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Stories from a Golden State

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Stories from a Golden State

A Thesis

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

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

by

Sara Paul

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Table of Contents

Golden State.....	1
Georgie.....	20
Resting Weight.....	43
The Clockmaker of Hidden Springs	63
My Life Inside the Wrecking Yard.....	93
Vita.....	117

GOLDEN STATE

Barry pulled in the driveway and let the car idle. High up on Mount Olympus another house exploded. From so far down below it appeared like campfire on the hillside, inviting in destruction. The roar of motorcycle engines ripped up the night.

Setting the car brake, he watched the flames along the skyline for a moment. When he got to the front door of his house he paused and glancing to the side window, used his sleeve to clear off the dirt and press his face up against the mottled glass. With one eye at a slight squint he could just make out Gloria, his wife, sitting back in his recliner holding the baby. He looked closer, tried to really see her, to take it all in.

His wife sat naked from the waist up, holding the baby up to her like she was breastfeeding. He thought for a moment that maybe he felt it, the wonder, but the longer he stared her face blurred, she began to look like a stranger to him, her and the child both strangers to him, strangers inside his house. He turned to look up at the mountain. There, where the firmament met the fire burning on the ridge and the stars began.

The change in the Vandenhoff household began the Tuesday prior, brought in with a rainstorm. Like all cracks in any foundation, it started less with a seismic shift and more with a little tremor.

Barry had been sitting in his favorite recliner flipping channels while Gloria had stood on the enclosed porch with her face pressed up against the window, a wool blanket wrapped like a shroud over her shoulders and thick, dark hair. She was peering out into the busted night, taking mental inventory.

She fretted over the possibility of her prized dahlias getting caught in the crossfire of the unrepentant gales or that the gates of the henhouse might blow open leaving her feathered loves in jeopardy. And never mind, she thought to herself, that Barry still hadn't gotten around to fixing that leak in the garden shed. This despite the many sticky notes posted like florescent-colored flags throughout the house for over a month now.

Anomalous weather for a coastal spring. Gloria wondered out loud what had got the sky god's panties into such a cosmic twist that they would send down this bluster upon all their heads?

Barry couldn't hear her musings over the televisions low drawl, but even he heard what happened next. The sheet of lightening that cracked and startled. Gloria shook her head and pulled the blanket tighter as it illuminated some sort of curious agitation in the compost heap. Probably nothing, she reasoned, maybe a raccoon or an opossum. Another crack of lightening, and even Barry jumped in his recliner while Gloria leapt back on the porch and screamed.

"Baaaaarry."

What?" he asked from the den.

"Get out here."

"Why?"

"Barry Vandenhoff. I need you out here. NOW."

Pulling himself up out of his chair Barry tied the belt around his robe. He stopped en route in the kitchen to grab another beer before wending his way over to where his wife stood tapping on the Plexiglas window like a Morse code operator.

Barry cracked his beer. “What? What’s so important?”

“The compost, Barry. Look at the compost pile!”

Another flash of lightening and he saw it too. Poking out of the side of a mountain of rotten peels. There, a pair of baby legs with strange feet kicking in the driving rain.

That’s how, during the peak moments of an electrical storm that just so happened to fall on a Tuesday, Barry and Gloria Vandenhoff came to throw on their matching yellow parkas and scramble out into the unrelenting night, armed with only a pair of salad tongs and a gardening trowel between them.

The wind yowled and tree branches tossed overhead as Barry scooped off mulch and Gloria picked through the cabbage leaves, together unveiling the newborn placidly gnawing, toothless, on a rotten carrot. The child appeared to rise forth from out of the pile food scraps, like a baby Venus on the half-shell (or a cantaloupe rind, as it were). Very much alive and perfect in almost every way except for one minor sticking point. The kid had hoofed feet.

Back inside the safety of the kitchen Barry watched as Gloria dipped the naked child in the sink, rubbing dishwashing liquid on the little thing’s back and spraying off fetid vegetable matter with warm water.

“Oh, Barry, look at her dimples! She’s absolutely darling, don’tcha think, Barry?”

Barry sipped his beer and considered.

“Who’d commit such a crime, bury a baby like that?” Gloria rubbed soap behind tiny baby ears where some spinach and eggshell still clung.

The baby gurgled, and Gloria cooed back. “*Who’s a good wittle girl?*” The child splashed in the water as if to answer Gloria she was a very, very good girl indeed!

Barry, unsure of the sudden new level of domesticity in his home, crumpled his empty can, went to the fridge and opened another. Gloria failed to notice, filling up the space of his reticence with her talk.

“...I’d bet the henhouse, Bar, that one of Merton’s old ladies dumped her back there.”

Every so often The Apocalyptic White Hogs of the Highest Caliber, a clan of rough riders clad in leather-vests, thundered down the mountainside on monster bikes on pillages. Followers of a man known only as Merton, the gang’s old ladies were notorious for committing the most brutalizing acts against domestic peace and local commerce during these raids.

“No shame nor love in the skinny, ragged bones of their kind,” Gloria went on. “Godless, Barry, I tell you. Ab-so-*lute*-ly Godless. Using their own children to run those meth labs exploding all over Mount Olympus. Five fires in the hills we’ve had this month already.”

Gloria tsked at the shame of the thought of it, bending over to smell the top of the baby’s head. She closed her eyes and inhaled then pulled her head back and squinted.

“What?” Barry asked.

“Nothing.” Gloria pursed her lips while holding the dripping child with one arm and laying a clean flour sack on the counter with the other, putting the little girl down to blot her dry with paper towels.

“In the morning we’ll need supplies,” she said, grabbing some cornstarch out of the cabinet for improvisational baby powder.

Gloria tried to identify the scent of the little stranger on her kitchen countertop. Not the usual sweet, buttery, baby smell. More like burnt, canned beans in an iron pot, with undercurrents of something fleshy, like hamburger or pork chop. No— perhaps gamier— like venison.

“You know, those dimples aren’t what’s gonna get her attention, Glory.” Barry took another sip of beer. The child wiggled, her hooves making a clunk-clunk noise on the simulated granite of the kitchen counter.

Barry knew what the furrow in Gloria’s brow meant, the look that preceded her dragging in another exotic chicken for her clutch or insisting they import emus to be corralled in the old aviary on the south side of their land. She was in a broody mood, and Barry would have to be the sensible one here, do the right thing. They had a mortgage to pay and one too many animal mouths to feed already.

“Those are some freak feet, Glory. Might be exposure to meth lab run off or who knows. We’re gonna need to call a doctor or find the child welfare people. Besides, kids cost real money. You know that.”

“I don’t know,” Gloria said, taking out another clean flour sack from the drawer for swaddling. “I don’t think we *need* to report her. Whoever dumped her lost their parental rights in my book.”

Gloria tickled the baby on her tummy and under her arms, careful to avoid the child’s soles with their sad lack of little piggies.

“Who’s a dimply chubby wubby? You’re a chub chub. Yes, you *are*. Chub chub.” She bent down and blew raspberries on the child’s belly, and the baby, obviously very easy-going,

very even keeled in temperament, widened her eyes, giggled, and burped with compliance.

Gloria straightened back up.

“Bar, you know how I normally feel about kids. But, I really *like* this one. I say, finders keepers.”

Despite the wind’s fearful ululations through the treetops outside the baby slept soundly nestled in a milk crate lined with an old quilt. Gloria slipped naked under the covers beside Barry and, though both bone tired, that night they navigated a thoughtful kind of lovemaking. The type between old friends used to each others bodies and used to putting up with each others ways, neither of them expressing in words what it was exactly they were trying to make right between them, or in the world, or why it had been so long between such visits.

In the morning the rain had stopped. Gloria needed to tend to the baby, and they agreed Barry should open the Stop n’ Shop Gas Filling and Gift Emporium, though mornings were usually Gloria’s shift. Barry mentioned over coffee calling child services, but he saw in Gloria’s set mouth that she would handle this one her way.

State troopers meandered around the stretch of highway out front. Men in electric green vests and hard hats stood deep in debate over where to strategically place their orange cones around several large boulders that had fallen by the main entrance of the gas station in the night. With all the commotion Barry decided a rare day off was justified, and went to call on his friend and neighbor Zeke instead.

The two men sat in the bed of Barry’s truck in the back end his property. The storm had flooded the underground caverns of a rabbit’s warren, pushing the small beasts out from the

safety of the earth's womb. Wild hares bounded through the vegetable patch, leapt over watermelon and squash, and chomped through the butter bean and the tomato vines. In the ensuing anarchy they even dared to nibble the stalks of Gloria's prized dahlias.

Barry hollered out the rabbits' coordinates and kept tally while Zeke used his revolver to pick them off as they careened around the property, occasionally handing the gun back over to Barry to be reloaded.

Zeke, a self-proclaimed autodidact who hoarded more *National Geographic* magazines than a dentist's office, had gone on several tours of overseas combat and made it his hobby to yell at the radio during news casts. All these factors, for Barry, amounted to the indisputable signs of a sage thinker. Also, despite suffering the indignity of a bulging lazy eye that he hid behind thick glasses and missing the pinky finger on his right hand, Zeke really was an impressive shot.

"You're never gonna have enough room in the deep freeze for all that meat," Zeke pointed out. "I'll take the extras to that new fancy French place that opened up. Make you a bundle. You know how much they're selling squirrel stew for?" Zeke didn't wait for Barry to guess. "Thirty bucks for a bowl of glorified, tree-meat porridge. Or as they call it..." Here Zeke squished up his face and arched his neck, speaking down the side of his nose in an accent meant to sound French, "le ragout de bad-ger."

Zeke gunned down a hare leaping over a rain barrel while his dog, The General, ran about in zigzags sniffing the air, gathering up the carcasses by their scruffs before gambling back to the men to toss the deceased onto the growing mound at the foot of the truck bed.

The two men guffawed at ludicrous notions of the townies, those insufferable weekenders who drove up the mountainside in expensive sedans. They laughed until beer came out of Zeke's nose, which made both men laugh harder.

"Hey, Zeke," Barry said when their jagged breath calmed down, pointing over to the chain link fence to indicate a hare, frozen and crouched on its haunches, trying to detect the direction death was coming from.

"What?" Zeke cocked the gun and aimed.

"Guess what Gloria found last night in the compost?"

Zeke frowned, thought about it, shot the rabbit and then brightened. "A dead body?"

"Not exactly."

Zeke stood over the makeshift milk-crate bassinet in Barry and Gloria's bedroom, the swaddled baby matching his gaze's intensity before compelling him to look away. Zeke muttered under his breath about staring contest with babies.

Gloria picked up the child and glared at Barry.

"She's a baby, Zeke, not something on display in a curiosity cabinet."

Barry said, "Now, Glory, Zeke might have some ideas of who she belongs to."

Gloria walked around the room singing softly to the infant while keeping her back to both men, the child wrapped tightly so as to hide her abnormality.

Zeke pulled on his chin hairs, as he was apt to do when thinking. "Have you thought what you might have here is an alien?"

Gloria rolled her eyes. "Don't start up with the extraterrestrials again Zeke."

“No, I mean an illegal. Barry told me about her, what d’ya call it, foot deformity. You could have some Latinos camping out in your shed, you know. They get all those pesticides when they work in the valley fields. So when they realize she’s born all, you know, handicapped-abled, and they don’t have the money for the doctor then, bam, they go and dump her in your compost.”

Barry looked at the child’s eerily blue eyes and small tuft of red hair on her head. “She doesn’t *look* Mexican,” he said.

“Looks don’t mean nothing,” Zeke replied. “We’re talking about genetics and that’s a real complex science. She could be a Spaniard or have some kind of Portuguese in her blood. Hell, I’m three quarters Cherokee on my Granny’s side and you wouldn’t know it to look at me.” Zeke rubbed his balding crown and sucked in his gut, standing a bit taller in an attempt to exude his version of native grace, the improvised stance of a wooden Indian from a smoke shop display. Zeke thumped his chest. “It’s how come I can’t grow any body hair, but I can predict the weather with ninety five percent accuracy.”

The blanket that Gloria kept around the little child’s feet slipped off, and she grabbed for it too late. Zeke gasped.

“What?” Barry asked. “What is it?”

“Holy sheep dip on a stick!” Zeke took a step back and bumped into the closet door, his normal eye bugging out to match the bulge of the lazy one behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

“They aren’t so bad,” Gloria said, bending at her knees to pick up the blanket and wrap the baby up again, shushing her, though the child made no noise.

Zeke shook his head. “When you told me animal feet, Barry, I figured she had some webbing, not hooves. This is bad, you guys, real bad. I’ve heard of this before.”

“Heard of what, Zeke? Spit it out.” Gloria walked out of the bedroom towards the kitchen, the two men following behind her. She held the baby on her hip and grabbed herself a beer out of the fridge though she normally never joined the men in drinking before noon.

“That— what you got there— is a government operative Centaur. A young one, sure, maybe harmless now, but I wouldn’t want that in my house once it starts getting its legs. They’re highly intelligent beings, and they can really kick.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Gloria surprised herself with how defensive she felt.

“I’ll be damned. Guys spoke about this in the combat zone.” Zeke shook his head. “Never thought I’d see one. Part of the CIA. We’re talking so hush hush it don’t even have a code name. Guys there breed them for secret missions, you know. They’re genetically modified lab invention, using frozen DNA found from Paleolithic times. Cold war stuff, we were doing this research back when we were trying to keep up with the Russians.”

Gloria laughed and took a sip of beer, bumped the baby lightly against her hip. “C’mon Zeke, why would a government spy end up in my compost heap? She’s just a baby with some funny feet, poor dear. We’ll have special shoes made. A little physical therapy when’s she’s older and no one will ever need to know.”

Zeke’s authorial tone concerned Barry. “Who’d ya think dumped her then?” he asked. Zeke frowned and looked up at the ceiling for a minute.

“Merton and his gang,” he said. “I bet he got this one on the black market. Maybe it’s defective, so they threw it out.” Zeke inched near the child and crouched down eye level with Gloria’s hip in order to examine it.

Gloria narrowed her eyes at the man crouched at her side. “It’s a *she*, Zeke, not an *it*.”

“Defective,” Zeke continued, “just like I thought. Those legs aren’t right. Should be more goat, or horse, or something.”

Off in the distance on the mountainside a broken down shack exploded, sending small children barreling down the hill, bringing the monthly tally of meth related fires up to six. The three adults turned towards the noise, just as the baby blew a spit bubble and made a grab for Zeke’s glasses.

The following morning Gloria stood behind the cash register singing softly, the florescent flicker of the *Welcome, Stop n’ Shop Open for all your Fuel and Gift Needs* glowing behind her in the gray dawn, and with the baby’s make shift milk-crate bassinet at her feet. She liked being there in the quiet part of the morning, the same world she always knew and loved, but with so few people that could make your life difficult to be found in it.

On the horizon the mountains appeared to merge with the asphalt of the highway as a single blackened thing as the sun slowly climbed up behind the rows of a hundred wind turbines, lighting up the stark white machine arms as they spun out of time with one another. Gloria sighed. Useless windmills built by corporate bureaucrats who failed to acquire the libertarian neighbors’ permission to put in lines that would cross their property. Now, instead of clean fuel bettering the local economy, the eyesores whirled about in a dizzying manner all day, impotent monuments calling out to the varying Don Quixote’s of the town, new-fangled energy with no outlet to get where it needed to go.

A school bus covered in murals of angels dressed as cattle ranchers pulled up to pump number three from which Pastor Arthur stepped out, dressed in tight white jeans, pushing his

aviator sunglasses on top of his face and sweeping back his long blond hair off his face in the process. Gloria knew the Pastor liked to make an entrance wherever he went, but she couldn't help but think of Barry who sprouted five o'clock shadow minutes after he shaved and tended to tuck his stained shirts into the waistband of his sweatpants.

In a former incarnation Pastor Arthur was just that guy Art. A hippie deadbeat who sold artisanal cheese out of the back of a school bus bought at a government auction. But then he had an epiphany one day while trying to put out a fire that threatened his sheep farm and small personal medical marijuana plot. Following his revelation he transformed almost overnight into Pastor Arthur, Man Child of the Goddess, priest of the Universalist Non-Denominational Saints Rising Temple of the Seventh Ray. Even had the online ordained minister certificate hanging in his van to prove it.

The Pastor pushed open the shop doors and paused before speaking. "Blessings, soldier in the neo capitalist fight," he said, greeting Gloria with his usual impenetrable manner. Since the transformation the man always spoke as if he stood behind a pulpit and punctuated his words with a lot of hand waving. "We are driving into the city, you may know it as the township of Gomorrah, and I need to come to you for your services in this matrix that traps us with its false reality."

Gloria looked out at Pastor Arthur's retinue spilling out of the bus, women in batik robes and turbans inexplicitly milling around the station while dinging on little triangles. Gloria knew she shouldn't judge, but she thought she might have liked the man better back when he was still just selling goat cheese out of his van.

"Hiya, Pastor, how much you need?"

"The Goddess has been good, blessed be." Pastor Arthur handed her a gold card.

She slid the card through the machine and turned on pump number three, watching as one of the women in a turban filled the tank and another in a white jumpsuit began to wash the van's windows.

At her feet the baby let out a yawn and the smallest of mewls, like a commentary on an interesting dream as opposed to a precursor to crying. Pastor Arthur stopped flipping through postcards of idyllic scenes and turned his eyes to the child.

“What blessing do we have there?”

Gloria glanced down at her feet. “This is our newest addition.” She smiled. “Amazing isn't she? I found her abandoned during that last bad storm we had. Can you believe someone could ever dump such a perfect creature?”

Pastor Arthur threw up both his arms, scattering postcards on the floor like pick up sticks. “You know the story of a baby adrift in the bulrushes?”

Gloria wished she hadn't started anything.

“That child was Moses!” Pastor Arthur continued, agitated. Gloria wondered if it might be that he was touched less by any Goddess and more by lead poisoning or mold disease.

“We are all Moses!” he shouted. “Some say these are the signs of the End Times, and Mother Earth is weeping. But, I say glory be. Glory be, I say there is a new prophecy upon us. These are the signs of a New Age, a summons for the miracle of times. Energy converges, and with the heralding of a child we become All One.”

“One what?” Gloria asked offering him a pen and his visa receipt. She could see her husband wave to the women around the van as he walked up to the station to relieve her of her shift. The baby, as seemed to be in her good nature, slept on.

•

Barry flipped a switch, and the glow of the neon sign buzzed went black. Never mind that the storm had made them lose a day of business once this week already, the register sales really looked grim. He recalled when the shop had overflowed with the sticky hands of tourists. Back when he and Gloria went to work together to assuage the tide of business. But that was before the economic crashes, prior to the White Hogs dominion, the fire's that threatened the mountainside. These days because of the difficulties not despite them, they worked in shifts, no need to be a team.

He swept and thought of the child and Gloria at home. That was the part Zeke got wrong and that his wife didn't get, what he himself barely knew how to articulate. He liked the way his life was set up now because he understood his current anxieties. He knew how to worry about the mortgages and how to dread his annual check ups. He understood to fear for the price of land being driven up, the thought that he would be able to afford to retire.

But a child, besides the money it would take, (and this one, who knew what doctor bills!) would force him to consider even more of life off of the mountain than the sliver of it he now dealt with. What would be the point of teaching her about the stars, or even how to play checkers, when they lived in faulty times? She wasn't a government spy like Zeke said or, as Gloria had mentioned, a foundling set adrift like Moses in the bulrush, but a force that would make him have to reckon his own nature.

He muttered to himself, tidying up the refuse the rabble had left behind and wiping down all the counters like he did every night. He thought maybe he should exploit the kid, build it a stand and paint a roadside attraction sign, *Free with the Purchase of a Full Tank, Come and See. Lo, Behold the Centaur Baby* when he heard a knock on the door.

Kaufmann the land prospector stood outside, bent over and looking like a rag picker, as he pretty much always did. In actuality he owned the most property along the coast and had been listed in *Forbes Top Ten Rich Octogenarians to Watch* list. Barry indicated to the darkened neon sign. Kaufmann knocked again. Barry shut off the alarm and opened the door a crack.

“Hey, sign says we’re closed.”

“I know, Mr. Barry. The Bentley ran out of gas three miles down the road. I’m too old for this nonsense. The wife is right, I should get a driver. My neuropathy, look at me, I shuffled the whole way here. I came to buy some gas, but, Mr. Barry, please, let me come in and rest a little first.”

Kaufmann had lived in the region longer than anyone could recall, but he always carried the faint odor of something foreign in his manner, and people said he kept all his money in gold ingots under his bed. He had parceled off much of the coastline, most locals thought his dealings to be shady, and the deluxe vacation mansion-condominium- houses he built would one day fall into the sea, taking the townies fool enough to buy at inflated prices with them.

Barry felt bad for his curtness to an old man and offered Kaufmann a folding chair while he swept.

“So?” Kauffman asked. “How’s business? What’s new?”

Barry barely listened to the old coot. He put down his dustpan. “Fine, Kaufmann, fine.” He didn’t feel like explaining about the child to the old man. “How’s your business?”

“Eh, you know. I sold three parcels of land last month. I can’t complain. My knees and feet complain, but I can’t complain.” Kaufmann laughed.

Barry grabbed two gas containers. One thing he still knew. Where they lived you watched out for each other the best you could, even those you didn't like. It reassured him in the moment that much hadn't changed for him. "Hey, I'll drive you back up to where your car is." He and Kaufmann bumped down the highway along the coast in Barry's truck with the windows rolled down, Kaufmann talking up a storm about various aches and pains. From the cliffs far below Barry listened to the waves crash.

"You know," Barry interrupted Kaufmann's litany, "most people don't think it's right."

"My heart arrhythmia? These things happen when you get older."

"No, you building on the coastal side, bringing in the townies."

"Oh," Kaufmann said and took a breath. "Sure, I know what some people say, Kaufmann, you're changing the nature of the place. But I don't change nature, Mr. Barry; I just follow it down its logical course. Let me tell you a story. When I was a young man I came out west. Everyone back east said you're a fool Kaufmann, that place is wild, there is no gold left in those hills. Back then they were trying to sell off the old ghost town down past the ridge, convincing the rubes there might be minerals or what not left in the mines. But when I drove up this highway, do you know what I saw?"

"No," Barry answered. "What did you see?"

"I saw the ocean, thousands of miles of ocean free to whoever wanted to stop and look. I saw the high cliffs, the forest behind us. I saw the view, and I knew, there was my gold. This place was nothing back then. No bikers, no fancy bistros, you weren't even yet a twinkle in your mother's eyes. Old man Gregson owned your station and it had only one pump and sometimes no gas. You couldn't find a decent sandwich shop for three hundred miles."

Kaufmann grinned. “But look at her now. We got electricity and running water, fancy restaurants and resorts. Sure, some hill people are struggling, good people, and there are not-so-good hill people, who do not-so-good things.”

Kaufmann leaned over Barry and stretched his arm out across the steering wheel to point out the truck’s window, the smell of age, money, and mothballs imbedded his frayed jacket sleeve. “That view, Barry, is golden. It’s a great equalizer. We may not all agree on how to get along, but up here we all see the same thing.”

Kaufmann waved his arm in the other direction, pointed to the shoulder where his Bentley sat parked at an odd angle. “Hey, stop, just up here.”

Barry pulled over. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, sure.”

“Do you believe that government spies exist up here, or in such a thing as miracle babies?”

“Let me give you a tip, Barry.”

“No, no I’m not asking for money.”

“Not money,” Kaufmann laughed. “A tip, you know, a word to the wise. People who talk about miracles, angels or devils, eh.” Kaufmann shrugged. “Spies, sure, the government spies, how else do they get their taxes? Why do you think I prefer gold to the dollar? I don’t buy miracles, nor angels and devils. No grand string-pullers in the sky. I think we have wonder and we have doubt. That view, I saw it and it made me wonder. You find the wonder, Barry, you’re golden.”

•

Gloria walked into the den with the baby in her arms.

“What’s your name little thing?” she asked. The baby yawned. “Why, I never thought I wanted one of you, you know,” she continued, rocking the child and easing into Barry’s recliner. Gloria liked how the child looked at her so intently, appeared to listen, really listen. “But I did think of getting a Shetland pony at one time, so if Zeke is right, my little centaur, then I suppose I wanted half of you.” Gloria lifted the blanket and looked at the strange feet. “The defective half, apparently.”

She’d really never had witnessed such a good-natured child before. Normally the squawk of a three-year old pulling a hissy fit in the Dollar Store had always been enough to reassure her she’d made the right decision in this lifetime, tending to her chickens and her dahlias, eating snap peas off the vine in her garden. She enjoyed watching the shop in the mornings and being a part-time businesswoman in the afternoon. Running her varying cottage industries out of their garden shed, lacquering pinecones to glue onto magnets and carving phony Indian arrowheads out of mountain flint for selling in the emporium. Her days felt filled. Wasn’t that the same as fulfilled? She eased back into the chair.

“I’ve had the same dream almost every night of my life, my centaur girl. Do you know what I do in the dream?” The baby grabbed at a lock of her hair. “I strip off my clothes and run naked through the woods.” Gloria laughed, her hair falling across the baby’s face. The child smiled up at her.

“So you approve? You would. You’re nature’s child aren’t you, my wittle chub chub with the funny feet. I can’t tell you why. It feels indecent in my dream, but it also feels so damn good.” She sighed. “The air on my skin and the pine needles underfoot. I always stop my dream self at some point, and I’m out of breath in a good way, like I was really running, and I say to myself, Gloria, I say, look. Just look. Memorize what the forest feels like when you’re in it,

naked, and it's evening. What you look like under the moonlit shadows of the branches. Remember this when you awake."

She jiggled the baby a little. "I've never told anyone about my dreams, not even Barry. Especially not Barry, I'll bet he dreams of his astronomy club and bowling trophies. Finding proof of alien life." She sighed. "But sometimes the dream is enough."

Gloria closed her eyes and drifted, lulled by the baby's soft heat radiating across her lap and the crook of her arm. "I feel alive then," she said with her eyes still closed, "and sometimes it's enough for me. I'm happy in it." A warm dampness spread across her chest. When she looked she was not surprised to see milk through the worn cotton of her shirt.

Taking off her shirt and bra Gloria sucked in her breath and flinched, the baby latching onto her lactating breast, but she quickly relaxed into the suckling swell as the milk moved through her and into the little one. Looking at her child and her body, she wondered if, after almost twenty years, Barry would rise to the occasion.

Gloria knew it didn't really matter either way. Though this wasn't her dream and she wasn't dreaming, things looked differently now. A shift had taken place, and whatever it eventually wrought with it, in that moment she felt alive.

GEORGIE

shoes.

Georgie slipped on the shoes and stood, easing herself into the uncertainty that came with the added height. Burdened, among other things, as a six-foot tall female with size twelve feet, she spent most days grounded in her favorite beat-up work boots. In her wanderings around the city she would, on occasion, luck into the world of cobalt blue patent leather, a stiletto heel or platform sole in extra large. Flashy and demanding in its exaggerated size, cartoonish in its epitome of femininity.

Behind a glass counter in the back of the shop sat a middle-aged drag queen filing her nails, decked out in loose folds of sparkling chiffon that hid her arms and neck from scrutiny. Prosthetic bras and corsets lined the wall by the dressing room, and feather boas looped from the rafters in rainbow-colored garlands. The place contained a faded, rundown type of glamour that fascinated Georgie, who made a pastime of skirting its dying stage lights.

“They are worth the cost, Sally,” the queen said, her voice a crackled falsetto, pointing at Georgie’s feet with her nail file. “Besides the Italian leather, you could kill a man in a dark alley way with those stilettos in more ways than one.” She winked. “If you know what I mean.”

Georgie shook her head, not in that line of work.

“Well,” the queen went on, undeterred, waving the file like a scepter, “I say make like a girl scout anyway, honey, and always be prepared.”

Georgie strode between faceless mannequins in beaded headdresses, admiring her calf muscles reflected in the scattered half-mirrors. Even with her shaved head and the slouchy sweater and pea coat combination she almost daily hid behind, nothing could eradicate her femininity when she moved. Symmetrical and striking, her features remained just ambiguous enough to form the kind of blank slate onto which other people tended to project their own assumptions.

Stopping in front of a three-way mirror, Georgie stretched one arm out to an invisible lover and glanced back, perhaps to a more desired, second lover waiting there, clenching an imaginary rose between her teeth. She attempted a few cobbled dance steps, seeing if she could make it work in the heels.

“Performer?” The queen raised her eyebrows, two half-semi circles drawn in heavy pencil strokes that gave the impression of permanent bewilderment.

“Always,” Georgie said. She sat down on a small bench, took the shoes off and put back on her boots, leaving them unlaced.

“Dancer, singer?”

“Performance art. Kind of.”

“Oh, something new, then?”

On Saturday nights, in the dying cabaret scene of the city, Georgie transformed. A double fake in the subculture of illusion, an anomaly among the already anomalous outliers on the bell curve of sexual identity: a biological woman who played at being a female impersonator.

Georgie boxed up the heels and placed them on the counter. “Yeah, something new. Who can afford to rely on old tricks, right?” The queen probably assumed her to be a stripper.

“Honey, in my day all I *ev-ah* relied on were the older tricks.” The queen laughed. She used a calculator to figure out the tax, the old-fashioned register either broken or for display only. She

adjusted the ropes of plastic beads circling her neck, and her eyebrows retained their startled expression even when she frowned.

“Believe it or not, Sally, but back in the dark ages silver-haired gents of reputable means would pay in gold chain for this dame’s company. They use to announce at all the best clubs in the city ‘Cartier is coming’ when I entered a room.’ That’s what they called me with all my gold chains. Cartier. I shined so back then.” She stared into the dusty light of the shop, crystal baubles glittering from all corners, as if the downgrading of her life from gold to plastic left her baffled in its reverse alchemy.

She shook her head and smiled, and held out the pink neon bag containing Georgie’s new shoes. “Sally,” she said, her voice lowering into a masculine range, “the lesson is get going when the going’s good. Tricks have a shelf life.”

“Everything,” Georgie said, taking the bag, “has a shelf life.”

The queen clapped her hands. “That’s why you have to have fun, Sally, while you still can.”

“Thanks,” Georgie said and smiled. Outside it rained. Georgie paused under the canopy hanging over the entrance to the shop and looked back at the door shutting behind her.

The queen rose up from her chair and moved out from behind the counter with the decaying beauty of an elder Amazon, covered in sequins. She began rearranging a mannequin’s wig, and dusted off its garment’s padded shoulders.

“If I still had your figure, Sally, I’d go to New York this time. Become a Rockette. Dance at Radio City Music Hall.” The queen touched the mannequin’s rhinestone necklace and listened in the quiet. “Yes,” she sighed. “You’re right, Sally. I suppose I’d still end up selling modified women’s wear in my retirement.”

wandering.

The street. Skinny, crooked houses piled up on each other at a slant. Gingerbread gables, wrought iron spandrels, corbels of wooden lace. A hawk, taxidermy, propped in a dormer window. Someone invites her in, and she enters the first floor of the flat with red curtains. Scattered branches fill the place. The brittle wood snaps underfoot, dead birds, a woman asleep on a velvet couch. A man offers her a cup of tea, ginger root, medicinal. How many sugar cubes? Two. She forgets to ask if they're laced with acid, stirs and drinks.

The park. Eucalyptus and Monterey pine. The natural history museum, dead zebras and gazelles, a painted backdrop of the Sahara, live starfish and sea urchins, school children poke at them in little pools. An arboretum, the green house, glass and wood. Fans rotate from cathedral ceilings. Butterflies bang up against cathedral ceilings. Butterfly wings scattered besides flowerpots. The Japanese tea gardens, a lecture on horticulture, the art of bonsai.

A bench. The smell of exhaust, pot, human excrement. A homeless man dances by a roller skating woman in hot pants. A woman in hot pants makes backwards-moving figure eights on roller skates. A wide gazebo, neo-hippies, cross-legged, drums. A couple rolling around on a picnic blanket. Punks hold pit bulls on leashes and watch. Guys in leather pants cruise the opening of a path, a path that leads further into the trees.

She digs through her bag, takes out a balled-up leather halter-top and dumps it in a trashcan. She crouches down on the grass and removes her shoes. She wonders if she'll come down soon.

•

invitation.

Patrick daubed black paint on a canvas set before him. Dusk washed down through the high-up windows that lined the tops of cinder block walls of the loft, bathing the room in momentary pink. “I’m going to invite Chesterfield and Ramon over Saturday for dinner and drinks before your act,” he said with his back turned to Georgie, shifting the picture a bit closer in the dusk before plugging in the chandelier that swung over his easel.

Georgie sat in her corner of the loft at her workbench, carving the final details on a ball and claw foot for a three-legged bookshelf that she swore was designed by Carlo Bugatti himself, not some reproduction, though the chances of the famous Italian Art Nouveau designer’s work being dumped in the gutter for her to discover made little sense. Georgie used her portion of the live-work space for refinishing her street finds, antique cabinets with broken glass doors and dressers with peeling veneer she brought home like lost puppies. She sold some to interior designers through shops that worked on commission around town, but had a hoarding problem. Patrick put his foot down when she got up to four armoires, three chifforobes, and two vanities. More furniture than they had clothes to fill, and, as he pointed out, making the place ass to elbow in mahogany and teak. She squinted in the bright light of the chandelier and looked up. “Why are you inviting Chesterfield and Ramon over? What for?”

Patrick with mutable eyes, owner of only mismatched socks and dirty fingernails. Slim hips and strong arms, the kind of masculine that helped him pass for straight when it served him, and made other gay men love or envy him for its illusion.

He painted portraits in the style of the Flemish masters, picking up his models from the streets, in love with discovering an aquiline nose, a cutting cheekbone, soft lips. Rendering their likeness in oils, starting with their profiles and turning the angle of the head at a slight degree in

each new portrait. He would pore over old art books from the public library, imitating the dress of ship's captain, duke or dandy. Prior to applying the final coat of linseed, Patrick went back in and painted black splotches that overtook, grew larger across each image, duplicating the syphilitic scars of the eighteenth century. The last in every collection, the portrait that stared straight at the viewer, had its flesh almost entirely blackened over, maybe an earlobe or part of the lips remaining unscathed, but with the eyes completely untouched. The subject's initial look of hunger turned to despair.

"What do you mean, what for? It's your birthday. We should celebrate with our friends."

"*Your* friends," she said. "Chesterfield was on a bitch tear last month." She gestured with her woodcarving blade in his direction without looking up from her work. "And you didn't help matters."

Last time Chesterfield came by for dinner he had brought his lover de rigueur, a young man named Dylan. Patrick and Dylan had gotten beyond drunk, the two of them practically screwing on the fainting couch right under Chesterfield's nose. Chesterfield, high and drunk himself, chose to spend the evening ignoring them, instead cornering Georgie in the kitchen and lecturing her on how young ladies of her ilk, women in sexless, play-acting marriages to queers, ended up. Punishing her for Patrick's transgressions, as she saw it. Only Chesterfield knew nothing of the intricacies of her and Patrick's relationship. At least that's what she told herself the next day while washing the quilt that had been on the fainting couch and cleaning up the rest of their general debauchery.

"Well, she's off the powder for now, so she'll be better this time." Patrick swirled his paintbrush in a cup of turpentine and turned on a fan to try and air out the fumes. He walked over

to where Georgie sat on her workbench and leaned over her, plucking the wooden foot out of her hands to admire its craftsmanship.

“You be better,” Georgie said.

“Be kind,” he said placing it back in front of her gently, kissing the top of her head and giving her shoulders a quick rub. He leaned down and stage whispered in her ear, “Our Chester’s talking about getting me connected to a New York gallery that’s interested.”

Georgie looked up at him.

Patrick stepped back and flashed his lopsided grin. “Chesterfield’s very fond of you, Georgie, and a big fan.”

Georgie pointed at him. “Your friend.” She pointed at herself. “My birthday,” she said. “Besides, Chesterfield King is a grown man named after a pack of cigarettes.”

Patrick thought for a moment. “Actually, I think Chesterfield’s a family name, Northeastern old money. At least that’s how I explain the way he has lockjaw.” Patrick clenched his teeth in an exaggerated under-bite and imitated Katherine Hepburn. “When he speaks like this, *dahh*-ling.”

Georgie giggled. “He clenches his teeth because he’s on too much coke,” she answered. “Fine, fine.” She picked up a piece of fine grit sandpaper and shrugged. “For you, I will take pleasure in their company.”

“Thanks, doll,” Patrick said, pecked her on the cheek and picked up his leather jacket from where he had left it on the floor. “Don’t wait up for me.”

The thought of sharing Patrick on her birthday rankled her, though she knew it shouldn’t, and that irritated her more. She couldn’t help that she liked when he helped her get ready for her

show, working on her dress and makeup the way he did in his paintings, with a devout concentration. It made her feel like someone was sculpting her into being.

Still. A gallery in New York. For a painter with no formal training, a guy who had lived half his life in poverty, hustling in his own way, this was good for him. This was big. Patrick was moving up. The thought gave her the vicarious pleasure that comes from a loved one's success. But, then, the selfish pinch of insecurity at the fear of getting left behind. Separation anxiety.

apart.

Patrick likes to make other people happy. He goes out to bars and visits the back room. He fumbles in the dark. He feels out for someone, feels out for a stranger. He goes down on them. It's dark. Strangers unzip his pants and go down on him.

How do you like it? a man asks.

I just want to make you happy, he answers.

Yes, you seem that type.

He likes to make other people happy. But when he feels someone else's pleasure it's like a camera in his chest. The aperture opens so wide, it lets in too much light, the picture comes out overexposed. No details, all shadow. It's dark in the back rooms. He fucks men in the back room of the bars, and men fuck him. He lets men buy him drinks, but he lies if they ask him his name.

She feels frozen in her skin. She goes out to shows, gets in for free. Boys in bands pull her backstage. Boys in the bands fuck her in their vans. These boys, they always tell her she looks the part. She goes to clubs, the kind where people whip each other.

What do you want? a man asks.

To make you hurt, she says.

Yes. You look the part.

Georgie feels frozen in her skin. The man writes an address down on a piece of paper. In the moments when she does feel something it comes on like a rage. Maybe, she thinks, she wants to punish, to extricate the anger inside onto others. She takes a cab to the address on the piece of paper, to the outskirts of the city. She rings a buzzer and the man unbolts the door, takes her to see a woman. The woman tells her the house takes fifteen percent. Tells her she looks the part, will fit right in.

The man shows her around rooms filled with equipment, watches her myopically through thick lenses. The man opens up a drawer of utensils, holds up devices. There's dried blood on a hook.

beats & hooks.

Ramon, looking like most of the men Chesterfield favored, ubiquitously tall, dark and handsome in tight jeans, flipped through Georgie's milk crate of old LPs. She acquired her album collection the same way she did her books and many of her clothes, by sifting through the boxes of unwanted crap other people left out on the steps when they moved.

“Ooo, mi amors,” Ramon cried out, holding out a big band classic single, the cover damaged from a basement leak or perhaps by an open window during a rain storm. “This looks like fun.” Raymond shook the seventy-six out of its sleeve and lifted the needle on the player. The tinny beat of a timbales being stroked with a steel brushes filled the room.

“Madam?” Chesterfield, middle-aged, thin white hair, wearing his signature bow tie and well-pressed seersucker pants, held out his hand to Georgie. She placed hers in his as he dipped his balding head in a slight bow. “Shall we cut a rug? Take the new Cadillac for a spin, so to speak?”

Georgie lifted one edge of her yellow cocktail dress, its short hemline showing off her legs in their tall, blue heels.

Patrick switched the overhead lights off and directed a beam of light from a table lamp upward, hitting a disco ball they had hung up night on a drunken whim. The room sparkled to the mid-century, syncopated rhythms of Ricky Nelson and his live orchestra, recorded in Dolby sound, the well-worn pops and hisses of the vinyl courtesy of time.

*Fools rush in
Where wise men refuse to go...*

Cha, cha, cha. Step one, two, three, swish and turn. Georgie loomed over Chesterfield in her heels as they fox trotted around the couch, the ropes of her earrings tickling the top of his bald spot. Chesterfield leaned in with a shimmy, and Georgie leaned back. Georgie leaned forward and shimmied, and Chesterfield leaned back. She grinned, always delighted to feel this way, feet moving together in time.

“More!” Ramon clapped when the song ended.

“Make it a waltz,” Chesterfield said, breathing heavily and dabbing sweat off his face and neck with a handkerchief. “Make me look dignified, dahling.”

Ramon made his way over to a decrepit Wurlitzer with sagging bellows in the back corner of the room. “Does this thing work, mi amor?”

“Barely. Can you actually play?” Georgie flopped on the couch and took a glass of wine from Patrick.

“My father was a church organist.” He pumped at the feet and the organ groaned. “And, yes, before you ask, I was an altar boy.” He pumped it several more times, cracked his knuckles, turned a few knobs and began hitting the keys.

Faust’s waltz. It set something off inside Georgie, reminded her of being six, spinning on a lawn until she would fall down with dizzy pleasure.

“Come on young lady,” Chesterfield demanded. She got up, and he touched the small of her back. They clasped hands. Step one, two, three, and four.

“We’re in Morocco, my dear. The war out there has ravaged this town. My plane is leaving tomorrow.” Chesterfield stared behind her as he spoke, lost in some movie still of his imagination. Step one, two three, and four. “You will not meet me out in the rain, and I will leave for Europe alone because there are no happy endings in our time. So, my dear, all we have left is this.”

“This?” Georgie asked.

“Dancing,” Chesterfield said. “Let’s keep dancing.”

When she performed she always had a moment before the curtain would lift when she wondered if she was good enough, and the thought would freeze her in the heat of the stage lights. But once the music started and the curtain lifted, when she could see the audience before her, her body understood that all that mattered was that she allowed it to move, that her limbs

and voice would express for her what she could barely articulate in thought, and it would be enough.

Chesterfield swept her across the floor. He pulled her in then spun her out, and the fractured rays of the disco ball spun too. She followed the light towards Patrick laughing, his face a blurry joy, and blurry joy expanded inside her too.

the coat lady & waltzing matilda.

Sirens. A building burning in the Mission district. An old woman in house slippers shuffles in circles on the street corner, a man slumps by an alleyway. They lit it on fire, they lit it on fire. The old woman's sobbing. A crowd gathers. No one does anything. Firemen arrive. Spray down the façade, yell at people to stand back. Who lit it on fire, Georgie stops and asks. The woman rocks back and forth in bare feet.

They lit it on fire. They lit it on fire.

Another woman walks over, dressed, despite the rare hot day, in a coat worn over many layers of sweaters. The landlord did it, the coat woman says. She lights up a half smoked blunt. Georgie looks at her. Don't stress. I got a license to smoke, girlie. She offers Georgie the joint. The joint is wet with spit. The woman is missing her front two teeth. Georgie takes it. Georgie inhales and offers it to the shuffling woman. The shuffling woman rocks herself, back and forth, back and forth. That's Matilda, she don't hear, the coat woman says. Waltzing Matilda.

That's arson, Georgie says, exhaling, gestures to the firefighters.

You kidding, the coat woman says. They won't do anything. See if they got any beds open at St. Mary's. Mayor's in on it, government's in on it, it's this whole town. Rent control.

Only way to get us out. Only way you can move a property with people like us in it now is you got to burn it down, light it on fire. She takes the joint. Smoke us out, girlie.

ashes, ashes.

They sat on cushions around the low platform table Georgie built from a cedar door; their plates pushed away, wine glasses emptied.

“If you get into Donna Rey’s gallery it’s all over,” Chesterfield promised. “We’re talking MOMA, LACMA. Anything she touches turns to gold.”

Patrick went to pour Chesterfield another glass but found the bottle empty.

“Never mind,” Chesterfield said waving his hand at Patrick. “I brought birthday presents.”

“You remembered!” She put her head on Chesterfield’s shoulder and, clasping her hands, looked over at Patrick. “Chesterfield remembered my birthday, darling. Isn’t he grand?”

“Georgie, dear,” Chesterfield said, patting her shoulder. “Patrick told me. I never keep track of these sorts of things.”

Georgie sat up.

“Still, for you my dear.” He brought a baggie.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A lovely combo. Hashish and opium, the gift of the Imperialist Dutch Indies. Or, at least a gift care of my friend who just returned from a ten-year stint in Holland. I must warn you, how he got it through customs he’s not saying.”

Georgie shook her head. Their nights always ended this way, too drunk and high on something. “I’ve got to perform in a few hours. You guys help yourselves.”

“Oh, you’ll be fine, honey. There’s an upper in it too. It’s very clean. Scout’s honor.”

“It’s true,” Ramon said nodding. “We smoke just a teensy bit already before we came.”

“I only acquire the best.” Chesterfield smiled at Patrick. “Like this one, here, such talent.” He turned to Georgie. “And, you my dear. I should really buy one of your pieces for my place.” He squinted at the back where a French door with broken glass leaned against a pile of rotted gingerbread gable and broken spindles. “Someday. I really should.” He looked her up and down. “Besides, here you are, the only actual female female-impersonator in the city to perform in drag shows. And you can really sing.” He touched Ramon’s hand. “Having a great aesthetic and a lot of money to spend, that’s my talent,” he continued, rolling the sticky substance into a small ball. Holding a glass pipe up to Georgie’s lips he lit it for her. “Lady-ladies first.”

Georgie wanted to stay there with them, feel what they felt. She inhaled and passed the pipe to Ramon. She lay back and looked up at the disco ball, exhaling smoke. Pleasure rushed through her blood, warming her skin in waves. “Like dancing,” she said out loud to no one. The pipe came back around, its center a tiny red ember of stolen fire. Ancient.

Time fractured. Georgie’s worst thoughts unveiled from her subconscious rose up and then nullified, one by one. Her darkest fears, change, growing older, no sense of direction to find her own upward trajectory, losing Patrick who was well on the way to his, the impending darkness kept to the periphery, buoyed off by the physical pleasure. Pleasure made the truths more than tolerable, made them negligible. How much time was passing? One thought became crystalline, pressed against her and waited inside. She turned her head and looked at Patrick

lying beside her on the cushions and studied his profile. His nose, the edge of his chin, overtaken by splotches of black, blotting out features she knew by heart. She blinked.

“I can’t pin you down.” The words had to be unglued from the roof of her mouth, sticky from being unspoken for so long. They laid on her, compressing her. She wanted to grab each one and shove it back in her mouth with her fists but felt no desire to move.

“What’s to pin down?” Patrick asked slowly. “I’m an open book.” He looked at her. “You know everything.”

“How can one pin down what doesn’t stay still?” Chesterfield asked, flopped out on the floor across from them, his sweater vest pulled up and shirt un-tucked, rubbing his stomach in slow circles.

“She’s never been in love,” Patrick said to Chesterfield, leaning up on his elbow.

“Have you?” Georgie asked Patrick.

“Yes.” He looked down at her.

“Who?” She wanted to sit up, but everything in her felt like it had turned to stone long ago.

“Jackson.” He fell back into the pillows.

The slow, constant tipping of the room, which Georgie assumed was her sensing the earth’s subtle rotation, halted to a still.

medusa.

Jackson picks them up one night at a club. Jackson who tells them that he has a parlor they can crash at. They’re just babies, teenage runaways. Jackson with the droopy mustache. Jackson

pours them drinks and invites them to play a little game. What's the game, Patrick asks. It's called Medusa, Jackson says, and Georgie wants to know the rules. You two make a tableau. They looked at him blankly. You pose in a scene, become living statues, use whatever props you want from around the room. And you guess what we are doing, like frozen charades? Patrick asks. Sort of, Jackson says. But with higher stakes.

Jackson, who doesn't tell them what the stakes are. Jackson, who tells them the only rules are these: you cannot move or speak, cannot break the scene, and I cannot touch you. But I get to do what ever I want to try and make you move. Georgie and Patrick whisper to each other. Patrick wraps a chenille throw from off of a loveseat around Georgie like a toga. Georgie loosens her still long hair. Georgie's hair hangs down around her chest and across her shoulder blades. She tries to emulate the famous painting of Venus. Patrick takes off his shirt and puts his belt across his chest and back like a sling. Patrick grabs dried papyrus from a vase and sticks the blades of tall grass through his belt. Patrick's made a quiver of arrows. Patrick leaps onto the back of a divan behind Georgie and crouches down, pulls back on an imaginary bow and puffs out his cheeks. Cupid, her child.

Jackson takes his shirt off, and, circling slowly, puts his face right up next to their faces. Georgie stares straight ahead. Georgie follows the rules. Georgie doesn't move. Jackson runs his hand the length of her arm, just above the skin. Georgie can feel the heat of it. Jackson never touches. Jackson follows the rules. Jackson drops down to his knees before her, and Georgie wants to flinch. Georgie stares straight ahead. Georgie follows the rules. Jackson sniffs at her crotch loudly, and she curls up inside, goes somewhere else. Jackson gets up and leaves her alone.

Georgie can't see what Jackson's doing behind her, but after a few minutes she hears Patrick try to stifle laughter and turns her head to see Jackson push him off the couch. You lose, Jackson laughs. I'm ticklish, Patrick complains. I never touched you, Jackson points out. I win fair and square.

Georgie sleeps on the divan in the parlor that night. Whatever Jackson won from Patrick happened in his bedroom, behind closed doors. In the morning the older man made the kids scrambled eggs and coffee in a French press. In the morning Georgie whispers to Patrick, I want to catch the train home. Fine, Patrick tells her, you should go. I want to stay.

love's child

Love? That was love?

"I love you," Georgie said.

Patrick nodded, staring at the ceiling. "And I love you too. But I'm talking something dangerous. The thing that makes you hate yourself, but you can't stop it. You seek it out over and over." He turned to her. "That's why I keep things simple now."

"I didn't know."

Patrick looked at her. "What's to know? I like to make people happy."

Ramon, who had been slumped over the Wurlitzer, his face on the keyboards, suddenly sat upright and looked around. The organ groaned, and he pounded out a chord, bellows wheezing a dramatic C minor. "For me, love is an escape," he announced.

Chesterfield laughed, still circling his belly with his hand. "For you, dah-ling, love is an excursion. For men like me, it's a price tag and an expense account."

Patrick glanced at Chesterfield. "Such brutal self-deprecation."

"What can I say?" Chesterfield grinned at the ceiling. "Welcome to the spectacle of the pleasure arcade. Purveyor of beauty, the artificial and the genuine, by any means necessary, here to serve."

"What?" Georgie's thoughts sped by in slow motion.

Chesterfield swept his hand across his eyes. "Just put another quarter in the jukebox, dah-ling, and there you have it."

Georgie sighed. "You're all crazy-wrong. Love is coming home."

"Good," Patrick said, wrapping his arms around her and nuzzling her neck. "Because the world is my home."

Ramon got up and shuffled back over to the record player.

...you're my honey, even when you ain't got money. You're my honey dolll...

The room spun, but slowly now.

"Oh shit, what time is it?" Georgie bolted up.

Chesterfield grabbed the pipe off the table. "Time to refill."

"No, no, I'm supposed to go on around midnight. Froggy's gonna kill me."

"That bearded lady of the holy order of curmudgeons? Tell her it's your birthday, you should have the night off."

Georgie ran to one of the armoires and began to throw dresses out. "What am I wearing? What am I singing tonight? I don't even remember!"

Ramon followed the movement of the thrift store gowns with his eyes, orange sequined, teal lace, red satin, as they flew across the apartment. He grabbed a 1970s white empire waist

dress with a high, lace collar. “So, chaste, mi amor.” He held the dress up to him. “Is this your wedding gown?”

“Yes, yes, mah wedding gown,” Georgie drawled in a fake southern accent. She grabbed the garment from him. “That’ll do.” She unzipped her cocktail dress and let it pool at her feet, yanking the white gown on over her head without first unbuttoning the rows of seed pearls clasped along the neck and lining the cuffs of the lamb chop sleeves. She stumbled, her head and hands stuck in the garment, unable to yank the dress down over her panties.

“Help me,” she called out, her voice muffled.

“Ramon,” Patrick directed from the cushions. “Please help the young lady. Go get her a wig from that chest over there.” He lit the pipe.

“Nooooo,” Georgie cried and started laughing. “It’s not wig time yet.” She stumbled forward, arms completely bound by the dress. “Get this offa me!”

“Which wig, Patrick?” Ramon asked and placed a neon green Cleopatra style on his own head, the bangs crooked.

“I don’t know. I told her when she brought that thing home that it was birth control. She looks like bloody Ophelia or Stevie Nicks in it. Try the long, blond one.”

“You’re the devil!” Georgie tried to scream at him, but they had all started laughing, and she couldn’t fully get the words out, her stomach aching.

“Shush, mi amor,” Ramon said and put the wig over the part of her face sticking out of the dress, blinding her. “Oh,” he clapped his hands. “It’s so pretty.”

She slumped to the floor and hiccupped.

“Hmm, it is pretty,” Chesterfield agreed. “But I think it needs some flowers in its hair.” He tossed the bouquet he had presented Georgie with earlier over to Ramon, who ripped the petals off of the Gerber daisies and sprinkled them over the fallen Georgie.

“I am the earth mother, and you are all flops,” she yelled, ripping open the collar with her teeth and, rolling onto her back, kicking her legs in the air. “Froggy’s gonna kill me.”

“Yes, Elizabeth Taylor,” Patrick answered back. “The show must go on. “

“Yes. The show.” Suddenly the laughing in her stopped, and she felt let down. Yes, the show. Because it was only the stage, dressed in the facsimile of a female, standing in front of a crowd of men who loved her for being a facsimile, that she felt real enough to be loved.

One time she got a few of the boys to be her back up, three shirtless men in white shorts with sailor caps on did soft shoe tap behind her as she sang:

*Welll... I'd love to get you on a slow boat to China
All to myself alone*

Patrick helped with the stage set that evening, painted a backdrop of a sailing ship against rocky waves and made a papier-mâché crescent moon that he manipulated on a pulley system to rise up slowly during the performance.

Welll... out on the briny with a moon big and shiny...

She wore a 1940’s navy blue pantsuit and a blond wig, swaying while the men spun behind her. She opened her arms wide and belted out the crescendo,

Melting your heart of stone.

On cue Patrick tipped a bucket of confetti hidden in the rafters. Silver flakes whipped down on the stage, and the crowd howled. She understood in the moment the men out there didn’t love her, only that maybe some wanted to be her, or at least her interpretation of

femininity. And that felt like a kind of love, and that was to be her gift. Or at least as close as she thought she would ever get to being deserving of one.

the present.

She passes out on her birthday in her ripped white dress. She misses her show. She wakes up crying. She can't understand why everything hurts. She rolls off of her mattress onto the floor, feels sick and calls out for him. He comes in and finds her on the ground, picks her up, takes off her dress and washes her face with a damp cloth, puts her back in the bed. Tucks her in, tells her not to cry, soothes her, tells her it's just the crash, that she's not use to it. The sun is almost rising.

I made you something he tells her.

He hands her a handmade wooden case the size of a shoebox. He hands her a box painted with pictures of imaginary beasts in different locations around the city, a griffin in a magic bus on a red bridge, a family of elephants with ball and claw feet in a green park, a café where winged zebras sip from teacups. She opens it. It is lined in red cloth. A painted box lined with red cloth and in it the cursive words embroidered in gold thread:

Leave everything impossible here, to be made possible out there.

What is it, she asks?

It's a possibilities box, he tells her.

How does it work?

You tell it the impossible, and it makes it possible, for you.

He puts the box down at the foot of the mattress and holds her. Eventually he leaves her bed, goes to get a wastepaper basket, places it by her head in case she wakes and is sick again. She can't sleep. It hurts too much inside, and she watches through her eyelashes as he moves about her bedroom. She wishes he would stay with her forever. His kindness. He closes the curtains against the almost rising sun. He goes out. He will have to leave her someday. That's the order of their unordered world. She crawls to the edge of the mattress on her hands and knees and picks up the box, lies back down. She needs her own life trajectory, her own grand scheme. The paintings make her think of wandering.

Skyscrapers pass overhead through greasy, bus windows, financial district workers hitting the pavement at the five o'clock hour, businesswomen in silk blouses and high heels on cement. How they double step, dodge the crazies. A shantytown over by the courthouse. Hookers in short skirts and heels in doorways. A parade. Skeletons. Children's painted faces float above sugar candy skulls lit with candles. Children wave flags of colored tissue paper and ribbons. Men in rhinestone and feather loincloths. Brazilian dancers. A man plays Spanish guitar and sings about unrequited love. At least that's what she thinks his song's about, but she can't understand the words. She turns down a small alleyway, finds a costume shop. Faceless mannequins with beaded headdresses, a pair of blue stiletto heels in the window. She enters.

In the early morning in her room she gets up, feeling sick and uncertain. In the early morning she gets up and wraps a sheet around her nakedness, staggers over to an old escritoire, digs around

and finds a pen and piece of paper. She flops back down on the mattress and writes. On a piece of paper she writes her request to leave inside the impossibility box.

She writes:

I wish for a ~~love~~ life of my own.

RESTING WEIGHT

Six hired hands show up to raise the house and lash it to the back of the flatbed but only one, the foreman, will actually haul the whole thing off.

I know that delicate flower of a man, my ex-husband, won't be out sweating amongst the laborers. I let my auburn hair hang loose and wild down my back, and I've put on my teal and fuchsia tank top to spite him anyway. I'm spackling on another layer of my favorite lipstick, Ragin' Raisin, and pursing my lips into a sticky pout when one of the work guys lets out a low whistle, and I smile.

The foreman stands by his truck and hollers, "One, two, three LIFT." Four men stationed at each corner of my former home heave and pull the building right out of the ground as the other guy attempts to slide a wedge under the back porch, trying for some traction to fix the wheels on. Groaning in unison with their arms wavering they reveal the foundation, nothing more than loose, unpacked rubble underneath.

My husband and I met at the local shopping center. He wore a tux and played a baby grand next to Women's Lingerie. I inherited a cart across the way that sold handmade scented candles, the only thing left to me in my mother's will. The executor gave me the paperwork with a letter Mom wrote, begging me to find a little balance in my life, learn to take care of myself. According to my mother, no one else in this world will. As an afterthought she added:

“P.S. I built the cart up from scratch. Finish my life’s work and get one of these babies in every mall in America! Don’t screw up and make me regret leaving my business in your care, honey. Love you! Mom”

She loved that candle cart. Of course, if anyone could figure out how to feel regret after death, it would be my mother.

In the beginning I got a kick out of being a small business owner. I also got a kick out of listening to my yet-to-be ex-husband tickling the ivories while I dipped my strings into a crock-pot of melted beeswax. I found the scent of ylang-ylang in the wax and watching the juxtaposition of a man in formal wear stationed so near the lady’s undergarments arousing. But retail scented candle making loses its thrill after a while, and I’m a woman of action. I needed something more to spark my interests.

A couple of weeks later I ended up next to Mr. Piano Guy in line at the Koffee Kiosk. Up close I saw he had that silver fox thing going for him, and damn, he really did look good in a tux. We struck up a friendly patter and discovered a shared sensibility when it came to Gershwin. Call it a mix of the convenience of captivity and the bottom dropping out in the scented candle market. I craved the distraction. When he came around to asking me to marry him the deluded part of me figured that it would be a union of candlelight and song.

The guy in the east corner drops his section of the house, and the men all leap back. The whole thing lands with a thud and a tremor. The foreman spits, yelling a stream of low sung curses. They stretch and shake out their arms before getting back into position, semi-crouching and lifting with their knees, not their backs.

Don't get me wrong; he could be a real charmer. When we first dated he picked up an old tandem bike, and he serenaded me with the song *Daisy Bell* as we rode around town. Peddling behind him, all I could do was fixate on how his voice got lost in the front winds, but the idea held merit. And sometimes he would take me out on his friend's yacht. Eventually it came out he preferred me when I wore my navy blue sailor dress with my hair up in a tan sunhat. He found those salt sea air afternoons rare respites when I looked "subdued." Of course at the time I never thought to question why he only brought me white carnations or why he demanded all his meals in monochromatic color schemes, steamed cauliflower with sturgeon in béchamel sauce.

They finally get the house on wheels and attached to the truck, and the guys whoop and pound each other on their backs. The driver, a burly, fat type in a muscle shirt that shows off a forest of arm hair, calls me "ma'am," and thrusts several copies of triplicate forms at me. "Sign here, and here, and here, ma'am," he says. So I'm a ma'am now, am I? When did that line get crossed, I wonder.

Soon after we got official he started claiming his synesthesia, a rare neurological misfiring in the brain that made him hear colors as sounds, worsened. The gaudiness of the department store's fall palette, that season's shade of green brassiere paired with plum-wine burgundy panties and trendy, ochre floral stockings, all conspired to screech at him like nails on a chalkboard. He staggered home every evening complaining of fireworks going off in his frontal cortex, pushed his meatloaf around his plate, muttering about diminished triad chords lacking any tonal resolution. The resulting migraines required complete silence from me, and multiple gin and tonics, supposedly medicinal, for him.

By then our bedroom life had become a moot point anyway. "How can you expect me to perform when all I hear is the theme music to *Jaws*?" he would ask, clutching his head in both

hands as I slid across the periwinkle blue duvet toward him in my peach nightie. If I tried to touch him he'd hiss *Fortissimo* under his breath.

"What I want, Maggie, is for us to ring out in a harmonious manner together," he said, throwing handfuls of white paint chip samples across the bedroom floor, requesting I pick a tone to repaint the house. "I'm looking for a nice, solid C major to get old with."

Well, I think that's the kind of thing you should let a person know up front before you promise death do you part. Only after I coated every wall in ten different shades of pale nothing, Ice Storm Ecru in the bedroom, Ivory Tower Cream in the bathroom and the entire downstairs several variants on Better than Beige, did he begin to rail against my flaming red hair. Call my very presence a composite work in "*katzenjammer*."

Turned out my hair, along with my freckled skin tone and Ragin' Raisin lipstick, grated along his inner ear, threw off his equilibrium, gave him vertigo. I was made up of all sharps and flats, my very womanhood a composition of scary Halloween soundtracks, infants wailing, and alley cats crying out in heat.

"Here, put this on." He tossed a platinum blond wig at me. "If you loved me you'd at least *try* to reach for a higher octave."

The driver gets into the cab of his truck and guns the engine, dragging my ex-home away behind him, chains rattling. I hold the pink copies of the paperwork in front of me, an appropriate shade of rosé for a recent divorcee trying to get a new lease on life. The other house-hauling guys mill around for a few, cracking open beers and toeing bits of rubble with their boots before grabbing their cooler and taking off down the road, following the divots the trailer left behind scraped into the gravel. I stand in the wake of dust between the tire marks.

I asked for the divorce. My ex quickly found himself one of those albino types for whom it's mandatory to go everywhere with a parasol, a more accommodating female blessed with less natural pigmentation than I. Good riddance! He got the house, and I got the parcel of land it sat on. Only I forgot to read the fine print before I signed, and last week I discovered the back taxes on it. So, yeah, my share of our joint fortune belongs, in actuality, to the state.

Besides one rusty, tandem bike, only a few boxes of beeswax and ribbon remain on the empty lot, the last of the supplies from my now closed candle stall. It turns out he also took out several loans using my candle cart business as collateral before defaulting on them, one by one. My poor, dead mama. She must be so full of regrets in her grave right now.

The funny thing is I'm pretty sure I never loved him, even during the brief window of time before the sex went south. Not even sure I even really liked him. But I liked the *idea* of him and of our marriage, in theory, if you know what I mean. For a moment there I saw myself, a married woman, a business owner, a lady in her *prime*. Like if I met myself at a cocktail party, holding a drink in one hand and laughing at a joke my ex had just charmingly delivered to our gracious hosts, I would have looked at me and thought, "She's a person who's got it together."

The trucker's paperwork makes great kindling when I hold a match to it and shove it under the cardboard of my few boxes, and the slow-licking fire whips up a notch with the wind. I try to imagine what the blue and orange flames would sound like as they leap higher, hearing something like an aria from Wagner Ring Trilogy or Beethoven's 9th playing in my head. I can hear a very real fire engine siren entering the score, the wails getting closer and closer, probably cobalt blue. As the fire truck turns a corner hurdling towards me, I grab my satchel containing the last of my worldly goods, leap on the bike and start riding as fast as the rusty heap of junk

will go with just one person peddling. Daisy, daisy, tell me your answer do. My answer is that I don't need to add arrest for arson to my already sub-par morning.

I'm riding like a madwoman when I reach the local dinner, so I figure I could use a breather. Sagging down into the vinyl of the booth I fix my wind-mussed hair and apply a little more Ragin' Raisin.

My eventual ex told me, "Maggie, you're too dramatic about everything. Giving up teal won't *kill* you." Owning nothing but the hair on my head and the freedom to pick out whatever color shirt I wish feels like a wonderful, terrible thing. Here I am, I remind myself, in my prime. But then the thought crouches into that dusty corner of my mind, the one small section I've delegated over to fear.

"What now?" it asks me. I slouch down in the booth. I bolster myself back up quickly. That's the thing. I will always float when you want me to drown. You can take me to the river, but you just can't keep me down in the water. I'm pretty unsinkable.

The waitress cruises by. "Coffee, sweetie?" I nod and then pour too much sugar into my cup from the dispenser as I flip through the free, weekly rag, skimming past the articles on town ordinances, giving *Real Estate* the old stink eye, and flounder around for a bit in *Erotic Services*.

Pages of grainy, newsprint pictures of hardened schoolgirls with their mouths hanging open, Eastern block bridal types looking for real love and trans ladies with very discrete outcall/in call services block my path before I can reach the pathetic half column of *Job & Career Search*. I sigh because all that's listed are the kind of offerings where one gets to keep ones' panties on, but no hope for a living wage. I flip back to the *Erotic Services* section, and I

swear the image of a self-proclaimed model named Natasha winks at me. The waitress sneaks up behind, “You need a touch up, sweetie?” she asks, leaning over with the coffee pot, and I fold the paper shut fast.

In my twenties I came to understand clearly that we all have to sell ourselves in some manner. All anyone has for commerce is a mind and body and maybe, though it can’t be delineated or tested (and therefore falls low on the metrics of commercial value scale) a soul. I tried selling my body for a minute, but I didn’t really have the goods. Or should I say I have them, I’ve always had quite the figure, but I ran into a snag and couldn’t get them to work in the right manner.

A strip club hired me as a cocktail waitress, and they offered to upgrade me to a dancing slot one night when a girl no-showed. That night in the basement dressing room I put on fake eyelashes while watching in the mirror as a more veteran dancer, Charlie, took a hit off of a glass pipe. The oldest woman in the club, she had been in the business for decades. Told me she and her girlfriend did best in the colder regions of the country where only loggers or fishermen lived, but now at nearing fifty her bones craved a warmer climate, and she wanted to buy her lover a condo in Hawaii.

“Don’t look almost fifty,” I said, being kind as I rouged my cheeks.

She took another hit and exhaled a long thin stream of smoke at the mirror, rolling her neck back. She wore only a strand of pearls and high heels and sat in repose with her legs wide open. She had an admirably sculpted body, not so much as a dimple on her ass and the legs of a woman twenty-five years her junior. The fluorescent lights above filled in etches of a hard life on her face, despite her expression of a glassy-eyed Buddha. She held up the pipe. “You want a hit?”

“Sure, what the hay.” I was in my experimental phase. One toké and my lungs raged and my hands shook. “What’s in this?” I asked between coughing fits.

“Crocodile tears,” she said and looked thoughtfully at her body in the mirror, opening and closing her legs in slow motion, like something precious might drop out from between them.

Applying the rest of my make-up became a daunting task what with my hands shaking. I heard them announce my dancer name, Collette, (I wanted something French sounding) over the loudspeakers before I realized I could hardly stand. Somehow I managed to sashay and shake my way onto the stage, but I only got halfway undressed before the seizures started. The club’s disc jockey mistook my erratic floor gyrations for part of my act and tried to accommodate by spinning something with a faster beat. Not until my eyes rolled back in my head and I began foaming at the mouth did they call the ambulance.

So, in terms of viable commerce, my body’s not on the market anymore. I pour more sugar into my coffee, knocking the mug over in the process. Brown liquid pools on the back page drowning the photo of Natasha. I try to mop up the mess with a napkin, but the pool turns into a lake and a small waterfall forms, dripping onto my lap. I can feel a man at the counter staring at me, but he glances away when I look up. I want to snap, “What? You’ve never spilt a little coffee in your life?”

The waitress slides past me again and whips out a rag looped onto her apron. “Here, let me get that, sweetie,” she says. I sense the rote way in which she pronounces sweetie, the phrase turning more perfunctory than endearing now. She grabs the soiled paper and wipes down the mess with three wide arcs of her arm.

“I guess you guys don’t have any openings for an official klutz?” I ask, trying to lighten the moment, though I mean the inquiry with a dead seriousness. I need a job. I could sling hash,

why not? I peer at her nametag. “I could be the one, Sunny, who screws up the orders and spills coffee. You know, for comic relief. I love your uniform, by the way. I look great in pink too. Most redheads can’t pull it off, but I can.”

Sunny smiles, tight lips and dead eyes, the complete opposite of sunshine. “We aren’t hiring, sweetie. Not for comedians, not for waitresses, not for comedic waitresses. Can I get you anything else, or will the check do?” She nods, fishing around in her apron for my bill, encouraging me to choose the check option.

“Check, thanks,” I say. In my mind I am picturing enough change lingering at the bottom of my satchel, visualizing all quarters, no nickels or dimes. I’ve read you can make things happen by visualization, and I need to start practicing more. I’d like to avoid further judgment, here at the beginning of my new life. Only an hour earlier I had hoped for rebirth by fire, to soar like the mighty phoenix from the ashes of my candle supplies. But right now I am feeling damp and slightly let down, more like a botched baptism-by-coffee.

Slapping the bill on the table she refills my cup and says, “One for the road, then,” before sliding on to the next booth.

I take out my compact and lipstick. In the compact’s mirror I can see the man at the counter turned full around on his stool, now blatantly checking me out, no ifs ands or buts about it. I tilt my head. He’s not classically attractive in the least. He’s short, and his scraggly beard shot with grey gives him the appearance of a terrier dog, but I find something appealing in his manner. I can’t stop staring. It takes me a moment to place what it is that pleases me.

The colors. He’s wearing a red plaid trench coat bordering on flamboyant, with orange, Scottish style golf shorts that bunch at the knees. What do they call them? Peddle pushers. He’s

finished off his ensemble with a yellow beret and florescent lime sneakers. I don't know why I hadn't put it together earlier. He's color deaf!

I laugh and shake my head, putting away the compact and lipstick, and turn my attention to really digging around the bottom of my satchel, trying to feel for quarters to pay the balance. Out of the corner of my eye the sudden movement of a splotch of yellow, now so close in my periphery, jars me.

Mr. Jaunty Pants n' Cap has seated himself across from me in my booth. He clears his throat and offers me his hand. His pinky finger is missing, and as if to make up for it he wears a giant ring with a bright, blue stone winking on the little finger of his left.

"I'm Goeffrey."

"Goefrey?" I squinch up my nose. What kind of name is that?

"Yes, Goeffrey, pronounced like the famous ballet company, but spelt with a letter 'G.' Now, more importantly, you look like a hungry lass. Let's get you something more than a cup of coffee for lunch, shall we?"

Without waiting for consent from me (and if he had I would correct him that I am not a *lass*, but a woman in the prime of her womanhood) he snaps his pinky-finger-missing hand and bellows, "*Sunny!*" He can't be taller than five and quarter feet, but his voice seems ripped from a larger man.

Sunny stops chewing on her pencil and looks up from behind the cash register, her expression one of displeasure at being so rudely taken from a moment of daydreaming. She shoves the pencil behind her ear and edges back over to my, now suddenly our, booth.

"What is it, sweetie?" She shoots me a look. "Everything okay over here?" Her tone has a little more deference than I feel she showed me earlier.

“Could you be so kind,” he looks up at Sunny with a beatific smile, “to get this young lass a tuna melt?” He stares hard at me for a beat. “She looks like she’d like the pumpernickel bread, no pickles, and get her your freshest of fresh fruit cups, madam.” He waves the pinky missing hand with a dismissive flourish.

Sunny yanks the check off the table and scribbles the new order. I think I hear her mutter something about canned pineapple and snorting as she walks back towards the kitchen. But I could have misheard.

“So,” he looks back at me. “What is your name, my lady?”

I can’t tell if this is the weirdest pick up I’ve ever participated in or what, but I decide to go along with it. Everything in his mannerism seems odd to the point of off putting, but he’s so brightly dressed. And a girl’s got to eat.

“Maggie,” I say, “Maggie Worth,” then ask, “How’d you lose the pinky?”

“Shooting accident, quail, not important.” He slides his face into both of his hands and gazes almost lovingly at me. “What is important is that I overheard your earlier inquiry into some sort of gainful employment, that you need to make a little green, and I am here to let you know I can assist in such endeavors.”

I tilt my head again and raise my eyebrows.

“Oh, don’t be silly. Everything very above board. Top top, so to speak. Look.” He snaps open his briefcase, takes out a pamphlet and slides it across the table to me. The front pictures two women, ostensibly the same by their dress and coloring. On one half the woman sits alone, slumped over a desk in a dim room sobbing, and the other half paints her with a man and child, all holding hands, skipping through a meadow under a rainbow. Inside the pamphlet reads:

DO You Suffer From Haphazard Decision Making Disorder as described in the nineteenth edition of the DSM? DO you beat yourself up for past failures? Are YOU frozen by the thought of future decisions? DO you sometimes make important choices by flipping a coin once, only to then settle on best out of three? DO you feel like life is passing you by while you spin like a broken wheel in a rut of your own creating? Want to freed from the chains of poor choices? Be the YOU you always knew you could be?

I'm perplexed. I slide the pamphlet back and look around, wondering if I'm secretly being filmed for a new T.V. show, *Recent Divorcees at Diners*. "Look, thanks for the sandwich, but that hardly describes me," I say. "Are you from the alien space ship religion, or something?" I shake my head. Jiminy Crickets, people. I am a formerly married woman and an ex-business owner, not some loony that would be willing to wear linen pants and bow down to a Rooster with a rising spaceship on its chest. "You can keep your cult, sir."

He chuckles, which aggravates me more. Sunny plops down my tuna melt. I would totally leave, but the sandwich does look like what I want, all greasy, crisp edges enclosing the perfect ratio of fat and protein. I even rejoice that the cantaloupe on the side clashes with the orange cheese dripping from the brown and ecru swirled crust.

"Eat, eat, please." He points at my sandwich, and I dig in. "No cult, not interested in your spiritual well being by those measures, Maggie. I work for the top conglomerate that owns all three of the most powerful and profitable pharmaceutical companies in the world, Glaspox, Tevelar, and Hexicon."

I swallow a bite of my sandwich. "If one company owns all three then why not just tell me the name of that company?"

He shakes his head. "Can't. Company policy."

"So what does this have to do with me?" I'm lost now. Is this a pick up or a sales pitch?

He smiles that saintly smile again and reaches for a napkin from the dispenser to dab at his brow, pushing the beret back on his head until it rings his face like a yellow, knit halo. "You seem like you have, perhaps, recently experienced the vicissitudes of life, at a cross roads, yes?"

I shrug and wipe some mayo off my lips.

"Perhaps you would like to enroll in a medicine trial that could both aid with your inability to process regrets, and make some money while you are at it."

Regrets? That's my mom's department. I don't regret; hell, I bounce back. But before I fire off a witty retort putting this unctuous man in his place, I have one of my rare, self-censoring moments. Because, let's face it, I could do with the money.

He leans in, his beret now sliding forward over one eye until he looks more like a Cyclops than an off-colored saint. "I'm a head hunter for pharmaceutical trials, Maggie, and I know my stuff. I see no ring. Tell me, are you married?"

"Are you?" I shoot back. Sore topic, buster.

He sits back and chuckles. "Many times, many times. Let me ask you this, if you could do anything, what would it be?"

"Alpacas." I answer.

"Alpacas?" he asks.

"Yeah, you raise them. Alpaca farms." I simply adore Alpacas. I'd gladly trade in an uptight husband and build-from-a-box home for a herd of smiley Alpacas in Peru. Besides, I've heard they've painted every city there in a palette of the loudest, most cheerful colors, and hundreds of parrots with jewel toned feathers flock in the rainforest.

He sits back, nods his head. “Well, this is a very cutting edge medicine trial, Ms. Maggie. Give my company loan of your gray matter, so to speak, for a little bit. I guarantee you will always remain the inimitable you. Only you may find yourself feeling just a bit more *you*, able to execute this and any other grand scheme of yours in a systematic and organize manner.” He’s starting to sound like my dead mom.

“Then, at the end of four weeks you shall be greatly recompensed for your time. Enough, I would imagine, to help purchase yourself an Alpaca farm. Perhaps you may even have the added benefit of making that decision with a clear mind.”

Whatever. Like the man said, I could really use the dough. I reapply my lipstick slowly and smack my lips a few times, blot them on a napkin, before I give him the benefit of my consent. He pushes the paperwork towards me, and I check off the boxes randomly, already bored by this whole conversation.

The entrance of the clinic stands at the bottom of a stairwell in the back of an alleyway. I dig for my lipstick to do a quick touch up before entering, give my spirits a lift, only to find I’ve misplaced it. I run back out in the street to grab Geoffrey and see if it dropped in his car, and also to tell him I’ve changed my mind; this doesn’t look like my scene. I can just make out his purple Alfa Romeo turning the corner at the end of the long city block.

Really, I tell myself, what have I got to lose? Nothing! I turn back towards the clinic. I laugh. I actually do have nothing now; no lipstick, and I left the bike back at the diner. I walk down and push on through the creaky doors.

Bulletproof glass shields an empty receptionist area, with a sign taped to the thick plexi-glass reading, *Take One*, with an arrow pointing towards a red dispenser, the kind found at most deli counters and bakeries, that spits out numbered slips. No one sits at the desk behind the glass screen announcing any actual numbers, and there's no display blinking a numerical value hanging on the wall, but I follow orders and take one anyway. The whole room is a study in gray and that nasty shade of mint green that institutions always seem to prefer and that my ex found comfort in. My stomach reels a bit. I may have eaten my tuna melt too fast.

I take in the crowd in the waiting room. Some people look like they've been camped here for days, stretched out on the hard plastic benches with open magazines covering their faces, while others stare at a blank television screen in the corner. Squeezing in along a bench, I turn the slip over to see where I am in line, but the ticket doesn't clarify much:

*Don't gamble, you're the type who always loses.
Lucky numbers 9, 17, 29, 33.
Remember to smile! It's better to be wise than happy!*

I crumple it up. Based on the pile of balled up tickets around the floor in front of the empty receptionist booth, I'm not the only one put off by my fortune. I should bounce, but then I think of the smiling face of an Alpaca wearing a traditional Peruvian headpiece embroidered in red and gold and decide to give it an hour. I dig the paperwork out of my satchel, unsure of the legality of what I've signed. That's how I realize the fine print at the bottom of Geoffrey's contract looks more like Sanskrit than English, and I shove the papers back in my bag unread.

The woman next to me wears Kleenex boxes on her feet in lieu of shoes, and the gentleman across from her sports some spectacular open sores on his face and hands. I can't find my lipstick and have coffee stains on my shorts. None of us looks like we just arrived from feasting on Stingray Carpaccio in some underwater café in the Aleutian Islands.

The minutes tick by, and I flip through every *Mademoiselles' Monthly* and *Geological Nation* I can find, still without a peep from an administrator or anyone. I'm starting to wonder who's running this show and am sorely tempted to try the steel doors by the receptionist desk, but right as I get up to do so a guy with sores on his face yells, "Oh, so *I'm* the crazy one?"

I look over to see who he's talking to. Kleenex-box shoe lady and everyone else in the room look down at their laps, almost on cue, so I'm guessing it must be a rhetorical question and sit slowly back down.

He waves his fist in the direction of a pine tree growing outside, then points and looks around the room addressing the crowd. "Yeah, well, *don't think I can't see that man in a tree-suit watching us!*" He bangs on the one barred window, and a siren goes off. "*How can you sheep not see him?*" The steel doors open automatically as two large male nurses stride through.

I wave and shout, "yoo-hoo," in a cheerful voice, trying to be polite but persistent in getting at least one of the nurse's attention. I really want to get this over with.

Both men ignore me, preoccupied with the task of getting the tree-suit screamer with sores on his face in a headlock and dragging him through the steel doors. I turn to the Kleenex-shoe woman.

"Question," I ask her. "You've participated in these deals before?" I point to the doors. "Does that sort of kerfuffle happen a lot during most clinical drug trials?"

"Oh no," she says shrugging like it's no big thing. "I've been on trial since the last war. On trial for many, many crimes. Many, many crimes against humanity."

Great. Maybe it's because I'm young, at least by comparison, but if this is what a lifetime of haphazard decision-making can do to a person, I'm starting to worry. What did Geoffrey see

in me at the diner that reminded him of this crowd? I mentally compose a list of life choices that others have told me could be interpreted as questionable.

I dropped out of beauty school at seventeen to join my then boyfriend on a road trip across the Americas. Turned out he ran drugs for a large cartel. Of course, we fought at a steak house and broke up about a month prior to his getting caught and being arrested. I may have had to hitchhike home for a few months, but at least I am not rotting in some jail cell somewhere in Bogotá, so that choice wasn't *all* bad.

I had gotten into a pretty classy college, but I forget to mail in the financial aid forms in time. I had a job as a magician's assistant, but then there was the knife-throwing incident. These among other turns along the way; decisions not always executed in the most methodical, well-researched manner. Plus my general inability to stay in one place for too long, which used to drive my mother crazy; she'd never know where to send me postcards of her imaginary grandchildren.

I can't help it; cities, towns, colorless men, I just get *antsy*. I feel like if I chose one thing and stick with it, through thick and thin, then I will always be missing out on all these other better, shinier things.

Speaking of antsy, I'm about to go try my luck with banging on the doors myself. They probably don't have tree suit people spying on us, but they must have security cameras, and maybe I'll get someone's attention. Might as well prove to myself that I may be haphazard or whatever, but I am no passive doe stranded in the forest of my life. I am a woman of action, one who can visualize a better future.

Right as I raise my fist to knock the door slides open and a nurse wearing a lavender uniform (one that really clashes with her hair, a similar shade of red to mine) steps out carrying a clipboard. “Maggie Worth?” she asks, looking right at me.

“Yes,” I answer, surprised at my own relief.

“Paperwork,” she says, and I hand her the forms from Geoffrey. She looks them over then adds them to her clipboards, appraises me for a split second and then says, “Follow me, please.”

“Bye, everyone,” I call out to the waiting room. I should at least make nice since I am being a line-cutter, but nobody in the room seems to take any notice as the doors shut with a click behind me.

We walk down corridors after corridor, switching right and left. “Hey,” I address her back, seriously panting trying to keep up with her cross-country style strides, “You know Geoffrey?” Without turning to look back at me she shakes her head. “The head hunter guy,” I explain, “who works for this company? That’s why I’m here...” I wish I had gotten a card or at least his last name.

We stop, and she opens the door to a windowless room. It dawns on me the impossibility of finding my way back out of here alone. I’m getting a *little* concerned now. What if this isn’t for me? Did I make a rash choice in doing this? I like my brain the way it is. That’s the moment when the irony of the whole situation hits me like an anvil dropping from the sky.

“I know of no headhunters,” she answers. “Please, after you.”

I enter. A giant scale takes up the entire back half of the room. It looks like a reproduction of old-fashioned balance scales, the kind found in front of courthouses usually held

in the hand in of a blindfolded Lady Justice. Maybe some sort of art instillation? They can't be functional, can they?

Before I can ask her where they got the scales she finishes marking on her clipboard and says, "I need to weigh you. Please take off your clothes and step onto the scales."

"Those scales?" I ask, pointing.

She looks at me like I might be simple. "What other scales do you see, Ms. Worth? Now, please remove your garments."

"Everything off?" I ask.

She nods. "Yes. Everything off."

I undress. Could I have sold my soul this time? Only that doesn't make sense. Geoffrey handed me a Bic pen; it's not like I signed the contract in blood. I hardly made a bargain with the devil if it's signed with a roller-tip Bic, right?

Naked, I climb up a foot ladder until I reach the suspended, weighing pan that hangs from chains attached above and crawl onto the dish. I stumble when, under the force of my weight, the beam arm above me swings in a wide arc and drops my side of scale down quickly like an unbalanced teeter-totter.

"Center yourself on the plate," the nurse yells, climbing a second foot ladder that's stationed by the empty pan across from me. She begins tossing bags of sand as counter weights onto it. I try to situate myself in the center of my brass plate, realizing as I move up and down that I can't stand, and begin to curl up into a ball instead, pulling my mass towards my center.

"That's it," she yells at me with encouragement.

The beam arm above sways back and forth, widely fluctuating with each additional counter weight, and as it moves an arrow motions up and down simultaneously in the center fulcrum between two points labeled *Heaven* and *Hell*.

The swinging slows to a gentle rolling. I'm on my back now, looking up at the ceiling, naked a newborn, a raw sort of sensation. It reminds me of that moment of respite on a Ferris Wheel ride right when you reach the peak of the highest drop. Up when the wheels crunch to a break, holding you suspended for a split second. You know what's coming, but everything slows down, so you can get a little perspective on the real free fall that's coming.

The nurse fine-tunes the scales by adding handfuls of sand now, small cups of grains that nudge the arrow along until the pointer finds its balance, resting smack in the middle. A sign unfurls above, displays a picture of the world in bright blues and greens. The gold lettering reads:

You Are Here.

Lying naked and still, I have to agree with the sign. Here I am. Maggie Worth. In all my failing and glory.

THE CLOCKMAKER OF HIDDEN SPRINGS

I. Solomon's Horological Movements Maker & Automaton Specialist Inc.,
Miami, 1962

For many years now I have kept the secrets of Eliyahu ben Avraham Solomonovich. Believe me when I say his secrets weigh heavier than most. I suppose no one calls him by his birth name anymore? Only by the name recorded in his American papers, one Mr. Eli Solomon. I find it a sad testament, as if a stamp by a border officer could provide new skin. Like the old can be so easily shed.

What else about Eliyahu? Single, male, Jewish. Born somewhere in countryside of Moldavia, transferred in his youth to the city of Kishinev during the rule of the Bessarabian Governorate Principality of Russia, specific date of birth unknown. Arrived in Canada by boat during the winter of 1906, then immigrated to the US through Detroit, Michigan. Current address: 2045 Sunshine Lane, Miami Springs, Florida, registered owner of the only clock repair and design business on the strip, Solomon's Horological Movements Maker & Automaton Specialist Inc. Or, as the locals call it, that crazy clock shop on the corner.

Sure, these constitute the facts, but as to the whole story— only I know that. I know things about him his one living friend left, Max Moskovitch, that kind old fool, could never fathom. I especially know more than the rest of the populace in this odd city where he has chosen to spend his days. So different than the place from which we all once came.

I certainly know more than the people who enter his shop, the kind of people caught in the eternal search for an alligator skin purse or palm tree lighter. Women in big hats, hobbling in wedge sandals, grasping the arms of their husbands, you know the type, bald men with slipped guts and Kodachrome cameras swinging from their necks. Young and old, year round these couples push open the heavy oak doors and take off their sunglasses, frozen for a moment even after their eyes adjust to the dim light.

Inside the shop, shelves filled with elegant marble bedside clocks, orbs the size of a human fist, rest on small pedestals next to three-feet tall carriage clocks with multiple dials for tide and moon, all bookended by French mantel-types with rare stones decorating each corner that correspond to the four seasons. Around the room seven feet tall granddaddies crouch, ominous like brutish men, synchronized pendulums swinging in their bellies.

Not a single cog or pinion gear Eli hasn't filed to mathematical precision, each spandrel for the center dials hand-cast in bronze, every Roman numeral stamped out of thin gold sheet. Clock faces decorated in filigree so ornate that under a magnifying glass each flourish appears written by ancient scribes. The entire store filled with a rainforest's worth of variegated wood, burnished until it gives off an almost human heat.

Irony, but most lose track of the time once they enter here. Customers mill about lulled by a vague sense of déjà vu they struggle to place. The collective pulse of the constant tock, tock, tock evokes something primordial as it vibrates through the body, subtly realigning one with a forgotten longing, dragging the human spirit back. Remember the sensation of floating in that lower berth beneath the beating of your mother's heart? High hopes you had back then, didn't you? Just bobbing about under the illusionary veil of safety, but with no real clue as what all to

expect. For one short moment in here you may relive what you've always remembered but could never quite recall.

I know just when Eli will look up from his workbench, his one eye distorted as he peers at the shop patrons through his jeweler's loupe. A woman's hand reaches out to feel the cool bronze of a sundial or a man tries the skeleton key to the door of a granddaddy, hoping to have a poke around.

Eli will growl and snap, "Hands off! No touching the merchandise!" These wealthy couples and pretty young things always flinch then, the kind of people more used to underlings who will kiss their derrières to sell them an overpriced block of cheese than a curmudgeonly old man with no patience for the public's whims.

Not a mere clockmaker but a creator, Eliyahu ben Avraham Solomonovich doesn't need anyone's business. Eli lives only in his work because it is in his work that he remembers his life. You're an anomaly amongst the heathens of the new world Eli, my love. Here you stand, an ugly old thing that makes beauty tick.

•

II. Room 209, Cedars Medical Center, Miami Springs, 1962

Max watches the television set from his hospital bed with his mouth slightly open, white hair sticking up around his face like a bird's crest. From the next bed over a ventilator's cyclical hum of breath filters through the privacy curtain separating patients.

Eli pauses in the doorway. He carries his full height of six and half feet without slouching, wearing a brown sweater over his blue suspenders despite the heat outside.

“Max?” Eli asks, softly tapping on the doorframe.

“Eli!” Max turns in surprised pleasure, though his copper colored eyes remain dull under the fluorescents. “My dear friend, why are you just standing there? Come in, come in,” he says, turning off the television set. “What are you waiting for? A mailed invitation on nice paper?”

Eli walks over and bends to kiss Max on both cheeks. One particularly brutal tube taped up Max’s nose hisses and sucks fluid from his lungs, but Max manages a smile despite all that tape.

“So. *Nu*?¹” Eli asks.

“*Nish koshe, Nish koshe*,”² Max answers. “Who wants to hear of aches and pains? More importantly, it’s the middle of the afternoon. How can you afford to take such time off? Do you not have a business to run?”

“I tell you,” Eli says, picking up a pitcher of roses from the bedside table and placing a small leather case in its place. “It’s a good thing, to be the boss of one’s own person. I want to visit with my good friend, Max Moskovitch? I take the open sign on the door and flip it to closed. Problem solved.”

Eli moves the flowers over to the windowsill. Every building in this town, even the ones that house the ill, come with an ocean view.

“Besides, Max, you should dream you could rid yourself of our chess matches so easily.”

How like night and day are Eli and Max, and what a miracle for such a friendship to last? Of course, over the years no one’s ever bothered to question the mystery that ties two old men together, one wearing his proverbial suspenders while the other suffers the indignities of excess ear hair, sitting next to one another on a park bench by the sea.

¹ A catch-all word in Yiddish, its meaning changes depending on context and tone.

² Not too bad

Elijah walks back over to Max's bed, pulls up a chair and opens the travel chess set on the table.

"So?" he asks, pointing to the tube in Max's nose. "That doesn't look so good if you have to sneeze?"

"Eh," Max waves his hand. "You should see what they have shoved in worse place. I swear it's a conspiracy. Undignified poking and prodding? Send in the pretty lady nurse. Sponge bath time? Send in the one male nurse in the entire place to soap me up. Nice enough guy, sure, but not exactly what I hoped for as far as perks go considering what this place charges."

Eli makes one of his infrequent half smiles.

Max sighs. "Who's to complain? This is a world-class hospital. I'm fine. I'm fine. You know who is causing me really to worry?"

"Who, Max?"

"Lydia and that doctor husband of hers. Those two, Eli, it's a shame, a real shame."

"What? Who's that?"

"My new soap. *Invitation to Lunch*. Or is it *Invitation to Love*?" Max tries to sit up, and Elijah helps him, placing a pillow behind his back. "Lydia's in a coma, and her long lost twin is plotting to seduce Giorgio, the nice doctor husband." Max grabs up the television remote and points it at the hospital room like it is a channel that could be changed.

"Think of it, to ruin a perfectly good marriage like that," he continues. "To have a wife that's a living turnip at such a young age, sure, a terrible thing. You know the worst part?"

Eli shakes his head. His expression impassive, inured to Max's emotional whims. "No, Max, you tell me."

“To have such a despicable sister.” Max’s voice gets louder. “What with the drugging and the lying. It’s not right, Eli. Blood should take care of blood.”

Elijah takes the remote out of Max’s hand. The soft beeping of Max’s heart monitor competes with the ventilator pumping breath into the man behind the curtain in the next bed over.

“Max, you’d think the people on the television were real.”

•

III. Kishinev, 1903

Before I can fully explain our story— Eli’s, Max’s and my story— I must give a brief history of Pavel Aleksandrovish Krushevan, so-called journalist, proud member of the Black Hundred, Moldavian nationalist and general tool of the Empire. I wish I didn’t have to, but in order for you to understand I must.

Picture a man in a suit cut better than that of his station, fond of twisting an impressive handlebar mustache (a sorry compensation for balding so young, I suppose) and waving about his silver snuffbox under duress. Fastidious, as obsessed with the creases in his pants being straight as he was with eradicating the “*amenitarea eveiasca*,”³— like we were dirt under his fingernails to be scrubbed away. No matter what I later tell you of Eliyahu don’t judge him without knowing that Krushevan and the others, they committed the real crimes.

Though life in the Jewish quarter of Kishinev had never been what you would call easy, life became that much more difficult after Krushevan wrangled himself a position as a reporter at

³ The Jewish threat

the local paper, *The Bessarabet*⁴. He showed panache for front-page news, never mind that he pulled most of his headlines from his own fever dreams, decrying for our death and implicating us as the disseminators of socialism. Etc. etc. He had found his, how would you say? His niche. Of course, *The Bessarabet* had always been a right wing rag not even fit for washing windows with, so... *nu?* What did we expect?

Perhaps his driving need to destroy us stemmed from being born an impoverished aristocrat of Moldavian descent raised under the Bessarabia principality of Russian rule, the kind of men who have always relied on scapegoats to explain away their own petty injustices.

He found his opportunity for his sick crusade during Pesach and a few days prior to Easter Sunday in the year 1903. Twenty-five miles north of the city peasants came upon a young boy lying in a ditch with his throat slit. They dragged the dying boy to the nearest hospital, our hospital, and the Jewish doctors there did what they could to save him. They failed. The boy died while in their care.

The next day the headline served as an example of Krushevan's best work yet. *Jews Murder our Children for Their Rituals*. The article claimed we needed the blood of Christian children to make our *matzo*s⁵ for Pesach, and a broadside stated that in retaliation for our supposed killing of the boy a recent imperial mandate permitted *krawawaja rasprawa*⁶ over the three holy days of Easter.

Lies. A rag full of lies. But these lies ignited throughout the city, swept out to the neighboring countryside, the very rumor of it enflaming the passions of even those who couldn't read. Lies that we sliced out the child's tongue and hung him by his heels from the rafters to

⁴ The Bessarabian

⁵ Unleavened bread

⁶ Execute bloody justice by whatever means necessary

drain and be cooked like a cow for Sabbath. That we would torture and sacrifice a child, then cook with human blood, with *treif*⁷? Such grotesque imaginings who would believe?

In the period before Russia annexed Bessarabia, before the government mandated us to the quarter, before some administrator drew on a map the demarcation lines of the Pale of Settlement in Poland to the east, life had been different for many Jews. In the period before they burnt our orchards, shut down our factories and schools, sold off our dachas, back when there was still freedom from the Tsar's oppressive Russian Jewry laws, we were, for a few decades here and there, almost civilized. We had artisans and authors, winemakers and tobacco growers. It was considered *a mitzvah*, a good blessing and a good deed, to drink and dance at weddings, to clasp our hands above our heads in circles, stamp our feet and holler. To call upon Elohim's light to shower down upon the bride and groom.

Though we should have known, we should have been prepared, on Easter Sunday in 1903, a day that so happened to fall on the seventh day of Pesach, we had not foreseen the bloody carnival that was to be unleashed into our section of the city. They say that death doesn't send a postcard before he comes to visit. But I have learnt death sometimes knocks first. That was death banging on our doors with Pavel Krushevan's inflammatory article. We were fools. We should have been listening for it; we should have heard.

•

IV. Limbo

⁷ Non-kosher, forbidden by Jewish dietary laws

Years ago when I first arrived in this room I would sit on a chair, hold my head in my hands and rock, singing to myself, over and over for comfort. The ship will be here by morning. The ship will be here by morning.

The words turned into a song to try to circumvent stormy water, but syllables got trapped in cross winds. I'd get up, open my closet door (pretending) and would ask myself, what to pack? What to pack? Then close it fast. The ship will be here by morning.

Downstairs I could hear women beneath me in a kitchen, dishing about this and that, knives and forks scraping an empty plate, Romas, a pair of gypsies. I would ignore them and, instead, give in to the voices in my head, hum along with the odd tune. The ship will be here by morning, by morning. The ship will come. The ship will come. It helped with the constant knocking that invaded my very skull, the constant thump, thump, itself enough to make me want to kill myself. And I would have long ago, if I weren't already dead.

For years I would sit at the kitchenette table in here, tracing the chipped paint along its edge, white peeling upon green peeling upon blue into a topographical map of places I will never go. I imagined tiny vessels pulling up to a tiny port shoreline that stretched out along the longitude of the worn rattan.

If I sobbed at night the woman would bang on the ceiling below me with a broom, shaking my floorboards. If I paced for too many hours, one would come up the stairs and pounds her fist on the door, yell at me in her gypsy tongue.

I wear a tin-snipped wreath of daisies on my head. At one point in boredom I tore the chicken feathers out of old down quilt I found in the cupboard and sewed it into a pair of wings. I've kept them on for what feels at least like centuries now. I have no mirrors to look in, but I can tell from the faint reflection in the glass of the portal window that they look more like sad feather

dusters than the wings of a divine being. So *nu?* I am a grubby angel. Eh, what a waste of bed linens.

The ship will be here by morning. Eliyahu, my betrothed, knows more than other men. For months before the calamity we had met in secret. My mother would turn in her grave if she knew I had let the strange boy, the one who let the attic in the house across the street from us, the boy with no family who came to our quarter as a mere tinkerer, no better than a rag picker, actually *kiss* me.

But Eli had read the books taken from the secret libraries of the greatest temples— the kind of sacred texts even Yeshiva boys are forbidden to read until they reach the age of forty, if then. When the time comes and things ever get too bad, Eli and I will escape. He has been through desecration before and survived. He will find me, we will be prepared and we will cross the ocean together. The distance of twenty-one days by ship to a new land, only we will do so in a single day. He promised. He knows secrets.

And our kisses are secrets too. Even as I wear them like a crown, I can recall hiding the tin daisies under my mattress so my mother will not find his gifts. See how the alchemy of his dexterity can turn base metals into something golden.

The woman downstairs yells at her companion. Their teacups filled with gin they play cards for all eternity. I fling myself back down on the bed and sob, and she bangs her broom on her ceiling. It's a card game no one ever wins.

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V. Solomon's Horological Movements Maker & Automaton Specialist Inc.,
Miami, 1962

Every day at noon in Eli's shop let the show begin! A multitude of bells rise up in chorus: soprano bells, baritone bells, bells like piccolos, bells like harps. Women pointing everywhere at once, fanning manicured fingers heavy under the weight of fat diamonds. Who can blame them? It is enrapturing to watch the automaton bluebird poke out his head and cuckoo, singing at the moment the archer's tiny bow slays it, how the marble woman retrieving water from the well will stand in mock horror as her young beau of ebony drops his lute, falls backwards and drowns, all while ballerinas rhythmically sidle out of small doors to leap en pointe and arabesque.

The male patrons squint and ignore the delighted cries of their wives as they move unlit cigars to the side of their mouths and mutter in disbelief about American manufacturing, obtuse in their beliefs the merchandise must be Swiss or Japanese.

Der guf a shvom, di neshomeh a tehom. What they do not understand, what they cannot know, is that the body is a sponge and the soul an abyss. Whatever we perform mechanically in life, we are doomed to perform mechanically in death.

•

VI. Room 209, Cedars Medical Center, Miami Springs, 1962

"Did you call Sammy?"

"Nah." Max looks out the window, such a dazzling view. "Who wants to scare their own child for no reason? I'll wait to hear the test results from the doctor first, if I should have the surgery. Eli?"

"Yes."

"If something should happen, Eli, I put your name down on the forms."

“Eh.” Eli shakes his head emphatically. “Now you’re just being melodramatic. Come on, we play. I’ll let you pick, white or black queen?”

Eliyahu tries to let his friend have an upper hand, but, no matter, Max can’t follow a simple strategy, and Eli ends up taking rook after bishop after knight.

“More brutal than a drunk Cossack,” Max jokes, lifting a pawn from the pile of dead soldiers stacking up in front of him.

“You, to make such jokes,” Eli says. “What do you want? I give you every opportunity, but you refuse. Eh.” Eli waves his hand in mock disgust. “There’s no sport in this.”

“Well, you are the one who twisted my arm into learning how to play chess in the first place, remember?”

“What, you are going to bring up the golf lessons again? I did you a favor. No strategy to golf.”

“Strategy? Who cares about strategy?” Max presses the button to lower his bed and looks up at the ceiling. “I wanted to drive around in a little cart, wear plaid pants, and drink all day.”

“I saved you from a life of sunburn and misery out there, Max Moskovitch. You should be thanking me. That country club! What a place? A dining hall filled with Americans putting mayonnaise on their pastrami sandwiches.” Eli shakes his head. “No strategy to golf. It would have made you soft.”

Max moves his wrist, trying to ease a small air bubble caught in the tubing of the intravenous needle, a little blood backing up in the line.

“Eli?”

“What?”

“I’m counting on you.”

“Of, course. When have I ever let you down?” Eli turns away and mutters, “Besides, apparently, being the greatest road block to your eternal happiness when I stopped you from improving your golf game.”

“Eli. Don’t let me become a turnip.”

Eli looks sharply at his friend. “What are you talking about? So, you’re slowing down a little in the brain. Chess has never been your strong suit, Max. You’re right, you’re right, you probably should have taken up golf.”

“No. Eli. Him.” Max points to the neighboring bed, to the half curtain that exposes the slight mechanical rise and fall of a stranger’s chest. “It’s going to be up to you, Eli. I don’t trust Sammy to make the right choice.”

Eli walks over to the windowsill and pours a glass of water for his friend. Outside the ocean unfurls, a dropped spool of thread.

If I could, I would warn Max. Eli loves him too much. Max, his only living friend, the only one left who tolerates Eli’s brusque manner and who never judges when Eli drinks his tea like the men did in the old country, with a sugar cube clenched between his teeth and slurping it out of his saucer. Max, who has stood with his pants rolled up to the knees in the warm waters of Luzanovka, who knows what the steps to the Opera House look like in Odessa and knows what it means to wait in the port nearby, to be sick on boat, to travel alone. Max wasn’t with us in Kishinev that day, but it is enough.

If I could I would bend over and whisper in the sick man’s ear just as my Eli’s back is turned. “You should be careful what you ask for, Max Moskovitch,” I’d warn him. “Maybe not what you ask for, but who you do the asking of.”

VII. Kishinev, 1903

The Quarter stood in the in the fourth district, isolated from the wide, smooth streets of the newer parts of the city. Our crooked lanes had names that changed depending on whom you asked and addresses that started and stopped with little reason, managing to befuddle even our own horse-drawn cabbies.

As a small child I would poke my head out through the attic window of our home and look down the spindly pathways of my neighborhood below. I could almost sense the past centuries unfolding along our bumpy flagstone.

Perhaps at one time a marauding band of Cossacks on a raid for spices traipsed over our cobblestones, leaving the dust of their boot prints behind. If I listened carefully on a quiet afternoon, I could hear the echo of the stampeding horse hooves of the Tartar's army, hear the swoosh of heads rolling as they galloped past villagers with their swords drawn. No matter how the years scrubbed down the stonework, the invisible bloodstains of history remained.

As a small child these visions came on me like a feeling and left me with an unnamed apprehension too large for my childish mind to fully comprehend. I suppose I should be thankful that despite my vivid imaginings of the past, I never got glimpses of our future. I never saw how our own neighbors would one day run up and down our lane ripping all the window frames from their foundations, taking axes to every door and pane, dragging our mattress out into the street to shred the burlap with their hands, looking for our heaps of supposed gold hidden there.

Can places have memories and call to them a repeat of past crimes? A home's very brick and mortar seeking out sick comfort by the reenactments of brutality that can't be overcome,

only relived again and again? A new atrocity every so many years spin of fate's wagon wheel? I have come to believe that places, like people, can get trapped in the time of their first demise.

I wonder how I would have felt as a small child had I known that feathers from our desecrated beds would one day in spring rise up on the wind, fill our secret courtyards, light on treetops in drifts. Snow down from above in spirals that spun spring into winter. How men would burn what was left of our orchards, spit in our bread, and slam pipes across our kneecaps, pausing only long enough to rape us and fill our mouths and split bellies with those same feathers ripped from our own beds.

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VIII. Limbo

Adonai. Elohim. Tzevaot. I could go on. There are seven holy names for God, and umpteen less holy ones. In Yiddish we say, *Aibishter*, "Most High." In Hebrew *Shekhinah* means "To Dwell," and refers to the manifestation of the Lord descending to dwell among us. In the Talmud it is written *Pereq ha-Shalom*. The name of God is Peace. *HaMakom* literally translates to the place, and speaks to the omniscience of our Lord through all of existence. *HaMakom yenachem etchem betoch sh'ar aveilei Tziyon V'Yerushalayim*⁸. The Place will comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. The place will comfort you. What place? Supposedly, all places. God is all places.

Eh, given what I've seen, I no longer subscribe to the comfort of place, of the idea of Elohim. Yet I tell myself one needs things to study in order to pass time, and the only papers

⁸ Traditional greeting offered to mourners as comfort

here consist of what Eliyahu salvaged from the ashes of the rabbi's study in the back of the looted temple before he fled Kishinev, so these things I read. I tell myself I do so with no faith. I tell myself that now, here, only darkness has substance, weight. Just as tears cloud the eyes, darkness brings grief and sin into the world. Darkness permeates the veil that hides the beasts that men are. Though I will admit despite my greater reasoning, some days the veil lifts. There faith still is.

I've spent my time perusing the usual rabbinical paper scraps, mainly writings of the Talmudic scholars who sat around all day arguing the length of God's nose down to the last centimeter but also several among the scrolls containing what, I believe, amounts to the forgotten apocrypha. As a woman, who am I to take such study seriously? Psha, I jest. Do you think I ascribe to that rhetoric? Though on occasion I do like to imagine the old *Chassidim*⁹, how they would gnash their teeth and tear at their *peyos*¹⁰ if they knew their precious lost books, probably long assumed desecrated, ended up being some girl's bedtime stories.

Most of the documents I've stumbled upon consist of translations of old Aramaic, the revelations of the secret of the word. Explanations for how to safely speak the hidden name of God: the formulation names, the *Notarikon*, *Temura* and *Gematria*, as well as the many-numbered names. Most important of all the *Tetragrammaton*, outlining the secrets that supposedly allowed the ancients to perform miracles. I haven't come across any Moses-level splitting-of-the-sea miracles. More along the lines of how to separate the spirit, which is the mind of the soul, in order to allow the body to walk through twenty-one days in a day, a primer for creating a loophole in time. Could come in useful, I suppose.

⁹ A member of a Jewish mystic movement founded in the 18th century in eastern Europe by Rabbi Baal Shem Tov.

¹⁰ Side locks worn by religious men

Before you ask, yes, I've recited the liturgy over and over, read the *Sepher Rezial Hemelach*, the supposed texts of the angel Rezial as given to man that lift the veil. I've tried imploring the heavens to help me escape this fate, and yes, I'm still here. Maybe the scribes and various translators recorded lies, or maybe the old mystics were right and girls can't practice *Kabbalah*. Most likely, as I've come to conclude, since my spirit has long since left my soul and my body long ago buried, these types of miracles just don't work when you're already dead. So, instead, I record these, my own papers.

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IX. Intensive Care Unit, Cedars Hospital, Miami Springs, 1962

Eli heats up a can of tomato soup in his small kitchen when the phone rings, dragging him out into the night. Good to his word, Max, that old fool, wrote the name Elijah Solomon as his only next of kin.

On this floor of the hospital glass rooms like large aquariums line the hallway Eli walks, but these rooms come with no ocean view. The structure gives little in the way of privacy to dying. The bodies, tethered to machines, have moved well past the point of shame.

But the souls on this floor of the hospital exist everywhere, their spirits shaking in fury, filled with abhorrence from the smell of physical rot and antiseptic wash. Frustrated soul-spirits float along the low ceilings, get caught in the centralized air vents, and slam themselves into the windowpanes, literally dying to be let out.

A nurse gets a chair for Eli. She checks the ventilator's monitor and the fluid level in the IV, makes some marks on a chart kept at the foot of the bed, and pulls the curtain to allow Eli

and Max a moment's privacy. Eli smooths down what's left of his friend's hair, a thin white halo.

"You fool," he whispers to Max, who no longer hears. "I always open with the Queens Gambit because I know you so well. You are nothing without your queen, just pawns scrambling to get across a board. And now you want to leave me? But it's just like our games, you always let me take charge."

He looks over his shoulder. Only a janitor emptying a wastepaper basket, the nurses' station otherwise unattended. Eli draws the curtain further closed around Max's bed. He begins to recite.

The metronomic rhythm of the heart machine quickens and an alarm goes off. Nurses run in, yell at Elijah to get out, someone shouts for the doctor on duty. Not for them to bother. Max is already gone.

It is easy for Eli to slip out in the tumult. He needn't sign the forms now, and he needn't face the wrath of Max's children, Sammy or the girl, Rebecah, for taking such decisions out of their hands. He can attend services, sit in the back of a congregation among the weeping, and cover his head as piously as any other man. More importantly, Eli has what he wants now. And in some ways, so do I.

•

X. Kishinev, 1903

A police officer sat across the street from our house on a curb, waiting for orders from the Minister of the Interior and the Chief of Secret Police to hold back the crowds. The only orders that finally arrived were instructions to mark chalk crosses on the Christian houses near the fourth district, so the rioters would know whom to spare. A man, a good neighbor, knocked on our door and urged us to board the doors.

My mother hunched over, holding me as we crouched down while our neighbor Dvoire paced the shuttered front room. My mother alternated between hissing at Dvoire to stop pacing lest they should hear us, and biting down on a leather purse to stop her own cries. My father had gone out to find my sister.

Across the street looters used hammers to splinter the neighbor's door like tinder sticks, the house where Eli rents a small attic room. In the workroom there they found Grienschpoun, the glazier, dragging him covered in soot and sobbing out from where he hid at the back of his kiln. He pleaded as the men ripped at his vest and shook out his pockets, angered nothing of value could be found. A few took axes to his wall of beautiful blown glass, colored cups for weddings and stained glass windows from the temple, while several others dragged his wife, Vayna, down into the basement among the pots and pans.

Then one man— no, a boy really— held up a knife and brought it down hard into the side of Grienschpoun's neck. With his blood the men began to cheer. An officer stood in the broken doorway and lit a cigarette, scratched the back of his neck and walked on.

Did you know Kishinev means hidden springs? Irony, no? There is nothing hidden that shall not be made known. Do you know who really split that boy's throat and left him in a ditch, that young man whose death under the care of our physicians brought the accusation of blood libel and the slaughter into our homes? The real murderer was no Jew, but a member of

Krushevan's own family to whom the boy owed a gambling debt. Publishing such lies in the *Bessarabet* helped Pavel Krushevan kill a hundreds of birds with one stone.

With the sight of bloodshed my mother got down on all fours and indicated for me to stay quiet and follow suit. We crept our way to the back staircase. At the foot of the steps Dvoire grabbed my mother's arm.

"That was Mihail," she whispered. "Mihail Tiranul."

My mother brushed Dvoire off and waved her hand in front of her face to hush her.

"Mihail Tiranul, Olena's son," Dvoire continued, louder. "It was he with the knife. That stabbed Grienschpoun."

My mother got up and took small shuffling steps up the unlit stairs. I followed her, clenching at ties on the back of her dress, pretending that if I could keep squeezing exactly at the place where the knot of her apron strings met then we would be passed over, saved. Dvoire pushed past me and seized my mother again, this time wrenching her around. In the half-light of the staircase even I recognized the look of madness in Dvoire's face.

"Don't you understand? That was Olena's son with the knife. Our old neighbor, Olena. Her son," she hissed.

My mother tried to press her hand against Dvoire's mouth, but the woman bit down. My mother cried out and pulled back her hand, her palm bloody. We stumbled, tried to shake her off and continue up towards the attic. Footsteps outside stopped by the threshold of our front door.

"I held that boy when he was a baby," Dvoire continued. "The boy who killed Grienschpoun. I held him. Don't you understand? I was his neighbor. His mother and I, we were friends. Don't you see what this mean, Aliyana? *We are already all dead.*"

We heard the hammers and axes first before the voice in Russian yelled from the front room.

•

XI. Limbo

I place a quilt across Max's lap as the kettle whistles. Poor dear, he looks so rumpled in his hospital gown with his soft white hair now forever in perpetuity stuck straight up like a bird's crest.

"Sholem aleykhem un bagrisn." I greet him in the language of our youth in an attempt to ease the transition.

Max looks around the tiny kitchenette, taking in the worn rattan, the rusted teakettle. "You? You are the Angel of Death? The Angel of Death speaks Yiddish, resides in a hovel and dresses like a girl from Dnipropetrovsk?"

I had forgotten about the wings and the halo of daisies. I take off my harness fold the costume over the back of the chair. "I'm a far cry from the Angel of Death, Max." I could sigh. He's right, all these years and they are pretty ratty. It has been a long, long time since I felt the need to impress anyone. Who follows formalities when, after what feels like a century, the first one to finally drop by for a visit happens to be a bit wrinkly and dressed in a gown that doesn't exactly cover his tuckus?

Max uses his index finger to root around his ear, as if clearing out his ear could change what his eyes see. "Even in a morphine dream I would have expected something a little grander than this," he says, watching me the way he watches television, with his mouth slightly open.

I can't help but laugh. The card-playing women shout through the cracked floorboards, startling Max. One babbles something at the other in Roma. They wonder who this strange man is to me. I can tell, they are not going to like it very much that I have company now.

Max clasps the armrests of his chair and rocks himself. I remember when I first arrived, the years in addled madness. To take in all this creates such a shock to the system, and we must take it slow.

How to explain to him who I am? Where we are? How to explain that I am hardly the Angel of Death, just Eli's once betrothed?

"They're Roma." I explain in English. He stares at me. "The women underneath us, they are Roma gypsies. You meet them eventually, Hilda and her sister. They are very unhelpful though. I don't even understand why he brought them here to keep me company, since I had to figure most things out on my own."

"So?" Max asks. Eli always did have a soft spot for people who got straight to the point. I pour him a cup of tea.

"What's this? Invisible poison?"

"You're dead, Max. Poison can't hurt you now."

He picks up the china cup and turns it upside down. "But, the cup. It's empty?"

I sigh. "I know. I just like the ritual. We all have our rituals here. Downstairs they play cards and pretend to drink vodka. I sit up here and have my tea."

Max shakes his head. "I'd rather a pretend martini myself, if I get a choice? Tell me, Angel of Death, why did I not pass straight into heaven? I always hoped for the Kingdom of God to be something a little more..." He looks around and shrugs. "Done up? Like the Biltmore Hotel. Have you seen the Biltmore?" He sighs. "Don't make them like that anymore."

“Max. This is not the Kingdom of God. I am certainly not the Angel of Death.”

“It’s not like I wanted pearly gates or anything.” He continues, ignoring me. “An elegant room, or even a something like a large, never-ending golf course. That would have been a nice touch, no?”

He shakes his head slowly, puffs out his cheeks and tries holding his breath. After several minutes he gives up, letting out a small cough and a sob.

Of course, it would be nice to have a guest a little more excited to be here. But this must be such a let down for a man expecting some sort of pleasant afterlife. I walk over to the portal window and touch the heavy folds of the cloth drapes that cover it. I need a moment to figure out how to prepare him for what must be shown next.

•

XII. Kishinev, 1903

Every year the bereaved light *yahrtzeit* candles¹¹ for us, the dead, and recite the Mourners *Kaddish*¹². I feel each lit wick like a physical pull, even here, bodiless in the realm of in-between places, and each one stabs at me, just a little.

I don’t have the heart to go back into detail of all this. Know that we did manage to get all the way up to the attic, the men initially distracted from seeing us by what they were doing to

¹¹ Mourner’s candles, literally translates to soul candle.

¹² The prayer said at funerals and on the anniversary of deaths to express the sanctity of God and the yearning to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Dvoire. From the attic we heard them coming and scratched our way through the thatching to the roof. Also know that when one falls any great distance, a thin scum of dirty feathers lining the street below is not enough to save one's neck. Let me move onto generalities. This, from the article that Eli keeps in one of the drawers of his workbench:

“The anti-Jewish riots in Kishinev, Bessarabia are worse than the censor will permit to publish. There was a well laid-out plan for the general massacre of Jews on the day following the Orthodox Easter. The mob was led by priests, and the general cry, ‘Kill the Jews’, was taken up all over the city. The Jews were taken wholly unaware and were slaughtered like sheep. The dead numbered 120 and the injured about 500. The scenes of horror attending this massacre are beyond description. Babies were literally torn to pieces by the frenzied and bloodthirsty mob. The local police made no attempt to check the reign of terror. At sunset the streets were piled with corpses and wounded. Those who could make their escape fled in terror, and the city is now practically deserted of Jews.”¹³

So, after three days of riots, the police finally stood up, stubbed out their cigarettes and shook out their legs, then went about enforcing the Minister of the Interior's official dispatch.

Broken men stood in broken doorways and listened to the new decree that instructed any man or woman left who could walk to clean up the evidence of the crimes committed against them and their families by nightfall or be imprisoned. Board up the broken doors and windows, sweep up the smashed crockery, and pick up the ripped pinafores of children. Men went to the well, threw bucket after bucket of water down the lanes of their streets, tried to wash away the stains.

Elijah dug bodies out from the rubble along side the other men, wrapped the naked dead in prayer shawls. He took only a few things with him when he left Kishinev to never return. A pocket watch he picked out of the broken pieces of his tinker's cart, as many of the texts that did not burn from the temple that could fit into a satchel, and my soul. That which he wrenched from my body in its last breath.

•

¹³ “Jewish Massacre Denounced”, New York Times, April 28, 1903, p.6.

XIII. A Bench by the Ocean, Miami Springs, 1957

Eli used to close the shop for lunch and meet Max every Tuesday at noon from Sunny Coves, Max's condo living community, over on Shoreline Drive. The two men would walk across the highway to a strip of beach lined with a few park benches.

"Eli?"

"Hmm, what?" Eli moved his Queen smack into the center of the board, right out into the battlefield and rubbed his hands together and chuckled. "Oy, that move should be cause for your concern, my friend."

Max watched the tide, well accustomed to losing these games.

"Do you miss it?"

Eli looked up, shrugs. "Miss what?"

"Kishinev. Odessa. The Black Sea. Don't you ever feel *benkshaft*, the homesickness? Are you never the least bit nostalgic?"

"What's to miss? Eli sounded like he could spit. "The lack of indoor plumbing? The cold in winter that crept across the floorboards to rub itself up your shins with its icy grip?" Eli shivered. "Eh. No thank you."

"I miss the hills sometimes."

"You? You're like the happiest man in Miami Springs, Florida, U.S.A. Your dance card is always full, and you love a good buffet. You were made for this place."

Max smiled. "I miss a real tobacconist. A good hand rolled cigarette from that one shop, in Odessa, oy, what was his name? Osip?" He holds out his hand like he's holding a cigarette, and looked at Eli. "Oh. You never went into Odessa much as a boy, no?"

“I was never a smoker, Max. Is not good for the health.”

Max ignored him, looked back to the sea, continued. “I remember ditching school to go steal apples from the orchards. I can remember glimpses of our neighbor, Beylke bas-Eliahu, through her kitchen window. I swear, she flashed her breasts when she kneaded dough. Oh, she knew I looked.” Max laughs. “I kept my pockets filled with candy bought with money I stole from my mother’s purse, waiting for the opportunity to woo some young thing, win her heart, but never had that kind of courage.”

“You yeshiva boys had it so tough. It sounds more like you miss being a hooligan and petty theft. *Tse vos men is gevoint in der yugend, azoi tut men oif der elte*, that which is practiced in youth will be pursued in old age. So, I see it was a good thing you became an insurance salesman, Max. Now, are you going to move, or should you like that I move for you while you continue this waltz down memory lane?”

Max coughed. They hadn’t yet found the spots yet that have spread across his lungs and pancreas, like the spots of mold that had eaten away at the photo album Max still kept in a suitcase in the back of his closet, that he once tried to show Eli, but Eli curtly refused to look.

“I miss the hills sometimes, Eli. This city is so flat.”

Eli paused his hand mid move. “I miss the tomatoes and the watermelons.”

“Aha! So you do miss some things.”

“Who wouldn’t miss tomatoes that grew to be the size of your Beylke’s breasts?”

Max grinned. “Why did you never marry, Eli?”

Eli placed his rook down and took his pocket watch out from underneath his sweater, flipping it in his hand. “Because, Max, a bad peace is better than a good war. And marriage with someone like me would have been a good war.” He put the watch away without looking at the

time. “Lucky you, Max. You get the pleasure of keeping me and my warring nature company, instead.”

Max grinned and slapped Eli on the back. “*An alter freint iz besser vi a nei’eh tsvai.*” One old friend is better than two new.

I could see then what drew Eli to this particular man in a city filled with Yiddish speaking Émigrés. Max was what his younger brother Yakov might, just maybe, might have been like as an old man had he lived. A tenuous link, a light spirit that refused to see evil in the world, and coppery eyes that deepened color by the sea.

•

XIV. Limbo

“You tell the Lord I never did so much wrong.” Max frowns at me. “Even as a young man. When I was drafted into the war, in the army I never even took so much as a crust of bread that was not offered willingly. When I married I never cheated on Goldi. For nearly fifty years. I never cheated on Goldi. I loved her, mind you, but it wasn’t like I didn’t have temptations.” His shoulders begin to shake. “Fifty three years together. Why am I not beside her now in the Kingdom of Heaven?”

He looks up at me, eyes colorless in a room with no color. I realize I must appear to him as so young, even though technically I’m a few years older than he.

“I’ve been offered ways to get rich. Remember those investments that one guy, what was his name? Mikhail? Well, I said no.” He’s defiant now, running quickly through the stages of self-grief. “I knew it was too good to be true, that someone would get screwed, and, pardon me,

Angel, but I lived my life in such a way that I was never the man doing the screwing. And when I did first start making money, I gave to the poor. Every year I fasted, I atoned, I paid my taxes. I paid for trees to be planted in the Holy Land. So I have forsaken my daughter, but, she, she left me first. And do I get a postcard from her? Would it kill her to have tried to contact me?"

He thinks he's pleading his case to one who has power to change this predicament. I don't want him to start sifting through his life, pouring over the regrets and the losses. It will happen naturally, but not just yet. I recall how highly unsettling it can be, and here, I only had fourteen short years on earth to revisit.

"No, no, Max, you've done nothing wrong." I want to put my hand on his, but I can't. It's entirely too human a gesture, and we are no longer flesh, no matter how we appear as to each other. "You just let the wrong man into your life." Max stays seated at the rattan table as I get up and go over to open the curtains that cover the portal window.

We both look out at a large wooden table covered in tools, various files and a small saw for cutting thin sheets of gold, needle-nose pliers and a jeweler's loop. Up close, the leather bound travel chess set besides a bowl of soup. We watch Eli's hand move a white pawn, pause, and then move the black knight. The image swings in and out.

Stunned into silence Max looks to me in disbelief, gestures to his neck and pats a pretend pocket in a non-existent vest, indicating Eliyahu's pocket watch.

"Where are we, Angel?"

"Max. You've already figured it out. We are in the pocket watch. The one he keeps on a chain around his neck."

"How? How can this be? Are we dug up from the dead?"

I wish I knew. I have stacks of papers, a few old books, and no clue how to explain what Eli's done, what his trespasses into the unnatural truly are. At first I use to hear his voice, talking to me. I would wail to be let out. Ask as Max did, why was I not in the kingdom of heaven? But over time the soft intonations of his speech faded, replaced by the endless ticking of the watch's hidden springs. All I know is that I miss the sound of human conversation and birdsongs at sunset. And now Max will too.

Through the portal window night comes on, and we watch together as Eli walks down the stairs from his apartment into the empty shop. It's quiet now. He needn't turn on the overhead lights. The marble and wood glow of their own accord, refracting against polished brass and gold fill. He opens a cupboard door along the back wall.

Inside, a set of clocks, not for sale, not constructed to delight. He lights a candle and begins his liturgy.

"Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'mei rabbaw..." A great temple will be built that will house the world-to-come, when the place dwells within us, and the dead will be raised to eternal life.

In the midnight hour a multitude of bells rise up in chorus, funeral bells, baritone bells, bells like frogs croaking, bells like locusts. A door slides up, and dogs with snapping jaws chase a man and woman round and round and through a small forest built underneath the clock face. Beside it a different clock that rotates wherein a man hides in a glaziers shop in front of a kiln and sobs with his hands over his head, another man raping a woman behind the kiln, her mouth the shape of a perfect, empty scream. A clock built like a port with ships pulling out to sea. A clock wherein a woman stabs and cuts the tongue out of the mouth of a child at the bottom of a twisted cobbled street. Villagers, at the top of the lane, cleverly designed to appear smaller in the distant perspective, holding torches aloft over the Roman numeral XII as the two hands meet.

And a new clock now. One upon which is carved an old man crying over a patient in a hospital bed.

Eliyahu ben Avraham-Solomonovich. Elijah Abram Solomon. Eli, my love. Is it that you create to preserve what you could not save? Please know that I forgave you decades ago for not being there to catch me. So much terror everywhere when the feathers fell on us like snow. No boy of nineteen, not even one self-schooled in illicit ways of nemoncrancy, could have prevented what happened. Could have saved us all.

Oh, Eli, trapped in this hidden place somewhere earthly but not of earth, we are no longer love but have become your demons. Has the time not come yet for you to release us now? Purge us from time and memory. Let the spirit, the secret of the word, us, all go in peace.

MY LIFE INSIDE THE WRECKING YARD

I have watched a kaleidoscope's worth of viewing different types of ceilings (tin, tile, asbestos to name a few) from the supine perspective of many varied psychoanalyst's couches (leather, velvet and fire-proofed industrial corduroy as examples) while I prattle and chortle on about the memory-waves, all in order to come that one very simple realization: I am the by-product of a complex marriage between a recalcitrant woman and a tyrannical man.

A particular type of willful obstinacy, therefore, complicates my DNA and sickens my spleen. A double helix strand that rebelled from its original ladder, split, and went south. It's all in the wiring, I suppose. But I have come to learn you can't be both a Rebel and a Yankee inside. It catches up to you. It takes you down.

The doctor leans over me filling up his hypodermic and agreeing with my assessment. "These things happen sometimes, kid." He gives the needle a little flick and shrugs his shoulders in a them's-the-breaks kind of way. "Now, if you could please stop flopping around down there on the floor and end this little fish-on-dry-land-jazz-hands charade." He really must give me this one little pinprick and get on with his day. One of his many needles. A very needley man, this doc.

I can't stop. It's a real curse, having the fits again, locked down here on the ground trapped in the horizontal hurly burly. "Control yourself," he commands and taps his foot, glancing at an expensive looking watch. Finally he gives up, sighs. "Your choice, kid," he says

and whistles sharply. Four guards, real hairy knuckle types dressed white coats and latex gloves enter and flank him. “I will give you to the count of ten,” he warns. “One, two...”

Hold it. This doesn’t feel right to me. I know what’s coming, and despite this prescient knowledge, or perhaps because of it, I prefer to add my own personal flourish to these scenes before they too crash out to sea. I close my eyes, and this time when I reopen them the hairy knuckles wear red masks and black leather gloves. The doctor practices flamenco steps around my flailing body in his toreador cape, beautifully embroidered in silk with scenes of men stabbing bulls and women dancing.

My body jerks on the cold tile, every spasm causing me to punch at my own face, thwack, thwack. Funny, my father used to overpower me in a similar way. Straddle me and grab my arm and make me hit myself, thwack, thwack, and then ask: “Why do you keep hitting yourself, huh? Huh?” Thwack, thwack. “Gahh, you are such a freak, child. Stop hitting yourself.” Thwack, thwack.

I want to let this nice doctor know that I’m not trying to waste his time. I suffer the indignity of Saint Vitus Dance, or severe chorea, in medical terms. He should be more understanding; seizures are a known side effect of the memory-waves that crash about in my brain. But then it’s hard to argue a reasonable defense wearing papier-mâché bull’s horns and with a gag twisted in one’s mouth.

The doctor gives a small, polite cough, though I feel he reaches ten rather fast. The guardsmen take off their gloves and corral me into a corner, throw a burlap bag over my head, and stagger as a single unit to lift me up onto the table. They struggle against my pummeling arms and legs, my body choosing to fight to the death even as I am resigned, in order to really get a nice, tight sailor knot with their lassos.

Needle in. Curtain drops. House lights off. Scene fades to black.

The mother disliked a lot of things. Like cat hairs on the couch, fabric that lacked swish, or a cracked kitchen window. She worried that something would get in through the broken pane and reveal to the world the dirty upholstery, the worn sole of a hand-me-down shoe, blue bruises like a charm bracelet around a broken wrist. The mother disliked a lot of things.

Mainly, she disliked the father.

In a rare good mood, the father played with the children out back, put them into an old wheelbarrow that he maneuvered around the dirt yard while making noises like a train.

Come, ride the rusty, red chariot, children. Come ride.

“They’ll need a goddamn tetanus shot, you fool,” the mother yells through the crack in the window. But the father pretends not to hear her, not over the sound of the children’s great joy, squealing “hooray” from the nook of the filthy wagon, two pairs of small hands waving in the air.

“Who’s the king of the castle?” asks the father as he navigates the chariot over tiny hills and valleys of the garden.

“You are,” the children cry out in response. “You are the king.”

“Come back here you little bastards,” the mother yells from her place behind the window. “There is lamb on the table.”

Whhheeeee. Down the garden path they fly, every small bump sending them up, loop-de-loop, catching air. A Ferris wheel of a ride. Or at least it feels like that until they land.

“Boom,” says our father and dumps us out of the wheelbarrow onto the road at the end of the garden path.

“Boom,” my sister and I respond and lift up our arms for him to pick us up.

“Boom,” says our father, and he slams the gate shut.

“Boom,” my sister and I whisper to each other and wonder if he’s ever coming back.

I’m sitting in the now defunct craft room with my case manager, the lovely Jamilia, who has asked me for the five hundredth time why my assigned doctor says I refuse treatment and tend to obfuscate. Easy answer: because I am a spinner of yarns and keeper of tales. Duh.

The thing about the craft room here is that the patients used to be able to enjoy crafts in it. At least I did, before they got rid of anything that could be used as a poking device. Liability reasons. Well, that and because somebody poked out somebody else’s eye. Sad really, I had gotten quite good with a crochet needle. Now only one potted fern remains on a shelf by the barred window, most of its fronds shed long ago. Which is crazy, really, because it’s a silk plant, but it still managed to find a way to die in here. And don’t even get me started on the color they painted the walls in here, a depressing shade of puce.

Jamilia takes a drag on her cigarette. “I know you well enough to know you are capable of some lucidity. You can speak to me about any trauma you would like, but you know that in order to help yourself, we need to talk about the incident that got you here.”

I adore Jamilia. I love Jamilia. Honestly, the thought of her fills up any decent part of my day and certainly fills up the decent part of my flawed soul. Screw having a mother and a whore complex, she is like Venus and Diana.

Every morning I follow the same routine. After eating my allotted bowl of cereal I search her out, walking with determination past the women and men who wander into/stare at walls, everyone dressed in the regulation pajamas with mandated Velcro closures. The theory is you can't strangle yourself or another with Velcro (though God knows, it's not because enough people haven't tried).

I pass the open entrance to the community room, where the slack-jaws sit unseeing in the bolted down chairs and nurses blare their favorite soaps at full volume to cover up the white noise of the patients' low moans. I especially hurry past the quiet room, with its one-way window placed high up in the door, trying not to hear the ker-plunk, ker-plunk of a detainee bouncing his body against the rubber walls like a human pinball. We've all been there, and it seems impolite to stare.

My goddess enters the ward through sliding steel doors. She carries her clipboard and keyless entry pass like the huntress' bow and arrow. Over six feet tall, always with a different silk scarf around her neck and with her dark skin glowing underneath her white coat. Small gold hoops adorn earlobes that I long to nibble, but with no wedding ring on a certain finger. When she stands near me in her sensible shoes and white stockings I smell gardenias, and it helps temper the stench of bleach scrubbed piss that permeates the corners of this place.

Jamilia, my special keeper of the key pass, lets me into the now defunct craft room and looks the other way when I read a contraband book or ask for a verboten pen (too pokey). In fact, she encourages me to try to do some writing. Maybe I am crazy, but I sense a connection when she hands me a notepad, an electric power surge of sorts when our fingers graze. I think she just might admire the cut of my jib. Hell, I've seen my face in the reflective coating of the one-way

mirrors, and even in Velcro closure pajamas with snap bottoms I'm still not without my charms, erratic though they may be.

We talk while she sneaks one of her flavored cigarettes, the kind with pink paper tips and gold filter, over by the barred window. I watch her bring it to her lips and French inhale. She shifts her legs and a stocking slips down a bit by the hem of her dress, revealing a sliver of kneecap and thigh. Nice. I'm a kneecaps kind of guy.

Jamilia looks at me and sighs. She mentions that the nurses and doctors complain that I distract the other patients during group therapy by going off on tangents that do not serve the therapeutic dynamic of the community as a whole. I don't know. Must we always dredge the past for dead bodies? Can we not sometimes practice the art of conversation? Exchange pleasantries as we speak to the quality of weather, or discuss the intricacies of wallpaper patterns and cricket scores?

She blows smoke rings. "I know you well enough to know you are capable of lucidity."

"Fine," I reply and reach for a cherry cigarette. Filthy habit.

"You do know that I've only been pretending all these years, don't you?" I arch my eyebrow at her, giving her my best devil-may-care expression. "Madam, I'm no madman."

"Well, some days you do a pretty convincing job." She arches an eyebrow back at me.

"You and I, we could be married," I continue. "I'll build you a house with a pond out in the yard."

"Sadly, no, you and I cannot be married. No ponds."

"One good reason, please?"

"I'll give you two: first, because you're a patient where I work, so it would be unethical. Secondly, well, secondly, stop getting off topic. Tell me what happened that day."

I notice that she does not say because she could never love me, and I want to try my best to please her, so I close my eyes and will the memory-waves to come.

I can still see the car careening around the corner, a blue Chrysler with fins, leather interior torn and a headlight out. I knew that car, it lacked seatbelts and the antenna had a coat hanger duct taped to it even though only one station came in on the radio. I remember how a blue Chrysler with fins sped around the crook of the blind bend, moving so fast that it angled up on two wheels and hovered precariously there.

My mother threw a saucepan of boiling water on the cat for stealing food off the counter. The cat dashed out underneath the garden gate, ran towards the road yowling its head off. “Evil crept in,” she screamed after it. I shouted at her that is not the cat’s proper name, and went after the animal, trying to warn it. Instead, frightened by my gesturing, it dashed further away from me, bolted into the street, racing toward the car.

The blue Chrysler with fins swerved. The impact of the cat’s body hitting the pavement sounded like a water balloon exploding, its belly splitting open, innards spilled out on the lane. Snakes. My sister screamed, red blood on a white dress. The masked driver stopped for a moment, looked back in the rearview mirror before driving on, wheels throwing dust in its wake.

I fell to the ground. My mother picked me up and carried me back into the house, dumping me on my cot, locking the door from the outside. A terrible wailing, like a chorus of grieving feline widows, grew louder and louder, until I clamped my hands to my ears, but that only made the banshee shrieks louder still. I thought the caterwauling must have come from the

neighborhood cats, a ragged chorus singing about loss. It continued for several hours more before I realized the howling was actually coming out of me, and I stopped screaming.

When I finish Jamilia looks at me. “You’re one fucked up customer. Is that what you want me to say?” she asks.

Stop my beating heart, my love.

“You have a visitor scheduled today. Your sister. She has been petitioning to get you released into outpatient housing. Would you like that?”

There is power in the beauty of the gap between her front teeth. I could dive into that gap, just live out my remaining days swimming around her mouth like a goldfish.

“And leave my sweet Jamilia?” I ask right before a coughing fit from exhaling a drag of my cigarette. Suave. “Never. Who would watch out for you here amongst all these crazies?” Besides, my sister’s even crazier than I.

Jamilia pulls a manila file folder from her clipboard and looks through it for a moment. Closing it, she sighs. “No one will ever agree to the petition, nor overturn the initial diagnosis and test results to qualify you to be released on good behavior, at least not unless we can get a doctor to sign off on your case.” She looks tired, and I feel bad for her. “That will never happen unless you try. I want you to try, if for nothing else, then try for me. Go back to that day with the car.”

But when I close my eyes the memory-waves will no longer come. Instead, all I see is Jamilia and I in an empty ballroom, she in her stockings and chiffon, and I looking dapper in a fine wool suit.

Me (playful): Shall we dance?

Jamilia (serious): No. Keep talking to me. Try to tell me what happened.

Me (offering out hand): Dance with me first. I'm in the mood for romance.

Jamilia (shaking her head): I can't do that.

Me (bowing): Just one dance. Please?

Jamilia (relenting a little): Maybe. But first tell me how what happened that day.

Me (sincere): I'm trying. Really, I am.

Jamilia (tired): Let's try again. Why don't you close your eyes? Sometimes that seems to help.

The man's birth took place early spring, at a midwife's cottage somewhere along the seashore. Now he lives far from the ocean but still hears waves crashing in his ears. The doctors refer to it as a side effect of the medication, they even have a fancy name for it, but then the doctors have many fancy names. The man intuitively knows that it's more a matter of cause and effect than side effect, that memories cause the noise when they rush in and out of his mind like the tide. Even when the man tips his head and bangs on his ear he cannot dislodge them, cannot drown out the incessant humming of his memories.

As a baby he had an unusually large head that got stuck in the mother's delicate pelvic opening. The midwife had to yank the kid out with forceps. She also, rather ungraciously, used her teeth to gnaw at the umbilical cord, and inquired if she might keep the placenta for her collection. The mother cursed at her and fainted.

The mother came to and accepted the newborn child into her arms, cooing. Shooed the incompetent midwife away. Whispered to the baby that he was her little treasure chest.

The sister, eavesdropping, called out with consternation, “Oh, yeah?” from the corner of the room where she played by herself. This must have really gotten her gall. That red-faced thing in her mother’s arms could hardly be worth a bag of marbles. “Then we must bury him back in the sea where he belongs, immediately.” She offered to go find her shovel, abandoned somewhere on the beach while making sandcastles.

“You are going nowhere,” the mother snapped, resting her head back against the pillows and motioning for the midwife, who ran over to dab at her brow with a wet cloth. “Kiss your new brother and make nice.”

My sister crawls up onto the bed beside my mother. She looks at me for the first time, the stinky little intruder, and puckers up, moving in with reluctance, probably resolving to give me just a peck. At the last minute she must have changed her mind, and instead places a big, fat, sloppy kind of kiss, open-mouthed and on my cheek. I feel the sharp pinch of incisors. I begin to wail.

But, then, my sister will tell you I am a born liar.

I think Jamilia seems frustrated when she dismisses me. It’s not my fault. I don’t really control the memory waves or the order in which they arrive. Still her shoulders slump a little as she stubs out her cigarette in the potted fern and glances at her watch, taking her key card out of her white coat pocket and ushering me back into the hall.

I get it. Love can be a real challenge in a place like this. I leave the craft room heading back towards my room, carefully pacing how I walk out of respect for my mother. Step on a crack and I could break her back. The loss of so many people in my life, it makes me dizzy. Too

many circuitous thoughts spin around in my head. A group of three patients jogs past me in an awkward, high-speed kind of shuffle, heads down and bodies bent over at the waist. One collides into me, such is his determination to move forward, and we all fall down. They scamper off like rats as I struggle to get back up, but find I can't fully stand. I clutch my pained heart instead, sliding down the wall until I'm crouching by the floorboards. The hall narrows into a tunnel, like through the viewfinder of a pinhole camera, radiating around the edges. The illumination of the spirit at war with the body.

Shit. I realize I'm getting blinder by the minute and have to crawl on my hands and knees, trying to avoid comatose patients dumped in the hallway, like the poor, dirty-diapered saps could just get up and walk if they just wanted to. Like any of us could just get up and push on through the electrified gate and walk. The hallway gets dimmer and smaller. At this rate I will have to put in a request for a cane.

My bunkmate, Ian, lies on the upper with his sheets drawn over his head. Ian's a real stinker. I'm not being metaphorical here. The man refuses to use the shower room and smells like overripe yeast. He doesn't like Joe, the guy hired to hose us off. There just isn't enough quality help around here to take notice.

"Look on your bed," Ian tells me in a muffled voice from under his covers. I flop down on the thin mattress without taking my slippers off and flip through some junk mail, get to a few postcards. One from a fan of the abnormal insect erotica I publish under the pen name Swollen Foote. She requests I put more pollen into the next bee scene, and I make a mental note. I must

say, it's always very nice to be appreciated for one's art. Under that, a note from my sister, who writes with poor script. It takes me several tries to make it out:

Dear Brother,

*Please, start looking at this world with some clarity.
I really need you to try. I owe it to you, and you owe it to me.*

*Love,
Your Sister*

I toss the card aside and hum to cover the guttural sounds coming from under Ian's sheets as he masturbates with the kind of vigor that can only be described as a sort of insanity. He makes it hard for me to think with all that noise.

"Hey, Ian?" I ask and kick the bunk above me.

He groans in response.

"You want me to tell you a story?"

I can hear him finishing quickly and sitting up. What a pro.

I poke my head out from the side of the bed and make a whistling noise, gesturing to his crotch.

He pulls his hands out of his pants and places them in his lap, twiddling his thumbs. I let him know he is a good boy. If you don't remind Ian he'll walk around all day with one hand down his pants. He'll even keep a hand there during dinner, fending off people from his dessert with a plastic spork clutched in the other.

"One chicken," I begin from memory and Ian joins me in recitation, it being his story after all. "was pale and yellow, and the children called her Buttercup. The other chicken was soft and white. Her name was Little Marigold."

The tale is a Greek tragedy told in three parts wherein a wicked Aunt poisoned Buttercup out of spite and Marigold subsequently died of a broken heart. It ends with the wretched woman

tying a young Ian to a kitchen chair and force-feeding him poulet au vin à la Marigold, with a side of Buttercup liver pâté. We always have a good cry over this. I tell him those birds were damn lucky to have known him.

“No,” Ian whispers, “I was the lucky one.” He pokes at his chest hard enough to bruise. “It was me that was blessed to know the grace of the flock.”

Ian is sobbing uncontrollably by this point. I know I am trying to be both a friend to the sad sack, but that I have an agenda here too. See, I myself can no longer cry about my life, lest I risk the consequences of dislodging the memory-waves and setting off my tinnitus. But I admire a man who can. Sometimes I get a little vicarious relief from a good sob session over Ian’s pain in the way that I have never felt for my own.

After I have dried my eyes I do the kind thing, and distract him immediately afterward. Luckily, much like the chickens he has loved and lost, Ian tends to forget what upsets him from moment to moment.

“How about I get you a snack, Ian?”

“Pudding,” he says and sobs.

“No, it’s too early for dessert. But, maybe I can find some chipped beef and crackers?”

A siren goes off. I realize I’m late for therapy, leap off the cot and shuffle to the door.

“Pudding,” Ian cries after me. “I want pudding.”

I have phrenology three times a week. The doctor, a short man with a round, moon face walks around on his tiptoes, ballerina style. He pulls down a chart with a drawing of a bald man’s

profile on it, the scalp cordoned off into numbered sections, and behind his desk his motto repeatedly flashes, slightly off-kilter, in neon lights. Like so:

Lumps Don't Lie! * Lumps Don't Lie! * Lumps Don't Lie!

Every week he lectures me on the sections of the brain that house human behavior in general and the deviant parts of my head in particular.

“This is Amativeness.” The doctor taps at the chart with his pointer, and the neon glints off his smooth forehead. “Connubial love, yes?”

The chart floats before me and appears like one would see it from the wrong end of a telescope. I nod and mime taking notes with an invisible pen.

“Attachment of the sexes,” he drones on, “invariably play an important role in how we relate to society. In excess this causes a buildup of fluid along the vertebrae and results in licentiousness and obscene behaviors. Sound at all familiar?”

I nod enthusiastically and make my “hmmm, fascinating face” by putting down my imaginary pen and thoughtfully stroking my beard.

“One must watch here for Philoprogenitiveness. Can you say that with me?” He comes over to where I sit and uses the tip of his pointer to make my chin move up and down while I repeat each syllable after him. “Phil-o-pro-gen-i-tive.”

“Parental love,” he cries out and tosses the pointer aside. “Ah, without the fuck-ups in this region of development, where would my industry be?” He turns his back to me to look out a window painted on the wall. I turn in my chair and try to see what he’s looking at, but he whips around and stares expectantly at me like he wants an answer.

I shake my head. I really haven’t a clue.

He shouts at the ceiling, “Without psychopaths how do we know what’s normal? We don’t. Aha, therein lies the rub! The world needs psychopaths, and psychopaths need the world.” With this he dramatically tugs on a string and a banner unfurls over the chart, the words printed backwards:

**ni the anatomy of the brain Conjugal Love inhabits the region
next to Combative & Self Esteem borders on Hope.**

“Do you see now?” he asks, but I can’t read backwards, and again I must shake my head, no. He clucks his tongue and tells me, “That’s because of your deviant nature.” He holds up a large mirror, so that I can make out what it reads:

**In the anatomy of the brain Conjugal Love inhabits the region
next to Combative & Self Esteem borders on Hope.**

A male nurse comes and wraps a towel around my neck and begins to shave my head while the doctor yells over my feeble protests, “You must confront your own abnormal reflection, head on! Head on!” The nurse brushes hair off of my shoulders and gives me a roughhewn piece of wood to hold afterwards, splinters getting in my palm. The Doctor stands behind me and digs at the nodules over my ears. “The Destructive region!” he cries, gesturing at the *Lumps Don’t Lie* sign, which blinks in complicity with the doctor’s sentiments. “Are you sure this is a real mirror? Where’s the other one?” I ask trying to look around, but the doctor holds onto my head too tightly for me to turn it. He ignores me and massages the place above my ear while muttering to himself. Suddenly his face lights up, and he hurries over to his desk drawer to rifle through its contents.

“After a correct analysis and diagnosis, we can now access the known deficiencies in the human soul through the use of a few handy items that anyone can find around the house.” A cameraman pops out from behind the fainting couch, filming. The doctor is handed a microphone while a lighting tech angles a filter over his desk lamp. “By taking the isopolar induction of the brainwaves own misaligned frequencies, one can use any isonic polymorphic type magnets.” The doctor holds up a refrigerator magnet for the camera, the kind handed out by restaurant delivery places, and separates paperclips and rubber bands into piles on his desk. “Actually, any loose matter will work, as long as you have a rubber band big enough to attach the magnetic field securely to the client’s head.” The lighting tech flips a switch on the *Applause* sign, and a studio audience claps politely at this diagnosis.

“Doctor,” I say. I hate to interrupt his show, but I have a pressing issue. “I think I am going blind.”

“Blind?” He looks up and waves his hand. “Oh, it’s probably just hysterical blindness.”

I happen to disagree with his diagnosis. I don’t find it funny at all.

Jamilia arrives. She takes me by the arm and we stroll together until we reach the end of the corridor and turn the corner, arriving at hallway that leads to a dead end.

“Would you like to try again?” she asks me.

I would, my love. I close my eyes.

When I open them grass is growing over the linoleum beneath us. Men in construction hats are busying themselves with ripping down the façade of windowless walls and wheeling away the comatose patients some erratic set designer’s been using around here as props. The

doctors and the rest of the remaining patients do a quick costume change into linen suits and sunhats.

I sit in the park on a checkered blanket, Jamilia beside me (looking quite radiant in a red sundress and a flower in her hair, I might add), and I offer her a peach out of a picnic basket. Jamilia bites into the ripe fruit, and juice dribbles down her chin. “Try again.” She implores me with her mouth full, lifting the hem of a petticoat like a napkin, dabbing it on her lips. I am entranced before her upheld skirts, both knees so freely displayed for one glorious, brief moment of heaven in the park. She takes another bite of fruit and looks at me, chews and waits.

I scramble onto a park bench and call out to everyone to listen. Couples in their Sunday best lying on blankets, children in sailor suits with cute pups, a mailman delivering letters to the picnic people, all stop their nattering and look at me, but I look to the lovely reclining Jamilia. I focus on the gap between her teeth and imagine diving, so that I may express myself with clarity.

“Listen,” I announce to the crowd and raise my arms. “I confess. In the beginning I only pretended all this. They gave me a standardized test and told me to fill in the appropriate bubbles of how I perceived the world.”

A woman breastfeeding a baby nods.

“Instead, I played hangman on their forms. How could I know I’d rate a ten on the psychopathic scale?”

A man shakes his head at me and eats a cucumber sandwich with the crusts cut off.

“That I only switched one life sentencing for a different kind?”

At this everybody gets up and begins to pack up their blankets and baskets. Men wave their hands in disgust in my direction, and women make that faint tsk, tsk, tsk sound, the kind that acts like some kind of aural fertilizer for shame that’s planted in my chest. The mailman

stops delivering letters and rolls up the grass into bundles, pulls down the trees, and restores the park back into the hospital corridor. Only Jamilia remains, but she's put back on her lab coat. She tosses the peach in the garbage and wipes her mouth on her sleeve.

Even if that's all true, you are committed now. Try to think what really happened?

Does the truth really matter that much to you?

Truth. The reality of memory should matter to you alone.

But, if you need to you may use me. Create me as your projection. Figure this out.

If I tell you, I want you to still love me afterwards.

Do I love you now?

Yes. In my mind you do.

Then, in your mind, I will love you still.

My father had been drinking at the pub and walked home through the woods as he always did.

My sister and I, we had been waiting at the gate. The car, a blue Chrysler with fins, had careened around the corner.

All the cotton swabs in the world can't clean out the sound of impact from ringing in my ears, the memory-waves that cause my tinnitus to act up. Have you ever watched a body break on asphalt from impact, like a water balloon smashing?

The car hit him hard, his neck snapped, and his face turned clear round, to where he could only look back behind him towards the woods, helplessly. I put my hands on his open stomach and try to close up the wound, but his belly is like a busted sack. My sister's white dress now covered in red. The driver stopped for a moment to look at me from his rearview mirror. We made eye contact, the driver and I. The driver wore a mask. The car squealed and lurched on, leaving wheel-turned dust clouds above us. In the dirt I tasted my fingertips. I tasted my father. I thought about how a car can be like a gun. How that Chrysler will end up, forgotten and permanently damaged in some wrecking yard somewhere.

Jamilia shakes her head. "Again," she whispers. "Try again."

I close my eyes. Only the car doesn't come, and instead what I see feels worse.

•

Rub-a-dub-dub, two siblings in a tub.

The father bathed the children. Sometimes he dropped them in a hot bath, splish-splash, little dumplings waiting to get cooked, so hot, too hot. Hot, hot, hot.

Often he'd get bored. He would leave them there. And only when the water cooled and their skin shriveled would he return, whiskey breath and shirtless. Pull the plug and ask if the dirt had washed off their sinful little bodies yet?

No?

Too bad.

In a rare good mood, the father played games. He dried them with a towel and then without a towel. He paid close attention to every detail, every piggy that went to market, and every piggy that stayed home. So much attention, too much attention. And it felt like love. But the kind of love he gave his children was hot, too hot. Hot, hot, hot.

And this love, it always left them cold.

“Who’s the king of the castle? The father tosses their naked bodies high up into the air.

“You are, you are,” they chant.

When he swings them up they squeal “hooray” because they are children and they do not know any better and they don’t want to fall back down to earth and they are flying above it all and this is love and this is all they have to hold onto and they keep their eyes closed tightly as they fall back down because maybe this time he will catch them and maybe this time it won’t hurt so much.

But he never does and it always does.

Who is king of the castle?

Over time their voices dull.

You are. You are.

The mother waits outside the bathroom door and listens for them to finish. When they are done she takes them, tucks them into a cot lined with a yellow blanket. She can’t read, so she recites bedtime stories from heart. She tells them about trolls who taunt fairies and about the ropes of pearls and green glass beads they barter between them in strange lands. She tells them about the kinds of places where pearls and green glass beads can buy a person out of a mess.

When the mother finishes she bends down to tuck the children in, and the sister leans over the cot and hacks. Cadmium colored beads spew out from the little girl, the ropes of which

splatter the hem of the mother's nightdress and her feet. Strands of pearls dangle from my sister's bruised lips when she's finished.

My mother, she screamed and screamed.

The sirens being blaring to indicate visiting hours, and when I open my eyes Jamilia has gone. A guard frisks me before escorting me into the guest area where my sister, dressed in black, thigh-high latex boots and a corset paces the tiny space that's the size of a broom closet. Actually, it might be the broom closet, since several mops and buckets lean willy-nilly, piled up in heaps the corners.

"Here." I turn two buckets over and offer my sister a seat. The heels on her boots are so tall that her knees are hitting her chin. She looks worse than usual, hollow eyed.

"You look terrible," she says, digging around in her purse for a cigarette. She tries to light it, but her hands shake. I worry she'll light the severe bangs of her wig on fire.

"Let me," I say and take the lighter from her. "I was just going to tell you the same thing. How's tricks?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asks and exhales smoke into my face.

We always talk like this. My sister has a real martyr complex.

"I didn't come to chit-chat and exchange pleasantries with you." She gets up and begins to pace the closet again.

"Oh, do tell."

"Look." She points to me with the tip of her cigarette. "Mother's dead."

She is confused. Our mother died years ago, right after our father's accident. Orphaned us. Tragic, really.

"No, she did not die years ago." (Sometimes I think my sister must have some sort of psychic powers. It really is like she can read my mind). "She abandoned us, you mainly, just before your trial. Try to listen and accept some facts you're going to need. Mother left. Remember? All those years without so much as a postcard?" She burns holes in a pile of rags with the tip of her cigarette. She should stop; they may have explosives hidden in here. "I even hired private detectives, but, nada, not-a-thing, no-thing-ness."

My sister holds her hands up, indicating emptiness. I hold up mine. People like it if you mirror them. I like this story. It is hurtful and familiar, like all the best stories should be. I lean in and wrap my arms around my legs. I've changed my mind. Burn the rags, burn the rags. We'll bond over fire and stories.

She takes off her wig and hangs it on a utility hook. Underneath, her hair is cut close to the scalp. If I could see better I would try to find her lumps, see if genetics win out in the topography of our skulls. She shakes me. I make a humming noise.

"Prepare yourself for this one," she yells. "Turns out the bitch got remarried. To the aging owner of a private island who conveniently left her his fortune." According to my sister, our dear mama grew fat on prawns and mangoes, dying of mercury poisoning about six months ago. "You should know, a man contacted me from the department of island affairs. We're rich. That's why I've hired a lawyer and petitioned to reopen your case."

I start hunting through my non-existent pockets; I know I've got something to show her.

“Don’t you get it? My brother, you fool. You’ve been deemed my trustee. It’s been sixteen years since you were committed. Can’t you drop this act?” She slaps me with her black leather gloves.

“Ouch?” I ask.

“Look, now it is my turn to care for you.” She pauses to cover her mouth with her hand and starts to bite down on her fingers. I worry she might start crying or something, but I don’t see what there is to get so distraught over. “Hasn’t it been long enough?” she asks.

“Would you like to hear my new piece?” I ask her, finding my notepad where I hid it, in the back of my underwear. It’s the latest bit of abnormal erotica fiction that I had been working on, about the sex life of a cicada. One day when I publish my collection I will dedicate it to Jamilia. What a lovely surprise she’ll have.

My sister keeps talking at me, but I ignore her, clearing my throat and reading, speaking louder and louder to drown out the noise in my head, the sound waves of her infernal voice screaming.

The Periodical Cicada sings its rare, raw song only once every seven years. Right after that sacred time when it claws up from the bitter, dank earth with red, bulbous eyes so accustomed to being enveloped in the dark, the cicada wishes momentarily to remain obscure. This fragile reticence is fleeting, for the heat of the sun quickly dries moist wings and the body swells with the new sensations of the above ground world. Its entire being vibrates with a message that extends far out into the atmosphere. The response is swift; a thousand like-minded cries fill the air. With the infrared homing precision of a heat-seeking missile, the tremulous aria draws to the Cicada everything needed for satiation of natural ardor.

I can’t leave this place. What would I do? Walk out into the bright light of day in my Velcro pants, clutching a paper bag filled with a few sheets of paper, a plastic harmonica and my soap sculptures?

Do you really think I am crazy? I know I have no chance with Jamilia. I do not choose to live in this wrecking yard because I am delusional that she is in any way contractually bound to

me by love. I can't leave this place because I know what waits for me out there. I stay because in here at least I have learnt to have some control over it.

Out there every car that I see would transform into that blue Chrysler with fins. Out there every car would be speeding fast around a blind bend. Out there every car has me behind the wheel, sixteen again, terrified and elated by what I was about to do.

Vita

Sara grew up in Northern California where she first learned to appreciate the giant Douglas Firs of the Pacific Coast. She has lived in many city and states in the U.S. since then, though New Orleans, Louisiana will always be one of the standouts among them. She currently resides Idyllwild, California, located in the San Jacinto National Forest. There she has been known to get into the occasional fisticuffs with territorial squirrels.