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The Isle of Flightless Birds: A Concise History

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The Isle of Flightless Birds: A Concise History

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

Carin Chapman

B.A. Indiana University, 2007

August, 2014

Table of Contents

Frank Didiot	1
Working It Out	20
Anonymous Support Group for Insecure People	38
Vicky's Very Own Boll Weevil Bugs	57
Stuck Between Middle Management and Oblivion	77
Patient's Account of Her Activity Just before Coming to Hospital Lutz	92
Vita	105

Frank Didiot

When he heard his momma's blabbering coming from the front porch, Frank Didiot froze-up right where he was, hunched over a white plastic paint bucket in the garden around back, plucking half-runner green beans. His momma rarely talked with anyone outside of him. Add to that her exact manner of speaking just now, and hearing it made Frank's insides squeeze up. He had to get up to the front porch, see what was coming off. Even now when she couldn't say any word right, he recognized a certain sound in her voice, like a loose bolt that drove him crazy with how bad he wanted to tighten it down. A certain sound he knew from years hearing it that meant a man was listening.

Which Frank knew could not be the case. She hadn't carried on, in that way she used to go about with men, for some years now. But she sure had that sound to her voice. Her blabbering floated back to Frank in the garden once more, and he decided right then, if she's up there with a man, I'm done with her. I been near finished for some time anyway. And this seals it. I won't spend one more night in this broke down, shithole house with Momma.

Frank'd leave. Go on down to Slocomb's new YMCA for a night—weren't many other Y's in Alabama. He'd set back a little of his earnings from working at Linus's garage, changing oil, pumping up tires. Most of it he gave to his momma for the bills, but he figured holding a bit back wouldn't hurt nothing. He kept it in a pocket he'd hand sewed to the underside of his rose-colored bedroom curtain, a hiding spot he used when he needed to put something out of his mind. If he didn't bury the savings away, he'd hand it over to his momma, no doubt. He reckoned he had enough for gas to Montgomery and food till he could find work. This was it then. Pick her these beans, grab that money pocket, and get.

In Montgomery, he could drop that name, Didiot, where not one soul would know him. His momma said it like ‘Did-he-oh’ But everybody else said ‘Duh-idiot.’ Like that lawyer did the first time Frank remembered ever hearing somebody else say his last name. That had been shortly after Frank and his momma had moved into Mr. Sanderson’s house, and then Mr. Sanderson had passed, and the lawyer came over an afternoon stepping light like, all pansy ass, around the mud and weeds, into the back yard where he found Frank’s momma, who was “in mourning only in the morning,” as she put it, hoeing up the patch for the garden. She wore dead old Sanderson’s work pants and long sleeve shirt, both of which she rolled up at the cuffs to keep out her way. Frank busied himself in his mud pit, dropping into then fetching out of the mud, a blue, metal truck his momma got him from sending in Rice Krispies box tops. His momma’d dug that mud pit for him. Filled a bucket with water and toted it over, time and again, until the mud sapped thick between his toes and made such pleasing, mucky noises that he forgot he’d first wanted a sandbox. The lawyer came in the yard and read some papers to Frank’s momma that mostly said, “Daisy Didiot, Mr. Sanderson left you this here house.” But he said ‘Duh-idiot.’

Frank had yelled over, “We got the house, Momma?”

His momma had swatted a hand in Frank’s direction, behind her back, without turning around. Which sign he had known to mean, ‘Shut your damn mouth, boy.’ So he had.

Daisy’d planned it, of course. She talked that poor goat, Mr. Sanderson, into letting her and little Frank move into his house when Sanderson sat past ninety and senile, past any need for a woman.

Before that, Daisy’d always took Frank fishing. Frank’d catch nightcrawlers on the courthouse lawn downtown. Daisy kept them in a coffee tin filled with dirt till they got to the river on the south edge of Slocomb where she used her long, dangly earring as a hook, whipped

out Frank's shoelace for a line, jabbed a worm on the jerry-rigged fishing pole and caught bluegill and smallmouthed bass. And while the fish flapped up a storm on the bank, she clobbered them with her ivory colored purse that'd gotten smudged all brown with fish guts and blood and muddy water. She fed her and Frank that way. They stayed in whoever's house would have them. Or have her, rather. Sometimes men let them stay for weeks. Sometimes just the one night.

Until Mr. Sanderson let them stay on a piece then willed them his house. Frank and Daisy'd stayed put in this two-bedroom, clogged-pipes rat nest ever since. Now that Frank had passed high school, past when he should've found a bride and started in with babies of his own, he couldn't stay here no more.

Add on top of that the fact Daisy sounded to be up on the porch with a man, and Frank had a mind to haul himself up there and tell her he was leaving right now. Not one more night, he'd say to her. He yanked a bean off the vine, let it plop in the bucket, and thought those lines over and again. He could say it to her. Yes, goddamn right he could. That woman didn't own him. And he didn't owe her jack-shit-all. Hell, a woman won't even tell you who your daddy is, what right'd she have to ask anything of you?

When Frank once had asked about his daddy, at the river's edge, she'd said, "Boy, you see that sun up there," she pointed at it, and Frank peeked up then jerked away, rubbing at his eyes to get rid of the glowing spots. "You were born when the beauty of that sun fell in the water, and there's no more you need know than that."

That was back before she lost all life's poetry. Before she had the surgery that cut out—along with the cancer—a portion of her tongue, sliced open the left side of her mouth from the corner of her lips back to her earlobe, and left a bright red scar running up the side of her cheek

from where the stitches had been. Before that, she used to squat on the front porch every morning and hold Frank's fat, baby hands in her skinny, sun-darkened fingers with her long, straight black hair falling around her shoulders. She'd say, "Be honest at school today. Be Frank." Wasn't till he grew up that he got how that held two meanings: Be frank. His momma always crafted her words. Before she lost them all.

"Last night *was* the last," Frank said from between the lines of green beans then cussed himself for saying something she'd say. Her blabbering from the front porch got so loud he couldn't stand it. He jerked around and started up the gravel path that fed into the driveway on the side of the house. Plowed up there in such a tizzy, he didn't even put down his bean bucket. Just toted it on up with him.

Blabbering was the word for what she did. She couldn't speak right since the surgery'd cut out half her face and pulled near-on every tooth in her head, back when Frank was thirteen, so going on ten years ago. To speak, she hooked her thumb in the left corner of her mouth, where they'd sliced it open, and yanked up that saggy, scarred flesh. Mashed it up into her bad, left cheek and held it there under her cheekbone. Frank figured it must rub the inside of her cheek against her gums something awful. Her doing it raised that corner of her lips so it looked almost like half her face smiled some sick way. Except where she'd pushed that cheek in with her thumb for years had left a permanent divot that never went away even when she let go. Such that no one would've believed that face had anything left to smile about.

Put on top of that the fact she couldn't say shit right cause half her damn tongue was missing, so her speaking sounded like a machine chomping at its own motor, and Frank had to swallow hard to listen to her. At dinner, she'd blender up her meal till it drank like a chunky, milk shake, and start in with her yammering, hold her lips and cheek up with her thumb, and gum her

food. As if it needed chewing. Brownish chunks of cornbread and white globs of potato would shoot out that left side of her mouth and land in clumps between them on the oak table. Frank turned up a beer every night before eating to stomach it all.

Not that he didn't feel like an asshole. Sure he did. She'd raised him best she could. And used every last damn resource she had. Mostly she'd relied on that one resource all women are born with, but she used it right. Got them this house. Got Frank his truck. Got him through school, even with her getting sick. Still, she kept on smoking after that. When he wasn't nothing but a runt, Frank used to dig holes in the yard and bury her Marlboro Reds. She'd find them. He'd pry up a floorboard plank and hide them beneath it. Chunk them under the clawfoot tub. Cram them between her box springs and mattress. Back then, seemed like misery was a thing that came in fixed packages. If he got rid of this one box, she wouldn't get the cancer no more. When another box showed up, he didn't feel any different. Just got rid of the new box. Lord, how he wished misery now came packaged in boxes.

Frank, with his bean bucket in tow, hammered one solid, black boot after the next up the gravel path, till he reached the side of the house and there found his momma, standing at the top of the front porch stairs, leaning against the awning pole, digging deep into her left cheek with that thumb so her words would come out more sensible. She's got so skinny, Frank thought. Where he could see above the cut of her dress, there was an indent below her collarbone so deep Frank could've shoved his fingers in under there and hauled her around by it. Her hair never had come back in with the beauty it had before. It hung limp and mostly gray now, like a wet rat, all dead and mangy at the ends. She always had big, purple circles under her eyes, seemed like, no matter how much she slept.

And, god-damn, there was a man speaking with her. Some old fart dust hanging on the gate to the yard. The old man had hand-slicked over the little bit of oil-ridden hair he had left. His leathered face, like a worn out pair of brown cow skin boots, hung off his bones in sachets of loose wrinkles. His ragged pant legs dragged the ground around his shoes which flapped open at the sole when he so much as shuffled. He might've bathed once. He held the reins to a oil-black horse looked like it'd walked from Alaska all the way down to here today. That horse, Frank knew upon seeing it, was the thing his momma was after. Her reason for even speaking to this fart dust in the first place.

On the porch, his momma jaunted her hip out like it might only be around seventeen years old, rested her hand on it, and cocked her arm out at the elbow. Frank burned up seeing it. Right there in front of him. Wasn't he a man now? Shouldn't a man's momma behave in certain ways such that he might call her a 'lady' at church or the doctor's office? When he was a young'un that was one thing. But now? Now there was understanding on his part. Every piece of his being wanted to smack that hand off her hip and tell her to get inside. Act decent.

All that behavior with her and the men had stopped since the cancer. Still, though, Frank'd wake up in a fit, every now and again, from dreaming about the sound of her single mattress. As a kid, he'd heard her rusty, metal springs squeaking near on every night, and he'd play in his head like it was a mouse, chirping at a cheese wedge it wanted to get at. He would fall asleep, listening to the squeaking and squeaking, while he gripped the red and blue quilt his momma'd sewed for him in big blocks with sailboats and baseball bats on them. He worried the one edge of that quilt till it unraveled, and when she asked him what in tarnation he'd done to it, he said maybe a tiny mouse had got at it. Chewed it up like a cheese wedge.

Daisy didn't spend time with anyone but Frank anymore. And she never had people over like she used to when groups of ladies would stop by on nights their husbands went to Cutter's Bar down the street. Those nights, ladies had brought cooking sherry, and Daisy had whipped out her Old Crow whiskey, and they played poker after shuffling Frank off to his room till they got sauced enough he could sneak back out. They took turns holding him, tossing him from one perfumed lap to the next, each lady snatching him up, saying, "My turn to spoil Franky." In front of the women, he often did a cowboy dance he made up where he tapped his heel on the wooden floor, took a couple steps sideways, then swung an imaginary lasso and shook at the hips. They fell out laughing. Called him Cowboy Frank. Pushed his hair, dark like Daisy's, back from his eyes and pulled him into their open chests where he buried his face deep and smelled lemon and sweat and flour and verbena and the burning smell of booze. He'd climb back in bed slap-happy and worn out with four or five different shades of lipstick smeared in kiss patterns on his cheeks. That'd all been some time ago.

Frank stood silent, clinging to his green bean bucket, pressing it between his soil-coated hands. He sized up the fart dust man at the gate until the stranger took notice of him and fell back a ways, as if he'd tripped over a tree root that wasn't there.

Daisy turned to see where the stranger was staring and spotted Frank. "You're finally here," she said, like she'd been waiting all damn day for Frank to show up. She ought to have been a movie star with acting like that. His momma turned every situation into the Daisy Show, where she played like she'd planned everything, knew every step before it happened. "Baby, come meet this gentleman," she said to Frank.

Frank didn't budge. Slocomb wasn't big enough to warrant strangers. Especially not strangers dragging around a damn horse.

“Mr. Avery,” she said, “this is my boy, Frank, who I was saying you ought to go around back and speak with.”

“Don’t see one reason,” Frank said, “he might need to be speaking with me.”

“Don’t be such a hardened fist,” his momma said, and flung her hand in Frank’s direction, like he wasn’t nothing but a lone fire ant. “Mr. Avery might be around more than you expect. Then how’d you feel about showing out like that?” But she looked at Avery, not Frank, when she said it.

Frank clenched his plastic bucket. He pushed as hard as he could against both sides and felt it resist. It wouldn’t buckle. Wouldn’t buckle like he wouldn’t. Not one more night here, he thought.

“I didn’t mean nothing,” Avery said, “I’m going on down the road.” He nodded toward the road but didn’t move.

Frank waited for him to live up to his word.

“Like hell you are, Avery,” Daisy said, but she gave him a laugh to show she meant it lighthearted. “Get on back there. Show him that nag.”

“What do I need looking at a horse?” Frank asked. Though he knew what she was after. She thought she could get that horse for her and Frank with her old ways. Make a trade. Her services for a damn falling-down, beat up nag? The thought disgusted him so. He felt he ought to spit to rid himself of it. He knew it was the way she’d got them everything they had before, but wasn’t he a working man? Hadn’t she stopped with all that? Frank’d taken care of their needs for some time now. The light and water bill, the extras. Even her Marlboro Reds. They did good enough with his earnings. He’d taken fine care of her such that she didn’t need to be doing this no more.

“Nag needs water, one,” Daisy said, “and I told Avery you’d take a look, see if we might need ourselves a horse like that.”

“I can make it a few more blocks. Get water downtown,” Avery said. “It’s as hot as it’ll get anyway.”

“Go on then,” Frank said to Avery.

“Look at that horse for your mamma,” Daisy said.

“I’ll go on downtown,” Avery said. “Don’t want to start no family argument.”

Daisy came off the porch then, which Frank knew to be a bad sign. She swished her way up the yard to the front gate. And before Frank could think what to do, she snatched the gate open, grabbed the nag by the reins, and yanked it onto the grass. It stomped one hoof, and Frank almost wished the horse could kick forward, at Daisy. Maybe then that nag’d take care of the situation. He didn’t mean that though. Any horse kicked his mamma, Frank’s life would be hell until finally he went on to Hell itself. Only, why couldn’t she be the way he needed her to be now? She’d took care of things so good before, when he was nothing but a little runt. But he’d changed. She hadn’t done one bit of changing herself. Here he stood, a different person. A man. And there she came prancing with a black nag and that fart dust like she still was a twenty year old primrose. Things move on. The green beans grow, and you pluck them, and you eat them. They don’t keep on as seeds forever.

Daisy pulled the nag, and Avery followed his horse, around to the gravel path on the side of the house where Frank stood. Frank looked down in his bucket and kept looking in it as they closed in on him.

“Take him on around, Franky,” Daisy said, when they reached Frank. “Take a spin. See how he feels.”

Frank didn't know the first damn thing about horses, and even he could tell you no chance that nag had been able to go for a spin in about the past century.

"This ain't all necessary," Avery said. "I'll go on." But still he stood there. Frank kept trying to figure: what's he after? Probably thought momma was alone so stopped at the gate hoping for a nibble for the nag and for himself, most likely. That fart dust piece of shit. Frank could've turned his bucket up, swung it around by the handle, and cracked it against Avery's skull. Make it that old man's last spin too. But that'd require Frank to spill his green beans all over the ground, and he hadn't worked hard on these beans to watch them get bled on by a pigeon-poker like Avery.

"What'd you say he's worth?" Daisy asked Avery. "He's the second son of a Kentucky Derby winner," she said and passed the reins to Frank who pried one hand off his bucket to take them obligingly. No, 'obediently,' he thought, that's how I took them. Like a whipped up little shit. "Second son, right?" she asked.

Avery nodded and mouthed, "Yes ma'am," but no sound came out.

"Mr. Avery says they don't let girls run in those races," Daisy said. "Isn't that a tragic something? Girls run way faster than boys. That's why boys are always chasing us." She laughed and flung her hand against Avery, like she was the funniest goddamn comedian ever lived. She left her hand there a second, pressing up against Avery's chest, before she eased it off. Frank knew his nostrils were likely flaring.

In school they'd poked fun at him about it. About how, when he got hot—usually from hearing them slander his momma—Frank hid it all except his nostrils that flared up like some bull. Like he wanted a good smell of the thing that had ticked him off.

“See, look at them pretty beans,” Daisy said. With one hand she grabbed the rim of the bucket and yanked it down so Avery could see in. With her other hand, she reached up, snuck her pinky between two buttons on Avery’s shirt, and hooked it there to pull him in for a look at the beans. Frank knew her pinky was rubbing at Avery’s undershirt and at his chest under that. She took her hand off the bean bucket, smashed her cheek in with it, and said, “He’s my little green bean farmer.”

Frank felt a dire urgency. To do what, he could not say. In part the urgency beckoned him slap his momma dead in the face. In part it told him to haul off and kick Avery, the slop house piss-ant, right out of his yard and out of his momma’s grasp. But mostly it made him want to jump on that poor nag. Ride off. Leave Daisy and Avery and go someplace he could stand up on his own. Not fiddle with such bullshit as this.

Frank felt pity scratching at the back of his skull, clawing its way to the front where he’d notice it. What was there to pity? Oh, that damn nag of course. Thing needed water. Frank dropped the paint bucket of green beans at his momma’s feet, whipped around on his heels, and led the horse back behind the house, over to the spigot. He turned it on, flipped over an empty bucket, filled it up, and served it to the nag. What kind of low-down, shit sack would make this animal keep walking when its legs had about turned to glue on the inside by now? Frank patted the horse’s down-stretched neck. His thumping caused sweat to splatter off its flank like a perfume-mister. He ought to clock that fart dust. Ought to take the nag down to the police or a farmer outside town. Some place it could live the way it intended to and not according to any other person’s demands. He ought to get him and the horse both out of here.

Frank suctioned the inside, gummy flesh of his cheeks between his teeth and clamped down, rolled his jaw back and forth, working that flesh from side to side. He wiped his nose and

smelled the deep warmth of a horse, like a mound of dug up earth, a smell you can trust. That goddamn horse, he thought. Only innocent thing out here. That nag only wants to do as it pleases, to have water and rest. Unlike Avery. Unlike Momma. Who wants nothing but to ruin every day of my life.

She'd already ruined plenty. Such that Frank couldn't even have a proper woman. He'd tried once. Mary Beth Clemmons, a girl at school with a sweet tooth who he took a slice of his momma's Devil's Delight Pie every Monday morning for weeks, until finally Mary Beth agreed to let him take her out. They went, on his truck, to the movie theatre over in Dothan where he watched not one second of the movie itself for looking out the corner of his eye at how her yellow curls laid over her shoulder, and rose up, then fell back down by the slightest bit when she breathed. Like they were waiting to spring up and bounce. At some scary part, she yelped like a puppy with a stomped paw and grabbed at his arm. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her soft on the fingertips. He wanted to brush his hand against her curls when he let go, but that felt like too far until after the movie she kissed him on the cheek and told him to pick her up the next weekend too.

First and only time they tried at making love, he climbed on top of her and felt like a cockroach crawling up a pile of left over dog shit. He pushed his hips up then down and watched her tight yellow curls bounce all around her head. But the bed made mouse squeaking noises and kept making them. Mouse squeaking and squeaking. He tried to focus on it being Mary Beth and not anybody or anything else, tried to ignore the noises, but all he could do was shut his eyes tight and wish it would stop until finally he whipped himself off her and jerked on his pants while Mary Beth asked what was the matter over and over and begged him, with such things as, "Is it over? Did I do it wrong? Don't go. I'm sorry for it. Whatever I did. I'm sorry."

And after that, he could only have whores. Who he'd take standing, against his bedroom's patched plaster wall, next to the window with the rose-colored curtain flapping, while he grabbed them in their mouths, and held onto the bottom of their jaw with his fingers wrapped around their teeth pulling there for leverage. Like they were fish he had to dig his hook out of.

Frank leaned around the corner of the house and looked back at his momma where she stood, with her skinny pinky hooked in Avery's shirt, twisting and turning at the hips like she needed to prove to that old man how she could still move good. Frank couldn't take one more second of it.

He yanked the nag up by the reins, marched back over to Daisy and Avery, caught hold of his momma by the wrist, and jerked her hand out of Avery's shirt which incidentally popped off one of Avery's few buttons. "Had the cancer's what did that to her," Frank said. He clung to her wrist and nodded at her ice-cream scooped cheek but didn't dare look at her.

"I'm not no harm," Avery said. "Your momma here was kind enough to offer water. Hospitality if I'd be needing it."

"She already offered up enough hospitality," Frank said, "to last all her lifetime and more than all mine."

Frank leveled his gaze with Avery's and needed to ruin this for his momma, like she'd ruined it for him. "Cancer," he said. "And still she shoves Marlboros in that hole of a mouth. Has to push in here," Frank said and, without much thinking what he was doing, he pulled her over by her wrist, and mashed his own, dirt-covered thumb into her cheek divot, and said, "Like that." He caught himself, digging in his momma's face, and thought he ought not to do that. But then something about it felt almost good. To have her under his thumb. So he yanked her by the wrist, held her up close to him, and ground in her cheek, like a tick trying to burrow, hard enough he

thought sure she'd gasp or holler. But she didn't flinch. "Has to do it to get suction on all that smoke," he said. "She don't know how to let go. Don't get for one second how things around her grow different." He felt her empty jaw line through her sagging cheek fat, mashed his thumb against the hardened, mushy, toothless edge of her jaw, her trying to yank her wrist away from him the whole time. He shoved on her so hard she had to push back up against his hand with her head so the force wouldn't knock her over, so finally they were leaning into each other. Now's when I'll tell her I'm leaving, Frank thought.

He reached to slide his thumb around her gum for leverage, so he could turn her head toward him and tell her right in her face that he was leaving her, but when his grip loosened, she tore her head off his hand, and slapped him away.

He only truly realized then what he'd been doing and flung her wrist away.

"Franklin Didiot," she said without putting her finger in her cheek, and nobody but Frank would've understood her. "I never." She seemed then to remember about the talking, shoved her thumb deep in her cheek divot, and said, "Coming up here like this." She tried to laugh, but it came out sounding fake, like she was scared. She shook out her graying hair and swatted at a mosquito that wasn't there. Then she full on did laugh. "Poor boy's worried," she said to Avery, leaning in close to him like it was their secret. "Every man I speak with, he thinks I'm replacing his daddy." She let her hand fall against Avery's shoulder. "Running up to protect his momma from mean, old Mr. Avery."

Frank watched it happen like it was happening to somebody else. Watched her make it the Daisy Show. He could do all he wanted, push at her in any way he knew how, and she'd twist it to make it look like he'd only done what she wanted him to do.

“You better get on, Avery,” Daisy said. “Frank here can’t stand to see his momma talk to any man but him.”

Avery turned, said yes ma’am to Daisy, and hobbled away with his nag quick as he could. Frank watched the back of his momma’s head while she stood facing Avery, watching him bumble his way out.

After Avery’d left, she aimed herself at the porch and, without speaking, moseyed up the stairs and in the house. It wasn’t that she slammed the door or gave Frank some kind of look, since she did neither of those things, but in the way she walked like she had some place to go, in the easy, unburdened manner she let her hand fall on the porch railing while she climbed the steps, in the way Frank knew right now she was inside slicing potatoes into thin slivers she’d boil for their dinner, she was saying clear as day that Frank was not in charge. She was.

And what could Frank do to change the situation? He could leave with Avery that was one thing. He’d head out right now. Never look back at her and never owe her a thing and start over in a place she couldn’t have any control over him.

Someplace where no one treated Frank different cause of who his momma was. Not the way people in Slocomb treated him such as when, in fifth grade, the boys at school had put Frank up to stealing a pair of Daisy’s underwear cause their daddies said she didn’t wear any, and the boys wanted proof if she did. When they said it, Frank had pictured the puffy-lidded, morning glory blue clothes hamper in the bathroom which his momma always put her underwear inside of in the morning. But if Frank woke up in the middle of the night and got up to use the bathroom, he’d see her underwear on the oak table or the rocking chair or the kitchen linoleum—all white or flower-patterned with the hem coming off and stained—sprawled out like somebody besides his momma had tossed them there without two thoughts about it. He couldn’t tell them boys he

knew his momma wore underwear cause he saw them every night. He'd wanted to tell them to go suck up shit, but instead he ran on home. Tried to forget.

Some new place wouldn't hold any of those memories or those people. Avery could go on to any place he wanted. Why couldn't Frank?

Frank took one step to the side and knocked over that paint bucket of green beans he'd forgot sat there. He watched the long beans and the curly-cued ones and the ones that had split open too early and already started offering up their insides, all of them spilled out on the gravel and lay there for the whole world to see how he'd not done with them what he meant to. He hauled off and stomped the bucket and heard the plastic start to crack before it slipped out from under his boot and skidded over across the gravel and came to rest on the grass.

He stomped to the backyard, jerked up the bucket of water he'd poured for that nag, and tossed it out over the garden. Goddamn little shit of a garden, he thought.

Daisy'd told him, years before, when he begged her to stop with the men, "Frank," she'd said, "I do it for you. When you came up in my life, it surprised me with the best surprise ever could have been. But I didn't have nothing else I could do. You'll understand later," she said and rubbed his shoulders with hands that were spoiled from touching so many other men. He mouthed off at her. Called her a 'two bit hussy' like he'd heard the boys at school say even though he didn't know what that meant. Told her he wanted to go live with his granny in Pensacola. Told her he didn't care a lick what she did, as from now on he wanted no part of it. She said no at first, that she needed him there. "You're the only one's loved me without expectation," she said. He kept her life going, she said.

Kept her life going. Just like that. Those words exact.

But he feuded with her till she crumbled and drove him down to his granny's that summer, telling him all she wanted was him happy. Not two weeks in at his granny's, Daisy called. "I've got the cancer," she said.

But Frank heard it as: you kept her life going. You left, and you're the only thing that had kept it going. You sorry son of a bitch.

He hadn't waited for his momma to come pick him up. He had hightailed it, hitchhiked back up to ten miles outside Slocomb that very day and walked the rest of the way home. And hadn't left her one day since.

Frank looked at the garden patch and kicked over the wooden stake he'd plugged in the ground for the half-runner's string. He could leave her. She could take care of her own damn self. Especially if she intended to take up with the likes of Avery, to start back up with that business. I don't owe her nothing, he thought. I done paid up.

He glanced back where his mud pit had been, at where he knew there laid potatoes under the ground, clinging to a vine for their life. Last look. He swung around and stamped in the back door. Started to take off his outside boots before he realized he didn't care a lick about her goddamn linoleum. He strode on up to his room, grabbed a clean shirt and his pair of black, Sunday shoes. Ripped his curtain around and tore the money pocket off. Slid it in his work pants and ducked on out without a word to her.

He reversed out of the drive way, the truck grumbling as loud and angry as Frank felt, shucking gravel out from under his tires, and nearly hit fifty miles per hour in the six blocks it took him to get downtown.

He'd get on to the YMCA, but first he reckoned he ought to have a beer with the men at Cutter's. Not much a better way to start out after leaving his momma than by drinking in a bar,

like a man on his own should do. He parked his truck across the street from the bar before he spotted Avery's damn nag, standing on the sidewalk, in front of Dottie's Diner next door, so close to it, the building might well have been propping the horse up. Avery, he thought. The pigeon-poker. Well who gives one good goddamn if he's in the bar, souring himself up? He gives me grief, I'll plug him in the side of the head with my beer. Frank was done taking shit from folks. His momma, Avery, any damn asshole there was. He felt as close to good as he had in some long time. Hell, maybe Frank'd steal that nag up. Take them both to Montgomery and start over.

He stepped in the bar where it got dark quick. A group of men sat around the far corner talking, laughing. Only dark hulks in the low light to Frank whose eyes hadn't got the sun out of them yet.

"You give her what she wanted?" one of the men asked another, with a laugh to his voice like he knew something everybody wanted to know.

"I ought to have," Frank heard the other man say. The man who Frank knew upon hearing him speak was Avery. "I ought to gave her what she needs. But I didn't want me none of that falling apart, old dried-up sack."

The men laughed.

Frank balled up his fists and let them go over and again. He should've cracked Avery open when he had the chance. And Daisy thinking the whole time she'd let the likes of Avery climb up on her, to get her and Frank that beat-up horse. For what? So maybe they could have extra money? So maybe Frank could have new work pants? Some extra thing he didn't need no how?

“You’d have been the last one to have her,” the first man said. “Hell, there ain’t much of Daisy left to have from what I seen. I figure next time I see her, she’ll be wearing a Sunday dress, and the preacher’ll be the only man to touch her then, just to close her eyes.”

Frank jerked his head in the direction of the man speaking.

“Probably best I didn’t do it,” Avery said. “She might not would’ve made it through the whole time. I might would’ve done her in.” And he grunted. Like he felt proud.

The other men cackled at that, at the idea of Frank’s momma passing with the likes of Avery on top of her.

“You saved her life, near on,” one man said, and slapped Avery on the back, and they started to laugh again until Frank took a single step into the bar and said, loud as he could manage, “Momma’s just fine.”

They stopped and all turned to look at him.

“Not a thing wrong with her,” he said. “She’s just fine.” His leg quivered in the thigh like he’d run a hundred miles. Not another body in the bar moved. Part of Frank dared them to try. Part of him knew he couldn’t step one foot past where he stood. “I mean it now,” he yelled over toward the men. “She’s not sick no more.” The whole bar felt tight, like everybody in there couldn’t fit inside anymore. Frank thought he might suffocate. He had to get out. He had to get on home.

Working It Out

Sammy moseyed into Peppy's Pronto Printing with her heavy-duty, brown rucksack hanging off one shoulder. The tools inside clanged up a storm when she chunked the bag under her desk. She didn't check to see, but she figured her officemates, Jessica and Bobby—who'd lumped their desks together on the opposite side of the room—were a damn-sight impressed. Her rucksack and gear would show them she had other, more important abilities than her Peppy's Printing typing job. Maybe going through with her plan would have a double good effect: she would get her bathroom back like she'd aimed to and her coworkers would finally see Sammy the way she wanted. As somebody worth having a conversation with.

Lord's-alive, her tools sure made a racket, though. What else did she have in her rucksack? Course, she had that slide lock and screwgun she'd tossed in before heading out this morning, but other than that, she couldn't say right off. No matter. She had what she needed. She'd head on down to her bathroom and put up that slide lock in a minute, but first she wanted more coffee.

Maybe coffee was only a way to stall. She didn't want to put up any lock. But what else could she do? The problem being: Sammy could not accomplish her morning bowel movement in front of other folks. Which was why, for the two years she'd worked at Peppy's Pronto Printing, she picked a bathroom for her own—the one on her hall with two stalls—and there got privacy by using specialized tactics to run everybody else out. Peppy's only had about fifty employees, so Sammy figured there were enough bathrooms to go around.

She could've used those other bathrooms too, but by god, she'd picked one and made it hers. Doing things the same way every day settled her. So she always used the same stall, where she once carved "Sammy's Spot" into the metal door with her pocket knife. Or she meant it to

say that, but if she put her name, people would know she did it, and they'd call a meeting to yell at her for graffiting. So she just put "S.S." in the door instead which stood for Sammy's Spot.

Sammy'd never had trouble getting her spot to herself until last Monday, when she found not only her bathroom, but also her stall, occupied. She bent over to have a look-see under her stall door and came nose-to-nose with some black high heels. No biggie, Sammy thought. I'll lay the tactics on them.

First, she tried hand-washing, hoping the running water would get the lady to urinate faster. A couple minutes of that, and the heels hadn't peeped. Sammy tapped her fingers against the mirror one at a time, in a row, and sighed real loud. She coughed. Coughed again and kept at it. Hacked fake coughs until she really started coughing and choked then finally gagged. When that still didn't work, she marched down, stood in front of the stall, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot repeatedly. The quiet made Sammy wonder if somebody'd only left their shoes. No person attached. She shoved the stall door.

A mousy voice squirted out, "There's someone in here."

Sammy jumped back, galloped out, and ran to find another bathroom, mumbling, "High heels? At work? This isn't a Friday night disco club. This isn't a prance around in front of the boys dance party." She glanced down at her black work boots and khaki cargo pants, her white shirt with the buttons done all the way up to the neck. Didn't anybody besides her dress decent? Take Sammy's officemate, Jessica. Sammy once snuck a J.C. Penney's catalog in Jessica's purse, hoping that girl'd take the hint, buy some respectable clothing. Sammy had no desire whatsoever, not one bit, to look like all the other girls, who somehow got away with trouncing around in party shoes and frilly skirts.

Next day, Sammy knew those high heels wouldn't dare show their face again after the treatment she gave them. But, lo and behold, when she got to her stall, there they sat. Then the same, every morning for the past week.

Sammy had to search out new bathrooms to find privacy. Every stall she used, she carved her Sammy's Spot initials in the door to make it feel more like home. But little good it did. She had to do it real fast, since she had a hard time getting the bathrooms to herself, so the S.S. came out looking chiseled, almost like a couple lightning bolts, instead of her initials.

She considered forcing herself to go in front of the black heels. By now in her thirties, Sammy'd wrangled most of her personality issues under control. She could handle this one. If she wanted. But, great snakes, she thought. I should be allowed one tiny flaw like my private bathroom need.

Teeny-weeny flaw like that? Wouldn't cause any ruckus. Wouldn't keep her from a promotion, say. Or from making friends. Wouldn't hold her back in the meeting men department. Not that she wanted to meet men, necessarily. Who's got time for romancing? Sammy thought. What with work at Peppy's and all her projects—woodworking, welding, and so on—Sammy was pretty tied up. Plus at her height and size, she hadn't found many men who could match her.

Last fellow that did was Morris, who smelled like cat litter, but agreed to take Sammy to their senior prom, then drove her home after thirty minutes and not one dance because he said her "stupid outfit" (Sammy wore khakis and a lacy white shirt) made him look bad, "in front of Shelia Anderson," who, he said, he "had been totally in love with since elementary school." Sammy apologized, offered to change clothes. But he told her to get out of the car. She scarfed down two half-gallons of Mudslide Mania ice cream and thought, if she'd let herself, she could

cry enough to fill up the empty ice cream tubs. Which really was only because Morris'd brought up Shelia Anderson.

Sammy had knocked Shelia Anderson off a step-box in fourth grade during Ribbon Dancing-Jazzercise in P.E. Not on purpose. Sammy forgot, for a second, about her "Husky Girl" clothes brand and danced like her body moved same as the other girls. But when she flung her arms to one side and jumped, her foot fell off the edge of her step-box, and all her bulk went flying into skinny-minny Shelia Anderson, who skidded across the gym. When she came to a stop, she sat up, wide-eyed with her hands over her mouth. The fall had knocked out a loose tooth, and a trickle-line of blood trailed from Shelia's purple step-box, across the wooden floor, all the way to Shelia, and down the front of her white t-shirt. When Sammy's mom heard the story, she said, "Sammy, people don't understand you. So you got to try hard to understand them. Act more like other girls. Be like them or boys won't ask—"

But Sammy didn't care a lick about not finding any more dates since men only distracted from life's important things, she guessed. Like building the rat traps her mom had asked for, which Sammy did in her shop every day after work. Or she did until last week when her mom complained about Sammy's noise, so Sammy loaded up her welding gear and moved to the field out back to work. That troubled her. She usually worked in her shop. Now, out of nowhere, she couldn't? Not doing things the normal way drove her bananas.

Which was why Sammy came to work today, prepared to get rid of this stinker of a lady and her black heels. She edged her backpack further under her desk with her boot and said, "I'm headed down to the lounge." She thumbed over her shoulder in the direction of the lounge and forced on a giant, classic-Sammy smile. "Who's up for a cup of the ol' java?" She clapped once and rubbed her hands together. Some mornings she had a tough time making herself offer to get

coffee. She knew Jessica and Bobby wouldn't want any. They never did. But she had to believe if she kept putting herself out there, some day they'd take her up on her niceness.

Back when she got this job, she'd hoped to make friends, but that never happened. Take Jessica, who Sammy once asked to come to the house for a beer. Jessica threw her head back laughing, and said, "You mean your parents' house?"

"My house, my folks' house. Same diff," Sammy said. She'd heard Jessica say 'same diff' a bunch. She tried to be like Jessica in some ways. Since Jessica was popular. More likeable somehow.

"What happens with guys?" Jessica said. "You just go to their place, so you won't wake up your parents?"

Sammy thought back to her last date, cat litter Morris. And how he'd always been in love with Shelia Anderson. Jessica reminded her of Shelia Anderson in some silly way. Like how they were both popular. But Jessica didn't need to know about that. "It's my parents' twilight years," Sammy said. "Don't you want to spend time with your folks? Before it's too late?" She dropped her paw on Jessica's sliver of a shoulder. Jessica tried to look heartless, but there was so much under those half-unbuttoned blouses and those skirts that never touched her knees. Decency lived under there.

"My mom's a useless bag, and my dad loved booze more than he loved us. So thanks for bringing it up," Jessica said and stormed out of the office, her skirt swishing behind her.

No need to think on all that today, though. Today, Sammy could fix this problem. Nothing a little slide lock in the bathroom couldn't take care of. "Coffee, Bobby?" Sammy said, and smacked Bobby on the back.

Bobby moaned. It was Monday. Which meant Bobby would wear his sunglasses all day and speak to no one. Sammy stuck to light beers, herself. Never got the hangovers that way.

“Jesus Christ,” Jessica said. “Inside voices, Sammy?”

“Right-o,” Sammy said and threw her hands up like she surrendered. Jessica had asked Sammy to think about her ‘voice modulation,’ as Jessica put it.

Sammy bent over and whispered, “Voice modulation,” in Jessica’s ear and thumped her arm.

Jessica jumped—awful jumpy lady, Jessica—and said, “Exactly,” with her head in her hands.

Maybe she’s got a hangover too, Sammy thought, and hoped Jessica and Bobby went drinking together. Sammy could see they were sweet on each other. She’d tried to help by drawing them matching Valentine’s Day cards with Cupid pushing them into each other’s arms. But somebody must’ve got their cockles up over that cause the manager called a meeting where Sammy said she hadn’t meant any harm then locked herself in her bathroom stall and dug her fingernails in the calluses in her palms and didn’t cry.

“Cigarette, Jess?” Bobby said and stood up. Jessica got up to follow him. They walked to the door without a word to Sammy.

“Coffee just for me then,” Sammy said, like it didn’t hurt her feelings one bit that Bobby never asked if she wanted to smoke. No matter she wasn’t a smoker. He could still ask.

But Bobby never cared if he hurt Sammy’s feelings. Like that time, after Bobby let Sammy help him and his girlfriend move, Sammy offered to buy a bottomless pitcher of electric blue margaritas at La Cancunarita Mexican Restaurant. Bobby said they were beat and had to pass. Then, while Sammy drank a margarita alone, they drove by in Bobby’s red Miata and went

to Thai-Me-Up restaurant across the street. No denying it: that tore Sammy up. She ordered more margaritas and more. Kept drinking until she had to call her parents to come pick her up and drive her truck home, and while she rode in the passenger's seat she blubbered to her dad, even though he never wore his hearing aids. "I wish," she said, "people would let me show what a good friend I'd make." He didn't say anything, of course. "Everything I say falls on deaf ears!" she screamed.

Sammy couldn't figure why Bobby didn't like her. Until she heard last week that somebody was putting up Nazi materials all over Peppy's. Sammy suspected Bobby. She knew she didn't have much reason to, but he sure acted hateful toward her. And Nazis were pure hate.

Bobby turned to glare at her before he stepped out to smoke. Sammy swore she spotted a moustache growing on him, a line right under his nose. Nazi, she thought. D-a-m-n Nazi.

Sammy figured she should tell Jessica about Bobby. She didn't want Jessica falling in with any Nazi. And Bobby wouldn't ever like Sammy anyway. Take that time she wrote out invitations to a Peppy's Super Bowl Party on index cards and scotch-taped them to all fifty employees' desks. Sammy showed up with barbecue chips, two dozen deviled eggs, and sandwiches. Then she waited. Not one person besides her showed up. She tried not to let it bother her. They had other things to do. Families and stuff. At least she had her favorite foods: bologna and mayonnaise. Even when she had heartburn the next day, she wasn't mad, until she noticed an index card balled up next to the wire trash can, like somebody threw it away but missed. She smoothed it out and saw it was Bobby's invitation—she'd made him a special one that said "Go Packers!" since he liked that team. He and Jessica had written notes back and forth on it. The first note said, "Jess, wanna come to this happening party with me?" and had an arrow pointing up to Sammy's invite. Sammy got excited, thinking they'd planned to come. But below

that Jess wrote, “Haha. Thought you’d never ask.” Then Bobby wrote, “I’d rather stab myself to death with a toothpick than watch the game with Sammy. For real though a bunch of us are watching it at La Cancunarita. Wanna come?” And the last note was Jessica’s and said, “Sure. And from what I hear, your girlfriend’s the one who gets stabbed with a toothpick.”

Sammy told the manager she couldn’t work like this, so he called a meeting where he wrote ‘Workplace Camaraderie’ on the dry erase board. She almost quit. But she took a few days off instead and convinced herself to give it another go.

That was just Sammy’s nature. She wanted to believe she might get through to people some time. Like how, even today, before she set her slide lock plan in action, she wanted to give those black high heels one final chance to give her bathroom back. She suspected that wouldn’t happen so went forward with great caution. Caution mixed with a bit of timely necessity, but caution all the same. She didn’t need any more coffee so made her way down the hall to her bathroom.

She edged the main door into the bathroom open a crack and listened for any signs of life: a footstep, a lone toilet paper dispenser softly swiveling in its plastic tray. She halted with a quickness when she heard a flushing toilet. Her shoulders—her mom always called them “football player shoulders”—locked in place, and she hunched over, ready to run. After a solid thirty-seconds, she decided that toilet was stuck running.

Relieved, she tried to slide in through the crack in the door but underestimated her girth. She’d ignored the gym lately. It was hard to go these days, what with her mom getting older. Every time Sammy left the house her mom noticed.

“Where you off to?” her mom would ask.

“Just to Hardy-Har-dware,” Sammy would say. “I’ll be back quick.”

“No, take your time,” her mom would say. “Go on. Go out now. Do you need some money?”

Here, take this money. Go see a movie. Here, take more. Go see a few movies.” Her mom would pull a sweaty wad of cash out from her leather purse and shake it at Sammy like a tambourine.

Her mom worried about Sammy not having enough money. Not having enough friends, or boyfriends, or fun. Her mom wanted her to have the most of everything, and some days Sammy thought her loneliness burdened her mom more than herself. That hurt to—

Sammy shook her head. Now was not the time for life inspecting, in the middle of her bathroom tracking. She snuck on in, stopped at the first stall, and dropped to her knees to peek under the door. “Great stars above!” she said: both stalls were bone-dry-as-chalk empty. She wouldn’t have to get her rucksack and go through with her slide lock plan after all. It might have taken Sammy a week to get her message across, but that black heels lady’d finally heard her.

Sammy stood up, shoved out her broad, mighty chest, and sauntered down to her stall. She stopped outside the door and nodded at it. Patted it.

“Hello, old buddy,” she said.

She decided some pre-performance squats were in order so stuck both arms out, and heaved her weight up and down at the knees, whooshing out a breath with every thrust. She belonged here. Where nobody, not one soul, had a right to stop her. To tell her she was doing something the wrong way.

She grabbed her stall door and flung it back so hard it hit the wall, like a single, welcoming clap at the queen’s return. She slackened her buckskin belt and watched her thick, green, corduroy pants swaddle around her ankles in warm layers where her white gym socks poked up out of her boots. Everything looked exactly like it should.

No more than two minutes into her business, the hateful swishing sound of the bathroom door opening damn-near broke the sound barrier. Sammy sucked in a sharp breath and pulled her bare knees in close. Please, she thought, anybody but those black heels. If it was white sneakers or brown high heels, they'd get the hint and leave, or do their business and leave. The clacking sounds edged closer and closer until the shoes came in her line of vision under the stall door, and sure-as-shit, it was them. Those hateful, black high heels.

Sammy barely kept from bellowing. She twisted her fingers, shrunk back, folded into her lap. The heels stood there, peeking in under the stall like the pointy heads of two black rats about to pounce. She considered stomping on them. Or at least balling up toilet paper and throwing it at them. Maybe if she stayed real still, though, they'd leave.

But no. The rat heels turned, skittered into the other stall, and slammed the door. Right next to Sammy.

Sammy bolted up to a standing position. Then remembered what she was doing and half-sat back down but not all the way. This last chance she'd given those black rat heels? They'd blown it.

To get this bathroom back, she'd have to get her rucksack and go through with her plan. She did what she needed to get her underpants back up, held her corduroys loose at her waist, and backed against the wall to stare down at the feet of her mighty foe in the next stall over. Sammy hadn't thought about it before, but now, in the heat of this moment, it occurred to her she didn't know why those heels kept coming to this bathroom. Why my bathroom? she wondered. Why not just go away? Give me my privacy? Why don't they get it? She watched those heels, sitting there, not doing a damn thing, like they were waiting her out.

Then it hit her: they were waiting her out. They can't go in front of other people either.

Holy crap, Sammy thought. Of course that was it. Those high heels suffered from the same private bathroom need Sammy had. A sudden sense of kinship washed over her. She knew those heels. As deeply as she had hated them, she now pitied them, felt almost like she ought to apologize. Who knew what lady was attached to those heels? Probably some lady just like Sammy. Maybe even the friend Sammy had always looked for, right there, in the next stall over. Don't get so excited, old girl, Sammy said to herself. That's likely too much to hope for.

But if Sammy knocked on the stall right now and explained? Maybe she and those heels could fix it. They could work out a schedule even. Every Monday/Wednesday/Friday Sammy would get the bathroom first. Then Tuesday/Thursday she would come in late, and the other lady could have it. That lady who probably had nowhere else to go. Like Sammy didn't. They could make a calendar, tack it up in the bathroom. Like a game. And they could drink margaritas together at La Cancunarita Mexican Restaurant and laugh over how they should've been friends so much earlier, and when Nazi Bobby and his girlfriend cruised by in that Miata, Sammy and her bathroom friend would be having too much fun to notice, eating baskets of free chips and salsa, singing "La Bamba," and drawing up next week's bathroom schedule. Like best friends do.

Sammy couldn't wait for it to happen. She had to reach out now. She balled up her fist and, shaking with excitement, knocked on the adjoining stall wall.

No one said anything.

In case the lady was hard of hearing, Sammy knocked heavier. "If you want, we could share," Sammy said. "Instead of fighting."

The lady didn't say a word. Didn't even sound to be breathing.

"Can you hear me?" Sammy said, almost yelling. "I said, let's work it out."

If she didn't know better, Sammy would've thought the stall was empty for all the answer she got. "All this fighting?" she said, "No need for it." She let her head sink forward onto the stall wall. Talking about things direct loosened her stress up. She should've done this last week. "It's silly," she said. "With all we have in common and us running away from each other." Sammy chuckled. "I know a place with the best margaritas where we can talk it over."

The lady's shoes made a scuffing noise, and Sammy heard her scrape at her lock.

"You want to both come out and talk?" Sammy said. The other stall door clanged open and thwaped against the outside of Sammy's stall where the lady must've thrown it back hard. The high heels burst out, took off running out of the bathroom.

Shit, Sammy thought, that lady hadn't understood. Maybe she didn't realize who Sammy was? Sammy jerked her stall open and launched out after the high heels to catch them and explain. She flew out of the bathroom, trying to button up her pants while she ran, yelling, "Hey, wait!" The lady sped off, clacking down the hall toward Sammy's office. Sammy gave up on getting her pants buttoned and held them up while she bolted after the heels. She turned the corner at the end of the hall and finally, for the first time, saw the lady's face. It was a secretary from downstairs. One of the bigwig's assistants, who Sammy'd only met in passing. What was her name? Damn it, Sammy couldn't remember. "Miss," Sammy yelled, waving, and ran up to her. The lady'd stopped running and leaned against the wall, holding her side like she had a cramp.

"Please," the lady said between pants, "leave me alone." She held her arm up in front of her, with her cell phone in her hand, like she was trying to keep Sammy at a distance.

"Don't you know me?" Sammy said. "I'm the one. Who's been in the bathroom too. All last week."

“I just,” the lady said, shook her head, and started walking backwards, away from Sammy. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about us,” Sammy said and pointed back and forth between the two of them, while she edged closer to the secretary. If she could get her to calm down, Sammy could explain her plan. “Us running each other out of that bathroom for the last week.” Sammy laughed. This would all be a funny story soon, after they became friends.

“I’ve never been in that bathroom before just now,” the secretary said, getting louder. Like she might be angry. “I don’t know—they told me to check out the bathroom. Take pictures.” She held up her cell phone, shook it from side to side. “For the meeting. For evidence.” She pointed at the wall.

Sammy looked where the secretary pointed and saw an Info and Update cork bulletin board tacked up in the hallway. She stepped over toward it.

“Just...leave me alone,” the secretary said and started backing up fast. Then she yelled, “You fucking weirdo,” and took off down the stairs.

Sammy couldn’t chase her. She stood in the middle of the empty hallway staring at that cork board, where there was a flyer that said, “Mandatory Meeting Friday, 10:30, Board Room C. To address the Nazi symbols/S.S. insignias carved into the women’s bathrooms. If you see one of these, please report it to the main office.” And under that, a grainy photo of one of Sammy’s S.S. bathroom initials.

Sammy needed to sit. She leaned against the wall and held her breath like she did when she was about to lose it but didn’t want to. She wasn’t sure why her S.S. looked like a Nazi thing, but goddamnit, she thought. Really? They think I’m the Nazi? All I want is to make the world a more comfortable place for me. I don’t hurt anybody. I’m not nasty. Or mean. I only graffitied.

They couldn't understand her, no matter how she tried. Now she'd done something so wrong it made her look like a Nazi? And how the hell was she so off about that secretary? It occurred to Sammy only now that lots of the women in the building probably wore black high heels. That secretary'd never used Sammy's bathroom which meant Sammy had tracked the wrong person.

Who was the real high heels lady? Sammy wouldn't ever know because that secretary was bound to tell her bigwig boss how Sammy scared her, or they'd figure out Sammy had done the Nazi stuff. Or both. Regardless, they'd fire her, like she eventually got shit-canned from every job she didn't first quit out of work-place loneliness.

If only instead Sammy had started out last week by asking the real black high heels lady to get a margarita. Or by offering to give up the bathroom. But that wasn't the problem, Sammy knew. Normally, she could tell herself little fibs, make it seem like she'd only messed up one particular detail in a situation. But if she let herself look at the truth, she knew it wouldn't have made one ounce of difference if she'd talked to the real heels lady. Or made better food for the Super Bowl party or explained to Shelia Anderson and Jessica how really she just wanted to be like them. The reality was Sammy wasn't good at people.

Sammy thought about her grand plan for fixing the bathroom today: that slide lock she intended to screw up inside the main bathroom door, so she could lock it behind herself. She could do it still. But they'd just rip the lock down and yell at her in a meeting. Tell her how she always did wrong. If they even bothered to do that. They might storm up here and fire her any second.

And here she came in today, thinking she'd fix things. Even brought her rucksack, heavy with all those rat trap tools she'd put in there to carry out to the field. Which, now she

remembered she had those other tools, a new idea occurred to her. One that would make things feel better in her own head at least.

Damn all these coworkers, Sammy thought. Calling me a goddamn Nazi. If they want me to feel sectioned off, alone, if they don't want to talk to me, about bathroom sharing or football or anything else, then so be it. I'm done laying down, taking it. She pounded her fist into her open palm. I'll do what I should've done all along. She shoved herself off the wall, and her heart jumped up and pounded like a shotgun going off inside her chest over and over.

She buttoned up her pants and plowed up the hall, to her office, and in a craze, bent over to heave up her rucksack. She hadn't refastened her belt, so when she reached under her desk, her pants slid down for a second until she got readjusted and yanked them up.

At the sight of Sammy's nearly un-pantsed rear, Jessica whooped out, "What the—," before Bobby cut her off with, "God, Jessica, is that necessary?" But Sammy swung past Bobby's desk and nearly clobbered him with her rucksack, at which point he ducked and started to gag like that alcohol wanted out from where it was trapped.

Sammy stopped at the office door, pointed at Bobby, and yelled, "Light beers, asshole."

She stamped back down to her bathroom, slammed the main door open, turned on her heels, and smashed it shut behind her.

Goddamn secretary. Goddamn Jessica, with her skirts barely covering her ass. Bobby the shithead weasel. Too scared to tell his girlfriend he likes Jessica. They'd see, she thought and inwardly laughed but then heard herself and realized it was actually an out-loud laugh.

Sammy snatched her rucksack off her shoulder, sat it on the floor, and leaned over to dig through it. She grabbed something heavy: her portable, hand-held, self-housed-battery-powered, MIG ready welder. It had been her Christmas present to herself, most expensive thing Sammy

ever bought outside of her F150 truck. This new, cutting-edge model didn't even need an external power supply, what with its dual-celled, lithium ion battery that took up no more space than a tin lunch box. Her baby. Her MIG welder.

She'd left all her welding gear in the rucksack ever since she went to work out back, where she wouldn't disturb her mom. She slipped on her goggles and gloves, and her hands didn't even shake anymore. She knew about this: putting things back in control. Some things you don't mess with. And when a girl needs privacy in her bathroom, there are ways and welders to make that happen.

She stood up, and when she did, her pants fell below her rear from where she hadn't put her belt back on, so she kicked one leg until they fell down, to get them out of the way. Then bent over, in her tight white, full-coverage underpants—respectable underpants, not the kind Jessica probably wore—Sammy welded the main bathroom door shut with her inside.

This was deserved. She had been kind to these people. Tried to understand them.

Sammy leaned in with the gun and pulled her body away to keep her work shirt and bare thighs from the sparks.

She'd tried to relate to them like her mom had told her to that time with Shelia Anderson and the Jazzercise step-box. That time, after she knocked out Shelia's tooth, Sammy hid in the coat closet until time to get on the bus home. When she came out, Shelia and her friends tackled Sammy. Sat on her arms and legs and held her belly-down. Cackled while they wrote on the back of her white shirt with Magic Markers. Sammy could've fought back, but she knew she'd screwed up. So she laid there and took it. They bruised her arms and half her left leg went numb where the calf couldn't get any blood. When she thought they were done, Shelia said, "Gimme the marker," and added something else that really sent them laughing. Then they ran off.

People hooted and yelled and cracked up behind Sammy the whole way to the bus, so she hid her shirt with her backpack, and put on both shoulder straps even though she'd seen all the other kids do only one shoulder, and she knew that must be the cool way. She kept her backpack on, which made her push her knees into the seat in front of her on the bus, and a blonde-headed boy screamed at her to get her knees out of his back. Nobody ever sat with her, so she turned sideways, until the bus driver yelled for her to face forward, and by the time she got off the bus she ran home and couldn't see through her sobbing.

Her mom tore her shirt off and wouldn't let her read it, but Sammy found it in the trash later. It said "Sammy the Fatty" and below that, "Fatty the Human Bulldozer." And all her mom said? Be more like them. Be more like those people.

Sammy focused on going steady with the MIG welder.

I tried, she thought. Hadn't she always been friendly with Jessica? Even though, every day at work, Jessica made her remember about Shelia Anderson? And about Morris and how she could never get any dates? Didn't Sammy watch football, which she didn't even care for, so she'd have something to talk to Bobby about? She spent all day thinking up things to say to folks, to be a part of them. But she never could do it right.

She mowed down the bathroom door with the welder, building the metal seam barrier.

Everybody else in the goddamn world got how to do it. Of course she had always known they talked about her. Laughed at her. But she tried to ignore that. Think the best of them. She could barely get up every morning and convince herself to come to work, to try again. To keep hoping she'd do something that would get through to somebody.

She got in one, half-inch long pass and figured that should hold this flimsy metal. Took off her goggles, and dropped the gun.

Sammy couldn't remember the last time she'd shaved her legs, and the smell of singed hair filled the room, covering up all the other smells. She pulled off one glove and scratched the back of her thigh, ran her finger down the side of the door next to the welded seam, and admired her work. That was a nice line. Showed good control.

Things felt clearer now. The relief surprised her. If she'd known she'd feel this much better afterward, she would've done this on day two. She walked to her stall, patted the door, took down her underpants, and sat to enjoy her private bathroom time.

Anonymous Support Group for Insecure People

The guy who chose the name Gary Coleman is late again. I've got no clue why he goes by Gary Coleman, since he looks a hell of a lot more like Jeff Goldblum, and I always almost call him 'Jeff' on accident. While we wait on him, the other four of us silently hunch over the boardroom table in our black vinyl rolly-chairs. When Gary Coleman finally waltzes in, the acting Chairperson, Anderson Cooper, begins the meeting by saying, "A couple notes, before we get started."

We look up—from our smart phones, yellow legal paper, and varied doughnuts—to glare at Anderson Cooper with exasperation over the delay he's causing but also with a deep appreciation for said delay as not one of us actually, truly wants to be in these meetings. Or we don't want to need to be in them. But we do need to be here. And we know it. We all voluntarily signed up for this support group through the Craigslist post Anderson Cooper made called "Free, Anonymous, Group-Led Support Group for Insecure People to Air Out and thus Overcome their Insecurities." Though according to rumor, one person signed up for the group because his court-ordered therapist knows he needs these meetings and forces him to come.

Not me though. I definitely belong here, even if I try to hide it in front of Hilary Duff—who, at the first meeting, debated what celebrity nom de plume to use, cycling through Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus before deciding to go with the more innocent Hilary Duff. I love that about Support Group Hilary. She's pure and pristine. These meetings are the way I met her, and eventually they'll be the way I grow the confidence to woo her. Not that I don't have confidence. I have surpluses of it, in fact. If 'surpluses' is even a word. Which it must be.

I just prefer to wait out my attack, is my point. On the ladies. I can woo them. Given enough time and the perfect set of one-hundred-percent ideal circumstances. These

circumstances I'm currently in? They've turned out near-ideal. In these meetings, I can anonymously unleash my hugest insecurities right in front of Hilary Duff. Then when she falls in love with me—later, at some unspecified point...hell, might be today!—I'll have nothing to hide.

Gary Coleman/Jeff Goldblum has shared one metric butt-ton of bullshit reasons he's in this support group. His alleged embarrassments so private he can only share them in front of anonymous strangers? They include such absolute gems as:

—Gary's "preposterously huge junk." A remarkably difficult affliction according to him.

—"Snake'n'eggs-itis," a condition resulting in a perpetual genital outline, in the crotch area (a side effect of "preposterously huge junk").

—And in last week's meeting, he made a new claim: "Wanna know my problem?" he said. "I slay the ladies." Then he raised his eyebrows up and down, really fast, at Hilary Duff. I could've decked him. I really could have.

"Like, literally slay them?" Hilary asked. Though I'm not sure she understands what 'literally' means. Sometimes, she seems to think it means 'figuratively.'

"You tell me," Gary Coleman said. He made his hand in a gun shape and blew above it like there was smoke billowing out.

I think it frightened Hilary. Obviously Gary Coleman, sack of shit extraordinaire, was hitting on her. But Hilary doesn't always pick up on subtle things like that.

Fucking Gary Coleman. My life would be perfect with Hilary Duff if only he wasn't here, getting in the way. I'm a capable dude. I'm spry. Young enough. Early-to-mid twenties. So what if Gary Coleman has a manicured mustache and tan? A shapely bicep that shows through his semi-unbuttoned button-ups? I work hard. Have clean-cut appearance on my side. And I never,

ever forget to zip up my fly. Sometimes I even safety-pin it shut. With a couple safety pins. For good measure.

“Finally,” I hear Anderson Cooper say, after he rants for awhile, “last time we met, one of us may or may not have admitted he would like very much to dabble in the field of women’s clothing design but is afraid of failing.”

It was Anderson Cooper of course. We all know this. But the rules of 1. Anonymity and 2. Never mentioning what someone said in a previous meeting (so nobody has to worry about having their insecurities tossed back in their face), mean we have to talk in some weird, third-person, removed way like that.

“Moreover,” Anderson Cooper continues, “one of you, upon leaving last week’s meeting, and seeing said would-be fashion designer in the parking lot, might have approached him and handed him your business card with a crude, gyzyming penis sketched in Sharpie on back. If possibly you did this thing, allow me to say this to you:

“You are well versed in our group’s primary rule. We remain strangers so we can share our most terrifying insecurities without fear of reprisal. The fact you breached this protocol, by giving someone your business card and thus your actual name, is not a thing I am willing to deal with since this is my last night as acting Chairperson. And as any lame-duck president would do, I will ignore this issue, leaving it for the next randomly chosen group leader, who will find when she sits in the Chair, a metaphorical whoopee cushion leaking out the contents of your protocol breach. The new Chair will have to deal with this embarrassing fact. You’re welcome.”

The Chair stops talking to breathe. When he does, Angela Lansbury stands and breaks in with her constant refrain. “It’s the damndest, darkest corner of hell I live in,” she says, and I could finish the sentence for her, but she keeps going, “where I cannot help but queef every time

a gentleman enters me. Call it age, if you will, but insertion ends in queef, and I am too mortified to do it anymore.”

Mrs. Lansbury. Totally certain no one’s ever known her pain. I’d do anything for the chance to learn about Hilary Duff’s queefing habits. Or preferably lack thereof.

“I’m alone,” Mrs. Lansbury goes on, “in a cage made of my own old body where I spend all my days wishing I could let someone in.”

I’m semi-sick of hearing Mrs. Lansbury re-announce that same, crass embarrassment every week. But I respect a person her age looking for help, being honest. Not to mention, flailing her sex life in front of everyone. Which is insanely brave. I couldn’t do it. Not that my sex life is crappy or anything. It definitely isn’t. But is it as stellar as I want Hilary to believe? Best to let her decide vis-à-vis first hand experience.

After yet again delivering her hugely traumatic revelation, Mrs. Lansbury folds herself back into her rolly-chair.

I look over at Hilary Duff. She sits by me tonight, as she always does. Admittedly, sometimes because I wait until she gets here to pick a seat, then I take the chair by her. Once Angela Lansbury took the seat next to Hil, but I pulled a rolly-chair out from another spot, edged it between them, and purposely bumped into Angela Lansbury every time I reached for a doughnut, until finally she rolled over and let me all the way in.

Hilary stands and belts out, “I can’t hold this one in anymore.” What a powerful voice. Probably she learned to project like that as a cheerleader in high school. Maybe she still has that old uniform? Though, I mean, I’m not weird or anything. Just, the uniform would be quaint, and we could pull it out and laugh when we go to her mom’s for Christmas. The whole family could

sit around and talk about how great Hilary is. That's pretty much the only reason I care about the cheerleader outfit thing.

"Go on," I whisper, to encourage her. Every piece of info she leaks gets me closer to figuring out who she really is. Though no way will I break anonymity by contacting her. Not till this support group ends. Rules are rules for reasons.

"I teach English," Hilary says. "I won't say what level or where—"

"Glad to see," Anderson Cooper cuts in, "at least one member respects our agreed premise of anonymity." He stares at Gary Coleman.

Hilary holds her hand up at Anderson Cooper in a stop-motion, like a crossing guard. Crossing guard? Maybe she teaches elementary school. I make a mental note to keep an eye out for schools nearby. Then I write a note on my legal pad to remind me. But a really small note so Hilary won't see it. Then I cross it out and then erase it because I'm positive she'll spot it. Do they list teachers online? Am I stalking her if I look to see?

With her other hand, Hilary tugs on the edge of her blazer to smooth it. She looks at everyone in the room, one after another. I get nervous when she looks down at me, wondering if she can see down my shirt that has the top button unbuttoned. But I know she won't look because, in a previous week, I told the group about my fear that I still have man-boobs which I know for certain I had when I was a kid but almost definitely don't have now since I am what you might call dangerously under-weight. Hilary Duff is not the sort of ass hat who would forget about someone's insecurity. But I casually make to scratch my chest and button up my shirt anyway.

"I'm an English teacher," she says, "and I don't understand what 'ironic' means."

One person sucks in a gasp.

Gary Coleman, the real son of a shit, leans over and mock-whispers to Angela Lansbury, “Now that’s ironic.” Which is about the cruelest thing a person could do just now. Gary Coleman has to be the one who’s forced to come here by his court-ordered therapist. And I’m guessing he is, in addition, the fucker who handed his jizzing business card to poor Anderson Cooper.

Of course Anderson Cooper is gay. Only Gary Coleman would do something as effed-up and homophobic as hand him a dick drawing. If you want to make fun of Anderson, it should be for his obvious color-blindness. Don’t get me wrong: Anderson is a stand-up guy. I’d support him by wearing any mismatched suit he designed. Hell, maybe after this group is over, he can help me pick out the perfect dress for Hilary. Still, dude’s utterly color blind. At the first meeting, he tried to color code all the “Notes/Info” on the dry erase board but kept messing it up and had to ask us which color was which. A fashion designer? Dream big, buddy. No harm in it. I hope good things come at you.

“I blame,” Hilary says, “that damn Alanis Morissette song about being ironic.”

I love it when she curses. It’s like some bad-girl side of her popping up. Terrific stuff, Hil, I think. Get wild.

“I was in high school,” she says, “and that part about how you can only get spoons when you want a knife? It was the most perfect metaphor—”

“You sure you understand metaphors?” Gary Coleman says. I imagine smacking him so hard his moustache will quiver for seconds afterward. Or maybe I could “accidentally” knock over his water glass, right on him, while reaching for the chocolate doughnut farthest away from me. That I could do. And I’d eat that chocolate doughnut too, even though I prefer the glazed kind with the multicolored sprinkles. Sprinkles that will forever defy Anderson Cooper in their varied colors.

Why does he call himself Gary Coleman? He isn't even black. Probably he's trying to be ironic. Oh, ouch: ironic. I almost apologize to Hilary before I realize that would be totally out of context since I only thought the word 'ironic,' didn't say it out loud. Still I look up at her, pleading for her to forgive me. Or even notice me.

"It was the perfect metaphor," Hilary goes on, "for how all these nice boys, with their hair parted down the middle and their Polo shirts, they all wanted to date me, and they were like a bag of spoons. A million, billion spoons. When all I really wanted was a knife. One boy with slicked-back hair. One bad boy who wasn't afraid to cut."

Bad boy? I think. I've been bad. At some point, I'm sure. Like, once I filed my taxes late. On purpose. I woke up on April 15, saw the date on my cell phone, and went back to sleep. Didn't even do them. Like a boss. Turns out? The government doesn't care unless you owe them money, which I never have since I don't make enough to pay taxes. I mean, I work and all. I'm just bohemian. Except bohemians are artists with long hair, and I never let my hair get long. Even when tips at work are low, I still get to SuperCuts once a month. Except that time I got a speeding ticket (who pulls over a scooter?!) and couldn't go for awhile. But I'll grow my hair out for Hilary and slick it back. At least until she's mine. Then I'll cut that shit off cause my hair touching my ears drives me insane. But she doesn't have to know that.

Hilary collects herself and keeps talking. "I keep having this nightmare where my students group up in a circle around me and literally close in on me—"

"She got literally right," Gary Coleman mutters.

"It's like in *Lion King*," Hilary continues, ignoring him, "when Scar corners Simba. Me being Simba of course, except I'd be Nala, but you see what I mean in terms of the story. Every time, my students chant 'i-ron-y' over and over until I sing the chorus of Alanis Morissette's

song. Then they all sit down and go back to talking about smoking pot after school. So I finally looked ‘irony’ up to try to stop the dream, but I still don’t understand it. I’m super-duper embarrassed about this.”

I guess, at this point, we should clap or something like people in normal support groups do, and I want to, but I feel weird being the first one to do it, so I sit silently. Gary Coleman says, “Pee Wee Herman there,” and nods across the table at me, “he could tell you about irony. Take a mother-load of irony for him to get with you.”

I clench my fists on my knees under the table and stare down at my black uniform pants. I know I smell like seafood. I hope the scooter ride over airs out my clothes, but I don’t have time to change between my lunch shift and these meetings. I know I’m a fuckup who hasn’t done anything worthy of Hilary. But does he have to bring it up in front of her? The woman I dream about making out with in front of the whole group? If I could do that, it would for once and final, prove it: I’m a powerful, fully capable man. Mighty even.

A capable, mighty man called Pee Wee Herman. That isn’t even the celebrity name I chose. When we picked our names, I wanted something that said “Competent.” Or maybe “Visceral.” I at least wanted something that said, “Most definitely no one ever nicknamed this guy ‘Free Willy’ because he once, in high school, forgot to zip up his fly after peeing, and his mom was behind on laundry, so he happened to be going commando that day.” Something that said the opposite of that.

Clark Gable? Ears too big. Cary Grant? Too predictable. Dennis Rodman maybe, but I’m no wildcard. Eric Estrada sounded right. That sounded like it should come with a gun. Maybe with knowledge of an ancient martial art. Plus: bedroom skills. Estrada’s got bedroom magic.

Not that I don't, of course. I'm magic. Just my magic is subtle. I'm no "saw-the-pretty-lady-in-half" bedroom magician. I'm more of a, "Is this your card? No? How about this one? Still no? I'll keep trying." And I will. I'll try and try, until I figure out exactly which card is yours. And then I'll play that card over and over until you resent me for never finding any other cards to play. Until you stop me mid-love-magic-session one day and say, "let's get creative" at which point I will, undoubtedly, roll over and play dead. Not because I don't want to please you in bed. I'm just terrified. Of anything I'm not sure about.

I settled on Bruce Wayne as my name. It seemed right for me.

But Gary Coleman apparently didn't think so since, at our first meeting, he said, "Thought we had to pick a celebrity name. If he can be Batman, I want to be Zeus." Then Angela Lansbury, said, "No name changes. Too confusing." Which, I get it. She's up there, age-wise. I don't hold it against her that she wants things to stay the same. But Gary Coleman said, "Fine. Then Pee Wee Herman over there," and he pointed across the boardroom table at me, "gets a nickname."

He called me Pee Wee all night. After that, no one seemed to remember I was Bruce Wayne. Could I have stood up and said, "Hey, I'm Bruce Wayne!"? I guess. Sure, I could've. But nobody likes a spoilsport. Plus the thing I'm actually most insecure about in the world? Usually it's that whole man-boobs thing, but right now, it's that Gary Coleman will confront me, and I will back down like the weak little ass lump I am. Which, really, is only because I'm a pacifist, in the sense that I don't believe in confrontation unless it's totally necessary. But still, I would look weak in front of Hilary. So I let him call me Pee Wee Herman.

Sometimes I think I see Hilary pause before she says "Pee Wee." I wonder if this is because she remembers I'm really Bruce Wayne or because she thinks the words "Pee" and

“Wee” are juvenile. Maybe she doesn’t know what juvenile means either? Of course she does. She’s a brilliant slice of pie. I’ll teach her about irony.

I’ve had more than enough of listening to Gary Coleman trash talk Hilary. So I decide to move the line of fire toward myself. In a gesture I hope Hilary understands to be both noble and self-sacrificing, I stand and start talking.

“Somewhere along the line,” I say, “the word ‘s-h-r-i-m-p’ became hard for me to pronounce. I can’t put the ‘h’ sound in that word, no matter how hard I try. I wait tables at a chain seafood restaurant that I won’t name for the sake of maintaining anonymity.” I nod at Anderson Cooper, glare at Gary Coleman, and glance over at Hilary to see if she’s taken note of my workplace. But she’s on her cell phone. Probably texting the parent of a sick kid from school or something. She doesn’t normally text while I’m talking. At least, not that I remember.

But what if she’s always been texting under the table, every time I’ve talked? Maybe I’ve never noticed because I’m a self-obsessed asshole. Maybe she’s the self-obsessed asshole? Have I had her wrong this whole time, and if so, what does that say about my ability to read people? But I can read people. Like a champ. That’s how I make all my tips at Red Lob—at my work, the name of which I won’t even think to myself for fear I will accidentally say it out loud. Everything’s fine. Hilary is in love with me. Or she will be.

I clear my throat. Go on. “Anyway, you think your life is hell?” I glance at Angela Lansbury. “It’s fine when people order ‘skewers’ or ‘scampi’ because I can say, ‘Ah, the scampi. Good choice.’ But when they order it blackened? Or grilled? And I have to repeat the S-word after them? Awful. The ultimate embarrassment. Repeatedly, every day.”

Gary Coleman reaches for another doughnut and says, “You should explain to Hilary how it’s ironic that you can’t say the name of the food you serve.”

“I can say it,” I say. “It just comes out lispy. With no ‘h’.”

“Say it then,” he says. “Say shrimp.”

“I don’t have to,” I say. Whoa!, I think. Badass, coming through! I don’t know where I found this brave streak, but I like the tingly feeling it gives me in my fingertips. Like I’m on fire. Maybe I’ve had more than I can take of Gary/Jeff being an asshole to Hilary. Eventually a guy has to stand up for people who are being singled out. Yeah. That feels right, so I add, “I’m not your plaything, Jeffy.”

“Who the hell’s Jeffy?” Gary Coleman/Jeff Goldblum says.

“More significantly,” I say, “Hil isn’t your plaything.”

“Who the hell is a hill?” he says.

Shit, I called her that out loud. I should not have done that. Now she’ll know I’m totally suckered by her. I need leverage. Need to look badass again. But me, a badass? Who’m I kidding? I can woo her with my gentleness. With my warmth. Or if that fails, my fastidious love of rules. She’s an elementary school teacher. She must dig guys like that.

“Hil? Hilary?” I say and gesture at her with my open, swooping hand. “The woman you have berated this whole meeting? This powerful woman who is totally capable of taking care of herself but chooses not to, as that would belittle her?” I swoop toward her again, praying she loves this. Believing she must crave me by now, with the way I stand up for her, literally and figuratively.

“You can’t,” Gary Coleman says, then takes a chomp out of his doughnut, “shorten a nickname. ‘Hilary’ is her nickname. That’s like if someone’s name was Harold, and they went by Harry, but you decided to call them Ha.”

Chunks of doughnut dribble down his shirt. The absolute slob. I look to see if Hilary notices, but she's still wrapped up in her cell phone. For the best. She shouldn't have to endure hearing me defend her honor.

"Gentleman," Anderson Cooper says, "this isn't—"

"Come on," Gary Coleman says. "Say it. Say 'shrimp'."

"I'm not sure why Hilary is in these meetings at all," I say, even though I totally know. Of course she's here because she's embarrassed about not understanding irony, about relying on her looks when she isn't sharp. But damnit, I'm smart enough for both of us. "You on the other hand, Jeff Goldblum," I say, "you're obviously here because you're insecure about your manhood."

"When did Jeff Goldblum get here?" Angela Lansbury says. "That's a hot tamale right there."

"Say shrimp," Gary/Jeff says. He puts his doughnut down.

"Your supposed giant package," I say. You can do it, I tell myself. Let him have it. "Bullshit. Classic compensation. You've probably got a micro-penis." I swallow hard and don't even look at Hilary. I know she's watching me in my grandeur. I'm like a prize deer trouncing away after giving the other buck a good, what-for ramming.

"Might I remind you," Anderson Cooper says, "we are not to bring up prior meetings' revelations for the sake—"

"S-H-R-I-M-P," Gary/Jeff says and leans in across the table at me.

"Everyone knows it's you," I say. I am totally on a roll. "You're the one with the court ordered therapist who makes you come to these meetings. You can't even admit—"

“And every meeting with my therapist,” Gary/Jeff cuts in, “we have shrimp. Barbecue shrimp and shrimp cocktail and shrimp’s shrimpy shrimp.”

“You asshole,” I yell. How dare him use my insecurity against me? Uncouth, sir. “You absolute fucker. At least I can admit I’m insecure. Let’s hear you say that.”

“Geez Louise,” Hilary says and slams her phone on the table. “Language, dude? What the heck’s happening?”

“You think you know about insecurity, hotshot?” Gary/Jeff says.

“Can we say this meeting is done?” Hilary says and picks up her phone. “I’m calling my ride.”

I grab her hand and say, “I’ve got it under control.” But she snatches her phone away like I’m trying to steal it and makes a noise in the back of her throat akin to the sound of someone on the verge of ralphing.

“Cause you can say ‘I’m a lispy, limp-dick loser?’” Gary/Jeff says. “Cause you want the girl you can’t have?”

I feel myself taking a step back. I know he’s outed me. But what the hell? Hilary will love me for who I am. Even if that’s an uncertain, scared man who can’t tell her that he likes her. It’s still a man. And this is the closest I’ve come to being honest in front of a woman. Probably ever. But definitely since high school.

“I’m calling this meeting adjourned,” Anderson Cooper says. “Who wants to be the next Chair?”

“You don’t know jack-shit-all about girls you can’t have,” Gary/Jeff says. He stands up so fast and hard his roly-chair goes flying backwards from the force. “You want to hear about

that? How that story really goes? What it's like to find the woman you don't deserve but get anyway? That what you want, champ?"

I take a few steps back. So many I find myself up against the wall behind me.

But he keeps yelling, almost like he isn't even talking to me anymore. "A woman you convince yourself you can have at first? That's when you find a good-girl, turned bad, turned good. A girl with formerly-dyed-orange hair and scars from where her lip and eyebrow and nose piercings used to be, whose only dream now is to stay at home and match your socks. Who you get a decent job for, selling shit nobody wants but you get them to buy it anyway because you know it'll make her happy.

"And when you somehow get her to overlook what a fucking moron you are, and convince her to marry you, all she wants is children. Your children. But then you can't give her that because your body is an empty useless sack of no-good. The doctors can help, they say. Just like the therapists will say later. They'll give you meds, they say. Homeopathic stuff first. Then hard prescriptions. You'll keep searching and buying weird shit. It'll get weirder. Until finally you're getting illegal creams smuggled in from Peru by a guy calls himself Davy but can't even say it his accent's so thick and your wife's got splotches of hair growing on her back now and sex is just a thing you do like putting gas in the car. A means to an end.

"Until your wife goes ape-shit nutso. Follows you into the bathroom while you're taking a piss. Screams at you, 'You always pee on the toilet seat' and grabs your dick and swings it around while you're trying to stop peeing midstream. Her screaming, 'Where does the pee go? Tell me where the pee goes,' the whole time. Then she leaves you. Before you can even clean up the bathroom."

I realize I'm flattened against the wall now. No one moves. Or speaks. Gary/Jeff takes deep, heaving breaths. His arms quake a little with how he smashes his palms against the table.

"I didn't know—" I start to say.

"Course you didn't," Gary/Jeff says. "Nobody knew. That's the point here, right? I say that shit? I let it out? Well, there you go."

The air feels heavy, like it's smashing us all closer together. I realize the fluorescent lights have been humming this whole time.

"That good enough for you, Pee Wee?" Gary/Jeff says. He throws his hands up in the air and shakes his head. "You feel all better now?" He slams himself down in his chair and flicks his hands at me.

I could be pissed at Gary/Jeff. Could remember how he changed my name to embarrass me. In a group where we're supposed to get rid of our embarrassments. And I want to get mad. I do. But it kills me to watch someone act that tough because they're so hurt. He can't say what he means and stop. He has to maintain this big-guy show, like he still wants to kick my ass, even when he's the most vulnerable person in here.

I can't let him put himself out there alone. I don't want to do it, but I know I'm going to do it. Hilary won't judge me. This will bring us closer, make our bond more honest. I take a step toward the table, look up at the ceiling, then before I can stop myself, I blurt out, "I went to Junior College." I take another step closer.

Gary/Jeff, still heaving, looks like he might slap me, and I realize that was out of context. So I add, "Because they called me 'Free Willy' in high school after I peed and left my fly open." Saying that out loud for the first time in years is thrilling. Like I've broken a really huge rule. It's like no one else is in the room now but also like everyone in the world can hear me, and instead

of stopping like I planned, I keep going: “Junior year. I was going to do it with Stacey VanDerbeek. She wasn’t like head cheerleader. But in terms of cool-ladder? She was a hundred rungs above me. She let me come over to her in-ground pool to watch her breast-stroke because I could get Boone’s Farm from my dad’s gas station, and one day she actually, swear to Christ, said she wanted to lose our virginity together. In the pool house. The next day. I was worshipping every god I could name. I got up at four a.m., stole a bottle of my mom’s blueberry Vodka, and a black and mild (for smoking afterward), snuck over to Stacey’s and left them in the pool house with a rose I picked on the way. So I was half-asleep at school, took a piss, and forgot to zip up. I got to my locker before some smart ass yelled, “Free Willy!” and pointed at me. Two hundred kids, minimum, saw it. By American History, I had my new nickname, and in gym, the girls doing laps screamed, ‘Free Willy’ every time they passed, until Stacey stopped mid-lap, in her tiny blue volleyball shorts, yelled “Hey!” from across the gym, then shouted my name, so everybody could hear, “Is it really as small as they say?” I didn’t even bother to pick up my mom’s Vodka.

“My grades sunk. I got stuck going to Junior College. And you know who goes to Junior College? Same people you went to high school with. That’s who. And losing my virginity? Happened when a drunk girl threw me in a bathroom at a JuCo house party. She wasn’t what you might call ‘small,’ and I wasn’t what you might call ‘strong.’ I asked her if this was okay, like ten times, and she said yeah, but kept calling me ‘Stevie-baby.’ Which seemed weird, and I told her, ‘My name’s not Stevie,’ but I figured, what do I know? I’ve never done it. Maybe it’s a pet-name thing? Until she realized, only after we finished, that I wasn’t the guy she thought. Then accused me of tricking her. Said she better never see me again. So I dropped out of Junior College, and now I wait tables.

“You have any idea how long it took me to be with a woman again after that? Or how many times I ask them if they’re sure they actually, really, definitely want to do this? Enough times that they usually change their mind. And if they don’t, they regret it because it’s like sex with a skeptical, overly polite robot. Like sex with C-3PO. So one person thinks you’re a fuck-up, Jeff? Try dealing with a whole school. Try dealing with the woman you wanted to give your virginity to. And the one you did give it to. Try that on for size.” I stamp my foot. Realize my hands are clenched in fists at my sides.

I don’t know why I feel angry at the end. Maybe cause I didn’t mean to say even half of that? It just came out. I hold my breath. Don’t make eye contact with anyone. My chest feels like it might explode. Now would be the perfect time for applause, I think.

Gary/Jeff eyes me. He leans way back in his chair and crosses his hands behind his head, pivots back and forth on the roly-chair’s rocker. Sticks his tongue in his cheek so hard, I can see it from across the table. Here it comes, I think. He’ll admit that he made his whole story up to get mine out of me. You can never trust people. When you do, they rub your nose in it, like a dog that’s pissed the carpet, to teach you to never do that again.

“If we’re really going to let it all out,” Gary/Jeff says and he uncrosses his hands, leans forward in his chair, and looks dead at Anderson Cooper, “I’m sorry about that business card. It wasn’t mine. Just one I found in my pocket. I did Sharpie the dick on there. But it was supposed to be peeing, not doing the other thing. Call it reaching out, crying for help. Whatever.”

Well, holy shit, I think. “Holy shit,” I say and realize I’m nearly panting from holding my breath for so long. “We should’ve been listening, man. We should’ve known. Or at least asked you.” Half of me wants to try to hug Gary/Jeff or high five him. Maybe go cut some doughnuts together on my scooter in the parking lot. And me being judgmental this whole time, thinking he

sucked for that business card? Damn. I'm about to apologize for being such an unforgivable asshole when Hilary Duff breaks in with, "You're both pathetic. God, this is the last time I sign up for anything after two bottles of wine. Why can't you people get your crap together, like the rest of us?"

Wow. Apparently now is time for all of us to show ourselves. And Hilary's self? Looking a lot like a crap-filled doughnut. She's pretty on the outside, enough to make you believe there must be cream on the inside. But when you get to her core? It's apparently real shitty.

I want to hate her for fooling me. For letting me show her what I'm really like just to have her mock me. For the way she's been pretending to be this great thing she isn't. But it seems so close to what I've been doing myself. I can't blame her, I guess. And, right at this moment, I feel too good to be pissed. Like I've let out this hot air balloon that's been filling up, growing inside me for years.

"Not one of you," Angela Lansbury stutters, like she just woke up from a nap, "has a clue. If any one person has ever loved you, or took notice of you at all, even if it all went to hell later, that was the best damn thing that could have happened to you. Wait till you're old and alone, desperate for anyone to pay attention to you, but too terrified to go through the agony of losing anyone else. Wait for that."

Double wow. She rubs her watery blue eyes, and for a second I think we all see that what she's got in there is what we wish we had.

"I renounce the Chair," Anderson Cooper says and marches outside.

We follow like ducks in a row behind him. Hilary Duff climbs on back of a yellow and black Kawasaki motorcycle, behind a pudgy guy who's doing that thing guys with long hair do when they start to go bald on top, which is to let his ever-decreasing ring of hair keep growing

out, untrimmed. He's got this forearm tattoo of a clown, like Ronald McDonald gone psycho-killer, but I've seen better tattoos come out of the Wal-Mart lobby quarter machines. And he's decked out in what I first think are leathers, but then they pull past me, and the guy is wearing all pleather. Who even knew they made pleather chaps? This guy. I can't blame him. I bet he's high on life, with a woman like Hilary on back of his bike. Good on him, I guess. Hang on to that girl, man. Hang on to that hair. Who knows how long until mine falls out.

Hilary shakes out her hair and flips us off, like she's totally proven how badass she is, and the Kawasaki roars out of the parking lot, engine screaming, until they immediately get caught at a red light. But then, after it's green, oh yes, they rip off into the sunset, growing smaller and smaller until all we can see is a blink of darkness in the middle of the amber glow.

Gary/Jeff sticks his hand out to me. I reach over and shake it and, for a second, make eye contact. I want to ask if he'll be here next week, if we can remember each other's stories, even if we can't talk about it. But I don't. Because it's nice to have something to hope for.

Vicky's Very Own Boll Weevil Bugs

After Vicky heard the bad news that Denise DelTorrio's airplane was delayed, she 'sashayed,' like Denise always said, over to the airport Cinnabon. The skinny teenager behind the counter, with her long dark hair parted in the middle, reminded Vicky of herself, when she was a young girl in Alabama, way back before she moved up here to Indianapolis.

"Let me get," Vicky said, "one of those pretzels. And that cinnamon cream dipping sauce."

The girl used metal tongs to dig the pretzel out from the clear, glass cabinet under her. When she stood back up, Vicky said, "That ought to hold me. Till Denise DelTorrio gets here." Vicky watched for the girl's reaction but didn't see much of one. "You know who Denise DelTorrio is, right?" Vicky said.

The girl shook her head.

"Gee-o, where you been at?" Vicky said. "She's got that TV show, 'Design on a Dime?'" The girl stood stock-still with the pretzel pinched between her tongs. "I'd be with her now," Vicky said, "but she got delayed in Denver. It's all right, though. She's going to come to my apartment and see how good it's decorated up." It ruffled Vicky's feathers a bit that she wouldn't get as much time with Denise DelTorrio as she'd expected, but Vicky'd learned a long time ago that good things don't last as long as you might like, and the best a body can do is appreciate what you can get while you got it.

The girl put the pretzel in a bag and said, "Four-seventy-five."

"For a pretzel?" Vicky said and whistled low. "I guess that must be some fine dipping sauce, huh?" She laughed. Even expensive pretzels couldn't upset her right now. She'd been waiting for this day since she first spotted that flyer on the sliding glass door going into the

Kmart that said, “Enter to win! One afternoon with Denise DelTorrio of hit HGTV show ‘Denise DelTorrio’s Design on a Dime!’” Vicky ran back and forth to follow the flyer while the door opened and closed with people coming in and out. She knew she looked a fool but was too excited to be bothered by that. The seventy-five dollar contest entry fee sure sounded steep. But Vicky figured she could manage it if she skipped the Goodwill for a while and sent her light bill off late. For the chance to meet Denise DelTorrio, she’d give up near about anything.

Denise had changed Vicky’s life. Vicky’d never given one iota about decorating until she saw her first episode of “Design on a Dime.” Straight after the credits, she took off to the Goodwill and bought a stack of pancake-sized, white lace doilies for a quarter and told the checkout girl, “I’m designing on two and a half dimes!” She ‘placed’ some doilies on top of the microwave and safety-pinned others to the ones on top so they hung down over the sides, like the microwave wore a doily football helmet. She watched more of Denise’s shows, and her apartment ‘transformed’ from a any-old-Joe’s place into a Vicky-paradise. If anybody’d ever seen it, they sure would’ve admired it.

Vicky handed the Cinnabon girl a five dollar bill and said, “My friend Suzanne,” Suzanne was Vicky’s closest friend and the other secretary at the State Farm where Vicky worked, “she didn’t remember right off who Denise DelTorrio was either until I got the email, saying I’d won the ‘Meet Denise’ contest, from Denise’s *personal assistant*.” Vicky leaned in and said those last words slow. The Cinnabon girl handed her the change. “It was Suzanne who told me to take Denise to my house.” Really, Suzanne had said, “You should show that Denise Del-what’s-her-name your apartment. Way you go on about it, it must be something.” Which idea Vicky might never have come on herself, but there it sat. And the more she thought on it, the more right it

seemed. She just knew Denise DelTorrio would ‘die’ for her apartment—Denise always ‘died’ for things on her show. Like she’d say, “I died for this headboard made from banjos.”

The Cinnabon girl walked down to the next customer without so much as responding. Vicky figured that girl didn’t understand cause she was too young to care about ‘decoraRtion.’ And truth be told, Vicky knew people in Indiana thought it was weird to talk to strangers. Normally, she remembered not to do it. But she was so excited today, she was having a hard time sitting on it. And that girl made her think of Alabama, so she felt like she could talk to her. Vicky took a seat in one of the plastic, slat chairs and pulled off a chunk of pretzel. Anyway, she couldn’t believe that she, plain old country Vicky, was about to meet the kind of lady who had a personal assistant.

Honestly, her friend Suzanne had been a little ugly about the whole situation. Like how, Suzanne’d first said, “Seventy-five dollars? Aren’t contests like that normally free? And shouldn’t there be a background check on you or something?” Then when Vicky told Suzanne she was going to pick Denise DelTorrio up at the airport, Suzanne said, “She doesn’t have a driver? You’d think a lady who has a personal assistant would have a driver.”

But Vicky swatted over at Suzanne and said, “I don’t give one rat’s banana about her driver. If I pick her up, that’s more time I get with her until ‘Ms. DelTorrio will retire at five pm,’” Vicky read from the personal assistant’s email.

Suzanne said, “She already ‘retired’ when they cancelled her crappy show.”

Which did set Vicky off in a way. But she was too full of joy to get good and mad. “There’s reruns of her show still,” Vicky said. Plus she knew Suzanne didn’t mean it. That was Suzanne’s Midwestern rudeness coming out, which Vicky’d never got used to, even though she was forty-five now and had been in Indiana since she was twenty, and her husband—well her ex-

husband—Benny had moved her up here then left her for the girl who stocked the vegetables at the Kroger grocery store. When he left her, Vicky had considered going back to Alabama where she knew people. But she stayed because she'd made a decision, and Vicky wasn't the sort to turn back from something like that. Benny was like her own, personal, boll weevil bug, she figured. They put up a statue of the boll weevil in Slocomb, where she came from, after those bugs ate up all Alabama's cotton because, by doing that, the boll weevil had put farmers on to growing peanuts. And peanuts turned out to be the way they should've gone all along. Benny might've wronged her like that, but he'd set her on to Indy, and Indy was where she'd made her own way. Some days she wanted more than anything to get a sack of Mr. Currington's boiled peanuts from the Big and Little Grocery Store and drive around the Dairy Queen parking lot, eating them and tossing the shells out the window like she was seventeen again. But she stayed in Indiana.

Indy had things Alabama didn't. Cultural things. Such as that time Suzanne took her to the museum for the "Local Indiana Folk Art" show where one of Suzanne's daughters 'displayed' a basket she'd weaved in traditional Indian ways. Vicky sure was proud for Suzanne. But damn if it didn't make her wish she and Benny could've had a daughter, and maybe her daughter would've weaved baskets, and Vicky would've had things to invite people to. Anyway, they had cheese cubes and wine at the museum, and that felt downright fancy! That was culture. Or as close to culture as Vicky would ever get. She knew she would never be a real city girl. But it was fun to pretend.

Vicky finished her pretzel, used her finger to dip out the rest of the cinnamon glaze sauce, and still Denise's plane wasn't there yet. So she walked back up to the long-haired girl behind the counter, who looked uncomfortable as all get out, staring at the ground. Poor thing's at a

awkward stage, Vicky thought. I remember being that way, before I knew myself. “Let me get another of those pretzels,” she said. The girl tongued it out, and Vicky said, “This is sure a big day for me. I need to look real fine. How’s my make-up?” She leaned over the counter and closed her eyes. Vicky’s momma’d always told her those blue eyes of hers were the best thing she had going, so she’d put on blue eye shadow to ‘accentuate the color.’

The girl didn’t seem to hear Vicky.

“I wore this slimming outfit today,” Vicky said. “Not that I need slimming down. But a little wouldn’t hurt I guess.” She fluffed her top out. Her pants suit, dark blue with light blue flowers on it, was flattering. At least she hoped so. Though it would’ve been nice to have somebody to ask if she looked all right. Really it would’ve been nice to have somebody to talk to about this whole important day.

Not that Vicky much minded being alone anymore. She kept busy with bingo at the VFW Hall on Monday nights; the fifty-percent off yellow tag thrift store sale on Tuesdays; Wednesdays was the Goodwill; Thursdays she watched Denise DelTorrio’s reruns, ate a whole bag of butter popcorn, and let herself have two Coors Lights; and on Saturday’s she drove down to Columbus—near on an hour away—for Auctioneer Andy’s Saturday Night Fever Auction where they had roasted peanuts, gooey cheese nachos, and what they called Elephant Ears in Indiana, but in Alabama they called them Funnel Cakes.

“Y’all don’t have Elephant Ears do you?” Vicky said to the Cinnabon girl. She hadn’t meant to say ‘y’all.’ People in Indiana said ‘you guys.’ But Vicky was wrapped up in thinking about Denise DelTorrio and forgot to keep her Alabama accent in check. She’d done good cutting back on it over the years. Except some words she could never say right, like ‘naked’ which came out sounding like ‘neh-kid.’

The girl looked up at Vicky, as if she didn't understand.

"Like Funnel Cakes?" Vicky said. "Elephant ears?"

The girl shook her head.

"People would eat them up. You should carry them. And you should let somebody else do your décor too. I bet Denise DelTorrio could fix you right up." Vicky had nothing but design on her mind. In part because of meeting Denise but also because she'd stayed up all night rearranging her apartment to get it ready. "I 'stylized' my house," Vicky said. "Just last night I hung a picture I found at the Goodwill of some people at a waterfall."

The girl said, "Four-seventy-five."

That was all right that the girl didn't care about Vicky's waterfall painting. She was too young to understand art. Denise would know Vicky's waterfall painting was something. It had half-naked people, with the woman hanging up a loin cloth, one man with his hand on her shoulder, and the other man washing clothes waist deep in the water. They looked like tribe people. Like not civilized or modern world. Vicky couldn't say one-hundred-percent it was pretty, but she'd learned from Denise's show that oftentimes fancy things don't look like what you'd normally put in your house. That's what makes them fancy. And the painting 'spoke' to Vicky. Those tribe people had each other. They spent their days together, doing their laundry.

Vicky did her laundry alone in the apartment complex's quarter machines in the basement. She once left a load going in the dryer while she ran to the pharmacy, and when she got back somebody'd ripped out all her blue jeans and Capri pants and blouses, and slung them across the floor, like they'd picked through looking to steal something. But they didn't take anything. She wanted to believe that was because they'd felt guilty. But she knew probably she just didn't have anything worth taking. But that didn't matter. She liked her clothes.

Vicky hung her new waterfall picture beside the TV. On the other side of which, she had another Goodwill find: a portrait with a whole family, parents and their three kids, all adorable and hugging up together, in matching jean jackets. She figured those two family pictures, on either side of the TV, gave it a good ‘symmetry.’ The colorful waterfall picture on top of the purple material Vicky’d tacked up on that wall, since painting wasn’t allowed, gave her living room a perfect ‘ambience’ to it. Last night before she’d gone to bed, she had held her Folgers in one hand—nothing like a good cup of Folgers—and stood back to admire her ‘aesthetic.’

When Denise’s plane finally landed, Vicky told the Cinnabon counter girl to, “Be good,” and ‘sashayed’ over to wait at the Arrivals section, holding a piece of paper that had “DENISE DELTORRIO” written on it like the personal assistant’s email told her to do. She dug in her purse for her Vanilla Fields perfume and spritzed herself a couple more times. Soon as Denise came out, Vicky waved big and made to run to her but found she could not move. There stood Denise DelTorrio. In her flesh. She didn’t even have guards. She wore these big old, black sunglasses that covered half her face and had a black scarf wrapped around her neck that flowed down around her black outfit. Black was slimming, Vicky knew. Lord, was she ever tall. And skinny as could be. Denise looked younger than Vicky’d remembered. Not that Vicky was old enough to be her mother. Maybe her older aunt though.

Vicky put her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming, but then no words would come out. Denise walked right by and stood, holding her giant, black purse by the handle, with a hand on her hip, looking one way then the other.

Vicky walked up behind her. “Mrs. DelTorrio?” she said.

Denise whipped right around. “Yes?”

“I’m Vicky,” Vicky said. “I’m the winner.”

Denise cocked her head to the side.

“I mean,” Vicky said, “I get to spend the afternoon with you now.”

“You’re that winner,” Denise DelTorrio said. “I’m sorry. I must’ve missed the sign with my name on it.”

That sign. What did she do with it? Denise DelTorrio wanted it. Vicky bit her bottom lip. Then looked down at her hands. There it was, sure enough. She must’ve dropped the sign-holding hand when she waved at Denise. So she jerked it back up in front of Denise’s face to show she’d done like the email said.

Denise gave a little laugh and said, “That’s okay, about the sign. Great to meet you.” She held her hand out to shake while she smiled and showed all her perfect, straight teeth.

“Where I’m from, we hug,” Vicky said and tried to pull her in, but Denise reared back, leaned over, and sneezed. Still: she’d mostly hugged Denise DelTorrio!

“That’s,” Denise said, “that’s a nice perfume you have. A lot of it, but nice.”

Vicky yanked a tissue out of her purse to give Denise, but stood clinging to it while she said, “Mrs. DelTorrio,” nervous even though she’d practiced this speech, “it is such an honor and a pleasure—”

“Hey,” Denise said, still rubbing her nose like she might sneeze again, “no need for all that honor and pleasure spiel. I’m a regular woman. Like you. And I’m Denise. Not Mrs. Anybody.” Denise patted Vicky on the shoulder. “Want to come grab my luggage with me? Before somebody steals it?” Vicky looked down at her shoulder. With Denise DelTorrio’s hand on it. Vicky nodded, and Denise gently shoved her in the direction of baggage claim.

She says we’re alike! Vicky thought. Almost like we might as well be sisters! Maybe when she sees my apartment, she’ll say, “This is so comfy, I’d rather stay the night here,” and

she could have the bed, and I'd take the love seat. But now that's plain silly, Vicky. Why in all the Lord's land would a grown woman sleep over at your house? You aren't any fourteen year old girl at a slumber party. But maybe Denise would say, "I've never seen such a good, creative interior design on so few dimes. We have to get the show started back up and do an episode on your house." Vicky nearly overheated considering it. What would she wear in the episode? What would she say? She'd say how her landlord told her, "No holes in the walls," but Vicky said, "I'm putting holes. It's not only décor. It's art." Then Denise would hug Vicky in, while she said, "Vicky of Indianapolis, ladies and gentlemen"—that was how Denise introduced people—"a true designer. A true artist." Then it would go to a commercial.

Hell-o, Vicky thought, catching herself, wrapped up in her own head. She didn't know why she got on into such ridiculous thoughts, but it was nice to imagine, pretend she believed it for a second.

By the time they got Denise's bags and made it to the parking lot, Vicky'd gushed over how she loved Denise's show enough that Denise said she was flattered to meet such "an ardent fan," but maybe they could talk about something else? "How about we grab some coffee near my hotel?" Denise said. "To make sure we're doing okay time-wise. I have a meeting at five sharp."

Vicky looked down at her watch. That only gave them an hour and a half. She got Denise in the car, then sank into the driver's side, before she said, "I was thinking, instead, we could start with some wine and cheese at my house." The night before, Vicky'd cut up some pads of Colby Jack, like she'd seen at the museum, covered it with cling-wrap, and put it with red wine in the fridge. "And you might like to see my décor," Vicky said. She tried hard not to come on too strong. Vicky's momma'd always told her she was "too much." Today was one of the single most important days for her to be "just enough."

“Wine and cheese?” Denise said. “That’s sweet. But I’m on a raw, macrobiotic diet.”

Vicky let those words spin in her head. Raw. Macro-something. She could pick up steaks and cook them rare, but she guessed that wasn’t exactly ‘raw.’ She couldn’t say she wanted to be on any macro diet. That black scarf, though—she did want one of those. Denise wore hers like it was a diamond tiara. “We’ll go over to my apartment just to let you settle in, then,” Vicky said. “And you could tell me your opinion on this painting I got of people at a waterfall—” Vicky stopped herself right before she said ‘naked.’ She probably already came off sounding country enough to Denise.

“I wish I had time to see it,” Denise said, “but with the plane being delayed. And us running late.” She tapped on her wrist where a watch would’ve been if she had one on. “My meeting’s across the street from my hotel. So I’d rather be near there.”

It didn’t take long to get across Indy. They could make time for seeing Vicky’s decorations. “My apartment’s got ‘ambiance,’” Vicky said. “You might need that after being in a airplane all day. You sure you want to go straight to some hotel? With no good décor in it?”

“Do I sound sure?” Denise said. “I feel like I sound pretty sure.”

Vicky heard some testiness sneak into Denise’s voice. I guess I’d be cranky too, Vicky thought, if I’d been stuck in a Denver airport all day.

“Let’s go straight to my suite,” Denise said and handed Vicky a piece of paper. “I’m at this address.”

Vicky glanced down while she jerked between lanes, trying to get out of the airport. “The regular Holiday Inn?” she said. She’d expected Denise to stay at some expensive place she’d never heard of. Denise didn’t say anything. “I bet we could find some fancier hotel,” Vicky said. “I can ask my friend Suzanne where one is. She grew up here and—”

“Can I ask a favor?” Denise said, sharp as tacks at first then took a second before she came back sounding normal when she said, “How about we don’t talk about it?”

Denise’s testiness was Vicky’s own fault probably with the way Vicky rambled on, like a fourteen-wheeler speeding off a hilltop. Vicky reminded herself to slow down, act proper. She hoped her eye shadow was staying on good. “I know right where that Holiday Inn is,” Vicky said. “Yes sir. Not too far from my house,” which was an out-and-out lie, but Denise might feel better about coming over if she thought it was close. “I made a new cover for my couch. It’s a love seat really, but it’s green.” Denise had one week on her show dedicated to the environmental awareness stuff where everything came from recycled parts. “You remember your Green Week episode? Jill of Baltimore’s house? I’d love you to see it, tell me what you—”

“Goddamnit,” Denise said, and Vicky got flustered, thinking Denise had no call for getting that angry, now, but then realized Denise was upset about the traffic jam, thick as bonfire smoke, they’d right then merged into on I-65. Denise leaned up over the dash and pulled her sunglasses off. “Shit,” she said. She was so stiffed up, Vicky felt she ought to offer a massage. Denise put her sunglasses back on and said, “Will it clear up soon?”

Vicky saw an opportunity then. “My apartment’s only another couple exits up,” she said. “We could jump off the Interstate, run over and see it, then take a back way to your hotel. Might save some time.”

Denise threw her head back, where the headrest would’ve been if it hadn’t broken off a couple years back. “Okay, fine. If it will get us out of this traffic. As long as we’re there before five.”

Vicky felt her blood pressure pick up. It was happening. Denise DelTorrio was going to see her apartment! She might be stressed about the time and all, but she was still coming over. Vicky shook her hands to loosen her own stress. Ha, her and Denise both needed massages!

“This has to be quick,” Denise said as they pulled in the apartment complex parking lot after sitting in traffic for some time with Denise staring at the time on her phone even though the car had a clock right there.

“Denise DelTorrio,” Vicky said as she turned the car off, “welcome to my apartment. Two floors up. Hope you got on your walking shoes.” She slapped Denise on the knee, got out of the car, then leaned back in to say, “Push that lock down for me when you get out.” She booked it up the stairs but made herself wait at the door. When Denise got there, Vicky said, “Welcome to my personal, Vicky-paradise,” thinking, Lord, that lady won’t put her phone away, will she? Vicky shoved the door open and walked in with her arms spread wide. “Come on.” She motioned at Denise to walk inside.

“Wow,” Denise said. She pushed her sunglasses up on top of her head. “This is something.”

Vicky grinned wide enough her face nearly ached. I’ll add to my wrinkles, smiling this big, she thought, but really she was too giddy to care. “Let me show you my favorite parts.” She’d thought up this whole speech. “This,” she said and squatted next to her three foot tall, wooden antique doll, with the painted on face, by the front door, “is Little Ouida, named after my Aunt Ouida. See her one eye’s about rubbed off so she’s always winking. But I raised up her arm.: Vicky moved Little Ouida’s one arm up and down. “So it’s like she’s waving, ‘Welcome home!’ when you first walk in, see?” That doll made Vicky feel like somebody was always waiting on her to get back.

“I see that,” Denise said.

“And this,” Vicky said, running to the TV wall, “is the purple wall. See all the different purple materials?” It was mostly what Denise called ‘monochromatic,’ except the couple pieces that weren’t purple. “Took months of digging at the Goodwill to find so many purples! This other wall.” She scooted over to the wall that led into the kitchen, “is the ‘Green as Grass’ wall. Green material’s easier to find. Then I got that ‘perfect pick’,” Vicky pointed at the third wall with the window in it, across from the TV. “That’s all one sheet! With the purple background and the green circles on it. How lucky was that to find? Since it matches up the other two walls?” Goodness, Denise DelTorrio was seeing her walls! With all the work Vicky’d done. Vicky almost couldn’t hold on to her excitement.

“Pretty lucky,” Denise said and clicked her phone again. “Just so you know, it’s getting late—”

“We got time,” Vicky said and flung her hand at Denise, like “stop your worrying.” It shouldn’t take them even twenty minutes to get to that hotel. Especially not with how fast Vicky’d drive with her being this pumped up. She jumped over, grabbed Denise by the waist, and scooted her in the apartment. “Shut that door now. You’re letting all the cold air out.” She kind of heaved Denise over toward the love seat. “I made that couch cover out of Goodwill drapes.” She started to push Denise down to sit on it, then pulled her back up and said, “Oops, nope, almost forgot. It don’t sit too good. The material pokes up at you. But it sure looks pretty. I’ll get you the kitchen table chair to sit in.” She took off for the kitchen, but Denise yelled, “I’ll stand. We have to go soon anyway.”

Vicky stopped in the doorway between the living room and kitchen, where there would’ve been a door if they’d ever put one up. She won’t even take a seat? Vicky thought.

That's about rude, now. What's she think, I'd let her miss her meeting? It wouldn't hurt her none to be comfortable here in this cozy place I created. Which she'd realize if she'd look around at it.

Denise clicked her phone and said, "How long will it take to get there? It's after 4:00 now." She turned to look at Vicky and got popped in the nose by one of Vicky's two-foot wide, gauze butterflies that hung from the ceiling. "Jesus Christ," Denise said and stumbled back, wriggling her nose and rubbing it.

"Watch out," Vicky said. She ran over and grabbed the giant butterfly by its edge. Damnit, she thought. Here I'll bruise her up before her big meeting. Vicky'd made the butterflies for a person her own height, not Denise's. "I made these," Vicky said, trying to change the subject, "by uncoiling wire hangers. I painted the ladybugs on them too. I learned from you about making up my own designs." There now, Denise would know how Vicky had meant it all to be a compliment. She let the butterfly go. "It's on fishing line so when you sit on the couch, it dangles like a lightning bug flying right over you."

"Or...like a butterfly flying right over you," Denise said.

"Exactly!" Vicky said. Maybe Denise was starting to see what this room's design was all about? It made Vicky nervous, to have Denise so close but not paying any attention. But surely Denise would calm down in a second here and see how good this interior was? "And this over here," Vicky bolted to the TV wall, "is my waterfall painting I was talking about. See how they're like a family together?" She ran her hand down the side of the wall by the picture, almost like a *The Price is Right* girl, she thought and laughed at herself. She liked this painting even more now than she had at first. Here if Denise would just peek up at it, she'd see how good Vicky'd done.

"It's all great. The whole apartment. Really great." Denise nodded.

Vicky started to lose patience. Come on now, she thought. This whole day is supposed to be about Denise experiencing my design, but that lady's ruining it. Ignoring everything but her damn cell phone. "You must have more of an opinion than that?" Vicky said, trying to remember to be calm. Maybe she needs me to point out more of the good parts? "How about that big old heart on the Green as Grass wall? I hot-glued wooden coasters together to make that. You like it?" She waited for Denise to say anything, but Denise tapped her foot a little and rubbed her nose. "I know I don't have any million dollars worth of things like you're probably used to. But I did it on dimes, like your show." Vicky didn't mean to be pushy, but Lordy, did she ever want to know Denise's opinions. "What do you like about it?"

Denise lowered her cell phone and looked around, turning her head every which way, while she made a low "hm" noise, like she was thinking hard. Finally she said, "I like that," and pointed at the jean jacket family portrait on the other side of the TV. "Are those your grandkids?"

Vicky felt more shy than she'd realized she would. She shook her head. "That's just a picture I found at the Goodwill. I know that probably comes off strange. But they look so cute together in their matching jackets." Maybe that was stupid, but Vicky liked to imagine how happy that family must be somewhere, all dressing the same and being together. She wouldn't apologize for liking what she liked. Even if it made her look dumb.

Denise raised one eyebrow up high. "Oh," she said like there wasn't anything else to say right then. Vicky fiddled with a purple, polka-dot piece of material on the wall. Denise clicked her phone and said, "I think I get your design idea here. And I only have like forty-five minutes. So, let's head out, okay?"

"Do like on your show," Vicky said. She hadn't entered the contest, won it, took the day off work, saved up her money, and drove Denise DelTorrio across town to *not* hear what that

lady thought of her home interior. Time issues aside. “If we were doing ‘Vicky of Indianapolis’,” Vicky felt her face get warm, like saying that might’ve made her blush, “what would you say?”

“I don’t know. Look, it’s 4:17. I’m trying to be cool here, but—” Denise held her glowing phone up.

“You do too know what you’d say.” Vicky crossed her arms. She would not let this opportunity go by. No matter how aggravating Denise might get. “Come on now.”

Denise pushed her bangs out of her face with both her hands. Looked around again. “I would say...curtains. You could use some curtains. Okay? Other than that, it’s great. So let’s go ahead—”

“Don’t I know it!” Vicky pranced over to the window. “Every time I go to the Goodwill I mean to pick up material for curtains. Those blinds drive me nuts!” That was the kind of eye Vicky’s apartment needed! On her show, Denise could always find those little things in a room that needed fixing up. She could make this place perfect if she’d give her advice. “You think I should do purple or green curtains?”

“Either one. Both.” Denise looked at the time again. “Vicky. I am so super close to losing it. If I’m late for this meeting, I will be fucked.”

Vicky cut a look over at Denise. There wasn’t any need for profanity like that. But Denise sure was showing her butt here. Vicky’d tried to be nice so far. It wouldn’t take five minutes for Denise to walk through and give her comments. “I want you to do how you would if we were on your show,” Vicky said.

“For Christ’s sake,” Denise said. She threw her arms up in the air by her sides and let them drop. “Can—we—please—go—now?”

Denise was nearly throwing a temper tantrum. What a brat. You'd think Vicky was kidnapping her. "Lord, I'm not asking for any million dollars," Vicky said. "I worked hard on this décor. And all I want is your opinion."

"You want my opinion? On design?" Denise said, cruel sounding all the sudden. "That's what you want? Fine. Here's what I know about design: not fucking shit. Okay?" She marched up to the TV.

Vicky tried to ask what Denise meant but couldn't seem to say a thing. No one had spoke that harsh to her since the day Benny left. Vicky held her hand up to her chest where her heart was beating fast.

"I've never designed anything," Denise said and stomped back and forth across the room.

Vicky looked at her sideways. What the hell did that mean? "But you always have those good ideas for things," Vicky said and pointed at the TV.

"Shows like mine?" Denise said, like she hadn't even heard Vicky, "They're all set-up. I was just a host. There was like a whole team of professional designers," she pointed out the door, like the designers were standing right outside, "that came up with the shit, okay? They told me what to say and I pretended like it was my idea. I've never designed fuck-all. That's how those kind of shows work."

"But," Vicky said, and she sat down on the arm of the love-seat to catch her breath. "You stand up there every week and tell people how to fix—"

"Every week? Are you fucking kidding? Did you notice they cancelled my show two years ago? You know what I do every week? Look for work. That's what."

Vicky nudged herself off the arm of the love-seat, down onto the cushions so she was sitting more stable. She knew the material must be poking up at her, but she couldn't take notice right now. What the hell was Denise saying?

Denise paced across the room with her hands on her hips. "I'm so desperate for work, I'm going to this meeting in," she looked down at her phone, "thirty-five minutes to grovel for some bullshit, regional Midwest show about getting design ideas from cooking or some crap. I don't know. And don't care. But I do know I need to not be stressed out, sitting in a tacky-ass apartment," she waved her hands around to show she meant this very apartment, "when I have," she looked at her phone again, "thirty-four minutes to be there and be charming as hell."

"I don't understand," Vicky said. She watched Denise pacing around like a locked up tiger, like she might launch out and attack Vicky at any second.

"Which part? Want me to say it slower? Look, I'd take a cab, but I really shouldn't spend the cash on that. The entry fee money from this stupid 'Meet Denise DelTorrio' contest barley covered my plane ticket and one night at that shitty hotel with its free continental breakfast I'll have to eat tomorrow. Christ." Denise pushed her bangs up again. "I'm sorry. I know I'm crushing you," she stopped pacing, put her hands up on the sides of her head and took a second before she said, "and your cheapo, home-made, middle-aged mom décor, but your apartment looks exactly like I'd expect and that's fine."

"I'm not a mom," Vicky said. She felt like she had chills. Like this must be some fever and her hallucinating. "And you're not crushing me." She tried to believe it was true. Tried to force herself to imagine she didn't care about any of this.

"I admit I'm being an asshole, all right?" Denise said. "But this trip is all I've got. Which is not where I thought I'd be at thirty-five. But there's nothing else in the pipeline. Not even

infomercials. Definitely not feature-fucking-films. So I have to get to this meeting. I'm begging you to please, drive me there." Denise slid her sunglasses back on, walked over, and opened the door. "I'll give you back your entry fee. Since this all went to shit."

Vicky looked down at her hands in her lap, at the scores of tiny cuts she had from where she'd hauled furniture and rehung things so it'd all be perfect for Denise. And needle-pricks in her fingertips from sewing this couch cover that she'd have to take off anyway since it sat so bad. She rubbed her thumb over a nick on her pinky knuckle. She'd thought Denise would understand doing things on a budget, understand Vicky and her decorating.

She pulled her legs in close to the couch and rubbed her knees. But Denise couldn't even understand her own self. She wasn't too much better off than that Cinnabon girl. Hell, Vicky likely knew more about decorating than Denise did. She could've made Denise feel worse, maybe by telling her how silly she looked in all black, with it hot outside, and throwing a hissy fit, like a little kid. But there wasn't any call for being nasty. Ruffling Denise up wouldn't solve Vicky's problem. But she knew what would.

"I tell you what, Denise DelTorrio," she said. "You keep my entry fee, but I'm going on to the Goodwill before it closes. You can come with me if you want, and I'll take you to your hotel after. Or you can call a taxi cab and use my money to pay for it."

Denise pulled those big, black sunglasses down to the edge of her nose, cocked her eyebrows, and said, "Excuse me?"

Vicky forced herself to smile. "I need to see if I can't find anything that looks like 'me' today."

"I guess," Denise started to say then stopped, like she couldn't quite believe this was happening. "I'll call a cab," she said.

They went down to the car. Denise popped the passenger's seat up and hauled her bags out of the back. "I really do apologize," Denise said.

"Don't bother," Vicky said. "You've had one hell of a time of it I guess," and she found she meant it. Poor old boll weevil Denise, she thought, only doing what seems right to her.

Vicky knew she'd start in crying as soon as she was alone. But she wasn't about to let Denise see that. "A pleasure meeting you, Denise DelTorrio," she said, then got in, shut the door, and left for the Goodwill.

Stuck Between Middle Management and Oblivion

The guy in the middle turns to me, in my window seat, and says, “So what do you do for work?”

Hot-damn-dog, I think. Having a forced conversation, with a stranger, in a confined space? Easily one of my all-time, top-five favorite things to do. If Jules hadn’t left me, she’d be in that seat. Or actually, hell, I wouldn’t even be on this plane at all. But I’m going somewhere, doing something, like she said I should. So she’ll come back. Which is what this is all about. I’m headed to the desert because that’s what she wants me to do. At least I think so.

Anyway, I’ve got poverty on my side: my cheapo, not-direct plane ticket means this short flight’ll end quick, and I won’t have to deal with this guy for long. “I’m an artist,” I say. Why doesn’t he move into the aisle seat? Probably because he loves meeting new people, having them trapped so they have to talk to him. And since Jules wasn’t there to mention it, I didn’t think to bring my iPod. Or a book. Or anything to keep me otherwise engaged.

He breaks into a grin. “You got a name, Mr. Artist?”

“Daniel,” I say.

He forms his hands into a megaphone shape around his mouth and says, “Painter on board! Attention! Danny the painter on board!”

Two things: first, I hate it when people call me Danny, and two, I knew he’d assume I’m a painter. Everybody thinks that when you say you’re an ‘artist.’ But I figured I’d give this guy a chance to prove me wrong. Still, he is pretty stoked. Nice enough guy. I almost hate to correct him.

“Actually, I do caricatures,” I say. “In an amusement park.”

“Like funny pictures?” he says. “With exaggerated parts?” He drops the mock-megaphone hands to outline the shape of the classic Coke-bottle, female form. Really, dude? I think. Yes, obviously my job is to scope out women. You nailed it. He keeps talking. “That’s a way to make money, all right. Me?” he says, even though I didn’t ask him what he does. “Living the dream. Moved up from the more ‘hands-on’ stuff at work. Got promoted to middle management.” He spreads his hands out as he says it, like he’s reading his title off an office door. I can’t tell if he’s serious or so deadpan he might be a comedic genius. “But,” he goes on, “the wife thinks I need to work on managing my own middle.” He laughs at his own joke, while he pats his butter-tub belly. It balloons out of his short-sleeved, white, button-up shirt like a cascading wave. Like it might keep rolling down to his feet. I do a polite, snort-laugh thing. Flip up the window shade. How long is this flight again?

The intercom bleeps, and the flight attendant says, “Use of personal electronic devices is now permitted,” at which point Middle Management snaps open the computer in his lap and buzzes into action. Excel spreadsheets and Word documents with long chains of numbers flash across his screen. Mostly it looks like his job is to Ctrl+C then Ctrl+V numbers from Word into Excel. Real important shit.

He pushes his laptop to the edge of his knees and angles the screen toward me. Then elbows me. “See all this?” he says and scrolls down a number chain. “All got to be moved over here,” he clicks open a spreadsheet, “by tonight. I ask my boss ‘How can I get that done while I’m flying?’ Multitask, my boss says... Multitask.” Middle Management elbows me again.

“Bosses,” I say, thinking about the last couple kids I sketched in my “Caricature Cabana” two days ago, which was five days after Jules left. The little girl dripped her melting orange sherbet push-pop all over my pencils while her mom ran back and forth between my Cabana and

the boy, who was perched on the rungs of the elephant enclosure. Then, when the mom finally got the boy to sit for his caricature, he hurled in my trash can. So I was enveloped by the familiar smell of a plastic, garbage bag warmed with hot-dog vomit up until the big mama elephant, Rosco, once again flung her shit all over the pavement and managed to projectile some on the roof of my Cabana, where it sat baking in the heat.

I couldn't put up with it anymore, so I marched from my Cabana, cut-through "Ride the Seas of Norway" (a seven minute "adventure," wherein a Wal-Mart quarter-machine car bumps you up and down to a video of far off whales) and made it up front, to my manager's office, in the section of the park called "White Washed World: a look at the planet's snowiest climates." White Washed is the pride and joy of "Around the World in Zany Days: An Amusement Park," and features such attractions as "Detroit: The Ride" and an unlicensed reproduction of the Jamaican bobsled used in the movie *Cool Runnings*.

I barged into my manager's office and delivered him a chain of chicken-shit lies about how I needed to go home for my fifteen year high school reunion. I'm not even sure those are a thing, but I did the math, and I'm thirty-three, so it would make sense. Plus I told him how Mama Rosco's stench meant no one came near me for the rest of the day, much less paid for a sketch.

"They're caricatures. Not sketches," he reminded me again.

"I need a few days off," I said.

"Fine," he said. "But if somebody comes asking if I've got a caricature-artist spot open, I can't promise your Cabana will be free when you get back."

"Right, I get it," I said, thinking any asscheek-cuddler who actually wants this job is welcome to sit in my place under Mama Rosco's shit storm.

On the plane, I hear a droning, like an outboard motor. I edge up in my seat and spot what has to be the world's largest and scariest flight attendant, shoveling a drink cart down the aisle. He yells, "Elbows. Watch your elbows," not because of the drink cart (which is surprisingly ergonomic) but because he's about five feet wide. Or would be if I sketched him, which I'm tempted to do. He rocks a high-and-tight, a slick, trimmed moustache that stops in a straight line right before it touches his lip, hands the size of medium-to-large boulders, and a furrow dug so deep between his black eyes you could rest a pencil in there. Something about his sharp blue, super-pro uniform looks too crisp.

He reminds me of Mr. Baumgartner, my German fourth grade teacher, who wore pleated khaki pants with matching khaki button ups. Also pleated. For a second, I trust the flight attendant entirely, want to ask him to read me *Wind in the Willows* and tell me what to do with my life, how to get Jules back, and how fractions work. But then he's looming over me, spilling me into darkness.

"Drink," he says.

I stare at him.

"Drink?" he says again and throws his boulder hands up in the air. Middle Management barely ducks in time to keep from getting hit.

It takes me a second to realize he's offering a drink, not giving a command. "Coffee and orange juice," I say. Then add, "Please," as this guy appears not stoked about life. He reaches for the coffee, and I say, "And water. If you don't mind." Can't forget the water. Jules always says, "Hydration is key." Key to what? I'm not sure. But if it's a key to her, then so be it.

"Three drinks?" the flight attendant says. He pauses with the coffee carafe in mid-air and holds up three fingers, spread wide.

“I mean,” I say, “if it’s a problem—”

“No problem,” he says. “I’ll give everyone three drinks. Everyone on the plane.” He spreads his arms wide to highlight that he is, indeed, talking about every person on the plane. “With all the time that’ll take,” he says, “the last passenger should finally get their three drinks right as we land. So, yes. Perfect. Three drinks for you.”

I want to point out how much time he’s eating up by describing the situation. But First Sergeant Flight Attendant here has the coffee. I want the coffee. And there’s the fact we’re trapped in a metal tube hurling itself against oblivion wherein he is the authority.

“Coffee,” he says. “Orange juice. *And* water.”

Before First Sergeant Flight Attendant can even ask if he wants a drink, Middle Management points to his laptop and says, “Nothing for me. Too much work to do.”

Smart, Middle Management. I should’ve known better than to engage the behemoth. When the drink cart moves past us, Middle Management leans over and whispers, “Hard ass, huh?” and points over his shoulder with his thumb, toward the retreating Flight Attendant. “You’d think there was a world water shortage,” he says.

“Probably just having a bad day,” I say. I would be too, doing that crap job.

Middle Management digs his thumb in his own chest and says, “I’ll tell you about bad days. All this computer work?” He moves the laptop more in my direction. “Almost makes me miss when I made the product. And the hell I took from my wife. Never had to travel before the promotion. She’s got new curtains coming for the living room. Pink and brown stripes, she says, and nobody to put them up.”

I try to nod, hope it looks enthusiastic, but mostly turn my head to stare at the clouds.

Middle Management's alleged "bad day?" Laughable. Try working coated in elephant shit. Try having the day I had. That whole afternoon, all I thought was: sweet, gentle Jesus, I've got to get home and tell Jules about this. I can endure my shit days solely because I turn them into stories that'll make her laugh. Which I'm really fucking good at making her laugh, and that is, according to her, the reason she even paid attention to me in the first place.

But as soon as I thought that, I remembered she wasn't home. She's in Alaska somewhere, doing something. That is, as far as I can tell, just a means to get away from me. To let me, "blossom on my own for awhile," as she put it. Followed by some lofty metaphor about her being the bigger tree blocking the sunlight I need. She is, in fact, a painter. With a reputation and etcetera.

Why did Jules leave? My real best guess? She's pissed I blew my try-out session at court. She knows my one true dream is to be a courtroom sketch artist. They're in there sketching history, man. And doing it super fast. Watergate? O.J. Simpson? Lindsay Lohan? All sketched by courtroom artists. Those six minutes artists get at arraignments to see, decide on, and sketch the whole scene before the accused gets hauled back out of the courtroom? That leaves no room for second-guessing. The world's counting on them to make decisions, quick. They have to be a pit-bull. They can't back down. Or hesitate. It's a roller-coaster in there, and you're the train conductor, hopped up on blow, calling the shots, owning it. I know I could do it. I can make decisions. Pretty quick. I can certainly be hopped up on blow. But the night my buddy called and offered me a try-out for the NBC affiliate, I was getting shit-faced at Jules's latest gallery opening and woke up the next day so hung-over I forgot my pastels and had to sketch the arraignment using charcoals which, for me, is like swinging a three wood when I need a putter.

Middle Management tippity, tappity types on his laptop. The noise infuriates me. Why? I don't know. It's just a computer. To get my mind off it, I imagine the sound of Jules's intentional brush strokes on canvas. Hard and swift, from the elbow. A sound full of meaning. Not like this number-shoving, nut-guzzler beside me.

Not that I despise Middle Management. He's a decent guy. I bet he has kids he loves but probably has one more than he planned on. Or maybe he didn't plan on any. Now, at fifty-five-ish, he's never scuba dived to explore a sunken ship, or sipped sweet vermouth from a Parisian prostitute's high-heel, or weaseled his way out of a South American POW camp using only a dame's bobby pin and a stick of Juicy Fruit chewing gum. He's given up a lot for his family. If I sketched him right now, I'd title it, "World's Most Self-Sacrificing Dad/Husband."

I'm just in a different life-spot than him. And at this spot of mine? In conjunction to his? I happen to find him somewhat annoying as hell.

Plus, I've been overboard caustic since Jules left. If I'd met Middle Management a month ago, with her, I would've called him endearing. Maybe I should lighten up? But I'm a guy who just got his ass left by the single most incredible being in existence. Temporarily. She'll be back, so it's cool. Nonetheless, I'm giving myself a little room to be bitter here.

I stare out the window, watch the shaking flaps on the wing. Which are totally sturdy, I'm sure. Though, I could convince myself easier if Jules were here. I'm not afraid of anything when I have to take care of both of us. And she always needs me to be brave about stuff like the soundness of airplanes. When, honestly, she's a million times braver than me. Alaska? That's insanity. She doesn't even know anybody there. She's never been there. But does that stop her? Nope. She didn't even deliberate. Just opened Travelocity and typed 'Alaska' in the destination

box, like she'd planned this trip her whole life. I've never got how she can do that—make decisions so easy, so nonchalant. Like there's nothing to think about.

Beside me, Middle Management lets a snore rip. I glance over at his gaping jaw, all black hole mouthed. That'd be a hell of a sketch. Guess he wore himself out with all that copying/pasting. That beach-ball belly and his nagging wife. A snot-blast of a job he'll have to pretend to care about until he can retire. I might end up as that guy. Asleep with his hand still on the track pad of his open laptop. If it wouldn't be weird, I'd close the laptop and move it so it won't fall off his knees. But then he'd jump up and accuse me of trying to steal it. Or think my hands were in his lap for some other sort of reason. Best to leave things alone.

That's always been my M.O. Leave it alone. Let things work themselves out. And Jules seemed to love that about me. She used to say I was all the mellow and she was all the yellow, and then she'd fling around her blonde hair. She hyperfixates on work, on being serious. But I take that stuff easy. Let it happen to me. Which she dug about me. Up until she decided she didn't dig it anymore and said I never accomplish anything. Said she was afraid I was wearing off on her. So she packed her owl-shaped suitcase with her yellow and red striped scarf, her huge Mary Tyler Moore coat, and her fur-lined Soviet era hat. She said she needed to go somewhere cold. Somewhere she'd have to move around to stay warm. Have to get things done to keep alive. She didn't exactly not-invite me. She held my scruff-covered cheeks between her leather-gloved hands and blinked at me with her hollow, green eyes. "You're not keeping alive," she said. "When's the last time you really did something?" I almost told her how I had scrubbed out her left over pasta pot that morning. Or how I pried open my guitar case last week and made a mental note to pick up new strings so I could play Mountain Goats songs for her like I did when we first got together. "You need to be more alive," she said. "You need to move around."

Thinking on it now, a week later, it appears she meant I need to move metaphorically whereas she needs to move literally. But I only consider this after buying a plane ticket with some cash I stashed for a vacation I'd hoped to spring on her as a surprise. Anyway, if she's headed to Alaska, to ice-age blizzards and whale blubber, I'll keep us balanced—like I always do—by going to the desert. New Mexico sounded nice since it has the word “New” in it. Like New Start. New Beginning. That's the kind of thing Jules would like.

She said she might come back. Probably would. But for now, I need to find a way to “invigorate” myself (her word). I figure Pall Malls and Tecates in the desert will do the trick. Maybe I'll chop down a cactus or something. Drink whiskey alone in a tent, listen to the sand swirl outside, and pretend like I'm in *Star Wars*. Nothing invigorates like whiskey-soaked *Star Wars* fantasies. Which all end up being about slave Leia, of course.

The First Sergeant Flight Attendant stomps back up the plane so loud I'm sure he'll sink us out of the sky. When he gets near my row, I shoot a look over to make sure he isn't coming at me with a cat-of-nine-tails or anything and when I do, I see it.

I bolt up in my seat, my stomach sinks in on itself, and a dry spot scratches up in the back of my throat: Middle Management is watching porn. Right here, on his laptop.

What do I do? I fucking panic, that's what. I want to scream and slam his computer shut or at least be like, “What the hell, dude?” but when I go to yell at him, he's still asleep, with his fingers grazing the track pad, so I'm guessing he accidentally clicked on a Recently Opened QuickTime file or something. What the fuck do I do? The poor old shit, sticking me in this situation, without even meaning to. He probably needs regular doses of porn. If I had his stagnant life, I'd have porn loaded up, ready to go on my work laptop, too. If I had a work laptop. Which I don't. So I just have easily accessible porn on my personal laptop.

I don't want to embarrass him. Or cause a scene, which would get the Flight Attendant's attention. I'll close the laptop. I reach to shut it, but as I do, Middle Management shifts in his sleep, and it semi-falls off his knees. I end up with a corner of it in my hands, which, all-fuckery-be, makes it look like I'm the one watching porn. Splendid. Totally, absolutely splendid. Last thing I need is First Sergeant Flight Attendant catching me with porn. So I shove the machine back on Middle Management's lap. Am I sweating? Is that really sweat? I open the air vent above me. The Flight Attendant is one row away and then walks by without looking over. Take it easy, Daniel. Everything is cool. Nothing is fucked here.

I can't close the laptop anyway. If I do, when Middle Management opens it back up, he'll see porn was playing, and he'll know I saw it since I closed the computer, and it will embarrass the hell out of him. At least the volume is muted. That's something to be thankful for.

I glance back over at the porn. Jesus, Middle Management. It isn't even good porn. It's between amateur (a.k.a. nothing to lose, ready to do whatever) and total sex-pot pro (predictable sex, plastic women, and Viagra dicks). It's that couple who thinks they're ultra-risqué cause they're trying non-missionary. And I've never admitted this, but it drives me insane when guys keep their socks on in porn. I don't know why. I don't notice for long, of course, but right at the beginning, before the sex starts, I'm thinking, take the socks off with the pants, man. It's probably because Jules makes me take off my socks, and I would do anything she wanted except she can never figure out exactly what it is she needs me to do. That or she can't tell me. I don't know which. Should I ask her? Should I maybe have asked her long before she left for the Arctic? Should I have done a billion things I didn't do? What good does it do to think about that?

The point is, I'm not proud of the fact I'm now half-chubbed on an airplane over some lame-ass, sock-donning porn.

What do I do with this stiffy? I'll look away. Think about how Jules is probably riding a sperm whale in Alaska by now. A *sperm* whale? Really? That's a good way to get my mind off the porno-box beside me. But probably she is riding a polar bear or a helicopter or a fishing boat. She loves to ride things. Ferris wheels, horses, dirt bikes. Me. Or so I thought. It's her long legs. They make her feel like she can control anything, ride it wherever she wants.

She's the kind of girl who wears the same earrings day in-day out and never does anything with her waist length blonde hair except wash and brush it and occasionally, when it annoys her, pile it on top of her head in a messy bun. I know a jazillion tiny things like that about her. Like I know her favorite version of "Landslide" is the Smashing Pumpkins's cover, even though she hates Billy Corgan because he slept with Courtney Love only days after she murdered Kurt Cobain. And I remember when Jules couldn't have admitted she loved art made by someone she despised, back in her twenties. Which was back in my twenties too, when I got wrapped up in the way she saw the world as all black and white. All definites and extremes, nothing left uncertain. Back when I let her explain how everything should be, and I so emphatically trusted her version of reality, that I never figured out my own. So that now, when she's gone, and not even for another guy but because this guy wasn't good enough, I realize I have nothing that is me, nothing that I believe. And I blew my one shot as a courtroom artist when I woke up hung-over and forgot my charcoals, yes, but really, I blew it because I couldn't pick my moment. Just couldn't do it. I deliberated, started five different sketches in a row. I choked. Because I can't make decisions, can't take action on my own. I can't do anything but let life happen to me. While I watch Jules make her own way, make all the decisions, and I sit—

The growl of the Flight Attendant's approach stops me mid-thought. I peer around people's heads and spot him tromping up the aisle. This is not perfect news. Not, say, the best

thing that could possibly happen right now. I need cover. Crotch cover. Remember how they used to give out blankets on airplanes in the eighties? What happened to the eighties? A blanket would hide old Excalibur here. Could cover my lap with Middle Management's computer? Oh, that'd be terrific. If Middle Management woke up and saw what appeared to be me watching his porn with this light saber sprouting in my lap? Yeah. That's a great plan, you fuck-scoot.

The Flight Attendant is coming. He already hates me. I'll probably go to jail for watching lewd content in a public space.

All right, all right. Calm down, Daniel. What are my options here? I tick them off on my fingers:

- wake Middle Management, point abrasively (but silently) at his computer.

- wake Middle Management, say I have to take a leak and need to get by. (Pretend I never saw the porn.)

- wake Middle Management by 'accidentally' elbowing him in his blossoming belly, which is creeping over onto my side. (Maybe this would work?)

- ignore it. Stop watching the porn. (Yep, that's not going to happen.)

- tell First Sergeant Flight Attendant. (And risk being throttled from the plane with a complimentary martini for the road and a, "Wish we had a parachute to offer you instead"? No thanks.)

- shut the laptop. (Already went over why this won't work.)

Damnit. The Flight Attendant's stomps get closer. I swear to god he's walking in slow-mo just so I have to panic longer. He's going to see the porn. He's going to see my chubby bunny. He's going to arrest me, mock me, tell the whole plane I'm a disgusting shit-stain on the

proverbial panties of an otherwise ethical and moral world. Then he's staring down at me, and I know he's glaring at my crotch, and the laptop, and I'm going to airplane jail for indecency.

I snatch the in-flight magazine out of my seat back and spread it across my lap.

"Where is your trash?" he says. Which by 'says,' I mean cracks out, like a whip. "You had three beverages," he says and holds up three fingers spread wide again. How the hell is this not waking up Middle Management? There is a dragon screaming over him. There is a woman (and a dildo now) and a dude with socks still on, going at it on his lap. There is me, hyperventilating.

"I...", I say, and fumble around in front of me, grab the in-flight magazine off my lap, since that seems like trash. Promptly put it back over my lap. First Sergeant Flight Attendant leans further into our aisle. Oh dear god. He's going to see the porn. Trash? Where did I put the fucking trash? He's so close now I can smell him. Like coffee and baby lotion. He hangs over Middle Management. I try to block the laptop by sorta flapping my arm in front of it. "On the floor," the Flight Attendant snaps. I start to get on the floor, thinking that's the position you assume when being arrested on an airplane, but then he says, "You threw it on the floor," and points at my feet. Where I have, apparently, tossed the empty cups. I grab them and half stand to hand them to him, to get him away from the laptop. He snatches them from me and says, "Put up your seatback for landing," while he tosses the cups into the transparent garbage bag he carries with him. I sink into my seat and am pretty sure I hear the cushions suck-in from how wet they are with my sweat. Is there a vomit-bag in the pouch in front of me? I try to open the air vent more. My wood has died down, at least.

The Flight Attendant's trash bag reminds me of my work. I bet he has to deal with vomit filled trash bags too. I bet he's got a Jules (or maybe a Mike or something) who leaves him feeling desperate to be a better guy. Or maybe he's got a wife like Middle Management's, and he

goes home to pink and brown living room curtains which might be the worst version of hell imaginable. I should have shut the laptop a long time ago. I should've woken Middle Management up and asked to go the bathroom. I should've made some decision. Long before Jules left. The seatbelt light blinks on, and the Flight Attendant gives the pre-landing speech.

Middle Management's going to wake up. I seriously should close his laptop now. He stirs, with his eyes still closed, and rubs at the drool pooled on the sides of his mouth. He's going to pop those eyeballs open any second. He's going to—

I throw my head against the window and close my eyes, pretend I'm asleep. I hear Middle Management sit up then close his laptop with the most, "I'm-so-embarrassed-I-sure-as-hell-hope-nobody-saw-that" laptop closing sound ever. I wait until enough time passes that I'm positive he has completely put away the computer. Then I stretch awake. Yawn wide. Look over at Middle Management and say, "Whew, howdy. I must have been out like totally that whole entire time."

"Me too, partner," he says. "Good thing. The old laptop here decided to open up a little gentleman's video, if you're picking up what I'm laying down." He elbows me.

Does he know? Did he see me? Was this all on purpose? Holy shit-sticks. What do I say? I can't pretend like I didn't know. I mean, I can. Maybe I should? Damnit, if Jules were here we'd just laugh. But she's too busy being in Alaska, leaving me to deal with crap like this alone.

"Good thing nobody saw it," he says. "Would've been embarrassing for a second."

For a second? Really? This guy would, what? Blow it off and shut the computer like nothing happened? Which is, I guess, exactly what he is doing.

The plane lands. We stare out the window together. Light rain splatters the long strips of grass we taxi by.

Then he says, “Real pleasure, Artist Danny. Here’s my card. Sometimes we need graphic designers. You ever looking for work, we like spry kids like you.”

I mumble thanks, grab my carry-on from the overhead, and look at the card after he walks down the aisle. It has his name then says, “Management Team. Wood and Fur, International Distributors of Adult Entertainment.”

He’s a porno dude? I stare up the aisle even though he’s already gone. I think about everything I know about him, remember him saying. But all I can really think is: that guy’s kind of got it together, way more than I realized. Maybe in the way I should have it together. And he’s offering me a gig? Well, sort of offering. I know people say stuff without meaning it. I didn’t even give him my full name. Chances are, if I email him, he won’t remember me.

Still, I could email him. “Artist Danny” does have a memorable ring to it. I could at least try at this and prove that I’ll fail. Or, maybe, sliver-of-a-possibility, not fail. I should do it. I will do it. I’ll email him. Jules would want me to.

I move up the aisle feeling a little lighter. First Sergeant Flight Attendant stands at the plane’s exit door, stiff, like he’s prepared to salute. As I walk by, he holds up three fingers.

“Ya know, you’re a real asshole,” I say to him. But not in a mean way. More like a this-is-just-how-the-world-is way. “But I still hope you don’t have to haul any vomit today.”

I head down the jetway. I’ll get to the desert. I’ll email Middle Management. Then I can tell Jules, and she’ll come home and help me get the gig. It’ll all work itself out.

Patient's Account of Her Activity Just before Coming to Hospital Lutz

When I do it, I use my mom's bathroom, and I only turn on the small, yellow lamp. I never use her overhead light, which is extraordinarily big and bright and nasty, because it makes me look old and dried out. I dragged the yellow lamp in there, hung it up high, and aimed it so it shines at the wall, away from me in the oversized claw-foot tub. I had to get a dining room chair to hang it. My mom has a chair in her bathroom, a heavy, stately old chair, like a throne, with a gold rim around red satin cushions. But I knew just by looking at it I wouldn't be able to haul it over to the wall.

When I do it, I first turn the water on as hot as it will go, stand directly under it, all except my face—which I try to never get wet unless it's absolutely necessary—and let the boiling water bring my blood to the surface of my skin until I think I'll scream. Then with my right foot, I shove the ivory handled, hot water lever all the way down then the cold water lever all the way up, and sometimes when this happens I do let out what I think is going to be a scream but turns out just to be a whisper. Some time I think I will let it be a scream.

Then I make the water warm. Half hot and half cold. Not too much of any one thing is ultimately how I hope to live my life. No screams or whispers.

In the warm water, I bend over at the hips so that my torso is perpendicular to my legs. I hold my arms behind my back, so I must look like I'm bent over to inspect something on the bottom of the tub. The water hits my back dead on. I feel it pool there briefly before it winds its way around my chest and stomach. I watch it spill down my thighs and drip-off my pelvis and midsection. There is room between my thighs, a small space. I stare through the space, at the hot and cold water levers behind me.

Waters runs off me in long, unending streams. I imagine a dozen tiny holes have been poked in me, pinpricks all over my stomach and pubis. I imagine the water pouring off me is actually the water from inside me, draining out of the holes quickly, so quickly that even if I wanted to catch it in a dozen tiny buckets, I wouldn't be able to. But I could try. And gulp each bucket in a mad dash to save my own life.

My mom barges in the bathroom. She took the lock off the door months ago because she knows about this, about me. I think she believes if I can't lock the door, I won't do it. Which is ridiculous. She flips the overhead light on. "Penny," she says, and I think 'thin as a penny,' which is what I always think when she says my name. "Penny," she says again. "You coming tomorrow? Your dad wants to see you. You should come. You're coming." I wonder if she actually cares what I'm doing in here. Why I'm here, in her bathroom. If she even notices. Or if she simply happened to come in the bathroom just now.

When she first found out about me, she assumed it was a phase. "Penny's acting out," she told my dad on the phone. She says juvenile things like "acting out" because she is from Kentucky. She bought me a self-help audio book, a true waste of the little spending money we have left. I played it while I was doing this, in her shower, but she banged on the door until I unlocked it then she came in with intentionally smeared makeup, like she wanted me to believe she'd been crying, and switched the audio book off. That's when she ripped the lock out of the door.

While I'm doing it, after she comes in the bathroom without knocking, she does something in the mirror. Touches her face somehow. I look out at her through the milky white, near-transparent shower curtain wrapped in an oval around the claw-foot tub. She got the tub from a man who she called "a true Roman" like it meant something exotic or extremely

important. She designed the bathroom. I don't want to talk about it. It was one of her last projects.

Lately, her only project is pretending she's going to bake apple pies. She buys dozens of bags of dozens of apples. All Red Delicious or Fuji—apples no one's ever made a pie with. She leaves cookbooks, with spines four times as thick as mine, cracked open on the mahogany island in the kitchen. She wanted butcher's block at first. Which would have been trashy, and she could go back to Kentucky for butcher's block. But my dad suggested the customized mahogany island. It's the color of the top of a burnt crème brulee and looking at it makes me feel warmer.

My mother's never baked a pie in her life. She leaves each cookbook opened to a recipe for apple pie, and each page has "Perfectly Pink," her L'Oreal lipstick shade of choice, smudged on its edges from where she licks her finger before she turns the page. I walked by the island to get a half cup of chocolate milk yesterday and stopped to blow off a layer of dust from one of the books. I'm exaggerating. But we can't afford a housekeeper anymore.

I once made her a pie and left it on the counter, the way a mother cat shows her kitten how to mangle a mouse, thinking my mom would see the pie and then somehow know how to bake. But she didn't even taste it. It sat rotting on the island for five days until I threw it away.

In the bathroom, I don't answer her about seeing my father tomorrow. I have nothing to say. Nothing I haven't already said.

My mom's Pomeranian-Shih Tzu mix—a rescue dog she adopted in one of her attempts to appear a decent person—runs in behind her. I shudder and jerk back from the tub's edge, fold my arms tight over my chest, cling to my own body like I could protect it. The dog bit me a few years ago, right after they took my father away. The day it bit me, I climbed to the third story landing where I pulled up the oddly-shaped, milky white rug with long tendrils. It looks like a

guttled polar bear someone spread open on the floor. I rolled it up tight like a Little Debbie cake log then folded it over once then twice. I made it as small as I could and pushed it into a corner and sat a heavy orange vase on top to hold it still. Then I spread out my body on the floor where the rug had been. The wood was cool, but the heat rose up warm from the bottom two floors. I liked the two different sensations, liked how I lay exactly in-between opposite places. I held as still as I could while continuing to breathe and shut my eyes. Like some sort of sacrifice.

My mother had her dog manicured that day, so his clipped nails made no sound on the wood. I don't know why he bit me. His spiky teeth sunk into the arch of my foot where tender skin popped open instantly to bleed. To be clear, I've never been a cutter; I didn't enjoy this. I yelped and kicked at him, but he pranced away, down the stairs, as if this was a thing we did every Wednesday at 1:30 in the afternoon. I left star-shaped splatters of blood on the steps from the third floor down to the second then left drips of red in the white carpet in the hallway while I walked to my own bathroom.

My mother won't get rid of the dog. I've never asked her to, but later that day when I caught her in the kitchen, mauling a hunk of baguette, hunched over her apple pie recipes, in yoga clothes even though she's never done yoga, I pointed at the dog and said, "It bit me." The butterfly bandage spread wide on my foot, so I couldn't feel the cold tile of the kitchen floor. She said, "That dog is tiny." I wanted to say I was tiny too, but I knew that wasn't yet true.

In the bathroom, my mother's wide body spreads out, broad like a billboard and bundled up in layers of blacks—the Calvin Klein scalloped lace top I insisted she buy and her favorite Dolce & Gabbana trousers, which I don't know why she even bought them much less wears them—all haphazardly matched, except her scarf, which is sleek satin and wrapped in a series of precise knots around her neck. She looks like an overstuffed garbage bag. Anyone who saw her

would think she was going somewhere. Somewhere besides her room to watch Oprah and leave crossword puzzles half finished.

I think she's putting on more cheap L'Oreal lipstick. So there can be more lipstick on more rims of more glasses. On more of her Virginia Slims butts on the deck out back. On more of the white cloth napkins in the laundry room hamper.

She yanks the shower curtain open. "Are you coming tomorrow?" she asks. "You can wear my old sweater I found." She holds it up, and its volumes unfurl. It's a bulky, coarse, brown bag. I know what she is saying: I can hide my size in that sweater. I can go, and my dad won't have to see how I look now. I used to be a size four, before all of this. The sweater would have fit me then. Now it will hide the way I've changed.

I snatch the curtain shut then have to sit on the lip of the tub for a second from the force of it. "Turn off the light," I yell.

She turns off the light. "Penny," she says, and I think 'thin as a penny.' "It would mean a lot to him."

My dad is in prison. My dad is a man who, if I said his name, you would know him.

Words that could be used to describe my dad include:

Former lobbyist

Golf enthusiast

Hard worker

Trench coat

Prison

They said it was 'white-collar crime,' which I thought was appropriate as Prada released their white line that season. A part of my soul hopes they did it for me, without knowing me. But

then my dad's been gone three years, and I should be in college by now, and Prada has done nothing else to note my existence.

My dad is not a thing I want to talk about.

"Go away, please," I say to my mother. I keep waiting for her to yell at me, to be angry. I've waited for three years now. But she only asks me, please, to stop. Maybe I don't want her angry. Maybe I prefer her passionless. I wish I were passionless, in-between things, never too far any one way.

When she leaves, I move from sitting on the lip of the tub to squatting, facing the hot and cold water levers, with my hands mashed against the bottom of the pristine porcelain on either side of me, bracing me. My hands look old and huge and disgusting. I tell myself that next time, I won't use any lights, so I won't be able to see my body at all. But I know that's not true. I will. I'll use the same yellow light because when the same things happen over and over, when I know what is going to come next, I can be okay.

But maybe I will use no light.

I have precisely two cups of chocolate milk inside me. When I went to the fridge to get the milk, some time over an hour ago, I stopped myself in the kitchen on the way. I like to distract myself in that process, to do anything that will make me wait longer. I can always wait longer. Sometimes I tell myself, "You will wait five minutes." Then I set the microwave, lean back against the island, and watch the clock tick down while the plastic ring in the middle of the machine goes around in slow circles. Often, when the five minutes is up, I tell myself, "Wait two more minutes." Every time I watch the time count down to :59 and then :45 and then :39, I grow anxious with the mounting intensity. I can't wait for the pleasure of it, of telling myself to wait more. This is the best feeling I've ever had. Sometimes I realize I have made myself wait for

over an hour in two and five minute increments. I could do this all day. I could do this for the rest of my life. My fingertips tingle, and I am aroused.

By the time I drink the two cups of chocolate milk, it is maybe an hour and a half after I first started to go to the fridge. Or maybe longer. It's hard to remember.

When I do it, in my mother's bathroom, I squat and look at my huge and disgusting hands on either side of me. The veins pop up high. Why do they do that? I go to shake my hands to maybe make the veins lie down, but if I don't hold myself up, I'll fall over. I don't want a concussion. I don't want to explain why I passed out again. No one believes my made-up answers anyway because they know why really. Everyone knows what's wrong with me. So why do they even ask anymore?

My friend Jon doesn't ask questions. Or he didn't when I used to let him see me. He tried to tempt me with treats I never touched: Mama G's BLTs he knows I love, Sour Skittles, and the thirty-two oz. Big Gulps we used to fill with squirts of all the different sodas on the fountain machines—we called them suicides—and chugged to see who could finish theirs first. After I told him about me, about this, he brought the treats over and I said, "Suicides?" and I didn't have to say the rest: that I'll finish my suicide first because I can't stop doing this to myself. This disgusts me. This horrifies me. I live by killing myself in tiny increments, and I can't let Jon watch.

He hugs me too tight anyway, but I can't tell him that, so I stopped letting him see me instead. Now when he comes over, he knocks on my bedroom door, so light, and whispers my name. I listen to him while I sit cross-legged on my Japanese print bedspread, pinching my fatty inner thigh, berating myself for it until my skin bruises, and I look at it and tell myself, "This is actually why you can't see him." His gentle tone at the door almost convinces me I am wrong,

that he'll only cradle me, not smash me so tight my breastbone shoves into my spine. But gentle-sounding things are often hard, in truth. My father said, "It won't be bad. It won't be for long." And my mom said, "It's not your fault," like they were getting a divorce or something. Like I blamed anyone except her.

When I do it, I keep my hands on the tub and my head hanging low while I raise myself at the hips until I'm standing, bent over, in the shape of an 'n.' I do this because it helps. All the blood rushes to my head, pooling there, where I imagine it drowns the sections of my brain that control my diaphragm and esophagus. My pumping heart spurts. It gasps, but I won't let it have any blood. Because this helps. I stand here for some time. For so long that I wonder how long the hot water heater can keep making hot water.

Did I explain that part already? Things are hard to hold on to.

When I do it, I stare out the bay window behind the tub, and if it's night I try to find the moon. Last night looked to be a full moon. But I stopped menstruating long ago so this means nothing for my body. I remember before all this, when I stood in the shower while I menstruated. I always took out my tampon first and watched the blood, a thin red stream vibrant against the white background, run the length of the tub with the water, and go so easy down the drain. That seemed normal then. That was fine. I wish I could do that now. I wish I could stop loving this so much, could menstruate and never measure around my thighs again. Throw away my measuring tapes: one in my bedside drawer, one in the crisper in the fridge, two in a Versace shoebox in my closet, one in the kitchen knife drawer, others I've left and forgotten, and one I always leave out on the black marble countertop in my mom's bathroom. Hoping she'll ask about it. Hoping she'll know what to do, how to fix it. But my mother never fixes things. She only makes them worse.

I wish I could smell cut grass again. Acres and acres of it like I did that summer when the news about my dad came, and I was at camp learning about textiles. My dad sent me there instead of letting me go to the summer fashion institute at Chanel in Paris like I wanted. He said, “You’ll never understand the top, Pens, until you understand every piece below it.” He started with nothing, learned everything for himself. He only wanted the same for me. He sat on the edge of my bed, in his slippers, one hand on his knee, sipping coffee—his constant guilty pleasure that kept his teeth stained—while I showed him an ensemble outfit I’d pieced together: a tragic affair of colossal mistakes including excess tulle and a neon yellow veil I hand-stitched on to a red pillbox hat. He tugged on the veil and smoothed the tulle at the edge of one sleeve. He said I was “A wonder. A paragon of fashion.” It wasn’t true, of course. I didn’t know what I was doing. But it was forgivable because I was fifteen and knew far less than I thought I did. Now I know what it means to actually want something, or to actually want to stop wanting something. I thought I did then. I thought going to Chanel was the most desirable thing imaginable. Instead, he sent me to the local textile camp, and I thought I hated him then. But he’s always been right about everything except my mother.

At camp, I snuck out with the girls in my dorm to explore the nearby abandoned mannequin factory. Our group sister—who would’ve been called a counselor at any other camp—said she’d let us get away with it if she could come too. At the factory, in the dark of midnight, our Maglites grazed across shockingly white, fleshy looking limbs. The mannequin pieces that had fallen, had broken, bled out ashy powder from their hollow insides. One girl said, “It’s like *Edward Scissorhands*,” and I remember exactly when she said it because I turned to tell her how abominable I found Edward in his dark, Gothic suit, but before I could say it our group sister came bounding up the stairs, her tight black Mohawk bobbing into sight above the steps

with every two stairs she jumped up. I wondered at how she didn't fall through the corroded, rusted metal, and now I remember it like she grabbed me, whirled me away from the others, and then I was home. But that can't be exactly what happened.

Isn't it funny how memory does that? One moment I remember so slow, so precisely what I was going to say. Then the next, I'm not at all sure what happened or how she said it. If I try hard, I can remember my group sister saying, "We have to get you back. Something's wrong," and then the wind whipping against my face while we zipped back to camp on her dirt bike. When we got there, I stood on acres and acres of fresh cut grass, a smell so strong it overpowered the dark, while they told me, "There's a problem at home. Your mom says for you to come back tonight. Right away."

They said my mother said it. But I know that was a lie. My father was the only one who ever made any good decision. My mother likely smoked on the deck and didn't say a thing.

I went to see my father once. Right after they took him. That's the first time I did this, only then I didn't know about things like taking a shower to mask the noise and smell or letting my head fall below my heart so I get light-headed enough to make it so much easier. That time, when I saw him there, I did it naturally. Like my body had known all along this was what I would do. I can't get him out. I can't control that. But I can get everything out from inside me. I can control what goes in my body and how long it stays. That feeling made it easy to do again after that first time. And then again. After that I couldn't see him any more. This is my fault, not his. I can't let him know about me, about how bad it really is, because he is a good and decent man, and he'll take the blame on himself. Just like he did with my mother, with the money.

My mother knew everything my dad involved himself in. I know she did. She made my dad do it all because she never had anything when she was my age like she's told me every day I

can remember since I've known her. She managed the money, even though he was the one getting it.

He took the blame and watched her, in the courtroom, in her gaudy, grey fur with light-brown trim and the leopard print, mini-hoop earrings that the girl at Gucci told her were, "Enrapturing." I stood next to my mom in the store, listened to the salesgirl say, "Those earrings are darling. They'll seal the jury for your husband," and I popped my chewing gum. Everyone at home knows who my dad is. Everyone at home knows who I am. My mom bought the earrings immediately. The Gucci salesgirl was moving back stock. No one else would've been foolish enough to want those tacky earrings. My mother is from Kentucky and has no taste.

In the courtroom, my dad turned in his chair, his solid, broad-shouldered, black suit, and watched her while they told him how many counts were guilty. All but one. Fraud, conspiracy to bribe public officials, tax-evasion. So on. He watched her because she cried over the money, not over him. She wouldn't even smudge her liquid eyeliner because she knew the photographers would be waiting when she got outside.

When I do it in the shower, I drink a sip of red wine. This helps. I never drink alcohol anymore except in this situation. But the taste of particularly cheap red wine makes this easier. The feeling of it in my mouth, like a silk bustier holding against me firm but smooth, is risky. I could love this feeling. I will tell myself later that drinking this is for a specific reason. I won't let myself drink it again just because I want to. I will tell myself no. I will stare at the opened bottle on the kitchen counter and bite my hand instead of reaching for it.

The last time I drank alcohol recreationally, after this started but before it was severe, Jon took me to the Fairgrounds and gave me a derby hat. It was beige with a thick black band and a broad bow at back. I bobby-pinned it to my hair and, for the first time in months, laughed when

he dropped strawberries he'd brought with him into our glasses of Brut champagne. We watched none of the horse races. We watched each other. I wish I could do that again. I wish I could drink anything without counting the calories. Now I have to remind myself that water has no calories. To force myself to drink it.

When I do it, I remind myself I will climb out of this bathtub, and I will wrap myself in a short, fluffy, pink bathrobe that's made to come to my knees, and used to, but now drapes down over them and hangs limp on my body, which makes me feel small. For a few seconds. When I first put it on.

Just before I do it, while I'm still standing bent over, I shake. My whole body in jolts. I tell myself this is not because I fear what comes next. Or because of the pain. This is anticipation. I have to believe this is utter joy. It is.

It will be quick. It will be easy. All that's inside me is two cups of chocolate milk and now three sips of red wine and I am not scared. I know that it will feel amazing afterward. This part is worth it.

I reach my index finger in my mouth and suck. This is seduction defined. This is my true orgasm. This is when I know how my body was made to feel. I suck my finger and run my tongue over the wrinkly edge of the fingertip, feel the groove the water has made, the way the finger always grooves in the same place when I do this in the shower. I start to pull the finger out, to ease up on the suction, just to let my finger think maybe it's done. Then when it's almost out, I jerk up to standing, snap my head back so hard my neck spasms, and cram all my fingers all the way back in the very back, as far as I can, until I know it's coming, until the pulsing pushes past a spot where I couldn't stop it even if I wanted to and I can let go.

Now I am here, in Hospital Lutz, for the seventh time, after my mother found me passed out in the tub again. I will go home and then she will bring me back and I cannot stop and this will not end until I can't do it anymore because there is none of me left to do it to.

VITA

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