the glow of the spirit-heart-flower, the manifestation of the unity of the ever-divided bodycongregation come together. There was no worth: there was no reason to continue the struggle.

There would be an after, they were sure. Each saw something, at the end of all things, which is to say, at the end of their things, and they tried to curl one lip, and failing that, twitch one finger, just so the others would know. But for once, they were alone. Right before the end, the child spared one thought, a flash of regret for the tiny seed that would have no more water. Anyway, silence won.

He and S?he slept once, after they saw the destination and before they reached the destination. The flower bloomed and died. Both dreamed, a rare occurrence, though they had forgotten by the time they awoke. They had dreamed in the glow before, but had never Seen it.

The next morning, He and S?he walk into the bare plain. The rocks are piled, and the people are stretched in all directions, haphazard, akimbo, chaotic. A goblet at the end of their sad snakeline. Skin shed and forgotten.

“What happened here?” He asks.

“Don’t be a fool,” S?he replies. “Anyway, it’s over.” S?he scuffs a shoe in the bare earth next to the child. The earth is ever so slightly darker than the rest of the earth. To her surprise, S?he turns up a seed. Kneeling, S?he cups it in her hands, full of soil and seed and just a touch of water. “Hey, come here.”

They look at the seed together. It looks strange, but then, they usually don’t find any seeds in the Place. Their eyes meet and S?he shrugs. He turns around. S?he puts the seed into the outside pocket of his backpack.

They walk on, and when the air is less heavy and their steps more so, He plants the seed. S?he spills a swallow of their scarce water over the earth. They sleep.

The flower blooms and dies. They dream in the glow, and in the morning, they smile at each other, refreshed for the first time in a long, long while. They take up their packs and continue to Wander.

Found Things

“Barkeep!” Sully called, flicking two fingers back and forth in the air with an urgency bespeaking a mortal wound.

“Keep your hat on, Sully!” yelled Bruce the Shark. Bruce had got his name on account of the unnatural amount of teeth you could see when he smiled. He was very sensitive about the mention of a certain children’s movie that had come out with a character resembling his name. *What a boon*, Sully had thought at the time. *A way to shake the unshakeable Bruce*. Sully had brought it up once, just to see, and had been summarily cut off and kicked out, the one and only time that’d happened, and also the one and only time he hadn’t had to pay his bar tab. *A break even day*, Sully had thought. Better still, now that he had definitive proof about Bruce’s limits, Sully could successfully avoid them.

Sully whimpered and stopped trying to flag Bruce down. Sully looked to his left. Empty barstool. He looked to his right. A man in a business suit. The rest of the bar was empty, except

Old Madge in the corner with her pile of found things in shopping bag. She was sorting the things into piles, though Sully could never rumble her system for doing so. Madge didn't speak, and she hissed whenever someone tried to sit in the barstool next to her. On the other hand, she and Bruce communicated in a series of gestures so perfectly simple that it bespoke a history Sully hadn't gotten Bruce to give up the dirt on yet. *A project for another time*, Sully thought, and returned his attention to the suit.

Now, these suits stumbled into O'Harahan's relatively often on account of the Convention Center being only about two blocks away, and O'Harahan's being between the Convention Center and the Holiday Inn Express. These guys weren't the big wigs – those ones stayed on the other side of the C.C. at the Marriott. They were usually the salesmen type, or the “on-trey-pen-oo-ers,” or the mid-size company execs who had an ownership share in their companies and were too cheap to stay somewhere without a continental breakfast. Sully loved these men. They either hadn't drank for a long time because of wives, money, kids (etcetera etcetera) or they drank far more than normal people, but in an extremely closeted, shame-filled way. This one seemed to be of the latter variety based on the fact that he was staring hard at Bruce's back. He was a young one, too, Sully saw now that he was paying attention. The suit was wearing a t-shirt under his blazer that read, “Work to live, not live to work (and hope your liver keeps working too!)” It was the cleanest t-shirt Sully had ever seen, especially considering that he usually saw similar shirts on the kids who paid him to get them a six pack from the corner store. Sully thought it was an odd choice for business attire, but then, Sully hadn't had a job since he left the Army. Not one that stuck anyway. Sully shook himself free from that line of thought. The important thing was that the suit was ripe for bar friends and bar friends bought other bar friends drinks.

“Hey,” said Sully. “How’re you?” He grinned at the suit, showing one silver false tooth on the right-middle-top side of his mouth, the one that he had gotten after that time he tripped over a stripey-cat on 5th and C, dive-bombed the sidewalk, and knocked out the real one. Sully always smiled big enough they could see it. It was part of his hustle, and everyone should always have a hustle. And a side hustle. Just in case.

“Oh.” The suit startled and looked away from Bruce. “Hey.” He took the bar napkin from under his Michelob Ultra, mopping up the condensation from his drink.

“In town for a convention?” Sully asked. As naturally as possible, he scooted his stool closer. The stool made a scraping noise that caused Madge to cover her ears with two purple teddy bears that she’d been cleaning up for her sale day tomorrow. She didn’t look in their direction, but Sully conscience twinged. He had disrupted Madge. That disrupted the harmony of the bar, and Sully believed in the harmony of the bar the way most people believed in a higher power.

Of course, this had drawn Bruce’s attention, because Bruce was the bar’s protector and enforcer. Bruce shouted, “Sully, you asshole, apologize to Madge!”

“Sorry Madge!” Sully said, loud enough for Madge to hear over the teddy bears.

Madge nodded and resumed her work.

The suit watched the exchanged, his head swiveling back and forth like he was watching a tennis match, but he didn’t move away from Sully. He had leaned a bit, when Sully had shouted very close to his ear, but he hadn’t moved. Sully took this as a positive sign.

“Convention?” Sully prompted.

“Sure,” the suit said. “Convention. Well, maybe meeting would be more accurate.”

Approaching, Bruce coughed, hacked really. He nodded to Sully that he was ready. “Shot of whiskey and a beer?”

Sully adopted a pensive expression that made his forehead cramp. He rubbed one hand on his head and the other over his gullet. “I want to Bruce, really I do, but my friend here looks so unhappy and dry that I couldn’t possibly drink in front of him.”

“No, please,” the suit said. “I don’t mind, I –“

“I couldn’t.” Sully flung his arm over the suit’s chest. “I just couldn’t interrupt the single-beer solitude of this poor unfortunate soul.” He then removed his hand, put it firmly on the bar, and looked at the suit expectantly.

“Fine.” The suit downed the rest of his Michelob Ultra and rolled up his sleeves. “*Two* shots of whiskey and two –?” He looked towards Sully.

“Guinness, don’t mind if I do,” said Sully. He’d take a break from Miller High Life if the suit was paying.

“And a shot for you, if you want it,” the suit called down the bar.

Sully congratulated himself. Drinking on someone else’s tab was the Platonic ideal of bar-going, from what he understood of philosophy. Also, he was gratified to have some cosmic reinforcement of bar harmony with this gift of drinks from the universe. Bruce shook his head (as he always shook his head at Sully, dismayed and a little impressed) and poured the shots. “Cheers, gentlemen,” he rasped. “To living only as long as we want, and dying in time for the party in Hell.”

“Or Heaven,” said Sully sanctimoniously. “Whichever you prefer.”

Time passed differently in O’Harahan’s, which was one of the many reasons that Sully liked it. When he was there, he could count time in drinks instead of minutes. He could keep track of drinks either in the responsible way, by tallying on his arm like his one-time A.A. sponsor had taught him, or in the normal way, by standing every so often to go to the bathroom and noting how long it took the room to settle. Sully put himself at about ten o’clock, assuming he had started drinking here at six and he was mostly sober when he came in. Anyway, the sun was down. Sully stood and the room settled easily into place. *That sponsor*, he thought, smiling, *couldn’t do drinking right and couldn’t do not drinking right*.

But O’Harahan’s was special, too. Madge cleaned and sorted, and Bruce enforced and coughed, and Sully hustled. That kept the bar perfect, as long as they all respected the balance. And if the bar was perfect, then Sully could drink the right amount without the bar spinning and without getting picked up by the cops and without having too many bad dreams. No sponsor could factor in those odds.

“So, come on now – ” Sully looked at the suit. “Jamie? No. George? No. Wilbur?”

“Charles,” the suit said. He scuffed at his forehead with the bar napkin.

“Charles, Charlie, Chuck, Chaz!” said Sully. “What is it that you do, in your line of work?” Sully leaned on an elbow on the bar. His elbow slid closer to Bruce behind the bar.

“Well.” Charles paused and glanced over his left shoulder towards the door. “I work in the death industry.” He belched mightily, as if this were a totally normal statement and it was completely acceptable to belch mightily after said statement.

Bruce and Sully were quiet. They exchanged a look across the bar: “it’s-finally-happened-there’s-a-paid-killer-at-the-bar.” They had discussed this scenario before. Both had

agreed that it would be stupid to call the cops on such a person, but they hadn't planned further than that.

"What." Bruce cleared his throat and then licked his lips. "What does that entail, exactly?" He hacked into his elbow. When he stopped coughing, there was a globule of slightly pink phlegm in the crease. "Eugh," he said, wiped it away with his bar towel, and threw the towel back over his shoulder.

Charles grinned. "Not so much, really. Lots of waiting."

They all laughed: Charles with the ease of a joke often made, Sully and Bruce with an unnatural syncopation and high-pitched overtone usually heard when the soon-to-be tortured is approached with a hot poker.

"Heh," said Charles. "No really. It's not so bad. People gotta die. I mean, that shit's not easy. I'm more of a specialty companion than anything else." The suit's face had grown redder, though whether from booze or from embarrassment was unclear. "You know, like a personal assistant for the dead and dying. I thought of making cards once, but the idea of the words 'Charles Dontus, Death Assistant' on a three-by-two inch piece of cardstock just made me laugh." Charles took a slug of beer, holding the liquid in his mouth and swallowing it bits at a time.

Sully's face was always red, especially his nose, with split veins running in the crevices around his nostrils, and also the very tip where it was the most bulbous. Sully watched as Charles' cheeks deflated and returned to normal. He envied the sight of going red and then returning to normal. He envied the suit's ability to blend. "I guess when you put it that way, it's a necessary service. Noble even!" He looked pointedly at his beer, which was dangerously near

empty. Then he looked pointedly at Charles. “Still,” he sipped at it carefully, so that there was still a bit left. “That must make you really in need of a release. You know, really, really thirsty.”

“Oh fine,” Charlie said. “Another round, Bruce.”

Sully smiled to himself and shook his head. This guy must be a sucker, because usually after a few rounds they have to get back to the convention or the hotel to call their “wives” or whatever. On the other hand, this guy clearly worked with pricks, coming here alone and all. Usually they came in groups and you had to figure out which was the right mark and when exactly was the right time to lay siege. Sully reflected that his powers of persuasion must have been increasing in both strength and subtlety. He took a sip of the fresh, cold beer that Bruce slid down the bar to him.

Some shots later, about two a.m. by Sully’s internal clock, Bruce had called last call for the other customers. It was just old Madge and the guy who had moved in upstairs a month ago and refused to tell them his real name. Madge signed to Bruce and then slid a clamshell zippered pouch over to him. He pulled out enough for the tab and a tip, then returned it to her. The upstairs guy walked out the front door and back in the side door to his stairs. Bruce slid around the bar to drink in earnest, standing but leaning on his elbow. In the interest of efficiency, Bruce had closed out Charles’ tab with the rest of the open bottle of whiskey and brought it around the bar.

Bruce sloshed another few fingers into Charles’ now-empty pint glass. His hand trembled, and a little bit fell on the bar.

“Oh, no!” Sully cried, the image of high tragedy. Drinks could not be spilled. It was sacrilege. He sucked at the pool of whiskey he had spilled over onto the bar and came up grinning. “Better!”

Charles looked vaguely horrified, even while laughing. Bruce snorted whiskey out of his nose, and clutched at his face to stop the flow. Sully laughed. It took them all a good five minutes to settle.

“No really,” said Bruce. “How did this happen? I mean, what poor sod was like ‘Man, know what I need? Someone to sit around anticipating my death, reminding me of it daily, and doing things that I can’t?’”

“Well. My first customer was my father. He was a real asshole. I didn’t charge him enough, that’s for sure.” Charlie stared at his pint glass, shook his head. “Then, I just realized – there’s a whole huge generation that’s gonna die and stuff. And what did they do all their lives? They worked. They worked and they were dutiful, and now they have shit they want to do, write their novel or whatever. So I started advertising on craigslist. I’m not the weirdest thing on there, let me tell you.”

“Damn,” said Sully. He wasn’t entirely sure he liked the direction of this conversation. Charles was ruining his buzz, but also providing him with one. Irony was the worst feeling of all, Sully decided.

“Yeah. I mean. My father was a secret poet, ya know? Wrote all through college. Got out, joined the big dogs doing supply chain engineering and never looked back. Now that man, that man could drink some whiskey. Could deal a backhand blow to fell a bear, too.” Charles grinned in a way that didn’t touch his eyes, just a flash across his face before a darkness took over, then sipped his beer.

For a moment, they all stared at the glasses, in their various stages of empty. Sully didn’t like talking about fathers. He avoided it like he avoided talking about the war and like he avoided talking about women who may or may not have waited at home with their hypothetical children

for someone who may or may not have come home. Not come home the same, at least. It was a game Sully played, hiding it in his head from himself. Sully took another long gulp of whiskey and swallowed it in one big chunk, let it burn his throat and his esophagus and his stomach. He gagged a bit, a result of the ulcers he'd courted for too long, and coughed to cover the noise. Bruce patted him on the shoulder, reached over the bar, and shot some of the soda water from the gun into Sully's glass.

Charles waited until he was finished and then refilled his glass. He clinked the glasses sitting on the bar. "Cheers, gentlemen."

A silence expanded into the bar. It was the sort of silence where you can hear, in the distance, ambulance sirens or cat screeches or a woman yelling out a window, and the noises only drew more attention to the quiet that they were trying to drown out. They drank.

"Welp," said Sully. "I really should get the old dusty trail. Hit on home, if you will." He poured himself some of the whiskey left in the bottle. It filled a good half of his pint glass, which he chose to view as half-full. "I'll bring this back," he said to Bruce.

"Sure, sure," said Bruce. "Sure." He coughed, twice. Charles gripped his shoulder, as Bruce bent half over, coughing at the ground, one hand holding onto the bar. Bruce sat down and Charles didn't move his hand.

Sully should have noticed something was wrong then, he realized later. Bruce considered it an amateur move when the bartender sat, even off duty, and above all, Bruce considered himself a professional. Also, he did not like people touching him. It was, however, one of those thoughts that flashed and then flew out his ear and dissipated.

"Nice to meet you," said Charles. Sully poured a bit more of the whiskey into his own glass. He examined the contents, remembered that Bruce had cut it with some soda water, then

tipped a bit more. The bottle had about a sneeze worth of whiskey left. Charles offered it to him, but Sully didn't want to finish it all. That would be rude.

Sully almost noticed this time, or at least, he noticed that what happened now was odd. Charles stared at Bruce's back again, that same look in his eye that Sully thought meant he was a champion closet drinker (and he was, Sully would tell himself later, he was and Sully had been right about that part at least). Charles took put his hands back onto Bruce's shoulder blades. Bruce's breaths stopped wheezing and he put his head down, peaceful like. Like he was ready to pass out for the night and maybe wake up sometime later to lurch over to the office cot that he kept there just in case.

Sully shook his head to clear the strangeness of the moment. "Oh yes indeed, nice and all." He looked down at his whiskey. He smacked his lips. "Many thanks for your kind hospitality." Sully transformed his botched barstool dismount into a little bow. He picked up his glass.

Quite the successful jaunt, he thought as he pushed the door twice before pulling it open.

It was the walk home before Sully really noticed that something was wrong. It fell on his shoulders like responsibility. See, because the thing was, he was just practiced enough that his stumble-homes were something of an art form. He did his due diligence on the way to the bar, checking for obstacles, incorporated that information into his memory, and then sashayed home. Most watching would have mistaken it for the kind of grace found in old musicals like *Singing in the Rain* and *My Fair Lady*. Especially because Sully was usually singing.

So on this particular occasion, when he tripped over something, an important part of the wall of securities he had built in his universe shook free. And all of the sudden, he noticed the smell of the street, like rotten everything all at once, and he noticed the way the fog only clung to the corners of things, just where someone should hide, and he clutched his tumbler of whiskey to his chest, holding his breath. It wasn't comfortable. Sully had spent a long time doing the groundwork to make sure that he was comfortable at all times and that involved the disability check and a supply of yellow government cheese and the whiskey.

So the real question was: what had he done wrong? He looked down at the whiskey glass, clutched to his bosom, and turned back to return it. When examined properly, in the order of the universe, it was morally wrong. Never should have taken it out of the bar. The bar had to be contained and all of its pieces had to stay there, in order.

Doggedly, Sully traveled the two blocks back to the bar minus his usual post-whiskey magic cape. Imaginary cape, of course, he knew it was imaginary. Each time he took a step the fog puffed back to the corners. Sully was satisfied. Even the fog was showing him the way to redemption.

"Bruce!" Sully flung the door open so hard it shook the tiny window set into it.

Charles was there, same barstool. Bruce had his head on the bar. The bar towel was puddled next to Bruce's mouth, stained pink. Sully looked at it and then wobbled around and closed the door firmly. He steadied his back against it and watched Bruce for the rise and fall of his shoulders, listened for a snore. Bruce always snored when he fell asleep on the bar, those nights when he was off work and would really tie one on with Sully. Old Madge used to throw some of her small, plastic objects (Legos, McDonald's toys, and so on) at Bruce's head when he got too loud in an attempt to preserve her eardrums for another few years.

The jukebox played, and Sully waited for the record change, just to make sure. End of the song now, and silence. Sully looked at Charles. Charles, just sitting there. The next record started.

“You bastard.” Sully made an attempt on Charles’ life, which actually looked like him falling forward onto his face and not getting his hands out in time to catch himself. The glass shattered in front of his falling body. For the first time since he’d understood how to control the bar, Sully did not try to slurp up the whiskey in front of his face. He slid his butt forward so that it was under him and levered himself to his feet.

Unfortunately, the slide forward had positioned his hand over a glass fragment, which now stuck jaggedly through the web between his thumb and finger in his right hand. He didn’t feel it precisely, but when he saw it, he yelped and fell into the booth behind him. This brought Bruce back into his line of sight, though Charles had disappeared somewhere.

Sully sobbed. It was a lot, to see your friend dead on a bar you were just drinking off of, a mysterious man *you know is there* disappeared into the bar, and glass sticking through your hand like a those pinned dead insects some people frame. He sobbed more loudly and looked at his hand, snot lacing across his face and the jukebox playing. He closed his eyes and held his own hand out and rocked and rocked.

Charles was back, squatting in front of him. “Here,” he said. “Here.” He pulled the glass out before Sully could protest and wrapped a clean bar towel around it. “You need stitches.”

“How – how – how.” Sully took a breath. He felt like a child. “How d’you know and why should I listen, you asshole killer, you killed Bruce and he’s just over there – “

Charles squeezed on the towel. Sully stopped talking. “Now, Sully.” Charles shook his head. “Sully, I’m a bit of a liar, but I didn’t want to scare you. Remember that whole death assistant thing? It was a lie.”

Sully nodded and took his hand back, cradling it to his chest. “I know. We knew. I mean, we both knew that a hired gun would make his way here one day. I just don’t know why you had to go for Bruce cuz he’d never tell anyway, cuz he’s done time himself you know, just for like some kind of mix up from a government check that he cashed for too much money or something, but still I mean, he’s got friends on the inside.” Sully glanced over at Bruce on the bar. “Or he used to got friends on the inside.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say. He wiped his face with his left sleeve.

Charles just looked at him. “Look, I’m not a killer, okay?” He stood up, and somehow he seemed taller. “I’m saying this once, because you’re not going to believe me anyway. I’m not a death assistant, I’m Death’s Assistant. Like capital letters and a title and shit.”

Sully shook his head. He tried to remember if he’d seen any news reports of people escaped from the nut house, but he couldn’t really remember anything outside this room right now.

“Now, see? It’s fine, you don’t have to believe me. I didn’t mean to get into this gig, let me tell you. Apparently it’s the mechanism to right the wrongs of so-your-father-accidentally-killed-you-and-you-were-too-young-to-die. So now I got this. Half-life, growing up, human flesh and whatnot, but not quite alive. Show up and be the welcoming committee. Universe is all about balance, ya know? One rule, really. But, come on Sully, you know his lungs were just getting worse, and they got too bad. And we both know Bruce was too stubborn to see a doc.”

“Never trusted them,” Sully sniffed.

Charles nodded and ran his hands through his hair. Sully was somehow unsurprised to see that he didn't have blood on his hands at all, they were clean and Charles' hair moved like any other man's. But Charles was far too clean.

Sully looked at his hand in the towel. It throbbed a little bit but it should have hurt more. He opened the towel. His hand was already scabbed and healing.

"See that there?" Charles said. "That's what I mean. You're hurting and you weren't supposed to be here and whoever runs this circus thought you hurt enough tonight." Charles sucked in a breath and exhaled. He looked at Sully. "Look, Sully, it's been a good night. Don't dwell on it. You said a good goodbye and now the funeral and move on, okay?"

Sully was trying to work out something in his whiskey-addled brain. His entire face was wrinkled in the same direction, like he was trying to fit all of it into one point roughly in the center of his face. After a good two minutes, he relaxed. His shoulders dropped and the wrinkles went away, all but the double line in between his eyebrows that he had had have forever anyway, that he couldn't get rid of no matter how much whiskey was involved anyway. "Guess he couldn't have gone out better." Sully stood, walked towards the door. On his way past Bruce, he picked up the towel and put it over his friend's shoulder. Patted him once on his shoulder blade covered with the stained pink towel.

It wasn't enough, Sully knew. Bruce wouldn't have a funeral, he wouldn't have wanted one. And besides, nobody had the money for all that. Sully wanted to give him something, see him off. If Old Madge were here, it could have been a real gift, something she'd selected from piles and piles of things that would make sense, just to her and Bruce and no one else, like a promise. Sully rooted in his pockets. All he had was two dirty quarters he'd found on the way here. Not enough for a tip, really, but Bruce would've understood. He placed them, side by side,

on the bar next to his friend. The quarters stared back at Sully, shining from the flashing neon Miller Light sign.

Sully left the bar soberly, quietly. It was the end of an era, after all, the end of O'Harahan's for Sully. The bar couldn't be balanced without its enforcer, and whoever took over probably would be terrible to Madge and make Sully pay for his own drinks. And they wouldn't be Bruce, who understood without knowing and never gave Sully crap about how much he drank.

Sully didn't fly home and he wasn't comfortable. He flicked his eyes to the ground in case there were obstacles that he couldn't anticipate. He catalogued: a Snicker's bar wrapper, a slightly crunched to-go cup, an uneven crack in the pavement, the turquoise deep-sea themed fliers that Jug's had started giving out advertising the free seafood dinner night, a rat skittering across the path and into the alley. Sully could hear the high-pitched shrieking echoing back and back on the walls. He watched the rat all the way to the shadows, the alley's corners disappearing into fog, but he couldn't see the end of it all, no matter how long he stood and squinted.

Root of Negative One

Dear Sir:

The last time we spoke you told me never to contact you again. You told me you love me. You told we you don't want to see me. You told me you love me. You told me love makes you a coward and you can't be a coward. Sir, I am a coward. Sir, I can't be without you. I am variable without you. Get it, Sir? The equation: $u/n = i$ when n does not equal zero. The u , of course, being you, over the n , of course, being us, which is to say, us together, our love. I am not I when we are not.

When is the last time you knew you were in love? you asked.

I told you, in the dark on the floor: I've only known once and the other one did not. I mean, I never told.

I want to tell you, you said. You looked at me very seriously and touched my temples with your first two fingers on each of your hands.

I made a twisty-scrunch face. I held my breath. I said, I don't want to know. If it always almost exists, then it always is possible. That is magic. I said this, everything except the part about the magic. Instead I said: That is the definition of hope.

But if nothing happens, then nothing is possible, you said.

Don't you want to live where nothing is possible? I said. Nothing is possible, but so is everything. You only know what you only know anyway, and who ever can trust what someone else's five senses say. Our brain is a fake overlord that we bow down to because what exists if our respective brains do not exist?

You exist, you said. You exist. You took my head in between your hands, two palms on my two temples, and pulled my skull towards you. You kissed my forehead, branded. No going back.

Everything is possible because you exist, I said.

I don't know what to do. I am falling. I didn't say that.

Dear Sir:

The thing is, I want to live inside your body forever. It's not comfortable, you know, the knowing and the living. I just I just I just was meant to be with you always. There is an element

that I don't understand. I want your body to be the only thing that gives me substance, holding me together, sharing electrons. Because we are more than our physical bodies, we are the electric space between atoms, the god particle, the thing that gives us mass and cannot be broken down to smaller parts and contains *possibility*, all problem sets ever (even the those that cannot contain themselves). The alchemical transformation of impossibility, which is to say, love, the thing that exists but cannot be proved. The point, Sir: we don't need to understand things for them to be true, and true things are sometimes impossible.

You said: I saw a performance of art. It was two people breathing. It was two people breathing each others' breathed out breaths.

How did they find the breaths? I said. We breathe out and then it is gone, mixed with so much dead air.

They had an apparatus, you said. They dressed like twins. They tried to be each other. They tried to be superhuman, more than themselves.

What happened? I said.

They passed out, you said. You breathed in like your chest was a vault, like you'd never let go. You said: There was a doctor. Their four lungs filled up like balloons with helium.

No, carbon dioxide, I said. My face melted. I didn't say: It was so romantic, so beautiful, and then they passed out.

What? you said.

Carbon dioxide, I said. It's ruining the ozone layer too. We only have one to share you know. I realized this might be the answer.

I wonder why they didn't take that as a failure of the apparatus, I said.

It's not possible to be each other, you said. It's dangerous.

Hm, I said.

Now the ladytwin helps popstars make something that is closer to art than machine, you said.

Does it work? I said, wondering why they couldn't be both, all of us be both.

Depends on your definitions, I guess, you said.

Dear Sir:

I am writing these letters because I am not contacting you. That is, I write them but they do not exist until you read them. They cannot mean and I am not mean. In the space between you and I, they are nothing. Get it, Sir? The average of the distance between u and i , which is to say u plus i divided in two, means nothing.

You said: I don't love you.

I said nothing.

You said, It's impossible.

I said, Impossible contains possible. Both can be true at once.

You said, No.

You said, I tried. And left.

Dear Sir:

i is an unreal number. Two exact equal things make a negative number. Well, they don't, but they might, virtually. Theoretically. Not in real life, only in the realm that we need the zeros and ones to build something bigger than ourselves, than nature. We build machines by yeses and nos, but it's all founded on the i , the impossible root of negative one. What's the only number that's both real and imaginary? $u/0 = i$ and in this case, this is the case, and the root of negative one is me. We did not signify more than we should have but maybe your zeros and another positive one will allow you to build something that does not involve i .

I am now, right now, walking into the ocean-salt-waves. This is the Pacific. I chose the Pacific because it goes nice, it goes slow, and then THERE'S A SHELF. Like falling. I chose the Pacific because it breathes in carbon dioxide and breathes out oxygen, and it will breathe me in and crush me and breathe out air for you. Always you. Also, the Pacific sounds kind of nice, like pacify, like peace.

Anyway, don't worry. Under the shelf, there is life. There is a swirly forest of kelp. Sharks can come right up to shore. Whales too. Also, down deep in the Pacific there are heat vents that shoot up steamy water and things live in there, things that don't like to be cold but also don't like to be alone and do like to be deep, deeply buried and away. I don't like to be cold. I want to be away. I am walking into the Pacific, and I don't plan on coming back. I am waiving my good-byes. Get it, Sir? Wave.

Kept

William said he couldn't leave her because she was dying, and I believed him. I told him I would wait. He would come be with me on the weekends when her mother would sit with her, or their children came home. Those weekends we had the sort of wild sex that only comes with denial, and in the morning, he made me a bagel sandwich with egg, sausage, and pepper jack cheese. It was his favorite.

It was my house, William said, and he signed it over to me once he'd paid for it. It wasn't a huge house, just a two bed two bath, and really it was more of a cabin. It was at the top of the mountain, the best one, he said. My nearest neighbor was two miles down the far side. He said it'd be good for us, the alone time. I knew from his cologne and the club we'd met in that he was wealthy but I hadn't guessed he was buy-me-an-house wealthy. Most days with me, he dressed like a real person, with jeans from Macy's and polos that were getting tight in the hips where he'd gained some weight.

We had both met elsewhere, see, before he moved me here. I was in Vegas with my sorority sisters for Memorial Day and he was there for a convention. My sorority sisters and I got into some club for free. It was themed something that justified having trapeze artists writhing in nets along the ceiling. He had a table and bottle service. He wasn't terribly old and his friends were funny, so we joined them. William didn't dance, but his friends did.

Pressing on towards midnight, I was drunk and grinding on Katheryn, and he put a hand on the curve between my neck and my shoulder. His breath on my neck. "You are too pretty to need a gimmick like that." He pulled me away to sit with him and soon after, we left. Not to his hotel room. That was later. We went to a hidden pizza place behind the Chandelier Bar, and waited in line for twenty minutes and talked about the possibility of extraterrestrial life. I was an astronomy major and he was a Star Trek fan. I texted Katheryn that I would be fine, that I was fine, that I would meet them at the Starbucks in the Luxor by ten a.m., I promised.

The next morning, William saved me in his phone as "!" so that I would come up first in his contacts. "You're going to forget my name," I said. "I can't forget you," he said.

He told me about his wife then. Not that she was dying, that she existed. The dying didn't happen until after I had said I wouldn't see him and then did anyway, after I had broken up with him and he had flown to see me on the redeye the same day. Until after I had dated some frat boy and then dated William at the same time, and then I graduated and I gave in. He didn't stop calling, texting, sending thoughtful, personalized gifts. He came to my graduation, the only person who came and stood for me in the sea of people, because my parents said they didn't have enough money for flights. After William tried to buy them flights, they said they couldn't accept such a gift from someone they didn't know. William thought they were terrible. "I am so proud

of you,” he said, holding me to his chest and resting his head on my hair after I’d thrown my cap with the others.

A whole year of back-and-forth, from Vegas until I graduated. In the end, he felt inevitable. Attention is a dangerous drug.

The mountain got lonely. When the wind blew through the trees at the right angle, it sounded like the trees were trying to pull up roots and run. I missed the smell of the salt-wind from my home. And then I remembered that it wasn’t mine anymore, or at least, that there was no home to go back to. My parents had moved to Costa Rica and started calling themselves expats barely after I finished high school. Friends had faded into people on Facebook who I talked to only on their birthdays. The bookstore had closed after Fran had died, and her house was sold to people who painted it all white, shutters and doors and trim, so it looked like a washed out copy of its former self. All I had of her were some of her books that I couldn’t bear to lose, on philosophy and morality and astronomy. I stole them before the creditors came in and catalogued. And I had the thrumming question in my head, one I wished I could ask Fran: were my actions with William too small to matter, relative to our future life together? Fran never sent an answer, but then, she’d always said there was no afterlife, just a transfer of our matter to the universal whole. “We are stardust,” she said, grinning, “literally.”

My parents let our old house just sit there, empty. They paid for the lawn care and the property taxes and a security alarm and in my head it became a ghost house. I never liked being alone the nights I dreamed about those houses. They somehow would be right next door and

they'd loom larger or maybe I'd shrink until I was the size of an ant staring at a blade of grass in front of me and I had no idea which way would lead me home.

William worried. He suggested I get a dog. I'd never had a dog growing up, so I was pretty neutral about them. I could see his point, though. Dogs cuddled, and dogs cared if you didn't come home. I'd tried those relationships, I told him, and the only ones that stuck were him and Fran. Still, I agreed because he was worried.

I sized up dogs at the pound the following Saturday. There were so many needy dogs. They scooted up to the edge of the mesh and wire and metal and whined, tried to shove their noses up under my hand. The one I liked skulked at the back of his kennel. He wasn't trying to hard to get me to choose him. "What's his name?" I asked.

"He doesn't have one yet," the volunteer said. "He just came in two days ago."

I stepped into the kennel, crouching and holding out some bacon I'd made for the occasion. The other dogs swarmed until the dog growled, a low, quiet rumble in his chest.

"Hey," I said. The dog regarded me with yellowish eyes. "What is he?" I said to the volunteer.

"We think he's mostly Australian Cattle dog. That's what makes him blue, you know. But," the girl paused. "To be honest, he might be part coyote. That black band down his back. And, he's half-wild and doesn't have much use for us, beyond food."

I pulled out some more bacon. "He's independent."

"That's one way to put it."

"I'll take him." Maybe it was that I wanted him, because the dog approached me, sniffing at my hand.

“He’s going to get a lot bigger you know,” she called after me as I knelt down before the dog. “Are you sure you can handle that?”

Maybe it was because I still had bacon grease on me, because he licked my fingers too. “Good boy.”

After I brought the dog home, I sent a picture message to William. I could tell from the tenor of his text that he was surprised about my choice. Maybe he thought I’d want some Pomeranian fluff ball that I could carry in a purse. I told him that this was the dog for me, no question. He asked what I named the dog. I said: I didn’t name the dog, because I thought he probably named himself.

I finally insisted on having a job. It had been three months. My friends from college were all over Facebook with their new lives, new opportunities. Katheryn was a PR assistant at Fox and she hadn’t even graduated yet. She filled my feed with pictures of events and celebrities and swag. I had pictures of my dog and my online shopping purchases and the mountain. To be honest, I was bored.

William said I shouldn’t have a job, didn’t need one. He gave me an allowance that more than covered my needs. And that turned out to be good, because when I was looking there weren’t a lot of jobs and most of them weren’t flexible about how many days off I wanted. I ended up with a three-days-a-week internship at the local museum, the only twenty-something among adults with lives and families and friends.

I took kids on tours to learn about dinosaurs, the Native Americans who had called this place home, and the history of the small, farming county that I lived in. I got approval and after that, once a week, I'd run a prerecorded starshow in the food court after it had closed. It was the only space big enough. Some weeks no one came and I ran it anyway, lying on the floor of the food court staring at the ceiling. You could see tons of stars at night on the mountain, but the sky was so wide out there some nights that it felt like the dark would suffocate me. Watching the starshow with my back on the slightly gritty cafeteria floor and the air conditioning humming in the background, I could remember that the world wouldn't fall away while I wasn't looking.

A few weeks after I started working there, the museum received a private grant to hire recent grads onto the museum staff, and then I was making some real money. A salary and healthcare for part-time work. I wanted to believe it was just luck, but people started looking at me funny. After a few days, my supervisor told me what happened.

I called William, right there in the office with my supervisor watching. He said that I deserved it and that the museum was lucky to have me, and that his company supported lots of small museums anyway. I shook my head and apologized to my supervisor. Then I went to the bathroom stared at my iPhone, trying to think of anything I could send him to make him understand. There was nothing. I went back to work.

After work, I called my parents and they were "just so *thrilled*" I was working at a job "somewhat related" to my degree.

"It's not the same thing at all, actually," I said.

"Hey," my mom said. "Maybe with all that museum and space stuff on your resume, you can move down here in a couple of years." This was a new sentiment I'd noticed since William

was around. After the museum, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd said something to them. Still, this felt better than the alternative.

"I'll think about it, Ma," I said, thinking of all the days and nights my parents spent in mudpits for their skin and hot springs for their joints and at the local tropical drink and merengue bar for the early bird special. They had started talking about the health effects of guava and how much fiber and omega three fatty acids there were in a traditional Costa Rican diet. They had worried so much about staying young, and there had never been space in that life for me.

I sometimes asked about his other life (the life I couldn't know by Googling him, the life that wasn't his corporate portrait poised over a bloodless biography), but he didn't want to talk about it. He said that I was his refuge, his safe space, and that was the reason he bought the house was on the crest of the mountains where we could see the fog and the sunsets and the treeline, and all that green. Green was his favorite color, he said, and he said there wasn't much of it where he lived. In times that his other life must have been going badly, William sent me lingerie in all shades of green, so that I could camouflage nearly naked in the trees, so that I was almost sure that my favorite color was green too.

Once he said to me, cuddling into my bare chest: "Thank god you can accept things. I'm just so happy you don't fight me on everything, you know? You're the only one who just *accepts* me."

It was about a week after I'd gotten my job and I was finally starting to feel better about taking care of myself and the dog, and maybe William someday too. Out of nowhere, the dog got sick. I thought he was dying. He'd lay in the yard all day, and if I came out he'd barely lift his head to say hi. Didn't come in for food or water. On the third day I came out, calling for him. "Dog," I said. He voiced a quiet *whuff* from a sunspot on the driveway. I walked over, felt all over his body to see if I could feel a break in his ribs or if his stomach was flipped. That can happen, Google told me.

I looked over to the left, under the porch, and it was a broken-bone yard. I looked closer: from the size of the bones, bunnies and woodchucks, but possibly some possums and raccoons too. If I hadn't realized it was the dog, I might have been nervous. Instead, I was impressed. The dog had just been living out his wild side. "Fair enough," I said. He'd been cooped up too long I knew. I didn't expect him to spend every minute with me. "Let me know if you need anything."

Dog waved his tail twice and didn't get up. I told William that he was my dog, and most people would think that, but the truth was that we were a pack. Maybe I was the alpha. I wasn't all that worried about distinctions. I probably wasn't cut out to be an alpha anyway.

Dog was fine living wild, so I decided to visit my old sorority house for the weekend. Kathryn had been elected president, and I wanted to see her.

The drive was longer than I remembered. I kept glancing down and realizing that I was going way too fast. I'd ease off the gas, stop to get a coffee somewhere, stretch my legs. William

would have been furious with me for driving so far alone, but Fran always said that we are never more ourselves than when we're alone in the dark. Four hours later, I made it – back to the place that I had tried to make my home for four and a half years until I graduated.

Everything looked the same, but it smelled all wrong. Katheryn walked me through the house, filling me in on all the drama. There were new girls too, girls who had to be introduced to me and who had heard of me from sorority stories but seemed shocked that I existed in the flesh. Someone else lived in my room. It was tradition: older girls faded into legend, into faces in the portraits on the walls. Or into contacts you'd call for donations or speaking engagements, or at least into stories of exploits at parties. To reappear was to break the illusion of graduation, the illusion that life after college was better than staying.

"Do you want to stay over?" Katheryn asked. "The alumni room is open if you want. We could go to Beta, you know," she smiled. "I mean, I have a test on Monday but it's whatever."

I hugged my arms around myself. This place was lonely now when it hadn't been before. The house felt empty, even with a full of girls charging up and down the stairs and getting ready for Friday night, and Katheryn right there, trying to bring me back with her for the weekend. I didn't know how to be that person any more.

I glanced at my phone. "It's okay," I said. "I'm okay. I have to get back. William just texted me that he might come Sunday, and I have to run a bunch of errands. You know, have to take care of the dog and all that." I wasn't sure why I lied. I knew he wasn't coming to the mountain for at least the next two weeks. But I had to get out.

"William," she said. It was the one fight we'd ever had, about me being with him. We'd solemnly clinked drinks, afterwards, agreeing that we'd never discuss it for real again. "He's good?"

“Yeah,” I said. “Things are really good. I mean, nothing’s that different, but we’re just really good.”

She looked like she wanted to say more. Instead, she half-shook her head. “Well, come back anytime. Seriously, I miss you so much!”

We hugged and that was it. It only took me three and a half hours on the way back in the dark. I did my best to not think but my mind kept looping back: it wasn’t my home anymore either.

Not long after, that’s when his daughter found me. I’d been on the mountain six months. I came home from work. It looked like it was his car, except the car was red. I sat in my car, squinted at the red car against the trees, stared until it became unfocused and looked like a bloody slash in my green forest yard.

She was sitting on my porch when I arrived and she told me her name was Amanda. I knew she was his daughter from the fact that she was too healthy to be his wife and from the way she measured me so quickly; from the shape of her chin and the way her hairline had a rounded widow’s peak. She couldn’t have been more than five years older than me. I told her to come in.

“You aren’t the first, you know,” Amanda said.

She sat at my breakfast bar and I spent one long moment cataloguing my kitchen. Spatula. Tea kettle. Stranger. Refrigerator. Knife block. I cleared my throat and made tea.

She said, “That’s not fair I guess. There’s only been one other. Maybe ten years ago? My mother found that one. She can’t right now, obviously.”

I turned with the kettle and plastered on the smile I used to wear during sorority recruitment. “How is your mother?” I asked.

“Dying.” Amanda cradled her mug, but her eyes were steady on mine. “She used to be graceful.”

I looked down. I poured tea. I sat on the stool next to her. I remembered the bits my lover had told me about her. That she was stubborn. That she loved her mother more than she loved him, and might hate him if she knew. That she, of all his children, had inherited his motivation to make something real and that it was a motivation that left them always looking, always *taking* from the world. It was the part of him that left me breathless because nothing was impossible, but it was also the part of him that made me want to hold and hide him and keep him on the mountain. Because nothing was impossible. I looked at William’s daughter and tried to match these things up with the woman in front of me.

“So,” Amanda said. “What is the point of this whole thing?” She fluttered her hand vaguely at the kitchen around her.

My mouth twisted into something approximating a smile. “What’s the point of our relationship?” *Love* I wanted to say, but saying it felt too much like a soap opera, and too personal to share.

“I – ” and nothing else came to me. The question that expanded to fill the room and then left it empty.

She rested her soft hand on my wrist. Then she stood, sweeping up our mugs and dumping them into the sink. “I think we need not-tea. I think we need wine.” She rifled through my cabinets as I watched her.

“I don’t have wine,” I said. “I only have whiskey.” I pointed to the liquor cabinet.

Amanda laughed. It filled the corners of my kitchen. “Fair enough,” she said. “Fewer calories per drunk, or what?” She refilled our tea mugs and brought them and the whole bottle to the counter. “Cheers,” she said.

We moved to the couch. “Let’s start over,” she said. “Perhaps I’m being too –” She shook her head.

She asked about my life, and I asked about hers. She ran a small company, something to do with real estate, and she had made her own money. I told her about the museum, and she praised my initiative with the starshow. She told me about her siblings, an older sister and a younger brother.

I found myself missing those things I had left behind for the mountain: my sorority sisters and the way we looked like a gaggle of geese when we were in public, falling off the sidewalk and bursting with laughter. My hometown and the way the leaves rained on your windshield in fall as you drove through the tunnel of trees on the way to the grocery store. Fran’s bookstore which stayed open until eleven and had a small café that I used to work in. It was my place, the place that felt more right than my home during my teenage years. I was an only child, and my parents spent all their time talking about the life they would have as soon as I left. I missed the way Fran would order special books if I asked, books about the stars and physics and the universe. We’d read them together and she’d always talk about philosophy. The only point to the stars, to other worlds, she said, was to remind us we are human and to inhabit that skin to the best of our ability. When I fought with my parents, she calmed me. When I wasn’t sure about applying to college, she stood over me until the applications were complete. When she died, I read from Steven Hawking’s *The Theory of Everything* at the funeral and only cried with that

first shovel full of falling dirt. My mother had patted my hand and left me there, at the graveside. The bookstore closed and my parents moved and I wouldn't go back anymore.

Amanda placed a hand on my thigh.

"What?" I asked.

"Are you faithful to him?" she asked again.

I cleared my throat. The room had gotten too hot. We'd been sitting there at least an hour, and I shifted so that I was facing her. "Of course I am. Where could I go."

"Anywhere. Away from my father. There's so much life out there, you know. You're too young –" She looked away, out the window. "Too smart to be kept."

I pulled my hair off my neck and piled it on my head, dropping it in clumps.

She leaned forward. "It's not just for me that I'm saying this. He's a black hole. He'll take it all, if you let him." She took a drink and held my gaze as she had before, when she was telling me about her mother. "He'll keep you here and this will be it, all of it. He did it to my mother, and he'll do it to you."

I looked past her to the mountain. Today it was covered in fog and the sun was about to set. The green peeked out among the streamers of fog, and as the sun went down they went from pink and orange and red to a wispy gray. The mountain was beautiful that way. When the light hit, it felt like no one at the base of the mountain could ever reach our house. "We'll have a life," I said.

"This life?" She waved her hand around. "Or, you know, the life with a two-year-old son with a sixty-year-old dad and a twenty-five-year-old mom? The kid will have nephews older than him." She laughed in a way that didn't reach her eyes. "Or the life where those same nephews and aunts and uncles don't talk to you, to my father, and to his whore's child."

My hands dropped to my lap. The room quieted and we sat for a moment. She reached out and fingered a strand of my hair. I didn't move.

"That's not a threat, you know. I didn't say it to make you feel bad." She tilted her head to the side, eyes intent on my hair. "It's just how they'll – we'll – have to be." She ran her fingers up the back of my scalp, then fisted my hair in her hand, pulling my head back and exposing my throat. I closed my eyes.

She grazed her lips along the line of my neck. I turned my face away as she went to kiss me again, not sure how to resist whatever mood she was in. I'd never been the fighter. She held my hair back for a moment longer, clenched her fist tighter so my hair pulled tight on the edges of my scalp, waited to see what I'd do. I sat, legs crossed, not meeting her eyes, and did nothing. I imagined the dog stalking up to the porch and forcing his way in, barking; imagined William's furious reaction if I told him about this night. Eventually she relaxed, dropped her arm.

I stood up, not meeting her eyes, and turned my back on her. "You can stay here, if you're too drunk to drive." And then I closed the door and fell into bed, curled on my side, and wished the dog would cuddle me, just this once. But he was still out, on a ramble, and had been all day. That was the biggest difference between me and the dog, I thought. He didn't need me, and I needed so him badly. Needed him to want to be there. Needed him to leave, and needed to know he'd come back.

In the morning, I didn't get out of bed until well past noon. It was Saturday and I didn't have to work.

I sat quietly, waiting to hear any noise in the other room. At first I thought maybe she was still asleep too, but Amanda was gone. The house felt empty. The mugs were on the coffee table.

On my mug, Amanda had propped a picture of her family. They stood arm in arm in front of a “Welcome to Yellowstone” sign. My lover’s wife was healthy, and Amanda and her siblings looked like they were eight to twelve or so. Everyone was happy and smiling.

I picked up the photo. I ripped out the picture of my lover and dropped the rest of the family on the floor. With careful fingers, I put his photo on the fridge, smoothing the tape over and over.

Here are all the ways to leave the mountain:

You could pick up I-210 just past the Waffle House outside town, drive through the winding roads that are cut into the mountain range, and park at the airport. Take a plane to anywhere, maybe Thailand.

You could take back roads, either 43rd Ave. or CR 319, past the farms and the orchards and eventually the old bottling plant. When you hit the lake go south, and the port will be there eventually. The steamboat still goes down the Mississippi, and after that you can buy an old sailboat and sail until you can’t see land.

You could put on some sturdy hiking boots, not brand-new just sturdy, and get a coat and call your dog. You could walk into the trees away from town, hoping it doesn’t snow and hoping it doesn’t rain and hoping that you find water and food and shelter. You could walk until the mountain feels like home and live like a wild thing with dirt under your nails and rat’s nest hair and silence for company.

You could stay here, waiting, for years. William's wife will die and then William and then you. You could request to be buried in your childhood hometown and not with him, you on his left hand and his wife forever on his right. They could take your body and pump you full of formaldehyde, sew your lips shut and put makeup on you. They could ship you on a plane and then drive you to the plot and then scatter some dirt over your body and let you decompose into the soil far, far from this mountain.

VITA

Stephanie Doyle was born in Clinton, Iowa though her family lived in Springfield, Illinois at the time, moved five times, then was raised primarily in San Diego and southwestern Michigan. She completed her B.A. in English and International Development Studies at the University of California – Los Angeles. Her work experience ranges from wine hustler to vestigial board member of a small Costa Rican company. Doyle lives and works in New Orleans.