

Every Way You Look at This You Lose
(nine connected short stories)

- 1.) “Winners and Losers” (published in *DaCunha Literary Magazine*, 2017)
- 2.) “Blank Slate” (published in *Good Works Review*, Fall 2020)
- 3.) “Shivers” (published in *Sweet Tree Review*, 2019)
- 4.) “The School Bus No Longer Stops in Front of the House” (published in Darkhouse Books’ *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Vol.2, fall 2020)
- 5.) “Locked In” (published in *Backchannels Literary Magazine*, January 2020)
- 6.) “Fortress”
- 7.) “Another Country” (published in Darkhouse Books’ *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Vol.1, spring 2020)
- 8.) “Every Way You Look at This You Lose” (published in Temptation Press’ *Intimate Moments: An Erotic Collection of Short Tales*, 2018)
- 9.) “Coda”

Winners and Losers

The ball did not cross the goal line. It wasn't really even that close. If your angle was obscured, or if you had taken up one of the positions on the far hill, well away from the action but in the blessed shade, then, maybe you would think it went in. Or if you were one of those goody-two-shoes who pontificated on the sidelines about referees being human and sometimes making mistakes, and this is just a game after all, and that generally speaking refs get it right about 99% of the time, blah blah blah, then, maybe you weren't outraged by the call; or, if you were on the winning side, maybe you left gratefully bewildered, asking no questions and murmuring about your good fortune.

I knew it was a bad call. But I blew the whistle and pointed at the goal and then the midline. I also ignored the linesman nearest to me. I didn't want to pretend I had no idea what that look on his face meant, that silent, pleading look that said I'd gotten it wrong.

Instead, I turned my gaze to Joanna Benson. She was the one who'd taken the shot. She was, then, the de facto goal-scorer. The goal also made her father, Douglass, the winning coach. What I saw in my mind's eye in that flash of space between Joanna's kick and my call was Douglass charging onto the field, weaving through the players, and finding Joanna, who, despite being a teenager, would leap into his arms. The two of them, father and daughter, would share an unembarrassed public display of love and affection in front of two teams, two linesmen, a referee, and two sidelines full of parents.

So I blew the whistle and made winners of them both.

I first met Douglass at the Brookdale Elementary School orientation when our daughters entered kindergarten. We were two of only three dads there and, consciously or not, we took seats next to each other. On some primordial level, I suspect we were terrified by the nervous, estrogen-tinged tension in the room. We loved our kids, sure, but we hadn't carried them and so couldn't begin to imagine the emotion involved in traversing the blink-of-an-eye distance from birthing to handing over our precious charge to the whims of the local public school system. The keynote speaker and answerer of questions (she said "there are no stupid questions" so many times that I got the sense she deemed every question as really rather stupid), there to assure us that everything would be just fine, was a veteran mom with five kids in the school, ranging from grade six down to kindergarten.

"It's a miracle she managed to get off her back long enough to make it here," the third dad whispered. He was smirking and slouching in his chair and had his arms crossed, full of defensiveness for . . . what? Being male, I suppose. Later, he sidled up to us during break. As we made small talk over cookies and fruit punch, he yammered on about the "talent" in the room, pointing out specifically the leggy blonde who had shoehorned the veteran keynote and was asking her a series of questions with her manicured nails perched—digging, it looked like—on the poor woman's forearm.

That was the cue for Douglass and me to attach ourselves to each other and exclude the idiot. Let's be honest: we were checking out the women, too. I mean, of course we were. But at least we had the decency to pretend otherwise, to remind ourselves that we were there because of our kids, and that when it was over, we'd dutifully head home and report everything to our waiting wives. And we'd do it happily. Douglass and I could be secure in knowing that we were

better men, more evolved, not only accepting of our wives' equal status within the family hierarchy, but celebrating it.

Of course, the second point of intersection between us was that we would both voluntarily spit on the sanctity of our marriages by cheating on our wives with much younger women. But that would come later. For now, we were young dads doing our duty. And what great guys we were. We could tell ourselves that then.

Douglass and I never did become more than just casual acquaintances. We'd see each other at assemblies and plays and other events in the sweaty confines of the school "cafetorium." But our daughters, while classmates, never became friends. Outside of school events, they often landed on the same invite list to birthday parties and such, so we'd run into each other during pick-up. We'd nod, say hello, occasionally engage in small talk. But that was as far as it went.

His daughter Joanna was a striking kid. Physically, she was very pretty. But that's not what made her stand out. It was something deeper, something internal. She possessed a quality of age well beyond her actual years. You'd see it in school plays, for instance. While the other kids swam in their too-large costumes or flubbed lines with maddening regularity, Joanna seemed to literally inhabit her characters' psyches. No matter if she were cast in the role of a thousand year old wizard or 19th century Great Plains pioneer, she'd nod behind her beard or sweep her straw colored hair from underneath her bonnet, and the characters' trials and tribulations, light years from our suburban Baltimore existence, would not only shine through but would reach the back rows.

Douglass and I both coached our daughters' soccer teams, and we had gotten into it in the same way, dragooned by way of desperate email pleas which explained that without volunteers to lead the girls, the teams would have to fold. This was rec soccer, and the prospect of herding a dozen or so kids around a ball was about as attractive to most as a colonoscopy, so there were few takers. But we saw it as an opportunity to spend time with our kids outside of the house, a real bonding experience. I loved it for the three years I did it. Eventually my daughter gave up soccer for dance, and my coaching days ended. But I had come to enjoy being out on the field on Saturdays, loved the late autumn crispness in the air and the smell of fresh grass and chewed mud, and I loved watching kids engage in sport instead of smartphone. So I got my referee's license. And every Saturday I threw on my uniform and prepared to be abused. But the truth was, very few parents or coaches ever actually got on me too badly. The key, obviously, was to be good at refereeing. If you rarely made mistakes, you could brush off the occasional complaints of parents or coaches as simply sour grapes for a game turned against their cheering interests. I eventually built up a reputation as a solid and fair referee. This, of course, helped me when I called Joanna's shot a goal. Because no one had ever witnessed me make an egregiously bad call before, there could be room for a once-in-a-lifetime colossal error.

Joanna had graduated from the rec rolls and was playing at the more competitive travel level. Douglass had gone with her for two seasons, guiding her and her teammates in successful fall and spring campaigns until Joanna decamped for a new, elite team coached by a guy named Burch. But before that, it wasn't unusual for me to draw one of their travel games. On these occasions, for the sake of appearance and propriety, Douglass and I were careful not to shoot the shit before or after.

I can't pretend to know the full story, and I know better than anyone to cast aspersions, but the broad strokes of the Benson family tragedy as I understood them went like this: Douglass, who worked in a law firm, had an affair with a young new hire fresh out of law school. He decided he was in love with her and so told Joanna's mother as much, taking full

responsibility, apologizing profusely, shedding many tears over the whole thing, but in the end deciding that the abominable phrase, “the heart wants what the heart wants” was the truest sentiment ever uttered. In short, he could “do the right thing” and forget about his new love and save his family, but with that muscle pounding around in his chest telling him otherwise; with his brain flooding his system with endorphin-clouded visions; with every square centimeter of himself bending toward *her*, well, the only honest thing to do was be with her.

Much of this I’m guessing, of course. I add it only because Douglass always struck me as a decent and thoughtful guy, and it’s how I can thank whatever divine intervention or alignment of the planets or stars or simple dumb luck that when my own affair ended, it did so without explosives—no one ever found out and my family stayed intact (though the fear always stayed with me that somehow it would all come out, even as it receded ever further into the past). Douglass, the poor bastard, realized his folly only after the young woman, all of twenty-three, decided that the novelty and attraction of an older man had worn off and she moved to Colorado with a guy her own age.

From the outside, Douglass was either a fool or a selfish pig who got exactly what he deserved. But, as I said, I was more sympathetic, and not just because I had my own guilt to assuage. I imagined Douglass steeped in that effervescent giddiness of finding yourself, at middle age, hopelessly in love with someone who promises to long outlive you. You do all that silly teenaged stuff—discovering meaning in every song on the radio, seeing signs in the stars, greeting sunny days as if they were created for just the two of you, and rainy days as places of refuge and safe haven buried in her fruit-smelling hair. It was everything you ever imagined and suddenly all those stupid movies made sense to you. You were a kid again: what better gift is there for a guy in his 40s? And yet you also had adult stability: a home, a job, a car. You didn’t tiptoe your way through each day, unaware that true love, love that feels like this, happens only once in a lifetime at best, and then retreat to your bedroom in a house other people owned, surrounded by sweat socks and despair.

And then it was over. And here is where Douglass and I parted ways. My affair ended; I mourned, then came to understand that I was mourning something I never should have possessed in the first place. And then came the clichéd inevitability: you turn the attention and effort you used to expend on her inward, putting it back in your own home where it should have been all along, where it should have never left, where you finally manned up and lived out the commitment and promise you made two decades earlier. Douglass’s dalliance ended, too, but he wound up in a shitty apartment with thin walls, within striking distance of his old home, trying to repair a hopelessly fractured relationship with his daughter.

I knew where Douglass used to live. I once had occasion to drop off pinnies at his front door for his team’s tryouts. I didn’t knock, just put them behind the screen door and left. It was a lovely home—small, cozy, with a sloping roof and a yard full of trees. The sort of home that screamed of that nebulous “good life,” a well-kept place that made you feel welcome, that said that you’d reached the goal your grandparents came to this country to realize. He lived on a dead-end street, so unless his house or one of his neighbors was your destination, you’d never pass it otherwise. But it was easy to get to, just a few streets outside of my usual route on a lovely leafy road that took me, in just a few more miles, to my own home. Enormous century-old houses lined this road, each unique and solid: stucco, plaster, slate, stone. These were the old summer homes of wealthy Baltimoreans fleeing the city heat in the days before air conditioning.

When you exit the highway, the first home you pass has an attic room, clearly visible from the street. It has Christmas lights strung up and cross-hatch windows with miniature

wooden shutters and an air of lovely isolation. I imagine it's precisely the sort of place Emily Dickinson would have holed up. The thought of living in that house in reality, so close to the noise and pollution of the interstate, seemed awful to me. But I did want that attic room. I wanted to take it and jam it into my own house and retreat to it, with its mood lighting and air of creative industry. I wanted a return to the womb, to come home from work exhausted on a rainy and cold day, slip into warm dry clothes, and go to that room, to feel safe and secure in a place where none of the infections of a sometimes cruel world could touch me.

I don't know what the inside of Douglass's house was like, but from the one time I was there on the outside, I imagined it much like that attic: a refuge.

I ran into Joanna and Douglass once, and then Joanna, by herself, in the years after the break-up. The day they were together was in December, close to Christmas, and a snowstorm had been predicted. I was in Home Depot buying an overpriced shovel when I saw Douglass and Joanna standing next to a pile of plastic sledding saucers. The saucers had been picked through pretty well; several of them lay splayed on the floor. Douglass picked them up, one after another, and showed them to Joanna—she would have been fifteen at this time—and to each one she gave a barely perceptible shake of her head, like a baseball pitcher refusing a catcher's signs. Her arms lay crossed against her chest and her eyes were glassy and red. Douglass didn't give up; he kept going through the pile until he'd exhausted them all. If not for his affair, this would have been a heartwarming scene: father and young daughter, on the cusp of womanhood, but still interested in sledding with dear old dad. But now it was a pitiful play, a father's attempt at normal when the new normal had thoroughly subsumed what once was, and no amount of pretending otherwise would ever change that. Indeed, it made it worse.

I walked away with my shovel and did not look back. But I could guess: they never did buy a saucer that day. They never did go sledding together.

I saw Joanna again many months later. I had refereed four matches on a hot Saturday in late summer and stepped into the local ice cream place called Shivers still in my gear (a thing I usually avoided: there's guaranteed to be at least one idiot who, upon seeing my referee's uniform, will ask me if I need help to the counter since, you know, I obviously can't see). But I was drained and didn't feel like changing. It was one of those sultry summer evenings where even after the sun went down, the air retained its dewy, suffocating cloak. Shivers was open to the night, exhaling a frigid gust from the AC and a cloying fluorescence from the overhead lights.

Joanna was working behind the counter. There was a long line, and I was grateful for it because it gave me a place to make myself invisible. I didn't want her to see me. I didn't want to pretend that we didn't know each other, that I didn't know what had happened to her family. But as it turned out, she never turned around. Instead, she focused on filling cones, executing her charge like it was some kind of funereal ritual: hear order, grab cone, pull lever. She had a look of longing on her face, of deep sadness, even despair, watching vacantly as the dispenser discharged its gelatinous payload into cylindrical swirls. As she watched ropes of ice cream fill each cone, Joanna had the look of a middle-aged adult stuck in lower management in some soulless office, waking one day to find that the job taken out of college as a temporary hedge against crushing loans had now lasted twenty years—a searing *Is this it?* look that should have been impossible for any American teenager to even imitate, no less possess. When it was my turn I ordered quickly and then turned my back. I paid, dropped a dollar in the tip jar, and scrambled to battle the sultry night for the consistency of my ice cream, eventually losing it to drips across

my fist, sodden brown napkins, and ultimately, a trash can. As it turned out, I didn't have much of an appetite for it anyway.

Fortunately, that look on Joanna's face was not the same one she wore at the soccer game. The intensity was still there, but it was of a wholly different variety. She was a solid player with good ball skills and excellent field vision. But she was quiet, and on a few occasions Douglass had to remind her to communicate, to alert teammates to attacking defenders or open space. Despite the instructions, she remained reticent. Was it obstinacy, an outgrowth of her natural personality? I couldn't know. And in any case, I needed to concentrate on the task at hand. I had a game to referee and focusing all my attention on one kid, and her father, and—I wondered if one of the women on the sidelines was Joanna's mother. I realized I had no idea what she looked like—focusing my attention anywhere else but between the lines constituted a dereliction of duty. So I did my job, and I did it well. Until the end, that is.

There were no complaints at all during the game, which was sixty minutes plus thirty minutes of sudden-death overtime of peerless refereeing. Had the game ended then, in its 0-0 tie, the teams would have been declared co-champions. But I kept my whistle out of my mouth as I noted my watch tick down. One of Joanna's teammates sent a ball toward the eighteen-yard line. This is where a referee's discretion comes in. We were at zero—no time left. I could have called it then, but the default is to let any potential scoring chance play out. So I let it run, and in my subconscious I'm certain much of that had to do with the fact that it was Joanna receiving the ball. I glanced at the sideline and saw Douglass rising from the bench, straining his neck. I turned back to see Joanna rocket the shot toward the far post—a real beauty. The goalkeeper made a terrific diving save, just getting three fingers on the ball and pushing it toward the post, where it bounced, came back toward the goal line, and then got scooped up into the keeper's arms. Clearly it had not crossed the line.

But I called it a goal.

The general reaction was what one might expect in the face of an unexpected tragedy: shock initially, everyone just stuck in place, processing, trying to come to grips with the distance between what they saw and what was actually happening. Then, slowly, the collective realization, swelling into quiet acquiescence on one side, vociferous anger on the other.

There was the usual, "Are you kidding?" and "No way," and a few along the lines of, "You fucking suck! That was the worst call I've ever seen." But I ignored them. Instead, I kept my gaze on Joanna and Douglass.

And it was in watching them that I understood my folly.

When Joanna's teammates realized they had just won, they surrounded her, offering congratulations and hugging each other. But it was clearly subdued compared to what should have been a celebration in the same circumstances; they had just been crowned league champions, scoring a goal in the literal last second after two sudden-death overtime periods. It was the most dramatic sporting scenario imaginable. And yet there was a tentative look about them, as if they believed the win might be snatched away or called a practical joke.

I didn't care. It was Joanna I was interested in.

I wanted to see her smile. It occurred to me that I'd never seen her smile. I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to feel and project the same joy I had so many times seen on my own daughter's face, the face of a kid who was a kid, who didn't have a chunk of her childhood ripped away from her in the murky depths of her parents' dissolution.

But Joanna didn't smile. There was no celebration. Instead, she extricated herself from her teammates and went over to console her opponents, several of whom were lying on the ground with their hands over their eyes.

Douglass and I caught eyes. I nodded at him, imperceptibly, a nod that I hoped conveyed congratulations, not complicity. Either way, he simply looked embarrassed and turned away.

More jeering came into focus now, and I knew that things could, and probably would, turn ugly. So I hustled off to the sideline, grabbed my bag, and headed to my car. As I threw my stuff into the backseat, a guy hitching up his pants and who looked like he was digesting a cannonball, got within two feet of me, spat on the ground, and asked, "The hell is wrong with you? How much that team pay you, huh, boy?"

"Excuse me," I muttered, while the guy's wife tried in vain to drag him away.

He was still standing in his spot as I pulled away, which meant I had little choice but to almost hit him as I backed out. That was precisely his plan, obviously, as he stood rooted on the edge of the yellow parking line. This allowed him to take further offense and delivered confirmation that I was a complete ass. He removed his ballcap and chucked it at me as I drove off. Through my rear view, I could see its lemon yellow color, lying like a dead bird on the back of my car. And I could still see him, too, fuming and stamping his feet and then screaming all the curses and punishments I deserved, things about "rotting in hell" and "eating my own shit." As I pulled on to the street, I caught one last glimpse of the field. Parents and players congregated on the sidelines as if unable, still, to compute what they had just seen.

I couldn't really blame them.

Just before my exit, traffic thickened and then ground to a standstill. Twenty minutes later, having gone maybe half a mile, I crawled past one of those "Your Speed" electronic signs with the mocking rejoinder: "7 mph." I took advantage of the stasis and removed my uniform as I drove, leaving only my undershirt and shorts. I wouldn't ref anymore. Not ever again.

I finally got off the highway and passed the house with the Dickinson attic room. I still wanted it; that hadn't changed. We all need a place to go home to.

Then, for the second time in my life, I turned down the street where Douglass used to live and where, I assumed, Joanna and her mother still did. I crawled along, looking at each house I passed until I hit the cul-de-sac. I turned around; somehow I'd missed it. So I went back, then turned around and did it again. And each time it was the same: nothing was familiar to me. Then I wasn't sure if I even had the right street. I wasn't even sure, if I'm honest, that I'd ever really been there or what I was hoping to find this time. Maybe it was someone else I'd dropped off my gear to and I'd told myself it was Douglass. I couldn't remember anymore.

I suppose in the end it didn't matter. My own home wasn't far away, and I was headed there.

I pulled into my driveway and turned off the engine. I sat for a moment, then turned the key and got out. I slid my key in the back door.

It was foolish to think I could help mend a family that, in the end, I knew little about and had no business trying to help anyway. And it hadn't done a thing for me, either. I had no sense of a good deed executed, of a lifting weight. Nothing had changed, except for the fact that when I entered my house, I realized that I was alone.

Blank Slate

Michelle Truitt's lips tasted like cheap beer. And they were incredibly soft.

But the softness disappeared, replaced by the hard smash of tooth on tooth. Blood—mine—mingled with the taste of Michelle's mouth. And that taste, in the moment before the fist registered, was the culmination of my entire seventeen and a half years of life. Girl, blood, beer: all the elements required to deliver a boy to manhood.

But then a regression: suddenly I was sliding down a hill in my fuzzy costume dodging a flurry of knuckles and boots. Benny's head tumbled after me, its bucktooth leer flashing as it rolled. As the mascot of the Fighting Beavers of Brookdale High, Benny had a look that was supposed to project fierceness. But it was really more like the vacant smile of the criminally insane.

When Benny's head came to a stop near my own, I slid it on for protection. I knew what it must have looked like, this poor beaver getting the holy hell beaten out of him there on the edge of the lawn, all the while grinning and bearing it—enjoying it even, from the looks of that maniacal smile. Someone happening on this scene would have probably assumed some sort of fetish. I shielded myself best I could, praying for a quick and merciful end. Through the eye slits I saw celestial bodies burning away in the night sky. Maybe it was just my own brain shooting neurons in response to each blow.

Either way, this wasn't how I'd imagined the evening going.

Video games in the basement again, deep in the scent of mold and funk that my parents had given up trying to rectify years earlier—around the same time my father had given up on pretty much everything: his wife, his son, his dreams of happiness on the open road. As a result, gutters hung precariously; roof tiles littered the front lawn, half hidden in unkempt grass; the wood pile had turned into little more than sawdust and papery snakeskin.

I played *Berserk and the Band of the Hawk*, a game that even to my teenage brain seemed gratuitously violent. The old Dad would have yelled at me to “stop playing that shit.” But these days he just mumbled and sighed.

It was my mom who pulled the controller from my hand and ordered me out of the house.

“You've graduated. It's officially summer now. Surely there's some place you can be . . . for God's sake, do *something*, Darren!” Her eyes rested on a days-old yogurt cup with a wadded tissue in it. “Get out of this stinking, disgusting room. Go!”

I'd already considered it. My friend Kenny had called three times, imploring me to get off my ass, that he and our friend Damon were headed to Michelle Truitt's party. I could picture the pantomime Kenny was going through as he told me this, making rounded mountains of his chest, sign language for Michelle's breasts, legends since the 6th grade. I wasn't immune from lustfulness, but Kenny's overheated, eye-popping idiocy kept me rooted to the couch in the basement instead of in the back of his car while he and Damon blasted Body Count, a band that made my eardrums bleed. When I thought about the way he—and every other guy in my class—reduced Michelle Truitt to just her chest, it made me, well . . . *sad*. But try articulating that to hormonal teenagers; there may be no better formula for getting your ass kicked.

After her mom died when we were in the 7th grade, Michelle turned into a new specimen, a beautiful and rare creature in a cage or aquarium that we could gaze upon but could not touch. When it was eventually gleaned, many weeks later, that in fact Michelle's mother hadn't died but

had left her family for a truck driver and moved to Nebraska or Kansas or somewhere, Michelle lost her female friends. They'd collectively decided that she'd betrayed them with her dishonesty and prevented them from exercising their natural rights of consolation. She then became one of those girls who had only boy friends, and then boyfriends, a steady parade of them. I longed to be one of those boyfriends, through every phase Michelle entered and then left: when she started riding motorcycles and played the electric guitar, when she cultivated the Catholic private schoolgirl look, when she shaved the left side of her head and dyed the remaining flop purple.

But before all of this, in the immediate aftermath of Mrs. Truitt's "death," it was me who found Michelle crying in the bottom of a school stairwell. She was crouched in the corner, head in hands, nearby a mop, bucket, and two barrels of that green powder they throw on top of puke. I was on my way to the bathroom when I heard the whimpering. I watched her, mesmerized.

When she realized I was there, she scowled and snapped, "The fuck you looking at?" and sped away.

There are few opportunities in the 7th grade to actually *see* a person, to strip away the external defenses and glimpse a soul. And so bearing witness to both that sadness and that fury—well, there's no other way to say it: I was in love.

Now it was five years later and we'd just completed high school, everyone gleefully partaking in the ritual of tossing every shred of paper—every test, every essay, every quiz, every spare doodle—into the air as we ran like mad for the exits, fresh off the final countdown. It's only now, looking back, that I see the cruelty in this, the way that even the teachers smiled indulgently at this ritual while it would be left to the school custodian, an ancient black man named Mr. Harrison, who went by "Ace" and perpetually sucked a toothpick, to clean everything up.

The graduation ceremony had been called off because of a bomb threat. No makeup plans had been announced and everyone more or less gave up on it ever happening. "Well, at least we went out with a whimper and not a bang" was the running joke.

But Michelle Truitt was having a major blowout. I had planned on going, until Kenny started calling. "Truitt, dude. Mi-chellllle Truitt," he repeated and I was certain he was sculpting again, so I hung up on him.

But now my mother was threatening to throw away the video games unless I left. This was serious.

The one other time Michelle Truitt actually talked to me, apart from the stairwell, was to tell me how adorable I was. Well, not me, really. But me as Benny the Beaver. Being the mascot put me in a unique social position in the school: not on any actual team, but part of every team. And, accordingly, never actually invited to any team parties, and yet free to attend all of them. I initially took full advantage of this, until I realized that the expectations of me more or less remained the same at parties as they did at sporting events: peripheral entertainment—part of, but separate; inside, but out, a ratio that grew in direct proportion to the violence of the sport. I could hang out with the basketball players and be myself. Soccer not as much. Go to a football party and I risked being made to walk a straight line while guys chucked beer cans at me, expected to turn on my heels with each connected shot like those ducks people shoot at carnivals.

Anyway, Michelle: I was headed toward the sidelines after one particularly atrocious outing in which our football squad was annihilated 49-0. No one else was around, most of the crowd, tiny as it was, having dispersed by the third quarter. The teams were already in the locker rooms. I'd spent the previous ten minutes desperately searching for a contact lens that somehow

got dislodged and was either in a tangle of faux fur or ground to nothing under a cleat. I was walking with one hand over the contact-less eye when Michelle jumped in front of me from under the bleachers. Her eyes were bloodshot and glassy.

“Ohmigod! Darren!” she squealed. “I never knew that was you in there. You got some serious moves!”

“One of those ‘moves’ knocked out a contact lens. I need to get the other one out.”

“Oh, you poor baby. Here.” She took a compact out of her purse and held it up for me. Her proximity was thrilling, and through my t-shirt, my fur, her shirt, and her thin sweater, I could feel the contours of her right breast against my arm. I burned at that touch.

“You are just adorable,” Michelle said. “Look at you.”

I ran a hand through my sweat-drenched hair. “It’s a thousand degrees inside this thing.”

She rubbed a bit of fabric between her fingers. “What is this, velvet?” She laughed uproariously, doubling over and crossing her legs like she might pee her pants.

“Aardvark, I think.”

She laughed again. Then she heaved a big sigh and said, “Man, I wish I had some way of hiding. Plain sight, but hidden, you know?”

“Sure,” I mumbled.

While I held her mirror, she sat on the ground and plucked blades of grass from the earth, a gesture that made her seem like a little kid.

I scooped out the contact and flicked it.

She got up. “Well, see ya,” she said.

I watched her walk away, wanting to say something. But, blurry and out of sorts, I said nothing.

Benny’s suit stayed hung in my bedroom closet, the feet crumpled onto the ground near my shoes. The head sat on a shelf at the top. At that angle, the downcast eyes made Benny look baked out of his skull. But the teeth were menacing, as if at any moment they might leap out of the mouth of their own accord and sink into my skull. It was only at eye level did the smile morph into the crazed goofiness for which it was known. I slipped into the bodysuit and tucked the head under my arm.

“Later,” I yelled and made for the front door.

“You’re going in that?” my mother asked.

“Graduation party, so . . . you know,” I said.

“Jesus Christ,” my dad mumbled.

I heard Michelle’s delighted squealing the moment I walked into her backyard.

“Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod, come here,” she yelled.

Her voice had the slurred edges of drunkenness about it.

“Oh, this is too awesome!” Her bloodshot eyes took me in. Then she threw her arms around my—Benny’s—neck and squeezed, mashing herself against me. Suddenly, she ripped the head from my own.

“For a second, I thought maybe it wasn’t you. I would have been so embarrassed.”

“It’s me.”

She screamed and hugged me again, only this time it was me and not Benny, who sat on the ground at our feet, dumped there by this beautiful, wonderful, wacky person who was squeezing my neck so hard I actually felt something pop.

I squirmed.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Michelle said and squeezed again, only this time I felt her lips on my neck and then the tip of her tongue in my ear.

A prickly heat spread through me and I jammed my lips onto hers, lucid enough to understand that what awaited me would most likely be a slap in the face. What I got instead was her lips in return, and that cheap beer. And then the fist.

It was Derek. Big, stupid Derek Solarno, nineteen years old, still a junior, had been shaving since the third grade. He was Michelle’s on again/off again boyfriend and, not unreasonably I suppose, didn’t take too kindly to the sight of his erstwhile girlfriend sucking face on the lawn with a half-man/half-beaver in front of a hundred or so drunken teenagers.

The fist landed square on my jaw. It must have gotten Michelle, too; I heard her say, “Ow! you PRICK!” before another punch landed and I was tumbling downhill. Derek must have kicked Benny’s head because soon it was rolling after me.

I threw on the head for protection and curled into a defensive position, but the cheap thin fur only provided so much. But despite its flimsiness, it felt like a cocoon, a deep pocket of something warm and moist and animal. It was a sticky night and the inside of the head instantly turned into runnels of sweat and condensation and blood. It was like that movie, that one where this guy cuts open a rotting beast carcass—a muskox or something—and after shoveling out the blue innards, slips inside to hide from marauders.

“All right, you idiots, enough!” I heard. This was followed by shuffling feet. Then I was being lifted off the ground.

“Hey in there,” it said. “Show yourself before I tie you to a spit and roast you for dinner.”

Michelle uttered a mortified, “Daaaaaaaaaad!”

Mr. Truitt pulled off Benny’s head and turned it in several directions, appraising it like a treasure hunter. When the stars fled the edges of my vision, I took in Benny’s rough condition: one tooth torn off, right cheek sunken in, left ear smashed to nothingness—I suspect I hardly looked much better, as if the both of us had suffered a botched two-for-the-price-of-one plastic surgery.

“All of you, out. Now!” Mr. Truitt growled.

Everyone complied with sullen adolescent mumbling.

“You—inside!” he ordered Michelle.

He threw his arm around my shoulder and then simply shook his head and smiled. “Come on, son. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Mr. Truitt tossed the head onto the kitchen table, where Benny stared at me—blame and disappointment all over his beaten face. Mr. Truitt ripped several sheets from the paper towel roll and wet them at the sink. “Here,” he said, handing them to me.

I swabbed my face, peeling off a few layers of mud and blood while Michelle watched.

Mr. Truitt reached into a cooler someone had left behind and pulled out two icy cans of beer. He opened both and handed me one.

Michelle let out a gasp of exasperation and skulked upstairs.

“You’re cleaning this shit up first thing in the morning,” Mr. Pruitte yelled after her.

She stomped back to the middle of the steps and pointed a finger at me. “What about him?”

“I don’t live here,” I said.

I immediately regretted saying it. I still held out some hope that, somehow, now that the house had been emptied of everyone else, I had a shot with Michelle.

Mr. Truitt laughed as Michelle turned on her heels and stomped the final few steps to her room and slammed the door.

You want a girl, get in good with the dad. I'd heard this advice a million times, but I'm not sure that's necessarily true when you're seventeen, and it certainly isn't true when the father and daughter plainly despise one another. In fact, it seemed clear that Michelle's loathing of me was the primary point in my favor as far as Mr. Truitt saw it. That, and getting my ass kicked on his lawn.

"You hungry?" Mr. Truitt asked.

"Sure."

He opened two more cans of beer—he was clearly thrilled at the inherited bounty—and, foam dribbling down the side of the can, handed another one to me while he slurped at his own. I drank greedily, feeling a serious buzz coming on. The alcohol and the beating were really kicking in. I didn't even care when a steady stream of beer dribbled down my fur.

"You like pancakes?"

"Sure."

"Give me ten minutes."

I headed down to the basement hoping to find a bathroom. There wasn't one, but there was an impressive collection of cigarette lighters. The Camel lighters alone were notable enough: more than a dozen of them in the shape of cigarette boxes, all cleverly concealing flints and starters. But there were also Coca-Cola bottles, a Noid, a rubber ducky, a Singer sewing table, a Polaroid camera, a bronzed fist flipping the bird, the Statue of Liberty, the lower half of a naked woman, a dozen various guns, pretzel, shampoo bottle, deck of cards, gunship, airplane, lipstick—it went on forever, shelf after shelf, hundreds of them.

"Pretty cool, huh? My pride and joy."

Mr. Truitt stood behind me, lighting up his own cigarette with, I couldn't help but notice, a cheap plastic neon purple lighter you find at gas stations. "Go ahead, grab one."

I lifted the Statue of Liberty and fingered its dull metal surface, wiping away a coating of dust.

"Cool," I muttered.

"Yeah." He cast his eyes lovingly over the entire collection. "You ain't seen nothing yet. C'mere."

He led me to a closet and undid a padlock to open it up, revealing a dozen or so rifles. "Some of these aren't even legal," he said. He handed one to me. I'd never held a gun in my life, but I cradled it as if I had vast experience with firearms and whistled my admiration. I was surprised by its heft and surprised also by how good it felt in my hands and how a feeling washed over me that I might like to blow something away.

"Watch it, friend," Mr. Truitt said, gently steering the mouth of the rifle away from his face. "You never want to aim a gun at someone's head, got it?"

"Yeah, sorry."

He took the gun from my hands and led me upstairs to the kitchen where a stack of pancakes awaited me. We sat down, me still in my beaver suit, Benny's head at the end of the table, watching us.

I rubbed my eyes: This is where Michelle ate her meals—breakfast in the morning, snacks after school, at night before bed. How many times I had wondered what Michelle was

doing at the moment I was thinking about her, on a Saturday night, or Tuesday morning, at a table just like this one, and what it looked like, smelled like, sounded like. Here was my answer. To my amazement, I had gotten so much of it right. I hadn't pictured the precise plastic fruit magnets on the fridge, but something like them. I hadn't stretched my imagination far enough to hear the exact squeak of the cabinets when her dad retrieved a glass or the jangle of kitchen implements when her dad slid open a drawer, but I was close. This mundane kitchen, where, edging toward midnight, Mr. Truitt and I sat down to pancakes and beer, was more or less how I imagined it was. But where I'd been way off was in the absence of some special glow, some celestial force that followed Michelle Truitt wherever she went. In my sweet imagination, I had always seen her moving from room to room, bed to bath to kitchen, cloaked in a sort of glow, a pillow of divine light and energy that delivered her, in all of her beautiful, sexy, sad glory to the same school building where I went. If only I could spend just one day with her, I thought, just one day inside that house of hers, that magical palace, then maybe I would understand what drew me to her in such an intractable, unknowable way. But it was clear it would, at least for now, remain a mystery. The house had an aura to it, for sure, as I'd imagined it had. But it was composed chiefly of a thin sheen of cigarette smoke.

"Eat up son," Mr. Truitt said.

I shoveled a forkful of pancakes into my mouth and grunted appreciation.

Michelle walked into the kitchen. She took in the scene of me and her dad eating pancakes together and glared at us both.

"What are you still doing here?"

"Hey, little lady," Mr. Truitt said, and glanced at me. I figured he would have still been pissed at her for the party, but instead he just smiled. It was a gloating smile as if he and his sullen teenaged daughter were instead some old married couple engaged in a long-running war and he had just won the latest battle. She exhaled loudly and marched back upstairs. I had to restrain myself from following her. I wanted to try and salvage something—she had kissed me, after all. I wanted to tell her that none of this was my fault and that I was on her side. I'd been conscripted against my will.

"Don't mind her. She can be real bitchy when she gets her mind to."

"I really should get going," I said.

"Nah, stay. Hang out. After we eat, we'll head downstairs and watch TV."

"My parents will worry."

"What's your number?"

"Huh?"

"Your phone number. I'll call home for you. Smooth things out."

I gave him the number, relieved that my mom would no doubt insist I get home right away and I'd have no choice but to leave. I ate the last of my pancakes while Mr. Truitt walked into the other room clutching the phone. Not two minutes later, he returned.

"All good. You can sleep here," he said.

"What?"

"Talked to your mom. No problem. I explained everything."

I would be sleeping in the same house as Michelle Truitt, so maybe things weren't dead. But she was upstairs steaming and Mr. Truitt was claiming me for his own and before I could even think to protest or ask how on earth he managed to convince my mother that it was a good idea for me to sleep over in some man's house she had never met, he was whisking me to the basement and turning on the TV.

“So, why were you getting your ass kicked?”

“Michelle kissed me and Derek got pissed.”

“I wouldn’t worry about him. Or her. She’s got a different boyfriend every week.”

I felt something warm and nauseating rising in me, as if Benny was rotting from the inside out, infecting me. I was drunk now, true, but it was something else: a sudden, radiating anger.

“You know,” I said, feeling very far away from myself, “Maybe you should be nicer to her. Maybe a little love from her dad might go a long way and then she’d want to be with one guy and not a different one every week.”

I waited for him to punch me or light my fur on fire or take one of his guns and put it against the side of my head. Instead, he sucked on his cigarette and then jammed it into an overflowing ashtray. He downed a few more sips of beer. “Probably shoulda let old Derek pound you into dust,” he muttered.

He clapped his hand, hard, on the back of my neck. “You sure know it all, don’t you? But trust me on this one—” He opened another can of beer and its fizz-pop echoed through the room. He slurped up the foam. “One day, you’ll wake up in a place like this and you’ll realize you don’t know a damned thing. Not until it’s too late to do anything about it.”

He handed me another beer and I sipped at it even though I was already feeling a roiling in my gut. His hands were rough, covered in calluses and stained a black at the edges of his fingers. The blackness was lodged under his nails, which were chipped and shattered and in the case of one finger, split right down the middle.

“I’m gonna help you out, son. You ever hear of table rasa?” he asked.

“Tabula rasa?”

“*Blank slate*. That’s the key, son. That is the key to life. Every morning, every single day, you got to look at it and say, ‘Okay, table rasa, blank slate.’ New day and all that shit. And then make something of it. You do that, hell, you’ll never have regrets.” He swept his arm around the room, taking in the lighters and the rifles and the desiccated carcasses of stink bugs and the quarter inch coating of dust. “You think this stuff just showed up here? It takes work.” He held his beer can aloft like a scepter. “Table Rasa!” he shouted.

“Shut up!” came a muffled reply, working its way through the heat vents.

I looked up toward the voice, toward Michelle, up there, as if in heaven. Mr. Truitt ignored it and turned on the TV. Having no other option, I settled in to watch. It was a reality show that pitted two families against one another in some kind of insane physical competition. It was pretty stupid and the rules were hard to follow, but that might have just been me. I couldn’t concentrate. Michelle was two floors away.

Somewhere along the line I dozed off, and then woke with a start. On the TV, there was a video loop of a swollen river churning brown and muddy with a group of goats overtaken by the flow, paddling like mad, trying desperately to keep their noses above the water, going under and then popping back up, their eyes wild with panic.

Mr. Truitt was asleep and snoring, his hand still gripping a beer can. I tiptoed to the middle level, and then up several stairs. I strained to hear something, anything, coming from Michelle’s bedroom. I stood there a long time, listening, hoping. A creak of bed. A sleepy sigh. Otherwise, nothing.

In the kitchen, I found a notepad and a pencil and started to write my thanks to the both of them for a memorable evening. I planned to prop it against Benny’s good ear and leave the head there, my gift to the Truitts. But I wound up leaving the note blank.

It was that moment just before sunrise when one side of the sky hints orange and the other, opposite, still holds the traces of stars. It was summer. High school was over. My future was laid out in front of me in a seemingly endless flow of terrifying opportunity. I was walking home, where my parents were. But they had largely done their job and I would be gone soon enough. To where, I wasn't sure. But I knew I'd be gone—someplace without a basement, far away from swollen rivers.

The heat condensed in the air, placing a stamp on the new day. I was still buzzed and sleep deprived and yet I felt good. I stripped out of my costume and, in sweat-soaked t-shirt and shorts, walked toward home, the costume draped over my forearm. The first stand of bushes I passed, I tossed the remains of Benny into it and kept on.

Workers had placed four orange cones on each edge of a sidewalk segment where it had recently been re-cemented. The tips of the cones caught the day's first light. But it was still inky enough outside that the morning felt like mine alone.

I scrawled my name in the cement with a stick. It had barely hardened at all and the going was easy. I was even able to add a nice little flourish to the last letter and underline the entire thing. Then I tossed the stick aside and moved on.

But I hardly got a hundred feet before I turned around and went back, where I wrote Michelle's name, too, right next to mine.

Shivers

I started working at Shivers ice cream shop in April, midway through my last semester at community college and just before I was set to transfer to a university halfway across the country. I'd finally gotten my crap together and lived up to the academic potential that had always eluded me. I'm not sure what it was; laziness, I guess. Or boredom. A rupture in my parents' marriage, maybe. Who knew? But I'd grown bored of being bored and the prospect of working at a place like Shivers for the rest of my life made me get my act together and finally apply myself.

Not that it was all bad. I worked most nights with Sara, a high school junior who wore purple lipstick and plaid skirts; she seemed to be trying to effect some sort of hybrid goth/schoolgirl thing that would have looked stupid on most people. But Sara managed. She carried off with effortless cool the nose ring and Tigger tattoo in the space just behind her ear. She was also wicked smart and really sweet. I'd miss her.

There was little else to miss. My parents had split up years earlier. I'd stayed with my mom and lately she and her boyfriend Hank were spending every minute with each other and were as nauseating as teenagers. They were talking about in moving in together. It was time for me to flee.

I was grateful that my last night at Shivers was slow. It gave me and Sara time to sit and talk instead of the usual assembly line operation we had to employ: one of us yelled out orders, the other ran like mad to fill them, and then we'd swap, carrying towers of cones, whipping up milkshakes, refilling the toppings tins.

But on this night, a combination of fog, rain, and cold front put the temps in the low 60s. Lots of our traffic came from a nearby pool and that day it had closed after a round of thunderstorms. Clearly, people just wanted to hunker down at home.

So Sara and I sat on the counters and let our legs swing and counted down the minutes until closing time. We talked about boys—well, I did mostly, giving her my usual lament about how utterly unsatisfying they were, how they simply didn't know a thing and the only men who were probably worth anything were no doubt too old for me anyway. I'd recently broken up with my boyfriend Darren, mostly because I never felt all that particularly excited when I was around him. I figured that was a condition endemic to the long-married and to feel that way already—well . . .

"You should expand your horizons," Sara said. "I don't even think in terms of male or female. No binaries for me. I'm open to whatever comes my way."

"Yeah, well, I like guys," I muttered.

It was another way I felt like I belonged to a different generation than Sara; she seemed so much more liberated than I was. Or maybe she simply hadn't been disappointed too many times yet.

As we ticked toward closing time, we told each other I love you and promised to keep in touch. Her plan was to head to Yale the following fall, though she was considering taking a year to travel around Southeast Asia instead.

"I envy you," I said. "You have your whole life in front of you."

"You act like you're eighty years old. You're, like, three years older than me."

"Four, actually."

"I stand corrected. I'll call the retirement castle now."

She hopped off the counter. Her thick-soled shoes made a clopping sound that echoed through the store.

“What are you doing?”

She pointed at the empty sprinkles tin.

“No one’s coming in,” I said.

“You know how much I love this.” She tipped a bag of multi-colored sprinkles into the empty tin, listening with satisfaction to the sound of semi-solid food on metal, slowly subsumed by a smooth whoosh. I had to admit, it was a great sound.

“Here we go,” she said. She plunged a paper cup into the sprinkles. “God, I love that,” she cooed. “It’s like a shovel sinking into sand.”

“You are such a nerd,” I said.

Smiling, she grabbed the cup from the tin, full of sprinkles, and cocked her hand back as if threatening me.

The door flung open, bells clanging like mad, and a guy came flying through, skidding and then tumbling onto the floor. I let out a screech and when he leapt to his feet, Sara tossed the sprinkles at him.

“Hey!” he yelled.

They were all over his hair. A bunch adhered to his face. They lined the collar of his shirt and lodged in the cracks near his eyes, some in his ears.

“What did you do that for?”

Sara muttered a half-apology, though she still held the cup in front of her like a loaded gun. I knew why she’d reacted that way; we were both still on edge because of what had happened a week earlier when some guy came in and ordered two scoops in a cup with gummy worm toppings. While there wasn’t anything that stood out about him, after five minutes, two cops came in and grabbed him. He put his hands behind his back like he was expecting it and the three of them walked out without a word. It freaked us out. Even after they were long gone and his ice cream had turned to chowder, the worms sunk to the bottom but peeping their heads out of the melted goo, neither one of us wanted to touch it, as if we’d be implicated in his crime or accused of tampering with evidence or something. Eventually, I wrapped about twenty napkins around it and threw it out.

We just stood there a moment—me, Sara, and the sprinkle man—waiting for someone to make the next move.

“Hey, Joanna Benson,” he said, looking right at me. “I know you.”

“Oh, my God.” Of course. I knew him too: Sebastian Fine. Though it had been awhile since I’d last seen him, I’d known him maybe longer than I’d known anyone else in the world.

When my parents were still together, they used to throw big neighborhood parties three, four times a year. The Fines were neighbors, so Sebastian and his mom always came.

Our basement was one giant playroom, stocked with my childhood toys. The adults used to steer their kids there, mentally locking the door behind them. As I got older, I better understood the appeal of this set up: the adults could be adults without the insinuations of their kids, which allowed them, paradoxically, to act like kids again—drinking, yelling, flirting—and we kids could pretend to be adults, making our own rules and acting in all kinds of forbidden ways. Punishments, when they came, were usually pretty tame because exasperated parents had to first sort out competing versions of what had precipitated this one crying or that one bleeding, before giving it up and declaring that so long as no one was dead or maimed, we needed to work

these things out on our own, which was everyone's desire in the first place. It was great, all around.

But not so much for Sebastian. He hated the basement. I called him on it once, as he sat upstairs with the adults, tethered to his mom's side. "Why don't you come down with us?" I asked, a glass of lemonade in my hand.

His reply: "Well, Joanna, I don't so much mind being in the gutter, but it feels like I'm the only one looking at the stars."

"You're weird," I said before his mother hauled him off to a corner to discuss the finer points in the art of making friends.

When his mom forced him back downstairs, he floated along the periphery, observing, like the scientist he would become. He stared at me a lot, but it was never creepy or possessive. I found it endearing. But mostly he watched the boys. They had no idea how to check their instincts. If a boy coveted a toy someone else was playing with, he might simply walk over and snatch it, at which point the whines and high-pitched squeals would break out. They were little different from chimpanzees, really. All impulse and only hierarchy to check it.

All the while, Sebastian set up camp in a corner, then moved for a better view, then again for a new perspective, composing in his endlessly working brain an entire scatology of this subspecies: the human boy. Then, getting his fill or finding himself on the receiving end of juvenile taunts, Sebastian would flee back to the adults on the upper level. Often, I followed, intrigued. Looking back on it now, I realize that I was always intrigued by Sebastian; he was just so . . . *weird*, so thoroughly in his own world and head, so completely unlike anyone I'd ever known.

"Maaaaaa," Sebastian whined. I stood next to him, watching. That was another reason I often followed him; there was something in the way his mother interacted with him that fascinated me. Part of it I found abnormal, even then. The other part made me envious; she lived for him. My own parents would never engage with me the way she did with him. I think this made me a more independent person and that was probably my parents' goal. But when I was a kid, I saw only lack of interest. It stung.

As for Sebastian, Mrs. Fine would assure him that with the right kind of tutelage one day he would use his prodigious mental powers for the common good. His name would be on that rarified list that was shorthand for righteousness and selflessness: Gandhi, Salk, Wallenberg, Schindler . . . Sebastian Fine.

She scooped him up. "What is it, my dearest?"

"I wanna go."

"I want you to stay. You need to learn how to endure all kinds of people. You will find a special coterie—one day—who share your interests and your intellect. And it's important you get the necessary socialization now."

Sebastian started to protest, but then collected himself. "I *have* been doing some interesting observations," he said.

"You see? All that will pay off. I promise. Besides . . ." and here she jammed a teasing finger into Sebastian's ribs. She turned him and pointed in my direction: "It looks like Joanna's going back down." She delivered "Joanna" in a sing-songy tone that made the implication clear: he was in love with me.

A lot of the boys used to scramble for my attention, climbing over one another in a parade line to give me various unusable gifts: hockey pucks, dinosaur stickers, scuffed lacrosse

balls, new hats and gloves. This happened quite a bit; I think it was because of my blond hair and, eventually, the fact that my breasts started growing before the other girls.

But Sebastian never did that. This endeared him to me, especially when I entered that cruel phase of childhood where the other girls started hating me for the attention I got. I liked having him around. He treated me normally. Besides, whatever I wanted to do, we did. He was the smartest kid—strike that, he was the smartest *person*—I ever knew, and that included our teachers and parents, but when it came to playing together, he never seemed to have any ideas of his own and was thrilled to do whatever I suggested.

Even as we got older and I came to better understand the implications of his interest in me, I just couldn't give him up. This was tested, though, the time Mrs. Fine came over and asked to speak with my mom while I was shooed off to my bedroom. Of course, I just sat on the stairs, out of view but able to hear them whispering in the kitchen.

Mrs. Fine's story: she and Sebastian were in the car and Sebastian was being very quiet. He was, according to Mrs. Fine, giving off his "thinking waves" again, and she knew not to disturb him. She glanced occasionally in the rear view, taking in his knitted brow. I'd seen that brow and knew what she was talking about. Even at ten years old, it was furrowed with the depth of a middle-ager who'd spent decades wincing against the sun. I used to imagine that his eyebrows would one day spontaneously burst into flames.

"Mama?" he finally said.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"That Joanna sure is pretty, isn't she?"

Here my mom chuckled. Mrs. Fine did, too. "Sometimes, I allow myself to forget that my son is still, in the end, just a boy."

"And, apparently, a rather healthy one," my mom added.

"Yes, well . . ." There was a long silence. I tensed up, ready to spring into my bedroom. But after a few throat clearings, Mrs. Fine continued: "Well, that wasn't all. He said something else, which is why I'm here."

"Is everything okay?" my mom asked.

"Well . . . he said to me, 'Mama, I think I want to put a baby inside Joanna'."

I had only the vaguest notion of how babies resided in people and I imagined it had something to do with swallowing them because of the big bellies women got. Whatever it was, I knew it probably wasn't something very pleasant and it wasn't something I wanted to have happen to me. Would I get a choice in the matter? Was Mrs. Fine asking for my mom's blessing?

"I was shocked to hear this. The steering wheel slipped through my fingers," she said.

Apparently, she wound up careening into a rather big roadside rock. The smashing sound had been awful. The tire was toast. But it was more than that. She could see the bends in the strut as she struggled with the spare. All the while Sebastian stood over her pleading to help.

"So what did you do?" my mom asked. If I didn't know better, I could have sworn she was holding back giggles.

"What *could* I do? I changed the tire best I could. Thank goodness we weren't too far from home. But I had to get the entire front end realigned. Cost me a thousand dollars."

Looking back on it now, I'm sure my mom thought that Mrs. Fine was asking for help paying for the repairs. But instead, after a long uncomfortable silence, Mrs. Fine simply said, "Well, I just thought you should know." And that was that.

I ran back to my room where I could hear my mother's howling laughter after Mrs. Fine left. I didn't know what to think. But I could hear my father's oft-repeated comment, back when

we had our parties and he watched Sebastian toddle with his odd gait down our sidewalk: “That kid is either going to rule the world someday or turn out to be a serial killer.”

Poor Sebastian. I could imagine Mrs. Fine at the scene of the accident letting him have it. “You see what you’ve done? Do you see?” she would have asked while holding out her hands, covered in blood and grease and probably also suffering a horribly eviscerated nail. He likely imagined that nail being pressed into his eye and, even more likely, felt that he deserved it. No less than torture would befit him for upsetting his mother.

I could see her driving the rest of the way home at half the speed limit with the flashers on, terrified she’d attached the spare incorrectly. And no doubt the sound of those flashers would become ingrained as an unease so deep and unrelenting that Sebastian would never be able to hear it again and not think about the moment when he confided to his mother about what he wanted to do to me and she ran off the road. That was how Sebastian was.

As for my mother, she never brought it up to me and no doubt she was simply amused by the whole thing. But I was just plain confused. Confused and intrigued. Either way, it wasn’t enough to make me want to give him up.

One summer afternoon I ran over to the Fines when I heard voices in the backyard. I walked around the house, but stopped when I heard Sebastian. There was something about eavesdropping that way, some allowance that told me that listening, unnoticed, might help me better understand the boy who wanted to “put a baby in me.”

“I don’t know the rituals, Mama,” Sebastian was saying. “I don’t value the same things the other boys value.”

“Give me an example of what you’re talking about.”

“Roger Metheny, down the street . . .”

“Yes, I know the Methenys. Father smokes cigars—can smell that man from down the block. And the woman, Pam, smokes also, like a chimney. Menthols. She blows it out of her nostrils like a dragon. Roger will most likely have carcinoma by his twelfth birthday.”

“You remember I played with him about three weeks ago.”

“Yes.”

“We were in the woods behind his house.”

“Yes.”

“I was pointing out the foliage. Especially interested in the leaves of one tree I couldn’t identify. The leaves were pandurate and . . .”

“Could be invasive. Was there only one?”

“That’s really beside the point.”

“Yes, sorry. Go ahead.”

“He had no interest. None. Just stood there and bit his nails and then asked if I was ‘queer’.”

“And you explained that such a term is derogatory?”

“I told him I was in love with Joanna Benson.”

Even though I knew this already, I still felt a weird flutter run up my chest. It wasn’t excitement, not like the kind I imagine you feel when you fall in love with someone for real. It was instead something unknown to me then, maybe that old feeling of figuring out whether my continued friendship with him was simply a bad idea, a prescription for his eventual heartbreak. But what else to do? Abandon him? That would hurt just as bad, if not worse. Besides, I liked him. For some crazy reason, I really liked him.

“And he responded?” Mrs. Fine asked.

“Who isn’t?”

“Right.”

“Well, he was bored. He kept suggesting we go back to his house and play *Grand Theft Auto*.”

“But the carcinogens in the house.”

“*And* it was a beautiful day. Anyway, I saw a turtle.”

“A turtle?”

“Yes. Eastern box turtle. Do you know that it’s the only turtle endemic to the state that can retract its entire body into its shell?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s true.”

“I believe you.”

“Roger asked me if he could have it.”

“And what did you say?”

“I said no. There were several reasons for this. One, that house . . .”

“With the smoke.”

“It’s an unhealthy environment for any living creature. I questioned his ability to provide the proper living conditions for the turtle. But most importantly, how could I confer ownership? It wasn’t mine to give.”

“And then what happened?”

“He told me that if I gave it to him, he’d be my best friend.”

“And?”

“I thought that was preposterous. I don’t know how one trades a turtle for the promise of best friendship. It doesn’t make sense to me. But more to the point I had no faith that he’d follow through. It seemed a pretty obvious ruse to simply get the turtle. So I told him I was going to put the turtle back on the ground so it could go to its natural home.”

“And how did he take that?”

“He snatched the turtle and ran off.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I suspect the turtle is deceased by now.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I haven’t seen Roger since.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a big loss.”

“It’s the larger point, Mama. I just don’t know how these boys’ brains work.”

I sympathized with Sebastian on this. I didn’t either—I still don’t, if I’m honest.

I didn’t see Sebastian much after that summer. He went to a special school for 7th and 8th grade, then was home schooled for a year, and by the time he started attending the high school where I went, we had been separated too long, what with my parents’ divorce and my moving across town. Plus, we weren’t in the same classes; actually, he wasn’t in the same classes as anyone. He had his own schedule, a series of independent studies: Abstract Algebra, Real and Complex Analysis, Integrative Biology, Human Developmental and Regenerative Biology—stuff the rest of us had no hope of understanding. Still, I always tried to say hello when we passed in the hall. But he had a way of moving as if he was either fleeing from something or racing to something and he only ever managed a quick, distracted, “Hey,” before he was off, leaving me behind to wilt under the looks of my friends who wondered why the hell I was even acknowledging the existence of a spazz like that.

The answer, but one I never actually said out loud, involved some weird, unnamable thing that stayed with me through all those years, this idea that I might like to deflower him, give him that huge break, that I would be doing something sweet and kind for him—but it might just be something I liked, too. I had to admit that. Of course, I never did it. I mean, what if he rejected me? I couldn't even imagine. Plus, when it became clear that he was going places, that the brain he had would carry him around the world, well, what did he need me for anyway? I was floundering through high school, scraping together a B- average, getting stoned in the woods with my friends, and letting greasy boys feel me up in my house before my father got home from work.

He won some huge international science award when he was sixteen. That didn't help his social standing, but I thought it was pretty cool. All those idiots who made fun of him, calling him Poindexter and pinning the heel of his shoe when he walked so he'd step right out of his sneakers, it was clear that they were never going to amount to a tenth of what Sebastian would.

He was interviewed on the local news. I was surprised and impressed by his poise. He looked dapper in a collared shirt. I recognized the plaid couch in his living room. The lighting was good and he kept eye contact with the reporter, who dutifully nodded and smiled at the appropriate moments as Sebastian explained the genesis of his discovery: "Currently, electronic medical implants like my uncle's pacemaker rely on batteries, and these batteries require surgical replacement. So I was thinking, why not instead run these batteries off the body's normal thermal energy? Nanocrystals can easily transform into efficient semiconductors."

Ardent reporter nodding.

"Quantum dots produce highly efficient heat engines that have super-high efficiencies because of their chemical potential energy."

More nodding.

"The body has natural temperature gradients, and if one implants a subcutaneous chip set to harvest this energy, it can power the implant naturally."

The reporter, clearly having little idea what was just said to her, turned to the camera to sign off, pumping up, once again, the genius in our midst, the local hero who would no doubt go on to do more truly great things.

And now that hero, several years removed, was standing in the harsh light of Shivers shedding candy sprinkles from his collar.

"Sebastian," I gasped.

"Hi, Joanna."

"Sebastian, this is Sara. Sara, Sebastian Fine."

"Sorry I chucked sprinkles at you. You scared me."

"I thought you guys might be closing and I'd miss it."

"Yes, well, you're right." Sara grabbed a broom and dustpan and headed out from behind the counter, but Sebastian intercepted her and did the sweeping himself.

Sara and I exchanged looks. I smiled. She raised a pierced eyebrow.

"Hey, what are you doing tonight?" I asked. "I'm about to get off."

Sebastian shrugged.

"Come with me."

Sara and I hugged goodbye and Sebastian gave her a formal handshake before he and I walked out into the thickening night.

"You want me to follow you?" he asked.

"No. I'll drive you back later. I'm only a few minutes away."

As I drove to my house, I couldn't stop smiling. There was something about having him in my car—this kid, this guy I'd known forever and yet somehow never really known.

"How's your mom?" he asked.

"Good. Got a new boyfriend. He's nice enough. They're in Florida for the week."

"Oh."

"And your mom?"

"Same old mom."

We passed a playground where I used to play, where one of the neighborhood boys had all his birthday parties. I couldn't recall if Sebastian had been at any. I suppose not, as by then we were no longer neighbors. It all seemed so long ago and far away.

Next was the community pool: a tiny affair, one lifeguard. I dated that lone lifeguard one summer, but it didn't last. Darren turned out to be a bit of an idiot; he was a sophomore at the local college and I was pretty certain he was carrying on an affair with a middle-aged woman who tanned poolside every day. Frankly, I didn't care if he did or didn't. He, like every other boy I'd dated, eventually bored me.

We passed a field where I used to play soccer. I did it for years; it was the one place I felt like I didn't have to be just a girl, where I could be a little warrior and sweat and grunt and get covered in mud. My dad was our coach and he loved it as much as I did. I kept it up through high school even. By contrast, I couldn't recall one single instance when I saw Sebastian doing anything even remotely athletic. He was always of the mind, never the body.

"So, what are you up to these days? Haven't seen you on TV."

"Working on trying to better understand liver disease."

"Really?"

"It's boring."

"I'm sure it's not."

"I mean that you'll think it's boring."

"I'm sure I won't."

"Well, okay: The foundational work was easy enough; the livers of A1AT-deficient patients contain accumulations of mutant A1AT-Z cells, which cause scarring, inflammation, even cancer. If one could slow or stop the degradation of A1AT-Z cells, the toxic accumulation might not occur." His hands flailed, suggesting the vastness of his subject by placing them far apart, then the microscopic nature of the elements he was dealing with by cupping them together. "The harder part was the discovery of two taggers. FBG1 and FBG2, proteins responsible for the degradation of both non-aggregated and aggregated A1AT-Z. Ultimately, if some pharmaceutical company developed a drug that would encourage interaction of FBG1 and FBG2 with A1AT-Z to degrade the toxic protein, the result might be therapies to treat liver disease."

I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Anyway . . . that's what I'm working on."

I pulled onto my street. The entire neighborhood was in darkness. "Huh. Storm must have knocked out the power."

I parked and we headed inside. Out of habit I flipped the light switch—nothing.

"Hey, you never did get your ice cream," I said. I led him to the kitchen where I got us both a bowl of chocolate ice cream.

"Better shut that freezer door," he said. "You don't know when the power's coming back on."

"Right."

I fished out a candle from one of the drawers and lit it and we ate our ice cream by candlelight. Occasionally, we caught eyes and smiled and stifled laughs in between bites. I noticed a dark mole near his hairline. I hadn't remembered him having that.

"Thanks," he said, letting the spoon rattle against the empty bowl.

I took the bowls and placed them in the sink. "Come on." I grabbed the candle and his hand. I led him to my bedroom where I closed the door behind us.

I placed the candle on my desk and it guttered a few times, throwing wild shadows across the walls.

I removed my clothes down to my underwear while Sebastian watched, the tips of his hair darkening with sweat. "Your turn," I said.

He slowly took off his clothes, keeping his eyes on me, until he had on only one sock and his boxer shorts, which strained under the force of what looked to be a rather well-endowed and wholly engorged penis. His chest was concave, each rib clearly defined even in the half-darkness.

I took his hand and we lay down in bed. He gave off a heat like I imagine animals in extreme distress or arousal do. I tried to calm him by running my hand over his and then through his hair. I kissed him on the tip of his nose and then plucked a brown sprinkle from his forehead which, I realized, was the "mole" I'd seen in the kitchen. I put it in my mouth, where it slowly dissolved.

He gulped.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"I'm happy to see you," I said.

I edged up against him and wrapped my arms around his skinny chest and then nuzzled my head into the crook of his neck. I had to adjust from the sharpness of his collarbone, but eventually I found a comfortable position and it felt almost as if I was a missing puzzle piece, so I wrapped myself tighter around him. I wanted to hold on this way before the inevitable pawing and squeezing and urgency that I'd experienced with other boys. They were forever grabbing, roughly, over-eager, as if I was the only girl they'd ever been with before or would ever be with again.

But Sebastian simply hugged me back, and so we settled in, quietly, sweetly.

We passed an hour this way without saying a word until I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew I was opening my eyes to find him still staring at me, his twiggy arms wrapped around me. I smiled at him and then got up to put my clothes back on. After he did the same, we walked outside into the inky blackness of a summer night in a neighborhood without electricity. The crickets took up their song and we walked, hand in hand, to my car.

When we got back to Shivers, he got out and climbed into his mom's old beaten up Chevy. The door growled in protest as he closed it and he shot me an embarrassed look.

I inhaled deeply and waggled my fingers at him before I drove away, down the street and toward a new life. I would be leaving soon and he would be gone soon, too, I was sure, off to rule the world.

The School Bus No Longer Stops in Front of the House

(new girl, who will be Locked In girl)- this girl is Sara from Shivers; work into below; he has to call her Sara at some point; she went to Yale, traveled around East Asia: Sara, a high school junior who wore purple lipstick and plaid skirts; she seemed to be trying to effect some sort of hybrid goth/schoolgirl thing that would have looked stupid on most people. But Sara managed. She carried off with effortless cool the nose ring and Tigger tattoo in the space just behind her ear. She was also wicked smart and really sweet. I'd miss her. Her plan was to head to Yale the following fall, though she was considering taking a year to travel around Southeast Asia instead.

My girlfriend Sara left me four days before my uncle's funeral.

"Will you at least come with me to the service?" I asked.

But the deceased wasn't really my uncle—rather, a longtime family friend—and, she reminded me, she was no longer my girlfriend.

It was, unsurprisingly, a somber affair. Worse, I didn't really know anyone. There were some familiar faces, sure, but they were familiar only in the peculiarities that stay lodged in one's memory: a droopy eyelid, a cleaved chin, some wicked palsy or unfortunate birthmark in the shape of New Zealand. I left without saying anything to anyone, my heart in a thousand pieces because she was not there with me.

We could have made fun of the guy with the awful toupee. Then, sitting in a café afterward, we could have upbraided ourselves for being at a funeral and making fun of a guy with an awful toupee. Instead, I came alone and left alone.

I still had my flashers on and the neon orange FUNERAL tag hanging from my rear view mirror when I pulled away from the motorcade, taking a left when everyone else went straight through a red light, respectful drivers waiting out their greens. There was a slight delay when the driver behind me stopped, started to follow, decided better of it, and then went on through.

I didn't look back for very long, didn't want to see the faces in that car gaping at me in confusion.

I drove all the way home with my flashers on, still with the FUNERAL tag hanging, passing through a succession of small towns as if I was the president, everyone giving right of way to the lost sheep who'd been separated from the procession and was struggling to make its way back. The blinking lights, the neon orange: they gave me license and I took hold of it like a possession rightfully mine, something I would not relinquish.

Sara had left me, and everyone else was respecting my mourning.

I would not give that up so easily.

First, it was bocci. She joined a league. But then she stopped going. It hurt her wrist, she complained. She tried to learn Russian and then when she gave that up, she took up painting. I teased her, sweetly, but she didn't laugh. While she painted, I played video games, hyper-aware of my swerving, jerking body English. In another room, she swerved and jerked, too, paintbrush in hand, a rainbow of droplets splattered across her jeans and t-shirt and face and hair, an enormous canvas the recipient of her angry strokes, each one an exorcism of something deep I never knew, a chipping away of psychic bruises while I blew away swamp monsters or swarthy terrorists or raced through the streets of Monte Carlo in a Bugatti Chiron.

She stayed up late and was grumpy in the morning and I grew frustrated and angry.

Her expression turned hard, her body sharp.

“You don’t understand me,” she spat.

“How can I? You’re a different person every week.”

She smiled—a weary, end-of-the-line smile that said *You’re hopeless*. “Every person on earth is a thousand different people, every hour of every day. Can’t you see that?”

I shook my head, out of both genuine confusion and obstinate consternation. I didn’t understand it then, hardly understand it now. But I’m working on it. I do understand that her belief in that idea is likely the reason I’m here and she’s somewhere else. But it has always been this way with us, even before we knew each other: when I was lifeguarding in a one-guard pool, twelve hours a day through a broiling heat wave that turned the pool water into a sauna, she was traveling around Southeast Asia by herself. That was just before we met.

And now she’s gone again, and I don’t know where to. I imagine this is what war wounded feel like—some essential part of yourself has been ripped out of you. It’s like oxygen, a thing you feel more in absence than presence.

I sit in the backyard of my house. It’s a sublime day: early October, the sky an eggshell blue. Suggestions of cloud are strung like cotton candy across the horizon. A lone jet trails a stream of white. The maples have started turning. The grass is a deep green, fed by recent rains. I wiggle my toes in the coolness and feel the slither of tears falling down my cheeks. I tell myself that I’m crying from the beauty of it all, the exquisite perfection of an early autumn day. But I know that isn’t it. I find myself crying, weeping even, more and more these days. Crying for the flattened fox at the end of the lane. Crying for my mother, who lives alone and who always seems to be in pain but who smiles to cover it up, who always says, “Nothing” and “I’m fine” when I ask her what’s wrong. Crying during AARP commercials, stupid movies, Subaru ads.

Crying because I’m crying. Crying when I hear “Dear Prudence.” Crying preemptively: for the inevitable day that the smell of her will have dissipated completely from my home, for the day I will not be able to recall her so clearly anymore: the fleck of hazel in her eyes, the taste of her hair, the sharp outlines of the Tigger tattoo behind her left ear. I will forget her phone number. The digits will swim in my mind’s eye, but they will not line up. They will displace one another, skip spots in line, disperse altogether.

I listen to country music. I hate country music. I imagine living in some godforsaken patch of nowhere—some place Nebraska or Wyoming, some place achingly beautiful in its insistent, defiant desolation. A place to love for its very hardness. But it was *us* I used to see there. Now, only me, and I can’t imagine anything worse. I used to see its hardscrabble pioneering allure. I see now a man alone, wiping a dish, illuminated by a single dusty bulb above a sink, a shadow, a silhouette, nothingness, a curiosity and caution for some solitary ranging coyote.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the scuttling against the wall as if something is fleeing. I’d opened the closet door and there it went, a wispy mass picking its way along the toeboards: three of Sara’s hairs enwrapped in dust. I carry it to the trash, biting my lip. I try to deposit it, but it clings to me. As I shake my hand, it wraps itself tighter around my fingers. I smile at this and then extract the three hairs, putting them on a desk, before letting the dustball fall easily into the can. I tell myself that it’s a joke, that I will keep these hairs and make a doll of it, ha ha. But then I spend the next six hours scouring every centimeter of the house for more hair. When I’m done—the corner behind the headboard was a goldmine—I’ve accumulated a fist sized sponge of

her hair, which I keep on top of the desk. It's a joke, I tell himself. Just a joke. But it's a joke I will not tell anyone else.

I sleep. But it isn't really sleep. Rather, a fitful battle against memory and ghost.

In the morning, bleary, I grab my funeral tag and drive to my mother's with the flashers on. Everyone gives me the right of way.

I bring her an envelope of legal documents: condo association rules and regs for the beach house, tax forms for renting it out. I've promised to head down there, clean it up, make sure everything's in order after the rental season. But I haven't gone. We were supposed to have gone together. Sara and me. And now she's gone. I can't bring myself to go.

"I promise, Ma," I say. "I'm just really busy now."

"With *what*?" she asks, but I don't answer. I'm half out the door, my mother's handicapped tag in my hands.

I have no food at home, at least nothing I would eat. Instead, it's cans of this and boxes of that, but nothing in the fridge. I haven't eaten much since she's been gone. I go to the grocery store, the old one out in the dying part of town, where no one goes after dark. We used to shop together at the chichi place near the refurbished docks, the one that drove out most of the grocery stores everyone's parents and grandparents went to. I can't go there anymore. Not alone.

I park in the handicapped spot and put on my mother's tag. From there to the door, I drag my left foot behind me and curl three fingers on my left hand. But I forget to keep this up and by the time I leave the store, I've forgotten about it altogether and only remember after I've walked by my car four times because I haven't remembered where I parked. It was just to see, I tell himself. I wasn't trying to gain favor.

I return the tag to my mom—slip it under the door—and hurry home, ashamed of myself.

I set the groceries on the counter.

I go to throw away the funeral tag, but it slips from my hand and quavers its way in a series of perfect arcs until settling under the fridge. I take to the floor and spot a stray Cheerio next to the tag. It's pocked and covered in gray fur. Was it hers, the Cheerio? Did it roll off the counter as she ran through her morning, radio on, standing near the sink, eating cereal, hair up in a sloppy bun, and fuzzy pink socks in which she used to slide from room to room?

I place it in the butter slot in the fridge. The cold will keep it preserved.

The birds. They won't shut up. I slam shut the windows, cover my ears.

We were walking in the woods; it was our woods, and we visited in different seasons: Summer, when we'd gone further than we'd planned and lingered too long and the crowning trees blocked out the fading daylight and we stumbled over rocks and roots but came across glowing moss and diamonds of light in spider webs and water drops. It was a kind of impossible fantasy. Even without the moss, those woods were themselves a species of magic, a large deep tract somehow spared from dense civilization crowding every side.

Winter—it had snowed during the day but the night was still and not at all cold and we ran through the woods and hid from each other and found each other and the going was easy because there was a full moon, enough light to read by. We chased, we laughed; we were in love.

We came back in spring, listening to the birds, and when we returned home, she retrieved two glasses and a bottle of wine and dragged the Adirondack chairs to the lip of the lawn.

"God," she marveled. "How is it that one tiny creature can give the world such a beautiful gift?"

"What do you mean?"

“The birds. I mean, it’s just, so, beautiful.”

I sniggered. “They’re not doing it for our pleasure. When birds sing, it’s a warning; they’re protecting the nest.”

I’d heard something like that before, though I wondered then if that was true. Didn’t they sing to attract mates as well? And couldn’t a bird have a beautiful mating song and also a mean squawk for defense? In any case, I was certain there was at least some sliver of truth to it. I was sure these birds weren’t just happy creatures singing for our benefit. The world just didn’t work that way.

“What do you think? Only crows and blue jays are angry? And songbirds don’t care about their young?”

She didn’t say anything. Then she lifted herself off her chair and walked inside. The door shut behind her, first with a bang and then with a series of dying taps. The fading sunlight caught the lip of her wine glass. Rainbows swum and swirled in the clinging droplets, a strand of her saliva thickening it, combining all the elements of the universe I could ever want or need—sun, earth, liquid, her—before it slid along the inside of the glass and disappeared into dark purple depths. The sun left the glass, then the leaves, then the near side of the earth altogether and I sat in the gathering darkness and waited.

But she didn’t return. She never seems to return.

Eventually, something from one of the grocery bags drips off the counter. But still I sit on the couch, immovable.

Putting my hand on her stomach. That’s what I can’t forget. The warmth. The initial tensing of the skin to my touch, followed by the loosening. The trust. Then her hand on top of mine, without speaking. Below our hands, deep inside her, one day a new life. One we would have created.

We tried, once. We rolled the dice, ready. The school bus had just made its stop in front of the house, the little neighbor boy sprinting to the bifold door, a glove falling into the street, where it would be left behind, run over, dimpled with pebble and grime.

“So convenient,” she cooed. “Our little shaver will only have to run across the lawn to catch the bus.” And then we were in the bedroom, even before the growl of the bus’s engine had fully trailed off.

She looked up at me. “I can’t read your expression,” she said.

“Huh?”

“On your face. You look . . . I don’t know what it is. I’ve never seen you look that way.”

I stopped. “What way?”

“You look . . . guilty. You look like a boy who’s been caught stealing.”

I felt myself softening inside her.

She was on her elbows now, talking as if we were doing a crossword puzzle. “You look like you’re going to cry or explode or something.”

I lay back and stared at the ceiling, pulling the covers up to my neck.

I knew what it was. It was Amazement. Gratitude. Wonder. I was *inside* her. It was like some kind of miracle, to enter another human being. I supposed a woman could say the same thing, or the obverse. That she knows what it feels like to have someone inside her. But it seemed a pale comparison. I was the one with the winning proposition, being a man, the gifts bestowed upon me by nature and biological logistics. I was the one who, when she asked me to explain my expression, was making memories not for selfish future retrieval but because these memories: the feel of her rib cage as she inhaled, the sight of her dimples at the edges of her

spine—these I was committing to memory so that if nothing else in this life, I had that, and she was offering it up to me and I was flushed and alive with love and gratitude for it . . . this is why I looked like a dope, or whatever I looked like that she couldn't describe. I was happy. Pure happiness. That is what the look was.

But I couldn't explain myself and when she eventually got out of bed and put on her clothes, still I couldn't say anything. Because, yes, I had an evolutionary endpoint hanging from my body—lucky me—but the thousands of years of biology that led the universe to the edges of myself, were, I was realizing, subsumed entirely by one salient fact: Men also had hearts. And hearts could be shattered.

Sara'd abandoned a decent lot of her clothes. I'd called, texted, emailed: "You coming over to get your things?" She never responded. She already had a new boyfriend, I assumed; she may have had a new boyfriend even while she was still with me. Losing some clothes was, apparently, a small price to pay for extricating herself wholesale. I imagine her new boyfriend saying: "Forget that stuff. We'll go shopping and buy new clothes." I imagine her smiling at this, kissing him lightly on the lips. I remember when clothes, and food, and air seemed superfluous—nothing was necessary, not one single thing, when you were in love. Nothing, that is, apart from love.

I buy a wig. I put on one of her blouses. It's tight across the middle, not surprisingly, and I let out a few stitches. I pad the area at the breast. I put on some old jeans, smear my face with makeup after shaving with a straight razor.

I pick my spots carefully—coffee shops in the city's hipster enclaves, radical bookstores near the art college. A place named Alexandra's, after a Russian Communist revolutionary, where girls with severe haircuts and black horn-rimmed glasses and a penchant for plaid and safety pins glower over enormous coffee mugs and tasteless pastries. Sugar, apparently, is a bourgeoisie affectation. I enter the women's bathroom, but it's the women's bathroom only by default. There are two bathrooms, both labeled "gender neutral," but old habits and the faint remnants of "Men" and "Women" stenciled above each lintel still shadow the hasty paint job, which means one of them is, by default, for women, and the other for men.

The women in the bathroom do not treat me with alarm, or even curiosity, but rather with nods of solidarity. I make no show of hiding the fact that I'm standing above a toilet, the stall door open. It's as if they can tell that I'm not there to try and catch a glimpse of someone. And they're right: I'm in there to relieve myself, after all—nothing more.

And when I'm done, I leave, feeling absolutely no sense of accomplishment or enlightenment at all.

Back at home, it hits me as I walk through my front door: it sprints to my brain at full force. I snap up a pencil from the wired holder on the desk. I can picture pencils clamped between Sara's teeth so vividly that I expect them to still be wet with her saliva. But they're not. No teeth marks, either. I pick up another and then another. Each is missing its eraser—had she swallowed them?—and each smells of lead and hollow metal cups. But no indentations. I feel a bubbling rage inside me, melting quickly into despair. I want those teeth marks, need them. For proof. Proof that she'd lived there, had shared her life with me, had reverted to some kind of childishness when she put pencils between her teeth and bit down.

But maybe I'd imagined it; maybe I'd imagined everything.

I catch sight of myself in the mirror, a homely woman with a jutting Adam's apple staring back at me. I change my clothes and toss the wig in the garbage. I wipe away the makeup,

but it smudges, caked like clown paint. So I get into the shower, where the spray bats at the back of my hanging head. I reach for the shower gel and there, tucked behind extraneous bottles of various shampoos and conditioners, is her apple blossom shampoo. I inhale, as if the very essence of her is trapped inside. Again, deeply, and again, again until it smells like nothing anymore. I close it up, put it back. I will not allow any more of it, of her, to escape. I will save it until it molders.

We'd stumbled upon an old apple orchard, once, I can't recall where. Derelict, with apples already mush on the ground, worm-eaten and browned by sun and rain. But many still clung to branches and offered themselves like little miracles: splinters of yellow and red streaking rounded edges from stem to puckered bottom.

Even though it was clear that this orchard hadn't been tended, it felt like trespassing and at any moment there would materialize someone with a shotgun pointed at our chests. But that made it more exciting. Isn't that the very essence of love? Of paradise? And what is paradise anyway, but a place from which we can at any moment, for any transgression, be expelled?

So we picked our way quietly, marveling, and while I stood watch at the crest of a hill with a view of a valley beneath where I imagined a cabin hidden in the woods, a place sheltering a jealous or paranoid owner, Sara collected a dozen pristine apples and loaded up the hem of her dress. When I turned around and saw her like that, white sundress loaded with fruit, a smile as wide as the moon across her face, the incredible innocence of it—she may as well have been a six year-old—I couldn't breathe or swallow. Where in the Western world do women collect fruit in the hems of their dresses anymore?

It is this image: the fruit of the vine, the fruit of her, that wakes me at night, gasping, and all I can do is reach out, grab hold of something that isn't there. Awake, I think about: A harbor. We'd visited one once, together, some late fall day full of crisp sunshine that turned cold the moment the sun started to sink, a cruel reminder to savor and hold on, breathe deep the clang of boats, metal on metal, the wheeling gulls, faint faraway laughter, the feeling that you were in on something grand and yet so tiny, compressed into a square of Earth where she, and I, were together, fingers interlaced, steps synchronized.

How can the absence of a thing feel more a presence than even the presence of it ever did?

There was work to be done still.

I slip into my best suit and head to a cemetery to catch the funeral service of a Mr. Grady Templeton: world traveler, Francophile, and employee of C.S. Burton & Assoc. This, according to the obit that appeared in the *Post-Gazette*. I did not pick up a new funeral tag. I will no longer engage in that childishness. I am growing. I have, for example, considered and then rejected donning blackface and trying to gain entry to places I never otherwise go. *Will probably look like I have a disease*, I imagine. Instead, I go to the cemetery straight, the singular man I am.

When the coffin has been lowered and the mourners have gone away, I remain, watching three Latino men shovel on the dirt. I stay because of the unspoken mandate she had left me, some unfinished project to which I have, so far, failed miserably.

Soon, a paunchy middle-aged man sidles up, reeking of cucumbers, the pickled smell of an alcoholic wafting from every pore. The man breathes out an ammoniac aroma with a long exhalation of surprise or disgust or wonder.

“So, how'd you know Ol' Grady?” he asks.

“We used to work together. Years ago.”

“At Burton?”

“That’s right. At Burton. He was good.”

The man lets out a guffaw. “Yeah, right. If that was true, after thirty years he would have risen beyond middle management. Real piece of work . . . with the way that man drank, no wonder they didn’t have him cremated. Sonofabitch would have burned for three weeks.”

“I slept with his wife.”

The man’s face lights up with surprise and delight. “Wonderful! Which one?”

“The first one.”

“Dolores?”

I nod.

The man slaps me on the shoulder in congratulation or pity or both. “You’re a braver man than I am. Speak no ill of the dead and all, but, geez . . . what was she? 275, 280?”

I feel an obligation to defend this Delores, this woman who deserves respect, this woman I do not know and never did, another ghost, another figment. “She was wonderful, if you want to know the truth.”

“I’m not sure I do.”

The man totters away, whistling, laughing to himself.

“Everyone deserves to be respected,” I yell after the man. “Everyone. And every different person inside everyone.”

The man waves a dismissive hand and laughs, picking his way unsteadily across the rows of granite.

The school bus route has changed. It no longer stops in the neighborhood. There are no more kids left. The neighbors have moved, and in any case, the kid who used to ride the bus is no longer in elementary school.

I hear its absence, every day at 8:31, its ghostly grinding of brakes, its rumbling approach, its exhaust-filled departure. All this I see, hear, smell, more acutely now that we are no longer.

She’d told me that every person, every person on earth, is a thousand different people.

Except that I wasn’t. I am still, and forever will be, one person. And the thousand people within me, living, loving, dying, reincarnating, every hour, every day, still only total up to one.

And that, for better or worse, is all I’ll ever be.

Locked In

I was home from work only long enough to plop on the loveseat and take off my heels. Done, I just sat there. Sat and stared.

Friday night and nothing to do. Scratch that; I had people I could call, things I could do. I just didn't feel like it. I was tired. God, was this what being an adult felt like: Friday evening was still the culmination of the week, but instead of an opportunity to go crazy it was just a blessed chance to relax and unwind?

The neighbors' music started up. Early this week. It vibrated through my walls, making my framed prints bounce against the thin drywall. The floating sounds of laughter and yelling was like breaking glass, so I grabbed my purse and got out of there.

I didn't really need anything, but the grocery store seemed a logical place to go. It was one of those hip places where dudes wore wool caps no matter if it was ninety-five degrees outside and where the employees wore shorts and Hawaiian shirts, even in the chill of winter. I guessed this was supposed to suggest a *laissez faire* attitude, that shopping at this place was as much about fun and proving you were hip than it was about groceries. After all, don't Hawaiians live in a state of perpetual paradise? Wasn't shopping here no less than a protest against the cold and brittle outside air? Its very presence was one of the things that allowed local real estate agents to sell the rapidly gentrifying area to young people—presumed hipsters—like me.

I passed the orchids and cacti and made for the shopping carts. A twentysomething dude with a 19th century beard pushed a cart toward me. I said thanks. Knee deep in a phone conversation, he nodded his chin at me.

My cart began to fill. Items seemed to just appear, dropped there by hands that were mine but that felt oddly disconnected. Sulphured dried mango slices; tiny red bananas; Fair Trade cold brew coffee in adorable, highly stylized cans. I reveled in the fact that I could afford this stuff, that I needed literally none of it and yet wanted it, wanted it in a way I wasn't even aware of when I arrived.

But I abandoned it all when I saw Coach Burch.

There he was, manning a checkout line, making small talk while he rang up items and then bagging them in threadbare reusables that every customer but me appeared to bring with them. Coach Burch's shirt had huge orchids on it, pointing their stamen like tongues. But his was tight on him and he wore it over another, solid colored shirt. None of the younger employees did this. It was as if he'd forgotten his and had to borrow one, or maybe he was making some point by keeping the other shirt visible. It peeped out at the collar and the edges of the sleeves flared out from beneath the aloha shirt.

We occasionally did this kind of thing, too, back in the day, us girls arriving at a soccer game wearing our reds instead of whites, and Coach Burch would have to dig through his bag, rummaging through pinnies and first aid kits and his dry erase board until he found a spare uniform shirt, crumpled at the bottom, smelling awful. "That's your punishment for bringing the wrong shirt," he'd tease. "I will not wash that until the end of the season. Next time, you'll remember to bring both."

It was that way he had with us, that line between being authoritarian and yet non-threatening. So when he did deliver a threat—we wouldn't start the next game, we'd need to do more sprints—he could do so with a smile and we knew he'd make good on it and yet somehow it never really was a punishment.

And now here he was, a cashier at a checkout line, and it seemed he had no authority whatsoever. His manager, who came over several times to open a drawer or enter a special code, was easily twenty years younger than he was.

So I left my cart and fled, terrified that he'd see me, embarrassed for the both of us. When I knew him, he'd been an architect. During soccer season, he'd get to his office at dawn so he could leave in the afternoon to make practices. It was possible, I guess, that he'd made a ton of money and retired but still wanted to do *something* and so took the grocery gig. But his face was too pinched and his movements too strained. There was no joy or pleasure whatsoever anywhere in his body. On the field, joy and pleasure radiated from him. Back then, he had to restrain himself from playing in every scrimmage with us.

I drove across town to the old grocery store, a behemoth anchoring a largely empty strip mall where few people ventured late at night. I got my groceries—cereal, bread, milk, eggs, that sort of thing. Elderly people floated through the aisles with a slow, unhurried ease. Not one of them clutched a phone. Not one of them was tethered to earbuds. The music piping through the speakers was full of strings, unlike the upbeat neo-pop stuff in the other place.

God, how he must have hated it.

I ate dinner alone that night, on my couch, the sounds of a roaring party pounding through the walls. I thought of Coach Burch.

I just couldn't figure out if the tears I held back were for him or for me.

On the soccer field, my passes sometimes fishtailed, veering off well wide or short of where I intended them. "Lock your ankle, Joanna. Lock your ankle," he'd tell me. Or I would move the ball to my right and then lose it instead of shielding on the left ("God gave you two feet, Joanna. Use them," he'd say). But mostly, when I lost concentration, I let my ankle flop. So I'd get the same instruction, which he always delivered with the same frustrated grimace on his face: "Lock your ankle, child." This is what ran through my head like a mantra all night and was still running through my head when I went back to the store the next day.

In the parking lot, I waited. I was nervous and yet I had no idea why really. Nor did I understand why I needed to see him. The easiest thing in the world would have been to simply forget about it. But I shopped there sometimes and eventually I'd see him again and he'd see me. May as well get it over with.

I took the key from the ignition and headed toward the door.

I didn't get far. There he was, on his way out, slinging his arms into a jacket, the ridiculous Hawaiian print like some kind of absurd beacon. He was heading toward the far side of the lot. It felt like I was losing him and before I even realized, I yelled out.

"Coach!"

He didn't turn. Not even a flinch, as if the moniker "coach" had never applied to him or that he'd been stripped of its honorific long ago and ordered not to use it anymore. I may as well have called him "General" or "Admiral" or, even, "Mr. President."

"Coach Burch," I yelled.

Now he turned.

He looked in my direction, scanning. Then right at me. Then right through me.

"It's me. Joanna. Joanna Benson."

His face lost its tightness. His shoulders dropped and he took a few steps toward me.

"From soccer," I added.

"Yes, yes, of course. Joanna, how are you?"

“I’m good, I’m good.”

I took a step closer and we were within hugging range. But I held back. I recalled something from years earlier that I hadn’t thought of before, how we used to practice trapping the ball with our chests. But when we started growing breasts, Coach Burch stopped those drills. Just never brought it up again. And I remembered how in the earliest days we would all hug him, especially if we won a tournament and he passed out trophies or medallions. But then we never hugged anymore. As we got older, he never put a hand on us, ever. I missed that; I liked his hugs.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I work here.”

“Cool. Cool. Nice place.”

“There are worse, I suppose. How about you?”

“Graduated from college in May. Got a job at Himmelfarb. Tech fund manager. Well, *I’m* not a manager. That’s what the firm does. It’s what I went to school for. So I guess I’m really lucky.”

“Sounds great.”

“Not really.”

I surprised myself, saying that. I hadn’t said it out loud before, but the sentiment was obviously deep in there somewhere, part of that nagging unease that accompanied me into work every day. I had recently begun to have this sneaking suspicion that working there would age me prematurely, that in no time I’d be one of the middle aged people grumbling about their kids over endless mugs of pungent cheap coffee. “Yeah, I was just like you when I first started,” they’d tell me. “Seems like yesterday. And now . . .” sweeping crumbs off a tie or running a saliva-soaked finger over a spot on a blouse, and they would never finish their sentences, as if “And now” summed up everything. That saying nothing at all was saying everything. It gave me the creeps. Was that adulthood? Spending your time looking backward and pining over the days you couldn’t wait to escape when you were living through them?

Coach smiled, his old sort of half-smile, the one he’d wear when we’d lose a game, the one that said he was disappointed but wanted to remind us that it was just a game and that he appreciated our efforts and that he’d see us at practice where we would work to get better. “Go enjoy the rest of your day,” he’d say, “And walk out of here with your heads up.”

“You need a ride home?” I asked.

He hesitated. I don’t know why I said it. Just that I wasn’t ready to let him go yet, as if he was the very last living link to my faded childhood.

He looked toward the street. “I usually just take the bus,” he said, pointing at the stop.

“But the bus sucks, doesn’t it?”

I was immediately ashamed. Bus riders fell into distinct categories, and there was that class of them that given a choice would much rather drive a car, a shorter route and one done on one’s own schedule. Because I was not a bus rider, I assumed they all fell into this category.

“Sorry. All I mean is, well, if I drive you it’ll be much quicker, right?”

He nodded.

I pointed at my car, embarrassed by its newness. “I’m right over here.”

He followed me without speaking and I began to think that maybe I’d made a huge mistake. I didn’t really know this man. And he sure didn’t know me. Last he saw me, I was fifteen, almost a decade ago. I smiled awkwardly as he got in.

“You know Applewood Estates?” he asked.

I did. It was one of those places made up of Soviet-style apartment blocks, the name “Estates” attached presumably in all seriousness when they were built, sometime in the 70s, if I had to guess, but had become shorthand for a sick kind of joke. Applewood Estates sat deep within a pocket of town that was changing rapidly; it wasn’t too far from my own new apartment and it seemed to me on those rare occasions I drove past it that it was like a last holdout for people on the margins, clutching the rails as a tsunami of suburban renewal pressed down on them, threatening to sweep them away like so much detritus.

“Applewood Estates it is,” I said, way too cheerily, and drove off.

Immediately we hit a red light. It was excruciating, just idling there. So long as I was driving, my hands and feet and eyes busy, I could chip away at the pregnant air. But while we just sat there, a heaviness ballooned around us, almost to the bursting point.

“So, you graduated from college then? Is that what you said?”

I nodded, relieved.

“Good. That’s good.”

“I almost didn’t though,” I laughed. “I had this book I’d checked out of the university library that I never returned. Weird thing was I had it for years and never got any notification about it, not even when I registered for classes. We had this transition to a new i.d. card system, so maybe it just got lost in the shuffle or something. But then they figured it out.” I said it all in one huge breath. I could hear my voice tightening and I had to suppress giggles.

Coach drummed his fingers on the armrest and nodded. I could feel a heat coming off of him, some kind of embarrassed energy that he didn’t know what to do with.

I cracked the window. The light turned and I took off.

“So, there I am all set to graduate and I get this note saying I can’t walk across the stage unless I return this book. By then, I’d already packed up everything. So I just paid the fine, which was the cost of replacing the book. They claimed it was like eighty dollars or something, which is absurd, of course. But you know what?”

He shook his head, eyes still straight ahead.

“I’m glad I have it. It had all these notes in the margins. In pencil. And there’s something about those notes. I don’t know. Some long ago, very serious student or a professor maybe, who wrote them in. Could be dead now for all I know. But something about them, about the seriousness of them.”

I was never sure what it was about those notes that intrigued me so much, but now, driving with Coach Burch and explaining the notes out loud, I realized that what fascinated me was precisely the same thing that made me used to stare at Coach’s dry erase board with its stubborn markings that never erased completely, ghosts put into certain positions and then erased and written over, old lines still visible, ex-teammates’ names clinging on season after season no matter if they had already abandoned the sport for lacrosse or some other kind of life, some other kind of identity.

“Evidence of growth.”

“Huh?”

“A person still learning, still growing, looking for answers, suggesting his own—or her own.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said.

I smiled. And, looking at me, he smiled back.

I was relieved. And the feeling that I was the adult between us, the grown up tasked with coaxing conversation out of a little kid, began to subside. Back when we’d first started playing, it

was him who asked us endless questions. But the more he did, the more we clammed up, unsure how to handle so much adult excitement. We mostly stared at the ground and mumbled our answers and just waited for the green light to run and chase and kick balls. It was hard back then, when we were just kids. I'm sure it was hard for him, too, for anyone trying to teach a complicated game to children. We laughed and gossiped while he shifted plastic cones around to show us different formations. He must have gotten so frustrated at times. But I couldn't recall one time he ever lost his temper, even on those occasions when we had spontaneous contests to see who could walk the furthest on all fours, bent over backward like a frown while Coach Burch tried to teach us the fundamentals of a containment style of defense.

It got better as we aged, but then our side talk turned to complaints about teachers, and then interest in boys, and then, finally, in our last seasons, to the laser focus on the task before us, the soccer field being the last great refuge from the pressures and stresses of teenaged years and impending high school. My dad had been my first coach, but we were all so young then. It was only the latter years of my childhood, when things felt crazy and pressured, that's when Coach Burch was with me. Through all those changes, Coach Burch was there.

Once high school began, that was the end of the team. Even those of us who attended the same school drifted apart, some choosing not to go out for the school squad, others trying out but getting cut, and a select few graduating to the big time, with huge turf fields and college scouts. Coach Burch melded back into whatever life he had outside of our team—architecture, I guess, or maybe a new team—a thing few of us ever really gave much thought to before, as if his sole function on earth was to be present on grass fields in heat and rain and occasional darkness when practice bled into the shortening late fall days and the setting sun failed us.

We drove past a repurposed strip mall that used to house a liquor store, greasy diner, outdated electronics place, and a by-the-hour motel. Now there was a pharmacy, an upscale furniture store, sporting goods, and a vegan café. The liquor store still stood, but now it specialized in an enormous selection of wines and craft brews. The motel was still hanging on, too, somehow, a lone holdout against gentrification and a place I figured simply couldn't carry on much longer, not without all the new foot traffic so close by. But the entrance, best I could tell, was around the back, so it provided at least some level of privacy, I supposed.

“God, that place always skeezed me out. I never understood it when I was younger. I mean, who goes there, right?” I asked.

Coach didn't say anything.

“But I was a kid then. I guess I understand things better now. I mean, everyone needs a place to go, right? I bet it's not so bad in there, really.” I was fumbling.

He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. I knew that look. It was panic. It was the same one he'd get late in games if we were down a goal and he had to decide whether to throw an additional attacker forward to get the tying goal but which would also leave us vulnerable in the back.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

When I told him, he raised his eyebrows and nodded, impressed.

I wanted to show it to him, proof of my adulthood. But I couldn't bring myself to suggest it. I suddenly had a flash of memory of a fantasy I'd had, way back then. Of me and him living together. I think I had a crush on him when I was, like, eleven.

But crush isn't really the right word, not at that age. It was more that maybe I wanted him to be my dad. I liked my own dad just fine, as a coach and a father. But with Coach Burch it was about fun. And praise. Even when we made mistakes, we got praised for our efforts. My dad told

me to make my bed and empty the dishwasher and he grimaced when I got B's on my report card. And eventually he cheated on my mom and moved out.

"You in a hurry?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Rarely in much of a hurry to get home."

"Good."

I pulled into the strip mall and parked.

"I'll be right back."

I could see him watching me when I jogged back, probably wondering what was in the bag I was carrying. But he didn't ask. He didn't say anything. His face was red and I could see his jaw working up and down, his temples pulsing.

I drove toward the motel entrance and parked at the furthest edge of the lot. We sat in silence a long while.

There, in front of us, beyond a thin tree line was an open green space. Quiet, just the two of us, staring at the unlined field, the rusted remains of a goal pushed against a chain link fence.

I touched his arm. "Let's do it," I said.

I grabbed the new soccer ball from my bag and hopped out. He followed me.

Once we reached the grass, I ran ahead. I turned and sent him a long arcing pass that swiveled away from him toward the treeline.

He chased after it, stripping off his Hawaiian shirt as he ran. He yelled something to me, but the breeze took it away.

"What did you say?" I asked.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled again:

"Lock your ankle, Joanna . . . Lock your ankle."

Even from a distance, I could see that he was smiling.

Fortress

The digging began in June, in the afternoon of the very day school let out for summer.

Five, six, sometimes eight or even ten hours a day, one shovelful at a time until we'd hollowed a pit probably ten feet deep by twenty wide, about fifty yards from the edge of the woods where the old man lived who owned a landscaping business and who was always scowling at us.

We were able to jump in the pit by early July, sliding over a massive piece of plywood one of us had procured from God-knew-where. The four of us—me, Russell, Kenny, and Damon—sat knee to knee in the darkness, unsure what to do next. But we knew how cool it was. It just needed some housewarming, and it needed to be bigger. Our underground fort would only be more awesome—or, “wicked,” or “radical,” as we called it then—if we could just keep expanding it.

We threw down some shag rug remnants, inexplicably tossed to the curb outside some crazy person's house who didn't know treasure when he saw it. To this we added a battered card table and a bunch of candles, which we left to burn without thought to fire or asphyxiation—turns out we didn't need to worry: the candles hardly gave off any light or smoke anyway. So we came to leaving a sliver of the plywood open so we could at least see the nothingness and each other's faces. It wasn't quite wicked or radical enough, so the digging continued. And continued.

Kenny occasionally got stupid with the monotony. To break it he would balance his shovel end on the palm of his hand, running zig-zags and tight circles as the shaft threatened to fall. When it eventually did, the metal end smacked Russell across the crown of his skull. He pitched forward and tumbled into the pit. He just lay there, eyes closed. He was breathing; I could see the little puffs of dirt next to his mouth. A slow trickle of blood had pooled up at the point of impact and traced a line into Russell's ear. I thought to tug on his shoulder and try to wake him up, but a stronger impulse, one rooted in self-preservation, I suppose, told me, told all of us, to get the hell out of there. So we ran, and we didn't look back.

We didn't see Russell again for several days. He wasn't at the fort, so we knew he wasn't dead—or at the least, we knew he hadn't died there. But soon enough he came back and when he arrived, he walked straight up to Kenny and whacked him in the back of the knees with his shovel. Kenny toppled over and writhed around on the ground for several minutes. The score had been settled. Had it been anyone else outside of our circle who had done that to Russell, accident or not, he'd better have hauled it out of town. But when Kenny eventually got back to his feet, that was the end of that. Wordlessly, we resumed digging.

When Russell had been gone, the obvious thing would have been to go to his house and check on him. But none of us was brave enough to do that.

Back when Russell had first moved into the neighborhood, we kept our distance from his house because of his dad, a retired cop who was only capable of speaking at one way-too-loud volume. He had a perpetual thumping vein across his forehead and a permanent glower on his face. The German shepherd named Bear that he kept locked up in the backyard to prowl in the shin-high grass was almost as scary. When it barked, white foam accumulated at his mouth, just like Russell's dad. The only time Russell's dad seemed like he wasn't furious were those few occasions when he sat Russell on his lap and let him steer the car while his dad worked the pedals. But then he stopped doing that. And then he left—just moved out one day and never came back.

It was right around that time that the fights started. Soon enough, they came almost weekly. We rarely even knew where these other kids, the victims, came from. Usually, their sole offense was walking through our neighborhood, taking the cut-throughs from one shopping center to another. Russell would spot some lone offending kid, or he'd focus on one runt in a small group, and he'd beat the hell out of him. I always feared that I'd be dragged in, that Russell versus whomever would turn into a battle royale and I'd have to defend myself from people I had absolutely nothing against. So I stood well away during these fights. I'd never been in one before and I wouldn't know what to do once one began. I almost peed myself during one fight when Russell whipped a knife from his back pocket, as if conjuring it in a magic show.

In my head, I screamed at him: *Why the hell do you have that? Where did you even get it?* Instead, I said nothing. It seemed natural for Russell to have it—a thing way beyond any of us, way beyond our experience or temperament. But for Russell, that knife seemed like an extension of himself, as if the leading edge of entering adulthood would come at the end of a blade, and Russell would take us there. The only question was how willing we were to go along for the ride. Fortunately, Kenny suggested he put it away, that he didn't need it, and Russell listened, folding up the blade and handing it over before proceeding to beat the tar out of the kid. Russell slapped him in the face, then jabbed at his jaw, and then, finally, while the kid hardly put up any defense at all, crammed him in the stomach. The kid doubled over, fell to his knees, and puked. Russell took his knife back, slid it into his back pocket, and we walked off, back to resume digging, none of us saying a word about it, as if we had simply gone off to someone's house for lunch.

When we did take breaks, we'd usually head to my house, or sometimes Kenny's or Damon's. Never Russell's; not after the first few times. Even without Russell's dad there, the house was no less unsettling. There was the darkness, for one thing, as if daylight simply refused to let itself in. There were brown rugs with dark stains, heavy brown shades that were always drawn, furniture in so many shades of brown. But by "furniture," I mean only the couch and an end table. Apart from that, it was mostly just piles of old newspapers and magazines. Best I could tell, there wasn't even a table to sit at and eat.

There seemed to be no set rules or regulations there, either. My family ate at the same hour each evening; not gathering at the dinner table was a sin excusable only by, say, emergency surgery. Meals in Russell's house occurred more spontaneously. Russell and his older siblings—one brother, one sister—grabbed food when it was available: a handful of chips here, a glass of milk there, dry cereal, maybe bologna and cheese.

Russell's sister had greasy hair and crooked teeth and we always assumed that was why we never saw her smile. She looked old at sixteen, defeated, and perhaps all the impulses toward smiling, all the funny or amusing or wonderful things that induce smiles in people, were simply sucked out of her life, or never there in the first place. The brother was deaf and he smelled weird—like canned spaghetti sauce—and the moaning noises he made when he "spoke" thoroughly spooked us. So after the first few times, we rarely went into that house anymore.

The last straw for me was when I walked in on Russell's mom in the bath. She hadn't locked the bathroom door. Assuming it was free, I walked in and took a step toward the toilet before I realized that she was soaking in the tub, a glass of wine on the ledge. The extreme redness of her nipples startled me. But she didn't even blink. I muttered some kind of stunned apology and fled. I was terrified of seeing her again. If I *had* to go over there, I'd stand on their front lawn waiting for Russell to come out. Unfortunately, she came home one day while I was standing outside, arriving in a battered truck driven by a guy wearing a leather vest and no shirt underneath, his head shaved bald but for a long gray ponytail. She acted as she always did, which

is to say she hardly registered my, or Russell's, existence. When he came bounding out of the house, shovel in hand, he ran right past her and neither of them exchanged a word.

The following week, while we played a pickup game, she stood on the edge of the grass, cigarette dangling from her lip. No one had even noticed she'd arrived until she started yelling. First, it was encouragement: "C'mon, hit it out of the park!" That type of thing. But soon, unmoored by her presence, our play got worse and she started berating us, hurling derision at our inability to hit, or field, or throw cleanly. She saved her worst for her son: "Christ, you throw like a grandmother. Damn it, hit it, you little shit. Just like your father—total loser." Eventually she tottered away and the game resumed. But our hearts were no longer in it and we went home. I don't know where Russell went.

Most days, Russell hung out at the fort after the rest of us left for dinner. And he was usually there before the rest of us the next morning, too. I suspected that he even slept there a few times. But he always denied that, and we didn't ask too many questions.

Russell was an invaluable part of our crew; Kenny and Damon and I, with our stable homes and fathers in the house who used to toss Frisbees with us on weekends and take us to ballgames, and with mothers who drove us to school and soccer practice and who volunteered with the PTA—we knew, deep down, that we lacked toughness, that Russell rounded us out, made us more men than boys. And at the fort he dug more enthusiastically than the rest of us, with fewer breaks and more zeal, as if his life depended on it. We knew it was a good outlet for his energies. We knew: if he wasn't digging he'd be fighting.

And the fights had started getting weird and unsettling.

During one of them, sometime in early August, he struck out in every direction, completely undisciplined—usually, he got into a boxer's crouch and danced around with his hands out front, always moving his feet—long strands of mucus and tears flying from his face in every direction. So much so that the kid whose ass he was kicking kept pleading with him to stop because Russell was getting snot all over him.

When it was over, we didn't talk. Russell had cried and we didn't know why and we sure as hell weren't going to ask. Better to just leave it alone.

It was a long walk back to the fort. We were just about there before Damon remarked: "Hey, you really whooped his ass."

"Shut up," Kenny said.

When we got to the path at the edge of the woods that took us to the fort, where the old man lived, Russell headed right instead of left, so we wordlessly followed. That was the path to the car.

Well, it used to be a car. By the time we discovered it, it was just a rusted ghost of a car. It had thin trees growing through the hollowed hood and trunk. It still had most of the roof, somehow, though it looked like you could punch straight through it if you wanted to. The glass from the windows was long gone, as were two of its doors. The other two had long ago been opened and each was furrowed into the ground, a slope of dirt and leaves reaching a quarter of the way up. The gear shift had still been there when we first discovered it, but after a few tugs it broke off in our hands. The most prominent remaining feature was the enormous steering wheel. You could see the shaft connecting under the floorboards and when you turned it the wheels turned, too. It gave one the impression of driving—at least it did to a bunch of kids who had never driven before; the closest any of us had come was Russell when his dad used to take him "driving." But the seats, incredibly, were more or less intact. There were gouges in the vinyl, places where discolored and rain soaked tufts of foam spilled out, but otherwise, two of us could

plant ourselves back there and, with two people up front, pretend we were on some kind of joyride.

But the car lost its appeal not long after we'd discovered it—for most of us, anyway. After all, you couldn't do much more than sit in its filthy husk and turn a ghost wheel. But Russell liked it. He liked anything to do with cars or trucks: the bigger, the better. He told us that his dad had gotten injured while on the job and didn't want to do desk duty so he quit to drive long haul trucks and one day, any day now, he'd come back in some massive Mack truck and Russell would go with him and hit the road.

“What about school?” Damon asked.

“Shut up,” Kenny said.

“Hey, Russell, you wanna sit on my lap and steer while I drive?” Damon said, laughing.

Russell punched him in that tender spot where his arm and shoulder met. Hard. So Damon left. “I'm going to the fort,” he muttered.

Eventually, Kenny and I followed. But Russell stayed. He often did. While we walked away, I looked back at him and saw him turning the wheel. He didn't come back to the fort that day.

A couple of weeks later, late-August, the sky an oppression, grayish with haze and distended with building moisture, as billowing black clouds marched across the sky and thunder rumbled in the far distance, we sprinted to the fort, ready to slide open the plywood and duck inside to test the weatherproofing. But when we got there, we skidded to a stunned halt. The top had not only already been taken off, but it had been splintered, torn up into a thousand jagged pieces, and was mingled with dirt and leaves and branches and our furniture, jumbled inside the pit, or what used to be our pit, our fort, our dreamed of home and escape. It had been filled almost completely and it was only after standing there, silently, trying to take it all in, that we even noticed the bulldozer tracks etched into the path in the woods and leading directly from the old man's house.

All our months-long labors, reduced to nothing more than a toothed jumble of detritus, probably decimated in less than half an hour.

Thunder boomed and then a crack of lightning streaked the sky before the rain fell all at once, massive drops packed into sheets as if someone rent the sky in two. Rivers of mud snaked around our shoes, each path leading to and then dropping into the reaming holes of our once-fort.

Well, that was that then. We gave it up, or at least the three of us did, accepting victims to the adults who made the rules. Our little world, we were reminded, still existed in the wider world, a place where we were regarded as insignificant beings worthy of little more than suspicion. All there was to do was grow up, become men, and then share in the rule-making, sure as we were that we would never look down our noses at kids just because they were kids. But even then I had a sneaking suspicion I would do just that. True, we weren't bad kids, and true that old man never even bothered to try and talk to us, figure out what we were actually doing in the woods behind his house. He just made his assumptions, and how could that ever be defended? And yet, look at it another way and it was pretty easy to see: if I were an old man and I spotted a bunch of kids doing God-knew-what, would I take the time to ask questions? I suspected, even then, that I probably wouldn't. That's what it meant to be an adult.

But Russell didn't take it like the rest of us. He ran out of the woods, his shoes sliding across the tracks of mud. We followed and emerged from the lip of the trees to see him climbing over the man's fence.

“Come out of there, you coward,” he yelled. He banged on the guy’s sliding glass door. “Come on. I’ll kick your ass. I’ll kill you. Come out of there!” he screamed.

It was late morning and a weekday so the guy was probably at work or something. Still, we weren’t about to hang around. We sure weren’t interested in a meeting with the cops. Instead, Kenny, Damon, and I took off while Russell stayed behind, still screaming. Before I turned the corner at the end of the street, I looked back to see Russell remove his shoe and chuck it at the guy’s window. I ran like hell, the rain lashing at my face, my shirt and shorts clinging to my skin, my shoes squeaking all the way home, where I would get dry, settle in, maybe have something to eat.

Summer ended soon after and my freedom went with it. I was expected to earn good grades and because I was struggling in algebra, I had to meet a tutor after school. I didn’t see much of the guys. Kenny went to a Catholic school and Damon and I didn’t have classes together and Russell hardly showed up for his classes at all, and it wouldn’t have made much difference if he did as I was in the GT classes and, well, he wasn’t. Plus, I’d become the new school mascot, Benny the Beaver, and my duties pretty well soaked up any free time I had. In any case, Russell soon got suspended. I wasn’t sure what happened; differing accounts ranged from his uttering a threat to pulling a fire alarm to calling in a bomb scare to stabbing the principal, which we were pretty sure wasn’t true as Mr. Davies had always walked with that limp.

It was Damon who called me one day in October. He’d found him.

I ran over to the abandoned car, past the mess that used to be our fort, and there Damon sat, reading a comic book while Russell lay slumped over in the driver’s seat, a bottle of Smirnoff still gripped in his hand. Convinced he would die out there if we left him, we lightly slapped at his face, tugged on his shoulder, and eventually just waited it out until he sobered up and could stagger home. There, we guessed, his mother and sister and brother would be waiting for him. Or not. They never seemed to be waiting for him.

We didn’t see Russell again after that. Eventually, they were all gone—the entire family. Just up and out one day. Gone. Maybe Russell found a truck and drove. Away. To some other place, a place to start over. Maybe. But in the end, he was just . . . gone.

I went back to the old neighborhood recently, the first time in over thirty years—a quick detour while in the area visiting an old friend who I’d found out was in the hospital. It was a blazing hot day. I would say just like back then. But back then, the heat was something almost aspirational, as if it held promise—long days, adventure, freedom. Now, when “long days” meant something else entirely and freedom and adventure were in short supply, the heat felt more like suppression.

My old house looked a bit rundown, as did much of the neighborhood. It hadn’t aged well. But Russell’s old house, actually that looked pretty good. It even had flower boxes on the windowsills.

I headed over to the old fort site. It was easy enough to find—a huge open area where the vegetation refused to grow. I supposed all the old junk that I knew was just below the soil prevented it. I preferred to think, instead, that its barrenness was some kind of memorial.

To what, I did not know.

I’d done some Internet searches for Russell, of course, but came up virtually empty. It was interesting that way, how I hadn’t done the same for Kenny and Damon, whom I had also lost touch with years earlier. I just assumed they were more or less well and lived lives like mine: got married, raised kids, lived in the burbs, enjoyed good employment and vacations and restaurants, eventually got divorced. But I couldn’t imagine such a life for Russell. There had

been a Facebook account once, but it was more than six years old when I found it and hadn't been updated. When it was updated, there was a stretch of three years that showed Russell's interest in mixed martial arts, plus a flirtation with becoming an ordained minister, and a life spent in different locales, far-flung from one another with no discernible relationship: northern California, rural Georgia, the plains of South Dakota. Then, he seemed to have disappeared. And there has been nothing since.

The only thing left to wonder is whether he's finally stopped somewhere, or if he still has the wheel between his fingers.

Another Country

As he wheeled his suitcase through the terminal at Heathrow, Sebastian Fine was already a tad giddy. For here he was in London to accept the Twenty-Ninth Annual Euthenics Prize for “work befitting the great spirit of selfless scientific endeavor for the betterment of humanity.” This, after his waterless toilet—solar-powered, self-cleaning and capable of converting human waste into fertilizer—won the quarter million dollar prize.

Settling into his hotel room, he paused and cleared his throat: “Every twenty seconds, someone around the world dies of a diarrheal disease.” Again, his voice lower and graver: “Every twenty seconds, someone around the world . . .”

Sebastian felt an almost overwhelming urge to add, “Am I right, people?” He’d always had a begrudging admiration for cheerleaders and stand-up comics who were able, by force of sheer inane will, to cajole an immovable audience into “giving it up,” and “letting it all hang loose.” This was a problem with his line of work: the conferences and the awards were always rather staid affairs; the same array of faces, drawn and pale with pinched eyes and tired brows from so many hours in the lab; the same terrible jokes he had once loved so well:

Have you heard the one about the sick chemist? If you can't helium, and you can't curium, you'll probably have to barium.

Or:

An ion meets his atom friend on the street and says he's lost an electron. "Are you sure?" asks the atom. The ion replies, "I'm positive."

This last one, he recalled, actually caused one of his colleagues to shoot Yoohoo out of his nostrils.

Nevertheless, he would eschew the jokes and get on with it: “Every twenty seconds, someone around the world . . .”

He stopped. No reason to do this. He’d be ready. He’d committed his entire speech to memory, running it over in its entirety as his plane hurtled across the Atlantic.

He unpacked his clothes and ironed his shirt and pants for the next day. He had dinner in the hotel restaurant, noting the extensive wine list, and got to bed early. He wasn’t very tired—only 7 o’clock in his body—but it was already edging up to midnight GMT and he’d need to be downstairs and ready to go by 8:30 a.m.

“Every twenty seconds, someone around the world dies of a diarrheal disease.”

The audience nodded silent consent.

“I’ve been told to always start with a joke, but there’s no joking about this threat to human health.”

More solemn nodding.

Sebastian stood next to his winning prototype, pointing out its functions to a rapt audience. “Here,” he said, tilting the solar panel toward the audience and blasting with a ray of fluorescent light a gray-bearded man with a *pince nez*. “The panel absorbs the solar radiation, which powers an electrochemical reactor . . .” Sebastian fiddled with the mechanism while behind him projected on a massive screen, images of the reactor tilted this way and that. “The reactor breaks down the waste into fertilizer. There’s a hydrogen byproduct, of course, which will be recycled into cells that can then be drawn upon to provide power on days in which there is not enough solar radiance in the atmosphere.” Great murmuring rippled among the crowd. While often indistinguishable to the untrained ear, Sebastian recognized the murmuring as awed

appreciation, not skepticism (he'd heard *those* murmurs before as well). Best to soak up the approval now; he recalled how his nanotube pathogen test for liver cancer was at first enthusiastically received and then how quickly the small but loud chorus of doubters came forward, questioning his claims about test speed and reliability and cost, and how his work hadn't yet run through the grinder of peer-reviewed journals.

"And here," he said, tapping the reservoir at the top of the bowl and quieting the murmuring, "This tank receives the treated gray water, which can be used for irrigation."

A hand shot up from Graybeard, now fully recovered from the temporary blinding.

"Yes?" Sebastian acknowledged, though the official Q&A had not yet been announced.

Graybeard stood, half turned toward Sebastian looming above him onstage and half toward the audience. As he spoke, he danced slightly so that he could address both parties at once, dawning like a quiver recently relieved of its arrow. "Let us say this toilet is put into use in some bush village far from cities and towns . . ."

"That's the idea," Sebastian said, smiling, solicitous. The audience chuckled.

Graybeard turned entirely to the audience. "What happens when the toilet requires repair? Is the idea to train one villager? And if so, where do the parts come from?" He sat, then abruptly rose again.

"The electrodes themselves have a ten-year estimated lifetime," Sebastian replied. "And all of the parts within the toilet are very easily repairable. It's unlikely there would arise a frequent need for new parts."

A young woman with a long brown ponytail and thick black-framed glasses stood up two rows behind Graybeard. "Having worked in many remote areas in Africa," Ponytail said, inflected with a midwestern American accent, "I can attest to the extraordinary ingenuity one finds in native people who must reuse as a matter of necessity. It is here in the U.K., in the U.S., in Western Europe, here we reuse and recycle out of a sense of environmental obligation. But the idea of yet another plastic bottle or a grocery bag being easily obtainable is never in question. But if you live in, say, the Togolese bush, you repurpose everything and extend one product's life into many lives. I would feel confident in backing our esteemed speaker and say that you will find villagers all over the Third World who would require no mechanical training. So long as the toilet operates when they receive it, they will manage to maintain it, I am certain."

Ponytail sat back down as a tremor of subdued applause rippled through the auditorium. Graybeard, undeterred, raised his hand with exasperated incredulity and shouted, "And what is the cost of this mechanism?"

"The approximated cost of the waterless toilet is twenty-two hundred U.S."

A gasp went out across the auditorium, but this one Sebastian found unreadable. The emcee, the distinguished A.S. Wang of Durham University, strode on stage as if he feared a riot might break out. He held his hands out in front of him and then raised them closer to his face as if he half-expected a barrage of Bunsen burners to come careering from the audience. "There will be plenty of opportunity to ask further questions at the appropriate time," he breathed into the microphone. "We will repair to the Q&A session after the awarding of our young distinguished scholar series, which as many of you know as past recipients, honors the work of our youngest generation of scientists studying in programs across the U.K."

A parade of children herded onto the stage. They formed a row next to Sebastian and Dr. Wang—some two dozen of them, a panoply of mostly Asian ethnicities: Burmese, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Korean . . . each one nervous and uncomfortable and very much bespectacled. "Here they are," beamed Dr. Wang, walking around to grasp the hands of each of

them, oblivious to their palpable discomfort as their spines rattled under Wang's overzealous two-handed grip. Up and down, bouncing and juggling, a rogue's gallery of discomfort, a veritable U.N. of social unease.

Sebastian took the opportunity to slip backstage and accept the bottle of Evian being thrust at him. "I'm so sorry we didn't have this available for you on the stage," a young student said, an Ursa Major of acne across his cheeks and forehead.

"It's okay," Sebastian assured him. "Really. It's okay."

Fresh beads of perspiration had popped out all over the kid's forehead. He emanated a reek of anxiety—his deodorant, had he chosen to apply some that morning, having already well expired, or proving itself incapable of keeping up with his overdriven apocrine glands. Sebastian shuddered. It was a repellent spectacle, and it was one that Sebastian feared was still his own reality—residing dormant just below the surface, ever-ready to pop out like a plague of locusts sprung out of years-long slumber. Sure, in the world of scientific advancement, Sebastian was sometimes regarded as a veritable movie star—fairly good-looking and possessed of an outer confidence that managed to reside just the right side of arrogance. Better yet, he was a nice guy, genuinely so, having never fallen into the trap of so many uber-intelligent nerds and geeks before him: diving headfirst into assholishness as reasonable reaction to a childhood spent being the butt of jokes. Now, here in adulthood, the very attributes—intelligence, mental acuity, inventiveness—that in any other person is regarded with admiration, and in the unattractive, socially awkward, nerd types, garnered nothing other than contempt, now turned themselves, more than often than not, into a generally nasty disposition. Sebastian wasn't that way. Here, among his kind, he was fawned over and admired and he doled out niceties in kind. And yet, to the outside world, he knew, he was hardly a few rungs up from the sweating kid with the bottle of Evian.

It was sometimes a difficult line to straddle. While he had no trouble voicing an opinion or keeping up with normal conversation, he was aware of the exhausting mental game he was forever engaged in: whenever speaking with anyone not in his field of expertise, where lingo and various *-eses* were perfectly acceptable, he had to perform a balancing act between coming across as condescending due to his superior intellect and dumbing himself down to the point of being patronizing. Either way, it was a losing prospect. And so the obvious path was to remain in the word of lab and conference. Venture too far into the sub-world—the sports bar, the boardwalk, the midlist state college classroom—and you risked exposure. And yet, he often wanted to visit those lands, to believe he could roam freely among this world and that. For he knew, he could never forget, that in that other world, that is where Joanna Benson lived. And Joanna Benson, even after almost two decades since they'd spent any meaningful time together, had never entirely left his mind.

Sebastian's recent Internet searches had revealed that Joanna was still living in Baltimore, a divorced mother of a little girl named Bexley. The fantasy persisted: he would go back, find her, reach out to her, offer her and Bexley sanctuary in a troubled world. It worked for Forrest Gump and the love of his life—until she died of AIDS, that is.

"What does a subatomic duck say?"

It was Ponytail, and she was standing a few feet away. She had sneaked over while Sebastian was signing a program for Sweat Boy.

"I'm sorry?"

"You said you should always start with a joke, so 'What does a subatomic duck say?'"

"Okay. I'll bite."

“Quark.”

He smiled. “That’s a good one.” It wasn’t, but she was so earnest—and, he noted, kind of cute.

“Christine,” she said and held out her hand.

“Sebastian.”

“Yes, I know.”

They decided on the hotel restaurant. As they were seated, Christine insisted on splitting the tab with him.

“Please,” he said. “I asked you to dinner. I’ll pay, and I will not hear one more quark about it.”

She blushed, pleased that he had enjoyed her joke.

He would order the wine first. Wine, the perfect melding of nature and human involvement, was one of his passions. He had calculated by the age of fifteen that a knowledge of wine was a necessity for adult life. The memories of boozy parties at the Benson house before Joanna’s parents split up had left a deep impression on Sebastian, then just a child: one could be thoroughly indiscriminate about it all, taking whatever was handed him without reservation and downing it in one massive, disgusting, gut-churning gulp. (He could recall one of the adult oafs being handed a drink that glowed with a repulsive neon color and seemed to have swirls of something vaguely fecal floating in it and, without asking what he was about to imbibe, simply bellowed, “Bottoms up,” taking the entire thing down in three gulps, his ponderous Adam’s apple escalating from jawline to the dip of his collarbone and back again while everyone around him cheered. When he was done, he slammed the glass down with such force that it cracked through). Wine, Sebastian decided, wine. Slow, savoring sips. Knowledge that took in not only Bacchus and mythology, but also geography, horticulture, terroir, and tannins. It wasn’t just Napa and Sonoma and the Loire Valley, but Pinot Noirs from Oregon, Italian chiantis and orvietos, Spanish tempranillos, sauvignon blancs from New Zealand, Argentinean malbecs, Australian shiraz, German and South African rieslings, the list went on and on and he knew that he had only scratched the surface; there were wines being produced in Romania and Israel and Moldova; even Uzbekistan had a large output. In the U.S., every state in the country had wine production—though the idea of a Wyoming Frontenac or a Nebraskan edelweiss gave him the shivers.

Sebastian scanned the extensive list, running over it two times to make sure of his choice. While he took his time looking it over, the waiter and Christine sat and stood, respectively, in anticipatory silence, twice turning to one another and emitting embarrassed little laughs before Sebastian declared: “We’ll do a Pauillac, the Château Pichon Longueville, Comtesse de Lalande. 2004.”

“Verrrrry good, sir,” the waiter said, taking the menus and hurrying off.

Christine gasped. “Um, I couldn’t help but notice that wine is, like, \$300.”

“No, no,” Sebastian said. “\$285, approximately.”

Christine squirmed. Her face reddened. A slight fog coated the insides of her spectacles.

Sebastian gently placed his hand on hers. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ve just received a prize with a generous monetary value attached. I appreciate your defense of me back there, so you get to be the recipient of the awards committee’s largesse. Least I can do.” He wanted to add, “I don’t expect anything of you,” but the only reason someone ever says that, he reckoned, is precisely because they *do* expect something and hope to secure that expectation by way of

paralipsis. He could guess at the source of Christine's discomfort; she had to be thinking: *This man just bought a \$300 bottle of wine. Plus dinner, plus dessert, plus tip. This will easily exceed \$500. Surely he's going to expect a swap of this sumptuous feast for sex. For crying out loud, we're staying in the same hotel.*

If these thoughts were in fact swirling around her head, he hoped to stave them off, or at least calm them. He did this by launching into a description of the wine itself, to let her know that it was no blind choice driven by vanity or a desire to soon have her submitting to his every lascivious whim, but rather his choice had been driven by his deep knowledge of the product: "The Longueville is an excellent Pauillac. The estate was originally classified as fourth growth, but the performance of the wine means, qualitatively speaking, that it's essentially a second growth, and has been that way for a good twenty years now. Ah," he said, noticing the waiter's return. In tow was the manager, there to offer his congratulations to the Mister for his superb choice and to observe his charge ceremoniously decanting. All of this heated Christine more; she had to remove her glasses and surreptitiously wipe them on her napkin.

"So, you're from Chicago?" Sebastian asked.

"Naperville."

"Ah, nice." He had no idea if Naperville was nice. But he smiled agreeably anyway and with deep confidence in what he was saying. Sebastian was self-aware enough to realize that the small act of standing on a stage, accepting a prize, being the toast of the town, made him infinitely more attractive and confident than he figured he actually was in either case.

"Tell me about your work," he said.

She had been working with the CDC in infectious diseases in West Africa but had been removed because of an Ebola outbreak.

"Ah, yes," Sebastian said. "Interesting. Sad, of course, but interesting."

"You always want to stay. But at a certain point . . ."

"Yes, I understand."

"Our lead physician was stricken, actually. Rushed to Berlin, then Emory. Barely survived. So we left. But I hope to get back." Her hands flew about her as she spoke.

"Ebola is fascinating."

"Clear signs of coagulopathy and impaired circulatory system symptomology," she said, tearing a hunk of bread from her roll.

"Bleeding from mucous membranes and puncture sites?" he asked, taking a sip of water. He eyed the wine, settling and plum-colored and lovely.

"Roughly half of reported cases. Small punctures. Fruit bats, usually."

"And the bleed sources?"

She was riled up now, bursting with excitement: "Hematemesis, hemoptysis, melena. Diffuse bleeding is rare, usually exclusive to the g.i. tract." She picked up her fork, using it to punctuate her words like a maestra leading an orchestra.

"I see you have sinistral leanings," Sebastian said, referring to her use of her left hand. "Me, too," he added, waving his fingers.

"True of much genius, yes?" She smiled.

I could like this girl.

"Pardon me." They both looked up, lost as they'd been in their dinner table talk. It was Graybeard. "I was sitting over there . . ." He pointed to a far-off table, desolate and small, set for one. "I wanted to personally offer my congratulations."

"Thank you," Sebastian said. Christine didn't say anything, looking suddenly chastened.

“You’re welcome.” Graybeard walked away, leaving Sebastian and Christine to sit in silence. It was the tone. Offered in such a way that the content of the message, clearly, was to be taken in opposition to its literal wording. It was snide and it momentarily ruined the mood.

Sebastian poured out small bits of the wine and prodded Christine to try.

She sipped. “Mmmm, good,” she said.

Sebastian glanced at Graybeard, sullen and glowering across the dining room. His glare confirmed that Sebastian was the victor: award, expensive dinner, girl—the spoils.

He poured their glasses to three-quarters full and drank. “Good indeed,” he said.

The wine paired nicely with their choices of meal: Grilled veal sweetbreads and pan roasted magret of duck for appetizers, main course of Grilled Herefordshire Lamb tenderloin with French Green Lentil Cream and Crispy Grit Cakes, and to finish it off: what the waiter claimed was the restaurant’s “famous” chocolate bombe: Dark Chocolate Olive Oil Mousse, Crème Fraîche Chocolate Cake, and Orange Caramel. He actually made a kissing pantomime with all five fingers pressed to his lips as he described it.

“And I’ll have a glass of Blandy’s Malmsey Madeira,” Sebastian said. He turned to Christine: “You want one?”

She blushed and shook her head. “I think I’ve had plenty. More than plenty. One more sip, well, I can’t be held responsible for my actions.”

After Sebastian had paid the bill—in the end, roughly \$635—and they entered the elevator, neither said a word as Sebastian pressed his floor, 14, and Christine pressed nothing.

They had started on “L,” of course, and so there were thirteen opportunities for her to press a button. But even after one or two, the act of it would have come across as a calculated decision, and not in his favor. Had she simply pressed her floor—he didn’t even know which one it was, but if it had also been 14, surely she would have remarked at such coincidence—when they first got on, well, message sent and message received. But as they zipped through—1, 2, 3, 4—and still no push of her finger, it spoke more loudly than the numbers themselves.

But suddenly the elevator jerked, groaned, and stopped, somewhere in the indefinable space between floors 9 and 10. A harsh, clattering deadened stop.

“Are we stuck?” Christine asked, her voice fluted with panic.

“I don’t know,” Sebastian said, pressing indiscriminate numbers to no effect.

“Oh, God,” Christine muttered. “Oh, *God!*”

Sebastian kept pressing, watching Christine out of the corner of his eye, the way she tipped from foot to foot as if she had a bladder threatening to burst; the way several strands of her hair loosed themselves from her tight bun and fell over her glasses; the way she kept smoothing the sides of her shirt in a jittery and insistent way.

“You okay?” Sebastian asked, his finger still doing a tapdance across the buttons: 16, 2, L, 11, 4—to no effect. Finally, his eye registered the red Emergency Call button, so he depressed this. The result was a shrill bell that only heightened the encroaching aura of hysteria.

“Oh, God,” Christine called. “Okay, okay, okay, okay,” she repeated, and began walking tight circles in the elevator. “You see—okay, okay, okay, okay—you see, I suffer from claustrophobia and, well—okay, Christine, okay, just breathe. You’re okay . . .”

This was the last thing Sebastian wanted to hear. He had always suffered from a touch of claustrophobia himself and the only thing beating back the crescendo of nerves was his self-imposed need to be calm for his companion.

“It’s an irrational phobia, I know,” she said, her voice more controlled but still tittery.

Sebastian had to bite back the urge to correct her: *Of course, all phobias are, by definition, irrational. That's what makes them phobias.* He knew this sudden nasty impulse derived from his own sense of panic. He loosened his necktie, thinking all the while how ludicrous a move it was, how terribly clichéd and how it accomplished little. Sebastian took notice of the elevator walls; they seemed at once to move in on them and then retract, a living, breathing thing, like a beating heart. He pushed the alarm bell again which did nothing other than enrage him. Somewhere, that stupid bell was sounding up and down the elevator shaft and it signified zilch. He could envision a cluster of people standing in the lobby pushing buttons with irritation, hearing the alarm, seeing that one of the cars had stopped moving, and doing nothing other than continue pressing the button. Hell, it's probably what he'd be doing if the situation were mercifully reversed. Eventually, one person might register the bell, put two and two together and go to reception to report the stuck elevator, but then what? A bellhop with a crowbar would be dispatched to save him and Christine, both beating back full-on panic with only the barest of threads?

"Isn't this thing supposed to have a phone, or a call button?" Christine asked.

Indeed, there it was, just next to the panic button. Sebastian depressed the silver button.

"Yes?" came the staticky reply. The fact that a real voice answered immediately allayed, somewhat, the feeling of impending asphyxiation.

"We're stuck in the elevator."

"Ok, which car, sir?"

"How on earth would I know?"

"Ok, sir. Just sit tight."

"Do we have any other options?"

"Help will be on the way."

"Ok, are you hanging up, or—?"

There was no response.

"Now what do we do?" Christine asked.

"Apparently, we sit tight." Sebastian stared at the ceiling. "Look, we have oxygen. You see the holes up there? We can't die in here. We'll be fine."

Christine exhaled and then flung herself at Sebastian, not really kissing him, but rather pressing her sweaty lips on his while strange staccato whistles leaked from her nostrils. Then she backed off and began unbuttoning her blouse. When she was done, she let it drop to the floor beside her, revealing an assertively unsexy beige bra, precisely the brand and style Sebastian's mother used to favor. He could see them in his mind's eye, strung across various hooks and faucets behind the green plastic shower curtain in his childhood home. When he wanted to shower or bathe, he had to unhook those bras from their perches and set them in a pile on the toilet seat. What a Freudian opportunity presented itself here in the form of Christine. How wonderful to fondle the not so soft material of the brassiere and return to the Oedipal cocoon.

He moved toward her, then stopped.

"You have a small patch of psoriasis on your shoulder."

"Yes," she said nodding and smiling, as if her psoriasis was a dermatological trophy delivered by divine fiat.

"Five minutes in a tanning booth. Clears it right up."

"You're sweet," she said, smiling, the tension released like the slow unletting of a tied balloon. She gave him a kiss on the cheek.

He reached down and, brushing her calf, picked up her shirt and handed it to her. "You don't have to," he said. "We don't have to."

"Isn't this the way it's supposed to work? I mean, a stuck elevator? We start here and then head to your room. Isn't that what people do? In movies, at least?"

"Believe me, this is not lack of interest on my part. You're a very attractive woman. It's just, well, if you want the truth, I'm in love with someone else."

It felt natural coming out of his mouth, but it somehow registered as a surprise to him. He smiled. "I've always been in love with her. Irrevocably, I'm afraid."

Christine put her shirt back on. "Yes?" she said. "Tell me about her."

He'd known her since they were little kids. He used to go over her house, first for rollicking neighborhood parties his mother had been invited to, and then play dates with just her. She was the only one who was consistently nice to him. And the thing about it, what made her such an amazing person, this Joanna Benson, was that she didn't need to be nice to him. She was the most popular girl in school. The only people who didn't like her were those who were jealous of her. She was a pure soul, a beautiful person . . .

"You keep using past tense. Is she still alive?"

"Oh, yes. It's just that we haven't spoken or seen each other in a long time. I saw her last right after high school. We went to her house and, well, that was the last time I saw her. She's married now. Well, divorced."

"You should call her."

"Maybe I will."

"But still," she said. "I can't help but wonder at it . . ."

"What's that?"

"You say I'm attractive to you."

"Most definitely."

"And here I am. And she . . . what, Sebastian? Do we live in our own lonelinesses forever? Lord knows, I do it, too. Have done it ever since I can remember. But is this what we are doomed to do?"

Sebastian thought. "Why risk a broken heart when you can have one that just thumps along, all utility and nothing else?" he said. But it wasn't really a question, at least not one to be answered.

The car started up again. They listened with relief to the movement of gears and pulleys doing their glorious work. The car lurched to the next floor and opened. A queue of irritated people glared at Sebastian and Christine as if it was they who had been responsible for the stuck elevator.

"I'm actually on 6," Christine said.

"I can ride with you . . ."

"I'll take the stairs."

"Of course."

They entered the stairwell and paused on the landing. Then, they shook hands; she went downward, he up. "Goodbye," they called. He watched her disappear amid the soft clatter of her shoes.

The three flights were an effort, the booze and the adrenalin smashing and swirling in Sebastian's bloodstream.

He hadn't realized it before, just how drunk he was. The buzz had left him completely during the elevator ordeal. But as he entered his room and sat on the edge of the king-size bed,

the sheets and blanket still tucked ruthlessly around the corners, the walls swirled about him and he had to close his eyes.

He lay back on the bed and let the world spin. He would be sick.

But no matter. He knew now: It was another country, one that could provide no real rescue. He wanted back home, to the world where she lived, to the cocoon of loneliness that cut wide, and deep, and delicious.

Every Way You Look at This You Lose

The nurse is at the end of his shift. That's obvious. A nest of purple wrinkles shades his eyes. His hair is greasy and unkempt. A yellow stain speckles one of his sleeves.

When I tell him who I'm there to see, he raises an eyebrow before leading me to her room.

"You're her second visitor," he tells me. "She's been here a week."

"I ran into a mutual acquaintance," I say. "He told me she was here."

The nurse just looks at me before he heads back down the hall—he doesn't give a damn. He just wants to go home.

When my eyes adjust to the room, I see her in the bed. What's left of her hair lay in strings across her scalp and looks to be the texture of cotton candy. But cotton candy gone bad—grayed and left to mold. Only the very faint rise and fall of her body under a thin white blanket tells me she's breathing.

I turn away, orient myself. I need a second. I'm not even sure why I'm here.

The room is a nauseating pinkish color. I can't imagine this engenders feelings of health or wellness in anyone. Aren't these places supposed to be painted shades of blue or green, like a sun-dappled pool or ocean? The view from the window is a brick wall. If you crane yourself one way, you can just make out the edge of the parking lot. There's a tree there. But you can only see a few branches of it and for only as long as you can stand to contort yourself in the uncomfortable position required to spot it.

When I turn back to her, I say her name. But she doesn't move.

I move closer, but I don't touch her.

I used to touch her. I used to touch her all over and every which way. But that was long ago. Long before I reached middle age, paunch around my waist and rather little hair on my head. My once nearly hairless body is now spotted with moles and scars, my flesh overrun with a coarse pelt as if all that left my head has migrated south and multiplied like C diff.

"Mrs. Flanagan," I whisper. "It's me. Darren." Still, she doesn't move. I won't press it.

To wake her up and reintroduce myself might be a cruel blow; it might strip away any remaining vestiges of memory she may have of a time when she had been, well, not young exactly, but not old, either, and certainly not wasting away in a pink room in a dismal hospital in a charmless suburb.

I don't know why I remain, why I take a seat and watch her, stay with her, bear witness to a life slowly wasting away.

Maybe because I'm the only one who's here.

I lay on her bed, naked except my boxer shorts. I was nineteen. For reasons I don't remember, or never knew, that was the ritual: that I would remove my clothes only to my boxers and she would take care of the one remaining article. She would run her hands and then her lips over my body. I was angular, hard, rangy, my ribs threatening my skin, wrists the diameter of young bamboo. She was thin, too, and perpetually tanned, her skin starting to show the wear of four decades. She, Mrs. Flanagan, was forty-six.

She had furrowed wrinkles around her eyes and a few deep bruises, almost like stains, on her shins and one on her lower thigh, but from mid-thigh up, at certain angles you'd be hard pressed to think she wasn't my age. But nothing about her or her nudity or her offering herself up

to me so easily was ever very shocking. It seemed to just happen and it all seemed natural, a rite of passage for an otherwise bored college sophomore who'd decided to stay in his off-campus apartment for summer break. It all seemed, somehow, normal. Most shocking was seeing Mrs. Flanagan's eyes as we lay in bed. Seeing her face without her eyes obscured behind gold-tinted reflective glasses sunglasses; that made her appear far more naked than her actual nakedness did.

We met at her development's pool. Her hair was short and dark with light brown highlights. She came every day and planted herself in a chaise and lay, almost completely immobile, from mid-morning to early evening. I never saw her actually swim. Instead, every couple of hours she would tuck her pointer fingers under the scallop of her buttocks to extract her suit and then lower herself into the deep end, ramrod straight without any splash, and linger underwater for twenty seconds or so before reemerging and settling back on her chaise.

Eventually, we engaged in small talk while I made my way around the pool's perimeter scrubbing tiles or while packing up the umbrellas if strong winds came and skies threatened. It was a tiny pool, a "one-guarder," and often it was just the two of us.

I think I knew why she invited me to come over after my shift one day. But I don't remember worrying or being scared or even excited when I locked up and walked over and she opened the door in civilian clothes, her hair smelling freshly shampooed. She kissed me and I don't think we even spoke as she led me to her bedroom. I pulled a condom out of my wallet; it had been in there since spring. But she told me I didn't need it and then, undressed, pointed to a scar across her abdomen. The whole thing was over in ten minutes and I ran out of there, sweating and short of breath. I left my whistle behind.

The next day, she met me at the pool's front gate. Spinning it around her finger, she handed me back my whistle.

"Thanks," I said.

She nodded.

"I'd like to come back today," I said. "If that would be okay."

"That would be fine."

It became an almost everyday occurrence. At closing time, I would shutter the gate and jog across the grass. In case anyone was watching, I'd get in my car and pull out of the neighborhood, only to park on a side street in the adjoining neighborhood and then cut through a path in the woods that led to her backyard. I would sneak across the lawn, yellowed with summer heat, and descend to her basement door, which she left unlocked.

The ten minutes of our first session stretched to twenty and then thirty and then more than an hour. Eventually I knew how to control myself. I enjoyed it, though I'm not certain I considered it fun. More like an educational opportunity. To that point, I hadn't had many of those. I was a decent student in high school but I hadn't ever really had an actual job. My resume was dominated by my stint as the very last incarnation of Benny the Beaver, the Brookdale High mascot. My school had retired Benny after my senior year and thereafter became the home of the Bobcats. The official reason was that bobcats projected more fierceness than beavers. But the change was mandated when the administration came to understand that the overwrought pep rally enthusiasm shown by the Brookdale boys was born exclusively from the sexual connotation of the old mascot. So my dad wasn't terribly enamored of my lifeguarding gig. He had urged me to get some kind of internship instead and not laze around a pool all day. "You should be learning something," he said. "Something you can take with you, something that will help you later in life." I figured with Mrs. Flanagan I was mostly doing that.

Just seeing her in her house, watching how she lived—a person settled, a person no longer striving for anything, no longer envisioning a future with questions about what it held—was an education in itself. Apart from my parents, she was the only person I ever interacted with who lived this way. And because of that, I never had to wrestle with the idea that what I was doing might have been wrong. We got things from each other, a mutually beneficial arrangement with a very real and looming expiration date. And so we continued seeing each other and ignored everything else, playing dumb at the pool by day, waiting for after.

At one point, mid-July or so, we got the idea to make mix CDs for each other. She would teach me what real music was, “not the crap kids listen to today.” And I would give her an education, too, show her that there were some great contemporary bands and she should give them a chance. But we acted as if it were a big joke, like we were being ironic. It was only much later that I began to see it for what it was, what she probably knew all along: that the ironic pose was a shield against actual feelings.

For her, that is. Not for me. I had a girlfriend; we’d gotten together after high school and stayed dating even as I went a couple of hours away to college and she stayed home to take classes at the local two-year school.

Keeping it from Joanna was easy. I think Mrs. Flanagan respected my relationship, or was at least clear-eyed enough to realize the impossibility of competing with a twenty year old. The one time Joanna visited and stayed with me for a few days, Mrs. Flanagan kept her distance. A rainy afternoon helped; I closed up and Joanna and I ate sandwiches in the supply room while we waited out the storm. But even after the skies cleared, Mrs. Flanagan didn’t come back.

After Joanna returned home and to her summer job in an ice cream shop, Mrs. Flanagan became especially aggressive, tearing off my clothes the moment I walked in her door. For the next week, every day, she would begin things by saying stuff like: “Does your girlfriend do *this*?” and then with a sly smile, she would engage in something like when she did a striptease, humming some tune I didn’t recognize while I sat in a chair staring up at her.

It made me feel sorry for her. But I never said anything. She fascinated me. Like the fact that she smoked a lot and yet somehow managed to never smell like it. Instead, she smelled like chlorine and suntan lotion and something else indefinable, something I would come to understand in later years as the smell of someone who drank hard alcohol, a lot of it, and often in the morning.

One time, one of the neighborhood kids, an asshole named Greg, came by with a couple of his friends from college, in town for several days before they headed out west on a road trip. They strode into the pool like they owned the place, like they owned the whole world, towels flung casually across their shoulders, each of them far more toned and muscular than me. Their forms stretched across Mrs. Flanagan’s gold-tinted reflective glasses as they walked by, but her head never moved. If she tracked them as they passed, there was no way to tell. Her eyes could have been closed for all anyone knew, or they could have been shooting daggers of disdain.

Doug’s feelings for her were clear enough. He said hello to her in a sing-songy way that shocked me. It was mocking, derisive, and no way I’d ever speak to an elder. This went on every day until she finally rose to the bait.

“Hey, Greg,” she cooed, raising her glasses to the top of her head.

“Yeah?”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Then she lay back down on her chaise and repositioned her glasses while Greg’s friends howled in delight.

When Mrs. Flanagan left, Greg turned to me. "Hey, you banging her, or what?" he asked. "No."

"Yeah, sure. Just watch out for her. She's a tiger all right. But tigers have claws you know."

"Don't know what you're talking about," I said, fighting an impulse to defend her.

"Dig beyond the newspapers and magazines in her recycling bin. See what you find."

"What do you mean?"

"A lot of glass, my friend. A lot of glass."

That day, I did my best to make love to Mrs. Flanagan. I didn't see it as fucking, or sex, or even the more clinical "intercourse." It was love, or the best approximation of it I could muster at nineteen. She seemed suddenly fragile to me, no longer the domineering and indomitable woman who lay in the sun as if cast in marble. I did my best to be loving, but she kept telling me to "stop being so soft."

"What's with you?" she demanded.

I could only mumble, "Nothing."

She shrugged a sheet around herself and lit a cigarette. She went to the window and stood there. Soon, I joined her. I stood behind her and we watched the neighbor teaching his son how to box in the rain.

"Kid's a psycho," she murmured. "I caught him cutting up worms once just so he could see the segments squirm."

"Well, maybe boxing is a good outlet then," I suggested.

"Or maybe it will turn him into an *unstoppable* psycho." She glared at the neighbor and exhaled her cigarette smoke loudly, shaking her head.

I guessed that look held a history and a weight that went beyond the neighbor and his kid in his shorts and oversized gloves and I had a feeling that I was in way over my head.

It was a relief when my buddy Rooster visited from Colorado and spent a week at my place. He'd been my freshman year roommate but he failed out and moved to Denver to start a jam band. Rooster and Mrs. Flanagan got along great; they mostly chatted and laughed while I twirled my whistle on the lifeguard chair. She would call out different dives while he bounced on the diving board, even though all he knew how to do were jackknives, flips, and belly flops.

One day, Mrs. Flanagan didn't show up.

"Dude, where's that hot lady?" Rooster asked.

I shrugged. "How would I know?"

"I think she wants to do you."

"That's ridiculous," I said.

"I'm serious, man. I see the way she stares at you."

"Whatever."

Rooster went back to Colorado and still Mrs. Flanagan didn't come back for another three days. When she returned she told me that her mother-in-law had died.

"Sorry," I said.

"I don't give a shit. The worst part was seeing my a-hole ex-husband."

The only thing she ever told me about her ex-husband was that he had a trick where he could twist his knuckles in such a way that they could almost line up flat on top of each other. I never really understood the logistics of it and after asking her several times to explain it, I just let it go. But not before adding that I didn't see how that was such a trick. What was it good for?

"He could never be properly handcuffed," she said.

“Is that a necessary skill for people?”

“He was a true son of a bitch,” she said, as if that explained everything.

I had that feeling again, that the life she’d lived was something way beyond me, a thing I couldn’t hope to ever understand. An occasional conversation, hanging out at the pool, sex. That was all it would ever be. I still had my life to shape, everything was ahead of me. For her, everything looked backward.

“You coming over later?” she asked.

“I have something to do, actually.”

“We’ll make it quick.”

I hedged. I didn’t really want to—I didn’t know why; having a ready excuse with Rooster in town had been an unexpected relief. But I didn’t know how to say no to her.

“We’ll be quick,” she repeated, irritated.

When I got there, we skipped the chatting and got right to it. She was lifting my shirt over my head when we heard a loud squeal followed by a sickening smash of metal on metal.

“Oh my God,” I said and started for the door. But she grabbed my shirt and held me back.

“Where are you going?” she asked. “You told me you only have an hour.”

“What if someone’s hurt?”

“No one’s drowning. You’re a lifeguard, Darren, not an EMT.”

I extricated myself and flung open the front door. There was a young woman in a compact car which was crumpled against a light post. She pushed aside a deflated air bag and staggered out of the driver’s seat. She took a few steps, vomited, and then sat down heavily on the curb, where she began to wail.

“Oh, come on, I don’t need this now,” I heard Mrs. Flanagan say. I was shocked by her hostility, as if this poor woman had intentionally chosen the light post in front of Mrs. Flanagan’s house to crash into. “She was probably fiddling with the radio. I mean, who just plows into a lamppost?” she said.

It was awful. But Mrs. Flanagan’s irritation stopped me on the lawn, as if I owed my allegiance only to her and helping this other woman would be some kind of betrayal.

“You should have been paying attention,” Mrs. Flanagan yelled. The woman didn’t seem to hear, but rather moaned and slumped onto the grass. I ran inside to call for an ambulance.

“God,” Mrs. Flanagan hissed.

From that point forward, she grew especially cruel and surly, as if she had no patience for me anymore. But I didn’t really care; summer was coming to an end and I would be locking up the pool for the season and heading back to classes. The last week we didn’t speak to each other very much. The final day dragged on forever; I had this heavy weighted feeling that we were building toward something inevitable, that we only had so much time left and it would all come to an unpleasant head. I worked around her and she didn’t move, didn’t speak—the hours dragged on. There were several other people at the pool that day and they stayed until closing time, so that may have saved me from a scene.

When I blew the summer’s final whistle, Mrs. Flanagan got up and collected her bag and towel. “I hope you enjoy yourself back at school,” she said as she walked past me. “Do well. Make your parents proud.”

“Okay,” I mumbled.

And then it was over. She was gone, and I didn’t watch her as she left.

I only saw her once after that, in the grocery store about three years later. I ducked into an aisle to avoid being spotted and loitered at the frozen dessert case until she left. Then I watched

her through the storefront window, where she ordered an employee in that gruff, humorless way of hers to put the groceries in her trunk. Then she flicked on her sunglasses and was gone.

I moved away the next year. Eventually I got married, and then divorced; turns out I was a lousy husband. Turns out also that I never quite got over my first real love, Sara. I still occasionally search her up on the Internet; her degrees from Yale, her medical residency, her beautiful family—I want to be happy for her and yet all I feel is regret and bitterness. Little wonder I drove my wife away.

My current job sucks. It's the same one I've had since I graduated from college. These days I tend to look backward, the way, I suppose, Mrs. Flanagan did back then. Maybe I was the one thing she had to look forward to. But summers always end.

I ran into Rooster a few days ago. We literally bumped into each other at a Trader Joe's. I hadn't seen him in ages.

"Jesus," he said, pointing to my bald head. "It's been a long time. Hey, you remember that crazy woman from the pool, Mrs. Fletcher or something?"

"Flanagan?"

"Yeah, that's it. She's dying."

"What?"

"Yeah, it's the craziest thing. My mother wound up buying a condo in that development after my dad died and they became good friends."

"Seriously?"

"Isn't that crazy? My mom used to tell me all the time about her friend and when they eventually realized they had a connection, well, Mrs. Fletcher—"

"Flanagan."

"Right. Well, she used to say all the time how much she thought you were great. Tell me, seriously, were you screwing around with her?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, anyway, she's dying. My mother went to see her the other day."

The sun is starting to set and the room is growing darker, the pink turning to red. I don't turn on the lights. Instead, I drag my chair closer to her bed. I study the lines on her face, the indentations from her pillow, the irritated skin where a thin tube lays across her lip and enters her nostril. I can't locate any of the person I used to know in there. I don't dare pull back her blanket and check her body for some recognition.

"Mrs. Flanagan," I say. "I'm sure you don't remember me, but . . ."

I expect her eyes to flutter open and take me in, uncomprehending perhaps, searching my face for clues.

Or maybe she'll know exactly who I am and smile and thank me for coming. Maybe this visit will inject life into her and before we know it, to the stupefaction of the medical staff, she'll be sitting up, eating solid food, playing rounds of cards with me, and we'll walk out of here together.

But of course not. Her eyes remain closed. Only the softest whistle comes from her mouth—that alone to tell me she's even alive.

I'm still not sure I know exactly why I came, or why I stay.

Or why I climb into the bed and squeeze myself next to her. What I do know is that it feels right that I touch her again, that I hold her for the very first time.

Coda

Sebastian knew better than anyone that diseases could be fought, that the seemingly incurable could in fact be cured, that the idea that one should never give up the fight was more than just an empty platitude. After all, his entire celebrated career had been spent pursuing cures for the “incurable.” He’d burst onto the scientific scene at the age of twenty by pioneering a procedure to swap batteries for devices such as pacemakers for subcutaneous chips that naturally harvested the body’s own thermal energy. Then, at twenty-two, he’d developed a nanotube pathogen test that could detect proteins responsible for liver disease. And then there was his cause célèbre: the waterless toilet—solar-powered, self-cleaning, and capable of converting human waste into fertilizer—which to this day continued to efficiently hum in disparate, far-flung corners of the globe, sparing thousands of lives annually from diseases due to poor sanitation conditions. Thus, Sebastian would reasonably be one of the last to surrender the fight to any disease.

Accordingly, when he received his own bleak diagnosis, Sebastian’s scientist instincts kicked into high gear. But soon enough the combination of the disease’s mortality rate and its own progression in his body became too much to ignore. Despite Sebastian’s initial work—the twenty hour days reading, consulting, testing, researching—the disease progressed unalloyed and indifferent to his efforts or hopes. His next inclination would have been to keep at the work so that he might allay the suffering of future victims of the disease, but instead he decided to ultimately surrender, tip his hat, and determine to live out his remaining days—estimated at three to six months—as fully as he was capable. In the end, he was also a person with a preternaturally begrudging admiration for the cellular mutation rapidly ravaging his body.

To that end, despite feeling crummy from the medications, he kept his invitation to the World Conference on Medical and Biological Engineering, taking place that year in Bogota. If for no other reason, he’d never been to Colombia and with his impending personal demise, he felt liberated from pressure to return home immediately after the conference ended. Instead, he would stay and, so long as he was able, travel a bit around the country, see what he could see, add some last novel experiences to a life that, while far too short at forty-nine years, had been a fulfilling and interesting life, after all.

His work had taken him to more than fifty countries around the world—though he had to concede, with a fair amount of regret—he’d rarely seen much of these countries apart from whatever city he found himself: Reykjavik, Brussels, Bangkok, Cairo, Stockholm . . .

And so on this trip, he would not only see Bogota, but then would get a short flight to Medellin, and from there make his way by van four hours east to Puerto Triunfo, home of Hacienda Napoles, where the drug kingpin Pablo Escobar once lived.

It was not something he generally admitted to, his lifelong fascination with Escobar. It was not admiration. That would require papering over the enormous destruction Escobar had wrought: the millions of lives wrecked through drug addiction, the internecine drug wars in Colombia that resulted in more than 50,000 dead. For a man who had dedicated his life to saving people, Sebastian’s interest in Escobar was an intellectual, even an anthropological, one—what to make of such an outsize figure, a walking contradiction, a person who seemed to embody the entire spectrum of humanity in his five foot six inch frame: from loving family man and hero to the poor and downtrodden, to ice-water killer—and often both in one day. And so Sebastian would visit Escobar’s old compound. But he would do so for reasons well beyond Escobar himself. No, he had something else, something more sweeping, in mind.

The conference in Bogota was fine, but Sebastian's sapped energy level led him to skip several panels in favor of the hotel room bed. But, as had been the case in the previous week, his body ping-ponged between severe fatigue and something that felt almost normal—though, if he was honest with himself, he had more or less forgotten what “normal” felt like, having been replaced by a new normal of wildly vacillating feelings. At the conference's end, he felt physically terrible. But there was for Sebastian a sort of affirmation in that—it was the breakdown of his body that caused the lethargy and the waves of crushing headache and nausea. It was no longer the medicine fighting, unsuccessfully, against this evil inside him, this haywired breakdown that told his own body to attack itself. He had the previous week given up his “fight medicine,” as his doctors called it, and was taking only palliative pills—pain killers, anti-nauseas—meant to stave off or, at the least, minimize the symptoms that came from giving up the fight, and he was elated to discover that he felt fairly well as he stepped onto the plane for the one-hour flight to Medellin.

Sebastian gulped down a few more pills, including a sedative, as he stepped into the van for the ride from Medellin out to Puerto Triunfo. He wished to sleep, but the guy who crammed himself into the seat next to Sebastian started in right away: “They don't talk about Escobar at this place, you know. They don't like the association. To Colombians, and especially Colombians in this area, Escobar was responsible for an extraordinary amount of violence and an attendant lack of economic investment. This area wants tourists, and Escobar is the draw—still some kind of folk hero to the rest of the world, to people who weren't in the path of his personal tornado—but they don't want to talk about him. Unless there's pesos involved, of course.”

Sebastian just smiled and nodded.

The man continued: “You know about his hippos, yeah? You know how people say that animals are more afraid of you than you are of them, that they would prefer you leave them alone to anything else? Not true of the hippopotamus. It will charge at you and trample you without a second's thought. They look like cartoon characters, but they are some means sob's. I love that.”

Yes, the hippos. These days, perhaps even more than Escobar, it was the hippos that drew the visitors. And it was the hippos that were the draw for Sebastian, too. He smiled and thought, as he often did, of Joanna and her love of hippos: the time she had missed a day of school because for her birthday her parents had driven her to the Philadelphia Zoo where they got her a behind-the-scenes confab with a juvenile hippo. “We were able to feed it and touch it. It was all rubbery-feeling. I gave it lettuce and it chomped on it. The hippo was just, like, a year old. They don't let you near the big ones.” This she told to a circle of friends at the school lunch table. They mostly just stared at her with bemusement or indifference. It was obvious that she was the only one who gave a damn and it was obvious, too, that she either didn't pick up on their lack of interest or simply didn't care, lost as she was in the recollection, doing that thing that she did that drove Sebastian wild: the way she would absentmindedly play with her left earlobe when she was talking dreamily. What kind of crazy person was she, that she could get that way over a year-old hippo? Sebastian loved her.

Though at this point they no longer hung out. This was middle school and the days of play dates were gone. He still thought about her endlessly—but from a distance. She still smiled at him, waved, said hello, but these were passing encounters.

As the van made its way over bone-rattling potholes, and the seatmate yammered on, Sebastian floated away: they were still quite young, and Joanna took Sebastian up to her room. This in itself was an incredible experience, like being admitted to some inner sanctum that had

been off-limits to all but a small elite: the inner working of the Forbidden City or the Kremlin or some such. No, not that, not in this case; instead, a princess's castle, a womb, heaven.

This was Joanna Benson's bedroom, after all. It was where she went to sleep—the bed was right there!—it was where she woke in the morning. The pale blue woolly knotted rug that sat on the floor is where she put her feet first thing in the morning, reestablishing her place in the world while she yawned and stretched her arms to the sky. The lavender dresser in the corner is where she retrieved her clothes. Sebastian was nine years old at this time and so his thoughts were not lascivious. Instead, there was wonder: pure and simple and as innocent as could be. And so very quickly his head went from these thoughts—Joanna's routine movements in this room—to being overtaken by the obvious: the hippopotamus theme. They were *everywhere*. The plush chair in the corner: two small feet and wide arms around the edges, enclosing the seat, goofy hippo head with two tiny white teeth on either side of its mouth. And of course the ears: those tiny tufted, ridiculous ears. The wicker trash can with hippo head at the top. An enormous stuffed hippo standing sentinel near her closet. And of course the menagerie of hippos scattered throughout the room: the figurines on her dresser, the stuffies on her bed, spilling to the floor and overtaking a basket for the purpose.

Sebastian had a female cousin, five years older than he, and he could remember the horses—dozens of them—that decorated her room in various incarnations. That seemed natural, a thing many young females engaged in; there was something about girls and horses. But hippopotamuses? Actually, *was it hippopotami?* he asked himself.

“Why do you have all these hippos?” Sebastian asked.

Joanna shrugged her shoulders. “I don't know. I just love 'em.” Then she flung herself on her bed and scooped up one of the bigger hippo stuffies into her arms.

The rest of that day consisted of the standard play routines young children engage in. There was no overt mention of the hippos again, but Sebastian couldn't escape them: they gaped at him from every corner, their eyes stitched on or glued in or painted, but in every case sunken in their oversized faces and ponderous jaws. It unnerved him somewhat, to be amidst such a singularity of theme. How could anyone have such a deep and abiding love of any one thing, let alone a singular animal within the almost limitless range of options?

But when it came to Joanna, the peculiarities of her and what she was interested in expanded to meet the outsized proportions commensurate with Sebastian's fascination of her. So if Joanna had an obsession with hippos, then hippos must have been God's greatest creation, no matter how absurd an idea when considering a hippo against, say, the majesty of a white tiger or a Eurasian lynx or a macaw.

Sebastian had managed to fall asleep and only the sheering and sudden braking of the van jerked him awake. He stumbled off the air conditioned transport and was immediately by a blast, like walking into a yawning oven. It was absurdly, otherworldly hot, a cloak of humidity that proved relentless. He waded through the air and tried to get his bearings. But it was hard to catch up to the world around him; multicolored things flitted and darted. Monkeys swung wildly and hooted and one another. Weird sounds emanated from the surrounding jungle.

Trying to orient himself, he wandered away from the van, passing the Hacienda Napoles entrance, and toward a wide cleavage in the land. When he caught his first glimpse of the Magdalena River, it appeared like a spear, slicing down the heart of the jungle. Several caiman sunned on exposed logs. He knew that manatees swam there, too, and giant turtles, and a multitude of fish. But he was really only after one river creature, the apex of them all, so he turned back to the Hacienda and made his way to the entrance gate.

Sebastian felt his heart race when he saw the iconic blue and white arch with the small biplane on top, painted in its signature zebra stripes. This was the plane that ferried Escobar's first cocaine shipment and this arch had stood at the entrance back in Escobar's time. But once beyond that, his heart sank at the abomination the place had become: streaming artificial waterfalls, wild animals behind chain-link fences, kiosks selling cheap food and drink, squealing schoolchildren running amok. The place had been turned into a literal amusement park. He knew this before he came, and yet it didn't seem something so grossly commercial and unsophisticated could be real. But now that he saw it . . .

No matter. He would not be here long. He was close to what he came to do. For now, he figured, he'd at least check the place out a bit. He stumbled around, crestfallen at the hideousness of the blatant commerce, but did—he had to admit—feel a bit of sympathy upon hearing the park director explain to a camera crew, in from the States, that the whole idea of the place was to confiscate what Escobar had left behind, repurpose it as a major tourist attraction, and provide an economic engine for the area. Escobar's old bullfighting ring, for example, was now a brightly-colored educational center dedicated to African wildlife and culture.

Escobar had famously imported a menagerie of wild animals to his sprawling compound and allegedly had a soft spot for his hippos. When his world collapsed and he was murdered, authorities came and rounded up most of the animals, sending them to zoos and shelters. But they couldn't remove the hippos—too large, too unwieldy, too expensive, too dangerous. And so the hippos stayed, eventually using their prodigious roaming abilities to make their way several miles east and into the main branch of the Magdalena, where they bred and eventually became the preeminent resident megafauna, a species outpost far, far from their ancestral African homes. But an original group that hadn't strayed was still at Hacienda Nopales and was very much part of the show: penned into a lagoon, they wallowed, bellowed, opened their massive jaws—all for the delight of the paying tourists. Warning signs were posted all over—*Peligro! Presencia de Hipopotamos!*—along with a picture of an immense hippo with open jaws. But these signs worked at cross purposes; by nature they were warnings and certainly the photograph of the ponderous beast could convey the danger involved. And yet these were beasts that looked hopelessly comical and the pictures only confirmed the caricatures.

Sebastian followed the signs to the hippo lagoon and took them in: their wild combination of droll buffoonery and beastly strength, their massively rotund bodies, their wide muzzles, bedecked with whiskers, tapering to cowrie-shell nostrils, beady eyes, and tiny tufted ears. Their stubby legs and inane tails. They look ridiculous. Watching them, he understood Joanna's love of these animals and why she cuddled with furry representations of them each night in her bedroom. And yet in real life they were massive, and being in their presence, their brute raw strength and potential for destruction were palpable.

"Even though these animals spend the bulk of their lives in water, they do not actually swim," a guide was explaining to an assembled group. "If you have seen them moving through the water, they are in fact able to sort of glide and kick and move easily, but they aren't actually swimming. Their body shape does not allow it." The group stood in front of a fence overlooking the lagoon where a dozen hippos wallowed, only their heads above the water, ears flicking occasionally, some spraying water through their nostrils. Otherwise, they seemed quite content to simply stand there. In this way, they edged far more toward the ridiculous than the dangerous.

The guide continued: "They have a clear membrane over their eyes, which gives them the ability to see underwater. Likewise, they can make their nostrils airtight, which allows them to hold their breath for several minutes at a time. Most impressive about this mammal—"

The guide stopped himself, for at that moment one of the hippos opened its massive jaws and held, giving full view to its open mouth: pink and rubbery with spots of black, rippled and quivering. Two tall spiked teeth on the bottom and rows of smaller teeth across the top. The mouth stayed open but now the animal emitted low, guttural, “laughing” noises.

“This is a sign of aggression. The hippopotamus is sending a clear warning signal. Those jaws are capable of snapping a boat in two. I have seen it happen. I have also seen hippos easily chew apart a crocodile.”

Perhaps. But still, despite the guide’s seriousness, it looked absurd. The hippo in question dragged its ponderous bulk out of the water and climbed up an embankment where it stopped and then emitted a massive amount of feces, which it spread with impressive efficiency by flicking its little nubby tufted tail back and forth like a windshield wiper. The resulting chunky spray easily covered twenty feet. It also resulted in a backside smeared as if the thing had used a mortar trowel.

“He is marking his territory,” the guide said. He delivered this pronouncement, as he did all the others he provided, in hushed, respectful tones. Despite that, much to his chagrin and increasing annoyance, the crowd was not absorbing his message and failed to internalize the awe and clear danger of this rotund animal. Obviously sensing this, the guide delivered the coup de grâce: “The hippopotamus is responsible for more human deaths than any other animal in Africa,” he said.

Not even a moment of respectful reflection. Instead:

“Good thing we’re not in Africa then,” one member of the group said. Everyone else chuckled. The guide did not even smile. Instead, his stern gaze suggested that he worried about the impertinence of this group—not only the smartass who had made the comment, but the others who had laughed. After a moment of deathly stare down, he repeated, “Hippos kill more people than any other animal in Africa. Never, ever get between them and the water. They are capable of running up to thirty kilometers an hour.” He took several steps back. “We will observe from a safe distance.”

Of course, they already were at a safe distance. Still, the group reluctantly retreated a few steps and Sebastian took this opportunity to wander away.

He left the park and walked again toward the Magdalena. He knew that multiple hippos lived in and around the river, though he saw none as he watched the lazy downstream drift. He walked some more, vacillating between waves of weakness and nausea, until he found a home near the river edge with a “Rentar” sign. Sebastian negotiated a room with ease.

The man who owned the house with the extra room smiled at him, revealing a bottom row of teeth with several gaping holes, and steered him to a cool, concrete-floor room in the back with a door that led to the outside. The owner opened that door and there, barely twenty feet away, Sebastian could see again the silvery ribbon of the Magdalena River.

“Hippos?” he asked, pointing to the river.

“Si, si,” the man nodded and then offered a few guttural calls, mimicking the beasts. He smiled widely and Sebastian noted the placement of his most prominent bottom teeth were similarly situated to the hippos’. It was perfect.

Dinner that evening was a potato soup. Sebastian gave his thanks and excused himself to his room. His bed was a raised platform in the corner with a thin blanket on top. He got the sense that someone regularly slept in that room, but accommodations had been made in favor of the unexpected boost of income. The man’s wife and what Sebastian guessed were his two grown sons also lived there. The two young men moved in and out during the day but hardly spoke, and

only one of them ate with the rest of the family. Sebastian crawled into bed, the sun barely having dipped below the horizon. He felt lousy, a feeling that seemed more and more to be a permanent condition. But he was accepting of that. It told him that his decision, and his timing, was right.

He'd fallen asleep quickly, but then woke soon after and could not get back to sleep. He instead lay there listening to the sounds of the jungle at night: the cricks and calls and beeps and pulses. But some of that could have been in his head, he knew, his medicated brain throwing up synaptic misfirings. He knew everyone else in the house was asleep; he could hear snoring, at first ragged and then syncopated, as he walked outside.

Sebastian could see easily enough for the brightness of the moon. He moved to the water line, watching small eddies and ripples and marveling at the otherwise stillness and at the long sweep of events that had brought him here to this spot, an unlikely one for what would take place next. He thought back over his life: full, but not nearly long enough, that if he just had more time . . . alas. The desire to do more was a natural one, but a fruitless one as well, so he stopped that line of thinking. He thought with pride of the awards he won, how his efforts and inquiries had truly had an impact on the good of humanity. He could take great comfort in that.

But like any human being facing his mortality, there were holes and regrets as well, unavoidable. He thought of his mom and her devotion to him, how he hadn't gone to visit her grave frequently enough. But he knew he had been a good son during her life, and that was what mattered most. He was grateful she wouldn't see his premature demise.

His largest regret had nothing to do with his mother, nor anyone in his family. It was Joanna. Of course. It was always Joanna. She had been his constant mental companion, seemingly for his whole life. Every relationship he had he measured against not quite what he had with Joanna, for in reality he never had an actual relationship with her beyond what they'd shared as children. But there had been enough interaction between then and now, and enough time spent ruminating, and enough mental calculations on his end to have convinced himself long ago that she was, quite literally, the only person on the planet for him.

He had told her as much once. It was after his last trip to London, where he received the Euthenics Prize. He'd there had an innocuous flirtation with a woman, but just as something of consequence was about to take place, he found himself telling her all about Joanna. She had understood and encouraged Sebastian to reach out to Joanna when he returned home.

Brimming with confidence, he determined to finally tell her what was in his heart. They'd met at a diner, spending almost two hours catching up. It was only when she was about to leave did he finally spill it: "I love you," he told her. "I always have."

She reached over and put her hand on his. "I love you, too, Sebastian. You're the kindest person I have ever known."

"No, I don't think you understand what I'm saying to you," he said.

She looked away, her eyes, glowing with energy just moments earlier, now downcast, sad, tired.

"You know I'm going through a divorce," she said.

He nodded.

"I have no emotional energy left over for anyone, or anything, just now . . ." She trailed off. "Oh, Sebastian," she said, and began to cry.

He rubbed her hand for several long minutes until finally she announced that she was sorry, that she had to go. She promised to be in touch, “once the craziness has passed.” He received the diagnosis two days later.

He’d fallen asleep and it took a minute to remember where he was. Wet grass clung to the back of his head. A small rock had indented itself in his cheek. The moon had disappeared, subsumed by thick clouds. He lifted himself up, his head swimming, feeling faint and far away.

Then he heard the grunting, followed by ripples in the water. He moved toward the river, squinting, finally making out their hunched forms, the water rolling off their backs. He stepped closer and his feet fell out from beneath him. He plopped, hard, into the mud. Ponderous heads turned his way at the sound and the grunting grew louder, more insistent.

A wave of fear overtook him and, despite his intentions, despite what he had determined to do, he instinctually turned away from the river toward the house. But there was grunting coming from that direction, too.

It was the violence of the initial hit that surprised him. He could feel himself atop the animal, riding, somehow holding on, which no doubt enraged the animal more. The overall impression, apart from impeding liftoff, was of the wet. Soaking, gooey, intractable wetness. His hands kept slipping. Only the forward momentum kept him on top of the animal. Wet gooiness covered the eyes and nostrils and Sebastian couldn’t get good purchase, but still he held on.

But then he was off the animal, flying through the air in a burst, a moment that could not have lasted more than a second or two and yet felt like a skydive, a deep and intractable freefall; it felt, improbably, like freedom.

And then he landed with a great, violent thump. The air pushed out of his lungs and he struggled to inhale. He lay, taking it in, smiling, his ribs broken, his sternum crushed, air an elusive element, like he was sucking his life through a straw. Sebastian could hear the rasp and wheeze of himself, and yet he kept smiling. No better way to depart this earth. His plan had come to fruition, after all. Yes, there was pain. Yes, there was something like asphyxiation. But all of that was coming anyway, and its coming promised a hospital bed and attachment to tubes. Instead, Sebastian was lying on a muddy bank of the Magdalena River in Colombia, listening to grunting and the thudding hooves of several hippos scrambling to finish him off.

He kept his mind on Joanna, kept his head and thoughts firmly fixed on her, on the life they could have had, on the multiple fantastical imaginings, on Bexley and on what the three of them could have had together, on what he was certain Joanna would think when she heard the news that he was gone, that he had left this world under the heavy foot of a hippopotamus. And he kept smiling. He heard the refrain of that inane song resounding in his skull: “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas . . . Only a hippopotamus will do . . .” blurry, wavy, in and out, the words came. “Don’t want a doll, no dinky tinkertoy . . . I want a hippopotamus to play with and enjoy.”

A quick flash, though, like a stab: what if he had ruined her love for this animal? What if being ground to dust by her treasured hippo would thereafter forever sour her to this monstrous, comic-looking beast that she adored so much? Worse, what if she had long ago grown out of her obsession altogether and regarded her hippo-love as little more than a lost remnant of a bygone and silly childhood?

But no, he pushed this aside as the life leaked from him, as his cogent thoughts snapped and fizzled, as consciousness blurred around the edges like a ship stern in fog. No, this was no time for regret. He had made it, and it would end here—just as he planned.

How could she see this as anything other than it was?

