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Rust Belt and Other Stories

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A Doll World

Suit Doll looked down at the counter far below him and saw a strange woman pointing at him with a long bony finger. Other man-dolls cleared their throats, but she was focused. Her eyes were enormous, framed by round, black glasses. "May I see that one?"

Suit Doll heard the squealing sound of the shop clerk pushing the metal stool close to the shelves. When the clerk popped up at eye-level, he was startled to be so close to the faint wrinkles etching her face. The clerks rarely brought him down, and it was usually for customers who stared into his box with awe and longing.

The plain-faced customer at the counter lifted him out of the box, letting his legs dangle against her wrist. She lifted him close to her thick lenses, making a head to toe appraisal while squinting and chewing her bottom lip. Then she set him on the counter and turned something in his back.

Suit Doll jolted into motion, his legs stiffly clicking forward. Then he reached inside of his jacket and presented a bouquet of silk flowers. The customer pulled nervously at the high

neck of her beige sweater, then extended her thumb and forefinger, started to take the bouquet, but then let it fall on the countertop. The internal pulling Suit Doll had felt wound down, and he collapsed beside the flowers.

“Ms. Vox, I promise you this is the finest item we've ever carried,” the clerk said. “A rare design."

At the other end of the store, lights flashed above a glass-walled crane-game. The young girl who had dropped her coins into the machine quickly turned a small wheel until the metal claw hovered above the tallest point of the prize mound. The prizes were faceless, naked man-dolls, wriggling over each other, their fabric arms flopping, writhing for a position.

The crane descended, the metal claw fingers opened, and the sharp metal points caught several doll legs and doll heads. The crane rose, pulling the dolls by their necks or by a foot from which dolls hung upside down, twisting and bending. They flailed their cotton arms and dropped from the claw until finally just one doll remained. The crane moved across the ceiling of the glass cube, and the girl was already jumping up and down in excitement.

The clerk giggled. “Remember when you were that young? Even the dolls full of sawdust were a thrill.”

“I don’t think I was ever that young,” Ms. Vox snapped.

"Well I remember. Always dreaming of the day I could have my own doll."

Ms. Vox pulled Suit Doll's string.

He spoke his first words. "Do you like long walks on the beach?"

"You can see why he's more expensive,” the clerk said.

"He'll do," Ms. Vox replied. She set him down on the counter, paid, and then snatched Suit Doll off the counter, dropping him into her large handbag before the clerk could put him

back in his box.

It was dark. He felt his way to the bottom of the handbag where he was thoroughly sickened by the peppermint smell and the relentless swinging. Although, when the swinging stopped and the purse began to open, he was relieved for fresh air but terrified of what life might have in store for him. The light above was blinding, and the enormous fingers of his captor searched the purse contents until she caught his arm and lifted him out. She set him on a small table beneath a lamp.

The light was warm, and Suit Doll wished he were not sewn into his clothes. The woman sat on the couch, shoes off, her bare, swollen feet lifted by a pillow set on a coffee table. She had claimed him, and then forgotten him. He could not decide if one was more upsetting than the other, but he wished to be nearer to her or, at least, farther from the hot lamp.

There was a glass of ice water beside her foot pillow, and he wished he could take a swim. No matter that all of his stuffing would take hours to dry, no matter he might later smell of mildew, he wished he could stand in that glass, arms hanging outside of the rim, and cool his feet. He wished he were not sewn into his shoes.

Later, the woman brought Suit Doll to her bedroom and laid him on a pillow beside her. She barely looked at him before she fell asleep. He was awake many hours more because of the volume of her snoring. This was all very different from the life he had imagined. The woman did not care to hold him against her bosom, talk to him the whole night through, or anything really. He was decoration. A question began to plague him. *Why am I here?*

***

Minerva slouched over the table, her large breasts sagging across the tabletop like sacred mounds. Her eyebrows were high and arched as if she had just been startled. She had an audience of man-dolls, one sitting on a box of baking soda, one leaning against a bottle of sparkling water, another perched on the rim of a cereal bowl.

Handsome Doll, once a bestseller, was lying on his side, his head propped up by his hand. He wore only swim trunks, an annoyance to the other dolls. He flexed the muscles Minerva had made by stuffing him with rubber pellets. She remembered a time when she would not sleep with any other doll on her pillow, a time before his fabric was threadbare.

"I'll rock your world," Handsome Doll said.

She sighed. What with his constant posing, and the thinness of his arms where the pellets had compacted over time, he looked ridiculous to her now.

"Let's get groovy," he said.

"Stop it," she said. "I need to think." She tapped her pencil against the notepad in front of her. For a long time she just drew squiggly lines on the page. She was not sure what she wanted anymore. Eventually, she placed her head down on the drawing pad, letting her hair fall forward, and ran a hand over the back of her bare neck.

Minerva wandered around the room, and in her catatonic state, she found the empty spaces where she could conjure ideas, one ideal man after another. She listened to silence to find their voices and rubbed the air between her fingers to imagine the texture of their clothes. Everything about their features and personalities was decided in the first moments she imagined a doll. As the only creator, she had no critics. However, as the only one, she was also solely responsible for all that was missing from her creations. She slumped back into her chair.

The First Doll had been created from scraps of floral printed fabric. Minerva was still

learning her craft then and had sewn his legs at two different lengths. This was the cause of his limping toward her when he leaned into her ear. "Pretty girl," he mumbled. "Pretty girl."

He was the only doll who knew how to comfort her. She turned to look at him, and he wiped a tear from her cheek with his felted hand.

"What if I'm done creating?" she said. "What would I tell them?"

"Pretty girl, pretty girl," he said, because that was all he could say.

***

Suit Doll discovered there were many man-dolls before him. They were stored in boxes under Ms. Vox's bed. They were tacked to the mantle, and the dolls dangling above the fireplace were covered in black soot with wretched looks upon their faces. They were trapped under cups, like spiders she planned to smash on a later occasion.

He alone was her companion on the couch, in bed, or at the breakfast table, yet they never spoke. He was terrified of the silence, every day wondering when she might drive a nail into his hand and add him to her collections on the wall.

One morning while they were lying in bed together she said, "Speak."

"Can I take you to dinner?" he said.

"That's a stupid question. You watched me eat dinner an hour ago. Say something else."

"What's your favorite flower?"

"I'm allergic. Say something else."

"Shall we go dancing?"

"I have bad knees." She was visibly angry now, her face red and her fingers tapping on

the table.

"Why am I here?" he asked.

The woman immediately lifted him up and tore the suit jacket away from his body. "Who taught you to say that?" she asked.

No one had taught him this utterance, so he could not say.

Across his belly, visible when Ms. Vox tore his clothes off, Suit Doll had a small serial number. She got out of bed, called The Manufacturer, and reported his serial number. He could hear them reassuring her that she had not heard the phrase she was certain she heard.

"What do you want to know?" she said to Suit.

"Why am I here?" he asked again.

The woman shouted into the phone, "Don't you hear him? What kind of question is that?" There was an angry exchange with the people on the phone until finally the woman ended her call. She got back into bed and put her head down on the pillow beside him. She put her thick eyeglasses on and turned him face down and then on his back. She lifted his legs and then lifted each of his arms.

She carried Suit to the kitchen where she carefully wrapped him in butcher paper. She tied a string around the package and placed him back into the purse in which he arrived.

***

Minerva was at her table, scribbling away on her notepad, when the doorbell rang. She never had visitors, never. The man-dolls around the room began standing up and peering at the door, saying the phrases she gave them to say and creating an excited cacophony. Ms. Vox was at the

door, holding a small package she threw at Minerva.

Minerva was so startled she took the package back to her table and did not invite the woman in. She unwrapped Suit Doll, her most recent creation, and she inspected where his suit had been torn away, where his seams had been ripped and where some of his stuffing was showing.

"I don't fix dolls," she said.

The woman continued to stand in the doorway. "Ask him what he wants," she said.

Minerva smiled at Suit Doll. "What do you want?"

Suit Doll did not understand who this woman was, but her face was familiar and simultaneously strange. He said, "Why am I here?"

Minerva's mouth gaped. She dropped him on the table and jumped from her seat. She said, "Who taught you that phrase?"

Leaning into the doorway on her tiptoes, Ms. Vox interjected, "You see? He thinks."

Minerva inspected the woman, crossed her arms across her bosom and said, "They only say what I want them to say. They can't just invent things; only I can."

"I want one that doesn't think," Ms. Vox said. "I don't care how he got that way, but I want my money back."

Minerva considered the woman's words. She slouched in her chair and looked down at all of her own man-dolls who were coming into the room to watch the commotion. She was sad for the woman who must have played some part in the malfunction, divine and strange though it was.

"I can only give them a few phrases," Minerva said. "But I like to believe that they have their own minds."

"They shouldn't think," Ms. Vox said. "Isn't that why you created them?"

That was exactly why Minerva had started making them. She had it in her mind to make a man that would not start wars, would not throw punches, and would not ignore desires. She could not even recall how many lines of dolls she had designed, each meeting a need. She needed romance. She needed compliments. She needed a dance partner. Over the years, each time she felt like there was still something missing, she made a new doll. There was always something else missing.

"Why am I here?" Suit Doll asked.

Minerva was thrilled by Suit Doll's phrase, "Why do you think you are here?"

He said, "Do you like long walks on the beach?"

Minerva's face fell. "What do you want to do?"

"Shall we go dancing?"

Minerva turned to the woman. "Leave him with me. I will send you something else, not broken.

***

Though Suit Doll disappointed her, Minerva had a new energy for creating. Or really, for fixing. She stitched a foot lift for First Doll, so that he would no longer limp. Then she made a bathing robe for Handsome Doll so that he might age with dignity. Every doll in the house benefited from her renewal projects. Each time she dismantled their bodies and filled them with new stuffing, she was also able to add a few new phrases to their pull cords. She oiled the knobs in their backs so that when she wound them, or when they wound each other, the gears would not

stiffen.

She placed Suit Doll in a chair in the center of her table, often stopping to admire the fine stitching she had done around his stuffing hole or the extra care she had taken when she painted his eyes. The other dolls treated him with reverence too. They often sat at his feet and pulled his cord, even when he did not seem to wish to speak. Minerva worried that there was some chance he might teach them things. They too might learn to ask why. They might ask.

One night, biting on her pencil while dreaming of a new doll line, Minerva contemplated what made Suit Doll strange. The questions. All other dolls before him only said funny things, suggested entertainments, or paid compliments. "Poor dear, Suit Doll," she said to him.

Suit Doll was dozing in his chair, but he stirred. "Would you like help?" he asked.

She called him poor dear again. She sighed.

He sighed.

"I think you are the result of my own doubt," she said.

The next day, after Minerva had tied a longer string to one of the dolls, it rose from its surgery and asked, "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

She giggled at the absurdity of the new phrase she taught him. She could not help herself. At random, she added a whole variety of questions to all of the dolls in her possession.

One of the dolls took on five questions. "Why? When? Where? How? Again?" Sometimes she pulled his string halfway so that he would repeat himself on the next pull. "Why? Why? Why?"

She laughed herself into a state of tears. Even to herself, she could not explain how something like that, an endless series of questions, might have annoyed her before the dolls, whereas now it seemed like a game.

Minerva created the dolls in order to tell her what she wanted to hear. Everything they did was for her sake. Because they could not answer their own questions, they needed her answers. The army of dolls followed her around all day, tugging at the hem of her pants, tickling her toes, begging for her attention.

***

Suit Doll far preferred sitting in a nice chair in the center of Minerva's table to lying in bed beside his previous owner. Minerva was kind, always keeping the dolls wound so that they could move around on their own free will. Yet, even at the foot of his creator, his mouth felt cottony, and there was a constant lump in his throat.

He and First Doll became good friends. The kind of friends who did not need to say much to be understood. First Doll had only learned one new phrase, "Will you?"

Suit Doll asked, "Do you like long walks on the beach?"

"Will you?" First Doll asked with delight.

When Suit Doll asked him why he was here, First Doll answered in a sad tone, "Pretty girl."

"Why am I here?" Suit Doll asked.

"Pretty Girl," First Doll said.

Then they sat together, watching the nightfall outside of the window, taking in slow deep breaths. Suit Doll stretched his arms above his head, and First Doll stretched his legs out. Suit Doll asked his question less often, and the doubt lessened as his satisfaction increased. Yet, the question lingered.

Minerva introduced a new creation. A nearly faceless doll, not unlike the cheap, voiceless dolls that Suit Doll had seen in the crane game, only decorated with a small black mouth. It was the very fact that Faceless had no face that made him easy to teach phrases. He had hundreds of phrases, answers and questions. Soon, it was Faceless that the other dolls sat around, and him that Minerva sat in the special chair in the middle of the table.

As Suit Doll learned that his novelty had worn off, he became despondent again. First Doll tried to soothe him, "Pretty Girl," and Suit Doll would try to smile. Then he asked, "Why am I here?"

Faceless must have overheard him, because he answered. "Why are you here?"

Suit Doll took a step back. He was tightly wound up, and he spun in a circle, searching for suggestions. He could not answer, but it was the first time someone had understood him. It was the right question with which to answer his question. He was no longer a novelty, nor an object of wonder. He was his own Man Doll.

Rust Belt

Daniel stopped at the gas station to buy coffee and a donut. The night clerk leaned against the counter, rubbing her eyes before ringing up his order. He had two dollars ready and dropped the change into a cup by the register. He held the door for another regular, and the two men exchanged their customary nods. There were familiar strangers at the gas pumps, and he nodded at them too.

Cline Avenue was already busy with early morning commuters, its turns lit by jaundice-yellow streetlights and billboards advertising strip clubs, casinos and bail bonds. There was no point in rushing around the big rigs because they were heading to the same exit at the harbor. Daniel slouched into his seat with one hand on the wheel and let his mind wander.

The car tires sang along the steel grate bridge spanning the river. He couldn't see the barges in the dark, but they reeked of diesel exhaust. If he were a cartographer, he would make a map of smells. The topography would peak by the Lever Plant where the air tasted like soap, a daily punishment for all of his cursing. Natural gas flooded the air, sweet like the scent of

flowers, on different days intoxicating or nauseating. By the oil refineries, where the rooftops were level with the elevated road, he caught whiffs of sulfur, the nail-polish stink of formaldehyde, and the chest-deflating stench of plastic burning, oil burning, and rubber burning. The air was poison, yet the smell of industry meant there were men at work.

Manny was waiting for him in the locker room, hardhat shadowing his eyes, clipboard tucked under his arm, and a coffee in hand which he stirred with a flat wooden stick. Daniel sat on a bench as he pulled on steel-toed boots, nodding as other men entered the room. Manny stood only slightly taller than Daniel seated. Manny was a stout man with several folds where his chin met his fat neck. Manny the Manatee, the guys teased him.

“I don’t want to have to say this," Manny said.

“Then don’t,” Daniel said.

“But we have deadlines.”

"I've told you a hundred times," Daniel said. "I can't cut steel faster than a robot, true. But these cuts are too difficult for programmers to code into the computers. So, you've got no choice. You got to wait on me.”

Manny backed away when Daniel stood. “We can't take new orders with this kind of backup. If it ain't done soon, you'll be out of a job."

Sometimes Daniel imagined throwing Manny down on the concrete and beating his head in. If only he were younger, if he could just cut out, get another job in the snap of a finger. Instead, he clenched his jaw and lied through his teeth. "I'll beat the deadline.”

Manny took off his hard hat, as if he too was itching for a fight. “One of these days there'll be a machine to replace you. You old guys just can't keep pace."

When Manny was out of earshot, Daniel threw one of his shoes at the wall of lockers, and

it clanged against the metal before falling to the floor. “Old guys?" he said. He spotted Gio, shaking his head while he fixed the sleeves of his bright yellow fire retardant jacket. "The computer guys don't know shit about machining steel. That's what I call job security.”

“Imagine Manny’s tiny arms," Gio said. "Trying to reach the levers on a crane or move the arm on the water cutter."

Daniel said, “And if our jobs are sent to India or Mexico, what's he foreman of?"

A few men laughed, and Daniel started to laugh too, but the mention of the work moving overseas turned his stomach. It sparked thoughts he tried to avoid. Every time there was a strike or a layoff, he worried about how he would earn a living if he could not get back into the mills. The anxiety cracked through his brain, and the only relief was to drink himself stupid.

***

When money was tight, Michelle found housekeeping jobs. The money was a little help with bills, and the work suited her. She drove Daniel crazy at home, always buzzing around to heat him a snack, wash the dishes, dust the knick-knacks, or fold the laundry. He couldn't relax and put his feet up without her vacuuming beneath him.

Lakefront spaces unspoiled by industry were crowded with the summer cottages of Chicagoans or the sprawling mansions of wealthy locals. These communities became the bedrock of Michelle's cleaning business, allowing her to hire employees and buy uniforms.

The income of the wealthiest seemed unrelated to the success of industry, yet the dominoes fell. Crime rose during long layoffs, as did the count of signs: going out of business, everything must go, cars for sale, for sale by owner, for sale by bank, will work for food.

Michelle's business faltered, revived with foreclosed homes, and then collapsed down to the few regulars, which she had to manage without staff. By then she had to work, to pay for the debts of her failure.

Exhausted by scrubbing floors and dusting baseboards, she hardly moved without her joints cracking or muscles screaming. After their son moved out on his own, Michelle and Daniel moved to a smaller house without stairs. Climbing stairs was hard on her knees. Harder going down than it was climbing up.

Many nights, Michelle slouched over the kitchen table covered in receipts, coffee stains, and a small white vase stuffed with plastic violets. She punched the numbers into her adding machine. Bethlehem Steel sold to Inland, and the pensions went with it for eighty-five cents on the dollar. Inland sold to Mital. Michelle multiplied Daniel's remaining pension by a thirty percent reduction, which the union had negotiated. Mital sold Daniel's plant, and it converted the pensions into investment accounts. Subtract market declines from two recessions, intermittent layoffs, and borrowing against retirement to pay their property tax. The long white receipt added to this: At some point, they had over a hundred thousand to retire on. Now Daniel had a fully paid life insurance policy, forty thousand dollars in a retirement plan and nearly that much in credit card debt. There was a complex arithmetic to going down, which he hadn't considered on his way up.

***

Daniel's workspace was on one of the wide platforms that circled the ground level, a warehouse of programmable MIGs, the automated steel-cutting machines against which he competed. His

days began with a matte sheet of carbonized steel or aluminum alloy and a design layout too complicated, too expensive, to code into the computers.

Daniel never wanted to be a mule, those young guys who think that they're invincible. A few years of loading at the docks or muscling their way to promotions at the mills, and they would discover signs of their mortality. Hernias protruded at their waistlines when they shed their T-shirts in the locker room. Fingers were permanently disjointed. Daniel apprenticed under his dad to learn a skill, not realizing in his twenties the wear it was doing to pull the arm of the cutting machines or yank out the various bits, or slam the gears to free a jam.

The machinists sat apart from others in the lunchroom, sharing hope that no matter how the industry changed, there would be work for men like them. They were artisans of metal.

***

Daniel opened his lunch bag and pulled out a container of rosemary chicken and peas.

"You gonna eat that cold?" Gio said.

"It's better cold."

Gio moved down two seats so he could sit across from Daniel. "Your wife cook that?"

Daniel nodded, his cheeks full with the first large bite.

"Why don't you cook yourself something else."

Daniel raised his fist to hide his open mouth. He said, "I don't cook."

Gio shook his head. "Don't cook? You're useless then."

Daniel nodded and smiled. He finished chewing before he answered. "Utterly fucking useless."

When they finished eating, they leaned back with their bellies relaxed and their arms hanging over the backs of their chairs. Gio said, “My wife is dying to go to Rome. I promised to take her when I retire.”

Daniel said, “You retiring?”

“If work’s drying up like Manatee says,” Gio said. He rubbed his browned skin and pressed on the wrinkled bags beneath his eyes. “I know I’m beautiful, skin like the ass of a baby, but I’m getting old. Hell, everything aches.”

“There’ll always be work for guys like us,” Daniel said.

“Nah,” Gio said. “They can automate anything nowadays. We’re just cheaper than computers -- for now.”

“And labor is cheaper in other countries,” Daniel said. “But we still got jobs. What’s that tell you? Tells me we’re too skilled to replace.”

“I’m gonna miss it,” Gio said. “The work, not the assholes we work with.”

"The only thing worse than work is not working," Daniel said. He had heard that phrase a thousand times, but saying it aloud sounded desperate. He asked, “Why Rome?”

“I don’t know,” Gio said. “I guess to meet the Pope and stare at painted ceilings.” He paused and looked up at the ceiling. “It’s a lot of money. Plane tickets, hotels, dinner. We can’t really afford it, but I’ve been promising for years.”

Daniel thought about the promises he made to Michelle, from the day they married on. Promises to take care of her and their children, to show her a good life, to never let them want for anything, to be better off than their parents. He sank into debt keeping promises. He said, “I’d miss the work. Always thought I could have been an artist. Make steel sculptures or something.”

"Yeah, me too," Gio said. "You know the Pope asked Michelangelo how he created the statue of David. He said David was always there; he just removed stone until he found him. That's what it feels like, what you and me do here."

Before lunch was over, they made plans to get beers later. Old guys like him could look at the engineer's plans and know how to cut the steel away, to erase things in order to create them. Daniel went back to work, folding a sheet of steel like origami until it took shape. The shining zinc-coated bumper, the front end of a semi-truck, his art, which would appear on highways across the nation. Objects appearing larger in mirrors, barreling through traffic, trailed by clouds of black diesel. He could see a flat piece of metal and know how to make it look like something. Sure, not David, but still.

***

When there were strikes, the strikers met every morning in front of the mills. In the boredom of standing around doing nothing all day, many guys shared things they normally kept private. They would look away in discomfort, digging their boot toes into the gravel and arriving the next day with a thermos of spiked coffee. Daniel could not go home at five with booze on his breath, so there was always a layover at one of the local dives. If there were guys from the same union at the bar, they would buy round after round for the strikers.

Layoffs meant there was no excuse for leaving the house in the morning, but after a few days of Michelle shouting about mud on the carpet, she was as ready as he was for a break. He would grab a greasy breakfast at the diner and sit with the regulars at the counter. They could bullshit for hours about how it used to be.

Used to be the union took care of you. They were in bed with the owners now. Used to be they all elected the same politician, the guy who promised new jobs. Then it was the guy who promised a return of the jobs. Used to be a man knew his duty, knew how to be a husband, a father. A man.

Daniel sometimes went home and convinced Michelle to go to the casinos. Gambling had been the only economic growth for the area, but they went there for the cheap lunch buffet and sometimes a good live band. The grandkids were at their house in the afternoon, his son's ex out of the picture completely, and Michelle didn't like him underfoot while she helped them with their homework.

At the end of what would have been a workday, he would head to the familiar dives. Kenny May's, open all night for the benefit of all shifts. Young and old guys hunched over the bar, grease blackening their fingernails, and practically crying about their problems. Kenny May's was really a strip club, but with middle-aged strippers. They had enormous breasts that they would flop in the face of a customer for a few bucks, but they never took it all off. Daniel came here because the bartenders reminded him of his wife in some ways, but in other ways, they were useful strangers. He could talk to them about things Michelle shouldn't know. His worries.

During layoffs or not, Gio and he always drank at Benton's. The old-timers bar by the harbor, always stinking like fry grease.

***

Gio was two beers deep when Daniel arrived, so he ordered two at a time to catch up. They put

a dollar in the jukebox and chose their rock songs, bitched about pop music, and chose their conversation from the usual playlist: sports, jobs, beer, or cars. Gio knew a lot about cars and owned a few classics in his time.

Benton's was good to their regulars. They trained new bartenders to spot the guys who they didn't need to throw out of the bar, the guys that were going to get shitfaced, yammer about nothing, and sleep in their cars in the parking lot. Guys like Daniel. Not troublemakers. He was downing the end of a glass, and the beer trickled out of the side of his mouth. He realized that he rarely smiled, except when he was a little drunk. Like now, Gio telling ridiculous stories about near disasters at the mills, rocks for brains kids who get in with the unions. Their end of the bar was erupting with laughter, men wheezing about all the good times.

As it got later and another shift of customers entered the bar, Gio and Daniel grew quiet in their corner. Daniel didn't explain about his good for nothing son not taking care of his girls, costing Daniel an arm and a leg to get them clothes and shoes and braces. He just said what Gio said, times were hard. Money was tight. They repeated it like a mantra and entered a silent trance, because there was nothing between friends but a code of silence.

Gio rested his head on his arm, which was flung across the bar. "Goddamn shit, shit that we've got, that we… It's a noose around my neck, all the time. Not a day I ever feel free."

***

Daniel woke with a sharp pain in his left elbow and a searing pain in his shoulder. He turned onto his right side, straightened his arm and rolled the shoulder back. The ache moved into his fingers, numb and tingling, and across his collarbone. He took a deep breath and arched his

back, bumping ass against ass with his wife. Michelle groaned and then kicked at the sheets like a swimmer kicking out of a turn before flipping over to face his back.

"Babe, you okay?" she asked in a hoarse voice.

"My arm," he said. She sat up a little so she could kiss his cheek and run her fingers through his thin graying hair. She was pissed when he came home drunk, but he told her that Gio was retiring, and she let that be a reason. She threw her arm around his belly and nestled her head between his shoulder blades. He stretched his arm back and grabbed her hip to pull her closer. The night was warm, but he was chilly with sweat.

At the end of their block, the street intersected with the six lanes of Indianapolis Boulevard, lined with used car lots, all night restaurants, and brightly lit gas stations. The muffled sound of cars speeding down the boulevard sounded like waves off Lake Michigan crashing onto the beach. Listening to the familiar rhythm helped Daniel fall back to sleep. When the alarm woke him again, he felt dizzy, as if he had slept on a rocking boat in the middle of the lake.

***

When Daniel arrived at his platform, just as he was starting his machine, Manny was on the floor waving for him to come down. Daniel motioned with his thumb to come up. He was trying to be a jerk, but he was also in no condition to make a bunch of trips up and down. Manny was huffing along the steep metal stairs, clipboard in hand, which he waved to cool himself. Daniel opened the door to his cage and waited at the top of the stairs. He had pushed it too hard the day before, and his fingers were numb. He could hardly raise his arm to put his hard hat on.

Manny always threatened to find a slightly younger or cheaper cutter to replace him, and maybe this was what he was coming to say. Maybe there was a guy out there who knew the machines, could do the work faster and do it for less. Maybe the tendons in Daniel's arms would not last long enough, and he would have to crack open the rest of the nest egg in order to cover the second mortgage.

Daniel stood fifty feet above the work floor, just high enough to break his neck. He looked across the plant to a caged platform on the other side. He spotted Gio standing at the top of the stairs, and thought he too was measuring distances, doing the arithmetic.

Morning After You

The room doesn't spin until you lie down on the bed. The last drink confirms your suspicion that you got very drunk. Something you hate to do. A total waste of good gin. Waste of a good party and a chance to meet someone new. To meet a guy to grab your ass, lift you up and press you against the wall while he buries his face in your cleavage. But here is your ass, snuggled into a pile of winter coats on someone's bed. Here is Jaclyn propped up on pillows, sipping a golden drink from a clear plastic cup. Jaclyn, desperate for an audience, continues her story even when Bria pauses in the doorway.

Cellmate Bria. You share a cubicle at work, because cubicles are so vast. Crowded daily by the sound of her tapping, typing, manicured nails and polite laughter into the phone receiver, and asking you for the umpteenth time, "Which way does stationery need to face in the printer?"

Jaclyn waits for her to leave before whispering that Bria's boyfriend is dull. If she looked like Bria, she would not settle for him. But Jaclyn turns heads too. Dark hair, big boobs, at least appeal if not class. Not a man magnet, but an arrow. She enters a room and aims, engulfing the

male target with her devoted attention. Coy looks, tilted head, passing touches. Allure.

"Then again," Jaclyn says, "Bria's probably boring in bed. Pretty people don't have to try."

Often you repeat Bria's name in your head. Someone who should marry a guy named Chad, or Beaux, or Clayton. Bria. The kind of person who knows what brand of stiletto someone is wearing. Shoe-wear matters to Bria.

She's only been working with you for a year, hired straight out of undergrad, more for her looks than her talent. Clients like her. That's how your boss explains it when Bria is promoted from entry level to your level.

A catastrophe tonight: her boyfriend's house, his party, her smugness. Jaclyn disappears and without your crutch, you find a way to support yourself. You lean against walls, crack jokes, get on well with the housemate Gabe. Bria keeps glancing at him. Something cruel about it, as if she is telling him to ruin you. A line of shot glasses, a sloppy pour, and you, drinking for the win. To prove you belong.

Surely, the universe is screwing with you. To tie your routine to Bria's routine. Adult social world, drawn like a Spiro graph toy, in circles of high school friends, college friends, work circles, intersections happening more by intention than chance. Lately, favorite friends have grown their circles with spouses, children, PTA, and soccer teams. Circles at the far edges of the page, distinctly separate from the world you inhabit. Whether by universe fuckery or sheer coincidence, Bria's circle and your circle have become one.

In your current state, the only way to escape this room is to roll off the bed, but you are on the side touching the wall. Jaclyn's not going to move for you, not now that she's finally trapped you in a conversation.

Jaclyn says, "Come on, you remember. The one I screwed in the bar? In the bathroom, after the St. Patty's parade. Or was it during? That guy."

Every time she sits up to drink, rocking the bed, it's as if your body is bouncing off a trampoline. You're in the air. You're falling back down.

"He walked through the party and goes right by me," she says, "like we'd never met. I called him on it, and he's hammered and stared for like a full minute, but then he smiles. And he says, 'St. Pat's? Was I that wasted?' That's how he says it. Like I'm fungus."

Jaclyn weighs romance and lust on the same balance, scales tipping for one-night stands. Admirable indifference to what she considers fronts. Follow her line of logic though, and she is all facades. All rejections based on something false. Rejection slaps you in the face, and each sting is added to a mental list, which unrolls itself after every new assault.

Tonight was supposed to be different. It was supposed to be you with a stranger in a bathroom. You walking away when it was done and intentionally forgetting his name. Not for revenge. For a break from mornings when you missed cues to leave or the days you have waited for a guy to call. Tonight is just another episode: Jaclyn's tales of conquests and your failure to assert. A mutual non-evolution.

You sit up, trying to keep your body from flying to the ceiling, while you look at her in the dim light. Jaclyn thinks you're thirsty and reaches back to the nightstand, handing you a full bottle of warm beer, which you gulp. A third is down before you remember: You are already drunk. You choke a little and lean forward, like riding a rollercoaster. Thrilled, the only thing to do is lie back; let the G-forces press you into the mattress. Going down the hill. Now loop the loop, earth above you and clouds at your feet.

"You even listening to me?"

You sit up again, smile at her, and she smiles back, and it feels like a super sweet moment between old friends who don't need words to communicate. She takes a drink and shrugs and then you ask, "Why do you care that he doesn't remember you?"

"Because I feel used," she says.

"Really?"

"Not really. I just don't like being forgettable. What's it matter?"

It would matter to you too, to be forgotten, but you press your cold fingers into your eyelids. Easier to tell the truth, eyes closed. "Just trying to see the point of your story."

"Because you're so damned interesting?" Jaclyn climbs off the bed and moves as if she is leaving the room but stops to swallow the last of her drink and wait for you to do or say something. She poses in the doorway, hand on hip, with a hard look on her face.

Then Jaclyn returns and sits. "Let me finish telling you. Same guy, not an hour later, finds me again, pushes me into the bathroom and bends me over the double sink. And *that* was the epiphany moment. What I've been trying to tell you."

You stare at her with one open eye. "Huh?"

She says, "I always thought they were stupid. But I get it now. Double sinks. They have more counter space."

The threads of her story unravel now, while you are trying to comprehend. Counter. Space. You fade on that. Space space. Time space. You think it's unfair no one warned you that you would have this kind of night over and over and over. The way you had imagined turning thirty is that parties would show signs of sophistication, conversations full of intellectual, rational, logical... For a while, you are in something like a dream.

The dream escapes. You feel people pulling their jackets out from under you and rolling

you from your spot. Maybe it's Jaclyn again, speaking on your behalf.

"She's super fucking wasted. She can't drive home. Let her stay."

***

It is dark out when you wake up, but you can't tell if it's morning and *still* dark, or if you slept all day and now, it's dark again. Those aren't your mini-blinds. This is not your bed.

Someone says, "Roll over."

You open your eyes. And close.

"Roll over. I'm barely on the bed."

You roll. You look at him. Shirtless Gabe, with a smattering of freckles between his shoulder blades. Smart. Funny. A fuzzy recollection of his climbing into bed with you. Discovering his lips are velvet soft, weaving your legs around his. His body turning away. Then sleep, then waking.

"You snore," he tells you. Like you didn't know.

But you didn't know. Can people be blamed for their snoring? Overweight people, smokers? You're a little of both, but not exactly either. Not your fault. Genetics or something.

You touch your belly. The sweater is off but the bra is on. Skirt is off, underwear is on. Memories arise from between the dreams. An interlude of drunk stripping. Wriggling out of clothes, lifting one cement-heavy leg at a time, finishing only half the job. You couldn't open your eyes.

"You're too drunk," he said.

"No'm not," you slurred.

This must be his bed. There's still a coat beneath you. Your coat? It's still dark out, early morning. The hue of the room is slowly brightening from charcoal to pale gray. You fling your arm out from the covers in search of cool air and then fall back to sleep.

***

You get up, hardly disturbing Gabe, sleeping face down in the room now bright with daylight. In this order, you find and put on your left sock, sweater, skirt, right sock. Then you lie back down and stare up at the ceiling. There's a weight on your chest, a solid brick of disappointment. You want to cry. It takes focus not to. Focus on the silvery spider web hanging from the blades of the ceiling fan. This day is no different from countless others. Waking up with a stranger after a party where you drank too much. This is routine, even though it's your birthday. You deserve something special, because you've long endured *not* special. Today, however, is no different.

In the kitchen, you search for coffee and a clean mug, settling for an unclean mug and the last drops of dish soap. The house is silent. Out the kitchen window, piles of snow reflect the white winter sun and make the visible patches of grass seem greener than they have in months. The coffee maker beeps.

There is a juicer jammed between the coffee maker and toaster in this kitchen. Probably the one Bria bought for the office. She had implied by the gift that your officemates were all a bit fat. In need of juicing. It collected dust at work. Even for her it was more convenient to run out at lunch and stand in line for a professional juice.

At the end of each workday, Bria heads to the bathroom and returns wearing black spandex workout pants, a transparent pink top, and a pushup bra, clearly built for exercise but

still, a pushup bra. The gym is in the basement at work. There's a locker room where she could change clothes. But no. She changes in the bathroom and parades through the office and stops by every desk to tell people to have a good night. The parade is not for the few male co-workers; they are surprisingly indifferent to her. It's for the junk-food-chowing girls at the office. Particularly you, whom she describes as her closest work friend.

Lunch at your desk, usually leftovers: a re-heated half of a pulled-pork sandwich. Just as tasty as the day before. Full of bad things, she tssks, bread and meat, salt, and don't you want to live longer? Weren't you trying to lose weight? Isn't that what you told her last week?

True, you told her that, but it wasn't the truth. You said it because it was, clearly, what she wanted you to say, and she wasn't going to leave you alone until she got what she wanted.

She always smells sweet like perfume. A person who does everything she can to avoid (her fingers sheepishly covering her mouth when she says it) poo-poo at work, thereby causing what you imagine to be a tremendous build-up, probably permanently lodged inside of her intestines, which explains why she rarely eats anything more than organic cricket-flour sesame seed crackers. That's the only rational explanation for why she described the garlic bread you shared with her last week as 'spicy food'.

Bria is now standing in the kitchen doorway. She crosses the room in a men's long T-shirt, disheveled blonde hair, dark roots exposed, hair flipped to one side. She finds a cabinet of clean coffee mugs in one try. Black liner rimmed eyes, watery, mascara trails, lipstick trails, raw morning skin. She looks like a child's doll, its face scribbled on with markers, but her prettiness is still apparent.

She sits in the chair farthest from you, looking at you through the steam of the coffee. "Have fun last night?"

You answer yes, and it's followed by a long silence, measuring each other. "Wish I hadn't gotten so drunk."

"It happens," she says. "Did you and Gabe –? I won't judge."

It's an accusation. You shake your head no. "We just slept."

You look at the juicer on the counter and back at her. Not because you really want her to know, but because you having nothing else to talk about, or desperately want to have some kind of feeling, you let her in. "It's my birthday."

She swirls and studies her coffee, one foot on the chair, knee under her chin. "How old?"

You don't want to say it. Thirty feels like an exit door. Once you go through it, you cannot go back. But you tell her.

"Thirty?" she says. She swirls, studies, sips, looks at you, like there is something else to say.

Her boyfriend Kyle enters the room, kisses her before removing containers from the fridge. Carton of eggs, bag of shredded cheese, foil lumped around something. You tell him your name when he asks, that you work with Bria, unsure how to react that he's met you three times and still doesn't remember your name or how you connect to his world.

Gabe walks in and gives you a puzzled look, like he’s trying to understand why you are still here. He absconds with a mug of coffee and a slice of brown bread, hanging from his mouth.

You follow him to his bedroom. You could make an innuendo about the bread, like you typically do. Instead, you apologize for passing out in his bed.

"Funny. I figured you were waiting for me."

"Why's that?"

"Like you seem to take chances, like wait for guys in their beds." He walks up to you, and he smells like clean, salty sweat. His shirtless chest lingers before you. “During the party, you seemed bold."

Bold is not a word for you, too busy trying to make an impression, distracted by all the ways to imagine things will go wrong. Then again, it's been thirty years of spinning wheels. There is nothing to lose; you see that more and more lately, just a guy who isn't going to call. A guy who had a chance last night and did not take it. Then again, that's something too.

You are not an arrow, not a magnet. Merely you, walking through a door.

You put your hand palm-flat on his bare chest. Slow breaths, hot face, staring at your fingers and the short curls of hair between them. When you finally look up, he too is staring at your fingers, not moving to touch you, not moving to push you away. There is no sign if he is revolted or enamored. Pressing your hand more firmly, feeling his heartbeat, you try to measure in its rhythm a sign of how to proceed.

You are just some girl that he slept next to after a party, and he's not rude, and he's not going to push you away. At the same time, he's not going to move into your apartment and cook you breakfast and join your family on beach picnics. Still, while your hand is there on his warm skin, you are closer to having a relationship than you have been in a long time. Less lonely. Less feeling like everyone else has figured out the game before you.

Bria appears in the doorway, and Gabe steps back, and you awkwardly leave your hand raised in the air as you turn to her.

He says, "What's up Bria?"

"There are eggs if you want. And happy birthday."

Bria is layered in facades, but it suddenly occurs to you that she too might be lonely.

Maybe looking for a way into the things that she feels outside of. Gabe, muscled, tan, tall, cannot possibly understand what it's like. Wishing that his body was for you, you are resigned to accept that this is not how things work out. You have to leave, before he finishes his coffee and discovers sober you. Morning-after you.

"It's your birthday?" he says. Same puzzled look as in the kitchen, head tilted, trying to work you out.

You nod, hoping he doesn't ask your age.

Gabe doesn't ask how old. He suggests you might have a busy day planned. You probably have somewhere to be.

A cue. You probably missed a few cues already. You grab your things from the floor, the bed and the dresser. Coat zipped, keys in hand, purse hanging from crook in elbow. While Gabe dresses, you spin around to confirm that you are leaving nothing behind.

You pause and imagine an early afternoon spent sharing a couch with Bria and Kyle and Gabe, watching movies, laughing and finding common ground. That's not how it ever turns out though. There is a history of you awkwardly leaning into the arm of a couch, a guy you slept with steadying cans of beer on your knee, while he and his roommates watch a football game and forget that you exist.

Gabe offers to walk you to your car. "I wasn't trying to rush you off," he says. "You're funny. Kind of sarcastic, but I like it."

You nod. You tell him he should call you. You don't know if this is bold you or same old fool you. Same old cycle of rejection.

Phones come out; numbers are exchanged; phones are put away. He grabs your hands and holds them in his warmth. Hot breath, cold air, white clouds forming around you like

cartoon thought bubbles, but there is nothing to say except goodbye. He quickly kisses your forehead, closing the car door once you are all in. You glance in the rearview to see him standing in the street, watching your car until it turns the corner.

Glass Cage

Mickey bolted upright, startled awake by the warm hand cupped firmly over her mouth. Her husband demanded quiet before releasing her.

“Man or animal?" she whispered. Mickey's heart thumped as the sounds drew nearer of dry grass breaking. Their Nandi spearmen made her nervous since every month the Mombasa newspaper reported tribal attacks on British landowners. Carl's calm demeanor would have been reassuring if it were not for a flowing beard, which made his appearance stern.

Carl swept aside the hair hanging over her eyes. Friction from his calloused fingers sent tingles across her dry skin, causing her to shiver. He nestled against her on the cot, pulling her into his arms before nodding at the tent wall.

Campfires for the night watch cast flickering light. It projected the silhouette of corkscrew horns onto the sloped canvas walls. Hooves scraped the clay earth. As the sound of the kudu drew nearer, the shadows elongated their thick-kneed legs, stretching the outline of their horns to the peak of the tent. Mickey felt as if she were sitting on a motionless carousel

while the bobbing menagerie circled around her.

She whispered, "It's like waking to a dream."

Carl lit the wick of the lantern on the bed stand. "But it's not why I woke you."

Mickey unfolded the paper he handed her. The feature was of them kneeling on each side of a limp-faced leopard under the headline, "Woman Huntress is Roosevelt's Competition." She turned away from Carl and covered her immodest grin.

"I had no idea my wife was a role model for the women's movement." Carl chuckled as he rose to leave. "Publicity like this might boost our funding."

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Mickey tucked her blouse into her baggy britches as she emerged from the tent. Dawn light shown on the kudu herd, wagging their tails as they plodded away from camp. In one moment, she wondered why they were grazing in near darkness, but in the next moment, she heard the yawning roar of a lion. She was still, watching as dozens of men emerged from tents, guns in hand, shoulders excitedly taut, as if they had never slept.

A lion's roar could travel boundlessly across the savannahs, making it nearly impossible to know from which direction it approached. She turned to Mwaka, a local boy they'd taken on as a porter and outfitted in a cork helmet and tall gumboots. When he donned the English costume, he looked less like a skilled bushman and more like a boy wearing his father's suit. There was another roar, and he announced, "No worry, madam. The lion eats."

Mickey asked, "How can you know?"

"When the lion hunts, he is silent," explained Mwaka. "When the lion is full, he roars."

Other men acknowledged their safety as well, their voices rising like the sun. Blades of pink light slashed the horizon as whispers grew to shouts and laughter; the pack camels too, welcomed morning with belches. The grass steamed as sunlight exploded across the savannah, mingling with the heat of cooking fires.

A dozen Kikuyu boys sat on their haunches stirring pots of stewed beef, maize porridge, or coffee. The women kneeled in their work, cleaving hard-shelled bush fruit and spilling the berry-like seeds into flat baskets. Their younger children ran wildly through camp with the Americans, whose mothers convened at the breakfast table in their tan shirtwaists and long, khaki skirts, stiff in their corsets and social conventions.

When their expedition began, the museum's men were enamored by Mickey's interest in taxonomy and pelt stretching. The team of scientists, hunters and taxidermists taught her how to handle a gun and shoot birds. Admiration diminished when the Natural History Museum added her name to a grant for a small mammal display. The men ignored her, and their wives picked at her like carrion, pursing their lips when she donned pants and gumboots. Reduced to little more than her husband's shadow, Carl treated her like an apprentice, sometimes like a child clinging to his hip.

Carl sat down near her and placed his rifle between them. Mickey pushed a cup of coffee toward him and asked, “Am I joining the lion hunt?”

He emptied the cup in one long drink. "It's not safe for a woman. Save that gumption for the elephant hunt."

Though lions had mauled one of their young spearmen on the last hunt, she felt safer when she joined the hunts. She took his free hand and pressed it to her chest. “Please, dear. Tell me not to worry."

Carl lifted her hand and kissed each of her fingers. "Don't worry about me," he said. When he stood, he let her hands fall from his grip, and then he walked away.

Bill called him over to the men's table. "Did you see? Your wife is in the paper alongside you. Carl and Mickey and their merry band of conservationists."

"I can't help my name being printed."

"I expect to see your name," Bill said. "Not hers, though, when mine is absent. Or George's. We're the ones with contracts, and it's our skills that got us here."

George said, "Maybe I should put my wife in front of the lens. Get my name in the papers too."

"If only she had better aim," Carl said.

"Make jokes," Bill said. "But she'll get it in her head that her contributions are as great as ours."

Charlie, the quick-tempered bachelor, said, "Anyone can shoot if you teach them to aim, but tracking, we do that. Choosing the moment? We do that, too."

One of the porters came to take Mickey's plate, and she smiled up at him. She wondered if he was thinking her same thought, that it was the Nandi who really did the tracking. Neither this thought nor Carl's pride in his wife mattered though; by the end of breakfast, they decided the women wouldn't be joining the lion hunt.

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After breakfast, the porters strapped the camels with food, bedrolls, guns and spears. Mickey and the children fed the camp monkeys, letting tawny vervets crawl across their laps or hang

from their shoulders. By the heat of midday, camp was bursting with outsiders, mainly the Kikuyu taking breaks from their farms to enjoy the shade and earn money. They washed clothes, cleaned tents, or helped Mickey.

Mickey led a group into the thickets, where they cleaved machetes into the bark of bush trees, collecting sap on squares of cloth to prepare sticky traps. They carefully broke the small necks of birds caught in the traps and brought them to Mickey in the work tent. She measured the specimens and instructed porters in applying spirits on traps to free the birds. She spent the afternoon netting moths and butterflies.

Some of the children sat across from Mickey at her workbench. They began their chore just as she had shown them, delicately removing butterflies from the nets and placing them in glass jars. Benji lifted a jar containing three leopard-spotted butterflies and asked, “Should we cut breathing holes in the lid?”

Mickey placed sopping cotton balls into the empty glass jars, explaining as she worked, “No holes or the ether won’t work. It’s a killing chamber.”

"When I'm grown up," Benji said, "I'll hunt with my father. I'll have the biggest count of the safaris, and the papers will take my picture."

"That's quite a plan," Mickey said.

"Your kill numbers aren't too bad," he said, "For a girl."

"A woman, you mean."

"I wish my mother hunted like you. Then maybe she'd understand about wearing out trousers and dirt behind the ears. But she doesn't like the smell of gunpowder. She covers her mouth with a hanky, like this, when guns are shot near her." As he raised his hand to his nose, he made a look like a bad smell, and the other children giggled. "I'll marry a woman like you, I

think."

"You're a boy with many plans, aren't you Benji? Well, get on with your work, if we're going to finish before supper."

By early evening, the whisper of fluttering wings was silenced, all the nets emptied and the chambers full. They quietly folded the nets and stacked the jars until Martin, speckled with dirt and freckles, asked, “Do you like killing things?" His older sister tried to pinch him, but he swatted her hand away.

“In our camp, we only kill for food, research, or safety," Mickey said.

"You can't eat butterflies, and they aren't dangerous," Martin said. "So do you kill them just to look at them?"

"They're for the museum, to look at and to research." Mickey really hoped that one of the natural history museums would buy her bird and insect collections. The men were not interested in this work, bored by the tedious labor and the naming of unknown species. It was the only hope of being recognized for her own merits.

"I guess I don’t like killing things," she said, "but it's important work.”

She patiently waited for the wings of her captive bugs to stop fluttering. Butterflies folded and unfolded, touching antennae to the glass, searching for escape. Sometimes she would lift the jars when the bugs were dead, and they seemed to twitch again, as if she was bringing life back to them. When she put the jars down, she realized that the motion was from her heart, pulsing into her fingers.

That night they ate curried guinea fowl by the light of the oil lamps. She leaned one elbow on the table and sucked marrow from a thighbone. The crack of bones was a familiar sound, like that of a lion crushing the skull of its prey. She felt ferocious.

***

The next day, Mickey organized a group of gun-boys to hike with her along the river. They loaded the rifles with rat-shot so that the spray of small bullets would kill birds without destroying their feathers. The air was cool along the small fork of the Thana River, which was too shallow for hippos, but narrow enough for trees to meet in the middle and form a canopy. It was a favored spot for all variety of water birds.

At one point, as she walked along a high steep bank where the grass was as high as her neck, she spotted an eagle hovering high above. She lifted her gun and steadied her shoulder, but when she had a clear shot, she waited. The bird called with a whistle-like song, and in the distance, she heard another eagle whistle back. The bird swooped down with speed, yet its great wingspan made it look like a kite falling to the earth. It splashed into the water and flew to a new perch with a wriggling fish in its beak. She took aim again, but then she lowered her gun to watch in reverence. The eagle maneuvered its catch, its white neck feathers glowing majestically in the sunlight.

The forest suddenly erupted with the grunting of baboons. Monkeys were screeching and hopping, climbing trees in flying bounds. The murmur of a lion had shattered the solemnity, and there was no mistaking from which direction it stalked. Mickey glimpsed the tops of spears bouncing above the grass line, and she ran along the bank, slipping in the mud until the ground leveled out.

Korinko, an old man who had been with the expedition since it began, was tripping backward through the yellow grass, and that is when Mickey saw the amber eyes of a lion,

darting forward and then pulling back, haunches raised, head lowered. Korinko fell back, and all she could see were his calves and feet as he wriggled away. The lion traveled like a bullet. Its mane shook like reeds as it leapt forward and then plowed toward the hunters. In a blink, in an eternity, it reached the line of men, stretched its enormous jaw, and bellowed at its audience. Its roar echoed, and the sound surrounded them.

Mickey had a shot and took quick aim, but the pellets from her gun were useless, and ricocheted off the muscles of the animal. The lion turned back to Korinko, who had risen and attempted to scare the beast by jabbing at it with his spear. The lion swiped with his enormous paw, yanking the spear from his grip, the force of which brought him face down, and the lion disappeared into the camouflage of grass. They threw their spears, but the lion moved too quickly, teasing them farther into the tall grasses when they ran to retrieve their weapons. The beast was silently stalking, and moment by moment, the grasses would move in spots far from where they had aimed.

Lions hunt with singular focus, committing to a target and stalking until they make their kill. It was quiet. Mickey's heart was beating in her ears, and she was biting her tongue in an attempt to slow her breathing. She watched Korinko turn to his left, and suddenly the lion leapt from behind him. Mickey cried out, but it was no use. The lion had caught the top of Korinko's skull, sheering off the top of his scalp. Some men ran toward him and grabbed his ankles to pull him away.

Mickey was deafened by the screaming and her own gunfire, and she could not hear herself as she shouted for them to retreat. The lion clamped onto the back of Korinko's neck, yanking his limp body. Mickey put her emptied rifle down and grabbed an iron spear, running toward the grasses in which the lion dragged the body toward the forest. She threw the spear but

couldn't see where it landed. Mwaka was running toward her, mouthing words, but she had been deafened. His lips seemed to say, *You are safe. The lion eats.*

***

The hunters returned to camp the following afternoon. The story of Korinko's death was told while they cleaned and stretched lion skins. It was retold while the meat was cooked and salted, and again around the campfire, between tales of bravery or stories that brought on laughter and relief.

Carl sat across from Mickey at her workbench and shook his head. "Half of those boys have never held a gun or hunted a lion. What were you thinking?"

Mickey brought the lamp closer as she stretched out the body of a bird. She had already measured its wingspan but was trying to occupy herself so she wouldn't have to look at Carl.

"If you're going to stage any kind of hunt, you need proper hunters with you."

She nodded.

"Maybe our men are right," Carl said. "Women don't belong out here. You don't think like we do."

"That's not fair," she said. "Anyone of us could have been walking along the river and been attacked."

"But it wasn't just anyone, was it?" he said. "Everyone thinks I've been propping you up. Too proud to see that you've become arrogant."

"It wasn't arrogance."

"That's the end of it," he said. "Just the elephant hunt, and then you're putting your guns

down."

***

The elephants were going to be the trophy piece of an exhibition. Carl had a vision of a herd of elephants for the great hall of the Natural History Museum. When he first taught Mickey how to load and clean a gun, where to aim to do the least damage to the skin, it was always with the idea of preparing her for the elephant hunt. The Kenya Protectorate would only issue one elephant permit per person. Carl wanted as many as he could get, so he wanted her to bag an elephant.

When their journey began the year before, Carl would stay in the back of the caravans to hold Mickey's hand to ensure she safely crossed rivers or made it up slippery hills. He always ate breakfast at her table and slept in the same tent. As the caravan began its journey north to the mountains now, Carl took his own tent at night. During the day, he stayed in the lead, never once checking on her.

Their animal collections were crated and sent by train to Mombasa. The porters balanced crates of supplies on their heads, the weight of which kept Mwaka from speaking much to Mickey. Kikuyu people joined the caravan, helping carry the burdens in exchange for the safety of crowds before they diverged to their intended destinations. At the end of a week, they reached the mountains and built a main camp. Trackers excitedly poked through large balls of dung, and chattered about the size and age of the elephants that must be near. The hunting party set out immediately with Mickey taking up the back alongside Mwaka.

They followed the evidence for another week, examining broken branches, scraped bark and large footprints until one misty morning at daybreak, they felt the ground shaking. Mickey

emerged from her tent, large gun at the ready, and ran toward Carl and the other men who were already dashing toward the hunt.

Mickey stalked small, young elephants, as she was considered the least experienced hunter. The shouts of a kill went out through the trees every hour or so, but for the most part she was alone with Mwaka and two of the youngest Nandi. Covered only in leather breechcloths, the Nandi carried wooden shields and seven-foot spears. She often marveled at their fearlessness, but when they joined her on a hunt, she felt like a nuisance. By British law, they were not permitted to hunt on their own. She understood that paralyzing fact, of being capable yet not allowed to rule themselves.

The light waned, and the hunt would end with the day. She was urgent to make a kill, knowing the herd might move on before they woke the next day. Success on this hunt meant a chance to get back in Carl's good graces. Her hunting partners had gone ahead to search for fresh prints, and when she turned to look for them she saw a great bull stripping the branches of a tree fifty yards away.

The gun was heavy to lift and difficult for her to steady. She bit on her tongue, took deep breaths, and waited. The elephant moved closer, stopping to rub its large tusks against an acacia tree. She waited until it was no more than twenty yards from her, hoping that the wind wouldn't shift and that it wouldn't catch her scent. It turned away from a tree, and she had a clear shot to its neck. She fired.

Mwaka ran towards her, and already the bull was waltzing side to side. She shot again, and it fell to its front knees.

Mwaka shouted across the valley to announce the kill. Soon a dozen men were in the clearing, watching as the bull fell to its side, shaking the ground as it keeled over. It kept trying

to hold its head up, kept moving its legs as if it might rise again. Finally, it was still.

Carl and the other men were soon in the clearing as well. Carl was carrying his enormous box camera and tripod. He stopped and looked at the bull. He measured its tusks, and other men commented it was the best kill of the whole expedition.

The best kill.

Mickey had been stunned by the ease with which she completed her task. She let her husband move her into position next to the elephant so that he could take a picture. While he fixed the camera, she crouched down on one knee and leaned against the bull. She pressed her hand against the wrinkled skin. She had bagged the best trophy, and when she looked up at Carl, she did not see him admiring her with pride. Instead, he was sullen. She leaned against the elephant and felt it already growing cold.

Life on Earth

August Mahoto wiped the sweat gathering above his lip. The audience was hardly visible beyond the bright lights shining on the cramped stage. Mark Long, host of *The Long Game*, was beside him at the conference table and projected onto two screens facing them. A red light blinked, indicating they were on air. There was no chance of backing out now, and August felt heavy with his duty.

"In science news," Mark said, "participant Mars 34 died. Joining us tonight from Houston is Dr. Mahoto, head of NASA's Life in Space program." The red light went off and Mark gulped water while an intro video played on the screens. The red light flashed again. "Doctor, could you start by telling us about your work at the LIS agency?"

August spoke slowly so that his accent would sound more American. "I am the chief researcher, and under President Nicanor our work has focused on a single goal. Space habitation."

"Let me interrupt, because I think the public wonders why so much money is spent trying

to relocate us." Mark's face reddened. He stopped to sip water and stifle a cough. "Why not fix Earth?"

August shifted in his seat, and then clasped his hands together. No answer satisfied public opinion, and he was tired of answering the same questions. "As you know, the damage is irreversible."

"But isn't that debatable?" Mark asked. "Aren't there people who disagree?"

"Yes, but they have no scientific basis…"

"You've stated before that the science is evolving."

"Yes, but what I meant…"

"Why should we trust you?"

Before August could answer, Mark signaled for a commercial break as he seized with coughing. Slouching like a man exhausted by a chronic condition, he closed his eyes and spat phlegm into a tissue. August guessed at a diagnosis: interstital-pneumoclito. The hack.

The red light flashed on. "Before the break, you were about to give us proof. A reason to leave Earth?"

August said, "The LIS researchers operate under the belief that this planet can no longer sustain us. Proof is no longer the core of our research. I am devoted to solving the human problem."

"The human problem," Mark said. "That's a cold way to put it. Is that how you think of Mars 34?"

"34 was my friend," August said, his voice shaking. Discussing the loss of his friend with a stranger only reminded him of the grief he tried to suppress. "Our wives died from the same condition. It's what drew both of us into this project." His wife had been the driving force,

the desperation with which he pursued solutions. If he could have gotten her to a planet where plants and bacteria, rather than machines and chemicals, filtered the air and water, there might have been a chance. Now, his son was the motivation.

Mark cleared his throat. "Doctor, how will 34's death impact the colonization plan?"

"There were a thousand volunteers in Mars Colony," August said. "One of several LIS colonies. And 34 was one of the survivors to return. Each death, each autopsy, revealed clues about long-term habitation."

"Is it true the government is covering up the total failure of this project? And is it true that acute heart failure was the cause of death for all of the colonists?"

"Which one do you want me to answer first?" August said.

The audience laughed, and Mark smiled. "What was cause of death for 34?"

"Heart failure."

"And the other colonists who died of natural causes?"

"I think you know the answer," August said, smiling. The audience laughed again, and he sensed that they wanted to be entertained, not informed. "But to be serious, yes, we have learned that a lack of gravity has a unique effect on organs. Not to mention planetary particulates. Radiation. It is still an unknown frontier."

"Would you call it a failure then?" Mark goaded.

"The failure was not reacting earlier. To the evidence that we were destroying our own atmosphere."

"That's a centuries old argument," Mark said. "Yet we've adapted. And we could keep on adapting." They cut to commercial while he endured another attack of coughing.

August sat quietly during the long break and imagined his son watching the show in his

bedroom. When he was his son's age, his father was dead and his mother was dying. She would wheeze as she knelt beside his bed and told him to say his prayers. Yet at nine years old, he found faith in science was more practical than any promise of god. In sentimental moments though, he knelt beside his bed, folded his hands, and prayed. "Please God, let Mother live another year."

The studio light flashed. Mark was red-faced, but grinning again. Gritting his teeth into a bright white smile. "It is Dr. Mahoto's belief that this planet is collapsing. And it is no secret there are food shortages, border wars, pollution related diseases. Viewers, you can reply to our survey now. Do you think we'll survive, or do you think leaving is the answer?"

"Doctor, I turn it back to you. If collapse is certain, but we aren't being evacuated to the colonies, then what is the government hiding?"

August shook his head. "I really can't answer."

"Can't answer, or won't?" Mark's eyes were small and bloodshot. He began to hack, but didn't cut to commercial. "How long before there's a promising colony?"

"I don't contemplate how long," August said. He slapped his hand flatly on the desk. "I'm searching for a place that could sustain us without destroying us. I cannot make the discovery of such a place fit into any kind of timeline. Would you prefer I lie to you?"

Mark eased back in his chair. "Folks, there you have it. Dr. Mahoto is playing the ultimate long game. That's it for tonight. Join us tomorrow when we talk to a high-rise farmer, about the latest in genetic breakthroughs."

***

August returned to work on the tunnel train. The tunnel was occasionally pierced by small rays of light, reminding him it was still daytime in Houston. He didn't get off at his stop. Instead, he stared out the windows at the sooty, cement walls of the tunnel.

The body of Mars 34 was ice cold in a drawer at LIS. August had been at work the whole night before, and by morning, he understood the initial findings of the blood work. He knew the truth Mark Long was asking for; he knew it before he arrived at the studio.

Most of the Mars Colony volunteers left Earth before the Green Lakes disaster. Their DNA had been spared the effects that the rest of mankind had endured. Mars 34 left Earth after Green Lake. Mars 34 mattered for this reason more than any other did. He arrived in Houston with skin lesions and greenness in his eyes. He had been suffering horrible things for years, which is why he returned to Earth. When August saw the condition of the body, he sent the other examiners out of the room.

It had been theorized by some scientists that the belt of radiation surrounding the Earth was actually imprisoning it. Green Lake created attributes at the genetic level, which made all of the survivors susceptible to even the smallest amount of space-radiation. There was no hope of surviving the pollution on Earth, but there was no way to travel through the radiation belt without weakening the walls of the heart or without exciting cancer cells.

Mars 34 confirmed the most pessimistic theories.

***

August arrived home and shouted from the kitchen, "Jay-bird? You home?"

"In my room," Jay replied.

When August came into the room, Jay's face was covered with a clear breathing mask. The machine beside the bed whirred; it's mechanical rhythms matched those of deep breaths. August sat on the mattress and pushed the hair back from Jay's forehead. Jay lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes, allowing his father to pull the sheets and blanket up around his neck. He pulled his mask off long enough to say, "I watched the show. You were great, Dad."

Jay soon fell asleep. August rubbed his son's back for a long time, then knelt down beside his bed and folded his hands in prayer. "Please God. Please exist."

This Is War

Amy wandered around Buckingham Fountain, searching for familiar faces in the crowd. She stopped to snap photos of protest signs like "Down with Dubyah" and "No Blood for Oil". When she started college, she took up chants for every cause, for anyone who might be in the shadows with her: bombed in Palestine, mutilated in Nigeria, poisoned in Central Mexico. None of her other causes attracted as much public attention, but no issue before had felt as urgent as the threat of war.

Her parents were among many residents who sat in front of bulldozers, arms locked, to protest the injustice of a garbage dump. The city planned to build it in the center of a low-income neighborhood, with the perceived intention of displacing the impoverished, unsavory residents. Her parents made the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* and hung the framed article in their dining room, as proof they could fight the good fight. The dump still came.

It was a humid August day, and the wind blew a cool mist down from the grand fountain. Amy was ready to move out of the sun or walk over to the beach and put her feet in the icy

water, but more than that, she wanted to have a part in the rally. At least a hundred people blocked the sun or waved themselves cool with anti-war signs. Thin old men in Vietnam-era military fatigues held up peace signs as she walked by and throngs of students bathed in the sun, using their backpacks as pillows. There were pro-war signs too, belonging to similarly perspiring people who fingered their flag pins or pulled their red, white and blue hats down to shade their eyes.

A commotion of applause drew Amy toward a crowd gathering by a small wooden stage. She continued looking for someone she knew, someone she could walk with. Others like her, wandered in search of likeminded friends. A man delivered a speech through a bullhorn, but there were too many people in front of her to move into earshot. At the front of the pack, hands rose in the air as an amen.

The crowd began to move forward, marching along a road that ran behind the art museums, hotels and restaurants along Michigan Avenue. The other side of the street ran along Grant Park, where joggers and tourists were using the same sidewalk as the protestors but headed in the opposite direction.

Someone chanted "No war. No bombs." It bounced through the crowd a few times before another chant rose up. For many blocks, the noise was mainly from cars on the other side of the park honking at the rally. Amy rushed to join the chants before they died, hoping to find her voice within the mass, but she kept missing the chance.

When the march reached its first turn, a chant finally took hold, and signs in the air moved to the same rhythm. "No more war. No more war." At first, Amy felt empowered by the simple message. The route was parallel to the jogging path, and as she passed numerous tan, attractive men, she smiled at them. Maybe as they passed, they were thinking of asking for her

number. But the marchers, without much of an audience, began shouting at the joggers and bikers as they passed. They shouted that Bush must go, that war was wrong, shouting accusations of indifference at the in-line skaters. As they approached Lake Michigan, the march took over the entire path, forcing joggers into the sand. Cyclists dismounted either to walk their bikes through the group or to heave their bike frames onto one shoulder as they scuttled around the group.

"No blood for oil," they shouted

The joggers began shouting back. "Shut the fuck up."

"No more war."

One cyclist got off his bike to point at the right-of-way arrows. “No more line crossing." Amy slowed her pace until she was in the very back with a handful of other timid protestors. She was relieved as they neared their turnaround point, Lower Wacker, where there was little chance of further public embarrassment. The lower drives were an underworld of streets, always dark and cool, overshadowed by the grid of upper streets, which was a giant network of bridges. The underworld smelled of urine and garbage and was full of permanent residents curled against walls amongst the pigeon feathers.

The marchers shouted, "Save our soldiers," and the chant echoed through the cave of streets. Men resting on sleeping bags sat up as people passed, grunting their approval at the throng of young women.

Amy passed a man with bloodshot bug-eyes who stared vacantly from the curb he was sitting on. When he heard a chant though, he punched the air and shouted, “Black Power.”

They shouted, “What do we want?”

He answered, “Equality.”

Amy felt changed by his voice within their message. In this even darker shadow world, his point seemed sharper than hers.

***

Amy rocketed up in a silver bullet elevator and entered the penthouse office. While she waited for the receptionist to gather the delivery, she leaned against a wall of windows. Lake Michigan was visible between the buildings. Its gray-blue water faded into the winter skyline. There was already a crowd of tiny figures gathered in Grant Park.

"Amazing view," she said.

The receptionist was a young woman prematurely aged by the fluorescent lighting and a boxy suit jacket. She didn't look up when handing off a pile of envelopes and folders.

The view at eyelevel was a panorama of rooftop gardens, copper steeples and cupolas housing alabaster sculptures. "It's like a private art gallery," Amy said.

The receptionist handed her a clipboard. "Sign, please."

Bike messengers are human fax machines, expected to arrive in the blink of an eye. Amy travelled at least forty miles a day, but the job admitted her to this secret city, carrying critical documents from corporate offices in Bronzeville to real estate agencies in Greektown to design firms just north of Wrigleyville. The enormous buildings snatched the sunlight, leaving the street level in winter shades of bleakness year-round, and exaggerated her firm sense of incredible smallness.

Offices and apartments floated above the events of the world; maybe the receptionist did not give a damn about the crowd in the park. Maybe she didn't even notice. Below, tourists in

team jerseys, pigeons, tan men in tailored suits and beggars all travelled along the same veins through downtown. The steel girders arching over streets to support the el tracks offered shelter from harsh weather. Here the problems walked beside you.

Amy pedaled by the flocks of people moving toward the park. She felt like the city had awoken from a coma. News footage of bombs falling across Iraq in the name of freedom had stirred nations. The war protest was one of her many causes, but for the first time, she felt their message might be heard. She was counting down the hours until she could join rank for another march.

***

Rush hour traffic on Division Avenue was moving at its usual chaotic pace, with cars speeding through yellow lights, slowing for drivers stealing the right-of-way, snaking around city busses in the right lane and lines of cars waiting to turn left. One of these cars crossed into the bike lane and corrected at the last moment.

Amy pedaled faster to try to get in front of the woman driving the car. She even tried shouting through the closed windows, "Bitch. Get off your phone."

As they slowed for a stoplight she kicked the side of the car, but the force made her lose control, and her front tire careened into the curb. She skidded along the curb, landing with the bike on top of her, the handlebars jackknifed and pressing into her side.

She took a deep breath and wondered if the sharp pain was a broken rib. The empty messenger bag was tangled around her arm and the handlebars, and the pain sharpened when she raised her arm to get the bag off, rolling away from the bike onto her back to stare into the bright

April sky.

The pace of traffic slowed until the people ignoring her were just inching by. An old beater rolled by. The back door was crushed in, music loud, bass line thumping, a young guy hanging halfway out of the open window. "Can you move?" he asked.

"I think so." She touched her ribs, thinking he might be ready to call an ambulance.

"If you can move," he said, "Get out of the street."

Another car pulled over, came to a full stop that caused a blare of horn honking. The driver leaned across the passenger seat to shout out the window, "You okay?"

Amy raised her middle finger. "Just fuck the fuck off."

The car started to pull away, stopped again, and this time the driver parked and got out. "Amy?"

She shaded her eyes to look up at him. "Dax? Didn't recognize you."

He was standing over her, scanning the tangle of her legs still hugging part of the bike. "Can you move?"

"Yeah," she said. She took a deep breath, and it felt less like a broken rib. "A little help?"

Dax pulled her up with one arm while maneuvering the bike out of the way. He lifted it into the trunk of his white Crown Vic, which showed signs of being a former cop cruiser: oversized mirrors, three antennas in the back, and a shitty paint job, which mostly obscured the word Police.

"Nice wheels," she said.

"My dead grandfather's."

They were just classmates. Not even that. They went to the same college and never had

classes together, but they chatted on cigarette breaks. They also sat with the same large group of people in the Underground Café, played black jack when they should have been doing homework, or joined the tabletop debates against north suburbs kids mouthing about how bad they had it now that they weren't living at home. Dax and Amy took up with the south-siders spouting the same complaints, legitimized by the fact that whether living on their own or with their parents, times were tough.

“You heading to school?” Amy said.

"Close. I work on Printer’s Row. I’m picking up fliers. Hey, if I drop you on State Street is that close enough?"

"Cool with me,” she said. She searched for something to talk about. “I’m just locking my bike over there. I’m going to a protest.”

“I’ll be there,” he said. He turned up the volume on the radio and lit a cigarette. Amy rolled the window down, letting the icy wind take control of her hair. Not having to convince someone to oppose the war gave her less to say.

When they turned onto State, she finally thought of a question. "Where you from?"

Dax answered with a hint of embarrassment, "Lynwood. South suburb."

She grinned, "I know it. The roller rink is there. And Stardust Lanes. There is actual shit to do there, when you're a kid."

He gave her a doubting look. "It's kind of a run-down piss-hole."

"No doubt," she said. But she weighed it against other suburbs, other places she hung out as a teenager. "Still. You had the roller rink."

Traffic crawled through the Loop. “No sign?” Dax said.

“No sign of what?” she said.

“For the protest,” he said. “You’re just going to walk with no message?”

“Isn’t the message just stop the fucking war?”

“If that’s all you think it is," he said. "Hey, I’m going to the shop first, get us out of this congestion.”

Dax double-parked in front of the Pacific Gardens Mission. Pretty name, like all the worst things in the city. Pretty names you’d expect printed on postcards: Live in Stateway Gardens, play ball in Englewood, stroll through Cabrini Green. The cement high-rise housing projects were surrounded by more cement, and razor wire walls, and overflowing dumpsters in neighborhoods where every window and door was barred like a prison. Amy waited in the running car, warming her fingers by the vents.

Dax returned with a tower of stationery boxes, which he dumped into the back seat. He opened a box and handed her a bright red flier printed with anarchists’ letter A in a circle. Beneath that: No Borders, No Banks, No Wars.

She asked, “Your message is destroy the government? You think that’ll stop the war?”

“I’m saying that the system failed us,” he said. “I got too many friends who are dogs for the rich and powerful. We sit by the table and wait for their scraps.”

“But this is supposed to be against Bush for fighting his father’s war,” she said. “Or for soldiers who are being lied to. Aren’t you stealing the message?”

His smug close-lipped smile made her nostrils flare. He tuned the radio and stopped at the same heavy metal song he’d skipped before, raising the volume. The words were indecipherable, just screaming thrashing noise.

***

Dax dropped Amy by the school's Michigan Avenue building, where she had to shove other bike wheels and frames out of the way to get hers close to the rack. There were groups of students kneeling on the sidewalks while they finished writing their messages on signs for the protest. At the park across the street, there were tons of familiar faces, students pressing forward to listen to a speaker. On her approach, Amy could just make out something about veterans.

This was the same corner usually occupied by young boys sitting on milk crate chairs, drumming overturned plastic buckets. Now there were college girls in heavy boots and black tights dancing to the beat, making the drumming seem like it was part of the event. When it was time to move, the boys would run ahead of the crowd and drum for a bit, then run ahead again.

Policemen on horseback rode on the perimeters as the group from the park began walking north on Michigan Avenue. The setting sun reflected off the buildings, and Amy walked with her hand over her eyes, saluting cars in the southbound lanes that were honking at the demonstrators. More people joined them near the Palmer House Hotel, people who were dressed like old school hippies, holding signs that were relics of the '68 riot.

The police in their dark blues, their white helmets, riding on their brown horses, trotted with the people, blocking traffic and keeping stony faced. When they reached Grant Park a lake of people rushing and clambering in waves, their signs crashing together in the air. The icy wind was blowing off the lake and for warmth, the crowd pulled together. Amy was part of something new, a powerful entity. They moved like blood trickling down the center of the city for miles, stalling rush hour traffic from getting to their highways, and suburbs, and escape from thinking about the war.

Someone tapped her shoulder, and she was face to face with a video camera, operated by

Dax. He pointed ten feet away from them at Dax and a large crew of people who were donning their masks and shouting obscenities at the police, whose horses reared with greater agitation. Then it was suddenly clear that they were headed to the artery of Chicago, a crowd ten thousand people thick was storming their way to Lake Shore Drive, well off the permitted protest route. He handed her a flier, which she crumpled between her fingers.

She didn't know if she should speak to him or the camera. "Anarchy isn't the message."

He smiled in his arrogant way, opening his eyes wider for an instant to hint at something more than what he said. “Does it matter what they take away from it, as long as they’re listening?”

“It matters.”

He pointed the camera at her as if he was a legitimate reporter. "What do you know about the Democratic National Convention in 1968?”

“Everyone knows it ended in violence,” she said.

“But if it had stayed peaceful, do you think we'd still be talking about it?"

She was trying to think of a smart answer, but there demonstrators walking away from the march. Dax pointed his camera through the thinning crowd where a human wall formed of police in black riot gear, foam guards around their shins and across their chests. They were donning helmets with plastic shields, and they stood with their feet spread apart wide, elbows bent, their arms spread out wide.

A man concealing his face with a bandana caught up with Dax and lifted the camera onto his own shoulder while Dax pulled out a bandana and began making his preparations. The march turned toward the Lake, where all of the evening traffic was snaking down Lake Shore Drive, where all the people who needed to hear their message were then driving, the horses

danced in front and blocked the way. From their mounts, police were clubbing at demonstrators who tried to break through the horse line until finally, the line broke, and the police tried to reform further ahead.

It was like walking into a crack in the wall. A clump of the tallest buildings in the world, from Hancock Tower to Water Tower Place, buildings with black girders the width of cars and steel feet cemented into the sidewalks, creating shadows, which blocked light and sound and all chances of green space, all, fell away at Lake Shore Drive. Amy could see the end of that tunnel, eight narrow lanes of car lights shining on tight turns. The noise of the crowd rose with awe that they had made it that far, that the pony parade had let them sneak through this part of the city. Amy felt for a moment that anything and everything was possible.

When the front lines began stopping all eight lanes of traffic, the black police clubs went up in the air. Dax ran away from her shouting, "They don't think we count."

The chant went up, and there were cries as demonstrators were thrown to the ground by police. A strong arm wrapped around Amy's waist like a belt, and she struggled away, only for the same cop to grab her bicep. Before he could pull her along someone hit him from behind on top of his helmet, and he darted through the crowd to catch the culprit.

There were people shouting as their hands were tied behind their backs, "No blood for oil." More masked faces materialized in the crowd, men with their fists in the air chanting again, "They don't think we count."

The chaos had stopped traffic, and the police were busy chasing the more aggressive attacks. Amy ran toward the mayhem because she didn't want to miss her chance to walk through the stopped cars and take the street back for herself. She ran to the other side of the street, which was elevated over the sandy beach, and got a view just not visible from any street,

or from sitting in a car, or from blocks away on the so-called Magnificent Mile.

Dax ran up beside her, the film camera perched on his shoulder. A cop ran between them like he was on a path, but when he got behind Dax he pulled the camera off his shoulder and smashed it on the ground. The same cop gripped Dax by the back of his neck and shoved his head forward. Amy grabbed at Dax's arms, trying to pull him away, and then she tried to wedge herself between the two men. The cop caught her by the hair just as he drove one foot into the back of Dax's knee, driving him to the ground with pain inducing force.

Amy wrenched herself free and ran. She ran toward Lake Shore Drive, into the middle of eight lanes of traffic already stopped for other protestors who had broken free. The smell of fish, of water, of sand mixed with the vomit sweetness of gasoline and then the gunpowder smell of smoke bombs. She caught her breath at one of the cement barriers that divided traffic lanes.

The white moon was just above the horizon, its silver light glistening on the crashing waves, which were audible above the sound of car engines and honking horns and shouting and horse hooves and police sirens. The barrier was distressed from weather, crumbling into rocks. There were people in the cars leaning out their windows, shouting at the protestors to get the fuck off the road. She lifted a large rock and threw it at the windshield of a pickup truck. She threw another toward a group of police, just missing them. The city was hers, if just for this moment.

Pedigree

Mike hugged Elizabeth from behind and wrapped his arms around her large belly.

“Stop,” she giggled. “I have to finish getting ready.”

He kissed her neck. “Finish then. What are you waiting for?” Elizabeth tried to wriggle away, but he pulled her closer. “Go already." She tugged at his fingers, but stopped suddenly and gently closed her hand around his.

“Did you feel that?” she asked.

“He’s a kicker," Mike said. "He’s got my legs."

Elizabeth shrugged out from his embrace and spun around. “You shouldn’t talk like that.”

“Like what?” he said. Elizabeth dug her long fingernails into her palms. Mike dropped his gaze and muttered, “He is my son.”

“It shouldn't matter what he looks like,” she said.

"You sound like you're having second thoughts."

"I'm allowed to worry. What if you see him and he's…"

Mike stroked the side of her face. "There's nothing to worry about."

While Elizabeth readied herself in the bedroom, Mike poured two glasses of wine. He carried his glass and the bottle across the open expanse between the kitchen and the living room. By the time she returned and grabbed her glass, the bottle was nearly empty. Alcohol was stronger in his day, but Elizabeth still reproached him with the familiar concerned tilt to her head.

"I'm sorry I upset you," Mike said. "In my version of normal, you imagine what your baby will look like when he gets older. Some of mom's face, dad's eyes, that kind of thing." But he knew that normal was history. Normal was centuries ago, a time before he climbed into a machine to take him into the future. "In your version of normal, everything looks perfect on the outside." He paused to gulp the remnants of the bottle. "But inside it's hollow."

Elizabeth leaned back against the kitchen counter and sipped her wine. "I think you forget that you live in this hollow normal. And that you and your crew chose to be here." She crossed the room toward him. "If you were *so* happy back then, why the hell did you leave?" She stared down at him, the glass in her hand spilling red wine on the polished stone floor of their apartment.

Mike slouched on the sofa, stretching one leg until his bare foot touched the small puddle of wine. There was something delightful, familiar, in making messes. He ran his big toe across the floor in an arc of red wine.

"Disgusting," Elizabeth said, as she backed away.

"In my time," he said, pausing to stretch and complete a circle of wine, "we weren't so disgusted by everything."

“Erratic behavior wasn’t revered, even in your time,” she said as she hurried out of the room. From the kitchen she added, “I think some of the customs you remember never actually existed.”

He listened to her high heels click down the hallway before she slammed the bedroom door. When they first moved in, he removed the existing pocket door and installed a hinged one so that he could hear again the sound of a slamming door. Far from home, reminders, even of his old bad habits, were comforting.

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They arrived late to Jean’s typical, catered dinner party. Elizabeth was pulled away by a group of lawyers, leaving him to straggle by the bar. Innumerable cocktails later, Mike was surrounded by three men discussing fatherhood. He stepped into their small circle. “I’m joining your ranks soon," he said. "That’s my wife over there.”

“You’re in for it,” the man to his right said. “My wife had a reaction to the hormone stabilizers in the final weeks. She was an unbearable lunatic.”

Mike swirled his glass. “I hate the melanin tablets, the hormone stabilizers, all of it. I want her to do it naturally. She thinks *I’m* the lunatic.”

“Well, yeah,” the man on his left said. “Natural is downright barbaric. Don’t you think?”

Mike turned to the bar for a moment, mouthed to the bartender while tapping his glass. “Another." He turned back to face the man on his left, who looked nearly identical to the man on his right, as did the man between them, and Jean’s husband, and every other man at the party.

“Don’t you ever wonder what color your skin should have been when you were born? Or what color your natural hair is?”

Man-on-the-left stepped back from their circle and said, “Are you kidding us? Skin color? Hair color? Notions like that started wars.”

“Franklin, you’ll have to excuse my husband,” Elizabeth said. She came to Mike’s side, grabbing him by the bicep. “He’s from the twenty-first.”

Man-on-the-left smiled. “I had no idea. How interesting to meet one of the travelers." He put his hand out and shook Mike’s hand, gripping tighter when Mike tried to pull away. “I see now,” he said. “I mean, obviously, you’re one of the Ten.”

Elizabeth smiled at Mike and rubbed his arm tenderly.

It made him furious when she petted him this way, showing her embarrassment even if she didn't speak about it. Mike said to Franklin, “Obvious? Because I think ancestry is interesting, whereas you think it’s offensive?”

Elizabeth squeezed his arm, as good as begging him to stop talking.

"If your un-evolved beliefs don’t give you away,” Franklin said, “then it's your face.”

Mike shoved him back with his free arm. Elizabeth pulled him away, his drink slopping onto the floor.

Franklin added, “Are you going to murder me now, like your great ancestors?"

Many partygoers turned to watch the commotion, and Mike narrowed his eyes at the onlookers as Elizabeth dragged him to a corner. She pushed him down on a chair facing the windows and walked away without another word.

Jean’s husband, Brahm, sat down near Mike and handed him a fresh drink. “Thought I’d find you here,” he said. “Always drawn to our view of the gardens.”

Mike stared out at the glass-encased, high-rise gardens. A dozen floors up, directly across from the party, was an entire floor full of apple trees. The bright red fruits were larger and more prolific than in any orchard of his time, but the proliferation strained the limbs of the trees. After a few harvests, the branches sagged and then snapped from the weight of their own bounty. In the reflection of the window, he saw the beautiful people at the party, sagging across sofas, hanging against the bar.

"Brahm, don't you get bored with perfection?"

"There's no such thing as perfect," Brahm said.

Mike said, "I mean the faces. From the day you are born, implanted face plates, every baby shaped to look like the trend, pudgy lips, and blue eyes. Drugs stripping you of your natural color, genetic roots wiped away so that everyone blends in."

"And you don't like this?" Brahm said.

"Everyone is a fake," Mike said. "A product of surgery."

Brahm tapped his glass for a moment. "I'm not defined by my looks. I'm no fake."

Mike apologized. "I didn't mean it that way. It's just, in five years Elizabeth has had a dozen surgeries. New chin, new nose, a calf lengthening, a thigh reduction. She keeps up with trends, like everyone else. Every few months I'm looking at her new face, flawless, but…"

"Jean keeps it new, and we never get bored," Brahm said. "Secret to a healthy marriage. Are you saying it's not enough? You want someone else?"

Mike turned back to the apple trees. He knew from experience that there was no joy in cheating. Whatever was between a woman's legs had been re-mastered by a surgeon's knife, every vagina identical to every other vagina and then changing with the trend. Any sensation desired could be delivered, but Mike became increasingly worried that there were sensations that

had never occurred to him. Sensations meant to be discovered, absent from the doctor's waiting-room flipbook.

A young woman passed them with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. Mike set his drink on the floor and grabbed a strawberry tart and a napkin. He ate it in two bites and wiped the crumbs from his fingers. He leaned toward Brahm. "See the problem is, it's like the strawberries."

"The strawberries are a problem?" Brahm asked.

Mike continued, "The strawberries look perfect." And the strawberries *were* perfect looking. Enormous, bright red. But instead of tasting sweet and tart, they were watery. "Like so many things in your time, they are pleasing to the eye, but dull on the tongue."

Brahm leaned toward him. "I know what you need. Heirlooms. They're expensive. They get so many diseases and need an absurd amount of water and hand pollination. But I'm told the flavor puts people in ecstasies. A sexual feast, you might say."

Mike's voice wavered, "Why can't all the fruit be so sweet?"

Brahm chuckled. "But the old fruits can be misshapen or bitter. They look terrible and they taste terrible as often as they taste amazing. It's unpredictable."

Mike sighed and said, "I'd pay for unpredictable. I'd gamble to taste something sweet again. Same with people. I'd risk the variation of genes, the chance of ugliness, just to see real faces again."

Brahm shook his head, "I'll never understand your time. You only see beauty when it is surrounded by ugliness." He stood up. "To be honest Mike, I pity you." Brahm walked away, and Mike was left to the apple trees.

The next course went around the room. The skewers of gray meat satisfied Mike's hunger, but not his appetite. He wandered the room, eventually leaning against a high table near

the music box. The music complimented the noise of the room, softening when conversations grew louder, strengthening when the room quieted. It never distracted from the party; it never drew attention to itself. When there was loud laughter, the music responded with higher bass, a constant moderator of tones. Mike hated the audio, but it also produced a glowing show of lights and colors that he found hypnotic, like the televisions of his day.

"You're a traveler I hear." A man set his drink on Mike's table and then chewed hungrily at meat on a skewer. "The others, I hear, have evolved."

Mike sighed. "They had their faces done. Yeah, they adapted. They blended."

"But not you."

"I don't consider it evolution."

"Artificial selection then." The man answered with a mouth full of half-chewed meat. "In my line of work, we were doing it even before your time."

"What line of work is that?"

"Farming. That's my building across the street."

"Do you grow heirlooms?"

"And deal with infestations, disease and lousy harvests? Hell no. No money in it." The man grabbed another skewer from a passing tray and pointed it at Mike. "Ask you a question?"

Mike nodded.

"Why stay here and complain all the time?"

"Sorry?" Mike said. "Do you know me?"

"No need," the farmer said. "I heard you earlier. You want to preserve your race. That's old-fashioned mumbo jumbo. Why not go back to your time?"

"The machine could only go forward. There is no way to go back."

The farmer grabbed his drink and passed close enough to bump Mike in the shoulder, growling, as he walked away, “Then don't be a shithead. Go forward.”

There was nothing lonelier than being isolated at a crowded party. When the crowd began to dwindle, Elizabeth finally joined Mike on a long couch. She petted his hair, but he felt patronized.

“You’re one of a kind, love," she said. "The talk of the night.”

He pushed her hand away and started an old argument. "You think I’m backward in my beliefs, just like they do. So why are you with me?”

“Don’t ask mean questions," she said. "I've gotten to know the reasons behind your beliefs. Even if I don't always agree, I see the world differently because of you."

She pulled his hand over her stomach and held it there. He stared out the glass wall at an artificially twilight sky. As she nuzzled her face into his neck, he looked in the window reflection if they had an audience behind them watching, but the eyes of the room ignored the lovers.

Elizabeth whispered by his ear. “You’ve been in a mood all night. What’s really bothering you?”

He kissed the top of her head and pulled her closer. “The moment we arrived, the other men abandoned me.”

“Tonight?” she said.

“No, the travelers. When we arrived here. No one from your time understands me, and my crew pretends they fit in. I’m out of place.”

“You’re sad,” she moved his hand along her belly. “But there are some things to be happy about. And I won’t abandon you if you don’t abandon me.”

They went home, Elizabeth smiling, Mike sulking.

***

Elizabeth's cries stirred Mike out of a dream. He felt for her in the bed. She cried again, and he followed the sound to the bathroom. When he turned on the light, he found her sprawled across the floor.

"It's time," she cried.

He started to lift her up, but she was too weak to help and too heavy to lift on his own. He ran to call for an ambulance, but she stopped him.

"What if they arrest us?"

Mike stroked the side of her face. "There's no law against doing it naturally."

She cried out, arching her back and squeezing her eyes shut in pain. “But what if they call it neglect? Not taking the drugs." She meant the melanin tablets, the hormone suppressants, the drugs that inhibited identity.

"Then I'll say it came from my time," Mike said.

The baby crowned while Mike called for help. He unlocked the door to their apartment and then ripped the covers off their bed and covered Elizabeth. She was trembling in pain and squeezing his hand as the emergency crew arrived and took over. It was a messy thing, nothing easy like they did in the hospitals, a dream that ended with them lying on the floor together, touching the soft skin of their son.

Mike kissed Elizabeth’s ear, telling her, “You’re one of a kind.”

She kissed her own fingers then pressed them to his cheek, then to their son’s cheek. The

baby's skin was blotchy, and his head unshapely. His eyes were narrow, and his nose was noticeably crooked. She touched his forehead, which was square and wide.

"I've never seen a baby like this before," she said. "He's ugly, isn't he?'

One of the nurses commented, "This can all be fixed. Nothing to worry about."

Elizabeth smiled. "Nothing to fix."

"He's perfect," Mike said.

An Eternity for Each

There was little relief from the late August humidity. Sister Patricia stopped to press her cheek against the cool stone wall. Then she repositioned a basket of clean sheets against her hip before continuing down the corridor. The start of fall term promised exhaustion, days of collapsing into sleep without the delay of racing thoughts. There was nothing so vainglorious as silence, and during the quiet summer months, she indulged in staring into the mind's mirror.

She chastised herself. "Forgive me Father, for putting worldly ideas before thoughts of you."

A nun's principal duty was prayer. Sister Patricia rested on a bench in the courtyard. Snatches of daylight remained. Moths paired in mating dances beneath the lights along the dorm building. She lit a cigarette and wondered if other nuns suffered from distractions. Were they selfishly grubbing at memories when they prayed? Did their prayers for students unravel into a fantasy of being that age again? Her own fantasies involved acts of self-sacrifice grand enough to bring admiration from the Sisters. She envisioned the Abbess kissing her fingers with tears

sparkling in her eyes.

Two students sat smoking at an iron table across the yard, hushing each other when they spotted Sister Patricia, but the sound bounced off the walls, and she overheard some of their conversation. She knew Anna's husky voice and though the light was dim, she recognized Liddy by her habit of pulling her blond curls straight.

“You have to take care of yourself. Especially if –” Liddy said.

“If. Then. Of course. But until I know for sure…” Anna leaned back and casually blew smoke upward.

Liddy brought out a nail file and kept it posed against a fingernail, as if she wanted to look occupied by other things. “If you are, what will you do?”

Anna whistled. “I might do anything."

"If it was me," Liddy said, "my father would break the jaw of the man before packing me off to reform school."

Sister Patricia's observations were interrupted by Madame Crayon, who rushed toward her, swinging a pail of dry wax. Madame Crayon collected drippings from candles in the chapel and the dining room and then heated the remnants to dip new tapers. She had arrived at Girls College with an insatiable aching to speak aloud many years worth of philosophies. She was jittery and often spoke before thinking, but these seemed to be the reasons for her popularity. The students teased her about her waxy fingers, but even the Abbess called her Madame Crayon.

“There's a problem in the toilets," Crayon said. She hurried back the way she came, and Sister Patricia followed her down the corridor to the bathroom.

Nancy was kneeling in front of a toilet with the stall door open. Madame Crayon went to hold her hair back, asking repeatedly if she had been drinking. When Nancy finished, she swore

that she was just sick. She pushed herself up from the white tiles and washed her face.

After they settled Nancy in her room, Crayon remarked, "Some girls get off easy for their sins."

"Do you think she was drinking?" Patricia said.

"She's a silly girl," Crayon said. "Of course, she was drinking."

"That didn't seem easy," Patricia said. She looked at Madame Crayon, really looked at the woman who was a few years older than her but under forty. Her face was calm, her forehead unwrinkled, as if she had never been worried by doubt.

Sister Patricia's father was a veteran of the Second World War, and maybe that was the reason for his temper and his drinking. There was never peace at home and having learned from the mistakes of her older sister, she threw herself into the church. In defiance of one father, she joined the convent in service to another. She thought she would be an instrument of peace, but she felt like a shadow. A ghost hidden beneath a black veil, behind a screen at mass, in secret service to her faith. The wimple of her order obscured their faces, rolling up high at the crown to create a cavernous cup, like that of a white calla lily.

The habit created anonymity, but she wanted to be remembered like Joan of Arc. Willing to burn on a pyre for the sake of others.

***

On the first Saturday after term began, Sister Patricia paced around the courtyard garden after supper. Selfish thoughts about her need for belonging distracted from holy contemplations. Students crossed her path on their way to the bus stop heading downtown. Two girls were

locked arm in arm, pacing the garden as one consoled the other.

"One dead rabbit makes all the difference in the world," Anna said. "It should be one of the warning signs of an apocalypse. Horsemen, swarms of locusts, and fire-rain. And one dead rabbit."

Liddy hushed her friend when they spotted the nun. The girls spun around and headed in the opposite direction just as Sister Patricia stood up, thinking she might talk to them.

She had confessed on numerous occasions envy for the bonds other Sisters had with the students. The sense of being an outsider haunted her. Even as she had prepared for her vows, she longed for mundane conversations, and she was accused of writing too many letters to her family. In one interview with Mother Superior, Mother sat on the other side of a great wooden desk and tapped her pen.

“You’ve been here three months. And you’ve never lived away from home before?”

Patricia nodded her head.

“You’re right on time then.”

However, Mother Superior never explained what she was on time for. At prayers each day, she glanced around the room at the nuns, bent over their books, wondering if they too were collapsing under the weight of silent introspection. She filled the silence with the sound of her memories, her head crowded by repetitions of old pain.

Her mother had sat at their kitchen table, darning socks while gossiping with her father. "That boy won't marry her, but it takes two."

Her father said, "I'd like to have killed him."

"What would that solve?" her mother asked. "He's already no better than you. No job, no prospects."

"My father raised me to know right," he said.

"You're not even right in the head," she said. "That's why we're in the damn mess."

"Won't happen again," he said. "She'll be gone soon, and we'll send Patty to the convent school."

"And how do you plan to pay for that?" she asked.

"I've got disability. And you've got work."

Her mother bit down on a thread to break it, only then noticing her youngest child standing in the doorway. "Don't lurk Patty. Check on your sister. Then you can deliver these shirts I finished sewing."

"Don't lurk Patricia."

Madame Crayon repeated herself until Sister Patricia turned. She had been standing by the statue of Mary at the center of the courtyard, lost in her memories. When she came to her senses, she realized it was beginning to mist. The wetness gathering on the grass seeped into her shoes. She mirrored Madame Crayon and lifted her robe as they walked across the lawn together.

Sister Patricia heard a girl sobbing, but before she could see anything, Madame Crayon rushed across the courtyard. She followed, kicking the lengths of her dark robe, which flew away from her legs like the wings of a raven. As she approached, she spotted the body of a girl, lying beneath a hedge of yellow roses. A swath of grass glistened in the light from surrounding windows and showed where it had been trampled, or really, where the girl had been on her knees and dragged herself across the lawn. The blonde hair stuck to her sweating face, stringy with sweat and sticking to her cheeks.

Sister Patricia knelt down and pushed some of the hair behind the girl’s ear. She

whispered, “Nancy? Nancy? Can you hear me? Can you move?” As she put her hand down on the lawn to bend closer, she felt the wetness and saw where Nancy had dragged herself; she had also left a trail of blood.

Sister Patricia directed Madame Crayon, “Call an ambulance. Have them meet us in front. Tell Sister Mary Therese.” She rolled Nancy on to her back and shoved her hands under the young woman’s arms, and then she gently pulled the limp body into her lap. Someone ran up beside her and started to grab Nancy’s ankles. “Go back to your room, Anna. We're handling this.”

“Like hell you are," Anna said. "Dragging a half dead girl by the arms?”

Sister Patricia pushed herself up from a squatting position, the body starting to slip from her grip. “Fine. Lift. Now, head to your left, fast as you can.”

Sister Patricia rode to the hospital in the back of the ambulance, holding Nancy's cold hand between her warm hands. There was a long line at the emergency room, and Nancy's gurney was brought to a hallway lined with stretchers, a young woman occupying nearly every one.

When Sister Patricia begged for treatment, the nurse at the desk dismissed her plea. “It’s the night after payday. We got a whole line of girls with the same problem. You’re just going to have to wait your turn.”

Nancy went in and out of consciousness, and Sister Patricia continued to hold her hand. Even while the nurse lifted her skirt to make her assessment, even when a police officer came around with his notepad.

“Did you receive an abortion?" he asked. Nancy didn't answer. "Is this your first pregnancy? What was the name of the practitioner who performed your procedure? Were you

aware that the procedure was illegal and that you or your doctor could be prosecuted?" Nancy did not or could not answer. When her parents arrived and asked some of the same questions, she just stared up at the ceiling and said nothing.

***

Two days later, Anna found Sister Patricia in the garden. "I went to see Nancy."

Sister Patricia broke her meditation. "Sister Mary Therese won't be happy you were there."

"I don't care."

"She's only trying to protect you," Sister Patricia said but then doubted her own words. "There aren't many people in the world who offer help, so you should take it as a blessing that we are here to help you."

"Then help me, Sister," Anna said. "She's dead. Blood poisoning or something."

Sister Patricia didn't understand, but the girl raised her hand to her belly and made it clear.

"I can't help you that way, if that's what you mean."

They began to walk again, and Sister Patricia finally said, "It's a heavy payment for sin. Have you considered having your child? Raise that child in service to the Lord, as a kinder atonement for sin."

"My father will take me out of school," Anna said. "Maybe send me to a home. And then what?"

"And then," Sister Patricia said, "you get back on your feet. Find strength in your faith."

They walked around the square in silence, with Anna picking leaves off the bushes and Sister Patricia lost in the memory of her sister who lost her child and then was lost herself. She reached into the pocket of her robe and brought out the wax paper package she had wrapped neatly the night before. She opened the paper and offered one of the golden biscuits to Anna.

"What is it?"

Sister Patricia laughed. "A madeleine." She watched Anna take a bite, smile, and finish hers in another bite. She gave her a second one but first held it up. "You know it's baked right when it gets this belly shape. It's a pregnant cookie." She made Anna laugh, and that lifted her up. "The madeleines, or magdalenas, were prostitutes. The Magdalena Sisters started a home for them, so that they would never have to go back to the men who hurt them."

"They became nuns?" Anna asked.

"A fallen woman is a fallen woman," Sister Patricia said. "But they lived much like the sisters. And they could have children in the convents and stay there for as long as they wanted."

"I'm not going to a home," Anna said.

"I'm saying you have options."

Anna methodically nibbled around the belly of the second cookie. "I want to finish college."

"We all want things," Sister Patricia said, "but we can't be so selfish."

"I've never wanted anything so much in my life," Anna said. "And I'm not going to let anything stop me. You understand?"

Sister Patricia felt choked with fear. "It's a sin. And it's very dangerous. You know it's wrong."

"What I know is that I would do anything to have choices that my mother could not have.

That you never had. I would do anything."

***

Sister Patricia sat at her desk, ready to hang her habit. She held the metal hanger in her hand and stared off into the space of her room, the linoleum, the chipped paint, the knotty baseboard and lines of dust. She looked down and absent-mindedly worked at the hanger until it was the shape of a circle.

She folded the wire hook back and forth, working to weaken the aluminum until at last it broke and she was able to bend the circle into a line, full of bumps and turns that she couldn't seem to work straight. She looked at the jagged broken end, running her finger across the sharpness, lost in thought, trying to imagine she was a girl in a room alone, readying herself. She shivered.

She folded the thick wire in half, creating a narrow loop. She lifted her robe and ran the hanger up her leg, feeling the cold steel. She leaned back and tried to imagine being alone in a room, doing surgery with such a disturbing tool. Then she dropped it on the floor and knelt to say her prayers.

***

Patricia, like the other nuns, had a short and choppy haircut, like a warden might have given to a prisoner with head lice. She was unidentifiable before, hair covered, face in shadow. Without the habit, wearing a plain brown skirt hemmed to the ankles, a long-sleeved blouse buttoned

tightly round her neck and a man's haircut, now she was invisible.

She fidgeted, scratching her palms as she often did, as reminder of sacrifices greater than her own. It was a moonless night, and she could hardly see the hat of the approaching man, nor make out his features shadowed by the brim. He walked behind her and covered her eyes with a cloth, catching some of her hair as he tightened the knot. He led her by the wrist out of the alley and pushed her head down as she got into his car.

"May I open the window," she asked. It was humid and warm, but when she reached for the window handle, he jarred the breaks and reached across her to push her hand down to her lap. Her heart raced, and sweat ran down the side of her face. She didn't dare raise a hand to wipe it away. The car turned and turned again; she sensed they might be going back the way they came. She tried to spy the streetlights through the blindfold. She counted the stops and turns, trying to place their moves on the map in her mind.

She was led from the car, twenty steps, up four stairs into a house, she guessed. Close enough to the Mississippi to hear a barge horn. She was put in a chair in a lit room. It was quiet. She thought she was alone, but when she moved to pull her blindfold down, her arm was jerked away.

A woman with age in her voice asked, "So what is it you want?"

Sister Patricia began with as much kindness as she could, "I hoped you could tell me about Nancy Lee. I think she came to you a few weeks ago."

"Don't know her."

"She has brown curly hair, a thin frame. She's a student at Girls College."

"Don't know her. I thought you said you wanted to help a troubled girl."

"That's why I'm here. Do you know any of their names?"

"I'm not Catholic, if you came to judge me."

Sister Patricia considered this, "Not by God, then what about the law? Are your scalpels clean? Are you trained?"

"Sister, I won't tell you how to run a church, but you provide something people feel they need. Me too. It's a dangerous thing I do. They know that. They still come. But I'm safer than most."

"I'll be punished for being here, and I'll serve her sentence in hell. I'm here to save a life."

The doctor laughed. "That's not exactly what I do."

Sister Patricia touched her palms. "The mother's life."

You Know I Love You

He moves in one day with a garbage bag full of clothes. At night, you lie on the couch while he massages cocoa butter over your growing belly. When you stare in the mirror at the stretch marks, he says you're even more beautiful now. In his reflection, you notice the darkening circles around his eyes.

On the phone with your mother, you worry about upsetting routines.

She hates to say I told you so. If he slips into old ways, she has no money left to give.

Your tone is defensive. He is nothing like he used to be. You remind her that he has changed, and he has a job now. Old debts will be paid.

"The money isn't why I worry."

On the way to the hospital, a contraction hits. You grab his arm, jerking it off the steering wheel. The car swerves, and he curses at you. You ease your grip. His mouth spreads into an amused smile as if everything is a joke.

A nurse settles you into bed. When pain hits, you writhe against the mattress, and then

you stand and pace the hallway, his hand on your back. You sweat through the robe.

During the delivery, he promises that you are almost there. "You know I love you, right?" He squeezes your hand. The doctor shows him how to cut the umbilical cord.

Much later, you pick at food on the dinner tray. You ask him to find your purse, take your wallet and buy you a hamburger. He is still gone when a nurse shakes you out of sleep to check your blood pressure. He might be at work. Or home, getting you a change of clothes.

Your mother comes to see the baby. When the hospital releases you, she drives you home. She watches her grandson in the rearview mirror and asks more than once why you didn't call sooner. She doesn't ask where he is.

You say that word methadone aloud after your mother has gone home. And that other word, the one he never says. Heroin.

You search the dresser drawers. You throw the sheets and blanket back, running your hand between the mattress and box spring. A shock of pain explodes across your pelvis, but you crouch as best as you can and reach under the bed.

You stand up slowly, taking deep breaths while glancing around the room. In the closet, you search the pockets of shirts and jackets. You rifle through the bathroom cabinet, then under the couch cushions. Your fingers hunt in dark spaces, but you find nothing. Which is proof that things really have changed.

You prop the baby snuggly between the nursing pillow and your body. His smallness is remarkable. In the lamplight, you see the ways he will grow to look like his father. The toes and feet are yours. The fingers and ears are yours. The mouth is yours. The eyes are not. You put him to bed, and he gurgles in the crib. It will be time for another feeding soon.

It has been months since you had coffee, not through the whole pregnancy. In the

kitchen, you reach for the metal can of coffee grounds. It rattles. You shake it. It rattles again.

You carry it to the couch beside the crib and watch your boy sleep. The rise and fall of the baby's chest entrances, like the dancing flames of a bonfire. You consider calling your mother to look after him while you rest, but she will want explanations. There are answers you don't want to give. Things you don't want to know. You realize there will be new routines. Now with this extra person to love, there is more for him in this home than ever before. More reasons to get back on track.

You set the coffee can down on the floor, unopened.

Here and Gone

The plum changed everything.

Millie was the youngest of five children, all of whom had left home to start their own lives as she waited to start hers. Alarm clocks, lists scribbled on the back of envelopes, wrinkled bus schedules, and thick instruction books dictated her life. Take a year off before college. Live at home. Don't waste money. Don't waste time.

She would follow her mother's grocery list and instructions to choose two bags of fruit. The suggested options were always the same: oranges, grapes, strawberries, or bananas. Ignorance of other fruits did not keep her from trying them; she had certainly eaten other things like raspberries and pears, but it gratified her to stick to a plan.

At work, where Millie honed skills for alphabetical filing, there was a bag of plums on the lunchroom counter with a note beside them, "Take one." She obeyed, as was her habit, and she rolled the plum in her palm. A gray haze covered the wine dark purple of its skin. The mild, sweet juice ran down her chin. It occurred to her that she had no language for describing its

texture, and she knew of nothing to compare it to.

After the plum, she walked in the park with her arms stretched out, running her fingertips along brick walls, prickly bushes and iron fences, searching for words to describe new sensations. She curled into herself so often that her shoulders creased. More creases developed at the base of her neck as she slowly folded inward. Then she flew down sidewalks, urgently chasing sensations, desperate to discover words before the not knowing flattened her.

Before the plum, she had never climbed on stools, to stretch for things that had been out of reach. During one of these new reaching episodes, on top of her mother's china cabinet, she discovered a shallow box filled with letters. Much of the ink was faded, the pages yellow and soft from wear. Some were slick sheets of onionskin typing paper, full of slick, onion-skinned poetry.

Millie imagined the kind of woman for whom a man writes bad poetry. In a past life, her mother might have been called someone's lover. She shook her head at the absurdity.

Her mother often sat in the comfy chair, massaging her swollen feet. No woman can appear sophisticated with such ugly gnarled toes, not when the pains require plain, well-built shoes. She believed that smart people turned and turned a thing until it appeared good. Her feet were stout, she said, so she could endure endless hours of standing and walking. Her feet were the reason she could endure double shifts at the department store. However, the shoes pressed firmly on a blue vein above the arch, causing her toes to tingle. She turned and turned the problem to see that the numbness promised relief from aching.

Millie brought the letters to her mother, who flipped through the pages without reading the words. There was a story in her mother's eyes she looked ready to tell. Instead, she blew on the stack, raising a dust so fine that it rose like smoke, in a swirl. The paper smoldered.

Fragments floated and fell until all that remained of the poetry was ashes, which her mother cupped in her hands.

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Millie tried to imagine her father writing such poetry, a thought even more absurd. The letters mattered because her mother had kept them. Were they relics of another man? Or the lost words of her lost father?

Her father only existed in football season. He was alive on the bleachers, rising to cheer, wincing at a dropped ball. He inhaled the crisp air and shivered against the driving late autumn snow. During other months, he was absent from his body. He was a cog at work, with nothing to say to co-workers who passed his desk carrying mugs of fresh coffee. At home, his wife sat beside him on the sofa, but they did not speak to each other. His fingers went numb. He had no desires. He had no name. Millie called him Father, and some days he would answer. Some days he could not recognize her.

But he was reborn at the first kick-off and watched the green field like an infant. He learned anew how to shout, to drink beer, to raise his fist victoriously. He had neither recollection of his past, nor remorse for his flashing absences from the world, like a strobe. Off and on. Here and gone.

***

Millie tried to name a person or a thing that she had lost, but to lose you must first have. She

looked forward to crossing off days on the calendar; each day gone was another day she waited for the something to begin. To cease, you must first exist.

The creases continued to appear. She collapsed when she tried to stand tall, reduced to an accordion of deep pleats. She refused to succumb to the flatness. Whether hunting for lost keys or truth, sometimes the best method was to abandon the search. She folded herself in half and in half again, then slid into the padded envelope on which she had written in black marker: Fragile.

Several days later she arrived in a new place, and the damp air eased her folds. The postman dropped her in the center of a town where a beckoning wind blew from the southwest. Like a bee following the scent of ready flowers, she headed into the wind and found an empty gray house, which she would call home.

Millie went in search of a job, setting out in the morning of a thickly cold day. Car exhaust hung in the air and sound travelled so slowly through the plasma that the quality had not diminished before it reached her. The acoustics drew everything near so that she travelled through a music hall of snow shovels scraping the sidewalk, ice crunching beneath her boots, and the recorded sounds from a bus announcing its stop, long after it had departed. The joyful screams of children on a sledding hill continued to plow across the snow, travelling a full mile into town until reaching the front door of a candy shop, where customers could hear the sledders ask, "Daddy, did you see me? Did you see me fly?"

Though vastly experienced in the profession of alphabetizing files, Millie dreaded the confinement of cubicle walls. The music of the streets inspired her. She promised to commit to a career with the same work ethic exemplified by her laboring parents. It was a warming feeling that despite her departure from their world, their humility was the foundation of her beginning. Expecting no more recognition or compensation than what her parents had received, she took a

job selling tickets at a dinner theater.

The other employees forgot her name. Hours would pass and then days where no one would say Millie, and she too began to forget. Then she would tie one shoe but forget the other. The phone would ring, but she stared, forgetting how to answer. After a few months, the sunlight in the box office burned through her, and her edges began to dissolve. She unlocked the theater doors in the morning and travelled in as a stream of particles, pollens of light, blown along by a draft. At home, she fell on her bed as a cloud of dust, bits of herself left behind in trails on the gray carpet. No one had taught her that there was a force keeping her together. She only learned it when the force was gone.

Millie set out to meet new people and thereby reinvent herself. To the pharmacy clerk, the barista and the beggar she made her first introductions, “Hello. I'm Sara, no H.” Some of the new people were also reinventing because they in turn introduced themselves, “Bob, no H” and “Linda, no shit".

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Christos played the lead as Hamlet in a musical version of the classic play, which he had written and scored. He sang above the clinking of dinner forks and ceramic plates and the whisper of waiters asking the hungry audience, “More bread?” The theater was little more than an excuse for men to wear a tie and pull chairs out for their perfumed dates. Regardless of the indifferent room, Christos let drama fill his voice, and his tears were beguiling.

One afternoon before the box office opened, Christos pulled the curtain down over the ticket window and sat beside Sara in her spin-able chair. He turned her round and round, and she

felt gleeful for the first time in ages. He stopped the chair so that they were facing and pulled her close until one of her legs was between his and one of his legs was between hers. As he leaned in to kiss the corners of her mouth, he rested his hand on her thigh. "You're so innocent." He pushed the hair away from her forehead and pulled her head towards him. While he kissed her, he moved his hand up her leg, gently kneading his fingertips into the flesh of her inner thigh.

Colors washed across her closed eyelids. She felt the trick of the theater. The hues bloomed into roses, and the petals unfolded and fell to reveal zinnias bursting with needles of pink. Wherever his fingers touched her, a surge of ants stormed across her body, an army of a thousand, their small legs exciting the web of nerves beneath her skin until every surface, from her knees to her throat, was awake with sensation.

Christos lifted her off the chair and raised her dress over her head. He cupped his hands around her clay breasts, molding them into the shape of a magnolia. His tongue lapped the stamens and stretched into the bell of nectar. She shyly closed her knees against the invasion of his hands, but her muscles trembled, and her limbs were green branches, pliable in his grip. Some of her leaves quivered and fell. He stripped away the remainders. He ran his fingernail down her, etching a line that revealed new growth beneath the old hardness.

He sat down, pulling her trunk toward him and wrapping her growing vines around his hips. Where a bird had begun to burrow, her pressed his fingers and burrowed more deeply, shaping a hole inside of her. He counted the light and dark circles, the cold winters and drought summers and declared her a young, pining thing.

Thrills of heat shot through her core, and the room began to rain with her humidity. She grew heavy with the sweltering heat. Sweat beaded on her foliage. Christos caught the beads on the tip of his tongue, each time releasing another surge of ants, which crawled over her neck and

across her chest. His fingers were glinting metal corkscrews, burrowing into her, tapping deeper toward her sap. He found the deposits, the wealth of sweet syrups, but he buried himself deeper still. He created a cavern, where he nested inside of her like an opossum craving her inner warmth.

All at once, the humidity broke, and the rain poured from inside of her, streaming down her thighs onto his. He lifted her off his lap. Sara opened her eyes. There was a brief intermission, broken when Christos opened his eyes. She had been watching him breathe for some time.

He looked away, telling her, "Rehearsal time." He picked her dress off the floor, dropped it in her lap, stood to zip his pants, and then he left the room. She shook the rain off her leaves and out of her hair. She brushed the ants off her arms before putting her dress back on. The pink zinnias had already withered into a brown mound.

The door to the box office toppled down. She went to lift it up and saw that it was not a proper door at all, just a board of wood painted to look like a door. She went to open the box office window, but it was just plywood painted to look like a window. Yet she heard someone tap the glass. She lifted a curtain beside the window and found an auditorium full of people, watching her every movement.

After a matinee, out of his costume, makeup removed, exiting through the side alley, Christos joined Sara in her car. She glowed with the memory of his performance. She was his delicate, misguided Ophelia. He nibbled her neck and asked, “Are you honest?”

She answered, “I have nothing to hide.”

“Where’s your father?” he said.

“At home I guess, watching the game.”

"Get thee to a nunnery," he said.

She was confused. "I'm not Catholic."

He resisted, “We will have no more marriages.”

She pulled her cheek away from his lips in astonishment. “Don’t you love me?” she said

“Are you honest?” he asked.

Her tears were guileless. He got out of the car to give her a moment to calm herself. She turned the key in the ignition and drove toward the highway, sobbing for a thousand miles.

There was a long highway of sad songs, radio stations reaching out to her with somber melodies fitting her mood. She pulled over to cry into her hands, spit slipping from her gaping mouth. Eventually she locked her mouth closed and let the salty tears run down, falling from her chin to her lap while she drove on, clothes soaked, puddles gathering at her feet, filling the car. When she opened her door at the gas station, a flood of tears poured out. It was daybreak when she finally parked beneath a scrub tree at the edge of an orange desert. She pinned her sleeves to a branch. She hung on the line in the afternoon heat.

Once dry, she drove to the nearest town, populated by stucco houses, Spanish tiled roofs and potted cacti. She began wearing narrow-toed boots, kicked the red dirt into small dust clouds, said howdy to people on the street, wore leather belts and leather hats, and rode horses equipped with leather saddles. She slept on a woolly yellow sheepskin and let her sweat drip onto it until over time. She evaporated.

At the end of a hot day, her skin was gray with a haze of salt. The salt was cruel, stinging as it ran into her eyes. It dried her throat and salted her words. “Damned fool,” she muttered at a man driving his truck too fast through town. The town was a small place, not on any maps. Sara figured that if she must live somewhere, there was no harm living in a place that didn’t exist.

Whole days passed where she saw no one, spoke to no one but the sly snakes and the wandering brush.

She could no longer distinguish between the pain of laughter and the pain of injury. Feelings prodded all day that could be ignored, only intermittent distractions. Perhaps everything else was a distraction from these sensations, but she didn't know which was the thing she was supposed to pay attention to. There was a rock in her shoe or it was a blister on her toe.

If she sat very still she became aware that her eyebrow was twitching slightly. There was an itchy mosquito bite behind her knee, a moth flying into the walls in the kitchen, a quiet squeal of wind blowing through a crack in the window, a frame on the wall vibrating from some deep earth tremor, tapping against the plaster in a furious tempo, like leaves on the tree, all blown by the same wind, yet fluttering at completely different paces.

The nights were dark, save for the moon and stars. The days were quiet, save for the buzzing wings of wasps. Other than the change of day and night, she had no idea what time it was. It was exciting, at first. She had no sense of time passing, therefore no regret for the passing. Then on a trip to town for supplies, she bought a calendar because she liked the pictures of horses that changed with each month. She counted the years that had slipped away and was sad to discover how time had passed, sad to have wasted chances to do something in the world.

The next time she was in town, Sara bought a watch to measure the hours between meals. She estimated the number of years she would live and multiplied days in a year and hours in a day to know how many meals she might eat in a lifetime. It was plenty. Then she timed the seconds between breaths and multiplied for breaths in a lifetime, and the number was so high it was difficult to imagine a life full of so many inhalations.

However, the breathing was the same from moment to moment. There was little variety

from meal to meal, and yet so much she wanted to try. She went to town to buy every unfamiliar vegetable in the grocery store, but the produce rotted before she could try half of it. And people in town had aged since her arrival, and the seasons had passed too quickly, and even the promise of plenty was not enough.

At home, she used a small flat screwdriver to pry off the back of her watch. The immediate time, the time she wore on her wrist, was too near and made the past too far. She removed the tiny brass screws, the round battery, the gears and timings. The hands on the face stopped moving, and she felt the immediate time slow.

In the slow world, there were many things to hear and notice. When time passed, these were too numerous to consider, too shifting in nature to categorize, all species of microscopic aromas, sub-cutaneous colors, prolific colonies of ideas, enough to fill a thimble. Once more, she was free.

Wind carried the sounds of music from a party down the street: the whispers of neighbors discussing a financial setback, a teenage girl gossiping into the phone, the ding of a microwave, the thwap-thwap of a stick catching in bicycle spokes, the crinkle of tissue paper enwrapping a precious object, the rip of fabric caught on a nail, keys jingling, gas burners click-clicking, children sniffling in their parents' bedroom doorways waiting for them to wake. The sound of children pulled into their parents' bed, nestling into the warmth to find the perfect position, to feel relief, to sigh. But the next time she went to town, she saw how the seasons had changed and the familiar faces had weathered, and time was still her jailor.

She bought more watches, and the pile of screws grew into a golden-brown mound until the gears and timings and watch faces filled their own room. She smiled at her progress in dismantling time, ever easing the worry of a fleeting life. Of deadlines, goals, and the heavy

weight of disappointment.

She held her heart and felt it beating. The heart cupped in her palm beat together with the pulse in her thumb, and then it was everywhere. A pace to things, the world tick ticking. Maybe the second hand was not the metronome of time running; it was the calculator of vibrations, signals passing from terrain to heaven. Now she longed for gears, and circles, and notches, and clicks because she suddenly knew the virtue of time. A way to remember what was before this moment.

The seasons changed, and the faces weathered, but now even time passing felt like a smaller burden than her great hollow loneliness. She saw that she must begin again.

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It was the era for conquering. She drove to the ocean. She was there, in every port of call. She stood on wharfs, her long hair catching the wind like a canvas sail, cutting a shadowed figure against the sunset. There were men of every variety of height, hair, and character that any imaginative mind could conjure. She lived from fantasy to fantasy, capable of anticipating the desires of any man, the prize, presenting versions of a self that had previously never existed. She crammed eighty lifetimes into a few years, her name and identity shifting like a sand dune, suddenly forming, burying the past, and then moving into a new formation.

She wriggled in the arms of lovers like a night crawler, dizzied by the heat and the motion of the rocking boat, melted off the bed and onto the planks, disappearing through the cracks, falling into the water and wafting down, like a leaf falling from a branch, onto the sandy ocean floor. Waves pushed her back to the shore, and as they receded they dragged away the

small pebbles and slimy seaweed, leaving a trail of salty blue foam. She scooped the foam off the beach and drank it like a gin fizz.

She walked with heavy feet through the sand and up a hill to a large house. She saw her reflection in the window. Her hair was wiry like her mother's, gray at the temples. Her eyelids were puffy, her cheeks less full. The blinds weren't drawn, and she saw two children, teenagers, at the dinner table, with their mother and father seated at each end. She couldn't hear words, but she could hear their laughter. It reminded her of family dinners, her parents, her brothers and sisters, glazed ham, Father's moustache, warm bread, Mom's high-pitched sneezes, green beans that had been de-stringed in the garden.

It felt so distant, some other lifetime, yet so familiar as if it had occurred the day before. This contradiction warmed her with an aching for family who never forgot her and always loved her. She followed a path farther up the dune, which led to a street, and she followed the street until a man slowed down and asked her if she needed a ride. He drove her to a train station where she boarded, and sat in the viewing car, and watched the mountains rise and fall, the forests thicken and thin, the daylight glow and dim.

As she travelled, the train moved so she could keep still. She had this moment to remember heartache, and this other moment to notice the pain of a rock in her shoe, which made her forget heartache. There were moments of brief pain that eased the great tragedies, followed by great joy, illuminated by small pleasures. She opened the window in the viewing car and dropped the burdens along the tracks, scattering them through one hundred states and a thousand countries until she was as light as a bug skimming the creek water.

She was homeward bound, Sara no H. She made no more plans.

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Sara settled into the surprise of discovering the meaning of a normal day. Time had not stopped, but the era had passed for a different dream. She did not have her mother's aching feet. She did not have her father's dead-end job, though the fluorescent light in her cubicle blinked like a strobe, off and on. She had vague recollections of past lives. There would be no children, but at her sister's table, there were nieces and nephews, yearning faces wishing to know more. She bought them treats from the farmer's market. One day, she set a bag down in the center of their kitchen table and scribbled a note to the children. "Ripe plums. Try one."

VITA

Rachel Slager was born in Lafayette, Indiana and completed her B.A. in Fiction Writing at Columbia College of Chicago. She has raised bees, taught hypodermic needle cleaning, served at over four hundred weddings, sold shoes and soled shoes, cleaned houses, and has raised money for a plethora of charities. Rachel Slager lives and works in New Orleans.