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Sixth Form

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Sixth Form

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Adrienne Barton

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Abstract

The ten stories in this short story collection explore the liminal spaces created by certain physical spaces as well as times in the characters' lives. The stories are largely related to a school environment, and the relationships and experiences that are unique to the players living and moving within that context. How much are the relationships and actions of the characters influenced by the setting. What weight do institutional forces and tradition carry in the characters' lives, and how do they exploit it for their own will or conform?

Keywords: fiction, literary, liminal space

Who Killed the Golden Fowl?

Sister Clare, headmistress of Saint Francis' Boarding School, ignored the crumpled body of the dead golden fowl that dominated the surface of her office desk. The portrait of the previous head of school, her father, loomed high on the wall to her left; feeling its stare, she ignored it too. She looked instead to the man standing across the room.

He held his sunhat in one hand, leaned heavily on the cane he carried in the other. He was old enough to be her father and was working at the school when her own father brought her here and left her to the nuns in the neighboring convent many years ago. Now his face was lined, his knee eroded, and as overseer of the grounds keeping and custodial staff, he remained a staple in her life.

"Mr. Higgins," she said. "An explanation, if you don't mind."

"This is bad business, Sister," he said. His knobby fingers worried round the brim of his hat. "Especially so close to the showing. And not even a week out before the anniversary of your father's death. To think what he would say if he were still here."

Mr. Higgins looked over at the portrait. Sister Clare spared it a glance. Her father was dressed in a blue linen suit. He held in one hand a heavy metal rosary set with precious stones, rubies, and topaz, and freshwater pearls; on one shoulder stood the golden fowl. It was impossible to capture the true intensity of the fowl's plume with paint, but the artist had come close: the bird's proud breast was rendered with layers of deep ochre covered with gold leaf and luster; thick beams of painted light radiated from all around its body. The brilliance of the golden fowl in the portrait served as a reminder of what once was in comparison to the dulled and rust-colored tinge of the bird on the table.

“I’m aware of the date, thank you.” She lifted a fountain pen from a jar on her desk. “I’ve phoned the insurance company,” she said. “An adjuster should be here by the end of the school day.”

Mr. Higgins responded with a sedate nod. “Wise of your father,” he said, “to have looked into that early on.”

“Clever of him, yes.”

She prodded the fowl with the tip of her pen. The head moved on its broken neck, the greyed eye reflected the morning sun.

“Who was it?” she said. “That found it. You never said.”

“Well, myself of course.” He puffed out his chest, struggled to stand straighter. “Doing my regular duty, same as always. Making sure everyone’s where they need to be ‘fore the school opens up.”

“Now we both know that to be false, Mr. Higgins.” She watched him deflate a little. “I’ve stopped seeing you on my morning walks before school. Waking later and later?”

He laughed, sheepish. “Old age, I suppose.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

He coughed, bunched the bill of his hat in his fist. “Jacynth,” he said.

“Bring her.”

The first bell rang. Sister Clare made the morning announcements. Jacynth arrived. She sat in one of the plush armchairs typically reserved for sullen employees and dissatisfied parents. Mr. Higgins remained standing by the door, supported by the shaft of his cane.

Sister Clare studied Jacynth. Jacynth's hands were balled into fists in her lap. Her eyes moved around the room, avoided Sister Clare's hawkish gaze and the bleary dead-eyed watch of the fowl head. Her face was brown and smooth like a brazil nut. Sister Clare had always thought Jacynth's personality was rather thin, without much strength and presence. Part of the kitchen staff, she seemed to Sister Clare as bland as day-old bone broth and dishwater.

"You have no cause to worry, dear," Sister Clare said. She was unpracticed in providing comfort so her voice hitched and wavered as she affected a calming tone.

"Excuse for me believing otherwise, Sister," Jacynth said. "Especially after *this one*," she stabbed a finger toward Higgins, "comes running and grabs me up in the kitchen –"

"Did nothing of the sort!" Higgins sputtered.

"—and *accusing* me of all sorts of things – see the bruise forming, Sister?"

Sister Clare watched as Jacynth twisted the unblemished skin of her arm looking for the bruise.

"I didn't do nothing except find the damned bird, thank you very much," Jacynth said.

"And what else did you find? Anything in the coop? See anyone at the time?"

Jacynth shook her head no.

Sister Clare sighed, leaned back in her chair.

"Only then I heard them boys coming round the corner so I stuffed the poor thing in my apron pocket because I didn't want them to see – see the blood, Sister?" she lifted the front of the apron to show where blood had collected and dried along the pocket seams. "But you wouldn't *believe*, Sister. Had such a fright when I seen him there, neck all wrong, back all bashed in, the coop door hanging open like that."

"Which boys were these?"

“The Not-Twins,” Jacynth said.

“Those two boys that’s always together,” Mr. Higgins said. “They were always chasing it round the schoolyard.”

Jacynth rose to leave.

“One last question, Jacynth,” Sister Clare said. “Are you usually out at that time?”

“Sister?” Jacynth said. She buried her hands in the front of her apron.

“Why were you out by the coop this morning?” Sister Clare asked.

Jacynth coughed, glanced from Sister Clare to the dead fowl. “For breakfast,” she said. “I needed to get extra eggs for the kitchen.”

Mr. Higgins, waiting by the door, snorted. “Don’t think that’s all you’d planned to get this morning,” he said.

Jacynth wheeled about to face him. “You have something you’re trying to say?”

“Just be glad that your friend the badminton coach was late today, or those boys would’ve found you with a dead cock in your pocket and a live one in your apron, same as every Monday morning.”

Jacynth sniggered. “Nerve of you,” she said, “talking about dead cock in a pocket.”

Mr. Higgins opened his mouth to speak.

Sister Clare’s voice cut across his. “Jacynth, have some pride,” she said.

Jacynth “Hmph!”-ed and brushed past Mr. Higgins and through the door, leaving it open in her wake.

“Mr. Higgins, see if you can bring those boys to my office.”

Mr. Higgins, mollified, flumped his hat onto his head, and with his cane made his unsteady way out of the office and into the hallway, leaving alone in the office Sister Clare staring at the bloodied cockscomb of the dead rooster.

By all accounts, Dell and Dellmar were hideous children. Fifth-form boys, they stood in the unforgiving late stages of puberty with an unfortunate combination of features between them. They were an inseparable and unmistakable pair, doused in cheap body splash, with limbs not yet fully decided on how long they would become, and so knobby ankles and ashy elbows protruded from the hems of their khaki uniform pants and linen shirtsleeves. Mr. Higgins had found them in the crowded halls right as the lunch bell rang and brought them to Sister Clare's office much to the great excitement of the other surrounding children. Now, here they sat, across from Sister Clare, one in each armchair.

Dellmar, the older of the Not-Twins, stared transfixed by the dead fowl on the table.

Dell, the younger, spoke. "We seen them fighting by the chicken coop," Dell said. "Didn't we, Dellmar?"

"Mr. Higgins sure was in a state," Dellmar said.

Dell hissed his teeth, shook his head. "Didn't even get to feed him today. Poor old boy."

Sister Clare tapped the tip of her fountain pen against the tabletop, careful not to damage the veneer. "He's fed every morning before devotion by one of the caretakers," she said. "What need would you have for feeding him? No need to lie, boys."

Dell was aghast. "Sister," he said. He leaned forward in his chair and rested his hands on the edge of the table.

Sister Clare watched oily fingerprints develop on the once mirror-smooth surface of the table's edge.

"To think you would accuse good old Dell and Dellmar of lying," Dell said. "Cuts deep, don't it Dellmar?"

Dellmar nodded, staring still at the corpse. "He'd been crowing so much lately," he said.

"Yes," Sister Clare said. "We heard him in the convent. Every waking hour it seemed."
Never a moment of peace, she thought. Not since the day it was born.

"Thought maybe he was just hungry, that's all," Dell said.

"Should've known something was wrong when I didn't hear him last night," Dellmar said. He chuckled his chin in the direction of the rooster. "He loved to crow after supper."

"Like he was saying 'Good night', you know?" Dell said.

"And then that new boy, Barclay..." Dellmar said.

"The transfer student, correct?" Sister Clare asked.

"Him same one," Dell said.

"Well, the other night, the window in the dorm was open," Dellmar said. "So we heard when he got to crowing, same as always."

Dell said, "Then Barclay—"

"— angry as I ever seen him."

"A temper he's got, hasn't he, Dellmar?"

Dellmar nodded.

Dell continued. "Barclay throws back his bedsheet and stomps over to the window, and slams it shut!"

"Then he says —"

“– and we quote.”

“‘If I hear that ugly chicken scream one more night’,”

“‘I’ll break its neck myself!’ is what he said. Ain’t that right, Dellmar?”

Dellmar nodded. “Mummy always said ‘cock mout’ kill cock’.”

Sister Clare had to laugh. It was an old country saying, one the nuns favored when she was growing up in the convent and that she hadn’t heard in a quite a while. Every time she failed a test she had said she couldn’t pass, the nuns would shake their heads and cluck their tongues in disapproval. “Cock mout’ kill cock,” they’d said. Watch your mouth, it meant; the things you say come back against you.

“Thank you, boys,” she said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

The boys rose in unison and moved toward the door.

“Send Mr. Higgins in once you leave.”

“Oh, he’s not here, Sister,” Dellmar said.

“Said he needed to go back to the coop, right Dellmar?” Dell said. “See if he missed anything at the scene of the crime.”

With the boys gone, Sister Clare slumped back into the cushion of her chair. The afternoon sun was a watchful eye outside her window, and she could feel the sweat gathering along the line her wimple cut across her forehead. The smell of blood and dead meat was filling the warming room. She looked at the dead rooster taking up space on her desk, the twisted neck, the bashed-in back.

Its golden plumage was not nearly as luminous in death, but with the sun coming in through the window behind her and shining onto the body, she remembered the day the egg had hatched. Her father had pulled her from her lessons in the convent. They had watched as parts of

the shell cracked and fell away revealing a beak opening and closing, seeking feed, the impatient squawking.

“Do you think Mama would like it?” she had asked him.

As she looked at the golden fowl, beaten to death, she felt the ache of the wide pitted scar on her ankle.

She had tripped on the stone path as she carried dried bedsheets in from the clothesline. Mr. Higgins had carried her in to the nuns who dressed the wound. The dressing and the scab yellowed as it healed until one day she was spreading feed around the coop.

She remembered how the fowl had turned its neck in a curious way – not unlike the broken angle it now lay in – the deep shining amber of its breast fluffed out, before the head shot forward, pulling the scab from her ankle, deepening the wound. She went to her father’s office to show him.

“What was the dressing?” he’d asked. “If it falls ill...” He’d left her alone in the office, her ankle bleeding onto her socks, as he went in search of Mr. Higgins.

She thought back to what the Not-Twins said as they left.

Scene of the crime.

She flung her pen onto the table. The pen’s nib scratched the table, leaving a chink in the veneer, before the pen rolled to a stop beside the rooster’s cracked beak.

She stood, turned from her desk and the bird to the window behind her. She opened the window. The breeze was warm and welcome in the stale air of her office. She looked down upon the campus. There, on the path leading to the school building, was Mr. Higgins, one hand clenched around the head of his cane, the other buried deep in his pants pocket. Sister Clare kept

watch from her perch by the window, following the round bill of his sunhat, until he ducked into the school building and disappeared from her sight.

She reached up to hold the heavy jeweled rosary hanging from her neck, idly ran a finger over three empty settings where the stones had come loose.

The school bell rang.

A knock at the office door.

She turned to the door, remained standing with her back to the window.

“Come in.”

Mr. Higgins entered.

“You’ve been out to the coop.”

“Sister?”

“The boys said. Earlier.”

“Oh!” he said. “Yes, just having another look about, ‘leave no stone unturned’ as we say.” His hand stayed firmly in his pocket.

“And you’ve found something.”

“Oh, nothing but the same straw and blood there was from this morning,” he said.

“Nothing more that’d concern anybody.”

Sister Clare smiled. “You’ve always been very kind to me, Mr. Higgins.”

Mr. Higgins visibly relaxed, dropped his shoulders. His cane dug into the carpet as he stepped forward from the door. He sat in one of the chairs across her desk. He removed his hat, rested it on the empty chair beside him.

She remained standing.

Mr. Higgins looked at the portrait hanging on the wall. "I remember quite well the day you first came here," he said. "Your father did a lot for this school, God rest him. He was a good man."

Sister Clare laughed, and knew Higgins heard the scorn in her voice and found she no longer cared.

"'A good man'," she said, "to leave my dying mother. To rob her farm. To kill the chicken that lay the golden egg. Come here, save the failing school with the prestige of this surreptitiously found mascot, all while his only child sits in a convent. Appointing me head of school was the only decent thing he's done. Oh, Mr. Higgins, you've no idea the make of the man you served."

Mr. Higgins leaned forward, his eyes wide. "What good does all that do now?" he said. "What use, to disrespect the dead?"

"Dell and Dellmar mentioned another student," she said. "Barclay. Transferred from Mount Merle High, home of the three-headed mongoose. He was heard making threats in the dorm the other night."

"No child could have done this," he said. "And even if they had –"

"Yes, Mr. Higgins, even if they had, could you blame them?" Her grip was white-knuckled on the windowsill. "Who could blame the child that had to suffer knowing they were second best to the adults in their life, not to a lover, or even to a god, but to a mascot. To a *goddamned chicken*."

She looked at the portrait of her father on the wall, at the fowl standing boastful on his shoulder. "I thought that maybe, after he passed, that I could find some peace. Prayed for it even."

“As we all did at that time,” Mr. Higgins said.

“But the constant crowing, Mr. Higgins!” Her voice was an angry hiss. Her hands came up, grabbed her head on either side. Her fingers dug into the fabric covering her head. “Day and night,” she said. “Crying out over and over, a constant reminder.” She reached down to grip the stem of the rosary she wore. The bent metal prongs of the empty jewel settings dug into her fingertips. She looked at the golden fowl, the limp tail feather, the broken, concave breastbone.

“And now, can you hear, Mr. Higgins?” she said. “Do you see?”

“Sister Clare...”

“Listen!”

Her chest heaved, rising and dropping as she tried to slow her breathing. Standing in front of the window she was framed in the halo of the sun. The light radiated around her. The beaming rays around her silhouette spread out in to the office. The golden fowl was cast in darkness.

“Quiet. Finally.”

It was a moment before Mr. Higgins spoke again.

“Fine,” he said. “Fine. Then something else. An accident, maybe even an animal, sneaking on to campus —”

She scoffed. “A wild animal unlock the coop door? And upon sneaking in kill just the golden fowl, leaving all the other animals unscathed? That would be a miracle unto itself. No, Mr. Higgins. The day is dying. I must be finished with all of this finally. The insurance adjuster will be in. The crime demands a culprit. And we must provide one. Bring the boy.”

She pulled her chair forward and sat. She flicked her hand in the direction of the dead fowl.

“And take this with you.”

By now, Jacynth had told the entire kitchen staff what had happened. Dell had recounted the entire interrogation with vivid and imagined detail to a table full of students in the back of study hall while Dellmar, saddened, flipped distractedly through his homework in mournful silence. From keen-eared boy to loose-lipped teacher, the news of the golden fowl's death had spread throughout St. George's Boarding School for Boys. The teachers whispered and giggled as they walked up and down the hallway and traded information both true ("I heard its whole stomach was scratched out! Caved in!"), scandalous ("The badminton coach? With the *kitchen girl*? No accounting for taste, I suppose.") and wildly inaccurate ("The whole barn was *covered* in blood, they even killed the dairy cow! You didn't hear that from me though.").

The school bell rang.

Sister Clare made the afternoon announcements.

A knock at the door.

"Wait outside," she said to Mr. Higgins.

Barclay stood in Sister Clare's office with all the careful and practiced nonchalance that only third-form boys seem able to achieve. With no rush at all, Barclay dug his little finger around in the narrow depths of his ear canal and pulled from within a full lump of dark yellow wax. He flicked the earwax onto the desk where the fowl had been. All God's creations are precious, Sister Clare thought. But surely children were a mistake. Dirty. Weak. Ineffective. Sister Clare attempted a calming breath, fanned her fingers out on the tabletop.

"I'm sure by now you have heard what's happened," she said.

Barclay folded his arms, smirked. "Don't think I know to what you are referring, Sister."

"I need to impress upon you the gravity of the situation," Sister Clare said.

“Sounds like a matter of perspective,” Barclay said.

Sister Clare’s smile was stiff, barely formed before it vanished and left no trace on her face. “Glad to see Ms. Bekemeyer’s vocabulary lessons are going well. The Annual Regional Mascot Showing is quite the event in these parts. Winning schools get a good bit of funding and exposure. As I’m sure you were aware. Your previous school won last year, is that correct?”

“If you know why you asking?”

“You have been named in the killing of St. George’s fowl.”

Barclay laughed.

Sister Clare stood. Her rosary hung heavy around her neck. She walked around the table and stood in front of the boy. She rested her hands on his shoulders. They were small, sharp and fragile under her hands, like the bones of young bird. She found her grip tightening.

Barclay’s smirk slipped off his face.

She spoke softly. “Again,” she said. “Let me remind you of the gravity of the situation. You will be questioned, and it is easier, for all of us, if you confess, and accept your position.”

“I never touched your stupid chicken!”

She slapped him.

“Sister Clare.”

She turned.

Mr. Higgins stood in the open doorway. A mix of concern and disgust turned his features. Behind him was a young man, bookish, briefcase in hand, a confused look on his face. Barclay pushed away from Sister Clare. The movement pulled her from her trance and she looked at the spreading print on Barclay’s cheek.

She spoke in a hush. “A mistake, Mr. Higgins.”

“Surely, Sister,” he said. “Let’s go, boy.”

Barclay sniffled and hurried from the room. As they left, Mr. Higgins pulled his hand from his pocket. Sister Clare watched as three small stones landed noiselessly in the carpet. Alone, she sank into one of the armchairs. The shrill call of the ringing school bell echoed through the building and across the grounds.

“The bell has rung, Mr. Higgins,” she said, but they had already gone.

Hominy

Some of the boys fell ill. This was not so unusual with any school and was even to be expected at the Hollywell Boarding School for Boys where the classrooms were crowded, the dorms triple-bunked, and the walls always damp from the heavy fog that settled in the valley and crept in through the cracks in the foundation. But this was not the typical head cold that Nurse – having worked there for twenty years, and only qualified to be a nurse in the vague parochial sense that she had never been able to afford a doctor’s visit and so took care of herself – had ever encountered in her years at the school. Instead of running noses, the boys sweat and convulsed in their beds from pain. Sneezing and coughing were replaced by streams of sick and a shit stink that rose above the bleach and carried along the hallways outside. The mask she wore blocked none of the smells. She struggled to keep them hydrated and breathing. By Monday morning the infirmary was overrun.

The door opened behind her.

Headmaster Manley introduced himself to the room.

“Nurse,” he said. He spoke through the perfumed handkerchief he held over his nose.

Dreyfuss Manley had been Headmaster at Hollywell half as long as she’d worked there and had maybe less than half the good sense. He’d moved on to campus with his pretty wife and idiotic moon-faced son and removed anyone that he thought might dampen the school’s reputation. His face was ruddy and sweat marked the armpits of his unnecessarily thick purple overcoat as his neck struggled against a satin ascot.

“Nurse, what are you *doing* in here?”

“Manley,” she said. “Sir. The boys are unwell –”

“You must take me for a fool, you think I can’t see that for myself?” He flapped his kerchief at the occupied beds and chairs.

“Everything just moving through them like water —”

“So give them more water.”

Nurse took a deep breath, attempted to calm herself. “In my professional opinion —”

A laugh, from Dreyfuss.

“—it would be best to take them to the hospital.”

“Yes, man,” he said. “Now we come to it.”

“The hospital would have more resources,” she said, “more beds, at the very least.”

“You know, I don’t know is which backabush country parish they found you in, but I will not have you further tarnish the reputation of this place more than has already been done. It’s only been three years since, pfft, well, hmph. Well, you know, you heard about it.” He waved his hand about as his voice trailed off.

Nurse thought he looked like a fat, flightless bird. “Almost three years since Bailey, and you’re getting ready to have more bodies on your hands,” she said.

“A spectacle,” he said, and flapped his kerchief in front of her mask. “You would have them make a spectacle out of me again. Parade these boys into town so you all have something to sit around and whisper and gossip about for a week. A school lives and dies by its reputation, Nurse! Did that factor in to your ‘professional opinion’?”

She opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted.

“Nurse?” A meek voice from behind a curtain. A boy who would have been frail even in health pulled aside his curtain. His feet hung off the side of the bed. He had his arm clamped around his stomach. An unfortunate rumble sounded from his stomach. He pitched forward at the

waist and vomited onto the floor. A chorus of groans from the other beds followed at the sound of the vomit.

Manley stumbled back into the wall to avoid the spreading sick.

The plastic covers over Nurse's shoes squelched as she walked over to the bed, wiped the crying boy's mouth and chin with tissue from the bedside table.

Fletcher felt that he was a mostly decent man. Were he not so lazy, less of a drunk, and had he not been racked daily by guilt about Bailey Brooks' death, he might even approach something close to goodness. Until such a time, however, Fletcher kept himself busy, did what he could. As Hollywell's groundskeeper and steward, he kept the lawns tidy, kept the bushes trimmed back from the stone pathways; he minded the chickens and the cows for the eggs and the milk the kitchen staff used each morning; and at the height of the sickness, he drove the school's van to the nearby hospital, moving carefully around the potholes of the unpaved country roads to avoid shocking anything from the boys' loose stomachs.

He sat on a hard chair in the cold hospital waiting room. Around him, family members talked in nervous whispers and flipped through old magazines. Fletcher had no wife and no children of his own. He was alone and very thirsty. The antiseptic smell made his nose itch. He busied his mouth around the end of a stalk of chewstick; the stringy bark cracked easily between his teeth and a bitter white froth filled his mouth which he swallowed gratefully.

A nurse entered the room. "Mr. Fletcher?" she said. "Please come with me."

Seated in another hard chair in an even colder office room, the air conditioner thrummed as he listened to the nurse's report.

“The doctor has seen and tested all of the boys, and has concluded that they are not contagious.”

The way she said this, said ‘cAAhn-taaaay-jhus’, made Fletcher’s palms itch.

Something about his overhanging brow and his mouth placed too close to the tip of his chin made him look young and stupid, and while he was, he did not enjoy how this prompted people to speak to him in the slow and measured tones with which one addresses the dying and the impaired.

“It is most likely a pollutant in the water. Perhaps even something they ate or drank, perhaps shared amongst one another.” She laughed softly.

A mother’s laugh, Fletcher thought.

“You know how young boys are.”

Yes, he knew.

She handed him a manila envelope with the hospital’s seal stamped onto the front. “This is the doctor’s report explaining everything. All you need do is give that to your headmaster, yes? Just put the envelope (*aaayn-veh-IUP*) right into his hands, okay?” She looked down at him.

Mute, Fletcher nodded as he knew was expected.

“Very good. Do you think you can find your own way out?”

He drove back with his flask kotched between his thighs. The fumes from the dark liquor they serve at Hollywell’s only dancehall and bar filled his nose. He scratched his palm against the steering wheel, hard, to keep from reaching down.

That was the deal, Fletcher thought. Don’t drink at work no more. Don’t tell nobody what happened. Don’t do it.

He pulled to a stop as a stray donkey strolled across the street.

“What’s to tell?” he said to the donkey.

The donkey flicked its ears toward him.

“Wasn’t even there,” he said. “Not really anyhow. Don’t even remember anything.”

The donkey flicked its tail

“Had naught to do with it, I’m innocent!”

He drove off leaving the donkey’s wagging hindquarters in his rear-view mirror.

He parked beside the school’s barn. His favorite cow ambled over to the fence to greet him. A door closed in the distance and, squinting, he could just make out Ms. Lu as she moved from the kitchen to the path leading into the woods from her evening walks. She lifted the hem of her skirt to keep it from dragging through the grass. Still decades off from middle age, Fletcher thought her buttocks was well high, her calves firm and toned. The back of Fletcher’s throat burned and saliva flooded from under his tongue to soothe it. He drank from his flask.

Innocent.

Dreyfuss Manley was certain – proof *positive!* – that the culprit was here. He had come down to the kitchens promptly after breakfast had finished. He had claimed the kitchen’s only chair. He looked past the towers of soaking dishes and the beginnings of lunch preparations to the four that stood before him: a prehistoric man and woman whose identically wrinkled faces and bent backs meant they were either siblings or married, and he never cared enough to find out which was true; a young girl, barely in her twenties, who fiddled with the hem of her apron; and lastly, another woman, whose skin was still smooth and her back not yet bowed, but the scarf wrapped around her head was thin and worn, and her tired eyes drained her familiar face of youth. All

eyes were lowered with what Dreyfuss felt was the appropriate amount of respect. Surely they understood the gravity of the situation.

The bell for first period sounded.

“Tell me,” he said to the room. “Which of you is responsible for my downfall? Which of you saw fit to risk the reputation of this institution?”

No one spoke. The bottom half of the young girl’s apron was a crumpled mass in her balled fists.

“A confession now, and I will consider leaving the police out of this.”

Apron gasped. She looked at him, then back and forth between the older women.

“But the school board is demanding answers, and I will be taking *swift* action against all involved.” He thought that was rather persuasive. He leaned forward.

Aged driftwood personified, the pair on the end had each raised a hand in unison only to lamely scratch at something behind their ears.

He sighed. He opened his mouth to speak when the young girl threw herself at his feet.

“I was only trying to help Ms. Lu and them!” she said. She grabbed at his knees, looked up into his face, crying.

“Theodora!” the head-tied woman said. “Get off the man.”

Dreyfuss recoiled in his seat. “What?” he said. “What’s this now?”

Theodora whipped around and pointed at the old couple. “Them two,” she said. “Always on me about how I do the least work. How I can barely wash a dish much less cook. And the one time I –” she choked on a sob. She turned to Dreyfuss again. “Swears I didn’t know, sir! Ms. Lu just has everything laid out so I just put a little of everything in the pot the morning, and then all

them little boys wind up in the hospital.” She was fully crying now, her arms clamped around his legs, her tears soaked through the knees of his pants.

“*Theodora*.” The head-tied woman lifted Theodora from the floor and shook her. “Stop this now,” she said. “Be quiet.”

“Carelessness,” Dreyfuss said. He stood, projecting the height of a much taller man. “That is what I cannot stand about you people, just total carelessness. Fletcher will be round with the van. Make sure you are packed and ready.”

Theodora wailed.

“Mr. Manley, please,” the head-tied woman said. She spoke softly.

He laughed. “‘Please’ what? The damage she caused. To think, if my son had been on time for breakfast —”

“It was an accident,” she said. “We know how easy accidents happen. And you were so very kind to keep me on after —”

“Yes, yes, yes,” he said, “never mind all that now.” He looked at the pathetic Theodora. “I will return,” he said, “for there must be consequences. Until such time, make sure she keeps her hands to herself.” He leaned towards the head-tied woman, whispered, “And you be sure to keep setting aside little Manley’s food separate, can’t be risking anything with him this last year.”

“Of course, sir,” she said. “As always.”

The sound of Theodora blowing her nose followed him out of the kitchen.

Back in his office, Dreyfuss sunk into the supple leather of his armchair. His ascot was gone, his jacket cast aside, and his window shut against the wet heat of the late afternoon. On the desk before him was the doctor’s report and a copy of today’s Friday issue of the newspaper. A

picture of Hollywell blanketed the front page. “Outbreak at Boys’ Boarding School!” read the headline. He sighed, turned to look outside. His eyes settled on the portrait hung over the window. In the picture he was genteel in his favourite purple overcoat, the lapels lying flat across his expansive shoulders. His wife beside him was tall and thin like stretched gum, sour-faced and unforgiving. The photographer captured her typical facial expression, one Manley had always thought said that they both knew she was too good for this meagre life in the wet countryside he’d given her. Between them was their son, Dreyfuss Manley III. There is no Dreyfuss Manley, Jr. Manley Sr. needed only the appearance of extended lineage, less so the actuality of it. The boy had his mother’s figure, tall and shapely, and his father’s intelligent face. This was little Manley’s last year, and if his father had any say in the matter, he would graduate next term without incident.

He thought back to this time three years ago. Yes, he thought. His son had suffered enough. The woman in the kitchen, what she said. Of course he’d kept her on after that little mess. Fire the dead boy’s mother? Never. The optics would have been terrible.

Bailey Brooks, 13, was on the Honor Roll. He was young, and bright, a scholastic joy for his teachers. To the day he died, he was the pride and light of his mother’s life.

If you asked Bailey, however, the most important event of his first term at Hollywell was becoming best friends with Dreyfuss Manley III. They sat together in the back of Social Studies, and shared their homework during Study Hall, and every Monday morning they were first in line at breakfast for a fresh bowl of his mother’s hominy porridge.

“There’s going to be a trip!” he said to his mother. “For all the Honor Roll students!” he enjoyed this time with her, walking around campus during the free time between dinner and lights out.

“Yes, I heard the teachers talking,” she said. “I am so proud of you.”

“So I can go? Please, please?” Bailey listened to her thinking silence. “We get to skip a day of school, and I spoke to Dreyfuss and –”

His mother laughed. “‘*Dreyfuss*’?” she said. “What is a ‘Dreyfuss’?”

“That’s my friend!” He started to laugh himself.

“Oh! So a Dreyfuss is a person,” she said. “Now I understand. I thought Dreyfuss was a kind of bush.”

Bailey dissolved into a fit of laughter. A passing teacher cleared her throat and fixed her narrow face pointedly in their direction.

“So?”

She was quiet again.

“It’s not that much.”

“How you know how much is too much?”

Bailey shrugged and kicked at the grass as they walked.

Silence still. And then, “okay.”

“Okay?”

“We’ll see, we’ll see,” and Bailey heard the love and fatigue in her voice, and was glad to have her here with him.

All the Honour Roll students lined up early Thursday morning, a small bag of overnight clothes slung over their shoulders. Led by the Headmaster, Mr. Fletcher – who the boys thought was great fun, with his funny smell and his chewstick – and the Science and Social Studies teachers, Misters Treewick and Greenwelt, they walked two abreast from the school grounds and followed the path leading into the woods. Bailey did not remember the last time he walked so far or for so long. They walked close together on the narrow path, slipping on stones overgrown with moss, mindful of the steep drops deeper into the valley along the way, and the wooden guardrails that splintered and creaked if they leaned on them for too long. They finally stopped at a wide open clearing on a gentle slope with two large cabins nestled at the edge. Bailey was so grateful to be able to sit down.

“Didn’t I tell you to have all this cleared out by now?” came the headmaster’s voice.

Bailey turned with the rest of the boys to see.

Headmaster Manley stood by a large pile of cut branches and leaves piled outside the cabins.

Mr. Fletcher dropped his bags and ran into one of the cabins. He came out wearing a pair of long gardening gloves. “Yes, sir, very sorry, sir,” Mr. Fletcher said. He grabbed large handfuls, holding the branches far from his body, and carried it along a path away from the cabins and the clearing. The teachers ushered the boys inside to prepare for the night.

There were so many activities! Bailey’s favorite was the team scavenger hunt (which Bailey and Dreyfuss did not win to the headmaster’s great upset). The science teacher Mr. Treewick, a skinny man that reminded Bailey of the grasshoppers that lived in his room, told them all about the local wildlife, and on Saturday night before they were due to return they had a campfire in the clearing where the social studies teacher Mr. Greenwelt, with his shaking hands

and quiet voice, showed them how people still use the stars to tell direction. Bailey went to sleep happy and excited to tell his mother all he learned.

“Bailey,” said a voice.

Bailey rolled over on the stiff cabin bed.

“*Baaai-leey*,” said the voice again.

Bailey opened his eyes to find Dreyfuss’ round face inches from his.

“Bailey, come outside.” He kept his voice low, an audible whisper. So as not to wake the other boys?

“I’m tired, Dreyfuss. Tomorrow.” Bailey closed his eyes and rolled to the other side.

“But Bailey!” he said. “You need to come see this thing we found!”

Bailey sat up and noticed that some of the other boys were also up. A few had their heads poked outside the cabin door watching for the teachers. “What did you find?” Bailey said.

From behind him Dreyfuss produced a small brown flask. “It’s Mr. Fletcher’s,” he said to Bailey’s questioning face. “This is why he always smells funny. Try it.” Dreyfuss moved closer to Bailey. He smelled the thick sweet smell he associated with Mr. Fletcher coming from both Dreyfuss and the flask.

“How did you get it?”

Dreyfuss shrugged. “He fell asleep like he always does. It was in his hand. Try it. It’s just juice.”

It burned and Bailey coughed and coughed while Dreyfuss and some of the boys laughed and clapped him hard on the back. Bailey felt warm and loose.

“You okay?”

They kept drinking, passing the flask from mouth to mouth until the boys pitched from wall to wall and spilled out of the cabin door running along one of the paths from the clearing. They hollered in the night. One boy stopped and turned to the group. Smiling and swaying he said “Look! I’m Mr. Fletcher!” He hunched over and lurched ahead buckling his knees together as he went.

The boys’ laughter ran up and down the slope and all around them. “Me next, me next! Watch me!” They each clamoured for a turn. Dreyfuss went, bending forward and shuddered with a lame twitch.

Bailey snorted. “That’s not how you do it!”

Dreyfuss straightened up and looked at him. “Well, how do you do it then?”

“Bailey, you do it! Do it, Bailey!” said the boys.

Dreyfuss shoved his shoulder. “Yeah, Bailey, go,” he said. “Show us.”

Bailey stumbled a little from the shove. He pulled at his pyjama pants until they drooped and dragged on the ground. He staggered down the path with an exaggerated bounce to his shoulders. The hem of his pants danced about his ankles as he pulled at the pants waist. The boys roared with laughter at the twitchy marionette in front of them. “And you can’t forget the chewstick!” Bailey picked a twig from a pile of bush trash along the path. He popped the end in his mouth with a flourish, and chewed.

The boys were bent, crying from laughing. None of them saw as Bailey spit the stem from his mouth.

Bailey felt very hot. The bitter heat from the drink had coated his tongue. As he chewed on the twig a new burning filled his throat and lined his stomach. He stumbled, not from drink or

from pantomime, but from the nausea squeezing across his chest. Saliva filled his mouth. He leaned heavily against the creaking wooden railing and spit into the valley.

The laughing slowed as one of the boys heard him gag. “Hey, Bailey. Bailey, you okay?” he said.

Bailey did not answer. He threw up violently over the side as his stomach squeezed into itself inside his body.

“Dreyfuss! Dreyfuss, go get Headmaster!” one of the boys said, but Dreyfuss only watched as Bailey shook and seized against the weak railing.

The wood gave way against his thrashing body. Bailey slipped over the edge and out of sight.

For the past three years, Lupine Brooks made porridge for the Hollywell boys every Monday morning. She laid out everything from the night before. Pepper and cinnamon, nutmeg and condensed milk, salt and sugar. All stood two abreast beside the sink. She rinsed the corn, left it to soak overnight.

Of the kitchen staff, she usually woke first. She dressed in the dark of the early morning while the fog lingered still over the lawns. Calloused feet slipped into thinning shoes. She knotted her tiehead at the back of her neck, her hair hidden away like a tightly kept secret. The school crest was a stain over her left breast.

There had been a posting in the newspaper. *Kitchen staff needed. Must have reference(s). Childcare/Tuition remission available pending qualifications.* References had not been hard to come by. She had spent years minding other people’s houses, cooking other people’s food, cleaning the sick off the bathroom floor in the dancehalls. Anything to make sure Bailey was

taken care of; that Bailey was fed and clothed; that Bailey was out of trouble, wasn't running street with the other boys; that Bailey was safe to love science and cricket and a hot bowl of porridge every Monday morning. It had only ever been the two of them. She had received his body with an unsigned letter of apology.

She turned on the kitchen light and walked over to the soaking corn. She reached inside and felt kernels that were fat and soft, and would boil quickly. By the time the water boiled away, and the spoonful of oleander stems had been added, she could hear Mr. Fletcher cursing quietly outside the kitchen door. She opened the door.

Fletcher was red-eyed and lopsided. Three eggs dropped and broke, and half a cup of milk spilled from the pails he carried before he makes it to the door. "Morning, Ms. Lu," he said. He stamped his dirty shoes on the doormat. "Brought something for you." Experience and routine told her he was still drunk from what routine told her had been another lonely Sunday night at the dancehall.

In the days after, Lupine had turned into a walking ghost. She had carried the empty shell of her body from place to place. She slept during the day, so as not to hear the boys' laughter and yelling. At night, she walked the campus grounds alone. She wandered in to the woods. She saw the broken guardrails, plants grown wild overtook the trail. While alive, Lupine's mother saw fit to show her the good sense of what was safe, and she stepped carefully around what wasn't. Everything grew in the richness of these hills. Her walks had taken her by the school's animals where she ran into Mr. Fletcher, drunk and inconsolable. He always had a lot to say, Mr. Fletcher.

She took what was left of the milk Fletcher brought and poured it into each pot. The milk scalded along the sides and she stirred quickly to keep the kernels from burning at the bottom.

She could feel Mr. Fletcher watching her. He lumbered over to her and slumped against the counter. Rank, stale alcohol overwhelmed the scent of the spices in the porridge. She couldn't stand the smell of him.

"What you making this morning, Ms. Lu?"

"Hominy porridge, Mr. Fletcher."

"Why you putting so much sugar, Ms. Lu?"

"Is just how I make it," she said. She emptied and stirred a tin of condensed milk into one frothing pot. "These boys like it sweet."

He made a sound low in his throat; a moan, or perhaps gas, Lupine couldn't tell, and didn't care to find out.

"Porridge in that little pot too?"

"Made this special," she said. "Just like Headmaster Manley asks."

"And these here?" He picked up a small, unmarked jar, shook it.

"Bay leaf."

"'Bay' what's it?" he said.

She watched his eyes widen as they struggled to focus on hers. "Leaf, Mr. Fletcher," she said. "For digestion."

"Oh, *leaf*, you said. Swears I heard something else." His hands seemed delinquent from his body as he *pat-pat-pat* his pockets in search of something. His hands found their way into his pants pocket and removed the battered flask.

She turned the fire down; the porridge was almost done now. She moved to the other side of the kitchen and opened the cupboards. "Make yourself useful then," she said, "and empty it in the little pot there. Whole jar."

He poured the jar's contents into the pot, and set it back on the counter.

Lupine was grateful for the quiet.

"Never had no hominy porridge before," he said. "Never had no mam to make it."

She had stacks of bowls and handfuls of spoons cradled in her arms when she turned and found him directly in front of her.

"Mr. Fletcher."

"Can I have some of your porridge, Ms. Lu?"

She felt sticky fingers fiddling with the hem of her uniform blouse. "Don't you worry, Mr. Fletcher," she said. "Time soon come."

It had been a week since Headmaster Manley carried his son from the school. Teachers and students had gathered by classroom windows to watch the excitement. He and his weeping wife had left in a blaze of sirens, followed closely behind by Fletcher driving the school van which carried the additional dozen or so boys that were dealing with a much milder stomach upset. The funeral came together quickly, and was held on Saturday of that week in Hollywell's oldest church. Mrs. Manley clung to the casket while Dreyfuss sat in the front pew, his eyes downcast, looking and seeing nothing. The Manleys returned to campus. Mrs. Manley was last seen pulling a brown leather trunk out to a black car parked at the campus entrance. Dreyfuss was rarely seen outside his office after that. The days after were quiet and almost routine. And as always, but especially so given this week at Hollywell, Fletcher looked forward to Sunday night.

Fletcher guided the van along the winding path from the dancehall back to the school. Guided by muscle memory and the same dumb luck that keeps babies safe from harm, he parked the van beside the barn.

His favorite cow bellowed at him from inside. It was a lonely sound that echoed in his chest. “Hello,” the cow said. “I’ve missed you.”

He slammed the car door shut.

The cow snorted and lumbered away to another corner.

Uneasy on his feet, he lurched from stone to cracked stone as he made his way on the path to the groundskeeper’s cabin. He did not see the packed bag by the door when he entered, but he saw her.

“Good evening, Mr. Fletcher.”

“Ms. Lu.”

She was not wearing the Hollywell uniform, dressed instead in a blouse and skirt he’d never seen before. Her tiehead was gone, and the thick curling mass of hair she usually kept covered was a halo around her head. She stood in the small kitchen-bathroom of the cabin, and the dingy water basin he washed in seemed brighter for having her near it.

“So,” he said, louder than he’d meant to. “What brings you ‘round?”

“I remember you asking me for something a while ago.”

The alcohol in his body dimmed what little sense he had, and it took him some time to answer. He dropped into the one chair he had at the only table that was placed beneath the room’s sole window. His weary eyes settled on a small bowl resting on the table. It was covered by a kitchen towel. He uncovered it. The porridge in the bowl looked thick, like wet cement. The steam coming up from it clouded the window. It smelled sweet, and the handle of the spoon resting in the middle was bright and clean. His stomach ached.

“I thought you might be hungry,” she said.

He looked up at her. Tried to focus on her face in the weak light. Heard the keening cry of his cow from somewhere outside. “Soon time for breakfast,” he managed to say. “Need eggs. Milk. For breakfast. The children.” He tried to stand, and she reached out with one hand and tenderly cupped his cheek. It was a mother’s touch, and Fletcher couldn’t help but lean in to the dry warmth of her hand, relaxed.

“You have no children.”

“No,” he said.

“Nothing to lose.”

“Ms. Lu.”

“Please.” She slid the bowl of porridge towards him. “While it’s still hot.”

Assignment Review

To Dolores Duke, “Guidance Counselor”,

Thank you for your most recent letter.

Since your last warning in November, I have taken great pains to revise my lesson plans to properly meet this new Universal Learning Initiative the Surrey County School Board implemented – with no input from any teachers, mind – at the start of the year. Your continued interest and fault-finding in my assignments is thus very confusing and more than a little aggravating. I especially did not appreciate the tone of this last letter. I know this is your first year working here at Surrey, but you of all people, *Dolores*, should learn how to talk to people if you intend to keep calling yourself a guidance counselor, especially with all the layoffs going around this year.

The assignment you’ve now taken issue with is the “My Life/Myself as _____” writing project I’ve given to my eighth-grade class. In the revised lesson plan approved by Headmaster Allen, the assignment fulfils the “Creative and Critical Thinking” metric set out in the initiative. The accusations that I have somehow been inattentive to warning signs that came out in the students’ projects are unfounded and insulting, to say the least. Take for instance Lonny Brecht’s “Myself As A Bicycle”, reproduced in full below.

Myself As A Bicycle

They call me The Golden Nara.

Alright, look, I didn’t choose the name, but let’s focus on what’s really important.

Like these handlebars.

Look at these handlebars.

No, for real. *Look*. At these handlebars.

And this seat. When was the last time you saw alligator leather on a bicycle seat?

Do you *see* this frame, though?

Steel alloy electroplated in gold, sitting tall on a pair of these *fat* fucking wheels, just stylin' on all the other bikes in the shop.

Not cheap, though. Probably why it took so long before someone chose me.

The Lagunas and the Schwinn's, even those ugly-ass Treks, all of them went home with families, hardly got a chance to know them.

But soon as he walked in the door, I knew.

No hesitation, walked right over, picked me up out from the rest of them and took me home to his family, him, his wife, a son. My new family.

Then it was me and the son, just cruisin', right? He strapped a bell to my handlebar. Smooth, easy riding, you know?

I mean, every now and then my back wheel would skid out to the side. It'd just been so long since I was out, you know? And you *know* those guys in the bike shop didn't care. Longer you're in there, the less anyone pays attention, so my alignment was all off I guess, and maybe my pedals would stick more than they expected, so maybe I was a little hard to deal with, I don't know.

But I swear I didn't mean for him to get hurt.

We're going along like normal, you know, moving down the road. Then he starts *pushing* me. Look at me, look at these wheels, man, I'm not built to do stuff like this. And I can see the potholes coming up. I can see it. I know what's coming. My back brake locks up. He didn't even land that hard. He got up quick, looked around all stunned. And then he kicks me. Just like that,

BAM!, spokes all bent out of place, my wheel's all twisted up. And he's crying, and his dad runs up, and they go back to the house without me, and I'm left behind again. They leave me there. I try and ring that stupid bell, call out to them. It was a mistake. An accident. Just take me home, man.

Dolores, obviously I deducted marks for the capitalization errors and foul language. If your suggestions are to be followed, I should have called Child Protective Services the day Lonny showed up on crutches. Thankfully, I'm not so quick to jump to conclusions. Lonny's foster father Mr. Gage was quick to explain that Lonny merely twisted his ankle while playing with his foster brother, and Lonny had nothing different to say about the issue. I know Mr. Gage would have taken great offense at what was being implied in your letter. He's always been such a great help to this school. He even built me a new set of cubbies for the classroom, which you know normally I'd have my dear Harold do it, but ever since his stroke and all the hospital bills, well, it's just been nice to get some extra help around here.

Additionally, if *you* were as attuned to the students' needs as you say I should be then you would know that Jenna Sarver is a lovely student and has become perfectly well-adjusted to Surrey's school culture since she transferred in. However traumatized you may think she is based on her submission "My Life as a Potted Plant" then perhaps you should reach out to her personally. She's occasionally surly and jumps at the sound of the bell, which is really no different from any of my other students – have you *met* a middle-schooler recently? They're all so overstimulated it's a miracle I can keep them in one room for the forty-five minutes. You were just the same, if memory serves correct. Always in trouble somewhere, always getting sent

to the office. You'd jump every time the headmaster came in to the room, do you remember that?
Who was it then? Mr. Haitchison! That's right. He was a funny sort of man, wasn't he?

My Life as a Potted Plant

Mrs. Johnson was my favorite study hall teacher. Third period was the best part of the day for the two years I was in her class. She always made apple fritters for the first day of each term, and there was always enough for everybody to get two.

I was scared the first time I seen her. She was so tall, and had this great big voice, and she kept these massive plants in the corner of the room.

She did roll and made us introduce ourselves to each other.

Travis Becker!

Carey Booth!

Joao Chaves!

Martha Driscoll!

Nadine Dunn!

Zabrina Himmel!

Samantha Morris!

Agnes Wei!

Roger Willem!

Then she turned and pointed at the plants in their pots.

"Birdie Paradise!" she said. "Craig the Croton, Fiddle Leaf Fiddlesticks, and best of all, Phil Philodendron!" and she laughed and her whole body shook.

She let me water them. She hid Easter eggs in Birdie's broad leaves and bright open beaks. If we were nice, she'd let us nap during the period. "Now, I'm really not supposed to let you do this," she'd say, and you would have to nod all serious. You could push all the pots together and sleep behind the plants, and the sunlight through Craig's leaves was red and green, and it was a shame when that bell went off for fourth period. Sometimes Vice Principal Vernon would go around to check the classrooms, making sure all the locks and everything worked, and she would tell him you went to the bathroom or something so you wouldn't get detention for sleeping during study hall.

I got to take Phil home at the end of last school year. He got to be taller than me by the end of the summer. Man, you shoulda seen how big he got! And how surprised Mrs. Johnson was when she saw. We had to have Mr. Vernon wheel it in on his cart on the first day back; he wasn't too happy about it though. The stalks were thick and woody, and the leaves on their red stems almost reached the watermarked plaster squares in the ceiling. Mrs. Johnson said by the time I reached high school I would shoot up out of nowhere and be tall just like her and Phil.

I was reading, tucked behind the plants, when everything started. My back was resting against Phil's wide pot. It was nothing like the drills. The bell didn't go off. It was a whole lot of noise. And then a whole lot of quiet. Mr. Vernon tried to move me after, pick me up and carry me over everything, but I slipped and then my sneakers got dirty, and I can't wear them anymore.

It was months before anyone thought to water Phil again.

And now there's this new lady. She takes roll without looking at us.

Booth, Carey

Chaves, Joao

Dunn, Nadine

Morris, Samantha

Wei, Agnes

Doesn't even look at Phil.

She doesn't see Phil's twisted stems, doesn't see Fiddle's broken trunk. All our leaves are brown and brittle.

"Get back in your seat," she says.

I stand in the dry dirt of Phil's pot and lift my arms and I am tall, I can be so tall. I will get to be so very tall, and my legs and arms and fingers that I had closed tight around me while I waited in the corner will unfurl and stretch past the new dark stains on the wall and ceiling, and I am Phil, philodendron, planted, rooted, and safe.

I have been teaching for 30 years come this September and have never had to deal with the sort of complaints you've levied against me this school year. I find that my students are paragons of good behavior, much more so than those hooligans over in Susan Richmond's classroom, who I'll have you know directly copied my assignment guidelines only to have *her* students produce such *marvels* as "My Life as the President" – as if Lamar Johnson could ever be president, have you *seen* him? Dolores, you were my student once. Surely you remember what it was like in my class, don't you? That must count for something, of course.

Hopefully I've clarified everything to your satisfaction. Do pass this all on to the members of the school board (now that you've gone and gotten them involved). I should hope that my contract for the next academic year is forthcoming.

Sincerely,

Lorna Fitzhenry.

Call Flow

Thank you for calling Key-Aran Telecommunication Services.

For security and quality assurance purposes, your call may be recorded.

For English, press one. Para español, marque número dos.

We here at Key-Aran appreciate your business.

So that we may best direct your call, please listen closely to the following prompts:

For billing and accounts review, press one;

If you are travelling and will be using your phone abroad, press two;

For lost devices, new device activation, and insurance claims, press three;

For more information on our most recent and ongoing fraud cases and to see if you qualify for reimbursement, press four;

For all other questions, or to speak to a customer service representative, press five.

Billing and accounts review.

Please describe your reason for calling.

Did you say: "Bill pay?"

I did not understand.

Please speak clearly.

Please describe your reason for calling.

I did not understand.

Please hold while I transfer you to the next available customer service representative.

Someone will be able to help you.

Thank you for your continued service.

[KATS Training Manual: Customers may not be able to see your smile, but they can definitely hear it. Smile big!]

Thank you for calling Key-Aran! It's a *beautiful* day here! My name is Geraldine! May I have your name, please?

Nice to meet you, Lorna! I look forward to helping you today.

[KATS Training Manual: Active listening is key at Key-Aran! Let the customer know you are paying attention by repeating their problem back to them. They will appreciate this and feel cared for.]

Okay, Lorna. Just to make sure I heard everything clearly, you're calling in regards to a phone bill for a phone no one has used for the past month, is that correct?

Could I have the last name of the account holder please?

Fitzhenry, thank you. And the first name on the account, please? Thank you for your patience, I was able to pull up Harold's account.

In order to fully access the account, I just need you to answer a few security questions. Firstly – Sorry?

[KATS Internal Memo – Customer Service: In light of recent fraud activity on some customers' accounts, failure to follow the security protocols will result in the customer service representative's immediate termination. Thank you for your compliance!]

Yes, ma'am, unfortunately this is standard company procedure, especially when someone besides the account holder is calling in.

Oh, I hadn't realized, I apologize. Mrs. Lorna Fitzhenry has a lovely ring to it. Is your husband around?

No, he's unavailable?

Then I still have to verify whether you can access the –

Sorry?

Yes ma'am, that is correct. If your husband had listed you as an authorized user you are allowed access to the account, yes. Please give me just a moment while I check . . .

Right.

So.

[KATS Training Manual: Information that may be shared about an account with an unverified caller: main account holder, authorized users on the account, number of lines on the account.]

You said your name was 'Lorna'?

Yeah, no, I heard you the first time. There *is* another name on the account with Harold. But it's definitely not 'Lorna'.

The second line on the account –

What?

Yes, ma'am, a second line.

The name is Candace. Your daughter, perhaps?

Oh, you don't have any children?

Oh.

Well, does Harold have any children?

Oh, okay.

You sure?

No, ma'am, I'm not trying to be smart.

Well, if you know Candace can you maybe get her on the line so we can get into this account?

Ma'am, there's no reason to yell.

Let's try the security questions. You have to get two out of the three correct in order to verify the account.

Can you please tell me the street address of Harold's childhood home?

[KATS Training Manual: Answers to security questions must be exact! No hints, no second attempts.]

Did you say '14 Goosecreek Place' or '14 Goosecreek Lane'?

No, I'm very sorry, it's actually 16 Goosecreek Park. *Sixteen*. Very sorry, ma'am.

What is his mother's maiden name?

I –

Yes, ma'am, I understand he may have told you that, but he obviously knew his mother well enough to know her maiden name.

Well, do you maybe know his password? The last four of his social security number?

No, ma'am, you cannot use his birthday.

So you don't have anything.

No?

[KATS Training Manual: Be mindful of tone when asking potentially difficult questions.

Customers may become upset which will result in low customer satisfaction survey scores.]

Are you sure you were even married?

Ma'am.

Ma'am.

Ma'am, if you do not calm down, I will be forced to disconnect the call.

I understand what you're saying, but –

Yes, ma'am.

No, ma'am, I do not take you for an idiot.

Yes, you may speak with a supervisor.

Please hold.

[KATS Training Manual: NOTE! Be sure phone is on mute, or customer is placed on hold, before speaking to supervisor or others in the call center]

Marcel! Come here a minute. Listen man, I'm taking my lunch, so you come deal with this lady.

How I must know what her problem is, Marcel? I look like Miss Cleo? She can't even verify the account, so what you want me to do? I ask her for the information and she over here screaming in my ears saying is her husband account, she don't care which other woman on the account, why should she have to tell me anything. All now I don't know why she calling.

What?

Whatever, man. You talk to her.

[KATS Training Manual - Supervisors & Floor Managers: Be sure to remember the two Ds: Defuse and Deescalate!]

Hello, this is Marcel Hough, center supervisor today and –

Yes, ma'am.

Yes, I understand.

You are absolutely correct, that is unacceptable behavior.

Yes, ma'am.

I will be sure she receives the appropriate discipline.

Is there anything else I can help you with today?

Okay, I'll get you to the right department.

Thank you again for being a valued member of the Key-Aran family.

Please hold while I transfer your call.

[KATS Training Manual: Be sure to transfer customers to the appropriate department. An excessive number of transfers will result in the entire call center coming under review.]

Hey, this is Chet with Tech Support, what can I do you for?

Cancellation?

Nah, this is Chet.

Yeah. With Tech Support.

Nope.

Not cancellation.

Tech Support.

Yo, are you crying?

Listen, lady this is my last day, I can't deal with you crying on my phone, come on, man.

[KATS Training Manual – Cancellation Department: Ask probing questions to determine reason for cancellation. If applicable. Make customer aware of cancellation fees.]

It's a wonderful day here at Key-Aran. My name is Ethel, and –

Hello?

Are you okay?

Oh, my dear, please stop crying, surely it isn't so bad.

Yes, this *is* the cancellation department.

Yes, we can take care of everything for you today.

I do see here that Harold Fitzhenry's account has been inactive for just over a month. May I ask the reason for the disuse? Poor connection?

[KATS Training Manual – Cancellation Department. Cancellation due to death: offer your condolences. Try to be sincere. Cancellation due to debt: forward to collections agency.]

I'm very sorry for your loss, ma'am.

[KATS Training Manual – Cancellation Department: If cancellation fee is less than \$50, waive. Anything over is charity, and what does Key-Aran believe in? Hard work and self-sufficiency!]

There is a cancellation fee of \$150 associated with this account due to his cell phone still being under contract.

You could always just keep his number! All those lovely voicemails and text messages.

Wouldn't that be a lovely keepsake for you?!

Please stop crying.

Let me see what I can do.

If you'll hold just a moment, I can go ahead and close the –

[KATS Training Manual: If a customer has to call back because of the issue being unresolved, or call disconnection, your metrics will be negatively impacted and you will be appropriately disciplined at your monthly review. Remember! Metrics is Money!]

Thank you for calling Key-Aran Telecommunication Services.

For security and quality assurance purposes, your call may be recorded.

For English, press one. Para español, marque número dos.

We here at KATS appreciate your business.

So that we may best direct your call, please listen –

I did not understand.

Please listen closely to the following prompts.

For –

I did not understand.

Please speak clearly.

I did not understand.

Please hold while I transfer you to the next available customer service representative.

Someone will be able to help you.

Thank you for your continued service.

Still Life

The thatch of pubic hair below the model's rounded belly was as surprising and violent as the accident that killed her. Having disrobed, the light cover up she'd worn when she'd entered the room now hung in the crook of her elbow. She stood before the modest podium in the center of the room.

"Class," said Professor Titchum, "our model today is Miss Maribel." He stood a respectable distance beside her. He faced the semicircle of easels and drawing desks that arced along the back of the studio classroom. He addressed the seated students. "As you can see, Maribel here is *quite* pregnant," he said.

The students laughed: short, and without much feeling or humor.

Maribel smiled and patted the crest of her stomach. "Thank you for having me today," she said. Her voice was smooth and carried easily around the small room.

"She's assured me, however, that she'll have no problem holding the poses for the duration of the class. Maribel, if you please." Professor Titchum helped Maribel up onto the podium. He placed her cover up on his desk and lifted a large timer from the drawer.

There came the gentle slithering of paper moving against itself as the students tacked blank sheets to their tables or fastened them onto easels.

"First, a brief warmup," Professor Titchum said. "Two poses, five minutes each."

Maribel stood. Leaning into the dim light stumbling through the studio's windows, she settled into the first pose. Ian Miller, second-semester freshman, sat at the drawing table directly across from her. He struggled to steady his hand. His fingers rattled around the stub of vine charcoal he held. He took great care not to look too long at Maribel as he began to shade and fill in the blank page. A loud *click* as Professor Titchum set the timer.

“Begin.”

After carefully considering his father’s threats to write him out of the will, Ian accepted an offer of enrollment to Mercyhill University. Together with his parents, they travelled from the temperate comfort of their estate to the mid-sized South Florida campus.

The late August heat was oppressive. It lay thick across the grounds. The willow trees drooped, their tendrils moped onto the sweating cobblestones lining the sidewalks. A major thoroughfare cut through the heart of campus. Warm fingers of breeze feathered the damp foreheads of family members struggling to unload suitcases and miniature refrigerators into residence halls. Ian and his father went about the orientation check-in procedures leaving his mother behind to unpack and pass silent judgment on the stale grey walls of the dormitory. They waited on one side of the street for the traffic to lighten.

“You’re not here to waste time,” Mr. Miller said. “It’s become more liberal since your grandfather’s time, but your Uncle Steve on the board says the business program is still worth its salt.”

“I thought you wanted me to study political science,” Ian said.

Mr. Miller snorted. “Yes, a political science degree from a liberal arts college. We have one too many bleeding hearts in this family. Remember your cousin Denise, from the family summit last year?”

Ian affected a thoughtful listening face as he watched a passing gaggle of freshman girls.

“International politics major from some *women’s college* out west. Now she has a lip ring and calls herself an anarchist.”

“I don’t have the cheekbones for a facial piercing,” Ian said.

Mr. Miller slapped Ian in the chest with the thick welcome binder.

“Dad, it’s college,” Ian said. “Relax.”

“I hope the Florida sun burns some sense into you.”

The orientation schedule pulled the students from the familiar comfort of their families. While Ian’s parents learned about the college’s extensive security initiatives, Ian and the rest of his freshman class went from one bonding game to another, from assault prevention lectures to responsible drinking seminars. By weekend’s close, both Ian and his parents were glad for the eventual start of school. They said goodbye on the curb in front of the dorm. A taxi driver waited with the meter running to take Mr. and Mrs. Miller to the airport.

Mr. Miller clapped Ian about the shoulders before stowing their luggage in the taxi’s trunk.

“My only son,” Mrs. Miller. She squeezed her thin arms around him. “You take care of yourself. Don’t let your friends get you in trouble.”

“You know me,” he said.

“Unfortunately,” Mr. Miller said. “Vivian, come along, we’ll miss our flight.”

Ian quickly fell into his old ways. With the friends he kept, the parties he ended up at, and the substances he was introduced to, he further widened the scope of problems with which to plague his parents. Strung out and on academic probation, he’d made it through to spring semester only by the weight and history of his last name. He flew home for winter break. His mother sat him down at the kitchen table. “Ian,” she said. “How much longer will we have to keep bailing you out?”

The clock's whining ring. The sharp clap of Professor Titchum's palm against the timer as he silenced the alarm. The warmup exercise was over.

"We'll now set up for our first extended pose of the period," Professor Titchum said. "Forty minutes, followed by a bit of a break for everyone to stretch their legs."

A soft, comfortable murmur filled the room as students changed sheets and made polite small talk with their neighbors. Ian stowed his marked sheets in the shelf beneath his desk. As he pulled a new sheet from the package, out sounded a loud clang as the studio's metal door was thrown wide and struck the wall.

Professor Titchum sighed, rubbed his temples. "Late, Mr. Schmid. Again."

"Hey, Titch!" Connor said. "Man, I am *so* sorry about that, but you know how it is: Thursday afternoon, just had lunch, coming from all the way across campus. I can only do so much, man, everything's working against me here."

Professor Titchum, weary, "Mr. Schmid, kindly find yourself to your seat. And careful not to spill your beverage on anything." Professor Titchum grumbled to himself as he rifled through the equipment locker behind his desk.

"You got it, Titch," Connor said. He shambled over from the door, foam flip flops squeaking along the floor as he spoke, to take the empty easel beside Ian. He dropped his bag on the floor and thumped his tumbler on the edge of the easel. He leaned over to Ian, lowered his voice so that only Ian could hear. "Hey, man. You look a little thirsty. Need some water?" Connor angled the tumbler's open spigot towards Ian's nose.

Ian recoiled from the fumes. He rubbed his nose, his eyes burning from the peppery scent. "Yeah, parched."

Connor winked at Ian. “For our interchapter bonding event next week.” He turned the tumbler to show the Delta Kappa logo etched into the brushed metal. “One for every brother. You’re gonna love it.”

“Yeah, about that,” Ian said. “You seen Abe around lately? I haven’t seen him since this past weekend.”

“Abe? The fat one?” Connor took a blank sheet from Ian’s pack and fixed it to his easel. “Nope. Don’t think he was at Chapter Monday night either.” He let out a short laugh. “But from what I heard you guys had a crazy weekend.”

“What’d you hear exactly?” Ian squeezed the soft eraser in his fist. Torn pieces of the rubber littered his desk.

“That new kid, Tapper. Two girls in the bathroom, right? But you doing alright, man? You’re looking wobbly.” He leaned towards Ian. “You need something?” He patted the front pocket of his cargo shorts.

“Maybe after this,” he said. He jut his head towards the center of the room. “Maybe during the break.”

In his lateness Connor had not noticed Maribel on the podium. “Whoa, MILF to be, am I right?”

The girl seated opposite them scoffed, looked over in disgust.

“Hey, equal opportunity here,” Connor said, “I’m a feminist,”

Ian laughed and in doing so looked for the first time, fully, at Maribel. She was seated for the upcoming pose, the cheap maroon velvet draped across the podium bunched around her body. To the side of the podium Professor Titchum stood adjusting a large spotlight. Under the

hard light from the lamp, Ian took his time looking over Maribel's body and considered all the details he'd not noticed in the fleeting looks he'd made while sketching.

Tight coils framed a heart-shaped face and hung below a pair of collarbones cast in sharp relief against the light. There was a living gleam in the rich depth of her skin. Her stomach rested comfortably in the bowl of her crossed legs. His gaze was held by the taut pull of her skin as first the foot, then the hand of her unborn child pressed against her stomach, then receded. Rapt, he watched the suggestion of a head take shape. The soft forehead. The smallest mouth cast wide with an unheard cry. Fingernails scratched along the inside. Over and over, five narrow tracks pulled at the screen of her womb. The mouth gnashed with malformed teeth. A breach. A fissure in the surface. Three hooked fingers emerged, the fingernails jagged and torn. Its teeth tore at the opening. Then! the bursting of a seam as forth came the hand and out spilled the infant's soft and dented head, the cord wound tight around its pulsing neck. A pained hiss escaped its throat as unlidded eyes swung to find Ian.

Ian yelped. He jumped back from his desk and collided with the girl seated beside him knocking them both to the floor. The class quieted and looked over at the commotion.

"Dude, come on," said the girl from the floor. She swatted at him to get him off her.

"Mr. Miller," Professor Titchum said, aghast. His glasses wobbled on the narrow spine of his nose.

"Sorry, sorry," Ian mumbled. He helped his classmate to her feet.

"If you've finished *destroying* my studio, we're about to begin."

"It was an accident, sorry." He settled back into his chair and straightened the blank sheet on the drawing table. A pair of students on the other side of the room laughed behind their easels.

Ian ground the broken stub of his charcoal pencil into his sharpener and ignored Connor's concerned look.

Connor scoffed. "Man, fire your dealer."

Ian tapped his pencil against the table. "Yeah, man, I'll get right on that. Hey, can I see your cup real fast?"

Maribel's hand rested on the smooth unbroken crest of her belly.

"Forty minutes, beginning now."

"A fraternity provides you all the right networking opportunities you'll need later on," Mr. Miller had said on the phone one night.

Ian had been sitting in his dorm room, the fraternity recruitment application half-completed on his laptop screen. "Is this really necessary?" Ian said with a huff. "I'm already in all those business honors societies you made me join —"

"You think after drag racing through the center of campus and knocking over a streetlamp that a few honors societies is going to do anything for your reputation?" Mr. Miller said.

Ian said nothing.

"We got you into that school, and legacy or not, you think that was any easy feat? Then not even two full months into the term I'm getting phone calls from your Uncle Steve about what you're up to. When are you going to start taking responsibility for yourself, boy?"

Ian's voice was quiet as he spoke. "It's only my first year —"

"'First year' he says." Mr. Miller barked a disdainful laugh and passed the phone off to his wife. "Vivian, come and talk to your son."

Formal fraternity recruitment was four days of being schlepped from one chapter house to another in the cool January air for half an hour of rehearsed conversation points before they were ushered into a room to vote for their chapter of choice. Ian, along with two students from Ian's freshman seminar received bids to Delta Kappa: Tapper (who'd also been involved in the drag race last semester), and Abe who refused to tell anyone his real name ("It's a matter of national security that you *don't* know," he'd say with a wink to the often uninterested girls he'd approach). The community service, brother bonding events, and sorority-fraternity mixers left Ian little time to get in trouble until the Stoplight party in February. Drove of college students dressed in red, yellow, and green crowded into cabs and vans to head to the club downtown, undeterred by the heavy spring rains that washed through the streets.

"Hey, Fast and the Furious, you're driving right?" Tapper said to Ian.

As the timer called the end of the third pose, Ian rushed from the studio and down the hall to the restroom. He had spent the last forty minutes watching Maribel from the corner of his eye and drinking from Connor's tumbler. Each sidelong glance had brought a new vision. Roaches scuttled from the kinked depths of her hair and flowed into a tear in her navel. Miniature hands scraped along the inside of Maribel's face, the skin rippled over tens and tens of knuckles. An unseen pressure forced her left eye from its socket. Ian watched in mute terror as it hung limply from the nerve against her cheek. He'd left the page on his easel a smudgy, indecipherable mess.

In the empty bathroom, he slumped against the counter. He splashed cold water on his face. His breath was a hoarse wind in his throat. He dug his palms into his eyes. He tore his fingers through his hair.

“What the fuck is going on, man?”

A knock at the door.

“Mr. Miller. Mr. Miller, it’s Professor Titchum, may I come in?”

“Yes. Sorry,” Ian said. “Just washing my face.”

Professor Titchum entered the bathroom. He looked at Ian for a moment before speaking.

“Your behavior today has been odd. I know you Business and Econ majors never care much for the arts and you’re only taking this class for your core credit —”

“Oh no, it’s nothing like that,” Ian said. “I’ve just been having a strange couple days. I’m worried about some friends of mine, haven’t heard from them in a while. But I’m fine now, see?” he said.

Professor Titchum took in the mussed hair, the ruddy eyes. “Yes. Fine.”

Ian coughed, exhaled loudly. “So, if that’s it, I guess I’ll just head back now,” he said quietly. He stepped towards the door.

Professor Titchum grabbed his elbow. He sniffed at the air about Ian, his thin nostrils constricting as he breathed. “Mr. Miller,” he said. “Drinking during class? I do not know what is the matter with you today, but you are very clearly not ‘fine’. And then there’s the matter of your sketch from the last pose.”

“My sketch?” Ian said. “I don’t understand. I barely drew anything.”

“It is most obscene. I’ll have to be in contact with your advisor. Please dry your face and return to the studio.”

Ian returned to the studio soon after Professor Titchum to find the page he’d been working on turned face down on his table. He turned the page over and fought the bile that climbed up his throat.

On the page was not the lame, light grey scratches and blurred, half-erased lines he'd managed during the session. The page was fully shaded, the background erased and filled in to illustrate a narrow section of a road. The figure of Maribel's body lay in the road. Her stomach was flattened beneath her, a thick, wet river flowed from her to a storm drain in the pavement. Her head was broken against the curb. The tightly coiled mass of her hair was matted and congealed.

"Gnarly," Connor said, nodding in grim approval.

Ian continued to stare down at the sketch. The wrought head lifted from the curb and twisted about on its neck. The split face gaped. Black and grey flooded from the open wound. Ian crushed the page between his hands and placed it out of sight in the shelf below his desk. The girl beside him sprayed her sketch with fixative and stared pointedly away from the tremor in Ian's hands and the wild darting panic of his eyes.

Professor Titchum clapped to get the class' attention. "We'll be going into the last twenty minutes of class in just a few moments. Two poses, ten minutes each. Please make sure you have everything you need ready."

Ian tacked a clean page to the drawing table.

In a corner of the room, a robed Maribel stood making polite conversation with some of the other students in the class.

"Maribel," said one, "where did you say you were from again?"

"Oh, I've been from place to place," she said. "I was living downtown for a while, but something came up."

By the time they started the drive home they were drunker than planned and the roads wetter from more rain than was expected.

“I’m good!” Ian had said. “I’m good, I can drive.” He careened around sharp bends and sailed down ramps as he navigated the downtown parking garage trying to leave. Ian squinted his eyes against the bright glare from the headlamps and focused on the road spread out before him. He balanced the steering wheel, finally righting the car into a lane.

“Man,” Abe said, “some party.” He was in front seat and had tilted the seat back as far as it would go before it landed on Tapper’s knees.

“Yeah, did you see that one girl?” Tapper said from the backseat. “The one in green with the face?”

Ian laughed. “There were at least eighty girls in green, Tap.”

Tapper waved him off. “Anyway, I’m doneso,” he said. “Ol’ Tap’s tapping out.”

“Come on!” Abe said. “It’s only three in the morning. What are you going to do, go to *sleep?*”

Tapper’s breathing was low and even. He slumped down in his seat and his forehead rested against the cool window.

Ian snorted.

Abe scoffed. “Old maid. Not me and Ian, though, right man?” he said punching Ian’s shoulder.

“Sure, Abe. Whatever you say.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna keep this party going!” he said. He bounced up and down in his seat, shaking the car. He whooped! and grabbed Ian by his shoulders.

“Hey, watch it!”

Ian's hands twisted about the wheel as Abe shook and pulled his shoulders. The car swung from lane to lane, slipping across the wet asphalt. Abe hollered and cheered. Ian struggled to buck him off. They veered towards the pavement. A brief flash in front of the headlamps before the wheels struck curb and connected with something solid. Ian shifted into park.

"What'd we hit?" Abe said.

Ian cracked the window enough to stick his head out to look at the sidewalk. Half lit by the headlamps, it resembled a mass of stained blankets until a spasm shook part of what lay beneath the mound. The amorphous mass was a body, a seemingly shapeless woman, bundled in many layers against the damp night air. Barely visible below a jacket's thin hood was a mass of wiry hair, matted with dirt, and held back from her face by a worn headband.

"I think it's just some homeless lady," Ian said.

"Oh, well, what do we look like, the Salvation Army?" Abe said. "She's moving, right? So she's fine, let's go."

In the distance, the vague scream of a police siren.

"Listen man," Abe said. "It's fine. My government professor says the state handles stuff like this all the time. I can't go to prison. Can *you* go to prison?"

Ian heard his father's voice in his head. *When are you going to start taking responsibility?*

Ian reversed off the pavement and pointed the car towards the exit.

The heavy breathing from Tapper's drunken sleep kept them the rest of the way back to campus.

Ian did not hear from anyone in the days following. There was no activity in the group chat. Tapper's roommate hadn't seen him since that night, and Abe was absent from their microeconomics lecture and was nowhere to be found in any of the dining halls. Ian's mother called him Thursday during lunchtime.

"Are you sure you're doing okay?" Vivian said. "You sound a little frazzled."

"Yeah, mom, I'm just heading to class," Ian said. He had been looking for his sketchpad.

"Oh, that's right, your art class. How are you liking it? Thinking of switching your major?" she teased.

"Mom, I'm trying to run Dad's hedge fund, not sweep its floors," Ian said.

"Well save your drawings! I want to see what my little Picasso has been up to."

Outside, a wet breeze boxed through the heavy branches of the trees around campus. Ian crossed the street and made his way to the studio as fat, bulbous clouds pregnant with rain hovered above and threatened to spill open.

The last twenty minutes of class passed without event. Ian was able to still the shaking in his hand and the shiver in his chest to sketch the last poses. He packed up his belongings with the rest of the class.

"Hey, I'll see you next week," Connor called to him as he left the studio.

Ian pulled the drawn pages from the shelf under his desk and moved to stow them in his folder.

"Can I see?"

He stumbled as he turned to face her. Maribel looked as she did at the start of class: robed, her skin smooth, her eyes clear.

She reached into the folder and took out the crushed sheets.

Ian stared at her hands as they turned over the pages. Her nails were brittle, the nail beds splintered. Dirt was buried in the deep grooves of her hands. Each page she handled was stained with filth and lines of blood from thin open tears in her fingertips. She handed the sketches back to him. He tucked the folder into his bag.

Ian pulled his gaze from her hands.

She had been looking at him.

He balked at the sight of her face, the flattened side of her head, the teeth broken from the impact of where her head struck the curb. He backed away, tripping over his chair. Throwing wide the studio door, he fled.

Outside, rain fell with intention. Ian covered his head with the folder as he ran blindly through the downpour. The heavy wind beat against him and he leaned under its weight. A voice ahead called out to him. Ian could barely see for the rain.

“Ian, hey, Ian!” The figure in the distance struggled with an umbrella. As the distance closed between them, Ian could just begin to make out Tapper, his silhouette made hazy by the rain. “Guess who had alcohol poisoning?” Tapper said with a laugh. He gestured to the white hospital bracelet around his wrist.

“Tapper!” Exalted. “Oh, man, I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you.” Ian hurried to Tapper as the wind increased. A draft caught the open edge of his folder and threw it wide. Ian floundered into the pedestrian crossing. Pages whirled about him and pitched against his face.

“Ian, watch it!”

His shoes slipped over the asphalt. He fell in the street, scraped his palm open against the gravel. Unseen, a car approached. Ian's folder was thrown by the impact. He lay splayed in the street. Blank pages settled on the ground, torn through by the rain.

Polly

Brock Williams was Polly's third white boy of her high school career. He was much unlike Tanner, the first boy, who'd developed a sudden interest in the diluted Rastafarianism that idle middle class boys gravitate to. His thin hair, matted and clumped in long acrid tendrils, made him unfit for Polly's goals. Nor did Brock have any of the pretense of her previous prospect, Preston Campbell IX, whose parents balked at the sight of her darkening their doorstep when he brought her over for dinner. By all respects, Brock was everything she could have hoped for during her junior year of high school.

His mother was the school's guidance counselor. Brock and Penny met in the fall at the first college fair that semester. Mrs. Williams was a nervous reed of a woman; she flit from booth to booth, between recruitment and admissions counselors, an empty smile stitched to her face as she shook hands and made small talk with old contacts. Brock trudged along behind her, branded coffee mugs and stress balls clutched in his hands. He drifted away from her to a table giving away free sweatshirts. Polly passed behind him as he turned to leave. He collided into her shoulder. Thrown, she stumbled. Her handfuls of pamphlets slid across the floor.

"Hey, man!" he said. "Oh shit, sorry."

"No, it's fine," Polly said, "don't bother yourself."

He watched her struggle to gather the glossy leaflets back together. "Here, just let me." Together they stacked the sheaves together. Polly straightened up to leave.

"Oh hey, wait, you're that new girl. Penny, right?"

"No?" she said. "Am I supposed to know you?"

“I’m Brock! AP Chem, third period. With Mr. Ruez? Yeah, yeah, you like transferred in from Honors or something at the start of the year? Yeah, you’ve got this big hair that blocks half the whiteboard. Me and my bud Matty are always trying to see around you.”

“‘Third period’,” she said. She stared at his face for a moment, thinking. “Oh, I remember now. Was it you that caught fire during lab last week? That was terrible, are you doing alright?” She placed a hand on his upper arm.

“Nah, that was Matty,” he said. She felt him tense his meagre adolescent bicep under her arm. “His jacket got totally fucked, he’s making his mom buy him a new one, the stupid idiot.” Brock laughed.

Polly’s smile and laugh were appropriately agreeable. “My name’s Polly, by the way.”

They became inseparable. Every study hall found them together, sequestered away in a private corner of the library, heads bent towards each other as Brock diligently tutored Polly in subjects she already knew. After he found out she didn’t have a car, he insisted on driving her home in the afternoon. A wayward hand would settle somewhere above her knee as he drove. When her activities finished late, and they left school with evening already set, he would drop her a block from her house before hastening back to his home far from the heart of her neighborhood. His parents took to her immediately.

“You know, Polly, you have just been so good for Brock,” his mother said. It was senior year. Polly had come over for dinner and they were gathered around the dining table.

“Mom, come on, don’t be weird,” Brock said.

“No, truly,” she said. She leaned forward and patted Polly on her arm. “You’ve exposed him to so much. You know, at the school I’m always trying to tell these kids another perspective,

so I'm just *so* glad that the two of you are together, and he can really see life from the other side."

Polly laughed. "Well, thank you. And I mean, I really appreciate Brock also. I've never met anyone quite like him."

"And I know all that studying they do together's gotta be good for something," Mr. Williams said. He chortled through a mouthful of soggy green bean casserole. He was a big, red-faced man that took up too much space and tended to look at Polly too long when no one else was around.

Brock winked and nudged Polly's foot under the table.

Polly hid a congealed chunk of macaroni and cheese beneath a mound of instant mashed potatoes.

Later, after Brock and Mr. Williams retired to the living room, Mrs. Williams pulled Polly aside to her home office. She asked Polly if she was thinking about college. Polly named her schools of interest. Mrs. Williams opened and rifled through one of her desk drawers. She placed thick information booklets for each school on the desk in front of Polly.

"Now, Polly," she said in a low whisper, "I wouldn't normally suggest some of these schools. They really only accept a certain caliber of student."

"Oh," Polly said.

"Brock's applying, of course."

"Of course."

"You know how it is. These things are all about relationships, who knows who and all that."

"Hmm."

“But how lucky for you to know someone who’s friends with the Deans of Admissions at these schools.”

“Yes. How lucky.”

Mrs. Williams giggled at her own joke. “You’ll be needing financial aid, correct?”

Polly – president of the school’s Model UN, Student Government Association, and second in her class – was accepted to three of the five schools she applied to, each with sizeable scholarships. Brock, the guidance counselor’s son, was accepted to every school he applied to. He decided to travel for a year “to like, Asia, or somewhere” before enrolling. Polly broke up with him after high school graduation.

Polly had only one boyfriend during college. She made sure to choose wisely. Hunter Prendergast was captain of the college lacrosse team. Treasurer of his fraternity. Moneyed. Well-connected. They met at a Greek life mixer her sorority put on. “Lax Bros & Tennis Hos!” read the banner hanging in the chapter room. His salmon-pink shorts were neatly laundered, cuffed slightly above his knees. She wore the same tennis skirt as her sisters in that peculiar shade of nude that looked ashen beige against her dark skin. His eyes heavy from drink and the usual party fare of private colleges, he stared at the well-placed nametag on her chest, at her equally full lips.

“I’ve never been with a, you know,” he said the first night they were together. On her extra-long twin bed he was sloppy, fumbling stupidly. Polly was as patient as her braids were long.

They met each other's families the next semester during Spring Parents' Weekend. Her mother was able to get time off from her jobs for once. She was eager to "meet this boy you've been interfering with!" she said during one of their phone calls.

Hunter's parents offered to take them out for lunch. He arranged a driver to pick them up and bring them to a restaurant. Inside, the family was cloistered away in the back. The chatter of the main dining area settled to a low buzz behind the heavy curtain. Hunter rose to greet them when they entered. A waiter appeared without summons with additional menus. His parents stayed seated and waited until Polly and her mother had settled in their chairs before offering them each a cautious smile and limp handshake. Introductions passed into watchful silence as they scanned the menu.

Moments later, their waiter. "Are we all ready to order?"

The Prendergasts, regulars, ordered quickly.

The waiter turned to Polly and her mother.

"Does everything on the menu make sense?" Mr. Prendergast asked. He had the same broad jaw as Hunter, and Polly could track the years of his life through his poorly concealed receding hairline. "I know the French names can be a trifle difficult."

"Yes, no value combos either." Mrs. Prendergast said. "Sorry if that doesn't make that easier for you." She shot a tight smile towards them.

Polly's mother laughed. "Well, I suppose since there's nothing of value here I'll just have the duck."

They made pleasant and polite small talk through the courses. Polly and her mother laughed and smiled at the appropriate times as the Prendergasts prattled on about themselves.

"So, Addison —"

“Adelaide,” Polly’s mother said.

“– what is it that you do exactly?” Mr. Prendergast said. “I think Polly’s told Hunter you’re some sort of doctor?”

Mrs. Prendergast looked at Adelaide, her eyebrows raised. She and Hunter shared the same thin nose; unlike Hunter, she had only the slightest suggestion of lips, lending a perpetually pinched look to her face.

“No, actually, I’m a home health aide. I contract with nursing homes, or for elderly at home care, things in that vein.”

“Oh, that’s so interesting,” Mrs. Prendergast said. She moused her mouth around her pasta as she spoke. “And I notice your husband didn’t come with you today; was he unavailable, or?” she said.

“No, I’m not married. It’s always just been me and Pollyanna.”

“You raised her all by yourself?” Mr. Prendergast said. He chuckled warmly, nudging his wife with his elbow. “This one demanded an army of nannies to deal with Hunter.”

“Well, you’ve done just a bang-up job here,” Mrs. Prendergast said. “She’s a real credit,” “So charming. And articulate.”

“I just love that about Pol’,” Hunter said. “She’s just so ambitious, she’s got real drive, you know?” He leaned over and kissed her quickly on the cheek.

“Yes, she’ll be going to law school one day, God’s willing,” Adelaide said.

“Law school? My, you’ve certainly set your sights high,” Mr. Prendergast said.

“Dad, I told you about that.”

“Hmph, slipped my mind clearly. Well, Polly,” he said, “if you’re really interested, I think we can find something for you to do.”

“No, please, I wouldn’t want you to put yourself out for me,” Polly said.

“Nonsense! I’ve got an old golfing buddy at a law firm looking for an intern.”

“Oh, that’s lucky,” Polly said. “But really, I don’t want to trouble you –”

“No trouble, only a phone call.” He rummaged in his jacket pocket for his cellphone, scrolling through for the right contact.

“Anything for the girl who’s caught our boy’s eye,” Mrs. Prendergast said.

Polly beamed across the table at them. “Thank you, I can’t begin to say how much I appreciate this.”

“At least you’ll see if this law school farce of yours is worth it,” Mr. Prendergast said.

“It’s hard work you may not be used to. And the internship is unpaid, of course,”

“Of course.”

“We all have to earn our keep after all.”

It was later that same day. The events for Parents’ Weekend had come to a close. They were taking a last walk around campus before Adelaide had to leave in the morning.

“So,” Polly said, “did you like him? What did you think?”

“The duck did dry.”

“Ma, come on.”

“Your Grandma Mavis, my mother – I don’t know if you remember, you was probably too small and we did leave there to come up here shortly after she dead – but Mother Mavis used to roast a piece of duck you see! Swear say is that duckmeat why my father never step out on her like all them other countryman.” Alone with just each other, Adelaide’s accent slid firmly back into place.

“Ma, seriously –”

“And is what that boy did call you?”

“Pol’.”

“*Pol*’?” Adelaide said. “Like say pole? Maypole? You is a streetlight?”

Polly’s laugh echoed out in the quiet of the campus.

“You shorten your name anymore you just going be P.” Adelaide snorted. “You just stay focused, you hear? Never come to this country with my one girl child to come make these people turn you into no fool. Do, try keep you head in those books so you get ahead, you hear me? That’s what going carry you through life so you not running round like me wiping the shit from white people batty just so you can have two shilling to rub together.”

Polly said nothing. She pinched her lips between her teeth and stared at the ground as they walked.

They continued in silence. They’d almost completed a lap around the campus when Polly asked what she thought of Hunter’s parents.

Adelaide hissed her teeth. “That woman. She don’t know her ass from her mouth the way them favor.”

“That internship sounds like a really good opportunity though,” Polly said.

Adelaide stopped in the middle of the walk. “Is why you really with this fool boy, Pollyanna?” she asked. She looked hard at her daughter.

In the dying light the Spanish moss hanging from the oak overhead cast thin, gnarled lines across Polly’s face.

“Well, listen. The man say him will link you up with him friend. You take these people for all them will give you, you hear me?”

“Yes, mommy.”

“Don’t forget them will fling you one side soon as you cross them, soon as them don’t have no use for you, you understand?”

“Yes, mommy.”

A thin breeze shifted the overhanging moss and the shadow lifted over Polly’s face.

“You just be careful,” Adelaide said. “You hear me, Pollyanna?”

“Yes, mommy.”

Polly’s internship led to a part time paralegal position she maintained throughout her time in law school. She specialized in inheritance law. Polly and Hunter did not last long after she graduated. Polly and her mother had very different ideas about how to get ahead.

Maxwell Oxnard was partner at the law firm Polly worked at. Detail oriented, yet lazy. Good pedigree. His skin was pale and smooth like a clean slate of opportunity. When Adelaide got sick, he got them in to see the best doctors, but it was too late; years of taking care of everyone else while sickness had crept through her bones and blood. She died quietly at home, Polly asleep in a chair at her bedside.

Polly threw herself into her relationship in the years following. The Oxnard social circles were beyond any she had ever experienced. Polly was nothing if not adaptable. She traded her braids for expensive bundles. Used less cayenne on Maxwell’s chicken. Learned to play bridge. She made herself useful for him: worked closely with him on cases, sifted through the volumes of paperwork that always needed signing.

When he proposed, she was gleeful, yet restrained. Practiced tears dotted along the edges of her eyes. Truly, she was grateful for the chance to be his wife. She made sure he knew as

much on the night of their engagement. It was a long engagement; they were in the middle of planning a destination wedding of their closest family, mutual friends, and the other partners at the firm, when she started going through his emails.

As the wedding date neared, she suggested doing the wedding rehearsal and marriage certificate before they flew out. “Get the legal stuff out of the way so we can enjoy our time abroad with our family. I’ll plan everything,” she said with a smile. “You just need to show up and sign.”

The day before their flight, they worked in a flurry to tie loose ends before they left for the festivities. Maxwell double checked his calendars and contacts. Polly darted about the office, bringing stacks of last-minute documents for him to sign. That night found Polly in Maxwell’s kitchen. Heavy, solid thuds shook the kitchen counter as she beat an iron meat mallet against a cut of beef. Her hands worked over the meat, coaxing the dry rub into its flesh. Maxwell entered the dining room as the beef reposed in the center of the table. Polly poured wine for them.

“Looks good, Pol’,” he said. “Smells great. Do you want any?”

“No, no, none for me. You eat. I’m fine with this.” She stabbed at the quailed spinach and old tomatoes that was the salad she was eating for dinner. “Need to look good for our big day,” she said.

Maxwell ate and drank with relish, moaning from the other side of the table. He dabbed at the wine and sauce that dribbled from his mouth. “Mmm, it’s a lot sweeter than normal. It’s good though, you do something different?”

“You’re out of klonopin,” she said.

His words slurred and dropped from his mouth. “What’s that you’re saying, Pol’?”

“You know, all I ever wanted was access. The right last name, the right signature on the right forms.” She spoke as if to herself with no regard for him at the other end of the table. “I could tolerate anything – and there’s a lot to swallow with you, Maxwell; do you know how *boring* your family is? – so long as it meant security. Somewhere to put my head down without somebody with a bill come beating down the door for every last penny. And the power of attorney you signed today gives me that security. Thank you, Maxwell. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. Truly.”

Maxwell’s face was crumpled and tired. His jaw was slack and he struggled to move his head.

“Madison. What kind of name is Madison?” she said.

Maxwell pushed up from the table. His limbs, weak and clumsy, folded under him. He crashed to the floor. His head rolled along the tile. “Polly –”

“Pollyanna.” She stood, set her linen napkin on the table. She lifted the meat mallet. Dried blood from the beef still dotted along the ridges. “My name is Pollyanna.”

Professional Development

Someone in HR sent the email out first thing in the morning, 7:45, right at the start of first period. Well, first period is my planning period, and I have study hall in second, so I was in my car sleeping off the remnants of the weekend until I actually had to teach during third. Then I gave a test in fourth period, and honestly? Fuck fourth period. Those kids *suck*. Can't look away or close your eyes for two minutes before someone's rolled up a sleeve and pulled out some sweaty index card with chicken scratch notes covering it. Especially that Mary Bunday. Mary Bunday. I caught her cheating at the start of the semester – the START! We'd read one poem! – and she looked at me like I was the problem. God, I hate fourth period.

I used to like teaching. But somewhere between administrators, standardized curricula, and having to use my own meagre salary to buy supplies for my classroom, all that went away.

I walked into the staffroom at the start of lunch to find Moya sitting on the edge of my desk. I rested the fourth-period tests on another stack of ungraded classwork.

"You're free this weekend, right?" she said.

I snorted.

"Good, because I signed you up already."

I dropped onto the deflated seat cushion of my chair. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm not going."

"It's the last chance to get hours for the semester, and I know you haven't finished yours," she said.

"What's the theme of this one?" I asked.

"'Professional development'," she said. "The email –"

"Which I refused to read on principle."

“ – said something about ‘harnessing your potential’, ‘stop holding yourself back from greatness’.”

“Lots of exclamation points?”

“Oh, obviously.”

“Didn’t the last one have a waffle bar or something?” I said.

“Maybe they’ll have an open bar at this one, eh, Annie?” Arthur Bendell appeared at my shoulder. He was one of the oldest teachers at Ewarton High and liked to squeeze the other female teachers’ upper arm in greeting. Like really enjoyed it. Like three-cases-to-HR-this-year enjoyed it. I maintained a wide-eyed, tight-lipped smile as he patted my elbow and slipped his fingers up my sleeve in greeting.

“One can only hope,” I said.

There was no bar, waffle or otherwise. I picked Moya up in my car and she directed me to a half-functioning strip mall right off the freeway. A large poster stood on an easel in the entryway. Emblazoned across the top was the title of the seminar. Below, a man cast in a spotlight stood with his arms open in welcome. “Presented by Jedediah Ealy” read the cursive printed along the bottom of the poster. As we signed in and pinned our nametags to our shirts, I heard the shrill gunshot of Eunice Ted’s laugh.

“Oh look, your favorite person is here,” Moya said.

“Shit, I made eye contact,” I said.

“Well, hello there, girls!” The staffroom administrative assistant, Eunice always stood closer and spoke louder than was ever necessary. Eunice hated all animals, loved elaborate cross-stitch, and ate her cheeseburgers plain. Just bread, cheese, meat, bread, done. No lettuce or

tomato. No condiments. Just cheese. What kind of person does that? “Didn’t expect to see you here today, Annie.”

I smiled as politely as I could. “I thought the assistants didn’t have to go to these things.”

She laughed, sudden, and loud, and with a surprising amount of reverb in the small carpeted room. “Well, it’s always good to get away from the desk every now and then.”

We straggled behind as she walked off. The same dingy and water-stained carpeting from the entryway continued into the modest conference hall. It seemed like half the staff was there. People wearing t-shirts with “THE EALY METHOD” printed on the front moved among the teachers with clipboards or drink trays in hands. A light flickered.

“Five minutes,” one of the t-shirts called out. “Please find a seat.”

Moya and I sat in the chairs nearest the door. I felt a tap on my elbow. One of the attendants had bent down beside me in the aisle.

“Would either of you like a refreshment before we begin?” he said.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Moya said, “but my friend here is a little dehydrated, thank you.”

I could barely make out her smirk in the dim light so I know she didn’t see the dirty look I shot her. But the inside of my mouth felt like the cheap paper napkins that come with the prepackaged plastic cutlery you get with your Chinese takeout, so I took a mouthful as a gentle spotlight focused on the podium at the front of the room.

Tangy, I thought.

“Good afternoon, good people!”

His teeth were bigger and his tan far deeper than the poster in the entrance could ever realistically capture. But in the fluorescent spotlight that lit him from above, his tan radiated bronze and warm around him. He looked fatherly, almost.

“Now I know most of you are here because you have to be,” he said. “You’ve got these mandatory training hours you’ve got to log for the school board. I get it. But today I want to focus on what’s really important. I want to focus on *you*. It’s time,” he said, and swung his arm in a great sweeping gesture toward us in the audience. “Time for the teachers to become the students.”

“Oh. My god,” Moya said.

Eunice turned around and shushed us.

Moya snorted, mouthed “Sorry” at Eunice. She nudged me with her elbow.

I felt a little stab of annoyance at Moya. I emptied my cup to keep from having to respond to her.

As the seminar continued, I fell into his words. “Work your workplace!” he said at one point. “Don’t let your workplace work you!” It was invigorating.

I was leaning forward against the chair in front of me when the lights came up.

“And now,” he said, “we’ll have some breakout sessions with smaller groups so we can truly pinpoint how to make you each the best you can be.”

Moya was watching me through the corner of her eye.

“This is nice, right?” I said.

“Are you still drunk?”

I threw my empty cup at her and walked over to a small group gathered in a circle. Eunice was seated on a chair in the center. Jedediah Ealy stood beside her, a hand resting on her heaving shoulder.

“Now tell our good friends what you told me earlier.” He lowered the mic to her face.

You could hardly make out what she was saying with all the sobbing. “When the teachers ask me to make too many copies, I spit in the coffeepot. I’m the one that left the ninth-grade bio class’ gerbils out in the rain.”

“Thank you for your honesty, Gretchen.”

“It’s Eunice –”

“*This*,” he jutted his finger at Eunice’s damp face. “This is what you need implement in your lives. You must face all that is terrible that you do or is done to you.”

And I swear he was looking right at me, right at Mary Bunday, at Arthur’s crawling fingers, at the towers of dirty dishes crowding my sink, at the piles of ungraded papers overwhelming my desk.

“You have control. Harness your potential to remove what ails you from your path!”

I *do* have control, I thought.

“Now is your chance to take back what you’ve lost! And I can help you. All I need from you is honesty, and willingness to continue the work we’ve started here. Please print your payment information clearly on the applications for the next sessions.”

Man, if that didn’t sound like a great idea.

Big Foot Sisterhood

Hunters visiting the island shot Bigfoot on Friday. It was the first day of their weekend excursion. The deer population in certain parts of the island had increased to worrying numbers: they ruined crops, nibbled on clothes hung out on lines to dry, and there was concern of Lyme disease. International hunting groups – under the hefty fee tacked on by local government – eagerly organized groups of hunters, novice and professional, to come to the island.

Friday night, they fell through the door of the lodge, hollered with excitement. Their guide, a local, walked in behind them. He dropped his bag by the door and went over the front desk. The lodge's night attendant sat behind the desk and watched the excitement with vague interest.

“One shot, *boom!*” said one red-faced man. “Went down like a sack of potatoes!”

The hunters' guide snorted. “Potatoes have legs where you're from?”

The night attendant perked up. “What's that? Where's the body at? We can mount it and send it back for you. Small fee, of course.”

The guide laughed. “Nothing to ship. The thing ran off. Could barely see what it was, one big hell of something out there.”

“Maybe is another new import,” the night attendant said.

He and the guide shared a laugh.

One of the novice hunters stumbled over to them. His face was round and soft, flushed from activity and the lengthy pulls he made from a flask in his hand. He clapped the guide between his shoulder blades. “The weekend's young yet, my good man!”

Word travelled across the island, and while the hunters ended their weekend trip with only a fawn to show for their efforts, by Monday news of a large wounded beast thrashing through the woods made the pages of the papers.

Kim was leaving her school's library when she heard the commotion. Her eyes were still adjusting from the darkness of the photo lab in the library basement, and it was a moment before she could make out the crowd clustered around the newsstand out front. Kim saw the worn-out combat boots and the untucked shirttail of Joelle's uniform. She reached out to pull it.

"Hey, big foot," Kim said, smiled.

Joelle jumped. "Yeah, no kidding!" She extracted a newspaper from the crowd and shoved it under Kim's nose. "Think we can add another member?"

Kim scanned the headline and article on the front page and felt her stomach turn. Cold fingers of dread scratched at her neck. Her heart faltered. Her voice was soft as she spoke.

"I gotta go," she said.

"What's that, Mumbles?" Joelle said.

Kim snatched the paper from Joelle and turned to the faculty building. She yelled over her shoulder as she ran. "I'll see you back at the dorms!"

Her book and camera bags bounced against her back and hip as she ran. By the time she reached inside the faculty building, her breath was dry and burning in her throat and the newspaper was damp and crumpled in her sweating fist. She burst through the door of her father's office.

"Dad!"

Kim's father waved a hand at her to be quiet. He pressed the handset of his desk phone to his chest, covering the receiver.

“Sit down,” he whispered. “And shut the door.”

Kim sat in one of the hard chairs across from him. His desk was a confusion of unmarked tests and essays, coffee-stained department memos, and photocopied textbook pages. The one clear space at the front of the desk was reserved for his nameplate – ‘Mr. Palmer’ etched carefully into the brass – and a picture of their family: Kim stood between her parents; her mother’s thick curly hair was pulled back from her face by a headband, and her arms were wrapped tight around Kim; her father hugged them both, and he looked calmer and happier then than he did now on the phone as he ran his hand over the close cropped coils of his hair. Kim’s knee bounced up and down as she listened and waited.

“Yes, sorry,” he said into the phone. “She would have set out Thursday morning. Yes, that’s right. She might have been wearing a ghillie suit. *Ghillie*. That’s G-H-I-L, yes, that’s right.” He sighed, kneaded the heel of his palm into the deep furrows along his brow. “Please just let me know if you hear anything. Thank you.”

Mr. Palmer placed the handset back in the cradle, put his glasses on, and cleared his throat.

“Dearest daughter.” He tried for a smile.

“It’s been five days, Dad,” she said.

“What would your mother say if she could see us,” he said, “fretting over her like a pair of sick hens?”

Kim mustered all the exasperation her teenaged body could manage. “We spoke to her Wednesday night. They shot something on Friday. *Dad*. Did you even *read* the article?”

“Of course I read –”

“‘Wounded’,” she said. Her voice broke. She threw her crumpled copy of the newspaper onto his desk. “‘No body after days of tracking’. Other people described seeing some big bushy thing through the trees. Who else would be running around the woods dressed like that? You know any other loony nature photographers in the area?”

“Kim, baby, please. Try and calm down.”

“What would Mom say if she found out we just left her?” The backs of her eyes burned. She saw the worry on her father’s usually calm and inquisitive face. “It’s like you don’t even care.”

“Kimber.”

She took the tissue he held out to her and dried her face. Her throat burned and struggled to catch her breath.

He moved around to sit beside her in the other chair. “I know, alright?” he said. “That was the lodge on the phone and I’ve already called the police. They said they’ll send some people out this week. But we have to wait.”

She opened her mouth to interrupt but he pressed on.

“She had all her gear with her. Food, first aid. This isn’t her first time, you know. And hey, if Bigfoot is out there maybe she’ll get a picture and show us when she gets back.”

Kim laughed, in part because she knew it would make him feel better.

He hugged her by her shoulders.

The school bell rang.

He clicked his tongue. “You have to be getting to class,” he said. “I’ll see you during dinner?”

Later that night after study hall, Joelle and Kim sat in their dorm room waiting for the nuns to call lights out.

Kim was washing up in the small basin in their room.

Joelle hauled her pajama pants out from a pile of mostly-clean clothes under her bed. "So where'd you run off to this afternoon?" she asked.

Kim pretended to choke on a mouthful of toothpaste to think about what to say. She debated whether to tell Joelle what that newspaper story meant for her. She heard her father's voice in her head. *We have to wait.* She spat. "I just wanted to see my dad is all."

"I get that," Joelle said. "If my dad was still around I'd want to see him all the time. But man, what a weird day, huh?"

"Yeah, Bigfoot is quite the story," Kim said.

"And then Sinclair gone all day."

"That's our Head Prefect for you."

Joelle started chanting 'perfect prefect' over and over until Kim walloped her with her pillow.

"That's your foot twin," Kim said. "You should be proud."

Joelle looked down at her feet, size twelves, wide. "They are lovely feet."

Their room door opened. "Eleven o' clock, girls," came a voice from the doorway. They looked up to see the tired face of one of the sisters. "Lights out."

In the dark, they quieted, listened to the nuns shuffling along in the hallway back to the convent, took comfort in the familiar sounds of the dorm settling down for the night.

"Hey." Joelle threw one of her pillows onto Kim's head. "You good?"

“Yeah,” Kim said. She rolled over to face the wall. She slipped her hand beneath her pillow where her fingers found the front-page clipping from the day’s newspaper. “I’m okay.”

Days passed. The worry lines in Kim’s father’s cheeks deepened. He’d try to spare her a smile when he saw her in the hallways, but there was no mistake the search wasn’t going well. Police presence in the area set mouths whispering, and by the end of the week there was a write-up about her mother’s venture into the woods; teachers and nuns aimed consoling looks in her direction as she walked to class. She took solace in the familiar darkness of the photo lab. She was sitting in the darkroom when she heard a faint knock on the outside door. She rubbed her shirtsleeve over her eyes, dried her face as best she could and opened the door.

“Sinclair?”

“Let us help,” Sinclair said. She stepped past Kim and turned on the light in the lab. Joelle was a step behind.

“Hey, come on, you guys can’t be in here,” Kim said.

“We are going to help,” Sinclair said. “Whether you like it or not. Especially because statistically speaking, children in single family homes tend to underperform across all aspects of their lives, and you really had so much going for you up until this point.”

“Oh...” Kim coughed.

Joelle punched Sinclair. “What a bitch thing to say.”

Sinclair rubbed her arm. “Yeah, it felt unnecessary as I said it, sorry.”

“This is why I said I’d do the talking.”

“Please, guys my head hurts,” Kim said. “Can you just go? I’m fine. Really.” She attempted a smile.

Joelle gripped her shoulders, forced Kim to look her in the face. “You are the size eleven baby of our group, so you listen to me. Between the three of us we’ve got brawn, brains – we make do with ‘Clair –”

Sinclair mumbled to herself, “*That* seemed a little unnecessary, but whatever, I guess.”

“– and a damsel in distress. That’s you.”

“Oh, I hadn’t gotten that far, thank you,” Kim said.

“So we’re going on a fucking mission. All you have to do is sign out with us this weekend.”

Since the day her father told her the police had found only a muddied camera bag with some damaged equipment inside, a knot had wound itself deep inside her chest. With Joelle and Sinclair standing in front of her, she felt it loosen just a bit. Before she could answer, she heard footsteps in the hallway outside. She turned as her father approached.

“Oh, good, I was just looking for you,” he said.

Sinclair stepped forward. “Mr. Palmer,” she said. “It is just so good to see you. I have a proposition for you.”

“Way to make it weird, ‘Clair,” Joelle whispered to Kim.

“Would you allow Kim to come to my house this weekend? It would just be a nice quiet girls weekend. Help get her mind off things for a while.”

“It’s okay,” Kim said. “I’ll stay here, in case anything else comes up.”

“It’s been a long week, Kim,” he said. “I want you to have fun.” He looked at Sinclair and Joelle. “Make sure to bring her back in one piece.” His laugh sounded hollow, like rotten sun-bleached wood, against Kim’s ears.

Joelle grabbed Mr. Palmer's hand, shook it and his shoulder. "Scout's honor, Mr. Palmer."

They were on their way to the lodge. Two days and one night. With the Bigfoot sighting, enthusiasts had appeared from seemingly nowhere. There was now a guided tour available along the trail where Bigfoot was rumored to have crossed after being shot. Kim sat in the middle of the backseat. The boxy frame of a Polaroid camera hanging round her neck clunked against the seatbelt buckle as Sinclair wound her parents' car up along the mountain roads. Joelle looked out the passenger-side window and down across the open edge of the roadside into steep-walled valleys lush green and shining with damp from a late morning drizzle. She twisted in her seat to look back at Kim.

"They even make film for those old ones anymore?" Joelle asked.

"I found some in my mom's stuff the other day," Kim said. She looked down at the camera. The glass over the flashcube was yellowed and the lens was only somewhat clearer. Her mother's initials had been scratched into the side of the hard black plastic shell.

"Ooh, maybe we can take pictures," Sinclair said. "We could scrapbook!"

Joelle snorted before she descended into a fit of giggles.

The tour guide was equal parts caffeinated exuberance and scripted niche enthusiast. He took them along the trail, pointing out broken leaves and wide swaths of depressed mud that ("If you squint *real* hard," Joelle mumbled under her breath) showed that Bigfoot had passed through the area recently. Before depositing them at their campsite, he took them to the main lodge to sign paperwork and to see The Bigfoot Cast™. The clay relief showed five stubby 'toes' protruding from a long rounded oblong.

“Flat foot,” Sinclair said with an understanding nod.

They spent that night in a leaking tent Sinclair swore she knew how to set up and refused to let either of the girls help her with. As the rains came and went, pinprick points of moisture seeped inside through the exposed mesh siding. One loose corner of the rain fly fluttered in the breeze. The ground beneath the tent floor was soft and mealy with damp earth and waterlogged leaf fall.

Joelle was in a sleeping bag she’d ‘borrowed’ from the outdoors club. The miner’s light strapped to her forehead beamed in the dark. She was poring over a dog-eared notebook, the pages covered in chicken scratch and gel ink. “I did some research,” she said. She held the notebook up so the other two could see. There were tens of pages covered in endless lists and bullet points about Bigfoot. Beside Bigfoot’s estimated weight of 400 – 1000 pounds, Joelle had written and circled “Big Bitch”.

“Maybe we’ll find something tomorrow,” Kim said.

Joelle, tired from the day’s hike, stowed the notebook and miner’s light in the corner of the tent. “Who knows,” she said through a yawn. She rolled over and attempted sleep.

Sinclair lay in the open fold of her sleeping bag, one size 13 foot aimed toward the tent’s ceiling as she opened a bottle of lotion. She slathered a thick layer over the skin. Kim watched as Sinclair cupped an expert hand around her heel, massaging the lotion along her high arches and the skin on the underside of her toes.

“Do you remember when we met, Sinclair?” Kim said.

Sinclair wriggled her toes as she slipped a pair of heavy woolen socks onto her feet.

“I thought you had the most beautiful feet in all of seventh grade.”

“Kim, we’re hunting Bigfoot and your missing mother,” Joelle said. “How do you make this weirder than it already is?”

“Just thanks,” she said. “That’s all.”

“*Kim.*” Sinclair’s voice was a harsh whisper. “Somebody. *Wake. Up.*” Sinclair jerked her body, sleeping bag and all, over onto Kim. The panicked flapping of hands startled Joelle awake.

“What *is* that?” Joelle said.

A large mass bore down against Sinclair’s side of the tent. The weight of the body pressed in. A thick heavy breath reeking of dead earth steamed through the mesh siding. The loose corner of the rain fly was being tugged at. There came the slow *zrrrrp* of tearing fabric. Kim reached for her camera. In the complete dark of the overcast country night, the yellow burst of the flashcube was startling. The mass fell heavily into the tent. Sinclair screamed, but it had righted itself and dashed off. Heavy footsteps thundered off into the brush. Kim unzipped the tent door and stood outside. Joelle reached for her miner’s light. By the time Sinclair crawled from the tent, Joelle was sweeping the area with the beam from her head.

“I think she went through there,” Kim said. The weak flash from Kim’s camera whined as it recharged between blasts of pictures. One sheet after another of developing still slid from the camera. Kim bounced as she pointed towards the trail. She ducked back into the tent, reemerged with a pen light, and disappeared into the dark.

Joelle aimed her light at Kim’s retreating back. Sinclair pulled her cellphone from the wreck of the tent. They caught up with her by a winding creek. Joelle grabbed Kim’s arm as she slipped down the creek bank. Together they hauled her up.

“Kim, your camera,” Sinclair said. The light from her phone lit up a heavy black hunk of plastic beside the creek. The camera had dropped from her hand when she slipped, and had fallen against a knot of protruding tree roots. The lens was splintered. Parts of the thick black plastic outer appeared dented and muddled.

“It’s okay, Kim,” Sinclair said, “I’ll buy you a new one.” She barely managed to duck out of the way as Kim threw herself at her.

Joelle grabbed Kim around her waist, pulled her back.

“That was hers!” Kim said. She dropped to the ground. She choked as she cried. “Why’d you bring me out here?”

“We need to get back,” Joelle said. The miner’s light beam bounced against the stands of trees until she found the right direction. They started away from the creek in silence. They hadn’t been walking for long before there was an audible *click* off to their left, followed by the pained whirring of the camera forcing the developed film sheet through the damaged slot.

Kim clapped her hand over Sinclair’s mouth to keep her from screaming. Joelle switched the miner’s light off. Their eyes adjusted as they waited for something to move, something to happen. Another *click*, the screaming *zshhhhh* of the camera motor. The camera’s timid flash blazed in the dark.

“Mom?”

The Lizard in the Mango Tree

Orville Wilkins was a sleepy sheepdog of a boy. If it were up to him, he would spend every summer day idling in the shade beneath the large mango tree in his yard. He dozed in the hammock strung between two low branches. The thick canopy of red and yellow mango blossoms blocked the sun as a lame breeze, buffered and cooled by the surrounding mountains, meandered along the narrow dirt roads that ran through the town. Cloistered deep within the mountainous spine of the island, the town of Hagley Hall was one insignificant settlement within the much larger parish of Cotter Bay. A town so small and unimportant except to those who lived there, it was not listed on any map, and even the most careful travelers could walk right through it without having known they'd visited. The road outside Orville's home was quiet. The children had all gone off to summer school for the day, or else were with their parents working in the town center. Even the dogs that typically roamed restless through the neighborhood were bored and weary in the still heat.

Orville slept. He heard nothing of his mother, Claudette, as she called for him from the house. He was blissfully unaware of her standing on the veranda watching him, arms akimbo, lips pursed. He did not see her pick up the machete laying in the garden and walk over to him.

Claudette swung. There came a loud *thwack!* as the flat side of the machete struck Orville's backside through the hammock. Frightened, he yelped and thrashed. Claudette kicked him squarely in the side. Orville fell to the ground and landed on a thick, exposed root that jutted from the grassy lawn.

He looked up into his mother's round face, her skin the same rich dark brown as the soil he lay in. "Oh," Orville said.

Claudette was a serious woman by nature. The bright blue fabric of her headwrap and cheerful pattern of her housedress did little to soften the perpetual sternness in her eyes or the sharp line of her mouth. Her features were further distilled in annoyance as she looked down at her son.

Orville rubbed his hip and the already forming bruise. He smiled sheepishly. “Morning, Mommy.”

“So what’s the plan, Orville?” she said. “Is well past midday. You don’t think is time you find something to do?”

“Mommy, is summer—”

“And is sleep you intend to sleep the whole time?” she said, her voice rising.

“No, Mommy,” he said. He quailed under the heat of her glare. “Just easy—”

“‘Easy’ what, boy? Easy, nothing!” She brandished the machete again. The blunt side caught Orville on his ankle before he could jump out of the way. He hopped as he ran towards the house. “Go on inside and make use of yourself, see if I don’t chop you and this hammock today. ‘Bout ‘easy’.”

That night over dinner, it was agreed that Orville would go into town to work with his father. Orville, cowed, and his father exhausted, made no attempts to disagree.

It was early still when Orville and his father breakfasted, bathed, packed lunches, and left home. Orville was wearing one of his father’s old linen work shirts, and the morning air was cool against his skin. He followed his father’s long, loping strides as he stepped over potholes and kicked aside loose gravel in the packed dirt road. Orville turned to look behind him and saw his mother watching them. A donkey cart pulled alongside her. He watched as she nodded good

morning to the driver and, in a plume of red dust kicked up by the wheels and hooves, went back inside the house.

Orville's father worked in the town center. "Paul Wilkins Woodwork" read the sign carved into the front door. Barclay, the kind and geriatric store attendant, was sweeping inside the storefront when they arrived.

"Morning, Mr. Wilkins," he said. His booming voice followed them to the back of the store, into Paul's workroom.

"Keeping well, Mr. Barclay?" Paul asked. He raised the hinged portion of the countertop that separated the front of the store from the workshop at the back. Orville ducked under his arm and placed his lunch pail on a shelf out of the way.

"Keeping just fine, sir, just fine." He fixed his heavy-lidded eyes on Orville. "And I sees we have the little Wilkins with us today?"

"Morning, sir," Orville said around a yawn.

"Boy's still asleep," Barclay said. "Too early for him, you don't think."

"Thirteen is old enough," Paul said in his even measured way.

"I don't know, you know," Orville said. "Mr. B older than the two of us. Him probably have more sense, right?"

"If you old enough to be so fresh, you can manage just so," Paul said.

Through eyes glued half shut by sleep Orville spent the day watching his father. Paul's skin was the deep gold of lacquered pine and his face shone with as much warmth as he consulted with customers, laughed and lunched with Barclay, and knocked Orville awake each time he found him dozing.

Late afternoon arrived. Evening came soon after. Bodies pressed into the town center. Shoppers rushed about from stall to storefront in the last minute hurry to complete errands before the workday ended. Orville swept sawdust in the general direction of the waste bin. Spent, he sat on the rickety three-legged stool and slumped onto the counter. His stomach grumbled. His thoughts turned to the dinner that must surely be waiting for him at home. Thoughts of roast breadfruit and salted mackerel filled his thoughts and he dozed, the stool wobbling dangerously beneath him. The world around him quieted. He slept.

“Pardon, but we’re closing for the day,” Paul said. “Please to come back tomorrow.” His voice drifted to Orville from some faraway place.

“Oh?” A woman’s voice, near his ear.

Orville, startled, woke with a jolt. He tottered on the stool before his father, who’d come forth from the workshop, grabbed him by the elbow steadying him.

“No time for Mother May?” the woman said.

“I only heard the bell when the door opened,” Paul said. “But it is closing time. Time we be getting home.” Paul rested his warm calloused hand on Orville’s head.

“This is your son,” she said.

“Yes, my boy, Orville,” Paul said.

Orville looked up at the woman across him and was glad for the counter separating them.

Mother May was bauxite red. She was hidden in layers of fabric. Shawls and loose threads dripped from her narrow frame giving her an appearance of melting in the summer heat. Her coarse hair was forced into two long braids that hung thick past the unknowable edges of her shoulders. The exposed areas of her skin were a deep angry color, and she looked down at Orville with the one lonely eye she had, bright green in the burning brown-red of her ageless

face. Everyone in Hagley Hall knew Mother May. Orville, along with the other schoolchildren in his neighborhood, had to walk through the gulley where she lived everyday on their way to school. They'd hurry past the corrugated zinc siding of her house, heads down, voices hushed. On one of the many days when Orville left late for school, he had to go through the gulley alone. Mother May had been kneeling in her yard when he passed. She held a white fowl by its neck over a porcelain bowl splotted with red. Two others lay still on a white towel beside her. The sweet head-aching scent of white rum floated to Orville from the open bottle to the other side of her. He saw the sharp gleam of a kitchen knife. The thick iron smell of blood. He gasped. Mother May had turned to find the noise, and at the first movement of her head, Orville had fled. He'd made it to the school gates with the distinct sense he'd been watched the whole way there, but found the road behind him empty when he'd turned to look. The same feeling was with him now as she stared down at him, and he wondered how long she'd watched him as he slept on the counter.

Mother May directed her eye to Paul.

Orville breathed.

"I've an urn," she said. "My husband. Needs restoring." She placed the urn on the counter in front of them.

Paul examined it with practiced hands. The varnish had peeled from the urn in large sheets and the wood beneath was warped and flaking. The mother of pearl was stained and discolored from time.

Throughout their conversation, Orville maintained absolute stillness and stared directly ahead so as to avoid attention from either of them. The weak cables of his muscles trembled with

the effort of keeping him upright. Orville felt his body humming with anxious energy so that when his father flicked his ear he jumped, and fell from the stool.

“You think you can manage to get that box off the shelf?” Paul said. He pointed to a set of display shelves near the door.

Orville did not miss the annoyance in his father’s voice. “Yes, Daddy.” He dusted sawdust from his face and righted the stool. He raised the hinged partition in the counter. In his single-minded haste Orville missed the urn resting over the break in the countertop. The countertop lifted the urn and sent it crashing to the floor. Mother May’s scream was sudden and piercing. She pushed past Orville who still stood holding up the hinged portion of the counter. The urn’s rotted wood split when it landed. Ashes poured from the crack onto the sawdust. Mother May groaned. She swept the floor with her scarves and sleeves, wrapping the urn, ashes, and sawdust alike into the many layers of her clothes.

Paul spoke softly. “Honest accident, May. Let me fix it, no cost to you.”

“Fool boy!” she said. Her eye swung from Paul’s pleading face to Orville still frozen beneath the raised counter. “Everything has its price.” She left through the open door, a trail of ash and dust marking her path, and a heavy silence in her wake.

“*Wicked* woman,” Barclay said. He peeked round from the doorjamb he’d been listening behind. “And I’ve had my fair share of run-ins with women like that.” He shuddered. “Watch yourself, Paul. People hear you run afoul of Mother May and—”

“Claudette hear I lose a piece of work I going have more to worry about than some gulley witch.” Paul handed Orville the broom. “See if you can’t get the dust in the bin this time. Time to go home.”

In the silence of his father's long shadow, Orville walked home. He carried both their lunch pails and stared at the ground, shame burning behind his eyes. His father's shirt felt heavy against his back. "Sorry, Daddy," he said.

Paul stopped and waited for Orville to pull alongside him and rested his arm across Orville's shoulders.

A wind came down off the mountain that night. It raced along the mountain ridge and down hilly slopes, and swept through Hagley Hall where it flung itself against Orville's house. It beat against the meager window of his small bedroom near the front of the house. The thin pane trembled under the weight. The mango tree whipped and groaned in the breeze. Orville hauled the covers over his head against the building threat. He fell into an uneasy slumber that lasted until morning when his father's yells from outside woke him.

"Claud, look here a minute," Paul said. "*Claudette!*"

Orville heard the familiar shuffling of his mother's house slippers as she came from the back of the house.

"Don't know why this man insist on bawling down people name so early in the morning," she muttered to herself. The shuffling paused on the veranda. "What, man?"

"You ever see a lizard so pretty?" Paul said.

"Hmm." The murmur was a low sound in her throat.

Orville opened the unbroken window and leaned out. His father was standing barefoot in the grass of the front yard pointing up at the mango tree. High in the mango tree, in a fork in the branches, was a croaking lizard so bright emerald it stood out clearly among the dark green leaves of the mango tree. It was as long as Orville's forearm. Its tail dangled in the crook of the

branches. Its scales beamed in the feeble morning light. The head turned towards them and Orville saw the single beady eye rolling in its socket.

“I never see a half-blind lizard yet,” Claudette said.

Paul laughed. He turned from the tree and walked to stand in front of her. “I heading out.”

“Take Orville with you.”

The following days and weeks at Paul Wilkins Woodwork were quiet and peculiar. Orville felt his father had forgiven him for what happened with Mother May. Paul still joked with him, teased him about his ears and squat legs, and gave him extra food from his lunch pail when they ate together. But Paul also ensured that Orville’s days in the shop were filled. Each morning and evening Orville was made to sweep the workshop in the back, the storefront display, and the sidewalk outside the store, clean and organize Paul’s tools on the shelves, and polish the merchandise on display. No corner-built cobwebs remained nor no speck of sawdust left unswept. As he cleaned Barclay was there at his back happily directing him to unseen specks of grime he missed. He ate his lunch and dinner in tired silence. He lay in his bed each night and listened to the belching croak of the one-eyed lizard outside. He turned his back to the window and covered his head tight with his pillow, and still the croak burrowed through and the bright green of the lizard’s scales flared behind his eyelids. Orville knew no rest. His hopes of a carefree summer felt the distant fancy of a child far different from himself. He resigned himself to toil the rest of the summer under Barclay’s eager direction for his father’s amusement.

There came the day when there was nothing left to sweep. As no customers came by, no dirt was tracked inside, no sawdust generated. As people in the town center gave the storefront a

wide berth, there was less litter for Orville to contend with. The jewelry boxes shone. The wooden game pieces bore no fingerprints. Orville retired his broom and chamois. Paul found him napping behind an unfinished highboy on one of these days. Orville's ear exploded in pain as Paul pulled him from behind the chest.

"You think this is your bedroom, boy?" Paul said. "You can't find nothing better to do with yourself?"

"Daddy, just easy, nuh," Orville said. He wriggled and bent and tried to free his ear from Paul's grasp, but only succeeded in twisting it further. "Is not like anybody coming here anymore." The grip on his ear tightened. He winced under the sudden pressure. He looked up into his father's face.

Orville saw the dark cloud that had come across Paul's face. Unlike many of his classmates, Orville had never been beat before. He knew nothing of a switch or a belt. Claudette and Paul had never felt the need. He was simply too lazy to get himself into trouble. But looking up at the angry splotches of color that flared on Paul's cheeks, Orville felt for the first time afraid of his father. He opened his mouth to say something, but Paul merely hissed his teeth, let go of his ear, and walked to the front of the empty shop.

They walked home in stony silence, each carrying their own lunch pail, Orville nursing his ear. I tell any lie? Orville thought to himself. The place empty for weeks. People don't even want to come inside to pick up the things them pay to fix. Ever since Mother May... Orville hissed his teeth. I never tell no lie, he thought.

His mother was standing on the veranda when they walked up. Claudette's smile fell from her face as Paul breezed past her. He dropped his work things by the door and stalked through the house to the water pipe at the back.

Orville hesitated at the foot of the stairs. He juggled his lunch pail from hand to hand as he watched his mother's profile and struggled to decipher the look on her face. The lizard croaked in the tree behind him. In the weeks since its appearance the lizard had become obscene. Its stomach had grown fat and swollen from its endless gorging on the ripe mangos that hung near it. Its tail still hung in the fork of the branches but had become so long that if someone were to walk unawares beneath the tree it would graze the top of their head. The single eye bulged and goggled in its head. The scales were now a putrid green that burned Orville's eyes even in the coming darkness of night. It bobbed up and down as it croaked, laughing.

"That lizard," Claudette said.

Orville's stomach whined, a queasy audible noise. "Evening, mommy."

She spared him a small smile. "Dinner. Then bed."

Sleep did not come easily to Orville that night. He lay awake in bed for a long time looking out at the mango tree swaying in the gentle breeze. He watched the lizard in the branches, the back and forth twitching of its tail. He heard the hush of whispering voices coming from the kitchen. On bare feet, he crept from the safety of his bed out into the dark of the house. He ducked by the door to the kitchen and listened. His father's voice was the clearest.

"How we going manage, Claud?"

Orville peeped around the doorway to see into the kitchen.

A lit oil lamp was on the kitchen table. Papers Orville couldn't make out were strewn about the table. Claudette's back was turned to Orville, and all he could see of his father was his arms wrapped around Claudette's back as she cradled his head against her stomach. Paul sniffled, a quick inhale, and his hand grasped at the thin fabric of her nightdress. Orville rubbed

the rising heat from the back of his neck. The sound of Claudette's gentle shushing followed him back to his room. The surprising gentleness of his mother's voice together with the gross metronome of the lizard's ticking tail lulled him finally into a fitful sleep.

Orville woke in the late afternoon to find that his father had gone into town without him. He wandered out onto the veranda where Claudette was chopping at a jelly coconut with the machete. She flayed the skin from the nut and drained the water into a jug resting on the ground between her feet. Cracked open, she scooped the jelly she scooped into the bowl beside her.

"Afternoon, 'Ville," she said.

"Daddy gone?" he said.

"You see him 'bout?"

"Is my fault him gone. Is my fault that..."

"You feel say is your fault?"

Orville said nothing. He watched the machete as it whipped past Claudette's head, down, down, down, onto the coconut.

"You're the only one that think so," she said. She brought the machete sunk through the coconut and cracked it wide. Water splashed in the jug and sprayed onto his ankles which poked from his too-short pajama bottoms. "Accident, is accident." She pulled a new coconut from the pile.

"You want help?" Orville said.

Claudette paused in her chopping, the machete still shuddering in a new coconut, and turned to Orville in wide-eyed surprise. Her face split as the laugh erupted from her body. Bright and clear as the summer afternoon, it burned at Orville's ears just the same. "Orville want

something to do!” she said. “Never thought I’d see the day when Orville looking work. I going have to tell Paul this one. Come here, boy.” She cut the top off the coconut and bored a small hole through to the center where the cool water waited. “Drink this and wash off your heart.”

Orville walked over to the hammock, coconut in hand. After so much time away, it seemed to him an old friend eagerly awaiting their reunion, a return to the easy comfort of an earlier life. He turned and sat in the hammock. For one brief moment he was happily suspended again, swinging freely in the hammock, before a crack rent the air and the branches supporting the hammock splintered. Orville fell, the coconut upended and drained around him. Dry rotted bark fell around him. In the tree above him, the lizard screamed with laughter. It bobbed up and down on its squat legs. Its gullet fluttered in and out along its throat as it laughed. The eye rolled in its socket.

“Foul thing!” Claudette said over the noise. She flung the emptied husk of a coconut high into the canopy of the mango tree where it struck the lizard. It fell from the fork in the branches and landed in the tall grass.

Orville watched its head turn, searching through the grass with its lonely eye. It saw him. Through the overgrown lawn he could just barely make out its bulbous body as it scuttled towards him. Claudette threw the machete. It sunk into the ground and cleaved the lizard’s head from its shoulders. Claudette and Orville approached. She pulled the machete free and knocked the head aside.

Orville stifled a groan as the lizard’s body roiled and bubbled. The stomach churned and the legs flailed. The flat black head of a snake protruded from the opening. The lizard’s stomach flattened as the snake unwound its length from inside. It reared up and peered around, its thin muscular body glistened.

“Careful,” Orville said. He brought his foot down onto the snake’s head while Claudette struck it in two with the machete.

Claudette hissed her teeth. “Enough of this foolishness now,” she said. “Go on. Take the water inside, is almost lunchtime. Make sure you wash your foot, don’t track none of that inside.” With the tip of the machete, she flung the rough pieces of lizard and snake into the road where it was bandied about by the waiting dogs.

Orville rubbed his foot clean against the trunk of the mango tree. He shook the dirt from the hammock, folded it, and tucked it under his arm. With his free hand he took hold of the jug of coconut water, cool and overflowing, and walked carefully inside.

Balmyard

It was the second Friday of the month, and the evening before the secondary school placement exams. Mamie, pretending to have studied as much of the sixth grade curriculum as her eleven-year-old patience would allow, was ready to keel over from boredom and mental fatigue. Her mother met her by the school gate.

“Mommy, I hungry,” Mamie said.

Her mother yawned, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. “Food at home,” she said. “Although if you really want something different . . .”

Her voice trailed off in the way Mamie associated with her mother being in the most suggestive of moods. *I did only doze off two time today in extra lessons*, Mamie thought. *I deserve this*. “Mommy, please?”

They passed two Burger Kings and missed the turn for a third before Mamie realized she’d been lured to a house she’d never seen before.

The house was wide and squat. A fenced in section of potholed backroad had been claimed for the yard. It was gravel and dirt and crunched underfoot as they made their way towards the sagging veranda at the front of the house. In the middle of the yard, a wide-mouthed pot sat in a cavernous pothole, coals burning bright orange just beneath; a small group of women sat on upturned pails by the pot. A vast cotton tree overwhelmed the right-hand side of the house. A party was in its early stages.

Drummers set up among the tree’s protruding roots, shrugged the shrouds from their instruments. Children milled about in the gravel while adults carried aluminum pans, bowed from the weight of the food they contained, into the house. Mamie watched the condensation pill on the cover of a pan as a woman walked past her, felt the spring humidity and sweat against her

upper lip and heard the angry rumble of her stomach as she caught the satisfying scent of fried meat. Mamie and her mother followed the woman toward the house only to pause at the bottom step of the veranda. The front door swung shut behind the woman and the food.

“Mommy, the food in there,” Mamie said. “You not hungry?”

“I teach you to come to people house and beg food?” Mamie’s mother said.

Tired and hungry, Mamie’s protest was interrupted by the house’s front door opening again. Laughter swelled from the opening.

“Say ‘Evening’ to your auntie,” Mamie’s mother said. She nudged Mamie between her shoulders.

Mamie took a clumsy step forward, stared rapt up at the woman standing above her, a woman she’d never met before this night.

Like Mamie’s mother, Auntie was short with closely cropped hair, and had hands and knuckles that had been gnarled by years of toiling (“You think your maths homework is hard? You know anything about hard? Tuh!” Mamie’s mother would say whenever Mamie complained.). However, while her mother carried what little fat she had left on her hips and in her face, Auntie was sparse and sharp, a threatening razor of a woman. The depth of her skin gleamed in the waning purple haze of sunset.

“Come, pretty girl,” Auntie said.

Mamie felt her mother’s firm hand against her back again, pushing her towards the stairs.

“You do what they tell you,” her mother said. “Follow instruction.”

Auntie’s strong fingers clamped onto Mamie’s shoulder. Mamie let herself be steered across the veranda and into the house. She looked behind her, and in the moment before the door closed she saw her mother cast in the warm light that shone from within the house, her face an

unfamiliar mix of doubt and fear. The door shut and Mamie was alone with Auntie. The drummers outside started up, and the drumbeat was a muted pulse that vibrated along the side wall of the house.

“Bembe!” Auntie called into the house.

Barely audible over the music and the laughter and crashing of cookware from the kitchen, Mamie heard a gentle *tak-tak-tak* approaching. Bembe appeared from a hallway off to the side. His face was long and slack, the lower eyelids loose and damp. Mamie could just see the cloudy pupils. He held a rusted probing cane.

“Another one,” Auntie said. “Exam tomorrow.”

Mamie did not trust Bembe’s blindness. He led her to a poorly lit bathroom and directed her to undress.

“Rest your clothes on the hamper there,” he said.

She stood and watched him lean his cane against the doorjamb. He opened the cupboard under the sink and pulled from within a small pail. From the shelves above the cracked toilet he pulled stained plastic bags, and bottles covered with faded and peeling labels, and rested them along a clean section of the countertop.

“You not really blind,” she said.

“You know enough about anything to say something is one way or the other?” he said.

Mamie thought herself clever enough to realize when she was being insulted.

“You think you can see better than me?” he said. “You don’t even see your own mother and she in front of you every day.”

Mamie hissed her teeth and crossed her arms. “She really send me in here to this madman?” she said quietly to herself.

Bembe hauled her by her collar over to the sink. “Look here, dry-head fool,” he said. His eyes turned in the general direction of her face.

Mamie, determined not to look into the gleaming silver that spread across the surface of each eye, struggled against his hold on her shirt collar.

With his free hand Bembe groped along the countertop. As he found each item he thrust it toward Mamie.

“Lime and salt to cut evil. Blue dye to wash off your spirit. Kananga water to feed whatever duppy hanging on you. Pickney like you is just a bag of sin without a lick of sense to redeem you.” He released his grip on her shirt. “Poor pickney like yourself need all the help you can get.”

Mamie stumbled. The back of her knee collided with the tub and she fell to the ground.

Bembe returned his attention to the countertop, feeling out capfuls and pinches of the ingredients, all of which he added to the pail resting in the sink.

Mamie had heard of places like this. The girls at school had whispered about it in the back of class. A parent applying for a visa, a sibling going for a job interview, a cousin going to foreign for the first time, taken to a house they’d never seen to meet an auntie or an uncle they didn’t know they had. It was always on a Friday, on payday. Money changed hands before the two disappeared into the house, or around the corner in an apartment, or to the claustrophobic back alley of a family-owned corner store. They would walk in then later come out alone, quiet, with their clothes sticking to them.

Mamie, inquisitive and ignoring the lesson on the board, had turned to listen to them.

“What happened in there?” she said.

The girls shook their heads. “You’re not supposed to talk about it,” they said.

One girl told Mamie about her brother that had gone to see an Uncle the day before he flew for the first time. “The plane went down,” she said. “Like somebody hand just reach out and —” She raised her arm out in front of her, and like a market woman patiently waiting for a fruit fly to cross her path, she brought her hand down, stopping it just before she hit the table. The girls looked around to make sure the teacher was still busy. “My brother was one of the only survivors,” she said.

Mamie kissed her teeth. “Nothing can’t go so.”

“So what, you saying my brother dead?” the girl said.

“Is true, is true,” the others around her chimed in.

Mamie huffed. “Well, genius, since you know everything is what did happen? What them do to your brother that make him live and everybody else dead?”

The girl shrugged, smiled. “Who knows —”

“I hear people get wash off!” one of the other girls said.

“Wash off?” Mamie said. “So what, them just bathe —”

The teacher’s ruler came down hard on her knuckles. The girls jumped and turned around in their seats.

Mamie had spent the rest of that class period standing in the hallway.

Foolishness, she had thought. Somebody can just go bathe and that fix everything?

Mamie knew where she was. She watched him stir the mixture in the pail with his hand, wide sweeping motions. She wiped her wrinkled shirt collar across her eyes. “I don’t need help,” she said. “I can pass just fine.”

Bembe filled the pail with water from the tap. “Get in the tub,” he said.

Naked and sniffing, Mamie tried to keep out of Bembe's immediate reach. The lime juice and salt burned her eyes and nose as he flung overflowing handfuls from the pail at her. She stuck her tongue out to lick at the lime pulp stuck to her lip when a palmful of water swept across her face. Mamie spat and a bitter lump of blue dye splattered onto the warped copper surface of the bathtub.

Mamie wasn't allowed to dry off – "You so dense and dunce you need to let that marinate on you," Bembe said as he pushed her from the bathroom – and so her uniform clung to her body in awkward clumps along her back and joints as she left the bathroom and wandered through the front door. Night had properly fallen by the time Bembe finished administering the bath. Mamie stood at the top of the veranda. From the quiet and poorly lit bathroom, the loud laughter and irreverent drumming were disorienting. She clung to the railing as she walked down the steps and into the yard. Against the glow of the cooking fire in the middle of the yard, Mamie could just make out her mother's silhouette. Her wet feet chafed inside her shoes while the worn-out threads on the soles slid over the gravel in the yard. Mamie wobbled with each step. As she neared the cooking fire, she paused.

Mamie's mother sat beside Auntie on an upturned pail next to the cooking fire. She held and occasionally drank from a Styrofoam cup that steamed in the burning light. She was leaning forward listening to Auntie when she reeled back and her mouth opened wide in a scream of laughter.

Is my mother that? Mamie thought. Couldn't be.

Auntie turned. "Come, pretty girl," she said. "You drink soup?"

Mamie shuffled forward and sat on the ground between her mother and Auntie.

"Mamie will eat anything," her mother said with a pointed look down at Mamie.

Mamie looked up at her mother. She seemed larger than Mamie remembered ever seeing her before. Mamie took the cup of soup Auntie poured for her. The thick smell of mannish water reached her. As she drank from the overfull cup, the warm and welcome taste of the stew coated her tongue and burned the sour taste of lime from her mouth. "Thanks, Auntie."

"What I wouldn't do for a bright young daughter like yourself," Auntie said. "You know how good your mother is?"

Mamie nodded and tried to speak around a thick chunk of boiled goat meat.

"And she doing so well at the extra lessons," her mother said. "She come back in the evenings saying all her homework finish and the teacher check it over for her. Good thing, too, since is so expensive."

Mamie lifted the cup to her head and forced more of the boiling stew in her mouth, burning her tongue so she wouldn't be able to speak, wouldn't have to lie.

"Yes," Auntie said. "Bright girl. Top school for sure."

Mamie felt the heat of their gazes on the back of her neck and could not bring herself to look beyond the fire lapping alongside the charred pot bottom. Her mother touched her lightly on her shoulder, and she jumped.

"Bedtime," she said. The rounded edges of her face were plump and smooth.

They held hands as they walked to the break in the yard's fence that led back out onto the road. Mamie's mother's grip was firm, her hands rougher than Mamie remembered them being. They passed another pair on their way out: the girl was much taller than Mamie with long legs and cornrows tights against her scalp; the older woman with her was brutish and spat into the dirt as she walked into the yard. From behind her Mamie heard Auntie yell, "Bembe! Wash out the pail!"

VITA

The author was born in Kingston, Jamaica. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Anthropology from Rollins College in 2014. She joined the University of New Orleans creative writing graduate program in pursuit of an MFA in fiction, and has studied abroad in Ireland in 2017 and 2018 while in the program.