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Frank and Gala

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Frank and Gala

A Thesis

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

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

by

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Beginning

We live in a small town in southern Minnesota, just across the river from Wisconsin and about 30 miles north of Iowa. Winona is a quiet little town nestled between the towering limestone bluffs and the Mississippi River.

Mostly, we are a quiet town, isolated from the surrounding areas by the Mississippi River and the river bluffs. During the school year, the college students create some trouble, but we still find time to tell stories about the people in the town. We are a sleepy little town that shares gossip at the Blue Heron coffee shop, the bars, and the churches.

We didn't know much about David Levison when he first moved to Winona. Maybe we should be more careful with strangers in our town, but he had a PhD in engineering, and he didn't seem any stranger than the other engineering professors, but that was when he first moved to town. He moved into the small town as an associate professor at Winona State University even though we never heard of him teaching any classes. He bought a small house on the ridge of one of the bluffs overlooking the town, one of the simple ranch-styles with a patio out back that overlooked the town, and he did whatever PhDs in engineering do without any classes to teach.

Still, when we heard that he might have built an electronics shop in his garage and he was doing some mysterious research in his basement, we should have wondered about him, perhaps not trusted him.

In those first weeks that Sherry became known to the world, we heard many stories, and although we certainly didn't believe all of them, the gossip and rumors spread.

When we first heard about Sherry, we couldn't resist sharing stories.

A few days after a damaging spring thunderstorm, some of us were drinking and bowling at Winona Bowl. Gary was one of the first people to tell a story about Sherry. He was drinking whiskey and leaning on the bar, elaborating the story beyond any rational imagination. He even propped himself up on the bar so people could see and hear him better, and he shouted about the thunderstorm a few nights previous. “Up on top of the bluff, where David Levison and I have houses, I could see the lightning for miles. The thunder and lightning were all around us,” he yelled. A few of us rolled our eyes. “The lightning was terrifying. I went out on the front porch to smoke a cigarette because the storm was not here to destroy or to bring death. It was bringing something else. Something very different.”

A few of us rolled our eyes again, but we were all listening. “I saw the Levison house a quarter mile away. The electricity was out on our street, but I could see flashing lights through all the windows. If I didn’t know any better, I’d have thought that David rented his house to a group of ravers.”

We pretended not to listen. We even would pretend to say something to the person next to us, mouthing some words or saying, “It’s chilly today,” as if we were still having our own conversations.

But we were listening to Gary. The smell of sweaty shoes and floor polish pressed around us, and the room was so hot and crowded that it felt tight, but somehow, Gary’s voice echoed around the room. “The thunder lost the rumbles and thuds, and it just exploded all around. And then,” he paused a little here, “A shot of lightning struck the top of the Levison house. But it wasn’t like a single bolt of lightning. It shone down like

a huge beam of light that lit up the entire Levison house. I swear I could see the chairs in the dining room and the pictures hanging on the walls. I swear.”

“And then,” Gary paused again, “I heard this groaning. The storm was beginning to fade, so I stepped into the rain and walked toward the Levison house. The groaning was coming from inside.”

We couldn’t help listening to this story. Gary would wave his arms in the air and sway a bit—possibly to demonstrate the severity of the storm or possibly because of the whiskey. “The groaning continued, and it sounded like some monster trying to wake from a winter hibernation. It was something like in an old Frankenstein movie.”

Someone else, Charlie Marshall it must have been, went to college with David Levison some twenty years ago. Charlie swears that David had a wife back then, but she died during their senior year in college. “I swear,” Charlie told us, “I swear that woman—Sherry—that’s his wife from college. She looks exactly the same as she did back then. She’s still twenty years old, but David is over fifty.” When we did try to look up information about any previous marriages that David might have had, we couldn’t find anything to prove that what Charlie said was true.

Pastor Steve said that she might be an angel of some kind. He had seen some old episodes of *Highway to Heaven*, and he was convinced that God sent mysterious people to live with us and guide us like Michael Landon. This was in the beginning before Pastor Steve grew to hate them and break up the family. “God works in mysterious ways,” Pastor Steve told us, “and maybe God sent Sherry to guide David or help him somehow. Make him less lonely or something.”

We didn't really think that God worked that way. God doesn't send beautiful and awkward women to give lonely men comfort, but Pastor Steve tells us that we shouldn't assume to understand God.

Two of David's friends told stories too. Paul and Claudio were David's closest friends before—well, before. Paul was a friend of David's before Sherry, and they worked together at the university, organizing research for new composites and demonstrations of the solar car. In the beginning, Paul was just as curious about Sherry as anyone else was, and he told everyone about how David stopped going out to the clubs with all of them and only went to work. Claudio, Paul's boyfriend, had always had a crush on David, so when David suddenly disappeared, the hole was there. Claudio didn't have David around to flirt with, and Paul lost his one friend who understood the complexities of his work.

A month or so before Sherry, David, Paul, and Claudio were all out to the Players Bar in La Crosse. Even though Players was over the Wisconsin border across the river and a half an hour away, they would meet there to have a couple of drinks on the weekends. According to Paul, David would stop and have a drink with them once a week or so, but the last night they were together at Players, David seemed distracted. Claudio said that David seemed unusually attentive to the few women in the bar, and after he ordered a second drink, he stopped talking with Claudio and Paul. He pulled out a pocket notebook and began doodling and writing notes. Paul swore that the diagrams were complex formulas, but he wasn't really sure what the notes were about.

David stopped answering his phone after that night at Players with Paul and Claudio. They didn't see him again for weeks. The only reason Paul did see him a few weeks later was because he showed up at David's house to check on him.

Paul told about that night after David had withdrawn for a few weeks, how Paul brought a bottle of merlot and some cigars to David's house. David answered the door wearing a T-shirt and slacks. Paul was fairly certain that David hadn't bathed in several days and possibly hadn't slept in longer than that.

David told Paul, "Leave me alone. I am working on a project that will change the world."

Paul had held out the bottle of merlot and said, "Let's have a drink together."

David took the bottle from Paul, looked at it as if he wasn't sure what it was. He handed the bottle back to Paul and shook his head. Paul put the cigars and wine into David's arms, and David looked blindly at the gifts. Paul thought he might drop them, but David just said thank you and good-bye and went back into the house. He closed the door behind him.

When Paul told us about what happened, he said that he was afraid that David was depressed and suicidal.

After Sherry showed up, Paul didn't like to talk about David. Possibly Paul felt uncomfortable with Sherry and didn't want to tell what he really thought of her.

Paul's boyfriend Claudio loved to tell stories and hear the gossip about David and Sherry. At Winona Bowl and the Blue Heron Coffeehouse when some of the locals were around, Claudio told some stories, about how they drove slowly past David's house. "One day," Claudio said, "We saw some movement in the house. We parked up the

street by Gary's house and snuck around the side to peak in the windows. You wouldn't believe the next part," Claudio told us. He used his hands when he spoke, and he waved his arms a little as if he was dismissing any disbelief.

Claudio sipped some red wine. He was probably the only person who drinks red wine at Winona Bowl. "There she was," he continued, "standing in the kitchen while Paul and I watched through the window. She was completely naked. Her body's perfectly shaped—like a model—but she had these long, jagged, fresh scars all over her body. The scars couldn't have been more than a couple of weeks old. It looked like someone had stitched her body parts together."

Sherry appeared slightly exotic. She was so slim, and her eyes and cheekbones hinted at some Asian heritage. We pictured a horrible woman, covered in scars and scabs. Later we saw how beautiful she was, and no one could deny that she looked like a model, but under her tight clothes and beautiful makeup, we wondered if she hid horrible marks. We imagined her torso zigzagged with horrible scars like some corrupted patchwork quilt.

Keith Lesser was a professor at Winona State in philosophy and critical thinking, so when he said that David designed her from a picture he had seen in a magazine, we thought he must have been trying to make an elaborate metaphor or something. Keith said that David had formed her flesh with his bare hands, shaping clay into a perfect body and perfect face, and stroking her skin and body until one day, she just woke up. Apparently, according to Keith's theory, David played god in some sort of Pygmalion way.

Of all the rumors, no one really knew how Sherry came to be. She was a beautiful woman who, despite advanced knowledge and near-computer detachment and analytical ability, did not act like any person we'd ever known. She moved strangely and spoke stiltedly like she had to process every reaction in a detailed computer program before doing or saying anything. She might have been an alien or a lobotomized mental patient or a robot or whatever, but she was unlike anyone we had ever met in our tiny town.

But the rumors didn't start until that first day that Sherry became known to us. David Levison walked into the Winona National Bank and asked to set up a joint account. The teller, it must have been Patti, told David that the second person would need to come in, sign some forms, and show ID. This was a normal request, and Patti told us that morning she hadn't had her second cup of coffee and wanted the man to leave so that she could drink another coffee and eat a doughnut in the break room. She was particularly fond of the Long Johns from Bloedow's Bakery with the rich maple frosting on the top.

"But identification may be difficult," David had said.

"A driver's license is the easiest. A birth certificate or passport would also be acceptable," Patti had said. She had told us that she wasn't taking this seriously because she was still imagining the maple-frosted Long John in the break room. If she didn't hurry, someone else might eat it.

Patti swears that David said, "She doesn't really have any identification."

"She can request a new birth certificate from her hometown. After she gets her birth certificate, she should be able to get a state ID or driver's license."

David looked at Patti and tried to explain that he had a girlfriend who was very good with numbers but would have some difficulty coming in and presenting identification. He wanted her to begin handling his finances, but she wouldn't be able to come into the bank to sign anything and might not be able to provide identification.

“Well,” Patti said, eyeing a coworker who was making a move towards the break room, “we can't add anyone to your account until she comes in to sign the forms and show her identification.”

Even though David stood there, starting to ask another question, Patti stood up and went into the break room. She ate the last doughnut, not a Long John, but one of the plain cider doughnuts that Patti wouldn't eat unless it was the very last one.

Then we heard other strange stories. A couple of days after David had gone to the Winona National Bank, he met Paul for coffee at the Blue Heron Coffeehouse. Paul never told anyone about the conversation, but the waiter overheard most of the conversation. The waiter said that David wanted to acquire identification papers. “You are so resourceful,” the waiter overheard David telling Paul, “that I thought you might know where I could buy some sort of identification.”

“What are you talking about?” Paul had asked. According to the waiter, Paul's hands shook a little as he sipped his nonfat vanilla latte.

“You know in the movies,” David said, “when someone needs to have a new ID?”

“I suppose so.”

“I am looking for someone who can do that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Someone gets stalked and needs a new identity. Or a spy who needs some backup identification.”

Paul didn't seem to know what to say, so the waiter said that David changed the subject. “What about increasing fine motor skills for someone who has stiff joints? Do you know anything about that?”

Paul suggested therapy according to the waiter, and even though we asked Paul about this later, he denied that he had ever had such a conversation with David.

Within a few months, we started to see Sherry. People had begun to formulate ideas about her, that she might have a computer brain in her human body, that she had a metal skeleton and a hard-wired brain, that she must be some sort of alien or angel, but really, the truth must have been somewhere in the middle.

Claudio said that he thought the truth is probably simpler than all of that.

Maybe David paid some marriage broker to send him a woman from the Philippines or from Thailand, but maybe she was some refugee who grew up in some confined place, so she didn't learn how to be a human. Regardless, if she was some mail-order bride, she must have had a lobotomy or something because she moved so stiffly and spoke so strangely.

We all suspect that Claudio and Paul know more about Sherry than they pretend to know.

Truth is, when we first heard about Sherry and we started telling all the stories, we didn't know what to think. We joked about her being some sort of advanced blow-up sex doll, and we laughed when Gary stood up on the bar, telling the story for the tenth time, stomping to imitate the thunder. We would laugh about the whole thing, wondering

when David would bring her into some public place so we could stare at her, looking for loose wires or scars.

Really, we were scared.

Date

“You won’t believe the night I had,” Lena told her boyfriend as she walked in the door. Lena still looked attractive after the nine-hour shift at the restaurant and despite her white shirt with faint stains from spaghetti sauce and coffee.

“How’s my perfect little woman?” Spencer asked with an unlit cigarette between his lips. She hated when he called her perfect because the term seemed more sarcastic than complimentary. He teased her to make her relax, but most of the time, his teasing felt the same as mocking.

She started to grumble about her sore feet, but he wasn’t listening to Lena. He focused on the next level of Grand Theft Auto. He was wearing the same Pink Floyd t-shirt and striped boxer shorts that he had been wearing for two days, and from his greasy hair and vague smell of sleep and old pizza, Lena suspected that it had been at least that long since he had bathed.

Spencer was probably depressed or something. He had lost his job at Jefferson’s Bar and Grill a couple of weeks before. He got caught stealing from the till, and the boss fired him on the spot. Also, he couldn’t go back to Winona State University until he appealed his academic suspension or took some classes at the community college to bump up his GPA.

Lena enjoyed being at home, but the little apartment just off the Winona State University campus was pathetic. Spencer sat on the couch his dad gave him, but they didn’t have a bed. They slept on an air mattress, but most mornings after the air had leaked out, Lena woke with her hips grinding into the hard floor. The kitchen was in one corner of the studio apartment and comprised of a half-fridge, a hot plate, and a bar sink that always ended up clogged with silverware or food when Spencer tried to wash

everything down the drain. Aside from the small and dingy room, the apartment was dark, and stale smelling, like a cave full of garbage and cigarettes.

Lena crossed the room to the kitchen. She wanted a stiff screwdriver, maybe two. She found a half-gallon of orange juice and a clear jug of vodka with a wolf on the front, but she couldn't find any glasses. The cupboard was empty. The sink was empty, too.

“Did you clean the kitchen?” Lena called over her shoulder, but the television blared as a cop car started chasing his stolen car.

The clean kitchen shouldn't have surprised and pleased her as much as it did, but the last time Spencer cleaned anything was when he did the laundry, and everything came out with a brownish pink hue. Lena had gotten angry, but she hid her anger because Spencer only laughed at her when her cheeks flushed in frustration. “You look like Marge Simpson when you get angry,” he had said, imitating the grumbling that the character did when irked.

Lena started a thorough search of the empty cabinets. She didn't see any dishes, but an old pair of his boxer shorts hung on the handle of the oven because Spencer could never remember which drawer held the hot pad holders, so when he cooked a frozen pizza, he would use whatever sock or shorts he could find. Lena opened the drawers and the cabinets. All the silverware and nearly all the dishes were missing—all except for two novelty mugs, one in the shape of the Incredible Hulk that held half the liquid that a normal mug held and the other a broken Scooby-Doo mug that Spencer had broken, glued together, and refused to throw away.

Lena yelled again, louder this time. “Did you wash the dishes?” She took the Incredible Hulk mug and filled it with equal parts of vodka and orange juice.

Spencer turned to look at Lena with a large, contented smile. “Sure did.”

“So where are all the stupid dishes?” She took a long drink, nearly finishing the small mug.

Lena looked at Spencer, lounging on the sofa, eyes glazed over and slightly unfocused. She glared at him, trying to communicate the frustration she felt and to force him off the sofa, but he could not hear her dirty look. She felt foolish, trying to communicate her angst to someone who found her anger so humorous.

Spencer lit the cigarette hanging from his lips. “Check in the bathroom.” Even though he seemed pleased with himself, he didn’t look away from the television.

“What?” Lena went into the bathroom, hoping for something nice, maybe a freshly drawn bath or a new outfit or something. In that brief moment that it took Lena to cross the room and go into the bathroom, she irrationally hoped that he had done something nice for her.

But he hadn’t. The bathtub was full of dishes, stacked haphazardly on top of each other.

“What is this?” she yelled.

“I washed the dishes in the bathtub.”

Lena stomped back into the living room/bedroom. Somewhere in her anger, the ridiculousness of washing dishes in the bathroom seared into her brain, confounded with her disappointment of an unpurchased gift or a kind gesture undone. She stomped back to the kitchen, finished the rest of her screwdriver, and poured more alcohol into the ridiculous mug.

Steadying her voice, she said, “You can’t wash the dishes in the bathroom.”

“Why not?”

“It’s gross.”

“What’s so gross about it? It’s the same water we use in the kitchen.”

Somewhere inside of her disappointment and anger, she couldn’t come up with a really good reason—except that he was being an idiot. Besides, whenever she got mad at him, he would mock her, stomping his feet and making frustrated grunts like Marge Simpson. “You can’t wash dishes in the bathtub. It clogs the drain.”

“The sink is already clogged.” His smile stretched across his face, exaggerating his cheekbones and displaying his perfect teeth.

“Did you use dish soap?”

“No, I used shampoo.”

“You’re kidding,” she said, waiting for him to contradict her, but he grinned.

“Dish soap costs three dollars a bottle. That shampoo costs fifteen dollars a bottle.” She took another deep breath, trying to remember what she saw in him, with his dimples and shaggy hair. He was good-looking and adventurous, but at that moment, even his defined cheekbones weren’t enough to soften her anger.

“It makes the bath unsanitary. I don’t want to bathe where old food and dishes have been.” Lena tried not to yell.

“How unsanitary can it be? The only thing that touches the bathtub is your feet. Besides, you clean that bathroom enough to eat off of.”

“I do take baths sometimes,” Lena said, and although she still tried to justify how wrong this was in her head, she felt herself softening because he noticed how often she cleaned the bathroom. “So, are you going to put the dishes away?”

“I’ll put them away tomorrow,” he said, and Lena almost believed him. He bent his legs next to him to make room for Lena to sit down next to him. She sat down and sipped her fresh screwdriver, and he rubbed her shoulder with one hand until the next mission to “Clean the Hood” loaded. “Loosen up, my perfect little woman,” Spencer said. “Tell me about your day.”

Lena knew that Spencer wasn’t listening from the glaze over his eyes that reflected his motorcycle careening through the city. Besides, Lena knew that he wasn’t interested in her life or her day, not unless the story related back to him in some way. After a few sips from her mug, she felt better. She lit a cigarette and began to tell the details of her day.

It had been a quiet Tuesday afternoon shift at the Green Mill Italian restaurant off Highway 61. The other wait staff had left after the lunch rush, and although she stayed through the afternoon, she didn’t have any tables between about two and four in the afternoon. Lena had walked behind the kitchen to the back parking area. She stood under the overhang, smoking a cigarette and watching the rainfall.

She didn’t get another table until 4:15 that afternoon. The group of ladies were regulars—they always asked to split plates of spaghetti, wanted the senior discount and separate checks, disputed the amount for ten minutes, and sat for an hour or more. They would sip coffee tediously, and when the coffee cooled to less than hot, they would ask for new cups and more coffee because they couldn’t drink hot coffee mixed with cold coffee.

Lena kept a stiff smile in front of the ladies, and the ladies thought she was adorable enough to leave a tip—a tip based on the 10% discounted price and no more.

She packaged the leftover spaghetti in small takeout boxes that looked like leftover Chinese. She fetched them new cups and brought more cream and then went back to the dish room to complain to John. Because the evening hadn't produced many dirty dishes yet, John was reading from a textbook discussing electrical circuits. Combined with his Chilean accent and muscles and intelligence, Lena found him very attractive. He listened and looked at her when she spoke, but even as Lena told this part of the story to Spencer, sitting next to him in their pathetic apartment and sipping her screwdriver, he didn't react. He wasn't listening.

Lena continued telling the story to Spencer, not because she wanted him to hear any of it but because she wanted to talk.

Nothing else had happened until later in the evening. After eight hours on her feet, Lena was ready to leave at 7:30 and even considered calling Spencer to see if he would pick her up from work. He usually made some excuse so he wouldn't need to pick her up—he was waiting for a friend to come over, he was watching a movie, drunk, or something—so she didn't call.

She would walk home. She lived close to the Winona State campus, nearly two miles from the restaurant, but she could walk home easily.

The dinner rush had passed by 7:30, but the lead waiter assigned her a final table, guaranteeing that she would be in the restaurant for another hour.

From the doorway of the kitchen, she watched the couple follow the hostess through the small hallway into the back dining room. The couple walked very close together, and the man held one of his arms to the woman's lower back and held her hands as if he were supporting her. Perhaps she was recovering from some injury because her

legs and back were so stiff and straight. She was a beautifully petite woman who might have been Korean or Japanese and maybe twenty years old, but her delicate features hid an ambiguity that Lena attributed to a mixed heritage. She wore a tacky red dress with too many sequins and that showed every one of her perfect curves and flawless shape. The man was much older than the woman, maybe as old as fifty, but he was attractive. He seemed to have some sort of shabby wealth because of his expensive clothes and manicured nails and deep eyes sunk behind tortoise shell glasses, but his hair was a tussled mess.

The man moved the woman's chair away from the table so that she could sit down, but a strange thing happened: as she bent her waist and leaned down onto the chair, her legs stuck out straight in front of her, as if they were in a brace that kept her from bending her legs. The man leaned down and gently bent her knees. The hostess hid her surprise and set the menus on the table before she scurried back to her station.

Lena shook her head and carried a tray of water glasses and warm bread to their table. The man looked over the menu, but the woman looked blankly at the closed menu lying on the table in front of her.

Without looking up from his menu, the man said to his date, "Open the menu and look inside. It has the available foods."

"Hello," Lena said, setting the water and bread on the table. The man looked at Lena and glanced at the woman as she gently opened the menu. The woman didn't move her fingers to open it. Her hands seemed strapped into an invisible brace like the one that had kept her from moving her legs. Her joints were frozen with her fingers spread and curved slightly. As she opened the menu, the woman smiled gradually, as if she had to

think about every muscle to move her cheeks and mouth in that way. Something seemed wrong with this couple, something off. The woman didn't seem normal. Something was wrong with her.

"I'll be serving you this evening," Lena said. She smiled to cover her confusion. Lena didn't get tips for understanding people; she got tips for serving, listening, and smiling.

"Would you like to order an appetizer or a bottle of wine?" Lena asked. Her voice felt slower and more carefully enunciated than normal, and Lena realized that she spoke carefully, like she would speak to a small child or to a foreigner.

"Thank you," the man said. "We'd like to order some wine. It's a special occasion, so perhaps you can recommend something good?"

"We have a new soave in from Tre Venezia. It's fantastic." Lena didn't really think it was fantastic. The wait staff sampled a bottle earlier in the week, and the boss encouraged them to sell the overpriced wine, and good wine usually meant better tips. Lena thought it tasted like olives and tobacco.

The man looked at the wine list, tracing his finger down the column of prices. "I think that is too expensive. Do you have a house wine?"

"Would you like red or white?" Lena glanced at the woman, but she continued to look at the menu. Her vision seemed unfocused. Her eyeballs didn't shift like people's eyes do while skimming over a menu.

The man did not consult with the woman about what kind of wine she would like. "Red, please. A merlot?"

Back in the kitchen, Lena mocked them. “John, you won’t believe the couple I just got.”

“What are they like?” John had moved to Winona to study engineering at the university, but Lena suspected that he enjoyed her opinions about popular culture and enjoyed her curvy hips.

“Do they have mail-order brides in Chile?”

“I don’t know. What are they?”

“It’s when a man wants a beautiful, exotic, and probably subservient wife, so he buys the woman a plane ticket and gives her a place to stay. They don’t know each other beforehand, and I don’t think the woman can leave him.”

“I’ve heard of that.”

“She must be a mail-order bride. They’re so weird. She moves like a Barbie doll, and he seems like he’s on his first date ever. He didn’t even ask her what kind of wine she wanted.”

He laughed a little and opened his mouth, ready to say something, but he didn’t.

Lena flipped her hair as she turned away from John. She collected wine glasses and the bottle of merlot. At the table, she opened the bottle and poured wine for them. The woman sat stiffly with her legs uncrossed and her posture like something taught in a finishing school.

“Would you like to order?” Lena asked.

The man folded his menu and took the one from the woman. “We will have spaghetti with meatballs.”

“Excellent,” and Lena turned to go.

“Just a moment,” the man said. “I would like to introduce myself.” He shook Lena’s hand as if his fingers had recently healed from a bad break. “I’m David Levison. And this,” he gestured toward the woman, “is Sherry.”

Lena looked at them both in turn. “Nice to meet you both. I’m Lena.” Her other tables had gone, so if he wanted to talk, she would listen. Without all the other people calling for more water and bread and coffee, she could invest extra time to get a better tip.

“This is a very special night,” David continued. “This is the first time that Sherry has been to a restaurant.”

“That’s nice.” Lena nodded and backed away from the table. Lena watched as Sherry tipped her head back and poured the wine into her mouth as if she was pouring the liquid into one of the garbage cans with a flip-open lid. Wine dripped down her chin.

Hiding inside the doorway to the main dining room, Lena watched David touch his napkin to his chin, encouraging the woman to use the napkin to wipe up the stream of wine, but Sherry did not appear to understand. She poured more wine into her mouth, and the wine overflowed and dripped onto her lap. He lifted his napkin again and demonstrated how to lay the napkin in her lap, chuckling at her. He seemed to be mocking her.

While John was busy washing a pile of dishes that was typical at the end of a steady Friday evening at the Green Mill Restaurant, Lena rolled silverware into the freshly laundered napkins and told him about the couple. “She hasn’t been to a restaurant. Sounds like he’s had her caged up or chained in the basement. Can you believe it?”

John turned off the high-powered spray nozzle and faced Lena. “You’re wrong about them, Lena.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s David Levison, right?” John said, leaning close to Lena’s ear. She nodded, and she could feel his breath on her ear. “You won’t believe this. I’ve heard of that man.”

“Tell me.” Lena felt his warm breath on her neck. The conspiratorial whispers excited Lena.

“I’ve heard stories about him and the woman.”

“What’ve you heard?”

“He’s David Levison. He’s a mad scientist, and he’s been working on some big project—probably in his basement in some crazy homemade laboratory. Maybe he has had her chained up in the basement.”

“I don’t get it.”

John smiled, probably dragging out his story and keeping Lena in suspense, but before he could continue, the food prep chef yelled at Lena. The salads were ready.

Lena tossed her head a little and walked away from John, promising to return shortly. She brought the salads to David and Sherry’s table. “Do you need anything else? More wine?” David shook his head. Sherry stabbed at the salad with her fork as if she were cleaning rubbish from the park. Lena hid in the doorway again, and she watched the woman put her fork in her open mouth and shake it, knocking some of the pieces loose. When David laughed at Sherry, Lena felt a cold chill down her spine. He might have been teasing her, but really, it seemed more like he was mocking her.

Lena turned to go back into the dish room, but nearly bumped into John who watched the couple over Lena's shoulder. John finished trying to create any suspense about what he knew, and the story tumbled out. "The man, David Levison, he's got grants for research in the engineering department on campus. He works with the university, but I don't think he ever teaches classes. Sounds like he created the woman in his basement. Lots of rumors have been going around town, about her being a robot or some freak of nature."

"So, wait. What are you saying?"

"She's not normal." John leaned close to Lena, whispering so no one in the kitchen could hear them. He wasn't breathing on her neck or whispering right into her ear, but she still felt warm.

"The woman isn't human?" she asked.

"I don't know. I think she's human, but something's wrong with her. She might have a brain tumor or something, but I suspect that David's done some crazy brain surgery on her. Taking out some of her limbic system and adding stem cells to her frontal lobe."

"Why is he doing this?"

"Taking out her limbic system would decrease her emotional and hormonal responses. Adding to her frontal lobe would increase her logical capabilities."

"Why would he mess with her head like that?"

"Something about creating a perfect companion and wife. He wanted to make a woman who'd be a perfect in every way."

"Why can't she move right?"

“I don’t know. If he did mess with her brain, then he could have affected her fine motor skills. Who knows what else he could mess up by digging around in her brain.”

“Gross. Still sounds like a mail-order bride,” Lena said, but again, the conversation was cut short. Of course, kitchen conversations were often truncated.

But this was a strange interruption. Lena heard a commotion from the front of the restaurant, and strangely, the commotion moved into the rear dining room. She and John ran into the rear dining room and froze.

A reporter from the *Winona Daily News* was there, snapping pictures and asking questions. Lena saw his press ID clipped to his sweatshirt—a sweatshirt that read Winona State University on it. The ID said something about “student intern.”

Lena pushed past the reporter and found David, calmly sipping his wine between bites of salad. Sherry shook more salad into her mouth, but now the front of her sequined dress was covered in wine, lettuce bits, and crumbled croutons.

Something about the strange, artificial woman, made Lena sad and a little angry. If she did have a tainted brain, then she might not understand what the man did to her and how strange she must seem. Maybe the woman didn’t understand what was happening, didn’t understand that the photographer tried to capture her, and didn’t understand how ridiculous her dress and stiff movements were, but it was wrong that David did nothing, just smiling and posing for the pictures.

“Dr. Levison,” the reporter asked. “Is she the perfect woman?”

“Yes,” David said.

“How much will you sell her for?”

“She’s not for sale.”

“Have you had sex with Sherry?” The student reporter fired off questions as if he were trying to get answers from some important politician during a press conference.

“That’s none of your business.”

Lena walked back to the doorway to the main dining room, hiding in the doorway, but she could still hear the reporter’s questions.

“Is she a sex toy?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Sherry, can you talk?”

David brushed his napkin across his mouth and cleared his throat as if preparing to make a speech. “Of course she can talk, but this isn’t a press conference. You are welcome to stay and take some pictures, but I won’t answer any more questions.”

Lena made her way back to the table and said, “Mr. Levison, can I get you anything? Maybe a few more napkins?”

David’s smile was tightened and formal, and he seemed to try to suppress his excitement about the reporter. Lena swore that he seemed to be posing for the student reporter.

“I’ll be right back,” Lena said, and she made her way past the pushy local reporter and went back to the kitchen.

The food was ready, Lena grabbed more napkins, and she went back to the dining room, elbowing her way past the kid with the camera to set the plates in front of Sherry and David. “I’ll be close if you need anything,” Lena said, setting several fresh napkins in front of Sherry. David nodded. The woman seemed to focus her vague eyes on the

spaghetti in front of her. Lena wondered how Sherry would eat it but took a step away from the table.

This scene made Lena feel protective and angry, but she couldn't sort through the feelings or why she felt that way. She could clean up the woman, make her look beautiful, and stop the embarrassing scene. She wanted the couple to get up and leave. She wanted to force the reporter to go. Possibly, David could throw a glass of wine as the kid took a photograph. Better yet, Sherry could spit food and wine at David, and Lena smiled at this thought.

Instead, David ate, gently trying to demonstrate the art of eating spaghetti to Sherry, twirling the noodles around his fork and using a spoon to keep the sauce from splattering all over his clothes. In the end, she used her fork like a shovel and tossed the pasta into her mouth. She tipped her head back and stretched her mouth open as if she were waiting for a dentist's drill. As she tossed the spaghetti towards her face, only about half of it landed inside her mouth, and even when her mouth was full of pasta, dangling ends and red sauce spilled out of her mouth. A meatball rolled off her fork and onto the floor. The paparazzi photographed this while David held up his glass, posing for the cameras.

Lena had to do something. She dipped one of the napkins in Sherry's water glass and wiped some spaghetti sauce off the woman's chin. The skin felt firm and strong, the way she imagined a bodybuilder's skin might feel stretched over tight muscles. Lena dabbed at Sherry's shoulder, fascinated by her taut skin and surprised that Sherry had somehow spilled wine down her back.

David nodded politely at Lena.

“Weird, huh?” Lena asked Spencer. He nodded, but Lena knew he didn’t care and wasn’t listening.

This was the end of the story that Lena would tell Spencer. She had finished narrating the events to Spencer, sipping on her screwdriver from the Incredible Hulk mug, but he hadn’t listened to one word. Spencer didn’t look surprised. He stared blankly at the television and occasionally nodded, but he didn’t listen to any of it. Lena didn’t tell him that she had stood in the dining room, waiting for the couple to finish, waiting anxiously for something horrible to happen, and when she finally led the couple out of the restaurant with their little Chinese takeout boxes filled with leftover spaghetti and with the front of Sherry’s sequined dress and body partially covered in salad and pasta and wine, Lena didn’t say anything. David had his arm around her waist, supporting her and almost carrying her out the front of the restaurant. David left a large tip, but really, Lena felt like she failed some test. She wanted to do something, say something. She didn’t know what she wanted to say, but the vague disquiet made her feel uncomfortable as they left the restaurant.

Instead, David turned to her and said, “Well, she isn’t perfect yet, but she’s still my perfect little woman.” His excitement showed in his tight-lipped smile and in the way he watched the photographer continue to snap pictures while David waved and led the mess of a woman out the door.

Lena didn’t tell Spencer this last part.

Dinner

When Paul first heard of Sherry, he expected David to introduce her to them. It should have been easy for David to invite Paul and Claudio over to meet her because they were his two closest friends. David had stopped meeting them at Players on the weekends and never came by Paul and Claudio's house for drinks. They hadn't seen David in months.

Paul was a thin, slight man with large blue eyes and thick dark hair that he wore away from his face, smoothed back in a gentle wave against his head. Paul suspected that David enjoyed spending time with Paul and Claudio, spending time with attractive, interesting men. He may have also felt comfortable spending time with a homosexual couple that didn't fit into the small town any better than David did.

It's funny the way friendships work. Paul knew that David was avoiding them for some unknown reason probably relating to Sherry, but when he got busy and remembered how much Claudio could make a scene flirting with David, he didn't really miss David. Paul enjoyed David's company and intelligence, but Claudio could make any situation worse.

Maybe David knew how much Claudio had encouraged the gossip and the rumors about David and Sherry, and maybe David didn't want to give Claudio any more material to spread. Claudio spread every tidbit and theory that he could, enjoying his privileged relationship with David spreading ridiculous stories.

It wasn't until nearly six months after Sherry appeared in the town that David called up Paul and asked them to dinner at his house on top of the bluff overlooking the town. Paul answered the phone, but Claudio hovered nearby, trying to hear the

conversation. “We need to find out about Sherry,” he whispered to Paul. “Let’s go. Tell him we’ll come up there anytime.”

Paul knew that the rumors about David and Sherry fascinated Claudio because he reminded Paul of this everyday and because he managed to dig up the latest stories about them. Paul had no idea where Claudio heard all the stories.

“It’s been a while,” David had said. “I’d like to have you up to my house. Catch up on everything.”

“Will Sherry be there?” Paul had asked.

“Sherry? What do you know about Sherry?” He sounded defensive, and Paul wondered if David had heard all the gossip in town.

“The whole town has been talking about her for months.”

“Oh.” After a pause, David said, “Yes, she will be here.”

Paul agreed to bring Claudio over to David’s house on Friday evening around six o’clock. David’s house was on one of the bluffs overlooking the little city, and the fall colors were just beginning to turn. “We can sit out back and smoke cigars after dinner. The colors should be fantastic this weekend.”

Paul knew, like everyone else in the town, that the colors seemed to explode about this time in early October, and inevitably, Harley riders and day trippers from all over the Midwest would drive into town for the day, walking around in the parks and watching for bald eagles. Even though the daylight was beginning to wane, a quiet evening on the bluff would be lovely.

In the three days before the dinner at David’s house, Paul and Claudio conspired about the dinner. Claudio spread news of the impending dinner to anyone that would

listen to his gossip, and although Claudio hadn't made up his mind about Sherry, he had come to some sort of conclusion about her: that she was a strange mail-order bride. They imagined a rural town in North Korea or Thailand.

Even though David had continued to show up at the university to lead graduate studies in composites and in alternate energy, he was distracted and didn't speak with anyone—not even Paul.

When Paul rang the doorbell at David's house on Friday night, Sherry met Claudio and Paul at the front door. She wore a short black skirt and a purplish blouse that reflected the light with shimmering pinks and blues. Her earrings and necklace were small pearls that echoed colors like her blouse. She was beautiful, but her clothes looked like something a nineteen-year-old would wear to a meat market bar.

“May I take your coats?” Sherry asked. She pronounced her words slowly.

Claudio looked at Sherry as if she were a talking cat. “It's too warm to wear a coat.”

Paul nudged Claudio slightly with his elbow and said, “It's nice to meet you, Sherry.”

Claudio smiled and nodded, muttering under his breath something about how it was as nice to meet Sherry as it would be to meet Michael Jackson's long lost love child. Paul nudged him again.

If Sherry heard Claudio's comment, she chose not to respond to it. Sherry smiled and said, “I am so glad that you could come. You look great. How are you doing?”

“We're fine,” Paul said.

“How was the drive?”

“It was a quick drive,” Paul said, playing along with Sherry’s small talk. Even though David’s house was above the city on the bluff, Paul and Claudio lived in a small two-story home in town, less than ten minutes away.

“You did not drive through any traffic?”

“No.” Winona never had any traffic.

Sherry led them into the house. “David is waiting for you in the dining room. I’m still fixing dinner.”

“Thank you,” Paul said.

Claudio and Paul had been to David’s house before—before Sherry began to occupy all of David’s time—but Sherry pointed them down the hallway and then excused herself to finish making dinner. “Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes.”

When they were out of Sherry’s hearing, Claudio muttered to Paul. “Told you she was weird. Think she’s from Vietnam?”

“We’ll ask David,” Paul said, touching Claudio gently on the shoulder. “He’ll tell us the truth.”

“Maybe she comes from a strange rural town in Manchuria where the women aren’t allowed to speak.”

Paul was trying not to laugh. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

David was sitting at the dining room table in the oversized dining room. The table was large enough to seat ten or twelve people comfortably and was a heavy wood with ornate carvings on the legs and around the edges. The legs were shaped the way a dragon’s legs might look, so that the table looked like some massive, gothic piece from an old castle. Aside from six chairs that matched the ornate carving of the table and that

left enough room around the table to make it seem bare, the room was completely empty. They sat close to one end of the table.

“This is a huge dining set,” Paul commented.

“You haven’t seen it?” David said. He stroked the surface of the table like he was petting an expensive pet. “I got this a few months ago. I wanted something to try to fill some of the space in this room.”

Paul and Claudio sat at the table, sitting next to each other on one side of the table. The table did not hold the usual papers and piles of mail that David usually left all around his house in discarded and unorganized piles. Instead, the table had plates, silverware, four wine glasses, a basket of paper napkins, and a basket of rolls. The silverware and glasses might have been exactly two inches from each of the plates. The glasses might have been exactly at the 75-degree point of all the plates. The napkins were pressed in exact right triangles. Paul even thought that he smelled some sort of flowery cleaning solution.

“Your house seems more together than the last time we were here,” Claudio said.

David did not seem to notice the precisely set table or his friends’ amazement at the orderliness. Instead, he collected the wine glasses and said, “I’m so glad you both decided to come. Do you want chardonnay or Riesling?”

Both men indicated the chardonnay.

David poured three glasses of wine and passed them across the massive table to the men. They sipped the wine, and Claudio made a little face. He took a large gulp from his glass instead of trying to savor the flavor.

“Sherry’s making some fish for dinner,” David said.

“That sounds good,” Paul said.

They sat for several minutes. David stared into his glass, Paul watched the other men carefully, and Claudio looked around the room and examined the silverware. Finally, Claudio picked up a fork and said, “This is nice cutlery. Have you learned some taste since we saw you last?”

David laughed. His laugh always sounded higher pitched and more nervous than he probably was.

Paul said, “What Claudio means, I think,” he paused here to sip his wine and to search for his words, “is that your home seems better decorated and cleaner than the last time we saw it.”

“Oh, yes,” David said. “With a woman, things are different.”

Claudio smiled, turning up his lips on one side and glancing at Paul. Claudio finished his glass of wine in another two gulps.

“When I leave papers everywhere,” David said, “she cleans up after me. She cleans and picks up all the messes I make.”

Paul took a sip from his glass of wine. He knew that Claudio was longing to hear all about Sherry, but Paul decided to make a little small talk, “I don’t see you much around the university anymore. How’s work?”

David began to talk quietly and passionately about his work. Although Paul worked with him in the university’s engineering department, Paul rarely saw David in the last months—not at work or otherwise. David explained about his research with some new composites, using some graduate students in the engineering department to run tests.

Both Paul and David had comfortable positions at Winona State University, but David always seemed a little more excited about composites and energy than seemed natural.

David reached over the huge table to take Claudio's glass and fill it with more chardonnay. After passing the glass back to Claudio, Claudio took another long drink from the glass. David continued talking about his work, telling them about his research with the student engineers.

After Paul had listened long enough that he felt that he could no longer keep his eyes from wandering and his attention from meandering, Paul said, "We've heard a lot of rumors about Sherry. It's good to meet her."

David leaned back in his chair. "So what do you think of her?" David smiled broadly and crossed his arms across his chest.

From his half-smile, Claudio seemed ready with some sarcastic remark, so Paul jumped in. "Your home looks lovely, and you seem to be settling down very well. Sherry seems to have helped you."

"Please," David said, "I want to know what you really think. Please tell me."

Paul and Claudio exchanged a thoughtful look, and Claudio took a large swallow of his wine. David put his hands in front of his mouth, pressing his fingertips together and waiting.

Paul cleared his throat before Claudio could say anything. "David, she's beautiful, and your house is so clean." He cleared his throat again and repeated, "You seem to be settling down well."

David raised one of his eyebrows. "I know that she is beautiful. I know that she cleans and organizes my house well. But what do you think of her?"

“Who is she?” Claudio asked.

“Sherry is a wonderful woman. She doesn’t have many skills, but she seems to be learning about housekeeping and cooking quickly. She’s also great with numbers.”

“Is she a mail-order bride?” Claudio said.

“Not exactly.”

“Is she from Asia somewhere?”

“Not really.”

Paul nodded politely, but Claudio pressed more. “David, that’s not what I mean. What is she?”

David sighed a little. “Claudio, you are gaining a reputation in town for being a gossip about this.”

Paul laughed. He imagined Claudio sitting at a coffee shop or a hair salon and gossiping with the other women. Claudio glared at Paul across the expansive dining table.

“But what is she?” Claudio said. “Where is she from?”

David reached across the table and tipped off the wine glasses even though his and Paul’s glasses were nearly full. “I made her,” David said.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s a perfect woman that I’ve formed and created. I wanted to make a perfect companion.”

Paul took a large gulp of his wine, trying to avoid some outburst or laugh. Claudio pressed further: “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I wanted a supportive, loving spouse that would follow directions and encourage me to be a greater person.” David crossed his arms and spoke firmly as if he defended one of his most important beliefs.

“What does that mean?”

“I can’t really tell you more than that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, this raises some difficulties. Perhaps I could get into some legal trouble or perhaps someone would try to steal her.”

Paul had heard all the stories that Claudio brought home. Claudio would greet Paul at the door some nights, pouring some rich drink and nearly bouncing with excitement to tell Paul about the latest rumor. With David’s sly smile and avoidance, Paul was beginning to think that David enjoyed the mystery he had created.

“Beyond what I’m willing for Claudio to share with the entire town,” David said, “I don’t want to say any more.”

“Is she a robot?” Claudio asked.

“I can’t say.”

“Is she an alien?”

David smiled a little. “I can’t say.”

“What is she? A lobotomized mental patient?”

Paul thought that David seemed to enjoy this secret. David smiled broadly, apparently pleased with the interest he had created. “I can’t say.”

Claudio’s face was flushed red, and Paul wasn’t sure if he was frustrated or drunk. Claudio asked, “David, what happened to you?”

David didn't say anything, but he made a motion with his hand for Claudio to continue.

"David," Claudio said, "You used to spend time with us. You never seemed interested in women before, well, before her. You'd go to clubs with us. Even though you don't go out with us anymore, we still want to know what is going on in your life. Women included."

Claudio looked away for a moment and added, "I even thought you were interested in me. Now all you do is work on your perfect woman. You never return our calls."

David sat silently. Paul knew that he hadn't really been interested in women before Sherry, but her body was perfect and strong. David's secretive smile and crossed arms glowed with a pride in the puzzle he had created.

Before any of the men could decide to say anything else, Sherry came into the dining room. The men stood up: David bowed a little to Sherry, but Paul jumped to his feet as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn't have been doing.

"Is dinner ready?" David asked.

"No. Dinner is ruined." Sherry announced this so unapologetically and factually that Paul laughed.

"What happened?"

"The rice burned to the bottom of the pan. The spinach and tomatoes have a soggy texture, and the fish is overcooked."

Paul saw Claudio hold his hand up to his face to hide a smile, but Paul laughed out loud. "How the hell can a perfect woman screw up cooking?" Claudio said a little too

loud. “All you do is follow the directions. Isn’t that part of what a perfect woman’s supposed to do? Follow directions?”

David furrowed his brow and again poured more wine. “Sherry, how could all these things go wrong?”

“The pot is an inexpensive composite of steel and cast iron so the heat distribution is uneven. The rice burned as a direct result. Because you do not own a broiler pan, I used a standard cooking sheet to broil the fish, but the pan did not allow for even cooking. Also, the oven’s temperature appears to be off by as much as 20 degrees, seriously affecting the cooking calculations.”

Paul sputtered a laugh. “She talks like a robot.”

“Never mind,” David said, turning to Paul and Claudio. “Should we order Chinese?”

“Chinese is my favorite,” Claudio said, sounding a bit like a teenaged girl talking to an attractive college senior. He took another drink of his wine and smiled. His cheeks reddened to a nearly purple color.

Paul heard a bit of movement. David pushed away from the table, and Claudio had a familiar, drunk smile on his face. Paul looked under the table and realized that Claudio had taken off his sandal and was stroking David’s leg with his bare toes. Paul felt a little sick but not surprised.

David cleared his throat. “Sherry, will you call in an order at the Great Hunan? The one down the bluff and in downtown? Let’s get an order of shrimp and broccoli, some egg foo young, some General Tsao’s chicken, and some egg drop soup.” He turned to Paul and said, “Would you like anything else?”

“Perhaps some spring rolls?” Paul asked.

“And some moo goo gai pan?” Claudio added.

“Certainly,” David said. “Sherry, will you make the order and walk over to get it?”

She nodded curtly.

“She has to walk?” Paul asked.

“She can’t drive yet. She has not mastered the skills and coordination to operate a car.” David pushed back from the table a little more. “She may be gone for an hour to walk over and get it.”

“Maybe we could drive over and pick up the food?” Paul asked. “Chinese is better hot and fresh.”

“Sherry can go. I’d rather stay here and talk with you. Shall we go to the back porch for now?” David said. He stood up and asked, “Perhaps smoke a cigar?”

They all agreed, and Sherry left to make the order. They stood in the dining room for a minute, waiting for any of them to say something. Sherry came back to the room after a couple of minutes. She hadn’t left to walk to the restaurant, and she appeared with a tray of tumbler glasses filled with ice and a bottle of Jack Daniels and led the men onto the back porch.

Claudio and Paul walked through the French doors onto the back screened-in porch. Several wicker chairs sagged around a wicker table, and large piles of books and magazines were stacked near the door to the house. The wicker pieces had served as David’s living room furniture for a long time, but he had spray painted them dark brown

to appear more sophisticated. David sat in one of the chairs, leaning over the wicker coffee table, pouring whiskey into the glasses of ice.

David didn't seem disappointed at the ruined dinner. He smiled as if he thought it was amusing on some level. Paul suspected that this whole dinner was some sort of experiment, and David was trying out his invention or testing his new research in a controlled environment.

David handed Paul and Claudio each a glass of whiskey and took a deep breath. He handed a glass to each of the men, saying, "I'm so glad you could come." They stood around the wicker furniture, not sure if the wicker furniture was strong enough to hold them.

Claudio opened his mouth to say something, but Paul interrupted him. "Of course, David. We wanted to come."

"Out of curiosity," Claudio said, "if nothing else." He held his glass to his mouth and sat on one of the wicker chairs, which sighed as he shifted. "You could use some new furniture in here."

David and Paul sat in the wicker chairs next to Claudio. The wicker chairs creaked as they settled into the chairs, and the glasses of whiskey sweat through the cracks of wicker in the table. A large, clear ashtray sat in the middle of the table. It was clean of ashes.

"Cigar?" David offered, and when the others nodded, David retrieved a wooden box from under the wicker table. He took out three cigars and began cutting the tips carefully.

“Sherry is a new creature in our world,” David began, “I don’t expect you to understand or appreciate her abilities, but I really want to know what you think of her.” Paul assumed that David was trying to collect data for this strange experiment. As intelligent and careful as David was, maybe he had some control group and documentation for all his work with Sherry.

“She’s beautiful,” Paul jumped in. Paul glanced at Claudio, and then he continued talking. “She seems very polite and sort of strange, but we have only seen her for a few minutes.”

Claudio took a long drink from his glass and started to open his mouth again. Paul’s steely look silenced him. David finished cutting the cigars and handed one to Claudio and one to Paul. David then lit a cheap Bic lighter for each of them to light their cigars. Claudio leaned in closer to David and looked at him through the flickering yellow flame.

David sighed and took a sip of his whiskey. “This is why I asked you to come,” David began, leaning back in his wicker chair and lighting his own cigar. “Paul, as much as I appreciate your kindness, I want you both to be candid. What do you think about her?”

Claudio looked at Paul, and Paul nodded slightly, so Claudio began talking. “She looks like a prostitute. Or worse, an Asian mail-order bride.”

David nodded.

“Her clothes are too tight,” Claudio continued.

David nodded again.

“And I don’t think I am the first person to say that whatever she is, she doesn’t seem right. She doesn’t seem human. And apparently she can’t cook. What do you see in her?”

David’s cheeks flushed a little, but he took a deep breath and said, “Unlike anyone else, she doesn’t get angry when I work too much. She doesn’t get upset if I don’t call or if I work all night at my lab. She doesn’t find problems with my work. She doesn’t criticize what I do.”

It was Claudio’s turn to blush slightly, so instead of responding to David’s subtle accusations, Claudio lifted his glass and drank the rest of his whiskey. Paul shook his head a little, trying to stop David from refilling his glass with more alcohol without Claudio noticing. Neither of them noticed Paul’s brief gesture to stop David from giving Claudio more alcohol. David poured more whiskey in his glass.

“Paul, tell me what you think,” David said.

Paul cleared his throat and glanced at Claudio. “I think this is what you have worked for. I suspect that whatever experiment you’re conducting, you should consider this project a success.”

“Thank you,” David said. He smiled a little at Claudio. “Paul seems to grasp the importance of Sherry’s success. What do you think, Claudio?”

“She does have a perfect body.” Claudio smiled at David, but then he kept talking. “But she looks like a whore. Did you pick out her clothes? And certainly, your house has more furniture, but with a perfect woman to decorate your house, I’d think that the décor would be better. Can’t she use the internet?”

“Of course she can.”

“She should be able to research design and fashion from Nat Berkus and Thom Filicia.”

“She is still learning,” David said.

“And you’re still wearing the drab trousers and shirts that you have always worn. You’re so attractive, but your clothing is horrible.”

“I dress to be as comfortable and safe as possible. This shirt helps to diffuse static electricity so that I don’t need to wear the safety jackets at work. Static charges can be a lethal threat in my business.”

“You are not at work now, though.” Claudio leaned closer to David, smiling shyly and drunkenly like a college sorority girl who is trying to disguise her sexual prowess, and doing so badly.

“Seriously, though,” Claudio continued. “She has access to decorating and fashion materials. This wicker is horrible, and I suppose you can afford better furniture. Sure, it’s a lot cleaner in here than it ever was, but can’t she do anything to make it welcoming? Why doesn’t she use some of her perfection to fix this place up? I’m sure she could help you spend some of your money.”

Claudio leaned over and touched David’s knee lightly. David shifted uncomfortably, and Paul pretended not to see.

“If you would like someone to decorate your house, let me know.”

Paul took a long puff on his cigar and tried to relax. Claudio flirted with many people when he had too much to drink, and Paul knew that he had passed this point of intoxication.

“And if you want someone to help you pick out clothes, I can help you.”

Paul cleared his throat. He was afraid of what could happen. He wanted to spend time with David and find out more about Sherry, but Claudio was drunk. Unpredictable things could happen.

“If you want someone to help you get dressed—or undressed—I can help you.”

Paul put his glass down on the table and reached to move Claudio’s glass away from him. Paul said, “I am sitting right here, Claudio.”

Claudio made eye contact with Paul and looked as if he hadn’t realized that Paul was sitting right next to him. “Oh, Paulie,” Claudio said. “Don’t tell me this bothers you.”

“Yes, it does.” Paul sipped his drink and stood up to leave.

“We have fooled around with other people before. Hell, you even kissed David once.”

Paul felt his cheeks burn. “I’m leaving. If you’re coming, let’s go.”

Claudio shrugged. “We haven’t had any dinner, and David doesn’t mind. And tell me that you wouldn’t love to spend some more time with him and Sherry. We can help Sherry be more, um, normal. Hanging around in this house with David can’t be helping her.”

“David, do you mind when Claudio hits on you?” Paul said to David. Paul leaned over the wicker table and rubbed the end of the cigar on the edge of the ashtray to put it out.

Claudio usually sipped on a glass of wine or liquor at night, but in uncomfortable social situations, he drank as much and as fast as he could. He must be incredibly uncomfortable even if he did enjoy the stories about them.

David stammered for a moment but finally said, “Yes, it does.”

Claudio glared at David for a moment, but then turned to Paul. “Let’s go,” he said.

Paul was glad that Claudio came with him.

Announcement

Claudio told us about the dinner, but Paul wouldn't say very much about it. Paul seemed uncomfortable talking about it, or perhaps he didn't want to encourage Claudio's gossip.

We hadn't grown tired of the stories about Sherry and David, but about a year after we heard about the dinner at David's house with Paul and Claudio, we were telling the same stories and coming up with the same theories, trying to explain her stiff movements and strange speech. She spoke like some robot from a 1960s B-movie. She wasn't right, but as many theories as we concocted about her, we didn't come any closer to understanding her.

After hearing Gary's story about Sherry's Frankenstonian birth for the hundredth time and after hearing about Keith's ideas about Sherry's computerized speech, we didn't come any closer to the truth.

It was strange the way we would grow a little weary of the same stories, and then a new chapter would begin.

The next chapter began with the wedding announcements.

According to Sam at the post office, David sent out over a hundred invitations purple envelopes, but wasn't sure what to make of the cards. She actually opened one of the envelopes to have a look, and the lilac-scented paper and gold lettering impressed her. The announcements were classy.

We wanted to go to the wedding and watch the marriage ritual turn corrupt. We imagined Sherry in some ridiculous dress with a short skirt and with lots of cleavage. Perhaps the couple would spend thousands of dollars on the wedding—flowers, cake,

dress, food—all in some attempt to have a normal wedding. There was no possibility that this would be a normal wedding.

Maybe some people would protest the wedding. With all the tales and fiction around the couple, many people in town had grown to resent them even if the rest of us felt fascinated but the whole thing.

Who could help being curious about the wedding? It was like watching celebrity news about the latest young, blond arrested for drugs or drinking and driving or whatever. It was just too fascinating. It was like watching a car crash into a speeding train and then seeing an airplane crash into the smoldering wreckage of the crashed train and car. We just had to watch.

A few people from the town, like Claudio and Paul, returned the RSVP card, agreeing to go to the service. Claudio and Paul were David's only good friends, but we had heard how awkward Claudio was when he met Sherry. We weren't entirely certain, but David's friends may have felt more loyalty to him than curiosity. Whatever, Claudio and Paul decided to go.

Some other people decided to go to the wedding, but they probably just wanted to be there, to be part of the crazy scandal. The people who agreed to go fought to see Sherry. They wanted to see her and observe her, but most of them couldn't face her or talk to her.

But then, like the irrationality and chaos of a riot, we started to hear stories about how Sherry couldn't pass the pre-marriage blood test and how Pastor Steve refused to marry them in the church. People started talking about going to the mayor or the governor to prevent the wedding. There was a petition at Bloedow's Bakery, and even

though fifty or so people signed it, nothing happened. Maybe we should've stopped it or done something.

We wanted to do something, but we didn't stop the wedding.

Wedding

David Levison's wedding was in an hour. Even though Claudio had been home all day, he was not dressed. Paul was ready to go, sitting in front of his and Claudio's blue house, smoking a cigarette. Claudio walked out the front door and stood in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe and sipping a glass of port, his second of the evening. Claudio waited for Paul to say something to guilt him into going to the wedding.

Dressed for the wedding, Paul looked a little like Jimmy Stewart when he was very young and had dark hair, like in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. He wore the pinstriped suit Claudio loved, and he told Paul such. He wasn't always complementary, but Claudio was very intentional with his compliments.

The last time that Paul wore that suit was the night that they had gone to David's house to meet Sherry.

"We have to go," Paul said.

Claudio leaned against the doorframe and lit a cigarette. "Love should be a choice," Claudio said. "If you have to make someone to love you, then the whole thing is pointless."

"He loves her. I suppose that's all that matters."

Claudio sat down next to Paul on the edge of the porch. They looked out onto the street, into the neighbor's yard, into the sky—looking at nothing and seeing everything. A yellow ball and toy gun were abandoned in the neighbor's yard across the street. A small bike was tipped over in the grass, left as if the child had been raptured. The house next to them on the left had too much landscaping, with squatting trolls in the pansies and

shimmering globes among the daisies. The lilac bushes from the yard sent smells like a quiet and simple love note.

Claudio was stouter than Paul, but he had defined cheekbones and deep brown eyes pointing to his Peruvian heritage, a hint of exotic appearance that Paul said he loved in Claudio.

“If there’s no choice, then this love is wrong,” Claudio said, still looking over the neighbors’ yards. “That’s not love. She didn’t choose David. David molded her to be what he wanted.” Claudio was usually uncomfortable speaking so openly about love, but the two glasses of port had loosened his tongue.

“We should support David,” Paul said. “We should go to the wedding.”

“You’re right. But the whole time I’m going to be trying to imagine him having sex with her.”

“It’s not that bad. It’s not like he’s marrying a goat or something.”

“Maybe it is that bad.” Claudio spoke with his hands, throwing his hands up to show his frustration. “He says he created her. It’s like a twisted story that they both believe in. She could be animal parts and robotics for all we know.”

“It makes me uncomfortable, too,” Paul said. “We just don’t know.” Paul seemed ready to say something, but he didn’t finish the sentence. Paul didn’t enjoy the gossip and stories about them as much as Claudio did.

“I don’t want to go to the wedding,” Claudio said.

“I know.”

“It makes as much sense for him to marry that bicycle.” He waved his hand toward the discarded toys in their neighbor’s yard.

“David loves her.”

“Maybe. But maybe it’s not really about love. If he really did create her to be perfect, then he’s just making someone to take care of him. That man has some serious control issues, I think.”

“I know.” Paul sighed. He smiled at Claudio. “Please, go get dressed.”

“Alright,” Claudio said, leaning over to kiss Paul on the forehead. He stood up on the edge of the porch and walked inside.

Claudio would never change Paul in the ways that David suggested that he had developed with Sherry. Maybe he would change Paul to be more assertive or masculine, but if he had the ability to change Paul, he wasn’t sure if he would. Paul was perfect in strange ways—the way he smiled, he worked, he took care of Claudio, and he looked at Claudio. Especially the way he looked at Claudio. Paul looked at Claudio in a way that made him believe that anything was possible.

Claudio glanced out the front door, but Paul wasn’t watching him. Claudio poured another glass of port and drank half the glass. Paul wouldn’t want to know that Claudio was having another drink. He would probably say something about how Claudio shouldn’t drink so much because it turned him into a flirt or worse.

But as much as Claudio hated when Paul tried to limit how much he drank, Claudio wouldn’t really change a thing about Paul. Paul cared for him and wanted him to be the best man that he could. Thinking of changing Paul was ridiculous.

Claudio didn’t really know what to think of Sherry. He viewed her as some strange robot or android or cyborg—he didn’t know the difference between the terms, but even if he did, he still wouldn’t know what to call Sherry. She was so ridiculous,

pawning to all of David's desires and claiming to be whatever he wanted her to be, and in the end, it just seemed preposterous. She was like a mannequin that would do whatever David told her to do.

Claudio smiled as he imagined the strange sexual habits that David probably enforced on her.

The first time Paul and Claudio met Sherry, it did not go well. They briefly saw Sherry a few times in the evening, but the dinner wasn't enough to satisfy Claudio's curiosity. Sherry ruined the dinner and left to get Chinese food. Claudio and Paul left before Sherry returned from picking up Chinese food. Claudio had drunk too much wine and whiskey, and by the time they left, Claudio knew that he had made Paul uncomfortable. He had been mean to Sherry and had flirted with David.

Mostly, Claudio liked to flirt with other men to see how jealous Paul could be. His cheeks would flush, and he would become irritable, and Claudio loved feeling like he could make Paul so flustered because it made Claudio feel wanted.

A few months ago, Paul and Claudio did have dinner with Sherry and David. Sherry had prepared an elaborated stuffed flounder dish with asparagus and rosemary potatoes. Claudio drank too much wine again, and by the end of the evening, he paid David too much attention, touching his arm and laughing too loudly. "Nothing like falling in love with your own work, huh, David?" Claudio had said.

David had smiled, looking at Sherry as she walked away. "Dinner was lovely, Sherry." David seemed determined not to allow Claudio's insults or sexual advances to affect him. Maybe he was glad to show off Sherry to people and perhaps he was collecting data from all of Sherry's interactions with other people. But probably, David

wanted to include Paul and Claudio in his new strange life because Claudio knew that they were the only real friends that David had.

Claudio had looked at David over a glass of whiskey and then said, “Do you think the statue chose Pygmalion?”

Claudio knew he had crossed some line, and they left shortly after that. On the way home, Paul had asked Claudio, “Do you still think about David?”

Claudio was surprised but said nothing.

“Are you angry that David is with someone other than you?”

“What are you talking about?”

Claudio pretended not to understand what Paul was inferring, but he knew that Paul wondered about Claudio’s loyalty. He enjoyed making Paul jealous. Claudio knew how ridiculous David and Sherry seemed, and he had never really liked David enough to make a real pass at him, but he knew that Paul was upset.

“Are you angry that David is happy?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I do think that the relationship can’t last.”

Claudio hadn’t really wanted to upset Paul. He loved him. Paul respected David and all his work, so Claudio wanted to be a part of David’s world, a world of engineering and creation that Claudio didn’t understand. Flirting with David was Claudio’s way of including David in their lives and keeping Paul close to him.

Claudio pushed back the memory of that night and so many other drunken nights with David and looked out the front door, standing in his undershirt and dark slacks.

“Should I wear my blue shirt?” he asked.

“The turquoise one? Yes. Not the periwinkle one.” Claudio smiled and turned to go back inside.

After Claudio put on his turquoise shirt and smoothed his hair in the reflection in the hallway mirror, he couldn't stall any longer. He drained the last of his port. “Okay,” Claudio said, walking out on the front porch and pulling the door shut behind him. “I'm ready.”

Paul hesitated for a moment, and Claudio thought that Paul might be reconsidering staying home or that he might suspect that Claudio had already had three glasses of wine. Paul would rather stay home and watch some movie, but Claudio knew he felt a strong loyalty to David. They couldn't get out of this.

They got in the car. Claudio drove—he always drove except when he drank too much—and Paul leaned in closely to Claudio, touching their shoulders together.

When they got to the reception hall, Claudio and Paul had to weave through a line of protestors from the town holding signs that read, “Marriage is a union between two PEOPLE” and “What is it?” and “What about the blood tests?” The town knew all the stories about Sherry, but as curious as everyone seemed to be about this couple, Claudio felt Paul's body tense. Claudio knew that she insulted everything that the little town stood for, and Paul felt this tension. David's claim to have created her angered people. Claudio considered grabbing a sign and joining the protestors, but Paul would be angry.

Even though Sherry's origins were a complete mystery to everyone in the town, Paul worked with David in the engineering labs at Winona State University and brought home stories to Claudio. After assigning weird projects to his graduate students, giving separate assignments to each one and prohibiting them from working together, Paul had

told Claudio about how the projects could have worked to create some new woman. One project had to do with artificial intelligence, another researched the connections between a brain and a computer, and another examined different composites that could replace bone and skin. David might not have been smart enough to develop a new woman by himself, but with as many projects and graduate students he had, Paul thought that David could organize the creation that might be Sherry.

About fifteen policemen were standing by the entrance to the church. They were lined up in formation, their face armor pulled over their chins and their shields held against the protestors. David and Claudio walked past the crowd and into the small church.

The ceremony was small but nice. Sherry wore a white dress and carried a single calla lily. Her dress was long and elaborate with ruffles and hoops that Scarlet O'Hara would be proud to wear, but it wasn't like the short and revealing clothes that she normally wore. The reception hall had some strings of Christmas lights hung from the ceiling. The ceremony didn't have any poetry or songs.

The ceremony wasn't large, but the flowers around the sanctuary and the ridiculous dress couldn't have been cheap. Claudio made some mental notes about the sanctuary, assuming that Paul would want to discuss the ceremony and the expense later.

At the end of the ceremony, Claudio ceased his daydreaming about the flowers and the decorations. When David kissed Sherry, Claudio thought he could see Sherry move her lips. If she had artificial skin and a computerized brain, then her lip movements seemed so strange. It was like David may have even created a program for

her to kiss. Maybe she had a tongue. This made Claudio wonder if David had to use lubricant and if Sherry cleaned herself out.

The few attendees sat in the last two rows of folding chairs. Paul leaned his head on Claudio's shoulder, and Claudio counted fifteen people in the small sanctuary. Fifteen, including himself and Paul.

Claudio reached over to Paul and held his hand. At the end of the ceremony, Claudio kissed Paul on the cheek and whispered, "I love you." Paul smiled. He would never change Paul to be someone or something that he wasn't.

They walked out of the sanctuary and into the reception hall, holding hands, and following the thirteen other people through the receiving line.

Paul shook David's hand first, and then he shook Sherry's hand, smiling at her and congratulating them both.

Claudio hesitated. He didn't want to shake Sherry's hand.

He shook David's hand firmly, not saying anything. David was distracted by other conversations and other people, so Claudio didn't need to say anything.

Claudio tried to move quickly past Sherry, but she reached her small hand out to Claudio. Her hand was cold and strong, and when she gripped Claudio's hand, he tried not to imagine the metal bones that might be under the cool skin. He could imagine some metal bones and plastic fingers closing around his palm and cracking all the bones in his hand with a single squeeze, but she released his hand after a couple of seconds.

"You look lovely, Sherry," Paul said. Claudio couldn't believe that Paul meant this because looking into her synthetic eyes, she was staring back at Paul and Claudio with the ambivalence and detachment of a shark.

Paul was muttering his congratulations to David and Sherry, but Claudio slipped past them. The receiving line was short, but all the attendees seemed to gather around David and Sherry, talking too loud and sharing the moment with the couple. All weddings were the same in this sense: everyone wanted to be a part of the bride and groom's special day even if everyone secretly suspected that the bride was a robotic monster of some kind.

Claudio slipped past the crowd and into the reception area. The reception hall in the church had rows of tables and chairs set as if David had planned the wedding for more than a hundred people. A table had a four-tiered cake in a corner with pink plowers and intricate swirls of frosting, and in the opposite corner of the room, a small bar was set. Claudio walked straight toward the bar.

Really, the bar was only a table where someone made drinks and poured champagne into plastic glasses. Claudio asked for a shot of whiskey, and by the time Paul broke away from the group of attendees and by the time he reached Claudio, Claudio was knocking back his second shot of whiskey.

"Claudio," Paul whispered. "Let's get out of here and go home."

"Yeah." Claudio recognized the intensity in Paul's voice. Paul might have tried to say something about the port wine before the ceremony and the whiskey after, but he didn't say anything.

Claudio tapped the edge of his glass: "One more for the road," he said to the man pouring drinks. The bartender poured a third shot for Claudio. He tipped the glass to his mouth and towards the ceiling and then started walking toward the door. Paul followed behind him, probably trying to deflect any interference that would keep them there any

longer. They could leave and go back home. They could curl up and watch a movie. They could forget about this whole thing.

But then, Sherry intercepted them near the door when Claudio was twenty feet from the freedom outside the church. Sherry was there, suddenly blocking the door, appearing like the ghost of Scarlet O’Hara with an 18-inch waist and defined cheekbones. “Claudio,” she said. Her voice sounded smooth and silky. “Claudio, I did not get to say hello.”

Claudio froze. In his mind he was already at home, curled up with Paul, sipping another glass of port and watching a movie. He wasn’t sure what to say. “Hello,” was all he muttered.

Paul took a step forward, trying to stand between them, but it was too late. Sherry was talking directly to Claudio. “I’m so glad that you came today. Not many people can find it in their hearts to understand how David and I love each other. We are grateful that you came to support us.”

“You don’t love each other,” Claudio said. “David loves you—maybe he doesn’t love you. And everyone knows that you can’t love him. Whatever you are, you’re not normal.” The drinks and the ridiculousness gave Claudio the courage to say this.

Paul tried to jump in. “We’re glad that we could come and support you both, Sherry.”

“No, we’re not,” Claudio said. “We’re David’s friends, not yours.”

Sherry had contorted her face to show a look of shock. She looked a little like a mannequin, posed to show surprise.

“Claudio,” Paul said. “Don’t be rude. You don’t want to hurt Sherry’s feelings.”

“What feelings?” Claudio said. “For all we know, she doesn’t have feelings. She’s not even human. She’s probably just a combination of wires and computer chips.” Claudio knew this would upset Paul, but someone needed to bring some reality to this ridiculous wedding.

Paul lowered his voice and whispered into Claudio’s ear. “Let’s get out of here. You don’t want to make a scene.”

“Make a scene?” Claudio said. “This whole thing is a scene. A crazy, illogical scene with no love and no freedom.”

Sherry seemed frozen, not moving or blinking. Perhaps her programming was confused or did not include any responses to this scenario.

David approached the three figures, wrapping his arm around Sherry’s shoulder to take a protective stance next to Sherry. “What’s going on?” David asked. His voice sounded strained, as if he was trying not to be defensive, but Sherry was demonstrating programmed responses of distress that shifted from her open mouth and arched eyebrows to her stiff jaw and furrowed brow. She waved her thin arms in the air, and Claudio couldn’t help thinking that she looked like one of the cartoon drawings in the seatbacks of airlines, placidly putting on an air mask or sliding down an emergency slide.

“Claudio has had a few drinks,” Paul said. “I was just going to take him home.”

“I’m fine,” Claudio said. He wasn’t angry at Paul for saying that had some drinks, really, but he wanted to say something hurtful to David and Sherry to see what she might do. “I was just telling this *thing* that we didn’t come here for her, and we are not here because we approve. We’re here because you are our friend.” Claudio was talking, facing David, as if Sherry were not standing in front of him.

“If you were my friends,” David said, pulling Sherry’s face to his shoulder, “then you wouldn’t treat my wife like that. She has feelings, too.”

“David,” Claudio said. “She doesn’t have feelings. She’s just some weird creation that you have molded to be exactly what you want.”

“Claudio,” David said, trying to remain calm, but the flush on his face gave away his emotion. “You don’t know Sherry. If you spent some time with her, you would like her, maybe even love her. I love her.”

“Of course you love her. She only knows what you’ve created her to be. The only thing you love in her is what you have created. It’s so narcissistic.”

Paul pulled on Claudio’s sleeve—the sleeve of the turquoise shirt that Paul thought made Claudio look so tan and handsome. “Let’s go,” Paul whispered.

“Claudio,” David was trying to stay calm. “I think you owe Sherry and I both an apology.”

“You’re right. I owe you an apology, David, but Sherry doesn’t have any feelings to hurt. I can say anything to her and do anything to her, and she’ll never feel a bit of pain.” And then, Claudio pulled back his tan arm and slapped Sherry across the artificial face. “Did that hurt?”

He didn’t mean to hit her so hard. He just wanted to make a point, lashing out at the woman that seemed to mock everything that love could possibly stand for.

Claudio thought that he saw Sherry’s skin ripple a little from the impact of his hand.

“Don’t,” Paul was saying when Sherry pulled her arm back, too. She pulled her thin arm back as if she were drawing a bow and arrow or as if she were about to launch a

shot put, and Claudio couldn't help thinking that she looked like some robot from a 1950s B-movie. Her round breasts and size-0 waist followed the punch. She landed her fist into the side of Claudio's face, and the punch hurt. Claudio screamed in anger and frustration, wanting to reveal Sherry for the fraud that she was. He lunged at Sherry. He pinned her 95-pound-body to the ground and shook her violently, ripping the delicate lace sleeves on her white dress. Her skirts held the circular shape of the hoops, and lying on the floor with her legs sticking out from the round skirt, she looked like a large white bell flung on its side with the clapper still moving.

Paul shook Claudio, trying to pull him away from Sherry. Paul pulled at Claudio, and Claudio rolled off of Sherry and onto the floor. Then, Sherry was on her feet, smoothing the ruffles and adjusting the hoops of her skirt.

Claudio saw the policemen before he heard the yelling.

His stomach sank.

Two policemen pinned Sherry's arms behind her and put her in handcuffs. They lifted her by the arms and pushed her outside, like a strange, thin ghost with ruffles flowing after them. A third policeman helped Claudio to his feet.

"Did you make her to do this?" Paul yelled at David, waving at the policemen.

"Not exactly," David said. He sighed.

The policeman with Claudio was looking at his face, examining a small, fist-shaped mark on the side of Claudio's face. "We knew there would be trouble today," the policeman was telling Claudio. "But we thought the protesters were going to cause the trouble. Didn't know that it would come from inside the wedding."

Paul touched Claudio's shoulder gingerly. "Will you arrest Claudio?" Paul asked the policeman.

"Afraid so. We saw it. He hit her."

"What will happen to him?" Paul was stroking Claudio's hair carefully, looking into his eyes.

Claudio loved Paul's empathy. Paul wouldn't judge this, knowing that Claudio had acted in the way that Paul could never act.

Claudio didn't want to come to the wedding. Paul made him come, but he probably wasn't surprised at what happened. Paul must have known that Claudio would act this way or that something like this would happen. Maybe they should have just stayed home.

"We'll hold him for the night. If she presses charges, then he'll need to get a lawyer..."

Paul started to open his mouth to say something, but as Claudio looked at Paul, he closed his mouth. He must have wanted to ask about what would happen Sherry, but he knew that this would make Claudio angrier.

Sherry had fought back after Claudio had already struck her, so the law wouldn't hold her accountable. Perhaps David would adjust her programming, maybe he had another Sherry back in his basement that could replace her, or maybe David could lobotomize another mail-order bride and give her a mainframe in place of a brain.

Paul looked so concerned as he stroked Claudio's face. He wished for a brief moment that he hadn't embarrassed Paul. Now he would be in jail for the night if Paul couldn't bail him out.

Two policemen led the handcuffed Sherry out the front of the church. The protestors outside cheered.

David followed a few paces behind Sherry and the policemen, suddenly looking very alone and small.

Driving

With all the rumors and stories that we heard about the Levison family, we didn't really know what to think about her or what she was. We knew she was strange—more than just a little unusual—but we didn't know what she was. Certainly, she didn't seem to have emotions, and David claimed to have made her. Whatever any of that was supposed to mean, we made up stories to tell each other and concocted elaborate theories about the family.

When we saw her in town, she moved like a Barbie doll. Her legs moved stiffly, and her fingers moved like uncooked hotdogs. Speaking seemed difficult for her, and for all any of knew, she may have had to run through every response through hundreds of programs.

Two years or so after we heard about Sherry and David's first date at the Green Mill Restaurant and maybe a year or so after the travesty of David and Sherry's wedding, we saw Sherry out driving.

This made us all very nervous because we had seen how stiffly and slowly she moved. Even though she appeared to be a beautiful and lovely young trophy bride who might have come from some Eastern country on the other side of the world, she moved as if she had a rod in place of her spine and as if she had severe arthritis in all of joints. Her movements hesitated, almost as if she needed to pass every motion through a massive mainframe.

She drove so slowly, probably not more than ten miles an hour. We wondered if the similar hesitation she had in her speech affected how she could respond to driving. Because she faltered in the way she moved and talked, her driving might have been

affected by her expansive programming. We wondered if some policeman would pull her over and ask for ID, but we weren't sure if Sherry had an ID.

We saw David sitting next to her in the car, possibly gripping the emergency brake between the seats and yelling instructions at Sherry as if she were a fifteen-year-old with a driver's permit. His face seemed flushed from what we could see through the car window, and his eyes scrunched up behind his tortoise-shell glasses.

The car inched down the bluff and across Highway 61. They drove into downtown Winona, probably topping fifteen miles per hour, and coming to a complete stop at all of the uncontrolled intersections in town.

Then they drove past the university towards the river and stopped at Jefferson's bar and grill. Sherry attempted to park in the lot across the street from Jefferson's and behind the local theater. The car inched into the parking lot, moving toward the back of the lot where there were no other cars. Sherry directed the car into an empty string of places, but the car was at a horrible angle, taking up parts of four places. She backed up and adjusted the steering wheel, straightening out the car. The wheels were straighter and the car only took up two places, but the passenger side wheels were well over the yellow line.

David jumped out of the car and ran over to Sherry's door. He opened the door and took the keys from her.

The bartender at Jefferson's recognized David when they came into the bar. David's face was flushed, and he ordered a double whiskey. He drank the whiskey quickly.

When David finished his whiskey, we were glad that he drove back up the bluff instead of Sherry.

Child

We had accepted Sherry into our town, mostly because we didn't do anything to make her leave. A few people weren't friendly with Sherry or David, but no one did anything to challenge them.

Mostly, we just talked about them behind their backs.

More than that, all we had heard the rumors. No one could prove anything about how wrong Sherry seemed, but we all knew that something was wrong with her. She wasn't right.

The gossip made her into a monster. If we listened to every story about Sherry, she was a mail-order bride with a lobotomy and autism, and David had created her with computers and brain surgery and who knows what else.

We didn't know what happened or how it happened, but one day the Levison story began a new chapter.

Martin Harrow is a thin grocer whose typical stance is to cross his arms across his chest, hugging his midsection as if he wanted to preserve what little body fat that he had. Mostly, Martin didn't talk to Sherry or David when he saw them because he loathed everything that they seemed to be. However, he liked to gossip about them. If we would listen to Martin, he would tell about the latest Sherry sighting and his theories about Sherry's origins. He thought that David had removed parts of Sherry's brain to make her more logical and less emotional.

She would walk to and from the grocery store—about a mile in each direction from her house—because Sherry couldn't drive well yet. She would walk down the road on the winding street that led down the bluff. She'd cross Highway 61 and go to the little grocery in downtown Winona.

She would stop into the grocer's almost every day, walking into town for exercise or something even though she clearly didn't need to maintain her figure. She would stop at the store to pick up a few things for dinner. She would often buy a half-gallon of milk or some toilet paper or some bread or some spices and pack the few items into her recyclable grocery bag. We had heard that Sherry started a greenhouse, so she didn't buy any vegetables or fruits. Sherry often purchased sushi grade fish, but she hadn't purchased this for some weeks.

Martin told us that one day Sherry came into the grocery.

On that day, Martin noticed Sherry's belly. He quickly dismissed this as loose folds in her clothing or perhaps she had put on a little extra weight on her petite frame. He didn't really think that the tiny woman could put on any weight even if she ate Bloedow's donuts and drank cream every day.

The next day, Sherry came into the store and purchased a bottle of prenatal vitamins. Martin said that his curiosity overwhelmed his desire not to speak with the woman. His curiosity outweighed his condemnation for her. "Are you pregnant?" Martin asked her.

"Yes," Sherry said. Martin did not know how to take her matter-of-fact statement without any enthusiasm or excitement.

"How did that happen?"

"Sex," was all Sherry told Martin.

When he told us about this, we tried to imagine what creature could be growing in her belly. She could be incubating some sort of human-robot hybrid. Perhaps the child would be some sort of mutated genes, spliced together like a patchwork quilt. Maybe

David replaced the child's brain with a mainframe, just as Martin suspected he had done to his wife. It even seemed possible that the child could be sort of normal but that David planned to do brain surgery on the child.

However it happened, Martin said he noticed her belly growing larger over the next months.

We waited to hear news from the local hospital about the birth of the Levison child. The child must be some sort of horrific creature, and we wanted to see it, talk about it.

But no one heard anything about any delivery or doctors at the Levison house, and one day, Sherry came into the grocery store with a small infant strapped to her chest in an expensive baby Bjorn. The child seemed to be sleeping the perfect blissful sleep of a normal baby. She walked quickly up the aisles and selected a large container of baby formula and some ice cream.

Martin hadn't spoken to Sherry since he asked if she was pregnant, but when she got to the register, he couldn't fight his nosiness because he thought he had seen her the day before, with a round belly. "When did this happen?"

"Last night," Sherry replied, in her direct and straightforward way.

"At the hospital?" Martin asked. He couldn't believe how strange this was. He had three children of his own, and his wife didn't get out of bed for a week after having the kids.

"No, I was at home."

Martin wasn't sure what to think of this. He pictured her at home, delivering the baby herself, but this seemed too ridiculous. But what else could it be?

“Shouldn’t you be home resting or something?” he asked.

“Why should I do that?” Sherry had said. She put the ice cream and formula into her recyclable grocery bag and went out the door.

When Martin told us about the first sighting of the child, we all wanted to know one thing: “What did the baby look like?”

“It looked like a baby,” Martin said.

“Was it a boy or a girl?”

“Boy, I think. It had a blue hat on.”

“Did you see any scars on the baby?” We were convinced that something must be wrong with the child.

“No,” Martin said. “I think it may have had a small stork’s bite on the back of its head.”

“What about its behavior? Did it act strangely?” We imagined the child spouting Shakespeare or spinning its head all the way around.

“It was quiet,” Martin said. He seemed so puzzled that we wondered if he was trying to remember the details or if he was making it all up. “The baby was sleeping and quiet.”

The doctors in the hospital didn’t know anything, and we continued to discuss the latest aberration of the Levison family. We didn’t really know how any of it happened, but we waited and watched for the new Levison puzzle piece to share more stories and shed some light on the mystery.

Baptism

The Sunday service was finished, and most of the people had already left the sanctuary to collect their children and go out to a buffet for Sunday brunch and then sleep too long on Sunday afternoon. Pastor Steve knew that this was the pattern of the congregation, the pattern that could help everyone deal with the pressures of the coming week and that could help them forget any uncomfortable or difficult ideas they may have heard in church. Religion, like so many parts of life, boiled down difficult ideas, but then people weren't always able to deal with the most challenging aspects. Going to church made people feel better, like they did something good, but church didn't really change anyone.

Pastor Steve didn't want to go to his comfortable home and eat an enormous meal and avoid all the troubling conflicts in the modern world, but this was his pattern. He knew the pattern well.

The congregation met in a large building that looked more like a gymnasium than any place of worship. The ceilings were high, the floors were wood, and the chairs were black metal folding chairs with red cushioned seats. Pastor Steve had recommended the black and red color scheme, hoping to reflect some of the intensity and passion that he thought a Christian building should have. Black and red with some white and yellow should reflect the stark differences between Christian ideologies and the rest of the world, or at least this is what he had told the financial committee when he had proposed the decorative changes. The committee had all nodded, seeming to simultaneously decide to placate the new preacher.

But the church spent more money on lighting and projection screens than most former Soviet states had to spend on food, but Pastor Steve didn't have any say in this.

The technology made people feel comfortable, entertained as if the congregation could be better people, more aware of the conflicts around them, by being entertained for an hour every week. And somehow, with the projectors and music and scriptures on the overhead screen (so no one needed to carry their Bibles to church), this made the difficulties in Christianity seem more entertaining and easier to swallow.

After the service, a few people still lingered around the sanctuary. One woman, with hair nearly as long as her broomstick skirt, was laying face-down in the aisle and babbling some unintelligible words. Another man stood in front of a prayer leader as he did every Sunday, looking for sympathy for his lonely life and hoping for some comfort or answer. A couple sat in the front row, gripping each other's hands tightly and passionately praying for a child.

Sherry and David Levison did not show the intensity or passion that the other members did. They waited in their seats, trying to catch Pastor Steve's attention and refusing to leave quietly. David Junior was sleeping quietly in Sherry's arms, and although every baby in the church—not just Pleasant Valley Free Church but in every other church in the world—received affectionate glances and soft caresses, DJ did not. The congregation would smile strangely and wave at little DJ, but no one would make faces at the baby or offer to hold him unless they didn't know about the family and hadn't heard all the stories.

Pastor Steve saw the couple sitting in the back of the sanctuary, but he didn't want to talk to them. They were watching him, waiting for him.

Pastor Steve was incredibly popular with the people, and the congregation continued to grow with every month that passed since he had arrived. Despite his

receding hairline and cerebral education, his stride had a youthful bounce and he challenged some of the established ideas in the church. He was fresh out of seminary, and his wife and two children seemed the epitome of Christian goodness. The pastor knew that gossip stated otherwise about his family, rumors about him drinking too much or about how his wife might have an eating disorder. Generally, though, the congregation seemed content with the new preacher and his attempts to introduce some intensity to the church.

The rumors about Pastor Steve's family were gentle compared to the tales about the Levison's family, gossip about how Sherry was no more than a sex doll and about how the couple was a sign of the End Times. Whatever, the congregation didn't accept David and Sherry. No one asked to hold the little boy, and no one included David or Sherry in any of the church gossip.

Pastor Steve had heard the stories and theories about Sherry, and as illogical as it probably was, he thought she was some android. She was too distant and controlled to be human.

"Good afternoon," Pastor Steve said, stepping into the aisle in front of the couple. He sat sideways on the red and black chair, resting his thigh on the seat next to him so he could see them from the corner of his eye, but his position was awkward enough that he could turn his profile to them and look away without appearing rude. He didn't want to look at them.

"How are you doing?" David asked.

"I'm well," Pastor Steve said, "but I suspect that you have something on your mind."

“That is true.”

David looked at Sherry and David Junior as if waiting for them to speak for him, but Pastor Steve couldn't shake the feeling that the couple seemed to be some strange experiment in humanity or lack thereof. Pastor Steve knew that David and Sherry had been married nearly three years ago, and he also knew the pastor who married them. The other pastor, Pastor Mike, was a friend of Pastor Steve's, and during the time around the Levison wedding and the brief protest, the two pastors spoke about the couple openly. “I keep thinking that it's not for us to judge,” Steve's friend had said. “God'll sort this out in His time.”

Somehow, David Levison had convinced Pastor Mike to marry them, and to that day, Pastor Mike could not convince Pastor Steve that it was the right thing to do. Despite the protests and the moral arguments, Pastor Mike married David and Sherry. “This is a travesty of what the church body is supposed to be,” Pastor Steve had said to his friend over a mocha latte and a blueberry muffin at the Blue Heron Coffeehouse. “David says that he created her. Like he's playing god. She's not human. That's all anyone really knows about her.”

Pastor Mike tried to convince him that humans couldn't judge the mind of God, and so Pastor Steve took his concerns to his wife, Paula. He decided not to protest the mixed marriage or the child, but he didn't hide his disgust from Paula—about how David had created a Frankenstonian monster and a test-tube baby. The family defied all the natural rules that God had set for humanity.

Pastor Steve didn't understand how his friend could perform such a wedding ceremony, and when the Levison family started attending his church, he suspected

trouble. Because of his discomfort with the couple, he tried to avoid them. His opinions about Sherry's lack of soul and about David's narcissicism made Pastor Steve consider how far some people could be from God.

Sitting in the sanctuary and looking at the strange couple, Pastor Steve wanted to run away from them.

"Well," David began slowly, "we want to be a part of this church."

"We have a membership class that meets every Tuesday night," Pastor Steve said. "You can join the church after you attend the class."

"We know this," David said, touching Sherry's thigh. He looked at Sherry carefully, and Pastor Steve suspected that something more was coming. "We think that religion is an important part of David Junior's life. We want him to learn about the Bible."

"That's good." The pastor wanted to add something more heartfelt and more compassionate, like how he wanted everyone else to realize this and how this was an important part of the church. Children made the church grow, but Steve didn't want anything to do with this kind of community growth.

"We want to have David Junior baptized."

Pastor Steve drew in a long breath. He didn't know what to tell them and didn't know how to be honest with them. Something about being a pastor and a leader made him want to be kind, but he secretly wanted to say something hurtful and painfully honest to them. Maybe they wouldn't come back. Perhaps he could make them understand how everyone thought of them and how unwelcome the family was.

He looked at David and then turned his eyes to Sherry, looking at the artificial, perfect woman and the lump of perfected genes lying in her lap. He could've gently told them that their situation was unique, and the deacons and elders would need to decide. He could've refused them because he thought that Sherry didn't have a soul. He might have said something about how the perfect baby was an unnatural, damned creation of a twisted man. He might have even told them that he needed to think about it.

But he didn't say any of these things.

"Of course I will baptize DJ." Pastor Steve realized that he didn't care enough to be honest or straightforward with them. David might be a genius and Sherry might be a computer, but they were stupid. Pastor Steve knew that the couple had joined a small group through the church, but the group didn't accept them. The other couples in the small group lied to David and told him that they needed to stop meeting. This wasn't true of course, and David might have suspected this. The other couples created a strange bond, gossiping and laughing about their interactions with David and Sherry between reading scripture and studying the Bible. The small group had some interesting stories to share, but everyone in the church was quick to tell about how Sherry took communion, about how she couldn't sing, or about how she sat during the service not moving or shifting.

Then, Sherry had volunteered to help in the nursery, and she went into the little back room and picked up a crying child. She rocked the child the same way that a little girl might swing her doll. She greeted the three women who hadn't missed a week of nursery duty in months, and they told Sherry that they didn't need her help. The women cast her out of the nursery faster than Jesus could cast out demons, and then they ran to

Pastor Steve. They wanted Steve to ban Sherry from the nursery because it was supposed to be a safe and loving place not a place for a strange man to introduce his idea of perfection—his perfect wife that held babies like stray cats. He tried not to laugh at them.

Pastor Steve noted how oblivious the couple must be as David exhaled slightly, as if he were releasing all the misunderstandings that he had been trying to attribute to their unique circumstance. David may have thought that all the awkwardness was nothing more than misunderstandings.

“I’ll need to make some arrangements,” Pastor Steve said, “but I can call you later this week.” If he considered what he had said, he might have realized his own procrastination and avoidance, intending to force someone else to deal with this situation. He just wanted to avoid David, and the best way that he knew was to agree with the couple. He could send them a polite but negative letter later—for that matter, he could make his secretary, Susan, send the letter.

Pastor Steve smiled at David and Sherry, and he even reached down to stroke little David Junior on the head. He turned to go, but as he walked up the aisle, he heard Sherry tell David, “His shifting eye movement seems to indicate that he wasn’t telling the truth.”

Pastor Steve thought he saw David glance in his direction, so he waved a little and smiled as if he didn’t hear Sherry and as a feeble attempt to try to convince himself and the couple that he was sincere about the baptism. He didn’t want to be mean, but their marriage was a farce, and the relationship seemed so distorted. David played god,

controlling and manipulating the world around him so that everything around him fulfilled his needs.

So Pastor Steve put the baptism out of his mind, convincing himself that he forgot it. The church and his family kept him busy, so convincing himself that he had forgotten about the baptism wasn't difficult. That Thursday, he stayed home with his youngest daughter, playing with her puzzles and talking at her, hoping to connect with his daughter with autism. By Friday, whenever he started thinking about the baptism, he would put it out of his mind immediately.

The following Sunday after the service, a few people stayed in the sanctuary for prayer or quiet time, and the Levison family waited near the back of the room. Pastor Steve remembered his promise to make arrangements for the baptism, but as he approached them, he decided to play stupid. This was Steve's most important strategy in the church: to pretend to forget, to be busy but willing, or to seem distracted. People in the church were willing to forgive distracted and busy pastors, but procrastination and avoidance were not forgivable.

“Good morning, Dr. and Mrs. Levison.”

“Good morning, Pastor Steve.” David smiled and reached out to shake the pastor's hand. “I wanted to ask if you have made the arrangements for DJ's baptism.”

“Oh. I'd forgotten all about that. After church last week, I had to run over to the hospital suddenly. Mrs. Peterson made a turn for the worse, and I had to spend some time there with her.”

“David,” Sherry said, turning to face her husband. “His eyes are shifting, and he appears both uncomfortable and dishonest. He is hiding something.”

Pastor Steve felt exposed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sherry is quite intelligent,” David said. “She has studied neuro-linguistics that helps her read eye signals to interpret a human’s meaning. She has also done some advanced research into facial movements and micro-expressions to help her understand people better.”

Steve looked at Sherry. What kind of monster had David created? Only God should know people’s innermost thoughts because these ideas made everyone good and flawed people. God should know every motivation and every desire that we had and be able to judge us based on our hearts, but everyone should be able to hide these things from the people around them. This was what makes people safe from everyone else, being able to hide their bad thoughts inside themselves. These were the protective parameters of society.

The pastor felt exposed and vulnerable looking at Sherry. Behind her blank eyes and glassy stare, she could process more about humans than he could, quantifying and measuring flinches and expressions that Steve didn’t even notice. He wanted to deny everything. He wanted to forget all about this and make Susan write the polite letter refusing them a baptism, but he didn’t know how to keep Sherry from understanding his dishonesty. He wanted to make Susan write a letter forbidding them from the church, but that probably wouldn’t happen.

“I’m not hiding anything,” Pastor Steve said. “I just forgot this week.”

“Again, his eyes and tone indicate that he is not telling the truth,” Sherry said.

“Sherry, you’re some bastardized idea of perfection. How can you understand anything?”

Sherry looked at David, her blank eyes telling David something that Steve didn't understand. The couple must communicate on some level and in their own bizarre way, but Steve couldn't imagine what that was. Perhaps subtle gestures or some tic allowed David to understand what Sherry was thinking—not thinking, but something else. She probably didn't think.

“Our marriage and child have been controversial for the public,” David said. He wrapped his arm around Sherry as if he could protect her non-existent emotions from being hurt. He appeared to be trying to protect her.

“And as an institution based on the soul,” Sherry continued, “you may be resentful of our union. We have a child that I nurture even though you probably think that I don't have a soul.”

“That's not what I think,” Pastor Steve said even though he did agree. “Every child matters to God. I simply forgot to make the arrangements.” The pastor could not think of anything else to say, so he shrugged and said, “I'll look into it and get back to you soon.”

Pastor Steve took one of the offering envelopes and a pencil from the pocket on the back of the seat in front of him. He began to write a reminder note to himself, reading it aloud to convince David and Sherry that he wasn't lying: “Ask Susan about scheduling a baptism for Levison family. Contact them with information.” With that, Pastor Steve stood up and sidestepped into the aisle and walked out of the sanctuary.

He left and drank a large glass of whiskey with the gluttonous Sunday brunch that his wife made.

He couldn't avoid the baptism any longer. He needed to find some new strategy.

Pastor Steve planned to tell Susan about this and have her send a letter to them this week, politely telling them that they wouldn't be able to perform the baptism, but on Monday, the finance committee monopolized his time to discuss the refurbishing of the church. "This black and yellow and red color scheme is entirely too outdated," the head of the committee announced. "And, the colors do not give a friendly, peaceful aura that is necessary for a church. Who decided that black and red were good colors for a church?"

Pastor Steve didn't remind them that he had recommended the color scheme, or perhaps they pretended to have forgotten. He wanted people to feel that this church strived to live on the edge of red and white and black, life and good and bad. The decorations were only two years old. He also wanted to tell the committee that the budget couldn't allow for the money to replace all the red and metal chairs in the sanctuary, the paint in all the classrooms, and the candle accents in all the bathrooms. They would need to replace the red carpeting in the classrooms as well. They might as well accept the décor for the time being.

But he didn't tell them any of these things. They wouldn't allot the money to replace the chairs, so the finance committee budgeted ten thousand dollars to re-carpet and re-paint the walls in a more neutral and calming beige and green. "These colors reflect peace, rebirth, and earthiness," someone on the committee told him. Steve wanted to say something about how the colors reminded him of something that he might find on a topographical map or about how the church didn't have the money to do whimsical redecorating, but this seemed confrontational. He let this drop.

Then, on Tuesday, Pastor Steve settled into his office chair, an ergonomic mastery of comfort and utility. With a fresh cup of coffee and a Long John with maple frosting from Bloedow's Bakery, he planned to play Facebook games and pretend to answer emails for most of the morning.

One of the junior pastors knocked on his office door. "It's the membership class. I need your help." He appeared more nervous than usual.

The junior pastor didn't say anything as he led Pastor Steve to a classroom off the main lobby. Pastor Steve opened the door, and the mustard yellow walls with black chairs and red trim suddenly seemed like a pathetic attempt to fill the empty rooms with some sort of personality, a personality that Steve wanted to reflect the passion of the Christian church. But this room, like any other classroom that he had seen in any church in any part of the country, was empty and free of any personality. The rooms were a blank slate, waiting to be filled and influenced. The room décor mirrored the church, open to the truth but really trying to remain empty and inoffensive, watering down the harsh realities of the world and the Bible.

David and Sherry were sitting on the right side of the table. A few other people were in the room sitting on the far sides of the table away from the couple and probably at a good distance to observe them. Pastor Steve didn't notice any of them. He didn't even notice that the junior pastor followed him into the room.

"What's going on here?" Pastor Steve intended this to be a statement of curiosity, but his frustration and impatience with the couple made the question sound demanding, angry.

David turned in his chair to face the pastor, and Pastor Steve could have only appeared more confrontational if he had stood up and puffed out his chest. “We don’t agree with all the tenets of your church,” David said, “but we still want to join the church.”

“Do you believe that Jesus Christ was sent by God to save us all from our sins?”

“No, not really.”

This blatant effrontery was more than Steve could handle.

“Then why do you want to join this church?” Pastor Steve could barely control the trembling condescension in his voice.

David looked at Sherry and nodded at her, so she said, “According to my research in child development, a child benefits from a strong community and exposure to strong morals. Many of the articles encourage families to attend church because this allows children to have different people influence their lives and because the children can see people struggling with their own morality.”

“Why do you care about baptism and membership?”

“These traditions,” David said as if he were speaking to a small child, “help to initiate people into the family of the church.”

Pastor Steve was befuddled. This was a sound argument, certainly, but this didn’t change his anger and frustration. The couple seemed to know how to upset Pastor Steve, poking at his most sensitive beliefs. He believed that Christianity was difficult, but the church was open to anyone who wanted to pursue God and to learn more about Him.

He wanted to tell them how blasphemous this seemed to be. They were mocking Christian beliefs, only concerning themselves with church because of their own needs and interests.

And he told them as much.

David's posture relaxed a little, his shoulders dropping a little and his jaw relaxing. "We have no interest in degrading your beliefs, but we do want some of the things that organized religion has to offer. Additionally, we may be able to offer the church some things in return."

"What're you talking about?"

"Sherry can certainly work in the nursery and teach Sunday school because her knowledge of child development is extensive. And I can offer money."

This was too much. Pastor Steve wanted to scream at them—this was impossible. Church was so much more than money and community and morals. Pastor Steve wondered how the other people in the room, including the junior pastor, could tolerate this, assuming they all were infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

"The women don't want Sherry in the nursery." Steve tried to calm himself, but the words came out like a hiss. "And offering money is an offence to this church, to Christianity, and to everyone here. You don't really expect that we will allow you to buy your way into this church?"

While Pastor Steve had been focused on the couple in front of him and on trying to control his voice, he was oblivious to everyone else in the room, including the other

pastor. The junior pastor cleared his throat, standing just inside the doorway, making Pastor Steve jump a little at the interruption. The junior pastor said, “Actually, Pastor Steve, I said that the church is in need of some remodeling. We could use the money. I thought that you might consider his offer.” Pastor Steve looked at the junior pastor, having forgotten the other’s presence and feeling a little like he was caught drinking whiskey before giving a sermon.

Pastor Steve didn’t know what to say, so he left the room. He walked straight to his secretary and asked Susan to call a meeting of the elders and deacons. “He wants to buy indulgences or something,” Pastor Steve muttered. “I can’t make this decision alone. Thank God that he is keeping me from doing something terrible in my anger.”

The next evening, fourteen of the seventeen elders and deacons arrived at the church. Pastor Steve poured himself a cup of coffee and encouraged everyone to congregate in one of the classrooms, which was just as empty and blank as the rest of the church. They loitered near the entrance, sipping coffee and muttering to each other. Pastor Steve could hear the men quietly talking, some about the recent bout of chilly weather, some about their work, some about their families.

The men followed Pastor Steve in the room, but the room didn’t have enough chairs. Some of the men sat down, some men discussed getting more chairs, and the rest of the men stood in the back of the room, crossing their arms across their chests. The single long table faced the podium in the front, and something about the small room with men crowded inside to make a decision and the large black and red room reminded Pastor Steve of some made up trial from *The Trial* or *M.*

“We need to begin.”

The men tittered a little as they shifted in their seats or on their feet, and Pastor Steve knew that they procrastinated.

Pastor Steve opened with a brief prayer: “Dear Lord, You have appointed us to guide this congregation in decisions to glorify You. Please lead our discussion and our minds to find Your answer to these complicated ideas.”

“Amen,” they said in unison. The men raised their heads and waited for the pastor to begin. The group of men faced the pastor at the front of the room, and for a brief moment, Pastor Steve felt like he was on trial.

“I need your help making a decision,” the pastor began, looking out over the professionals in the room, dressed primarily in suits and ties because most of these men had come right from work. The group was comprised of the most respectful and most rational men in the congregation. He trusted them to make a good decision, a decision that he wanted to make but couldn’t support.

“The Levison family admits that they do not believe in God or in Jesus, yet they want to become members and to have their baby baptized. In return, they have promised a donation.”

Pastor Steve paused for a moment while the men muttered comments to each other and again thought of one of the strange trials that movies and books had fictionalized.

“They want to be a part of this community to allow their child exposure to different role models and different ideas and to instill a sense of morality in the young David.”

Again, the men muttered to each other while Pastor Steve paused.

“The first issue at hand is whether or not to allow them to become members. If you find this acceptable, then we’ll need to determine if we can baptize David Junior.”

One man in the third row raised his hand. This was Carl Lohmann, and he was an important lawyer in the city. Rumors stated that the portly and dignified man who looked vaguely like the older, fatter version of Orson Wells might run for mayor in two years. “This is the robot couple?”

Pastor Steve was prepared for this question: “I am not privy to the details of her anatomy or of their marriage, but from what I understand, David is human, and his wife is something different. David claims to have created her to be a perfect wife. For all I know, she’s some type of android. Who knows what the child is.”

Carl nodded. This was not a foreign issue. Their attendance had been discussed in previous meetings.

“She’s not human,” said Martin Harrow, the local grocer. He sat in the back with his arms crossed against his narrow chest. “She has no soul. We can’t allow them to become members. Jesus didn’t die for artificial beings, let alone some creation by a man.”

“I agree,” interjected Frank Groeber. He worked at the Brock Candy Company, and although he boasted of his important position, Pastor Steve suspected he was little more than an assembly worker. “She’s only an extension of David, but she doesn’t think for herself, ergo, she has no free will. Perhaps we should consider allowing David to become a member but not Sherry.”

Pastor Steve listened quietly. He felt calmer and more relaxed than he had felt in days because these men validated his opinions on the subject. He wouldn't need to stand against the couple. He would have the church leaders to back him up.

The debate continued in a similar vein, discussing Sherry's soullessness and David's presumptions.

"Before we go into too much detail about this situation and the seemingly endless implications," Pastor Steve said, "I'd like to hear from those of you who haven't spoken, especially if anyone has a dissenting opinion."

The men fell quiet, and Pastor Steve watched the men carefully. Martin looked around the room, waiting for or daring someone to contradict him, and Frank chewed on his fingernails. After an uncomfortable pause, Dr. Prozeroski cleared his throat. He was a psychiatrist at Winona Hospital. "I recognize her behavior," Dr. Prozeroski said. "I've read about cases and seen a couple of similar people to Sherry in my time. Sherry must have some sort of brain defect. Certainly, it could be from a stroke or an injury, but it's likely that her brain's been altered in some significant way. It's even possible," he paused, "that David somehow engineered her brain, choosing pieces to remove. It's not likely, but he does claim to have created her."

A few of the men nodded, but Pastor Steve didn't really believe this. Sherry couldn't be the result of some brain malfunction. She was a monstrosity.

Keith Lesser cleared his throat. He was a professor at Winona State University, teaching philosophy and critical thinking. "Perhaps," Keith began, "We shouldn't be determining the Levison family's position with God. God tells us not to judge others. He'll judge everyone by his own standards."

“Continue,” Pastor Steve said. He was proud that his voice held steady. His anger was beginning to rise, but he didn’t want to influence the men’s decision. He wanted their ideas to support him without him telling them what he thought.

“Well,” Keith said. “We don’t really need to know what the logistics of their souls and their lives are. With their willingness and honesty, God says that He’ll meet them where they are. As a church, we shouldn’t judge them, but we do need to keep our arms and doors open.”

Steve thought he heard an “Amen” and a “Yes” come from the group of men.

“If a regular, human couple approached us with a similar request,” Keith continued, “the only thing that we would need to understand is their desire to be a part of this community. And the child, he’s a young soul, just as valuable as anyone’s soul and just as in need of spiritual guidance.”

Pastor Steve wanted to agree with this. He should agree with this. The church didn’t have any obligation to understand other people’s motivations. He understood the logic in this, but Jesus didn’t go around preaching to dogs and trees and other things that didn’t have souls. Maybe the couple was just misguided, and the church could help correct this, but he didn’t want to fight this battle.

Steve snapped back to attention when he heard Carl Lohmann say, “The church shouldn’t play God. Besides, we could use the money.”

Even though Pastor Steve could feel the heat in his cheeks increasing, he said, “Perhaps we should put this to a vote.”

The fourteen men shifted their weight, recrossed their legs, and sipped their coffee. Steve watched the men, crossing their arms or folding their hands in a

satisfyingly conclusive gesture. “All in favor of allowing the Levison family to become part of our membership, raise your hands.”

Keith’s and Carl’s hands went up quickly. Five more hands went up slowly. As Pastor Steve counted the hands, he saw four more half-hearted hands rise, including Martin’s and Charlie’s hands.

“That’s eleven,” the pastor said. He thought his voice sounded a couple of pitches higher than normal in his attempt to disguise his anger. “That’s a majority.” He paused, taking a deep breath and trying to focus his attention on cooling his cheeks to a normal hue. He couldn’t change this, but he would need to back up the decision that the elders had made. “What about David Junior’s baptism? Shall we go right to a vote?”

Even before they raised their hands, Steve knew that they would agree to baptize the child. “That’s it then,” but his voice sounded more frustrated and angry than he could quell.

As he left the church, Pastor Steve muttered to himself about right and wrong. If the church couldn’t tell right from wrong, what was the rest of the world supposed to think? The Church was whitewashing itself in half-truths and good intentions. The intensity and passion that should lead the Church to wisdom was being diluted to muted tones. The people avoided the truths that made them uncomfortable, replacing them with ideas about tolerance.

At home, Steve poured a large measure of whiskey into a tumbler and settled into his leather recliner to watch a basketball game. After a few minutes, Steve’s wife, Paula came into the room and sat on the floor next to him. “What’s wrong?”

He didn't look at Paula or take his eyes away from the television. He took a long drink from the glass and said, "They decided to redecorate the church." Paula nodded. "All the blacks and whites will be gone. Only muted earth tones will be left."

Sister

Elizabeth hadn't seen her brother David in years. When the two siblings were younger, they were close, both in years and in their relationship. Certainly, David annoyed her as a teenager, tagging along with her friends and riding with her to school every morning, but they generally got along well.

Since they both moved away to college, though, their relationship had been strained. She didn't exactly approve of David's path in life even before she heard about his new wife Sherry. Something about his self-confidence made Elizabeth dislike the brother that she knew better than most. She recognized his self-confidence as a form of arrogance.

Even as children, Elizabeth knew that David sometimes resented having an older sister. She didn't intend to make his life difficult, but teachers commented on how different they were. David was antisocial and bored in classes, Elizabeth friendly and engaged. David was awkward and nerdy, but Elizabeth could pretend to be the popular and confident teenager whom she wanted to be.

She thought that she understood David, how he thought, and what he strove for, but when Elizabeth married Robert, David didn't seem to approve. Certainly, Robert communicated in a sarcastic and strange way, but when Robert told David something about "Once you fail at your dreams, you can always teach," Elizabeth knew that the two wouldn't hit it off. David enjoyed working with students, but he hadn't given up on his research.

When Elizabeth had her first son, Robert wouldn't let David hold the baby. Robert thought that David would drop the child, and certainly David admitted that he felt

strange holding the child, but Robert took the child away from him. David acted like this was a serious affront to his tenuous uncle-hood.

Elizabeth was fairly certain that Robert and David would never get along.

After Elizabeth had her second child, a little girl, David didn't come to visit. He sent a little green jumper and some diapers. Even though Elizabeth's family struggled with money, David might have been sending a subtle message about Elizabeth's family in sending the diapers. Perchance he didn't know what else to send.

But again, this was all before she heard about Sherry.

The first time that Elizabeth heard about Sherry, a co-worker approached her to find out if she were David Levison's sister.

"Yes. Why?" she had said.

"You won't believe some of the rumors that people say about him and his perfect companion." The co-worker had a daughter at Winona State University, where David worked, and even the non-local students heard about the gossip that spread around the little town.

David had invited Elizabeth and her family to his wedding to Sherry, but she couldn't get away. Elizabeth had called David and talked to him about the quick wedding and to wish that they would come visit, but the conversation was stranger than Elizabeth could have expected.

"How did you meet her?" she had asked.

"I didn't exactly meet her."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's more complicated than just meeting her. I designed her."

Elizabeth didn't really know what to say or how to react to this, so she laughed and awkwardly wished him a happy wedding. She sent him a nice bottle of whiskey and a few cigars as a wedding gift. She didn't know what else to send. Like David sending diapers to Elizabeth, they no longer knew each other well enough to buy thoughtful and meaningful gifts.

The next time they spoke on the phone was nearly a year later.

David called to tell Elizabeth that Sherry and David were expecting a son, and Elizabeth knew the two families should meet. Six months later, Elizabeth called to invite them up to Chanhassen to visit. Chanhassen was a small suburb of Minneapolis, and the trip shouldn't take David more than three hours to drive up from Winona.

"We don't have much here, but you're welcome to stay."

"That would be great."

"I can't really get away, you know with work and the kids and everything. So you're okay to come up here?"

David agreed.

David and Elizabeth set on a convenient weekend in October in a couple of weeks when David could bring his family to visit. The colorful leaves would be pretty, and the drive would be quick, driving up Highway 61 with the bluffs and beautiful colors. He could take the afternoon off work and drive up to the Twin Cities Friday afternoon in time for supper. "We'll be there at 6:30, okay?"

Even as Elizabeth agreed, she knew the evening would be difficult. Between Robert and David's tenuous relationship and the strange creation of his wife, the visit

would be awkward. She hoped that it could rekindle their relationship. Whatever, she was nervous about the visit.

It started when Elizabeth got caught at work until nearly 5:45. She was growing more anxious about the evening, and with each passing minute she was at work, she felt more nervous. On her way home, she called Robert. “Start dinner? I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She was wearing fashionable boots pulled over her slim jeans. Her fall jacket hid the deepest parts of her cleavage that her sweater did not cover. Her long golden hair hung in gentle waves around her face. She wouldn’t have time to change or freshen up before David and his family arrived.

So, Elizabeth walked in the door at 6:15. She walked around a wooden train track that guided different toy trains and cars around the room and under the furniture. Around the coffee table and the couch were several blankets strewn between different pieces of furniture. It might have been a fort before it collapsed in on itself, and even though it briefly occurred to her to make the kids clean it up, she didn’t really care. This was her life. David certainly would understand after having his own child.

She had a similar thought as she got into the kitchen. Robert stirred frozen broccoli on the stove, and she thought some smoke was coming from the oven. Her two children played at the table, painting some elaborate landscapes with purples and blues. “I’m home. How’s it going?” Elizabeth said, giving her two children and her husband quick kisses on the cheeks. She knew that this was a part of her life, and David would have to accept this.

Then, she heard the doorbell ring.

“Robert,” Elizabeth said, panicking at the last moment. “Can you get some drinks going?”

“Sure,” he said. He calmly stirred the broccoli. He peaked into the oven, and a cloud of smoke billowed out. “No worries,” he said to Elizabeth. “The smoke is just from the crap on the bottom of the stove. Dinner’ll be ready in five minutes.”

Robert was as tall and overweight as he had always been, but Elizabeth saw his genuine and honest spirit. Instead of his usual attire of boxer shorts and t-shirts, he wore loose jeans and a t-shirt of some obsolete music band that he liked.

“Okay,” she said. She swept off the kitchen table, clearing off the papers and the paints. “Shoo,” she told the kids, “go wash up for supper.” She stacked the pile of papers on the end of the table.

They scurried out of the room. “Wipe off the table, please?” she asked Robert as she made a dash for the front door.

Robert rolled his eyes at her. She had been worried about this night for weeks, and Robert was probably growing tired of this.

“Can’t someone get the door?” Elizabeth yelled from the living room, but then she opened it, smiling widely and standing to one side to let them in. David looked like the mad scientist he pretended to be, but Sherry looked like a college student in her tight jeans. She might have been a freshman student at some Ivy League school except for the small baby in her arms.

Elizabeth yammered greetings and apologized for the messy house as she led them through the living room with afghans and pillows, stepping carefully over the toy

train tracks and around the tent that the kids had made in the living room. David followed Elizabeth's steps, shadowing her path that wound between the toys.

"The kids are hungry," Elizabeth said, "So we should eat now."

David's family followed Elizabeth to the kitchen where Robert still stirred the broccoli. Magically, Elizabeth noticed silverware and plates in the center of the table waiting for dinner, but the pile of mail and bills threatened to slide over the table and onto the floor. The purple and blue landscapes dripped paint onto the table. Elizabeth laughed a little and gathered all the mail and the paintings into one pile and dumped them on a small table in the hallway.

"You want a drink?" she asked. "Robert, get us some glasses."

Robert looked at Elizabeth narrowly and set several plastic cups with cartoon animals on the side.

"Get some nice cups, please?" Elizabeth said. "Something to pour drinks?"

She yelled at her husband and children to join them for dinner.

"I'll have a scotch," David said. Sherry stood in the doorway, holding her sleeping baby and waiting for something to direct her to some action. David stepped tentatively into the room and gently kicked a small train through the doorway toward the living room and the other toy trains.

"We don't have scotch," Robert said.

"Whiskey?"

"I forgot that you like those strong drinks. I could send Robert out to buy some?"

Robert flashed her a severe look. Elizabeth realized that he had an empty glass next to

the stove. The glass dripped some moisture onto the counter as if he had just finished drinking it. He usually drank gin and tonics in the evening.

“It’s okay,” David said. He glanced at Robert. “We’ll have whatever.”

“Rum and coke okay?” Elizabeth asked, but she was already pouring the drinks.

Elizabeth’s six-year-old boy raced his younger sister into the kitchen, and the little girl whimpered as she slumped her four-year-old ego into her chair. Robert followed them to the small table, balancing a pan of casserole, a basket of rolls, and a bowl of broccoli.

David smiled at the whirlwind that blew into the room, and the children settled with a relief that sounded like a sigh.

The table had only four chairs.

Elizabeth retrieved two new chairs from another room and pushed them up to the corners of the table. David and Sherry took off their jackets, hung them over the back of two chairs next to each other, and sat down. Sherry dropped her diaper bag at her feet and shifted so that David Junior rested in her arms, but the baby never stirred from his sleep. Robert dished up plates and dealt the food around the table like a deck of cards. The children banged their silverware on the table.

“We’re not very organized around here,” Elizabeth said. She laughed a little, and then she said, “Let’s pray.” The children dropped their forks and continued to chew the first bites of bread that they had already crammed into their mouths. The children put their hands together, and David and Sherry imitated this. Elizabeth’s voice changed slightly, becoming more pronounced, slow, and careful: “Thank you, God, for this food,

and thank you for bringing David and Sherry and David Junior to visit us. Bless our time together. Amen.” The children echoed the amen and resumed eating.

By the time that Robert pushed plates of food in front of Sherry and David, Elizabeth’s children were already mixing the remainders of their broccoli and casserole into a mushy, green mess.

As everyone at the table was eating, a piece of long dried food—perhaps some banana or oatmeal—on the edge of the table seemed to distract David. He picked at the crusted morsel with his fingernail but glanced around as if expecting someone to catch him. He shifted his plate to cover the remnants. David was probably just as distracted and obsessive as he had been when he and Elizabeth were children.

Sherry shifted the infant into the crook of her left arm, freeing her right arm to eat and lay a paper napkin across her lap.

Elizabeth poured more rum and coke for the adults and pushed the tumblers across the table. “I do hope rum is okay,” Elizabeth said. “I didn’t think to pick up any whiskey. Does Sherry drink?”

“Of course I do,” Sherry said. She and David picked at their food. Sherry wiped her mouth with her napkin and took a tumbler of rum and Coke that Elizabeth had pushed across the table. “I am sitting right here, and you can talk to me.”

“She eats?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes,” Sherry said, not looking up from her plate of food. “Sometimes,” she said, “when people do not wish to acknowledge someone in the room, the other people will speak about that person using third person pronouns, pretending that they are not there. This conversational strategy is generally considered disrespectful and rude.”

Elizabeth didn't respond to this, but after taking another sip of her drink and straightening her back, she repeated her question: "If David made you, where does the food go?"

Sherry rested her fork upside down, leaning it on the edge of her plate. She opened up her mouth and pointed inside.

Elizabeth laughed. "That's not what I mean. What happens to the food you eat?"

David cleared his throat and said, "She stores the food in a compartment inside her abdomen. It's a sealed container, but she empties it within an hour or two of eating so that it won't smell and won't contaminate her body."

"Empties it?"

"In the toilet or in the garbage."

"You're kidding," Robert said, sputtering a little rum as did. "That is one of the biggest wastes of food that I have ever heard of. You've created a bulimic, perfect woman."

"She does recycle a lot of the food, too. She can recycle most of the food by mashing it up and feeding it to David Junior," David said, looking at Robert from the corners of his eyes. "Besides, eating is a social ritual. We eat dinner together, and when we are around friends, this makes people more comfortable around her."

"I'm not sure that is true," Elizabeth muttered, watching Sherry open her mouth like a Pacman and putting a forkful of casserole inside.

David smiled. "Of course that's not true. I'm teasing you. She eats food like anyone else."

Sherry smiled too, but Elizabeth could tell that Robert was neither impressed nor amused.

“What is she?”

“I designed her,” David said.

“So I heard from the father of a Winona State student. He works with me and told me about some of the stories. There’s lots of rumors floating around about her.”

“You can’t believe everything you hear.”

“So what is she? Like a robot or something?”

“Not really.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Robert asked, slamming his drink onto the table a little harder than necessary.

“It means,” David said with a strange smile that seemed to take pleasure in the suspicion he created, “she is a woman that I designed to be a perfect companion.”

“You created Sherry to be your perfect wife?” Robert asked, and then sat back, smiling a tight-lipped smile between gulps of his fresh drink.

“Yes, I did.”

“What is she?”

Elizabeth saw David glance at her again, probably trying to decipher Robert’s intonations. Certainly, Robert could be brash, but he was trying to understand. He wasn’t trying to offend David, and David must understand that Robert wasn’t being mean.

David glanced back to Robert. David’s glass was overly filled with a second dose of rum and coke, and he lifted the glass and sipped carefully. “Actually, I did create

Sherry to be a thoroughly excellent companion, but I have to be careful about what I make public knowledge because I am not the only person who wants an assistant and a companion.”

Robert nodded and said, “We are considered public knowledge?”

“Yes. Companies would buy the information from anyone. 3M tried to buy information from me last year. GE approached the university recently.”

“Impressive companies,” Robert said. “What a string of luck for Sherry to become such a success.”

Elizabeth considered correcting him, saying something about how David’s success was probably based on hard work and time. Instead, she asked, “Well, what is she?”

David put down his fork. He had been playing with the food, but he pushed his half-full plate to the center of the table. “Why does it matter to you what she is?”

“I want to know,” Elizabeth said.

“I’m not going to tell you. Besides, it should not matter. We are family, and we should accept and love each other, regardless of where we come from.”

Elizabeth sat back a little in her chair, hunching her shoulders slightly and watching Sherry with wider eyes than previously.

Elizabeth’s son leaned over and pinched his sister’s arm, and the little girl started whimpering. Elizabeth swatted at the boy, but he snuck a dirty look at his sister, sticking his tongue out at her.

“David Junior is so quiet,” Elizabeth said. “He’s a good little boy. How do you do it?”

David chewed a large piece of broccoli, so he looked at Sherry and said, “Go ahead, Sherry,” he said, but it sounded more like, “Mo ahe, Rerry.”

Sherry dabbed at the corners of her mouth and replaced the paper napkin in her lap. “I have researched different methods of caring for little babies, and while children are all different, an excellent philosophy on child-rearing is explained in *Baby Wise*. The philosophy that the author explains encourages the parents to direct the feeding and sleeping of the child, and with routine and guidance, the children will learn to respect authority and schedule. Perhaps your children would benefit with more direction and structure.”

David nearly spit the broccoli out of his mouth. He swallowed the chunk of food and said, “That’s not really what Sherry means. David Junior is a very good baby. He doesn’t cry very often because Sherry anticipates his needs.”

Elizabeth laughed a little and glared at Robert as if he had been the one to insult her children. The little boy kicked his sister, and she whimpered a little, but they both resumed playing with their food.

Robert cleared his throat and took a sip of his drink. “David, do you enjoy being a father?”

Elizabeth wanted for Robert to stay quiet, for everyone to have a peaceful dinner, and for no one to create a fuss, but Robert was not one to avoid sensitive conversations. He was headed in that exact direction.

“Yes, very much,” David said. “Being a father is very pleasant.”

“It must be very strange to have a perfect little you. How did you have the little guy?”

“We certainly used hormone therapy for Sherry to become pregnant, and then we used gene therapy, choosing some of my best genes. Depending on his education and interests, he may be more intelligent and handsomer and more athletic than I am.”

“Huh,” Robert said. “I didn’t think that it was possible to improve on your perfection.”

David looked at Elizabeth, and he seemed to be trying to look for the joke. Even though Elizabeth knew that Robert was just trying to find some answers, Elizabeth knew how abrasive Robert’s comments might seem. Elizabeth chewed thoughtfully and pretended to ponder Robert’s comment. She ignored the slight to David.

“I’m done,” Elizabeth’s son said.

The little girl whined a little and said, “I want to get down.”

“Take two more bites,” Elizabeth said, but her flat tone seemed to indicate more habit than attention.

“I can’t eat this crap,” the little boy said.

Elizabeth ignored this. “Two bites, both of you.” The little boy looked down at his plate as if he wanted to destroy the plate with his glare. He resentfully put two small bites into his mouth and jumped down from the table, saying, “I’m outta here, people.” The girl imitated him, mournfully eating two miniscule bites, jumping down, and repeating the “I’m outta here, people” remark.

Elizabeth put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands, smiling across the table at Robert. “That’s adorable. I guess you taught them to say that,” she said, looking across the table as if this was their first date. Robert smiled and nodded.

They both put their empty plates in the center of the table, but David and Sherry still chewed their food.

“You eat fast,” David said. “I don’t remember you eating your dinners.”

Robert smiled. “We may not be able to dispose of our food, but we do have vacuum suction in our mouths.”

“You will too,” Elizabeth said, laughing. “After you have a kid, you stop savoring meals.”

For the first time that evening, little David Junior began to stir. He didn’t cry or fuss, but he did punch his tiny fists at his face. He stretched his tiny mouth, yawning largely.

Sherry looked at her watch and said, “It’s almost time for him to eat. Do you mind if I feed him here at the table?”

Elizabeth smiled and said, “Of course not. Do you need to use a bottle warmer?”

The last words were not out of Elizabeth’s mouth before Sherry removed a small and perky breast from her shirt and put the nipple into David Junior’s little mouth. The baby sighed a little and closed his eyes as he began suck on Sherry’s breast.

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth said, her tone much louder and shriller than when she had called the children to dinner. Robert stared at Sherry’s beautifully round breast.

Sherry looked at them and said, “I’m feeding him.”

David stared at the others around the table. In the seconds that followed, Robert and Elizabeth seemed frozen as if they couldn’t understand or react to the breast-feeding creature at the table. After the awkward seconds passed, David said, “According to all

the research that Sherry has done about breastfeeding, the personal contact and interaction with the mother are important to the child's psychological development."

"What the hell?" was all Robert could mutter.

Robert continued to stare at Sherry's breast, but Elizabeth sputtered out her reaction: "I think that Robert is trying to figure out how you created a woman, and now she's breastfeeding your child."

Sherry looked at Elizabeth in a way that might have been colder than the average robotic glance. Sherry removed her breast from the boy's puckering mouth, and adjusted her breast inside her shirt. As she reached into the diaper bag that she had dropped at her feet and removed a prepared bottle, she said, "Breastfeeding is a normal part of caring for children. It is nothing to get upset about. I am this boy's mother."

Elizabeth shifted her gaze uncomfortably to the pile of empty plates on the table, but Robert said, "Are you? I'm not even sure what you are. I'm probably more of a mother to that child than you could ever be."

Sherry fed David Junior his bottle and didn't respond to this. Elizabeth stood up to pour more rum and coke into the glasses at the table because hers and Robert's glasses were empty. David and Sherry had barely touched their drinks, but Elizabeth filled their glasses to the rims. Elizabeth's children were fighting, out of sight in the living room. David heard the little girl yell something about being smothered in blankets. Robert and Elizabeth did not flinch.

"Aren't you going to do something?" David asked, waving a hand toward the living room.

“About the children?” Elizabeth said. “You can’t always be disciplining your children. They will figure things out for themselves.” Elizabeth couldn’t stop the look that she gave David even though she felt how condescending the glance was: it was the look of an older sister telling her younger brother that he didn’t know anything.

Sherry glanced at him quickly, but she kept her attention on David Junior as he continued slurping at the bottle, which now seemed impolite in the ensuing silence. David cleared his throat. “How are the children doing in school?” David tried to raise his eyebrows and smile, attempting to convey an expression of openness. He tried to change the subject and direct the conversation away from Sherry.

“Fine,” Robert said.

“Do you still enjoy staying home with the children?” David asked Robert.

“Of course,” Robert said. “Being a father’s the most important thing that I can ever do in my life. I take pride in taking care of my kids and giving them everything that they could ever want.”

Elizabeth saw David and Sherry exchanging a strange glance after looking around the small kitchen with the cluttered papers and scattered toys. Elizabeth knew David well enough to guess that he didn’t agree that Robert took pride in anything in the house.

David turned to Elizabeth, exaggerating an open face, and asked, “How is work?”

“Fine,” Elizabeth said. The little boy called from the living room, wanting to turn on an old James Bond movie. Elizabeth yelled back, telling them to keep the volume low.

The two couples sat, listening to David Junior suck at the bottle. He opened his eyes and looked at Sherry.

“She’s beautiful, certainly. Long thin legs and perky breasts.” Robert nodded at Sherry as if he had just recovered from seeing her breast. “She looks a bit like the old pictures that I have seen of your mother.” Robert leaned back in his chair, holding his drink and smiling in a way that made him look a little like the Cheshire Cat mixed with a bit of the self-satisfied Dr. No. He seemed to be waiting for a response, but David and Sherry said nothing. So Robert continued: “Did you create your ideal woman to be whoever you want? Even your mother? Is she like a sex slave that will clean your house and take care of the perfect mini-you?”

Elizabeth sat quietly and from the deepening red on David’s cheeks, she suspected that David wanted her to say something. Instead, she sipped her drink and nodded amiably. She refused to interpret her husband to David. Certainly, David may not approve of the life that Elizabeth had chosen with Robert, but she didn’t need to explain herself to her own brother.

She added, “She doesn’t look exactly like Mom. Mom was bigger and had blue eyes.”

David’s eyes darted, and he appeared to be searching for something clever that would silence his sister, but Elizabeth knew that when he was near Elizabeth and when she directed her condescending older sister gaze at him, he became the younger brother, one step behind her and never quite as attractive and clever and popular as she was. Instead, he said, “It’s no worse than the programming that you feed your children through television every day.”

Elizabeth crossed her arms across her chest and frowned at David, “That certainly wasn’t necessary,” she said. She didn’t need to explain their parenting to her brother, and

even though Robert could be a little harsh, David hadn't any right to say negative things about her family. Especially since his own family was so strange.

David couldn't hold his tongue and lashed out like the embarrassed and awkward teenager he had been. "You think that James Bond is a good role model for a five-year-old boy?"

"He's six," Elizabeth said, despising David for not even knowing the children's ages. "They enjoy James Bond," Elizabeth said. She sipped her drink and leaned back in her chair, recrossing her arms against her chest. "And yes, I do think that he's a good role model. James Bond's smart and successful and fearless."

"And a womanizer and a cold-blooded murderer."

"The children know that it's pretend."

"Except they might learn a thing or two about violence and sex."

"We are a Christian family, David," Elizabeth said, and she was using the same patronizing and exaggerated enunciation that she used when speaking to her children.

"Our children know that violence is bad."

"Sherry and I take David Junior to church," David said.

"We believe that God created everything," Elizabeth said. She stopped nodding and frowning her brow as if she were listening to a discussion about Teilhardian philosophy that she didn't entirely understand. She frowned and squinted her eyes. "You claim to have created a perfect wife, and now you have a son. They're your creations. Do you think God's happy to see them in church?"

"Your kids are creations as well."

“Created in God’s image, not in some distorted human understanding of perfection and gene therapy.”

David pushed his chair back from the table. “So you think Sherry and David Junior are evil?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, looking directly at David.

“But we make things every day,” David said, staring at the table. “Robert—not God—made dinner. Does that mean that this dinner is evil?”

Elizabeth took a long drink from her glass. “I think you should leave, David. Take your family with you.” She put a slight emphasis on the word, “family.”

David looked carefully at Elizabeth, apparently trying to find a joke or something in her hardened face that would explain this. He didn’t find anything except her frozen glare and tight lips.

Sherry put the bottle back in the diaper bag and stood up. Sherry said, “On the way here, David spoke about how he wanted your family in our lives. He cares about you and wants to be a part of your lives.”

Elizabeth tipped her glass up, finishing the last of her second rum and Coke. She stood and took the glasses from David and Sherry, and then she refilled both hers and Robert’s glasses.

Sherry continued talking. “Our family is different from your family, but that does not mean that you are better than us.” Sherry shifted David Junior onto her hip as she stood up. “It does not mean that we cannot learn from each other. Your family is more relaxed than we are. I can learn from you.”

Elizabeth remained standing. She still held her drink and crossed her arms.

Sherry zipped the diaper bag and shifted the baby in her arms. He was awake and blinking, but he didn't make a sound. "Elizabeth, you know David, so you must understand how hurtful this must be for him."

"Yes, I do."

David followed Sherry out of the dining room and through the scattered mess in the living room. Elizabeth watched them through the door to the kitchen. Her two children sat within five feet of the television, leaning toward the television as if they might lean right into the world of James Bond. They looked at David and Sherry as they entered the room, and David said to them, "Sherry and I need to go now. Do you want to give us hugs?"

The boy looked back to the television and said, "No," and the girl followed his lead, turning back to James Bond and saying, "No."

So David and Sherry walked out the front door and shut the door behind them. Elizabeth and Robert didn't come to the door to wave goodbye. Elizabeth never asked to hold the baby. Robert never shook David's hand. The children didn't stand on the front steps blowing kisses and chasing after the car.

"That didn't go well," Robert said.

Elizabeth didn't say anything, but she tipped her glass to the ceiling and drained the rest of her third drink. She put more ice in her glass and filled it with rum. She didn't pour any Coca-Cola in her glass.

"Tomorrow's my morning off," Robert said. "Don't drink too much so that I have to get up with the kids."

Elizabeth didn't really care at the moment. She wanted to spend the morning with her lovely children, painting pictures and playing trains in the living room. David might have some preconceived notion of life and perfection, but she knew that her kids were perfect.

David's family wasn't.

She was relieved that they were gone. As awful as the evening was, Elizabeth was glad that they didn't stay the night or the weekend. Her chest loosened. She hadn't felt this relaxed since a couple of weeks ago, before she knew David's family was coming to visit.

Fire

David Junior was turning six years old in May, and his parents David and Sherry decided to have a party with some of his friends from school and church. They invited nearly twenty kids for a campfire and sleepover at their home on the bluff overlooking the city, but in the end, almost everyone made excuses.

We all wanted to know what the house was like and what the family was like even though we didn't want our kids going over to that house for the night. So we were glad to hear that two little boys went over to the house that Friday evening. We thought that the boys, Will and Travis, went to the party so that they could tell their parents about the strange family, and really, we were glad that they went because then we could hear a bit about the house and the family. They had a beautiful home with some nice property for a campfire, but no one had seen inside the home in years.

The daylight was getting longer, but the evenings were still cool enough for a campfire. The two boys told us about what happened the next day. Apparently, the seven-year-old boys could not access how expensive or well decorated the house was, but both of the boys told us that the home was clean and smelled like flowers. Will and Travis saw David Junior's new bicycle in the garage and found a large television in the living room.

David Junior wanted to have hotdogs and s'mores, so his father collected firewood and scrap paper to start a small fire in a small clearing with large rocks, on the edge of the bluff and overlooking the town. Will and Travis agreed that the yard was awesome with the nice view of the town and the tire swing and the fire.

When the father David had a small flame going, the boys stabbed hotdogs and marshmallows with sticks and stuck them into the flames.

Will and Travis told us that Sherry was not comfortable having a campfire. “If you want to eat warmed marshmallows and hotdogs,” Sherry had said, “I can make them in the kitchen. I don’t understand this.”

David was apparently trying to be fun about the fire, so Will and Travis told about how the father teased Sherry a bit. “Of course not. This is one of those silly things that you wouldn’t understand.” David was roasting a marshmallow on the end of a twig he had found nearby. He stared into the fire, mesmerized by the blue base of the fire and by the browning marshmallow. David Junior poked a stick in the smoldering embers, digging for his dropped marshmallow and generally playing in the red embers. The other two boys had made elaborate shish kabob-like concoctions with pieces of marshmallow alternated with bits of hot dogs. Will and Travis had even discovered how to bore a hole into a piece of chocolate, but they quickly learned that roasting the chocolate on the sticks meant losing most of the melted chocolate to the fire as it dripped away. Sherry walked back to the house, probably for more chocolate or hot dogs.

Sherry came back to the small clearing without any chocolate. She was holding a bucket of water, standing in a posture of readiness and apparently waiting for the fire to explode.

“Come sit,” David said to Sherry, but she didn’t move.

“That flame could kill us all if it spread.” Will and Travis had thought this part of the story was hilarious.

“You will be fine,” David said. “You aren’t close enough to the fire to be damaged. It’s safe.”

“No, it is not. The ground is covered with dry leaves and sticks. If a stray spark lands on the ground near here, the fire could spread very quickly. An open flame surrounded with flammable material all around us is not safe. We are within fifty yards of our house, and a fire could easily spread to the house.”

“People do this all the time,” David said.

“Why?”

David removed his stick from the fire and blew on the marshmallow to cool it. He ate the marshmallow directly off the stick because he hated getting his fingers sticky. “Well,” he said, “It’s like a return to our primitive past. Before the modern age, people would sit around fires and cook things and talk or tell stories or whatever. And it’s pretty. Fires are mesmerizing.”

“So in an effort to imitate a past that no one really wants to return to,” Sherry summarized, “people create unstable infernos to roast processed meat and puffed sugar?”

“Basically, yes.”

“That is stupid,” Sherry said. The two boys laughed. They smoshed together the melting chocolate and marshmallows between blackened hotdogs.

David smiled. “Yes, I suppose it is.” David started roasting another marshmallow, turning the stick slowly, and browning the marshmallow an even tan.

“Sticks are so unsanitary, too.” Sherry said.

David Junior smiled, too. He put the stick up to his mouth and licked the end of the stick where the marshmallow had left a sticky residue. Will and Travis seemed to think that he was learning to take Sherry’s rationalizations with some of the good-natured bantering that his father showed. Whatever, Will and Travis enjoyed this. They told the

story with the excitement of seven-year-olds who had visited the state fair or an aquarium for the first time.

“I realize that you are being ironic,” Sherry told David Junior, “but it’s not healthy.” He smiled at her.

“Let’s go inside,” Sherry said, and David nodded. Sherry stepped cautiously closer to the fire and poured the bucket of water over the flames. The fire dissolved into a cloud of steam, and, as Sherry stumbled away from the steam, she nearly fell backwards.

David Junior looked at Sherry as if she had crushed his favorite pet.

Sherry looked at David Junior. His eyes were wide, and his chin quivered. Sherry patted him on the head and asked, “What is wrong?”

“I was having fun.”

Will and Travis nodded. They said they felt sorry for David Junior.

Conference

Ms. Hess hated parent-teacher conferences. She knew she was a good teacher, and after fifteen years of teaching third graders, she had defended her teaching too often to misunderstanding parents. Really, parents wanted someone else to take responsibility for their children. They didn't really want to admit that their children needed more attention and more discipline and more guidance, but she couldn't do more than teach no matter how much parents wanted to shun the responsibility.

Teaching was one of those paradoxical things to Ms. Hess. She couldn't be the children's parents, and although none of the parents would ever admit this to themselves or the teachers, they secretly wanted teachers to be more like parents. They wanted teachers like Ms. Hess to discipline their children and mold them into the excellent students and great kids that the parents didn't have the time or patience to instill. As painful as the parent-teacher conferences were, she would placate herself by thinking about how little the parents understood and were unwilling to admit about their own children.

But this was against any job description that Ms. Hess had ever read.

And so, it was time for another round of conferences with parents.

She didn't schedule more than four a day because she wanted to spread out the parents, but she wanted to finish the conferences as quickly as possible. After the evening conferences, she would go home and drink a glass or two of port. She'd been saving a nice bottle of port for some occasion, and she couldn't think of a better occasion for some port than a week of conferences. Maybe she could drink enough to remember why she started teaching in the first place, or more likely, she might drink enough to forget that she was a teacher.

So on one Friday afternoon, Ms. Hess had scheduled four conferences. After sitting at her desk, pretending to look over some papers, and thinking of the bottle of port, Ms. Hess, beckoned Mr. Lopez into the classroom. Mrs. Hess was a woman prone to health problems based on the ill distribution of her weight. She was a tall, long-legged woman, and for her tall five-foot, ten-inch frame, she might have only been fifty pounds overweight, but all of this weight was in her waist and chest.

Mrs. Hess did have lovely dark eyes that might have been black had she been wearing any other color than red. The red reflected in her nearly black eyes, leaving an impression that her eyes had a softer pigment. Despite the intense color of her eyes, they had dark bags under them, and her eyes looked red.

The first meeting went quickly. Mr. Lopez was grateful that his daughter was passing and didn't ask difficult questions.

The second meeting with Jimmy's parents, John Castaneda and his girlfriend Tatiana was less than simple. Tatiana insisted that Jimmy was having troubles in class because the teacher didn't give him enough attention. "He needs to know that you are paying attention. He's a better child when he thinks that he will get caught and punished."

Ms. Hess sighed. With thirty children in the classroom, she couldn't spend much time with every child, but she knew that she couldn't tell John and Tatiana that. "Jimmy probably needs some more exercise. He's much more productive and can concentrate much better after recess or after he runs around a bit. Have you considered entering Jimmy into an extra-curricular sports team?"

Tatiana nearly began to wail, something about how dangerous and bad sports were. John patted Tatiana's shoulder and told Ms. Hess, "We believe that sports are a concentrated microcosm of the evils in the world. From social class differences to drug and alcohol abuse and sexism and racism."

Ms. Hess stopped talking at this point. She nodded and listened to the couple complain about sports, and Tatiana continued to speak a few decibels too loud and with an edge of a shriek in every word she said.

Ms. Hess was glad when they left. She thought of the bottle of port that she would open that night. The bottle would be opened after the conferences that night. She continued to nod at John and Tatiana, but she had stopped listening to the couple and concentrated on the bottle of port that she would open. Maybe she would drink the entire bottle. Tomorrow was Saturday, and although she wanted to do some class plans for next week, she could sleep in.

The next mother was Jason's mother, and it was much of the same. Jason's mother cared for the three children by herself, and she blamed Ms. Hess for Jason's misbehavior. She told Ms. Hess how important Jason's education was, how he was a brilliant child that needed to be challenged much more than the average student, and how Jason was destined to follow in the footsteps of his politician uncle. He would be a powerful and intelligent man, but Ms. Hess was holding him back from his potential.

Ms. Hess wasn't really listening, but nodded blankly to seem to be listening. At first, she considered telling Jason's mother that Jason needed to master basic skills—reading, writing, math, and the rest—before he could be the genius that his mother dreamed him to be. Really, Jason struggled with the simplest of skills, and Ms. Hess

doubted that he would amount to anything close to a genius, but of course she wouldn't tell her that.

After another twenty minutes of this, Ms. Hess ceased listening and nodding and thought about the bottle of port. Maybe she would even watch a movie and take a bath and order some Chinese food. She deserved something good after a week like this.

The last meeting of the evening was with the Sherry Levison, but before Ms. Hess went into the hallway to look for Sherry and after Jason's mother had stopped daubing at her dry eyes with a tissue and had left, Ms. Hess sat quietly. She looked around the room, reminding herself that the parents were the worst part of the job. She knew what she was doing, she was good at her job, and she knew that the parents were just hoping for something greater than the imperfect children that they had.

Ms. Hess had heard the rumors about the Levison family, about how the woman was some sort of pseudo-human creature, about how the husband claimed to have created her, and about how the town gossiped and talked of the family like they were alien celebrities or something.

She didn't believe all the ridiculousness that people said about Sherry. Ms. Hess had disregarded the rumors that she had heard about her being an alien or a robot or a lobotomized mental health patient as the most outrageous stories claimed.

She believed that something might be wrong with Sherry even though she had only seen her from a distance at the open house on the first day of school. Really, Ms. Hess assumed that Sherry was a victim of some brain injury or flawed brain surgery, but maybe it was more simple than that: maybe Sherry had a strange form of Aspergers or

autism. Ms. Hess even thought that she could reach out to her and help her to become more accepted in the community.

With this bit of motivation, Ms. Hess looked out into the hallway. Sherry waited, clutching her purse and sitting on the edge of the bench like she was waiting to see the principal. The hallway was long and empty, and except for Sherry and the bench she was sitting on, only a trophy case and a row of lockers were in the hallway.

“Mrs. Levison?” Ms. Hess asked.

“Yes,” the small woman said, looking up. She had a beautifully heart-shaped face with a pointed chin and defined cheekbones, and her face was framed with beautiful dark black hair that shone a slight green reflection and moved like silk across her shoulders as she turned her head to face Ms. Hess.

Ms. Hess was nearly twenty minutes late, so she said, “I hope you haven’t been waiting long. Please come in.”

Sherry stood up and placed the strap of her purse over her shoulder. She walked to the doorway of the classroom and facing Ms. Hess. She said, “People are sometimes unaware of time constraints because time can seem malleable to many people, but casual tardiness can be an expression of disrespect or irresponsibility, lacking consideration for other people’s time.”

Sherry’s speech seemed formal, but the observational and uninterested comments reinforced Ms. Hess’s initial assumption: she may have some form of communication disability. “My apologies for keeping you waiting,” she said to Sherry. “I have had three other conferences this afternoon.”

Sherry walked into the room behind Ms. Hess as if she didn't waste any extra movements or energy. Despite the limited and slow movements, she didn't move as awkwardly as people in town had said.

Ms. Hess's desk in the front of the room held several neat stacks of papers, stapled and paper-clipped in crossing stacks. Several textbooks sat neatly on the desk also: one was a child psychology textbook, and another was a childhood education text. The others lay to an open page, stacked on each other, waiting to be graded.

Ms. Hess pointed to a desk in the front row of the classroom and said, "Sit down, Mrs. Levison." She gestured to a small desk directly in front of her own desk. Many of the parents would have been too large to sit on the chair, but Sherry slipped into the small chair easily. She adjusted her short skirt and twisted the strap of her purse between her fingers.

"Please," Sherry said, "call me Sherry." Sherry began playing with the strap of her handbag. The movements seemed like a nervous habit.

Ms. Hess did not offer the same, but she did thank Sherry. "Shall we begin, Sherry?"

"Yes. Allow me to say that David Junior enjoys your class very much and that he appears to learn many different things. You must work very hard to challenge the students and direct them in positive ways. Because of the advanced reading that you assign, I assume that your primary interest is in literature?"

"Yes," Ms. Hess said. Sherry didn't smile or show any emotion, but she pursed her lips together in an expression that Ms. Hess thought might be controlled anger.

Ms. Hess learned to read people quickly. She knew when her students lied or hid something, but despite her strong instincts, she didn't know what was behind Sherry's crossed arms and direct eye contact. If Sherry had a variation of autism, then her body language might be as affected as her speech.

Sherry crossed her legs and shifted a little. She twisted the strap to her purse, wrapping it tightly around the buckle in the middle and then unraveling it.

"Sherry," Ms. Hess said, "David Junior's an excellent student."

"Yes. David has excellent genes, and we chose our parenting techniques carefully. We also encourage him to read at home. He doesn't watch much television, but he does spend a lot of time on the computer. I constantly monitor what he sees and researches so that he will not go to any websites that contain material better suited for adults."

"It's obvious that David Junior is intelligent and disciplined."

He was an attractive boy with above average coordination skills, above average capacity in language, above average skills in mathematics and science. He excelled in everything that he did.

"Sherry," Ms. Hess said, "I'm very glad that you could come to meet with me. I'm sorry that Dr. Levison couldn't come, though."

"He is at a conference in San Francisco. He wanted to be here, but he will not return until next week."

"Please let him know that I'll be glad to meet with him if he has the time to stop in after school."

"I will tell him."

“Dr. Levison didn’t take you to the conference?”

“My job is to look after David Junior, so I stay home. I also have commitments. I help with DJ’s soccer team, and grow most of our fruits and vegetables in a greenhouse. I also have started knitting.”

“Fascinating,” Mrs. Hess said. She was trying to analyze Sherry’s body language and speech to diagnose some communication problems. “You grow a lot of the food that you eat?”

“Of course.”

“Really, it’s such an honor to meet you. I’d also enjoy meeting Dr. Levison.”

Sherry smiled.

Ms. Hess looked down at the paper in front of her, glancing over different lines of handwritten notes.

“Is David Junior having problems in your class?” Sherry asked.

Ms. Hess looked at Sherry, looking into Sherry’s dark eyes as if she were looking for some reason for Sherry to ask that.

“David’s doing extremely well, Sherry. I’d thought that DJ might even skip a grade.”

“That is great news,” Sherry said. “But is he bored in class? Does he have a difficult time staying on task?”

Ms. Hess smiled, and she hid a patronizing look. But she said, “No.”

“Why do you think that he might want to skip a grade?”

“Because he’s so far ahead of the other children.”

“He is not bored?”

“No. On the contrary, he helps the other students. He digs deeper into the skills that we practice, and his analytical skills are exceptional. He’s a pleasure to have in class and often offers a different perspective that help the other children, but DJ may benefit from some more challenging ideas.”

Sherry seemed pleased by this and stopped twisting the strap of her handbag.

“In my research,” Sherry said, “children that surpass their peers in learning do not benefit from skipping levels of grades. The knowledge may challenge the child more, but the social skills and interactions that the child has with their peers helps to determine how they will interact with other people in the future. Boys develop slower than girls do, so this further separation between David Junior and his peers may accentuate and exaggerate David’s youth.”

“That’s very true.”

“Despite the drawbacks of development,” Sherry said, “you still think that DJ should move ahead for the greater challenge?”

“Yes.”

“This is very good news, but explain to me your specific reasons.”

Ms. Hess thumbed through a stack of papers and selected a page in the middle of the stack. The paper was a pop quiz that requested the students to write what they learned about conservationism based on the Earth Day celebration that the children organized. The quiz stipulated that the students only had twenty minutes to write a paragraph on this topic. She handed the page to Sherry.

“What did you do for Earth Day?” Sherry asked.

“We planted a tree in the playground and talked about recycling. We talked about the things that we throw in the garbage and ways that we might be able to reuse some of the garbage. We made whistles and shakers from empty water bottles.”

Sherry looked down at the paper with the handwriting that Ms. Hess had grown to look forward to reading. David Junior’s small, neat handwriting had elongated and curled loops in the upper zone of the letters, a slight right slant, and closed vowels. While graphology had questionable applications, David Junior’s handwriting indicated a forward-thinking, intelligent, creative child who was more reserved than open. This was another skill that Ms. Hess had studied in an attempt to understand children better.

The essay read, “Earth Day is a great reminder of our limited awareness of the world around us. We need to understand that planting trees and recycling are important practices for us to practice, but these activities cannot be limited to a single day. If we really care about the environment, then we may as well invest more money in alternate energy sources and better material.

“In the end, Earth Day is a real horrible idea, encouraging people to do some minor deed to make everyone feel better about their impact on the world around them so that the rest of the year people can waste and use as much as they can. Instead of remembering our impact on our world for a short 24-hour period, our culture, media, and government should make a stronger effort to encourage environment habits to become a more intrinsic part of our society.”

Sherry read this passage, nodding at the basic premise that David Junior argued.

“This is a good essay,” Sherry said. “I would hope that She would have hoped he could have added more details and examples as the general rules of writing encourage.

There are several grammatical errors as well, but the brief passage is a clearly stated expression of his ideas on the subject.”

“This is easily the best essay in class.”

“How does this prove that David Junior should go to a higher grade?”

“David never looks down at the other children, but most of the class is still struggling with punctuation and spelling. Some of the students are still struggling with cursive writing. Some students print their letters backwards. The other students certainly don’t know what ‘intrinsic’ means. They might not even know what ‘alternative energy’ means either.”

“Are the other children mentally disabled?”

“No, no, Sherry,” Ms. Hess said, smiling. “It’s typical for an eight-year-old to struggle with language skills and writing, especially boys who tend to be better in motor skills than girls. I’m saying that David Junior’s easily several grades ahead of everyone else.”

“Oh. Moving David Junior is an interesting but complicated idea. This is a decision that I cannot make alone. I will discuss this with David and have him arrange a time to meet with you.”

Sherry began to collect her bag, untwisting the strap and stood. Ms. Hess was waiting not saying goodbye, but she cocked her head and upturned the corner of her mouth as if she had something more to say.

“May I pass any other information to David?” Sherry asked.

“No, no.” Again she paused and seemed ready to say something. And then finally, “Sherry, I wanted to ask you something.” She paused for a moment, looking at

Sherry and wondering if she was overstepping some boundary. “I wanted to ask you about being a parent.”

Sherry sat down again. “David has directed me about the parenting styles that he wanted to focus. He stressed that David Junior should have strict rules. Infringements to these rules require punishment. We do not punish him harshly.”

“Of course.”

“Punishments include, but are not limited to, time-outs and denying David Junior access to a treasured toy or game.”

“That is very reasonable, and I’m sure that you have done considerable research to come to these parenting decisions. Really, I’m just curious. I wanted to know if parenting is difficult for you. You seem very logical.”

Sherry began to twist the strap to her purse again. Mrs. Hess had the same expression, cocked head and half-smile that may have confused any autistic person, let alone someone as unusual as Sherry.

“I enjoy parenting,” was all that Sherry could say.

“Yes, but I have been wondering about parenting experiences for you. All your parenting decisions are made with logic, and you have unlimited resources to inform your decisions. But your experience with David Junior must be much deeper than that. How does being a mother make you feel?”

This question seemed strange to Sherry. “Generally, I do not think about feelings,” she said. “Emotional reactions never fulfill any purpose.”

“Do you ever feel anything?”

“I can touch things and sense changes in temperature.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Does DJ do or say things that you can’t make sense of?”

“Sometimes I don’t understand why David Junior says things or does things to defy me or his father. His actions and emotions are often irrational.”

“You seem like a wonderful mother,” Ms. Hess said, still attempting to understand this odd woman and hoping to break through her emotionless speech.

“Thank you.”

“Many people say that your logic and lack of emotion make you a bad mother. I don’t think so. You seem to understand being a mother better than most of the parents that I meet.”

“I can analyze human reactions and gestures logically. While I understand the ambiguity in neuro-linguistics and body language, my studies in communication allow me to decipher human meaning and implications. I can recognize emotional human reactions.”

“I see.” Sherry didn’t seem to know what else to say, but Ms. Hess felt validated. Sherry must have autism, but recognizing Sherry’s strengths seemed to encourage her. Perhaps Ms. Hess was breaking through to her.

“So I will tell David to visit you?” Sherry said.

“Yes,” Ms. Hess said. “I’ll look forward to having a conversation with him.”

Sherry left the room, carrying her tangled purse under her arm and only untangling it to retrieve the keys to her car.

Ms. Hess watched Sherry walk out of the classroom, not turning back to smile or wave at the teacher.

Ms. Hess thought she understood David Junior and Sherry. She even felt better about her students, knowing that she was a good teacher who could encourage students to do their best.

Certainly, Sherry seemed like a normal woman with some emotional or communicative handicaps, but she had hoped that she had reached Sherry somehow. Ms. Hess felt certain that she understood the Levison family better than anyone else in the town.

As much better as she felt, she still called an order at the Great Hunan Chinese Restaurant. She would still open the bottle of port, but she didn't feel as overwhelmed and discouraged as she felt in the beginning of the evening. Listening to Sherry talk made Ms. Hess feel more perceptive and like a better teacher even if none of the other parents recognized this.

Doctor

Dr. Prozeroski leaned forward in his seat, peering at the couple under his bushy eyebrows and glancing down to write the date and names on a legal pad carefully balanced on his sharp knees. He made his notes with the capital letters, heavy pressure, right-slant, and small characters. He wrote at the top of the page: “FRANK AND GALA LEVISON.” In his own notes, he had begun referring to them as the mad scientist Frankenstein and his Galatea, but of course he never called them this directly.

During the first session with the Levisons, the doctor used “Frank and Gala” in his notes to help him to make light of the couple. Dr. Prozeroski attended Pleasant Valley Free Church with the Levisons, and he understood why people alienated the family. They were odd, and David seemed too confident that he had created her. Really, they did not have any problems. David monopolized the therapy discussions and conversations at church but denied that he had any problems.

Dr. Prozeroski had heard the gossip about Sherry and David, all the stories about how perverted David must be and about how abnormal Sherry was. People came up with the most ridiculous explanations for this, from how David had designed Sherry from wires and mannequins to how David had removed pieces of her brain to make her into a meeker and more pliable wife.

Dr. Prozeroski wasn't entirely certain of what to make of the couple, but in that first meeting, David had insisted that he had designed his wife. “I made her to be a perfect woman. I will not tell you any more about that due to privacy.” He had no idea what to make of this.

In that first meeting, Dr. Prozeroski also found out that Sherry had done things that surprised David, things that he didn't expect. She had started watching HGTV and

the View, learning about design and female perspectives. David wanted to fix Sherry of this habit, and Dr. Prozeroski decided that David may have altered her brain or controlled her in some way that coincided with the ways that David wanted her to think and act. Sherry didn't seem to have any problems, but David certainly struggled with anything that he couldn't control.

It had been a few months since that first meeting, and although Dr. Prozeroski had made some judgments about the family, he still wondered about them. He jotted down a few more notes before saying anything to the couple.

ASK ABOUT SEXUAL DIFFICULTIES—ANY CHANGES? BOREDOM?
CONTINUE TO EXPLORE DAVID'S CONTROL ISSUES?

"How're you doing?" Dr. Prozeroski asked after the couple was settled comfortably in the deep leather sofa facing him. The doctor looked over his wire-rimmed glasses and inspected them. David Levison reclined in the sofa, holding his wife's hand as she sat beside him, her leg touching his. David wore his usual khaki pants, rumpled shirt, and tortoise-shell glasses, and although Sherry wore business clothes, her straight skirt and blouse revealed a distracting amount of skin.

"We are doing very well," David said.

"Sex is satisfactory?"

"Yes."

David started talking. When he was excited or enthusiastic about his accomplishments that he saw in Sherry, he talked in a strange monotone like he was reading from a prepared statement. He talked about how beautiful Sherry could be, how

resourceful she could be in bed, and how sensitive she was to all his needs. As David continued to drone on, Dr. Prozeroski wrote more notes.

FRANK ENJOYS SEX, BUT APPARANTLY APPRECIATES GALA'S
INGENUITY—CLAIMING THIS AS SOME SORT OF VICTORY IN HIS
EXPERIMENT WITH GALA. HE THINKS HE CREATED HER, SO ANY OF HER
POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES ARE A REFLECTION ON HIS POWER.

“Have you explored new routines?”

“Yes. Sherry is very flexible. She also researches sex and practices online, so she can be very resourceful.”

“Sherry, what material do you use to explore sex?”

Sherry continued to look at David but responded to Dr. Prozeroski's question. “I read articles in *Vogue* and in *Men's Health*, and I watch pornographic videos.”

Dr. Prozeroski couldn't help but to smile. “You are very creative.”

David held up his hand. “No,” he said, his voice a pitch higher than normal. “I am the one with all the creativity and imagination. She will go along with anything I suggest.”

“What about the ideas that she suggests?”

“Her knowledge and resourcefulness are part of my creative efforts in Sherry.”

“You claim responsibility for her creativity?”

“Of course.”

HE RESPONDS TO FLATTERY, WANTING ANY OF GALA'S TALENTS
OR SKILLS TO REFLECT HIS OWN STRENGTH.

David's reaction to this felt irrational, so the doctor decided to approach the subject differently. He asked, "Has anything interesting happened since I saw you last month?" Dr. Prozeroski glanced at Sherry, but her face remained turned to David. The doctor rarely spoke directly to Sherry. He mostly talked to David because Sherry's lack of communication and emotion could make the doctor feel so foolish, boiling down his reactions and questions to a simple human psychology that she could find in a freshman textbook.

David began talking about his work and the everyday moments in their lives. The couple's body language was so strange and lopsided. Sherry leaned toward David, facing him and touching his hands, so she appeared to be focusing all her energy and attention on David. David appeared relaxed and comfortable as he leaned back and held Sherry's hand.

"David Junior won the science fair," David was saying when Dr. Prozeroski redirected his focus to David. "He has also joined an intramural soccer team."

"Does DJ enjoy soccer?"

"He hasn't played long, but he doesn't know if he likes something unless he tries it."

The doctor clicked the button on his ballpoint pen. David flinched a little at the noise. The doctor wrote a note,

FRANK'S CONTROL APPEARS TO AFFECT FRANK JUNIOR. HE ALSO SEEMS IRRITATED BY REPETITIVE NOISES. ANNOYING NOISES AND OTHER'S FLAWS MAY PROVOKE FRANK'S ATTEMPT TO CONTROL HIS ENVIRONMENT.

“Would you be as proud of David Junior if he wanted to play the flute or take gymnastics?”

David smiled. “He’s much too tall to be a gymnast.”

“David,” Sherry said, “the doctor may be suggesting that we direct David Junior to do activities that we approve of.”

“Exactly,” the doctor said.

David furrowed his brow and fell silent for a moment. “No, doctor,” he said, “I do not think that we force him to do things that he doesn’t want to do.”

“What does he enjoy doing the most?”

“He is eight years old. He likes to play computer games and to play with his friends.”

Dr. Levison clicked his ballpoint pen, and David flinched as if he heard fingernails screeching down a chalkboard. Dr. Prozeroski enjoyed irritating David, trying to break through his logic and control.

“Would you bring David Junior to see me for your next visit?”

“Certainly.”

The doctor paused to write.

FRANK JUNIOR MAY VISIT NEXT SESSION. BE SURE TO ASK IF HE FEELS APPROVAL AND ENCOURAGEMENT FROM HIS PARENTS.

David began to drone on about David Junior’s successes and interests. According to David, the child excelled in everything he tried. The doctor focused on the square that he was drawing on his legal pad because the doodle helped to focus his attention. He

divided the square into four precise triangles, and then he bisected each of those triangles. He began drawing a crosshatch over every other triangle.

“Let’s talk about conflict resolution,” the doctor suggested during a pause in David’s speech.

“We don’t have any conflict.”

“David, I think you impose control on many things in your life.”

“You mean with Sherry? We do not argue. We do not have conflicts.”

Dr. Prozeroski drew another square and began dividing it into triangles.

“Every married couple has some conflicts.”

“That may be true for most couples, but we aren’t like everyone else.”

“True. But conflicts are a part of any marriage.”

“Not ours.”

Dr. Prozeroski fought the urge to say something about Sherry’s subservience, but instead he said, “With Sherry, you want her to serve you in every way. David Junior does activities that you approve of. What do you do when something doesn’t go the way you want it to? Like maybe at work?”

“At work, sometimes I become frustrated with the other engineers,” David said.

“They can be idiotic and unimaginative.”

“What do you do when one of your engineers makes a mistake?”

“They usually prove useless. They don’t last very long.”

“But what about when David Junior becomes a teenager? What’ll happen when DJ does something that you do not approve of?”

David shifted a little and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “We will punish him of course.”

Sherry interjected again. “The doctor appears to be implying that you do not know how to deal with conflict because you seek to control all the variables in your life.”

Dr. Prozeroski clicked his pen again, pleased that he could upset David so easily. He wondered how far he could push David by simply clicking his pen.

“That is foolish. I have dealt with many conflicts in my life.”

Sherry touched David’s leg gently. “Yes, you have had many obstacles. The doctor is not suggesting that you have had an easy life. He is suggesting that you avoid conflict through controlling your environment.”

“That’s basically true,” the doctor said.

FRANK REFUSES TO ACKNOWLEDGE HIS CONTROL ISSUES. AS RATIONAL AS GALA IS, SHE SEEMS TO RECOGNIZE FRANK’S POSSIBLE FLAWS, BUT SHE ACCEPTS THESE PROBLEMS. SHE DOESN’T TRY TO CHANGE HIM.

“David,” the doctor said, leaning forward in his seat and looking over his glasses at the couple, “when you are driving and someone cuts you off, what do you do?”

“What anyone else does. I may flick off the driver and swear to myself. At night, I have a drink or two to relax.”

The doctor clicked his pen a few times, carefully watching David’s grimace deepen with every click of the pen. His face grew redder and his clenched the muscles in his jaw. “Go back to work conflicts,” the doctor continued to pry. “What do you do when something wrong happens?”

“I do not tolerate incompetence. I fire engineers that cannot do adequate work.”

“What would happen if you made a mistake?”

“I am very careful. I rarely make mistakes.”

“What’ll happen when you discover David Junior wants to have sex?”

“Instruct him about the dangers of sex,” David said, firing back the response like a game show contestant. “I will give him condoms and teach him to be careful.” The skin on David’s knuckles was tight, and the muscles in his jaw clenched again.

“What will happen when David Junior sneaks out one night?”

“We will ground him. Maybe take away some of his privileges.”

Dr. Prozeroski clicked his pen another two times, and David clenched his fists and leaned forward, waiting for the next part of the pop quiz. “David, I don’t think that you understand that the world can be unpredictable. Sometimes things happen that we can’t control.”

“I am not a fool. I understand this.”

“David, I’m concerned that in your effort to control and avoid conflicts, you won’t have the adequate skills to deal with David Junior when he becomes a teenager.”

“That is ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

David uncrossed his arms and held Sherry’s hand, his knuckles still white.

“Sometime in the future,” David said, “David Junior is going to become an adult. He may rebel. Powerful hormones and an underdeveloped prefrontal lobe almost certainly will overcome him. He may make mistakes. Sherry and I will deal with it.”

“How will you deal with it?”

“We will punish him and ground him.”

“You’ll keep him home so you can control what he does? And then you’ll have a few drinks to control how the lack of control feels?”

“Sherry,” David said, stroking her hand, “I think the doctor just called me a control freak and an alcoholic.”

“David,” Sherry said, “that is not what the doctor said. He is implying that, certainly, but he did not say that.”

“Let’s go, Sherry.”

They got up to leave.

“If David Junior needs someone to talk to, I’ll be glad to see him.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

David shut the door, not quite hard enough to be a slam.

FRANK AND GALA ARE GONE. MAY NOT SEE THEM AGAIN.

End

One night, Gary heard an ambulance pull into his neighborhood. The Levison family intrigued all of us, including Gary, one of the Levison's neighbors, but more than ten years had passed since the wedding, and we suspected that the child was around eight or nine years old. Aside from the family's church attendance, from Sherry's walks to the grocery store, and from David's reclusive research at the university, we didn't really see the family much.

When Gary told us about the ambulance, he admitted that he hoped that something had happened to Sherry. We all sort of hoped that something had happened to Sherry because, even though we enjoyed the stories about her, we needed something new to talk about. We wanted a new chapter in the story to talk about.

We wanted to read the autopsy report that would tell of Sherry's insides. Perhaps the coroner would find a mass of spaghetti wires, sorted and connected with all sorts of homemade wire ties and solder. Possibly the coroner would find out that her family in Thailand had reported her missing years ago after a bad lobotomy. Maybe he would find scars in her brain from added and removed tissue.

We all wondered if Sherry's blood might be green.

"Maybe," Gary said, "They'll cut her open, and she'll have a perfectly normal human body except for her brain. Maybe she has a mainframe where her brain should be."

We wondered if we would ever learn about the autopsy report because if it were strange enough, someone would probably cover it up. We talked about a government conspiracy to hide their human cloning program or to cover up the evidence that aliens walked among us. Maybe David had built her in some secret laboratory at the university

or in his basement from mail-order materials, and now they would bury the cyborg in some desolate hill, hundreds of feet below the surface.

The doctors and nurses in the hospital were just as curious about the family as the rest of us, but we didn't hear anything for two days. The doctors and nurses were all busy.

But the ambulance wasn't for Sherry. She was fine.

David Levison was not. He had died of a heart attack.

We should have felt bad for the family. But we weren't. We just wanted to know what could have happened. We wondered what happened that night.

We imagined Sherry checking David's pulse and administering CPR, in an effort to save David. David might have programmed her to be able to do all sorts of medical procedures, so maybe she tried to shock his heart back to life with the live wires from a lamp or something, or she tried to give him a transplant with an artificial pump that she built in the basement as quickly as she could.

Or maybe, we all whispered, just maybe, she didn't try to save him, just standing by and watching him die. We imagined her watching the life drain from his body, unable to save the man that had formed her.

Worse yet, perhaps she killed him because he disagreed with her on some point that she could logically defend. Possibly, she wanted to take over the house and the child and start a new life out from under David's power. Maybe she wanted to take over the town. Maybe she planned to take over the world.

We also wondered about the eight-year-old David Junior. He was odd, but not as odd as his parents. He could have been a normal kid who was exceptionally smart and

who had really weird parents. We told each other that we hoped the child would be okay, but we wondered if this could be the trauma that pushed this poor kid over the edge into insanity or robotics.

The doctors told us that David had a heart attack. He died in their home before the ambulance even arrived, and the paramedics and doctors couldn't do anything to save him. When we asked the doctors about an autopsy or any sign of foul play, the doctors told us that they didn't have any reason to suspect foul play. Apparently, they had not even tested for drugs or poisons in his system.

We wondered what a full autopsy would have revealed. We wondered if we could exhume the body and take some samples in case someone started asking the right questions. We could have the evidence waiting.

We never exhumed anyone, though.

We went to David's funeral, and Pastor Steve gave an uncomfortable eulogy about David's intelligence. He even added something about David's soul in the end of the sermon, but we knew how Pastor Steve felt about the family. He might have tried to hide his condemnation for the family, but we could hear the sarcasm in his voice when he said, "David's soul."

Even though Sherry was alive with her aberrant child and David's death didn't pose any clear answers, we had new things to talk about. Would Sherry own the house? Would child services come to take David Junior away to lock him in a laboratory and do experiments on him for the rest of his life?

At that time, we didn't know what would happen.

Lake

Keith Lesser walked toward the edge of the lake. A small group of people gathered by the lake, and Keith noticed that Sherry Levison stood behind the crowd, several paces behind them. She stood about ten feet from the edge of the lake, watching the surf vary an inch or two with suspicion.

Since her husband had died, she had grown more cautious about hazardous things like cooking, using electricity, and driving. She had gotten progressively stranger in the past years, and Keith knew that she made no-bake desserts for all the church potlucks because she said, “The oven may light afire.”

The rest of the crowd wore shorts and T-shirts appropriate for the warm weather, but Sherry wore a plastic skullcap and a raincoat in some effort to protect herself from any stray splashes that might come from the lake.

Keith knew that something wasn't right with Sherry. He had met her several times at church, and Keith had worked with Dr. Levison at Winona State University. They had worked on different sides of the campus, Keith in the philosophy department and David in the engineering, but Keith had seen David and Sherry Levison several times. He suspected that Sherry had some sort of brain surgery that made her logical thinking stronger and her emotional and hormonal centers weaker. If she did have any emotional capacity at all, then the baptism at the lake would have to affect Sherry.

David Junior stood near Pastor Steve, talking animatedly. Keith could barely hear what they were saying, but he thought he could understand the context: he was talking about the spirit and how wonderful all of it felt. He said that he felt good.

Pastor Steve looked over the group that had gathered and said, “Okay everyone, let's get started.”

Everyone turned to face Pastor Steve and DJ, and Pastor Steve announced, “We are gathered here to witness DJ’s commitment to God. DJ was baptized as a child because his family wanted to commit him to God.” Pastor Steve sounded a little sarcastic as he spoke of DJ’s family and of his baptism. He paused for a moment, and Keith knew that Pastor Steve had fought against David Junior’s child dedication. The parents didn’t believe in Jesus, but they recognized some positives in the church, its morality, and its community.

“A child baptism cannot reflect the faith that we must have as adults,” Pastor Steve continued. “Adult baptism is an outward expression of DJ’s commitment to God. Today, DJ will be baptized in water and with the Holy Spirit.” He put his hand on DJ’s shoulder. “Would you like to say something, son?”

Keith knew that the term “son” could be a term of affection, but Pastor Steve’s use of the word felt like a slight to the Levison family, as if Pastor Steve were claiming the child as his own. He must have created a strong bond with DJ, which was potentially positive after the death of his father. However, the intimacy felt like something his real father would not have liked. David would have resented the man for filling the young boy with spiritual ideas that represented a contrast to everything that David had believed in.

Who knew what Sherry really thought of any of this.

DJ took a small step toward the group and said, “My life hasn’t been full of drugs or alcohol or anything so dramatic. I haven’t had any sort of powerful, spiritual change in my life, and I haven’t hit rock bottom like other testimonies might say. But my dad

died when I was eight, and” he paused here for a moment, clearing his throat, “I have felt very alone.” Keith wondered if this felt as mean to Sherry as it seemed to Keith.

He continued after a brief pause: “I didn’t have anyone to help me. I was afraid, and I felt so alone. I thought that I would have to take care of myself.”

Sherry watched DJ closely, and Sherry must have cared for DJ in her own way. She had been there the night his father had died. She had perhaps become overwhelmingly protective since David had died. Even though DJ started calling Sherry by her name instead of “Mom” and he had begun voicing disapproval at her presence, she had been married to his father. She had carried the fetus, but that was all, according to David Junior.

Certainly, DJ was at an age in which he questioned the world and his family. He had become increasingly vocal about his family and its questionable origins. Teenage years could be difficult for any child, let alone a child who didn’t understand his parents. No one understood his parents.

“Then Pastor Steve came to my house after my father died,” DJ continued. “When he cried with me, I felt as if someone else cared about me and about my father. I didn’t feel so alone.” Pastor Steve squeezed the boy’s shoulder. The gesture indicated some comfort and perhaps explained DJ’s transferred feelings from his dead father to Pastor Steve.

“I felt the presence of God,” DJ said, “and I knew that God was calling me to something bigger and better than even my father would have hoped for me. God has a plan for me and my life, and although I have no idea what that plan might be, I’m excited to be included in the Master’s work.”

DJ rubbed his eyes possibly wiping away tears, but Keith didn't see any moisture around his eyes. "I don't know where my dad is now, but I hope he can see me. I hope he is smiling today."

Pastor Steve smiled at the boy and said, "Yes, God has a plan. God knows what he has in store for all of us." He led DJ into the water, and when the water was waist-high, they stopped. Pastor Steve placed a hand behind DJ's back and asked, "Do you believe in God?"

"Yes," DJ said.

"Do you believe in Jesus Christ and his resurrection?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you confess your need for Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for your sins?"

"Yes, I do."

Pastor Steve suddenly dunked DJ into the water, announcing that he was "baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

All the people standing on the beach applauded. One of the teenagers from DJ's youth group whistled.

DJ emerged from the water with a splash. He was dripping and smiling, and the two began to make their way back out of the water. Keith heard DJ tell Pastor Steve, "We really are family, now."

DJ was seeking support and understanding in another adult since his father's death. He chose another role model. He was choosing his future path. Keith thought that DJ's loyalty to Pastor Steve doomed DJ to be disappointed. Sherry had raised the boy, and Keith suspected that DJ would appreciate Sherry's care in the future. He would

grow out of this, probably not giving up his religion or accepting his mother as the enigma that she was, but DJ would not turn his back on Sherry forever. He would appreciate Sherry sometime, Keith felt sure of this.

Dorm

It was a beautiful October day on the campus of Wheaton College. The undergraduates were outside, sitting in the sunshine on the grassy lawns, tossing Frisbees, sipping coffee, and checking out the most attractive students. With the temperature close to 80 degrees, many of the young women wore jean shorts and T-shirts that clung beautifully to the shape of their bodies with just enough sweat to stick the fabric to their skin.

It was nearly 11 AM when Trent finally walked across campus, carrying a travel mug of coffee that he had made in his upperclassmen apartment. He walked across the campus to the lawn in front of Fischer's Hall. Trent had been flirting with a long-legged sophomore, and he hoped to catch a glimpse of her and convince her to let him take her out to dinner. He didn't see her, but that didn't really matter. Lots of other beautiful, twenty-year old women lay on blankets in the sun, shimmering a little with sweat or lotion.

Trent could watch the women all day, but he had every intention of pursuing some date for that evening.

Wheaton College was a conservative Christian school: no sex, no alcohol, no drugs, and no cigarettes. When Trent first started school at Wheaton three years ago, he thought that the rules would help him to focus on school, but in his senior year, Trent grew restless of the parameters. He wanted to do something wrong just for the sake of doing it. Not anything that could get him into real trouble, but he wanted to do something bad. The most enjoyable thing that Trent could think to do would be to seduce some gorgeous underclasswoman.

Trent sipped his coffee and scanned the lawn. He noticed an exotic-looking woman leaning on a Lexus SUV. She was slender and curvy in an exciting way, and her narrow chin and sharp cheekbones made her face look like a picture from a magazine. She wore an orange sundress that might have left some of her figure to someone else's imagination, but Trent could imagine everything.

"Hello," Trent said to the beautiful woman.

"Hello," she said back.

"I'm Trent," he said, extending his hand to shake hers. She reached out her hand as if she wasn't certain of what to do.

"I'm Sherry."

Trent felt warm looking at her. He knew he was relatively attractive, but this woman might be out of his league.

"Are you a student here?" he asked.

"Of course not."

This was perfect. She didn't go to the college, which meant she hadn't signed any pledge to not have sex. Lots of students took the pledge seriously.

"You visiting friends?" Trent asked.

"No. My son goes to school here."

"Son? You don't look old enough to have a son at all, let alone one in college."

The woman smiled as if she wasn't certain how to take the compliment.

Trent leaned on the side of the car next to the woman, crossing his arms across his chest and sipping on his coffee. "Where you from?"

"Winona, in Minnesota."

“Long drive?”

“A little more than five hours.”

Sherry took out a cell phone and said into the receiver, “I am downstairs.” After a moment, Sherry put the phone in her purse and told Trent, “My son will be down in a few minutes.” She opened the back door of the SUV and took out several bags.

“Let me help you,” Trent said.

They got out two shopping bags, one with a small coffee maker and one with a water filtration pitcher. She also took out a new backpack stuffed with some other things that Trent couldn't quite determine. When he had been a freshman, Trent's parents sent him homemade cookies and school supplies, but as a senior, they didn't send him anything.

They gathered all the bags and stood next to the car, watching the students unwind on the beautiful fall morning.

“I can wait with you.”

Trent stood next to Sherry, leaning against her sports utility vehicle. The car was an expensive model but a little old, perhaps ten years old.

Trent leaned close to her.

“You married?”

“No. My husband died almost ten years ago.”

A student walked across the lawn towards them, weaving between the Frisbee game and a couple sitting on a blanket and sipping coffee. He seemed to be heading toward the SUV.

“Can I take you to dinner?” Trent asked.

Before Sherry could answer, the young kid came close enough to hear the conversation. “Hi, DJ,” Sherry called to the student as he got closer.

“Hi, Sherry,” DJ said. He kissed Sherry awkwardly on the cheek as if he kissed a loathed and wrinkled aunt, but he watched Trent standing next to her. “It’s eleven o’clock. When did you leave Minnesota?”

“At 5:39 am.”

“It’s early. You didn’t need to come so early in the morning.”

“Well, I wanted to bring you a few things, but I’m supposed to be back for church tomorrow morning.”

DJ was wearing plaid pajama pants and a dark blue T-shirt, looking like a typical freshman student who had stayed up too late reading or playing some computer game. Trent wore a clean, brown T-shirt and the pair of blue jeans that a girl in his physics class had commented on. She said that the jeans made his butt look amazing. Even though most of the freshmen dressed like they didn’t know how to care for themselves without their mothers, Trent had learned to dress to attract women.

“Who’s this?”

Trent held his hand out to DJ, and DJ shook it. “I’m Trent,” he said. “I was keeping your mom company.”

DJ looked carefully from Trent to Sherry, and from DJ’s squint he seemed to be trying to figure out the situation.

“DJ,” Sherry said, “he was waiting with me while you came down. Do you know each other?”

“No,” Trent said. “I’m a senior. Engineering major. What do you study?”

DJ narrowed his eyes, and Trent thought that DJ was suspicious of him. “I’m a freshman. I haven’t decided what I will study.”

“I know that he will do some great things,” Sherry said.

Trent looked from DJ to Sherry, comparing the tall and lanky American teenaged boy to the petite woman with an exotic and angular face to find some family resemblance. “If you have the kind of genes your mom has,” Trent said, “then I’m sure you’ll do some great things, too.”

“Listen,” DJ said, “This is my mom, but it’s not what you think.”

Trent shifted his weight and looked down at his feet for a brief moment. “Stepson, huh? I’ve got a step mom who may be even younger than Sherry is.”

“No, that’s not it. She’s not my step mom.”

“Even better. I asked Sherry to dinner, but since she’s not really your mom or your step mom, then you wouldn’t mind.”

Trent looked at Sherry. He also leaned towards Sherry a little and brushed his hand on the side of her leg.

“Mom,” DJ said, “I think you should leave.”

“I have brought some things for you.”

“Mom, I think you should go home.” DJ seemed angry from the tight line his lips made, but he also sounded bored or tired, like he had said this too many times.

“I will go after I bring these things up to your room,” and she indicated the bags. “But I would also like to take you to a late breakfast.”

“Okay.” Something about DJ’s tone seemed defeated.

As DJ picked up the new backpack, Trent picked up the coffee maker and water filter and juggling them with his half-full coffee mug. DJ looked at Trent, opening his mouth to say something, but he closed his mouth and looked away.

Sherry, DJ, and Trent walked in the lobby of Fischer Hall where someone was playing the piano, a few people were sitting nearby listening, and some people sat on the sofas, sipping coffee and reading books. Sherry and Trent followed DJ through the locked security doors to the stairs, and they went up the stairs to the third floor. In his room, his bed had been poorly made, simply pulling the sheets and blankets over the pillow, and several T-shirts and jeans were on his desk and chair. DJ even had a pair of boxer shorts and some jeans on the end of his bed, and Trent wondered if he slept in the bed with the clothes on top of his blankets.

“Let’s see what you brought,” DJ said, taking the bags and putting them on his bed.

DL spread out the things on his bed. He cleared off a small corner on his desk for the coffee maker and put the water filtration system in his closet, pushing it to the back of the top shelf. He opened the new backpack and pulled out a bag of cookies, stopping to open the bag of cookies and eat one, but he didn’t offer one to Sherry or to Trent. He didn’t say anything when he pulled out a bag of apples and a hand-knitted sweater from the backpack, but he looked at Sherry accusingly. He took out a portable bookshelf, turned it on and began flipping through the titles on the screen.

“This looks like all the books I will need for the rest of the semester,” DJ said. He nodded at the screen. He seemed pleased with the present, but he resisted showing any real gratitude to Sherry.

Sherry nodded.

“Your mom’s great,” Trent said, eyeing the portable bookshelf and chocolate chip cookies alternatively.

“My dad’s dead,” DJ said, “and she’s not my mother. C’mon Sherry. Let’s get out of here and get some breakfast.”

Trent looked at DJ. “Even if she’s not your real mom, she brought you some great things.”

“You don’t know a thing about my family. My parents create more problems for me than I can create.”

“What problems?”

“It’s messed up.” DJ put the portable bookshelf on his desk and began rearranging the papers and pens as if he were trying to act busy.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sherry thinks my dad created her. Something about rebuilding her brain to be a perfect woman.” DJ said this like a confession he had practiced every day for ten years.

“She’s pretty close to perfect.”

“No, she’s not. She doesn’t have emotions. For all I know, Dad reworked her brain or added a computer in her head. Sherry’s convinced that he made her, and he died when I was too young to ask him any questions. Sherry won’t give me any straight answers about where she came from. If he really did make her, then I’m basically a product of my father and his daughter. Told you messed up. Totally Chinatown.”

“Sounds interesting actually.”

“Yeah, whatever. Now, she spends all her time bugging me and working in her greenhouse.” DJ began folding the scattered clothes and avoiding eye contact with both Sherry and Trent.

“Can I still take you to dinner?” Trent asked Sherry.

Sherry was strangely quiet, but DJ snapped his head up to look at Trent.

“I don’t care what you do with her,” DJ said.

Trent didn’t quite know what to think about this strange command. He began to wonder about the strange family, the mother who wasn’t a mother or a stepmother and the son who told her what to do.

“Okay,” Sherry said. “Let’s go get some breakfast.”

“Can I come too?” Trent asked. He smiled like a stray puppy, happy to follow along even if he didn’t belong.

“It is okay with me,” Sherry said, but DJ glared at her.

“He’s just looking for a free breakfast,” DJ said.

“I can pay for breakfast,” Sherry said. DJ frowned a little, but Trent followed them outside.

They walked back across the lawn, Trent walking closer to Sherry than David Junior, who trailed a few steps behind them. A game of touch football had started on the far side of the lawn. DJ looked at the game, watching the others laugh and run.

“Do you want to play the game?”

“Yes.”

“I understand.”

Sherry stopped and looked at DJ.

“Would you like to go play the game and I can bring you some breakfast?”

“Let’s get a quick bite,” DJ said. “There’s a diner around the corner from here. You don’t need to come back to campus.” He glanced at Trent.

“Shotgun,” Trent called playfully and climbed into the front passenger seat.

DJ got into the backseat, slamming the door.

Sherry drove DJ and Trent across campus and onto Roosevelt. DJ pointed to the Seven Dwarfs’ Restaurant, and they pulled into the parking lot.

The hostess led them into the main dining area, pointing them to a booth in a back corner. Sherry sat across from DJ in the large booth. Trent hesitated a moment and then slid into the booth next to DJ.

After DJ and Trent sat in the booth across from Sherry, they looked over the menus. The walls had a thin yellowish film on them, perhaps from the greasy food or perhaps back to a day in which the diner allowed smoking if it had really been that long since the restaurant had cleaned or painted the walls. The seats and details were a bright turquoise, and the color made the walls seem even dirtier and yellower than they were. Despite the poor interior, DJ remarked, “Something smells good.”

Trent frowned a little at DJ. He didn’t know how anything could smell good in that place. He suddenly thought that DJ seemed lower class than his beautiful mother.

“Even though Wheaton does not permit sexual intercourse,” Sherry said, “the other student does not appear to observe this.”

Trent grinned.

“Sherry, we’re young adults,” DJ said. “We think about sex.”

The waitress approached their table. She was a thin woman in her mid-forties, and the skin around her eyes wrapped around her bulging eyeballs. “What’ dya want?” she asked, and DJ winced a little from the waitress’s smoky breath. Sherry ordered two scrambled eggs and toast with coffee, and DJ ordered a farmer’s omelet with bacon and two pancakes with coffee. Trent ordered the same.

“You will need to watch your food intake,” Sherry warned as the waitress stood in front of the table, tapping a three-inch pencil stub against a small pad of paper. “You may put on weight or develop health problems.”

“I know, Sherry, but I have good genes.” DJ didn’t say this in a complimentary tone. Trent smiled a little but said nothing.

The waitress looked a little surprised as her bulging eyes widened more, but she took the menus and left them alone. They sat for a few minutes, looking around the little restaurant. DJ examined the table, studying a nick on the side of the corner and picking at it with his fingernail. He unrolled his silverware from the paper napkin, put the napkin in his lap, and looked around some more. He avoided making eye contact with Sherry or Trent. DJ seemed uncomfortable, like he didn’t want to be there. He leaned up against the wall next to the booth as if he were trying to put as many inches between he and Trent or as if he were trying to lean through the wall. Trent, however, leaned forward with his relaxed hands clasped on the table. He stretched his hands close to Sherry’s fingers, brushing them gently. DJ glared at him.

“What are your parents like?” Sherry asked Trent over her menu.

“Divorced, remarried, divorced,” Trent said. “Nothing unusual.” He was all smiles, enjoying the family interaction, but DJ seemed to lean more into the wall.

“What is it DJ?” Sherry asked.

“Nothing.”

“That is not true. You do not look at me, and you are very uncomfortable with Trent.”

“Yes.” DJ mumbled this. He seemed withdrawn and angry.

“I understand that young adults begin to make their own decisions, and that this is a natural part of being human. Your father and I have raised you to be a good person who will make good decisions.”

“If you trust me to make good decisions, then why do you drive here every weekend?”

Trent shifted a little, and DJ sat up straighter.

“You are exaggerating, DJ. Since you moved into your dorm eight weeks ago, I have been here five times, and that is including the first weekend that I moved you into your dorm.”

The waitress brought their drinks to the table, slowly placing a coffee and water in front of each of them. She seemed to be waiting for something or perhaps eavesdropping on their conversation. DJ got the sugar shaker and a bowl full of creamers from the end of the table. He poured several tablespoons of sugar and three creamers into his cup and stirred the light brown coffee. The empty creamer packages lay across the table.

When the waitress finally turned away from the table, Sherry said, “You are a young adult. I want to make sure that you have everything you need and you have the ability to make excellent decisions. I’m not sure that loading your coffee with cream and

sugar can be good for you. High fat and cholesterol breakfasts are not good for you either.”

“I can make good decisions.”

“Why do you resent my assistance and visits?”

DJ looked around him, and Trent leaned back a little, smiling and chuckling a little. As awkward as this family interaction was, Trent found it amusing, like watching a sitcom from the 1990s or something.

DJ’s face flushed from embarrassment or discomfort. “Sherry, listen. When kids go to college, they do irresponsible things to test their boundaries. They stay up late. They sleep in on Saturdays. They skip church. They eat too much, and most of us try alcohol and cigarettes. We even eat crappy food and drink too much sweetened coffee.”

“This is not news. I know this.”

“You can’t do anything to stop me from doing stupid things. That’s what weekends at college are for. If you keep coming to see me every weekend, then I’ll resort to doing stupid things during the week, and this’ll interfere with my classes.”

“I see,” Sherry said. “So you do not want me to come visit?”

“No, I do not.”

Trent covered his mouth to hide a laugh. DJ glanced at him, and his face flushed a deeper red.

“I am overstepping my role as a parent?”

“I moved away so that I might have some space. I thought you wouldn’t drive eight hours every weekend.”

DJ seemed ready to yell. Trent still felt like this was amusing, but it was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He might be able to console Sherry after this horrible meal.

“I do not visit every weekend,” Sherry said.

“I know. I’m exaggerating.” DJ sighed a little.

They sat, not saying anything. DJ’s face was still red, and then Trent said, “This is one of my favorite places to come. The food on campus is okay, but it gets old. Here they have great hamburgers and pie.” He didn’t really mean this, but he was hoping to deflect some of the strain between Sherry and DJ.

The waitress brought a large tray, balancing the food on her shoulder. She placed the tray carefully on the edge of the table and placed two small plates in front of Sherry, one for her toast and one for her eggs. DJ and Trent got four plates each, one for the omelet, one for the pancakes, one for the bacon, and one for his toast. The waitress placed DJ’s plates carefully, pushing aside the empty creamer packages.

“I’ll bring more coffee,” she said. “You want anything else?” The waitress stared at them again. DJ shook his head.

None of them said anything until the waitress brought the coffee back to the table. Trent picked at his food, but DJ began eating large bites of pancakes and omelet. As the waitress poured more coffee, she said, “I have a child who left for college this year. It’s difficult for me to be alone, and it’s difficult for her to find her footing, you know, find herself. But she’s gonna be fine.”

Trent and Sherry watched her walk away, but DJ continued to eat.

“That was weird,” Trent said. Sherry and Trent watched DJ pour more sugar and cream into his coffee. Sherry and Trent picked at her food while DJ shoveled eggs and pancakes into his mouth.

“She is trying to relate to us,” Sherry said. “And she is correct. It is a difficult time, and we all have to go through the same things, but we will be fine.”

DJ didn’t look up at Sherry, but he smeared strawberry jam on a piece of toast and ate the piece in two large bites. He had already finished half of his eggs and had pushed two of the pancakes into his mouth. He said, “We will not be fine. I’ll be fine. You’ll be fine. But we will not be fine.” DJ stressed the “we” a little.

The waitress was back at the table, pouring more water and coffee. She gave DJ a cold look, piercing and accusatory, and Trent thought that this was the same look that she would give her daughter when she wasn’t happy with her.

“Sherry,” DJ said, after the waitress walked away, “this needs to change.” He seemed to be ignoring or to have forgotten Trent, but Trent continued to chew his food and smile because he still hoped to defuse the situation a little and because he hoped to end up in bed with Sherry that night.

“What needs to be changed?”

“Us.” He took another large bite of his pancake and looked hard at Sherry.

Sherry waited for DJ to continue, and she sipped her coffee.

“I want my inheritance. I want my share of the insurance and of the house. I’m an adult now, and I can take care of myself. I’m grateful for the times you drove me to youth group and for cooking for me and for all the rest, but you do not offer me anything

but trouble anymore. I want the money from the house and the insurance. And I want you out of my life.”

“DJ, you may need to come home over the summer. You may need someone to take care of you.”

“Yes, I may need to come home over the summer, but that house is half mine. Dad left it to me. And perhaps I may need someone to take care of me, but that person will not be you.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What does it matter to you? I can sell the house, and we’ll split the money. That’s none of your business anymore.”

DJ seemed to be trying not to yell.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

Trent looked back and forth between DJ and Sherry. He alternated his expression between a furrowed brow and a grin. He did not know how to react to the family conflict.

“I don’t care. Find another husband to take care of. Go out with Trent. Grow more vegetables. I don’t care what you do, but I want you out of my life.”

“What about the car?”

“I don’t care,” DJ said, waving his hand. “Keep the car.”

Trent waited. He wasn’t sure what to say or how this would come out, but Sherry was vulnerable. Trent would be there to comfort her.

DJ pushed his plates for the omelet and the pancakes to the center of the table.

“I’m finished,” DJ said. “I’m going to walk back to school.”

“I will drive you.”

“Sherry, no.”

“Your father would not be happy if he were here now.”

DJ narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. “You may be the person that I used to call ‘Mom,’ but I don’t know who or what you are. For all I know, you’re not even related to me. And you’re nothing like a mother should be. Dad told you what to think and how to act. You’re exactly like him without any of the things that made him real.”

“That’s not true. I look nothing like him.”

Trent suppressed a laugh.

DJ appeared angered by this. “Listen: you’re not welcome here. The last thing I want is to have my controlling mother showing up all the time with hand-knitted sweaters. People that know about you and Dad think that I’m weird.”

Trent interrupted. “I don’t think you’re weird.” He reached across the table and touched Sherry’s hands.

“Shut up.” DJ glared at his plate and put a large piece of toast in his mouth as if he had a grudge against the bread.

Sherry watched DJ pick up the toast from his plate. He climbed over Trent in the booth, not waiting for Trent to let go of Sherry’s hands and not waiting for Trent to get up to let him pass. Sherry sat, sipping her coffee and apparently pausing to process the conversation.

Trent did not say anything. He waved at the waitress to bring more coffee and seemed to be waiting.

“Don’t think about it too much,” the waitress said, filling Trent’s and Sherry’s cups. She placed the bill on the table next to Sherry and stacked the empty dishes from breakfast. “They don’t mean it. Don’t you remember saying things to your parents that you didn’t mean at that age?”

“No. I never said anything that I didn’t mean.”

“Okay,” she said, and she furrowed her brow and walked away.

Sherry sat for several minutes, sipping her coffee. Trent waited for her to say something as he picked at his breakfast. He waited, hoping to make this better and hoping she might be grateful enough to pay back her appreciation physically. He imagined her tiny breasts underneath her orange sundress.

Trent reached across the table and held Sherry’s hands. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Will you sell the house?”

“Probably.”

She didn’t seem sad about this because she stated it so factually.

“Will you miss it?” Trent asked, hoping to seem genuinely concerned.

“Just the greenhouse. I grow lots of vegetables and fruit in there. Even avocados, limes, and hybrid irises.”

“Impressive.” He wasn’t sure what to say, so he pushed away his half finished breakfast and sipped his coffee.

“Want to go to the Science and Industry Museum?” Trent asked.

“Yes,” Sherry said. “I do want to go to the museum.”

Trent began talking, suggesting they could go to Navy Pier or his favorite Italian restaurant downtown after the museum.

After leaving a large tip and paying the bill, Sherry stood up. Trent took Sherry's hand, and they left to go to the Science and Industry Museum.

Afterward

Trent came to Winona to look for Sherry. He stayed a few days in town, asking everyone where she could be and telling about his afternoon with DJ and Sherry in Wheaton. He didn't tell us if he slept with Sherry, but we assumed he did because he came all the way to Winona to look for her. We wished he would have told us about sex with Sherry, but he wouldn't say anything about it.

We didn't ever find out what happened to Sherry after that day. The house went on the market, and some executive at Fastenal bought it. He tore down the greenhouse the first summer that he owned.

We still talk about Sherry and David and DJ sometimes when a group of us are drinking coffee at the Blue Heron Coffeehouse, drinking wine with Claudio at the Winona Bowl, or sipping tea at Pleasant Valley Church.

We wondered what became of DJ. He might have followed in his father's footsteps and crafted a perfect woman. Probably, he just bought a small house and started working in some craft trade—soldering or assembly seemed the most likely.

DJ was interesting, but after Trent told us about how he dismissed and disowned Sherry, we didn't care about him very much.

We wondered more about Sherry. She seemed like some victim of the family, molded in the image of her husband who died and then abandoned when DJ disowned her. We didn't know where she ended up, so mostly, we talked about what might have happened to her.

Perhaps Sherry moved to California and started her own line of wines.

Maybe she married Trent and started a new home and a new family.

Maybe she moved back to Vietnam or North Korea or wherever she might have come from.

Whatever happened to her and wherever she moved, we didn't hear from any of the Levisons again. The Levison family became a myth in Winona.

VITA

Heather McGrail was born in Ames, Iowa. She obtained her BA in English with a writing emphasis in 2001 and her MA in English in 2004, both from Winona State University in Minnesota. She began the University of New Orleans Low-Residency MFA program in 2008, studying creative writing. She currently teaches at Ivy Tech Community College in Indianapolis, IN and resides in Central Indiana where she writes, studies, and teaches.