

STRAIGHT UP
AND
NO SKY THERE

ALSO BY STEPHANIE DICKINSON

Road of Five Churches

Corn Goddess

Half Girl

STRAIGHT UP
AND
NO SKY THERE

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY	9
STRAIGHT UP AND NO SKY THERE	31
THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER	47
BIG AIMEE'S PINK ALLIGATOR BOOTS	67
LUCKY 7 & DALLOWAY	85
SWEETNESS OF IRAQ	101
VALLEJO TO ISABELLA	115
VILLAGE OF BUTTERFLIES	131
GOATSUCKERS	141
KLARA'S BOY	157
THE GIRL WHO WATCHED	175

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For Janet and Marge

FIRST LOVE WEST
SIDE HIGHWAY

TAXI

The taxi raced, skimming over the West Side Highway, all the sidewalks Danielle trudged earlier, all the Walks and Don't Walks, now flew away in a blur of gray. Millions of lit windows had turned themselves off, letting the warehouses of grimy brick and scarecrow water towers do the peering out. Her feet burned. Earlier she'd pitched forward onto the cobblestones and the heel of her silver shoe caught in a crack. She didn't know why birds kept quiet at night or maybe they sang, but she couldn't find them with her ears. She loved birds. Then she wondered where the stars were, because they'd disappeared. They hated the city. Asleep, did stars and birds close their eyes? Curl their toes around a branch? Stars burn. Birds sing through rain and thunder and at night they sleep. Who keeps the lookout? They must travel together. They don't break off from the rest.

The cabbie picked them up as a couple; he wouldn't have stopped for the brawny man in sweat pants if it hadn't been for Danielle. The petite black girl in white mini skirt who must be his girlfriend made it all right. "Cold enough back there?" he asked through a slit in the Plexiglas. And then the taxi entered the Lincoln Tunnel where the river was on top of them and all the currents and silky filth forced back by tiles like the ones in the girl's locker room of Danielle's private high school. Gray and pink tiles that she liked to rub her toes against after a shower with a towel around her. The good feeling of a good run and those tiles neat and pressed against each other.

"See, I told you everything was going to be okay," Demetrius said, the guy who used to be a bouncer at Crobar then at Clubland, keeping to his

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

side of the taxi's back seat. His face shone with dimples and his warm eyes seemed to drink in all the night's trouble. But it was his soft voice that convinced her to get into the taxi with him. His niceness. She'd been lucky, all that fear and then it had worked out.

"Danielle, that's a pretty name," he said. "Like a greyhound purebred racer."

"How did you know I'm a runner?" she asked.

He grinned. "I was meant to rescue you."

Maybe someone should have rescued Demetrius when he and his mother lived in motels along Hwy. 42 right outside Zebulon, North Carolina. He flashed on his mother's boyfriend all those long years ago, his square head buried in the pillowcase's smiling violets, his jeans rumpled on the rug, Demetrius fishing in the pocket for coins. His mother on her belly, an arm thrown out, little pieces of lint caught in her hair, a balled-up silver gum wrapper. Demetrius hid the coins under a piece of rug where the tacks came up, and the next day he snuck to the convenience store, pointing to the red hots and bubble gum. "A nickel a piece," the cashier said. He opened his palm, looked at the quarters, no nickels. He left the store, empty-handed. He was one dumb kid.

Leaving New York City just as the sun began to seep into the sky, Demetrius watched light break over the interstate. He wondered if the girl's eyes ached from the dump of mascara on her lashes? She had one of those upturned noses like some of the light-skins did. A plaza of tollbooths appeared. They were going to the hotel in Weehawken where he lived with his girlfriend Tabitha. It was where his car would be parked if he'd had one. They called Demetrius' girlfriend with Danielle's cell phone. "TeeTee, I'm bringing a lost girl with me. We're going to drive her home." He'd had to hang up when Tabitha started crying that they didn't have no car and what was going on. Demetrius wasn't thinking more than two to three steps ahead.

"You're a greyhound purebred," he repeated, after finishing the call. He'd been a runner too, although none of his sprints were for extracurricular activity.

Danielle liked being compared to a greyhound, the second fastest animal on the planet. Her right foot throbbed from her earlier fall on the cobblestones, the strap of her silver shoe had snapped. Her right foot was unlucky: it had been born as a club foot, which they'd operated on almost immediately. You wouldn't know it. Her dad still talked about how spunky Danielle was, a baby with a cast on her foot almost as big as she. Instead of crying for her bottle, she'd bang her crib with the cast. Her feet turned

out pretty, but she took extra care when she drank because then she went up on her tiptoes and took tiny steps. Track was supposed to have cured her of that. She ran the half-mile in high school; her short legs going as fast as they could up on her toes while the ostrich girls with their endless legs tried to get by her with flying strides. Danielle ran harder, from her gut, three strides to their one. "Come on, tiptoes," the coach shouted, stuffing a hotdog into his mouth, another hot dog in his windbreaker pocket. "They're passing you. Run!" But they weren't. Danielle threw herself over the finish line. Coach clicked his stopwatch, scratched his stomach that hung over the elastic of his sweats. Blue green pickle relish like broken glass in the cracks of his teeth, "Not bad, tiptoes."

"Which side?" the cab driver asked. "Right or left." He'd taken the exit that curly Q'd off the interstate to Weehawken and hit his turn blinker when Demetrius told him to take a right. The neon's fading orange announced PARK AVENUE HOTEL.

Demetrius wondered if she might get skittish once she saw the motel. He paid the driver, adding a two dollar tip.

They got out of the taxi and the sticky reek of urine struck her nostrils; there were glistening puddles in the parking lot, but Demetrius smiled and she could see dimples and wasn't it time she saw how other people lived who didn't have dads who worked for the Securities & Exchange Commission. She thought she heard a bird underneath the splash of traffic. A really tiny one. Like those hummingbirds at the bird garden in Jamaica where her dad took her after the divorce, two inches across and taken for bees. Maybe it was one of those birds beating its wings so fast until it sounded like song. All by itself, a red bird twitching like a shred of heart.

"I'm not going to be living at this motel much longer," Demetrius said, trying not to but seeing the hotel through the girl's eyes anyway. "My lady and I are waiting to hear on a mortgage application. We've been looking at houses in your neck of the wood."

Danielle nodded. In her neck of the woods all the houses were basically empty during the daylight hours of the week. Her father was an attorney and worked as a fraud examiner, busy these days after the Enron collapse, all those imaginary offshore subsidiaries and holding companies that didn't exist. Employees whose lifetime savings were lost. And sometimes her father didn't exist beyond a wave when he headed out for his hour and fifteen minute commute to Trenton, and a "Luv ya bunches," on the cell phone. Eighty hour work weeks. Before her parents separated and later divorced they loved to read mysteries, especially in series: a veterinarian

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

detective whose cats solved murders; an ancient one-eared Laotian detective; and black, blind, female, transsexual, and born again Christian detectives. They loved dead bodies. They didn't like to drive into the city because why be reminded of what they'd left behind. And all the shipwrecked people still there. The failures, while they were successes. It wasn't the color line they broke through, but the money line. Class. Beyond her parents and grandparents, Danielle didn't know much about her forebears, only that they came from Trinidad to New York City. She was Caribbean-American, part of the African Diaspora, her ingredients included European and Indian like Heinz 57 and pasteurized milk all blended together until you didn't know if it came from cows or melted crayons.

CLUBLAND

It was still Monday, a few minutes before midnight in Manhattan near West 14th Street. Celestial and Danielle went around another block in the red Dodge that belonged to Celestial's mom. A van pulled out of a parking spot and they zipped in. Perfect. Not far from Clubland. They sat in the car. Earlier they'd eaten Thai food. Virgin Spring Rolls. Peanut-plum sauce, basil and carrots wrapped in rice paper. They had to make sure they weren't wearing any food. Celestial twisted the rearview to apply mascara and Danielle smeared on strawberry lip gloss. It felt like a race, getting the starting blocks in place, buttering on heat salve, wrapping your ankles. Most of Danielle's friends were runners while Celestial had been a glam girl, a cheerleader, not an athlete.

"Do you think I should take my bag in?" Danielle's tote overflowed.

"You won't be able to dance with it," Celestial advised. "I'll carry my purse. You paid for dinner. I put drinks on my card."

The heat came at them from all sides, a humid ninety degree brownish fog that sucked away their breath. Celestial was dressed in a black stretch top with an oval cut out of its middle so her belly button could stare out. The stretch top snapped between her legs and doubled as panties. Danielle wore a white mini, a black halter, a wide silver belt that her cell phone attached to.

Celestial lit a cigarette and they walked down the street. "How do I look?" she asked, exhaling a string of smoke. "Yummy?"

Yes, yummy like a papaya salad with cherry tomatoes.

Outside Clubland there were lines of glittering girls. Girls in off-the-shoulder beaded tops, in Hong Kong bustiers. Wrap-dress girls. Like those

Chinese prisoners executed for stealing chickens, sold as cadavers, cut open and filled with plastine. The sight of all the chickies made Danielle ache for her ex-boyfriend. *Jon, I love you still.* Jon's parents owned markets in River Vale, in Closter, in New Brunswick. Upscale food, lots of organics. He had a playboy's handsome face, those kinds of special looks. Black hair, large intelligent dark eyes. His smile could melt the cools of a hundred girls. Danielle was pretty, but not beautiful, or maybe you would call her long neck and face with almond-shaped eyes quite lovely. *I would tear the skin off my fingers; I would give you the tip of my index. One toe.*

««—»»

Demetrius was watching Danielle and her friend as he moved toward Irena, the waitress in her black fishnet dress. He gave Irena a nod, his get me a seltzer water with two limes nod. First she waited on the girls—underage, you could see that—bending over their table to slap down napkins.

Yeah, Demetrius thought, wasn't he alive only in his eyes at work, looking out for trouble, but mainly checking out the ladies, coiffed and perfumed into goddesses. The girls were black, but they'd been groomed and might as well have been white. Look, but don't touch you low rent mother. Demetrius liked to study cockroaches back in the day, staying in those long-term rental motels, his bed made up in the tub while on the other side of the bathroom door his mother tended to her boyfriend. She'd had a string of them, like the same man in ten different skins. She'd put out black plastic roach traps all around the commode and under the sink and he'd see the big bugs stagger away, flip onto their backs, their whiskery legs peddling in the air. When Demetrius finally couldn't stand it, he'd flip them onto their stomachs and they'd crawl away, but you could tell the poison had got to them, they were wounded. Once he threw out the traps and his mother's boyfriend Clovis gave him a beating. "That's not blood, Demetrius," Clovis said between smacks. "That's a new shade of lipstick for sissies." Fuck, Clovis. Demetrius fed lots of bugs five star meals. Sticky fruit they liked. He'd seen a cockroach wrap itself feelers and all around a bit of raspberry like it was making love to the fruit, curling around and sucking it deeper.

The girls ordered strawberry daiquiris. Demetrius watched them settle into the air-conditioning. The dancing was far away across rings of tables and terraces. Irene brought the strawberry daiquiris on a silver tray with juicy strawberries on each rim. Danielle smeared her fingerprints onto the

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

ice goblet. Demetrius liked the one in that white denim skirt sucking on her strawberry same as that cockroach, her lips like feelers doing the love making. Wouldn't he like those lips on him? The other girl had a light brown weave and tossed it around her shoulders.

He checked out the posse of girls in cobweb dresses and rhinestone shoes drifting off the elevator. There was a short guy in white jeans and black leather mid-calf coat with them. He waved his arms in front of him. "Come on, girls. They'll have to clear the VIP section for us. None of those people are on my list."

In the roped off VIP section, you could see that there were more than one Very Important Person, like expensive cars you rented for weddings to take you from there to here. Like here was the heart of Clubland, its bloody beating muscle. Red stitched leather chair, swivel cushions. Red cherry walls with mirrors, not really mirrors but fish sequins of glitz.

Demetrius had to clear the section.

««—»»

Shouldn't Danielle stick with strawberry daiquiris? How was that Thai eggplant and coconut broth going to mix with liquor and chocolate? What about the Thai Meing Kum Coconut Wraps. Crying Tiger Sushi. The crusted Salmon. Ginger, onion peanuts, crispy shallot, roasted coconut flakes, in Boston lettuce wrap. Black and white sticky rice.

It was the length of her face and slanty eyes that made Jon see Danielle as exotic, not like her suburban sisters, all her friends, the ones she spoke to on her cell phone. The silver bracelet on the knuckles of his wrist, how she liked to watch it move against those bones. All the languages he knew: English, Spanish, Hindu, Bengali, from working in his parents' store. They were of the mercantile caste. The second or third highest caste after the Brahmin. But Danielle soon came to realize over there was also over here. Did he remember the afternoons in August, in the hottest part of the summer when she was sixteen and he seventeen? Or the following spring when she liked putting her mouth there tasting his cinnamon? *You smell. It smells like cinnamon too.* He laughed and asked if she was comparing him to the dried bark of the laurel tree.

"Ever have a chocolate martini, Danielle?" Celestial had been dancing and her partner treated them. "Come on, have a chocolate martini with me. We'll split it."

The chocolate martinis came in triangle glasses with a stir stick of cinnamon.

Two guys came over and then the drinks changed to pineapple shooters.

“Girlfriend, don’t worry.” Celestial said. “We’ll get a coffee before we drive home.”

Danielle wanted another shooter and then to go dance with those guys in cut away shirts. A pineapple shooter. “What’s in that?” she’d asked, even her voice syrupy. Absolut vodka, muddled pineapple, absolut kulant. It tasted so good. She wanted to sip it, but the adult held up his shot glass. “Bottoms up.” DJ Big Vinod was spinning. Mos Def and Bizzy Bone. The drinks kept coming and Danielle was anxious about her tote bag in the car. Not to worry, Celestial had her credit cards. She’d be glad to pay for Danielle’s drinks, but look: some guys had already been taken care of everything.

Danielle sipped a blue drink. It looked cool—a miniature swimming hole, but tasted hot. Like blue licorice. It hadn’t been there in her hand and then it was.

They were back to daiquiris. Neither girl was counting. Or they were starting all over again.

Again, Danielle knew that sometimes when she wasn’t totally aware of herself she got up on her tiptoes and walked. Her dad thought it was endearing and adorable, his little girl who grew but not as tall as her brother and sister and tried to catch up. *Do I look yummy? Yummy enough to take your love in my tummy? A hot girl likes sucking and swallowing. Likes it like peanut butter plum sauce slathered on a spring roll.*

TOW ZONE

Danielle and Celestial left the club. Once of the bouncers, the nice one who’d checked their IDs on the way in, escorted them out. “Take care, ladies,” he said. They tried walking a straight line outside, but they weaved across the street. Now it was Tuesday morning, 2:00 a.m. The buildings that a few hours earlier twinkled with nightlife and excitement were blacking out. Near the entrance to the Citibank ATM machine, a woman with strips of garbage bag wrapped around her ankles held out her arm as if clutching a microphone.

Danielle had her cell phone that could do almost anything, but it couldn’t slide into the ATM machine and get money.

Celestial tried to slip her Chase card in the door to the ATM. The red light stayed illuminated. “Come on green. Green, you ass.”

The homeless woman shuffled toward them. “Ladies, I’m talking to

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

you. A man isn't going to save you. That almighty man is going to land you in Hell. For eternity. Do you know how long eternity is? If you ground down every building in this city and a pigeon flew each pebble to the moon and came back for the next, ladies, it's longer than that."

The sky between buildings was the color of pebbles, a lighter shade than the behemoth buildings that seemed to walk with them. Old sweatshops with their locked windows straggling after. At last they were standing in the empty slot where they left the red Dodge earlier.

"Is that where we parked?" Celestial hiccupped. "Mom will kill me if we lose her car."

The no standing sign stared at them from its pole. That couldn't have been there before. Maybe they'd miscalculated, parking on the next block. But then they hadn't and after walking in circles, Danielle called 911 and was transferred to the Tow Pound.

"Twelfth Avenue and 32nd Street," the dispatcher said.

"Eleven blocks, think you can make it?" Danielle asked Celestial. She had fewer of the pineapple shooters inside her body and knew she could.

"Lead the way," Celestial slurred.

They headed toward the Hudson River back to the Meat Packing District where earlier they'd eaten. It wasn't the same. All the closed stores watching them stagger by. The French Cleaners, Leather and Fur Experts. The heat hardly parted to let them pass before it moved against them.

Jon loved the heat although in each of his parent's markets ice cold air conditioning blasted along with the Indian pop songs that Danielle grew to appreciate, the one note over and over with trills. Like yellow curry, the sweat of it simmering down an esophagus. And since all the girls flirted with Jonathan, she never really knew why he chose her. They couldn't date in the open. Not in front of his parents. After graduation from high school he enrolled at Rutgers, and his mother had gone to India and engaged him to a diamond merchant's daughter, rich and beautiful. Danielle heard from his friends at the market that she was very nice. A virgin. That Jonathan said, "She's great."

"Shit, Danielle. Oh, shit shit," Celestial moaned, facing the building, wishing for a crack, somewhere to hide herself. Not shit. But vomit. Her Thai meal splattered on the sidewalk and on her stretchy shirt with the open belly hole. Danielle swayed and the lights on the street split apart, so much jittered in her eyes, but the liquor kept her wide awake.

Someone was following them, someone barefoot and fat and fanning himself with a violet fan. At first Danielle thought he might be a woman,

but under the streetlight she saw it was an Asian man with long grey hair. Behind him about a half of a block back strolled Demetrius. He figured he'd see where the girls were going, if they needed help. They lurched from right to left, the girl in the white mini tiptoeing. Maybe a part of him was feeling protective, the way he wished someone had felt about his younger self. It still made him sick to his stomach when he thought of his mother taking off with her square-headed boyfriend Clovis, leaving Demetrius behind in the Dutch Windmill Motel, ten years old and totally alone except for TV and the remains of an everything pizza. He listened to the ghosts of their old fights. "Fix your hair," Clovis shouting. "Ivonne, fix it." His mother snorting, "You're not going to be sleeping in my hair, baby." Clovis lighting a match. All the years he lived in foster homes, he remembered the scrape of match over the strip of grist. Demetrius wiggling the knob, the door popping loose and him running alongside the highway and into the ditch where his friends the frogs and toads lived. He huddled down, letting the cold mud squish between his toes. *Wish I could croak, wish I could just be a toad.*

When the man with the fan turned up another street, it was just Demetrius and the girls. They out-walked Lenscrafters and Chipotle Mexican Grill. They passed Sin Sin Happy Hour, Salvation Army, La Nueva Rampa Restaurant. They kicked through Gatorade bottles and orange juice cartons and cigarette butts.

IMPOUND

Part of the sidewalk was closed. Blasting instructions, the sign said. Three short whistles meant the blast was one minute away. Dynamiting out the roots of old buildings. The Impound was a long lot with chain link fence around it. Two tow trucks entered with their catch.

"Shit shit shit." Celestial staggered against the chain link. A No Standing Zone. When they parked the red Dodge they honestly thought that sign meant no teens or gangs hanging out.

The uniformed men inside the Impound glanced up, and then really stared.

"Get it together," Danielle nudged Celestial.

They walked deeper into the office where it was too bright, like walking into a lit refrigerator. Celestial fumbled her purse but Danielle opened it for her. Soon she'd have her tote, her cards, and the keys to her car, cash. She'd have her life back. Her father wouldn't have to know. Danielle's father voted for Ralph Nader in the second to last election

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

although he knew he was only throwing his vote away. Letting George W. Bush back in the White House. He had to vote his conscience. Both parties were bought men and women. The day after the election America would wake up. But now it was Obama in the White House and you still couldn't tell if America was asleep or awake. But they called it a jobless recovery and her father was busier than ever. You couldn't tell if the city employees were awake or asleep either. Were the motor vehicle police officers in their blue shirts and decal patches on their shoulders all alike?

"We're here to pick up a car," Danielle said.

"Is that so?" a tow pound officer said, lifting his red face and dark eyebrows. Three long wrinkles stretched over his forehead.

Danielle rubbed her temples, feeling groggy. A headache was beginning in her forehead and left eye.

"A red Dodge," Celestial piped up, pushing herself against the mesh. "My mom's car."

The impound officer lifted the three wrinkles. "Do you have the registration papers?"

"They're in the car. As soon as you bring it around you'll have 'em," Celestial slurred, beginning to sway, her fingers tightening around Danielle's arm.

A light was shining in the red-faced man's dark eyes. "We can't bring the car around if you don't have that registration." Two other impound officers had gotten up from their chairs and stood behind the red-faced officer.

"Come on," Celestial said, hitting the counter with her bracelet. "How are we going to get home?"

"Are you ladies intoxicated?"

Celestial dropped her purse and Danielle scooped it up. Tears budded in Celestial's eyes. "It's my car." Nothing would be worse than getting a citation for public intoxication.

A sign read Traffic Department Tow Pound. Fine to release \$150. Money orders, cash, on-site ATM.

"You can't operate a motor vehicle if you're intoxicated, ladies."

"May I *just* get my purse out of the car? Please it's got my credit cards and house keys in it," Danielle asked, her hands shaking, the headache streaking from her nose to her eyes.

"Let's see ID."

Danielle pushed Celestial's license into the slot.

"That's her. Who are you?"

Celestial gave a hand wave. "Let's go outside," she slurred clutching her mouth.

The impound man called EMS when Celestial fell down. She kept falling deeper into the puddles of saran wrap and Gatorade bottles, her shirt with the belly hole more open, as if she wanted to crawl back into her navel. Her light brown woven hair spread around her on the ground like it was trying to run away. Her pony print purse went flying.

The white-shirted EMS guys left the red siren circling and bleeping, as they rolled out the stretcher and lifted Celestial. “Okay, what’s in her?” the EMS man snapped. He chewed gum so hard it made his ears bounce up and down. They strapped Celestial to the stretcher. The impound guys with their clipboards surrounded the gurney.

“Any drugs in her?”

The real police were coming and Danielle knew it. “No drugs.”

“You want your friend to die?”

Danielle’s hands trembled, her knees knocked. “Please,” she said. “I told you the truth.”

Two drunken Jersey girls, two liars.

They’d arrest her for underage drinking, put her name in the police blotter, and what would her father say? “You know how to hurt a man. I have government clearance. Don’t do this, Danielle.” Since the divorce when her mother dumped her father for another man, Danielle tried making it up to him by being a good daughter. Once Danielle had to go to the River Rove bank where her mother worked. She followed a brown woman in a red suit walking hand in hand with a tall white man upstairs to Customer Accounts. There on the low tables magazines rested, one called *Sail*, white sails bending into the blue seas, cloudless skies. Then the couple turned. It was her mother and the new husband. Danielle’s mother used to oversee the cashiers on their high stools, how cool and disembodied they looked, dispensing cash. More asleep people. I’m in love,” her mother had said to Danielle’s father. “You’re in love?” he repeated. Danielle listened from the stairs. Even now thinking of those words the daiquiri grew thick in her throat like a cut so rich and bloody she couldn’t swallow. “Who is he?” her father asked. After a pause her mother answered, “A man I work with. He took me from the side. I wasn’t expecting it.” It was how her mother slipped away from her marriage and family. When no one was looking she went.

They had Celestial between them, loading her into the ambulance, the EMS guys looking nothing like skinny Nicolas Cage in *Bring Out the Dead*. They were burly and their faces well-fed. But the movie had it right about all the junk food. She could see all the Big Gulp cups, Ritz crackers, wrappers from double-stuffed Oreos on the floor in the back of the ambu-

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

lance. While they were all gathered around the moaning girl, Danielle simply walked away and no one stopped her.

Danielle's whole body trembled now and her heart raced. The street grew dirtier as she hurried and the moon a huge blob of hot lard, an ice cream scoop of lard, a bushel basket of sheep fleece. Did she think she could run to New Jersey? Tattoo parlors. Liquor stores. Everything 99 cents. Ricky's Unlimited Jeans. At the Don't Walk a man sat on a fire hydrant and poured what looked like beer in a water bottle onto his toothbrush. He brushed his teeth, and then spat. Warehouse mouths where earlier the cows twirled on hooks, where the fat hit the cobblestones and wormed its way into crevices.

There were buildings on either side; grates pulled down, Kerry/Edwards's stickers, I Love New York. Obama: Change You Can Believe In.

WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

Demetrius hailed a cab, an off-duty cab, sometimes those were the best kind. He explained to himself about this girl, that he was watching out for her. A rich spoiled girl for sure. The highway that had crumbled more than once formed a line between the Hudson River and the interior of Manhattan. The girl probably didn't know how she had managed to stumble here where cars flashed around her, making splashing sounds like fleeing water. They'd recently renamed it Joe DiMaggio Highway. There was New Jersey, the Garden State across the river.

Night after night he sat on his stool drinking his seltzer with two limes, watching the chicks and young bucks get high. High was like bringing in the pit-bulls that you'd kept in a bathroom without water, all that musky, lifting a leg, sniffing. All fidgeting because last call was like death, last call without hooking up. Desperation.

Demetrius had the taxi slow down, pulling over almost onto the shoulder. "Hey, you look lost. Let me help you," he kept saying. "I saw you at Clubland. I'm a bouncer."

She sighed, her whole body like she might cry, so relieved. But she wasn't sure, couldn't look. *Let me help you.* She picked up the pace.

"Wait up," he called out, but another swarm of cars pierced his voice. Maybe she'd start running soon only how would she know where to go. Her hands shook, vehicles honked in her face. "Miss, please. This isn't any place for a young lady. Don't be afraid, I want to help you. You look like you can use some."

She started to run, felt her feet up on tiptoes. Danielle didn't want to be the one who looked like they needed help. Ever since Jonathan's grandmother grew sicker in her bedroom on the first floor with the Hospice aide there and not there, Danielle thought she might have the fortitude for nursing. The aide couldn't be there all the time and neither could Jon's parents with all the markets to work. And Danielle didn't mind really. Hospice showed her how to bedpan the old woman without hurting her, how to lift her haunches and lower her onto the stainless steel pan, and then leave the room to give the patient privacy or staying and giving encouragement.

That taxi kept following her. "Miss, I'm in training for the Marathon," the man called out, "and you look like you're a runner who is lost." That stopped her. The Marathon. He was in training. A runner would want to help her, a fellow athlete.

More of the hundred mile-an-hour cars speeded past.

In the taxi Demetrius introduced himself. He hadn't asked, but she told him her name. Danielle. He'd seen her earlier. Did she remember the bouncer at Clubland? Sure, she nodded, she remembered him, but he looked different out here. More like the stone sky.

He felt like he'd just won a prize, this beautiful greyhound crossing her legs in the backseat of a taxi flagged down by him. You bet she never had to kill brown lice, but Demetrius knew how you had to get them on the flat of your fingernail before you could pop them, his younger self laughed at how brown lice jumped from child to child at the foster home, how they bed down in your privates and eyebrows.

It was a hot fast ride. Ruts and potholes didn't bother the tires. You could see the ditches on either side, the telephone poles leaning in the water. Demetrius told her he lived with his girlfriend just across the river in New Jersey. That's where his car was. "My lady's name is Tabitha. Like that baby witch. Remember that old TV show *Bewitched*? They show re-runs on TV Land." Tabitha might not like it, but she was going to have to vacate the room for a few hours. But Danielle didn't know *Bewitched*. "Are you sure you don't belong to that Greyhound bus?" Demetrius gently teased. "I didn't know if I could catch up to you. You're sleek and fast. A real purebred."

He patted her hand, felt her trembling. She was safe and right there practically bolted onto the back of the front seat was the Passenger's Bill of Rights, along with a telephone number to call in the event the cab driver violated one of them. When Demetrius talked he could see her trying to

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

listen, but totally uninterested, trying to stifle a yawn. This silky fine light-skinned girl from River Vale wouldn't give him a second look in her world, but she'd done messed up and was in his world now. "I know the by-ways of this highway," he bragged, like he owned it all: the bicycle paths and granite block paving, the original cobblestone highway.

He had such a low voice like that soft spoken actor. Danielle's mind kept drifting. Why hadn't Jon even e-mailed to say sorry? Maybe that's why she couldn't get over him. The injustice of it when she had even fallen in love with his grandma whose face showed all the hard work done in that hotter country. "Saffron is used to color rice yellow," she told Danielle. Grandma sat in the kitchen in her emerald green sari while Danielle chopped and stirred. *Was I hot enough, Jon? Saffron, the most expensive spice of all.* They needed a girl to come in during the day to help prepare the grandma's meals. The old woman knew English mixed with Hindu. She taught Danielle how to prepare Indian foods. Masala dabba, the spice box. Seven tiny spoons as if for a doll, seven compartments, seven spices, like crushed powdered jewels.

The meter made a whirring sound. They stopped almost in the middle of the lot. Demetrius slid his money clip from his back pocket, peeled off a five from a thin bill roll. "I'm light, man. It's been that kind of night. I'll send my roommate down to pay you the rest of the fare."

PARK AVENUE HOTEL

Everything was silt-covered, especially the glass door. A grit of black exhaust. Demetrius held it open for her and she followed him inside the lobby. Two dusty couches faced a TV on wheels, the kind rolled into junior high classrooms to watch breaking news, usually a disaster. Only on this screen the Shopper's Channel disgorged its riches: a garnet ring mounted and turning, pivoting to show itself from all sides; then a sapphire, one naked girl after another touching herself. She remembered being eight years old and watching the World Trade Center towers fall down. Two gigantic erasers clapped together and Miriam crying because her mother worked in Tower One.

The hallway smelled of mildew. Demetrius knocked; the door had scratch marks keyed into the beige paint. "Who is it?" a girl asked through the door. Then the door opened although she left the chain-lock still on.

"What's up freckle face cartoon girl?"

"Demetrius," the girl said angrily.

The chainlock slid off and Demetrius and Danielle stepped into the

room. A bed bumped against a dresser loaded with microwave and TV and CD player and quarter bottles of Coke and beer.

“Tabitha, this is Danielle. Now go pay the cab,” he said to the white girl.

Tabitha stared at Danielle with blue worried eyes. She stuck a cigarette in her mouth and lit it. Danielle was sure she’d never seen hair like hers. An ash blond so oily it looked almost wet. Little motel shampoo samples sat near the sink. Five or six of them that Danielle glimpsed because there was no door to the bathroom. Tabitha opened her eyes wider. They passed each other, close enough for Danielle to take in all her odors, mint and cigarettes and a rough muskiness. Her hair was a grease pit, but her skin was white like the plush calf interior of her dad’s Jaguar. What were those blue peepers trying to signal?

Danielle turned to follow the girl.

“Not so fast, greyhound.” Demetrius reached for her hand. “Tabitha keeps promising to stop smoking. She’s always putting on the nicotine patch and taking it off. See over there?” He pointed to a pile of discarded patches curled like silver seashells. “Relax. Have a seat.”

“But aren’t you going to take me home?”

“You bet,” he said, heading into the bathroom.

Danielle walked deeper into the room that smelled of sweat and fish guts. That must be what that milky saltiness was, a thickness saturating every air molecule. She almost gagged, and then she did, coughing into her cupped hands. No, she couldn’t stay. It was a mistake getting into the cab, and once she was in the cab, her next mistake was getting out of it. A night of mistakes. When Demetrius came out, smoke curled from his lips. “These funny cigarettes don’t count.” He stubbed out the joint on the dresser, separating the coal with his long index finger from the rest of the roach, leaving the ember to burn out like the pink eye of a chameleon.

She wiped her hands on her skirt, tried to breathe through her mouth not her nose.

“How about a dance?” He hit the radio button on the CD player and out jumped the rhymes of Notorious G. Then Demetrius rested a hand on either side of her waist where the halter separated from her mini. Danielle stepped back, hitting the edge of the bed.

“Aren’t we going soon?” she said, shivering.

“You bet. All the way to River Vale.” He dropped his hands. “Hungry? Looks like Tabitha ordered takeout Chinese.”

White take-out bags sat in the room’s one chair and on the dresser.

“No thank you,” she said. How could anyone eat in this air? She had to get out of this room. She’d stand in the lobby and wait for first light.

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

“No *thank you*,” he repeated, lifting one carton after another from the paper bags, and easing his bottom onto the dresser. Demetrius jacked up the radio volume. “Dance for me.”

She didn’t move.

“Dance for me,” he repeated.

Something in his tone got her legs going. Her feet were sinking into the carpet and taking the rest of her body with it. She swayed, swinging her arms, but inside she wasn’t dancing, inside she felt hollow because no one in the whole world besides Demetrius and Tabitha knew she was in this room. *Really did you think this ride would be free from a perfect stranger? Even if River Vale is only sixteen miles.* She watched him dig into those take-out containers. Baby shrimp and blue-veined prawns squirmed over the plastic fork, the cold noodles. Danielle’s head swam. She tried holding her breath against the smell. *The room stinks, Danielle. Are you afraid if you say the room reeks even in your mind he’ll call you uncool. A black racist is meaner than a white one. Sheltered Jersey girl. Burb chick.*

A drop of soy sauce clung to his chin—one brown tear. “You’re a beautiful lady,” he said after he finished eating. “I’m not sure you’re a greyhound. Nah, you’re no dog, but maybe you’re a raven. A beautiful black scavenger.”

She thought of the trip she and her father had taken last year to Spain. Smile, the ad said. You are in Andalucía, in a horse drawn carriage. You’re the girl with blazing white teeth in a white sun dress leaning over the carriage rail, your smile so wide, and a much older black man holding the reins, steering the horse, the freshly painted yellow wheels. Andalucía, this summer, next summer, a promise.

There was still food in his mouth when he asked, “Now tell me the truth. What were you really doing on West Side Highway dressed like that?”

“Like what?” *Be quiet*, said her mind. *Be quiet.*

“Like a working girl,” he said, flatly. His glassy brown eyes reminded her of goggles with mirrors.

His arms went around her and he kissed her neck, using lips and teeth like he was chewing. She pulled away, backing into the dresser, spilling a carton of fried rice. The blue prawns squished under her silver shoes.

“Don’t,” she said, trembling.

“This is my house and I’m the only one who uses that word. *Don’t* is my word. Now kiss me nice because your life might depend on it.”

Demetrius stood above her slowly shaking his head. Then he lifted her

halter, reached for one of those goldfish containers. She felt the bean sprouts and water chestnuts and snow peas on her skin even before she saw Demetrius dump them over her chest. When he looked up he was again that nice soft spoken actor, smiling his dimples.

He took Danielle's hand, he began to rock her in a slow dance, and she felt his groin against her skirt. When you said what he'd said, when you made a threat, you felt yourself expand, get big, everything obeyed, even the radio played the songs that flashed through your head. When you told someone they could lose their life if they didn't act right, you were king, the keeper of all the cash transactions, the eater of shells, lobster, crawfish, all the stink stuff.

"I bet you don't wear a bra, not even one of those strapless." Demetrius pulled her top up. "Your tits look like baby corn." He kissed them, his lips greasy with Chef's Special Sauce. He sucked her nipple like a baby trying to drink milk. Her breast looked funny being stretched, like elastic. He nibbled on her, licking and smacking like her grandfather did the bones of pork chops. He bit her flesh that ten hours earlier she'd showered and lotioned and perfumed. On the bed in her room were the runner up choices of what to wear: an open backed midnight blue dress with a string across the wingbones, a front knot apricot halter dress, a mesh tutu skirt. She'd chosen the white studded mini.

Demetrius wouldn't hurt her if she stood still, if she kept perfectly quiet. She wondered if she would ever see Jon again. Was he married yet? His parents knew her as Danielle who was so good with grandma. They never knew her as Danielle whom their son was making love to. It was spring, the beginning of melt. Jonathan gave her a capsule of brown mescaline. They didn't know about that either. A body high. The Bangladeshi guys who worked had lots of things, had connections to Afghani hash. The pill tasted like cocoa and after she took it the rain started to fall. The new rain was long and hung in the air. Jonathan piggybacked her to a picnic table. They kissed. "This isn't fair," he said. Danielle touched the rain on his face; there were sparkling pieces of it. Blue and pink and white like Chicklets gum. She opened her legs. The rain was so beautiful. It blessed them. Rain was caught on the branches above like warm icicles; the drops took so long falling. Then the rain was hot and full of the spices Indian families cooked with. Rain turned into mustard seeds. Mango powder. Mint. That was March. If she had gotten a baby from him, it would have been born in November. "You didn't bleed," Jon said. She pulled her jeans up, "I really am a virgin." Danielle had taken her own virginity with a Tampax. Celestial gave it to her to wear so they could go swimming. It

FIRST LOVE WEST SIDE HIGHWAY

wouldn't go in, so she pushed. Each time it wouldn't go in she pushed harder, until her eyes teared and she made it go in.

She must have fallen because he was putting his arms around her, lifting her. He helped her stand up until both of them wavered in the mirror. "See what a nice couple we make. We look like a wedding couple." Demetrius smiled like that actor, and there Danielle was with rice in her hair, General Chow's special sauce on her breasts. Not big enough. She'd asked for implants for her next birthday. Her father said, "We'll see."

NO MAN'S LAND

The lard moon must have slid down into the river. It could have been worse she told herself after Hawkin's girlfriend Tabitha put her in a cab. The driver kept peering into the mirror, dying to ask what happened. She imagined Demetrius dragging her into a laundry bag, emptying the motel towels, the panties, and stuffing her in. You wouldn't want to look at a dead girl because the second the breath goes she's no longer sexy, no longer a hot hooker body. No breath, no air, strangled, things broken in her head, forcing her eyeballs out.

She imagined him washing her body with ammonia to rid it of DNA traces, cutting her fingernails with the cuticle clippers. Then using her cell phone to call his mother who lived in Co-op City, Danielle's caller ID living after her.

The Hudson River. Maybe he would have carried her to the river. Danielle had done a paper on things that lived beneath and above the George Washington Bridge. You had to feel pity for the plants, for the things of Earth that had to share air and water with human beings. You had to love the Lined Seahorse, those little seahorses that swam upright, their tails clinging to the underwater grasses, clinging to each other when they mated. And on the cliff-like girders of the bridge lived the Peregrine Falcons. In the laundry bag she might have felt like the seahorse upright and clinging to life. Danielle could see clearly from here, better than ever. Like the falcon.

She remembered being in the cab with Demetrius. "You know there's a Passenger's Bill of Rights," he said.

"Come on," Danielle said, laughing.

He'd almost hooked her with that one, "Yeah, posted right there on the back of the seat where you can read it. You can read, sweetie, right?"

"Sure, can you?"

“Right there with the emergency number. Any funny stuff, you can call.”

He'd flagged down an off-duty cab. They were always ready to squeeze one more fare out. He'd talked stronger than this whisper of a girl with her smooth legs and arms into a taxi with him. A purebred. A silver beige girl. He'd make her see after midnight and before dawn, when basically people like Demetrius were the only ones out and the drunken kids who broke off from the pack. Alone ones. The cab flew over West Side Highway, passing honking cars and early delivery trucks. What had that sign said so long ago in the parking space when Celestial and Danielle pulled in? No Standing Except Trucks Making Deliveries. That was what the sign had said. The most important of her life and she'd hardly glanced.

STRAIGHT UP AND
NO SKY THERE

Jamer doesn't know why he was born scared of everything. Being near or in water—the bathtub, fear of being upside down, of taking his undershirt off, fear of his own bare chest, of anything south of him, fear of echoes. Before age ten the only beings that didn't frighten him were the hummingbirds buzzing alongside his mother's flowers. Finger birds. If he crouched near his window, and listened hard, he could hear them humming above the scarlet runners and bleeding hearts.

Now, under the bedcovers, wings are beating fifty times a second. Jamer listens. The sky is the clearest blue he's ever seen. Beaks everywhere are slipping down the necks of flowers. Long, forked tongues. Birds flying backwards, sideways. Diving. If his body worked like a hummer's, his heart would beat over a thousand times a minute. After his temperature rose, he would explode.

"Jamer, wake up!" Ivory calls.

He doesn't want to leave the bedcover tent. This time between sleep and waking belongs to him alone. The floating. The feel of hovering.

"Jamer," his wife says again. "Wake up!"

He yawns, his eyes darting around the plywood trailer bedroom. Scalloped yellow curtains, yellow comforter. "I'm awake, Ivory," he mumbles, wishing he wasn't. He sits up, sheets slipping below his waist. Jamer stayed skinny and small until age fourteen, when he shot up to six feet two inches. His brown skin smooth except for the darker, puckered places, the mouths of scars, one above his left hip, the other across his stomach. Flood souvenirs.

Every day's harder going to school. He has to leave earlier and earlier. He wonders if the Lizardi Street Blue Dudes and Chef Menteur Cold Hearts will be hanging around the playground of Alfred Lawless today.

STRAIGHT UP AND NO SKY THERE

They like to line up on either side of the walkway and mess with the students. Eggheads. The Blue Dudes have been courting him, trying to get him to go in with them. Good boy without a record. Yesterday he turned them down. Today is recitation day in the eleventh grade, and Ivory has tutored him until the poem “We Real Cool” is stitched on the inside of his eyelids.

Bang bang on the bedroom door and in bounces Ivory. Round face with large brown eyes and a dimple pushed into the middle of her chin. She’s about four feet nine inches tall, tiny like an Asian girl with water lily hands and feet, but her skin is cocoa brown. Ivory is always opening books and pointing out words to him. *Puma* and *llama* and *lynx* and *sphinx*. X’s and u’s he likes. Think of the difference one letter makes. An X, not a J. Like if his name were Xamer, not a Mister Vanilla soft serve Jamer with a shivering heart and bottomless appetite for food. Who would mess with a Xamer?

“Girl, what’s going on?” Before he ducks into the shower, he’ll check his feeders. Grab the sugar water from the refrigerator. They’re picky birds. They don’t go near anything dirty. He’ll fill the two, strawberry-shaped containers.

Usually, Ivory says things like, “Breakfast is ready for my recitation man. My honey, Jamer.” He’s expecting something like that as she makes her way around the edge of the bed. Ivory is his older woman, his lawfully wedded wife. When they tied the knot four months ago, she was eighteen and of age, while he was only sixteen and a half years old. They had to get his mom’s permission from up in Massachusetts’s cold country where the flood carried her and Felix, his stepdad. There are plenty of dads in his school, but Jamer is the only married man.

“JAMER!” Ivory cries. “Get up, quick! Something’s happened to Mrs. Phipps! The door to her trailer’s wide open. I called, but she’s not answering.”

His head goes hot. That someone would disrespect Mrs. Phipps’ trailer. If I were Xamer this would never have happened. Jamer is footsie pajamas and raspberry jam. He grabs the baseball bat beside the bed. Just as he pushes out the door in a pair of jeans and an undershirt, a silver Saturn idling near the entrance pulls away. One of his two, strawberry-shaped plastic feeders that hang from the outside wooden stairwell to the trailer lies smashed on the ground, but he can’t stop now. He takes off running toward Mrs. Phipp’s trailer.

“Wait up,” Ivory says, following him.

“Stay back. Let me check things out first.”

Once his cousin, Little Stink, who is now a Blue Dude, told him he'd kick a dark chocolate bitch like Ivory straight to the curb. Xamer would have punched that idiot and sent him missing his front teeth to the dentist. But Jamer looked down at Little Stink. "Hey, I think she's cute," he stammered. "Your eyes are weird, man," Little Stink said. "A green one and a brown one. They don't match. No wonder you can't see real well with them. That chick is mutt ugly."

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He's moving in all directions at once when he treads past the wedged-open door into the trailer where the old woman old lives. "Mrs. Phipps?" At first nothing registers except a mewling sound like rising water and wind. He raises the bat, ready to swing. It's dark. His eyes adjust to the dim. Corn nuts are scattered underfoot. There's milk spilled on the counter and a coffee saucer gunked with cigarette butts. Mrs. Phipps doesn't smoke. He passes the empty cage. Where is Beauty, the old woman's egg-laying hen, who survived Katrina in a Laundromat dryer?

"Jamer!" a childlike voice shouts. "Jamer!" Calvin, a 200 pound twelve-year-old wearing Spiderman pajamas, rocks in front of the open refrigerator. He's slow-brained and loves to eat and whoever leaves his trailer door unlocked may receive a visit from him. He's got egg salad on his lips and digs into a mayonnaise jar with a wooden spoon. He loves Mrs. Phipps' refrigerator, loves its potato salad, its hummingbird cake and sweet milk.

"Calvin! What the hell did you do?" Jamer has warned Calvin's cousin who looks after him that the big boy is eating the old woman out of house and home. Whoever was in here turned everything upside down. Calvin is holding fiercely onto his mayonnaise jar filled with potato salad.

Jamer hears moaning from the bedroom and elbows his way past Calvin. "Mrs. Phipps!" He crouches, surveying the room just big enough for a bed and bales of clothing tied with string. House dresses and slippers and tops and trousers, old stuff found on the street that Mrs. Phipps has mended and ironed. Her feet stick out from beneath the bed: her left foot, all gnarled knotty toes, and her right wearing a fuzzy purple sock. It looks like they trussed her up in sheets and did their best to shove her under the mattress. Her heels move.

"Mrs. Phipps!" He kneels, reaching under and easing her out. She's a medium-sized woman shrinking with age. There's a bruise like a blue plum wrapped in the newspaper of her yellowish cheek. Her bottom lip is split. "Are you hurt?" he asks.

STRAIGHT UP AND NO SKY THERE

“Jamer,” she whispers. “I’m glad you’re here. Where’s my girl? Where’s my Beauty?” Her curled fingers resemble Beauty’s talons and she tries to claw down her nightgown. A piece of freezer tape on her forehead between her brows prevents her from frowning in her sleep.

“Mrs. Phipps, what happened? Who did this?” Jamer’s teeth clench.

Ivory tiptoes into the room and Calvin shuffles behind her. He smiles at Mrs. Phipps and goes back to eating. Jamer and Ivory gently lift the elderly woman onto the bed. She doesn’t want to lie down. She’ll just sit for awhile and be fine, she says.

“Those boys thought one bump on the head would finish me off, but I’m spry and my friend Calvin saved me. You know how he always comes in here for his sweet milk. Calvin kept shaking the door and I guess that scared them off. They wanted my FEMA check, which was already in the bank. I told them so. They took my laundry coins. It was that skinny kid with those dusty braids. Not handsome like my Jamer. She takes off her crooked glasses and examines the bows. “And that light-skinned one.”

Little Stink and Dante “Fig” Newton. Jamer’s mouth twists. Xamer wants to hurt whoever did this and hurt him bad. His heart is beating fast—he feels like he can almost fly with his hands. Calvin grunts and plops down on the bed. Mayonnaise dribbles from his chin. He nuzzles against Mrs. Phipps.

“He likes me to scratch his wooly head.” Mrs. Phipps raises her hand to Calvin’s head.

Like most people around here Mrs. Phipps lost her house to the black water. She used to run a coin-operated laundry on Tremé Street. Two washers and dryers and a sign in the laundry: *Empty your pockets of bullets*. The old lady doesn’t want the police called. The only thing that worries her is Beauty, and you know the police won’t help find a chicken.

“Where’s my Beauty?” she asks, shuffling into the living room. No sign of the bantam in her cage or on her roost. The brown and white barred hen is a refugee from the destroyed poultry processing plant. “She’s a good girl. A one-egg-a-day hen. When I’m not cooking or mending, I sure like to hold her in my lap.”

Jamer examines the brown and white feather caught in the mesh of the open cage door. He looks under the sofa, checks the closets and overhead cupboards. He fears finding her feathered corpse. His whole body pulses. He owes Mrs. Phipps. She’d let him eat at her table after his father died and the string of boyfriends that ended in Felix, the stepfather.

He promises Mrs. Phipps he’ll find Beauty. Not to worry. He holds the baseball bat behind his back. She knows she can count on Jamer. He might

not yet be seventeen years old, but Mrs. Phipps recognizes a good man when she sees one. Rare indeed. Like her deceased son, Rock, who stood up for a girl's honor in a public place and was shot for it.

"Mrs. Phipps, I'm going to make you breakfast and clean up here," Ivory says, already chasing down the corn nuts with a wisk broom.



Outside Jamer takes a deep breath. Since the flood, the insects have changed. The stinging mosquitoes have vanished and in their place are gnats and fruitflies. Swarms of them drawn to his mouth and face. This is home. Forty camper-trailers set down on the border between the Blue Dudes and Cold Hearts. FEMA roaster-ovens parked so close to the next it feels like they're piled on top of each other.

He heads back to their trailer and stands over the smashed feeder. Someone yanked it off the staircase. A bird no longer than his pinkie finger is flattened with the red plastic. His fists clench. Two ruby-throated hummers quiver at the remaining feeder. Never in his life has he wanted more to be Xamer, fearsome like deep night. Like a room sitting off a long hallway, not knowing what's at its end. He wants to be feared like a siren washing through yelling and fighting. A red lit front window. Hummingbirds coming to the glow. Thinking it nectar, the red flesh flower.

Somebody must have seen him filling the feeders. The Blue Dudes and the Cold Hearts have nothing to do but hang around and flash each other and be stupid. Three more ruby-throats hover where the sugar water used to be. They eat every ten seconds. He picks up the smashed feeder and the dead hummingbird. What is he going to do with her? Where will he bury her? He walks toward the weed growth at the edge of the FEMA lot, the hummer cupped in his hand, a mush of stiffness. Crouching, he sets it on the ground, pulls weeds and covers the tiny bird. "You'll be revenged. I promise."

Of all days, today is the one when he's supposed to stand up at school and recite from memory. That doesn't scare him, not like being handed a book and told to read a paragraph aloud.

Almost finished with his shower, he hears Ivory banging around in the kitchen. He runs one of their conversations through in his head, only it's Ivory doing all the talking. "No, you won't be tongue-tied. Honey love, I've tutored you. Remember how scared you used to be of words that had three syllables?" Toweling off, he enjoys the taste of terrycloth. The fresh-smelling way Ivory keeps his things. She's a good person and he's lucky

STRAIGHT UP AND NO SKY THERE

to have her. Who the hell cares if she's not sizzle-burn like Fig's girl, Genesis Reynolds? He scissors away a few spare bristles from his sideburns. Turns from side to side in the mirror. Small ears, weird green and hazel-gold eyes, brown skin that lightens and darkens in eye pockets and chin creases. His cheek twitches. He dresses in a pressed white shirt and dark slacks. Ivory always tells him he's handsome, but that doesn't mean a damn thing. Anymore than a ruby-throated seeing its reflection would consider itself good-looking. He's a bundle of solid quivering. Xamer would find whoever laid a finger on Mrs. Phipps. Xamer would say, "Fuck it. I'm not going to school to recite poetry. I'm going hunting for Beauty." In the towel closet he reaches to the top shelf where Ivory's too short to trespass, finds his fold-up knife and palms it into his pocket.

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Jamer watches Ivory tidy up the already neat breakfast nook. She stirs oatmeal on the propane-fueled stove, cuts an orange and squeezes it. Her hair springs up around her barrettes and she fingers it back.

He settles into his chair at the table, but he can't sit still. "Ivory, I don't think I'm going to school today. I can't recite. I can't concentrate."

Her eyes widen. "You can." She fills his bowl with oatmeal and sprinkles on brown sugar with raisins and walnuts. Brain food. The most important meal of the day. Jamer sets his elbows beside him, dunks his spoon in his bowl and like a hinge spoons the oatmeal into his mouth.

"Ivory, I don't want you to meet me after school." He doesn't want Ivory trailing along to Alfred Lawless. Anything could happen.

"Why not?" Her lids are dusted with eye shadow like gold-flecked pollen.

He gulps down his orange juice. "Because I'm going to hunt for Beauty after classes. I'm going to sign out from last period study hall and go looking."

"I want to look, too." Her shoulders and the muscles in her upper arms draw his eyes, like ants to sugar water. "I'll go with you. I don't want you going alone." As if to prove her point, she gets up, murmuring how you could not eat a cake that tastes nicer than her oatmeal. She comes round the table to pluck off bits of shower rain from his forehead. "I'm drinking you. Think of me as one of your birds. Even if we can't find Beauty, Mrs. Phipps is going to be fine. Don't let this derail you. This is your recitation day."

"I don't care about reciting. I don't care about school. Maybe I'm just going for you." That's a lie. He likes school and is secretly ashamed he's

not one of the bright kids the teachers circle. He lets her talk all she wants. He can feel the tiny hearts beating beating, being drawn to the nectar, to the Xamer in him.

She throws her arms around him. “Jamer, keep going for me.”

“Okay.” He thinks about how ridiculous bird feeders are to the Blue Dudes. They’ve sprayed gang tags over half the camper-trailers. The Cold Heart guys are older than the Blue Dudes. There’s a few girls connected with them from the Chef Menteur Houses. They favor knotted braids that stick up over their heads like firecrackers. Black t-shirts and hooded sweats.

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The sun isn’t midmorning high yet, just bits of cinder and tin, the forenoon rays finding the quartz glint. Head down, Jamer trudges along. Two million years of stone tools and then 150,000 years ago something happened. Homo erectus started to smarten up. Why? “Cooking may have been the cause,” said Mr. Brutus, the science teacher, reading aloud yesterday from an article. “Less energy is needed to digest cooked food.” Brains got big. The accident of meat falling in a fire led to Jamer carrying his book bag down a ravaged sidewalk. He’s tried to stay clear of the jail-bound idiots, but there’s no way to avoid them. He’ll find Beauty; he’ll make whoever left a hummingbird dead in front of his trailer sorry. Ivory would never understand. Be a softie. Be pajamas—turn the other cheek.

Ivory had no one whereas Jamer grew up in an aquamarine shotgun house with frilly curtains. Red jalapeño pepper Christmas lights strung along the porch year round. His parents spent their honeymoon in Matamoros, Mexico, and brought them back. His father was a gentle homebody of a man. Weekdays, he delivered mail; Saturdays, he went shrimping and fishing. Sundays, he baked apricot cakes. What would make a forty-two year old U.S. Postal Service worker who drank nothing stronger than wine or beer take a puff off a crack pipe? A dare? One suck from the smoldering white nipple of a witch. That’s all it took for the house, the aqua paint, and the jalapeño lights to go up in smoke. When his father’s heart burst, the EMS found him curled over a pipe made from a toilet paper roll and tin foil. At the wake, Jamer spotted the white burn marks on his father’s brown hands from scratching all those matches.

He heads past the clapboard Fountain Church of Jesus Christ’s Love and stops to listen to a trumpet player and an amputee gospel singer trading licks. In comes the piano, and all that blowing and vocalizing and trying to harmonize moves him. Jamer is a listener like the hummingbirds

STRAIGHT UP AND NO SKY THERE

outside his baby window. But even they sometimes fight, puffing themselves up, spreading their wings and tail feathers.

The streets still wear a coat of sludge. Plastic containers seem to have rolled out of the earth itself. Bleach and liquid detergent, shopping bags and water bottles like a whole plastic civilization. He kicks at a hunk of black ash and discovers it's a moldy, old-time picture album. He stops and kneels. Black prisoner athletes jumping hurdles and crawling through barrels surrounded by white walls. Fedora-wearing men with gunny sack eyes. Girls in rowboats. Driftwood. An inscription: *Colored Day at the Beach*. A white girl, maybe four years old, rides a donkey, and a black woman in a high-necked lace dress holds the bridle. The young guys in the old time pictures are the saddest. Rusted-out eyes. Mufflers.

The smooth pavement turns to potholes and in places washes away. The road surface fades. Green, violet, rose, and white houses with waterlines dividing them. Telephone lines sag from their wooden crosses and other lines are twisted and ripped away. He turns down the last block to Alfred Lawless. The turd school for dummies is what they call it. More FEMA trailers parked against each other. A couple of Blue Dudes with blue bandanas around their wrists are hanging out in the swing sets with their brown bag beer cans. You can see more waterlines on the metal poles. The Blue Dudes have been going through the abandoned houses, digging out the copper wire and copper piping. New houses going up are easier and the copper worth more when you tear it from those walls. They have taken to holding show of strength gatherings on the old basketball court. Even \$250 sneakers don't stay clean kicking through that smudge.

He spots his cousin when he reaches the entrance where the little flags flutter in the breeze. Like a used car lot. Little Stink would weigh in at ninety pounds, but his dreads add volume. Although he barely comes up to Jamer's shoulder, his mouth is mean and he likes to wear perfume, cloying stuff like *Jungle Gardenia*. Once Ivory bought a bottle and the smell sent him to the toilet. Dante "Fig" Newton and Maurice are drinking 40's. Breakfasting on forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor. The hummingbird beats its wings deep in his left ear. He thinks of the packs of dogs roaming after the levees broke. They'd reverted back to wild. Running and packing up, paws cut by glass and kitchen poisons, the Blackwater contractors hunting them down.

Little Stink stands downwind and Jamer still smells *Jungle Gardenia*. "Jamer, we got something you might want back," his cousin says with a sneer. His braids sweep over his chest. His thumb ring snags in a knot of hair and he curses it.

“What’s that?” Jamer asks, the twitch in his eyelid kicking in.

Little Stink pulls his thumb ring free. “A hen. An egg-laying mother-fucker.”

Fig walks up behind and Jamer does a quick turn. In straight-leg jeans and a pale blue t-shirt, he’s the same height and build as Jamer, but older – nineteen, maybe twenty. Fig raises his fingers in a peace sign. “Hey, school days, Jamer. What’s shaking?”

“You tell me.” His eyelids faster than you’d ever imagine.

“Not much to tell, brother,” Fig says in a soft voice. “You know the low down. It’s not like we haven’t asked nice. Now we’re telling you. The Dudes need a driver. One who’s trustworthy with no record. We gotta hook this up today.” Fig Newton sets his beer on the sidewalk and places a hand on his hip, the diamond ring on his pointer finger giving Jamer the evil eye.

“You want Beauty back, honcho?” Little Stink grunts. “We’d like you to run out to Fat City in that bucket and drive back a trunk-load of .45s, 9 millimeters, and shottys. You and your lady both need to be in the car.” Little Stink cocks a thumb at the silver Saturn parked in the school lot. “Drive there and pick up the gats. Make some deliveries and you’ll get that egg-laying motherfucker back.”

Jamer stiffens. “I want to know the hen’s alive,” he says. Xamer is ready to squeeze Little Stink and Fig by their necks and knock their heads together. If they were unarmed he could take both of them at once. But bastards who punch old women don’t travel light. “Her name is Beauty and she’s special.”

Little Stink guffaws, “What do you think we can do? Put the bird on the phone? Hey, bitch, talk to my cuz here.” He flips his dreads and wipes the stones in his sapphire ring on the back of his pants.

Jamer stares at his cousin’s chin. “Put her on the phone. I know the sound of her.” He could tell them right now he’d never let Ivory in a car carrying guns. But he’ll keep that close to his chest.

“Listen, cuz, we’re not going to babysit a chicken all day. I already voted to KFC its ass,” Little Stink laughs. “Who gives two shits for a chicken that don’t sit on your plate with biscuit and mashed potatoes? We want you to carry your bookbag and get in that Saturn. The keys are in it.”

“Put her on the phone and I’ll consider it,” Jamer says. “Now excuse me. I’ve got class.”

He’d like to spout that Gwendolyn Brooks poem right now. We real cool, ain’t we Little Stink and Fig Newton? His head pounds like too loud manholes lifting and dropping in the street. Ivory in a car loaded with weapons? No, not even for Beauty.

STRAIGHT UP AND NO SKY THERE

There are no metal detectors at the entrance to the FEMA trailer classrooms. He carries the knife in his pocket. A steel foldout with a three-and-a-half inch blade: a Black Dog Spring Assist.

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The clock with its wide, black hands stands suspended. He finishes taking questions in his English class.

“Very good, Jamer,” Mrs. LeJens says, after he recites and has crossed the room to his blond wood desk.

He’s never met a desk that doesn’t smell of spit. The teacher’s a decent looking woman in her late thirties or early forties, but on the heavy side. Today it’s black slacks and a lightweight red turtleneck. Black high heels that bend under her weight. A slash of lipstick, the color of Red Devil cake.

“Well, class, how about a hand for Jamer?” Mrs. LeJens asks.

Half-hearted applause. The never-do-wells sit in a semi-circle at the back, already broken into cliques. Today they’re giving her hell. But she can serve it back. The boys are chuckling about a girl pleasuring a guy in the lunchroom. They’ve got a couple butterfly bushes to hook up in the science trailer.

“What did you think of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem?” Mrs. LeJens asks.

“Worst poem I ever heard,” one of the mouths pipes up. “Lil Wayne blows that to bits.”

Jamer’s glad the air-conditioner is cranked up to super cool. He’s worried that Little Stink and Fig Newton will be waiting for him after lunch. He’s calling their bluff. Mrs. LeJens walks by and pats his shoulder.

He feels a thump on his back, and a piece of paper lands on his desk. It’s from one of the mouths in the last row. A Blue Dude about to be beaten in. He unfolds it. SOMETHING 4 U IN THE LITTLE BOY ROOM. He thinks back to early school days when the teacher would roll a skeleton map down over the blackboard. Using her pointer, she pronounced words like *femur*, *tibia*, and *clavicle*. Then the teacher would call on students to repeat those words. Jamer scrunched in his desk, so scared of being called on he wet himself.

He rises straight from his chair and when Mrs. LeJens asks him where he’s going, he tells her he’s sick to his stomach. It’s not a lie.

“Fine, Jamer. I’ll write you a pass.”

He misses the drinking fountains and lockers of the old school. The buckling wood floors. He liked the gym with its purple curtain and gold braid. There’s Genesis Reynolds hanging out by the girl’s bathroom with

her home girls. His cousin Chardonnay, too. Genesis wears a jean mini over black lace tights and a frilly, sleeveless shirt with pearl buttons. A gap between skirt and top just so you won't miss her naval piercing.

She smiles crookedly at him, then snickers. "Fig decided we don't want you to drive for us. You'd just drop the flag on us. Chicken shit."

Maybe if he hadn't met Ivory he might have listened to Little Stink and Fig, sucked it up and agreed to be a wheelman. The one who always gets caught. But Ivory is his family now.

He pushes into the boy's room and smells the sour sweet odor. He blinks. Sees the blood puddle and the hen's body dangling from the ceiling. A brown and white barred bantam. Whoever did the honors punched in a piece of pasteboard and tied a cord to one of her legs. Beauty. Decapitated, red rain drips from her sawed-through neck. He grips the sides of the sink and bows. Her head is in the drain. The comb and yellow eye. He struggles with the sink, trying to shake it from the wall. Then he picks up her head with a paper towel and unties the rest of her from the ceiling. He takes off his shirt and wraps all of Beauty in it. He remembers the great quiet those first months after Katrina. The world without birds. He turns the sink water on to wash away Beauty's blood. When the sink is clean he turns the water off and leaves.

He keeps walking. There are hummingbirds in the water fountain; he catches them in the corner of his eyes. They fight less when food is scarce, anything to preserve their long beaks and tongues that flow down the throats of flowers. Only nectar's sugar keeps their hearts beating. Who would design something so tiny and revved up that it must constantly eat?

At age seven he was a small, timid boy. He remembers playing in the garage, that 4th of July. A hummer drawn by the red door handle took it for the bright flesh of honeysuckle and flew inside. His father and mother and an overflow crowd of friends and relatives barbequing in the backyard, the ribs and hot dogs sizzling, the wine river flowing. Little Stink and the rest of the kids locked Jamer, shivering and prone to hiccups, in the garage. The hummer was terrified and flew straight up, thinking it the best way to escape and no sky there. When the dark came, the finger bird fluttered from the rafters into his lap. Jamer screamed until his father finally heard him. "My softie son, Pajamas," he joked. Jamer sat with the bird in his hands, saying, "Oh, no. Oh, no."

"Hey, crybaby, I know how to bring that bird back to life," said his girl cousin Chardonnay, Little Stink's sister, who was hanging upside down on the backyard fence. She ran inside and mixed sugar into water and brought it back out. "Gimme," she ordered and lifted the lifeless ruby-

STRAIGHT UP AND NO SKY THERE

throated hummer to the bowl. It sipped water, puffed its feathers like scalded cream, and flew off.

In his forehead the sky has turned grey, the blue drained away.

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He carries his shirt, the white already spotting red, into the parking lot. The silver Saturn is still there. For whatever reason, his Aunt Melba's voice rings in his head, Little Stink's mom. "Where are the police when you need them? After the storm there were lawmen from every corner of the land and those dreaded Robocops. Now someone steals my screen windows and I can't get anyone's attention." Deep down it is all the same.

Little Stink and Fig Newton are still hanging out like he figured they would be. There are more Blue Dudes: Maurice, Dray. The asphalt is covered in grey cobwebs and dust. You'd think a fire had burned through here, not a flood.

Little Stink moseys closer to the Saturn with his flat lips and the butterfly tattooed into his cheek nods. "Let's go, Jamer. It's time for you to drive." Little Stink will never get a straight job in his life; the best he can hope for is messenger boy, pedaling a bicycle, trying to outrun a whip-poorwill's ass.

"Hey, cuz, you pulled my bird feeder down," Jamer says, stopping. "I found a dead bird on my grass this morning."

"Misdemeanor homicide," Little Stink laughs and pulls at his baggy pants. "You been saying the wrong word too long, Jamer. No. We're the ones who get to say no."

Jamer reaches into his pocket, easing the knife into the shirt against Beauty. "That's two of the bones I have to pick with you. Number three is in my arms."

Fig Newton claps his hands. "That's for your woman. A chicken in the pot." A smile crosses his face. "This is Jamer's day. A birthday turned inside out. Your day to shine or flop."

If he were Xamer, he'd press his thumb onto the blade release. Three-and-a-half inches of steel. Xamer would slash Little Stink's neck and watch the arc of red nectar spurting. He'd slash until Little Stink's neck was only a spider silk of skin and his head a blood fountain gurgling on the ground. As for Fig, Xamer would cut into his meat, opening him enough to see sirens writing his name, before nothingness. But he can't. Jamer turns his back to Little Stink and Fig. The hummers are with him, flying backwards and sideways. Puffing their feathers. Diving. He doesn't

look back to see Little Stink groping in his pants for his .45. He can feel the hummingbirds inside him. Bird song to sweeten the sunshine.

Jamer keeps on walking. Sweat creeps over his skin. The parking lot looks like a place ready for trees and shrubs. All the ones that died in the flood. Did anyone say an amen and a prayer for them? The classroom trailer doors burst open and the kids push out for recess. A patrol car pulls up, and two burly men in camouflage uniforms and moon shades get out, checking Alfred Lawless out. They have the black water sheen to them.

He hears her before he sees her. "Jamer honey?" Ivory asks like she's calling from a different time zone. She is running toward him, doing what he asked her not to do. She rolls her big brown eyes and when he reaches her he's still cradling Beauty. She takes the bundle from him and hugs it. "You're alive," she says.

"I am." He turns his hand and brushes her cheek with his knuckle.

WHEN THE SNOW
LEOPARD STALKS
THE RIVER

“**B**onnie, Bonnie,” the booths call out. Everybody thirsts for another drop. They cheep like feeder birds but since this is my last night on earth I’m hearing with different ears. Two screwdrivers here, two longnecks there. Back booths filled with regulars. Front ones, college kids home for the holidays. I move on. A few nights ago Nick and I practiced running naked along the Yellow Medicine River. I liked going barefoot in the snow. All I needed to wear was the scotch I’d swallowed. It was very beautiful and cold and I waltzed like a gauzy curtain over the drifts. Then the kill. Nick pounced, capturing me. He buried his teeth in me. He bit my cheek. I went limp. The cold in his arms smelled of burning cinnamon. A remembrance I’ll savor when we leave here. Nick says he’s only a partial man and that he’s turning into a snow leopard. I glance around at the forest of empties. I can remember a whole room of drinks, slow-sevens, tequila mockingbirds. Nick’s memory started blacking out on him after Korengal Valley in Kunar Providence and last week he got lost trying to read a menu at the Chalet Steakhouse. He claims it’s the leopard in him getting stronger.

I’m carrying six empty longnecks and my apron pocket overflows with soggy napkins. At the end of the bar straddling his own two boots is Marlon Hickey. Before I married Nick he used to follow me around. Marry me, Bonnie. But back in high school he bullied me. Most of the night he’s been right there staring. They’re the least appetizing eyes you’d want admiring you. His round face is putty-colored and his mat of hair you’d take for an inexpensive toupee, only it’s real. He was captain of the Kilowatts football team. In the tenth grade I broke his nose and you can still see the bump. “Bonnie,” he shouts, “what’s the damage? We’re ready to settle up.” He tells me I’m beautiful, how everyone looks even the guys with girls showing off their diamond rings.

WHEN THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER

I give him a smile. “That’s a change from the names you used to call me.”

Marlon used to make fun of the girl who stank of sour milk. Stink Thing and Mad Cow were his favorite epithets. Once in class he sat behind me and inked on my white top. I jumped up and slugged his nose. Before he could swing back I ran. That semester something happened and my ordinary face turned heart-shaped with stung lips and blue-green river eyes. I felt the weird power good-looks command.

“Guys, I called this looker Mad Cow. Come on, I was vying for her affection.”

His buddies hoot. Once again Marlon professes to be crazy about me. But my head is full of Nick and always has been. A decorated U.S. Army hero. But don’t say the “h” word around him. Two back-to-backs in Afghanistan, a year spent at the mountaintop Korengal Outpost where he took shrapnel, lost a tiny bit of vision in his left eye, lost his right eye entire. His brain swelled some. His ears ring. When he came home I was prepared not to know him. But I did.

I circle back to the cash register near the silver of the shakers, the gin bottles with their snowdrift glaze. My father-in-law Fritz is tending bar tonight.

“Where’s your skirt, Bonnie?” he asks teasingly. He tosses a rag over his shoulder, takes a sip of his scotch and scoots another to a customer. His dark hair is thinning and his blue eyes twinkle tiredly, but there’s still some handsome to him. Everyone likes Fritz when he pours. “Where are your pants for that matter? What will the hubbie say?”

“Fritz, your son picked this outfit himself. Now can you add up Marlon’s tab?”

Tonight I wear a black silk shirt with long enough tails to call it a dress and a pair of black tights and boots. After seeing all those covered women over there Nick considers less clothing more. The plan is for Fritz to drive me home and that will give Nick a chance to say goodbye to him. Then sometime before or just after first light my husband and I are leaving life. It’s all been decided except for our dog Loyal and what to do with him. I told Nick I’m still divided over whether to take our beagle. As a girl I used to have twin greyhounds that would burrow into snow banks then burst forth, their muzzles bright with blue snow beads. Loyal’s an indoor dog. The snow scares him. At first it was just Nick talking about leaving. After he got back he didn’t feel at home here, didn’t feel like the Yellow Medicine was his river anymore. He said I treated him like a stranger in our bed. I had to pull it out of him about the snow leopard. Truth be told we fought some because he’s my husband and I wasn’t going to be shut

out. I love him that much. The only other person I ever loved was my sister Elizabeth, who died when she was seven years old.

Fritz gives me Marlon's tab and I weave between the drinkers not minding the chatter and high pitched laughter. Maybe it has bravery to it. "Bonnie, I'm glad you're back," Marlon chuckles to the flannel shirted crowd behind him. He's had way too much to drink and that's his excuse when he nudges aside the tail of my shirt dress and palms my buttocks. "You're hot, Stink Thing, you smell of fire. Why don't you leave that crazy killer for me?"

At home we've got a wood-burning stove. Nick adores the smell of burning in my hair and refuses to let me wash it much. I'll miss that. Him stroking my hair because there's smoke in it. I could tell Marlon how much I'd always hated his purple face when he called me names not that many years ago, five to be exact when we all graduated. He'll never have the chance to touch me again so I let his fingers slowly close over my left cheek and when I feel his breath against my neck I back away. He gives me twenties and a ten dollar tip and as I leave, I say. "That crazy killer killed to keep you safe. Never forget that."

Anyway, Nick's got the vehicle gassed. Nights we work together Fritz gives me a ride home. Nick likes to tease that I'm one of those no driving motherfuckers. I just never had the patience for it, my foot got nervous on the accelerator.



Last call. The liquor store's about to close. I push into the lady's room. I take just a second to listen to the door. The little squeak I've always considered a friendly sound. One of the girls from the underage table is kneeling in a long purple dress before the toilet trying to spit out her tongue. She just curled up and laid her head against the rim cool as a crust of snow. I like it there sometimes too. I try Nick on my cell phone. He picks up on the fifth ring. His deep voice never loud but always strong enough to get his point across. "Better not leave without me, understand? Nick, I'd never forgive you for that." I tell him that Fritz shouldn't ride me home as his father might decide to stay all night. Anyway, I'd like to walk the road home one more time. "I can do it in fifty minutes." "Enjoy yourself," he says. "Nick, I love you." "Ditto."

I take a look at my pale face nestled there between waves of dark brown hair. Blue eyes and black pupils to match starling feather eyelashes. A sprinkling of black freckles over the bridge of my nose. My husband

WHEN THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER

stands about six feet two inches. It's odd but he looks like me only better. Blue eyes, dark hair only his is black. But that's where the similarities end. He doesn't have the dirty freckles. And he's smart. He can speak French and Spanish, the only languages our school offered. He can shoot the bull in Flemish and Swedish to the old time farmers around here. He just has the ear. He taught himself some Arabic before they shipped him over there. In high school he was National Honor Society and quarterback for the football team and I was the first girl in our class rumored to give head. The joke was I sucked off bulls in my father's barn. My father owned two brown Swiss cows, no bulls. The guys in our class made fun of me in front of their girlfriends, calling me Manure and Mad Cow, then on their own drove past my father's farm. Nick never did.

I thumb Nick's little leather notebook that he threw out along with his medications. I rescued it. Sometimes he prints perfectly and other times he scribbles sentences and diagrams in the margins. This little notebook has helped me understand. Plus Nick leaves messages on post-it-notes.

I've told Bonnie what has to happen. Nick's going to disappear. Die. My eyes since Korengal Valley have dimmed out. Struggle to see 20 yards what I used to spot at 80 yards. No difference between reds and yellows, all becoming shade of blue/gray. I find myself walking on the sides of my feet, and then slowly shift my weight onto the soles. There's something like fur between my toes and scratchiness underneath. How fucked up is that? Snow leopards are loners. No, they mate, Bonnie argues. They're loners, babe. Loners tear the face from the animal before they eat. They break its spinal cord. Even when they rut, one might bite the other's jugular.

When I married him right out of high school we surprised everyone including Fritz. He had no idea we even dated. I was the strange girl whose father milked cows for bigger farmers and hired himself out to haul away downer cows. It was his pick-up with the tallow hook swinging and the bed that smelled of cow sickness and shit that got me nicknames. My husband was the valedictorian of our class. Why not let the Army pay for college we both figured. After he enlisted we moved to Ft. Carson, Colorado. On base we lived next to Mabel, a Ukrainian-American witch. She had long white-blond hair and almost transparent gray eyes. Mabel could pick any lock and I'd wake to her staring over me with those eyes. Her husband had been gone on so many deployments she'd taken to

casting spells on the United States Army command and that's why she trailed a dusty odor. Garlic. Mushrooms. When Nick got his orders for a third tour I asked him if he wanted me to accidentally stab him in the hand. "That's not going to get me out of it," he told me. "Why not?" I asked. "There are too many bad guys over there," he said, "and I've got to help take them off this earth." The Colorado cockroaches finally got to me, having to tie everything into plastic bags. Bread. Walnuts. It was twisties this and twisties that and when I wasn't twisting I was zip locking. Fourth deployment, I headed home for Granite Falls. Fritz got me a job at the Liquor Store and I rented a cute little gingerbread house with a garden a mile outside of town.

The curled up girl has white skin and a waterfall of reddish brown ringlets. I walk over and lift some of her ringlets letting them fall through my fingers. I kiss the crown of her head. I've never kissed the top of a girl's head.

"Come on, sweetie, this place is closing. You've got to go," I whisper. The last girl I'll see in the Granite Falls Liquor Store ladies room. Farewell, reddish brown ringlets.

She lifts her pale face. "My friends left without me."

I don't know why but those words make me think of my dog. Beagles hate to be left alone for even a minute and Loyal's no different. They're not smart dogs, I can't lie. I used to run my skinny greyhounds in the snow, and then I'd grip the dogs' paws to keep the frost from burning them like black grapes held too long by the sun. Some city person had dumped the dogs on our road and I recognized them as friends the instant I saw them running up our lane.

There's a knock on the bathroom door. "Ready, Bonnie?" Fritz calls out. "I'll give you a ride home."

I open the door to the ladies and step outside. Fritz's face almost meets mine. His eyes are Nick's and a sob catches in my throat.

"I just spoke to your son and he's on his way to pick me up," I lie. My teeth are chattering. "There's a girl in here needing a ride home. Why don't you take her?"

"Sure, I'll carry a straggler home if she doesn't live in the next county."

I grab my cape and toss my hair into the hood. "I'll wait in the parking lot for Nick." I pull on gloves over my trembling fingers.

"Bonnie, wait a minute." Fritz blocks my way. He's holding a brown bagged bottle of scotch. "How's Nicky?" he asks after his second swig. "Any better?" He offers me the bottle and I take a sip. Hot brown.

WHEN THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER

“You saw him two nights ago,” I say, figuring this is the last time Fritz and I will meet.

Fritz scratches his nose. “I didn’t see him whittling on his stick. That’s a good sign.”

“Maybe.”

Nick isn’t hanging around. He’s lost thirty pounds since he’s been home and the VA has him on fifteen different pills. A few nights ago he threw all his medicine except for the Xanax into the wood burning stove. Fritz wouldn’t want his son to go into the great silence alone. And I don’t want to think about those first weeks after he got back when everything startled him, the weight of melting snow, the dripping of ice down the rain gutter. That’s when the CD player went up so high you had to keep your fists up to break through the sound. He sat naked in the unheated upstairs staring out the window. Sometimes he’d whittle a stick with his pocket knife. Nick sat so long the starlings in the tree outside began staring in at him. He wouldn’t touch me, wouldn’t talk much, but when he did all I heard about was the tree boy he couldn’t save. That he wanted to adopt. About the baby snow leopard he’d seen on the Abas Ghar ridge. I showed him my grit, how I was with him all the way.

Fritz puts his arm around me and pats my shoulder. “Least he wasn’t talking about turning into a damn animal or that kid he found in a tree.”

My head slumps on Fritz’s scratchy jacket. There’s a nice smell on this man. He presses his hands against my temples letting the warmth reassure me. My own father was repressed emotionally and so was my mother. Miserable misfits. They were both from a long line of farmers and it was their fate to fail the land.

“Here take this, babe,” my father-in-law says, giving me the bottle of scotch. “Enjoy it with Nick. Tonight it’s going to drop to 20 below with wind chill.”

“Merry Christmas, Fritz.”

“That’s not until next week. See you in a couple days. Stay warm.”

Christmas less than a week away and Fritz thinks we’re coming over to celebrate with him. Both Nick and I are extremely sorry about that. I bite my gloved knuckles. I push them into my pockets, touch Nick’s leather notebook. All about that boy.

We found him in a tree. Mulberry or holly. Eastern Afghanistan. Not many trees left. Most burned for firewood, smuggled or blown to kingdom come. A boy like a feline, long and slinky, landed on all fours. Green eyes reflected our flashlights. Seeing us, he leapt

back into the branches. First thought, he was a deformed child soldier. A Nuristani. The green eyed, pale skinned mountain tribe. He might know which village house had weapons. We opened a meals-ready-to-eat and tied it to a piece of string. I called up to him in what might pass for his language. Pashto. Words brought him down. Boy, not nine years on this earth. These were the things he'd learned. Hunger. Cold. Hide. His thin back was crisscrossed with scar tissue and open sores. Men had poured oil over him and before they struck a match they ordered him to lick it from his skin. We'd seen the pretty boys the warlords traveled with. The boys they buy or kidnap and put bells around their ankles.

The boy told with gestures how the men lured him from his hiding spot. One said, I will pick up a stone and bring him down to serve me. His stone missed. The tree grew colder and the men built fires and cooked. The ice branches reached for the flames. Two boys with reddened lips were shivering under the tree. They called up to him to come down. There is meat here. The tree boy knew they wanted him. Hunger gnawed him. He'd eaten birds. Indian blue robin. Himalayan woodpecker. He hated to twist their necks and end their singing. He hoped when he pulled their feathers and ate the small bodies their song lived on inside him. It was lamb and flat bread soaked in grease that he could not resist. Flesh not singing but lying on the ground. When he jumped to snatch the food, they bound his hands, took turns. He had to stop himself up with dry leaves to keep his shit inside him. Then because he could not dance they threw cooking oil on him and struck a match. His feet were deformed and paw-like. He could hardly walk upright. We decided to take him with us to the outpost. I was the only one who could understand bits and pieces of his story.

Was the tree boy a little brother to Nick? Like my Elizabeth. Is it peculiar to say I'm jealous of a kid? Since his last deployment Nick's cut back on spoken words. Sometimes he makes a *chuffing* sound like the big cats do.

Our house is only a mile out of town and if I can't walk that I don't deserve to have legs. It's starting to snow and flurries are blowing in from the Dakotas. Goodbye Granite Falls Liquor Store. The flat roofed building, the microwave cheddar and salami sandwiches, the popcorn salted to mouth heat.

WHEN THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER

“Let’s have a drink now,” I say to the snow. The scotch boils my throat, burns through my tongue. I tremble looking into the white taffeta. I skate through downtown. DeJoy’s Family Restaurant where Nick bused dishes in high school. Kay’s Kasual Kurl where my mother went twice a year for a perm. Bobby’s Dent and Rust Repair. An already forgotten town. The wind grabs into my cape and takes a handful of my hair and pulls. Flurries hit my face, reminds me of the ping of milk fresh from an udder striking the bottom of a pail. Snow swirls around the streetlight and I throw my head back to watch. The wind pushes and I skitter toward the giant steps that edge the river as it trickles over rock falls. I hold onto the iron railing and slide past the old stone jail where they brought Nick after his second arrest for DWI. I’ve read about how the cold gets warm when you’re freezing, how it becomes blissful.

Looming grey granite, a nineteenth century county holding pen. Nick shivered for a week after a night in the stone cell. He woke on all fours ducking for cover, sweating, quivering. Sure he had been returned to the Korengal Valley, touching the wall, trapped in one of the stone houses, able to withstand earthquakes and air strikes.

I stick with the old river road that turns into County Road 40. The streetlights fall away and I’m heading into the wind. My legs keep walking, getting stronger with each step. A few more strides and I’m where the old tuberculosis sanitarium used to be. The town tore it down about six years ago. In the snow I can see it shimmering. The ghost of an enormous white building settles between the trees and river right behind. Once in junior high I ran away from home and hid here. I didn’t want to live with my parents after Elizabeth, who had Down syndrome, died. She was a beauty girl and I loved her. I worry about Fritz missing Nick but I think he understands about the pain and the VA and the bullshit people who say yeah yeah we support the troops and then nothing. Well, this is my small part of support. Pretty soon I’m on the bridge over the Yellow Medicine. I love this river. I honestly can say I love it. Under the bridge light I take out Nick’s leather notebook and read.

The tree boy told me how the snow leopard flattens himself into the snow. His mother, a Nuristani, belonged to an isolated tribe of the rocky crevices. Twelve years old when she was given to a 70 year old man to repay a family debt. Gathering firewood on the mountain, his mother felt herself being watched. Each time she crouched she glanced back. Nothing. Then from so far off she couldn’t see him, the snow leopard who had stalked her steps

leapt upon her. Few female leopards left, the male sunk himself onto a human her. Teeth at her neck, claws pierced her shoulders. The boy's mother trembled, too terrified to scream. Its smell repugnant to her. Yet thrilling. The whiskers brushing her back, the cold nose. Gut of blue sheep, heart and brain of twenty birds. The leopard mated with her. Her womb accepted its harsh snowy semen. His mother almost bled to death giving birth to him. The husband stole the baby from her. Left him in the rocks to die. Then the boy showed me his own wide fur covered feet. Much later he learned his mother was killed in an air strike.

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I can hear Loyal barking even before I see the house. There's no lights burning because the electricity is cut off. If you're leaving and not coming back there's no reason to pay utilities. I don't see Nick's car. The lane is empty. Loyal must smell me because he's banging himself against the door. The side door's unlocked like always. I reach for the flashlight we keep on the counter. Army-issue. Loyal jumps for me, yipping and barking. He's trembling, the poor thing. I pull off my gloves and light the kerosene lantern that soaks the round oak table in a soft gray yellow light. There's my teapot on the wood burning stove. I warm my hands over the black cast iron fitted with ceramic tiles.

I call Nick's cell and get his message box. "Nick, I'm home. Waiting. I love you."

Lifting Loyal's bowl to the sink I think of the moment that love began. Elizabeth and I walked into town to visit the Dairy Queen. Marlon and Nick and the crowd were hanging out in the parking lot. "Mad Cow, is that the kind of kid you get from blowing bulls?" Marlon yelled. Nick stomped away from his friends and picked up Elizabeth and carried her inside. He bought the three of us vanilla ice cream cones. My little sister stuck her finger into his mouth and Nick laughed. I open Loyal a can of wet dog food and mix it with dry. Within seconds he's gobbled it. He's really a polite dog. Again I try Nick's cell and get his message box. I open the cupboard to where he kept all his prescriptions before he threw them out. But we agreed we'd keep the sugar bowl he'd stocked with Xanax. When I set it on the counter I notice there's a pawprint penned on the sugar bowl, and right there in a coffee cup, Nick's cell phone. There's a red flush in my head that spreads. I hug Loyal again until he half whimpers. Nicky's going to do it without me. I imagine the house with him

WHEN THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER

gone, like a thousand deployments, stacked endlessly back to back. I gag over the sink, dry spit.

I can't sit still. I brush my teeth in the kitchen sink, scrub my tongue. I take off my shirt and tights, wash my face and under my arms and between my legs. I shake on lavender talc until I'm made of snow, touch my own skin. I race upstairs and put on white fishnets and an angora sweater dress I chose especially for tonight. The upstairs is a deep freeze yet Nick and I made love here three nights ago. We practiced having sex in the coldest cold.

Two of Nick's sticky post-its are stuck in my underwear drawer. A big purple square and a smaller yellow one.

A tail is sprouting from the base of my spine. That piece of gristle prevents me from resting on my back. When I drop off into Ambien sleep a heavy long tail thuds with me. What the snow leopard uses for balance wraps itself around my penis and starts to squeeze. My facial whiskers and eyebrows are becoming sensitized, less coarse, longer. My chin is an oddly erogenous zone. Thump. A bullet hits me before I hear it. Awake, the oil burner heater puffs on. Beside me Bonnie breathes and I sniff her skin and muscle. I chew her hair.

The leopard in me wants to go down into the cellar. A lair. To check on the oil burner. It's dark as cold hell. Rancid. Afghanistan. But what's to fear? Isn't that where I'm going? Darkness. I hear mice in the corners, their whiskers brushing against the old vegetable cupboard. It's freezing here below the house on the floor. On all fours, nose to the dirt, then I have it. Field mouse. I hold it in my fist, feel its heart pounding. Over there I killed so many. Human mice. There's something larger down here. My ears are ringing.

Those are love notes in their way. There's an animal in each of us some religions teach. Familiars. Nick and I used to make love among the rocks and trees alongside the Yellow Medicine. He told me I had a river smell. Now I unzip my burgundy satin make-up case and take out pinkish maroon lipstick, its color stamped on the bottom of the tube *Wet Kitty*. My fingers aren't trembling, in fact, they're steady smoothing on moisturizer, then five dots of liquid foundation. I take my time with the eyeshadow and mascara, finish off with the eyelash curler. After blotting my lips with tissue I get up, open the wood-burning stove and throw in my makeup.

I hear the vehicle when it's a mile away. Yes, it's him. Soon there are headlights in the lane and Nick's boot-black Hummer drives up. Truly an ugly vehicle, I won't tell an untruth. Nick had a car wreck and Fritz suggested he get a vehicle he'd be less likely to be killed in if he wrecked again.

The side door opens. Loyal licks his hand and Nick crouches to kiss the beagle's head. He wears a patch over his missing eye and looks at me with his single blue one. Like a pure fjord. His cheeks are shadowed with stubble. My man. In Colorado enlisted girls liked Nick, civilian girls liked him too. He's taking off his sheepskin jacket and draping it from the banister. Under it he wears a camouflage vest over bare chest. I see the brown spots he's smudged on his skin with eyebrow pencil. I want him to draw them on me. I want to feel their musky and mysterious circles.

He tells me to close my eyes, that he's brought me a surprise. Into the soft yellow of the kerosene lantern he carries a Christmas tree. Spruce with teardrop needles, spindly but delicate. He must have taken the axe and looked until he spotted an evergreen along a fence line. No one saw except the trail the needles dragged in the snow. He lights the second kerosene lantern. More brown spots dot his waist and stomach. I'm attracted to the spots. I move closer, wanting to touch them, their amber color, ringed with darker brown.

I follow him into the room. "I didn't think we were getting a tree this year," I say, just to put my voice into the air and immediately I regret it. Nick likes interesting thoughts. He knows I always managed to cut a tree and string popcorn and tie red ribbons on the boughs to please my little sister. Even in that frigid farmhouse where my parents preached the New Jerusalem.

"Come here," he says, opening the closet. His sinewy arms encircle my waist and squeeze like he wants to force the air from my body. All the coats and jackets have been removed and looped from the hangers are strand after strand of stringed popcorn and necklaces of cranberries. To use a needle and thread to string them takes forever. Incredible, he must have popped fluffy corn while I was cocktailng, he must have been doing this for weeks. Loyal is sniffing the popcorn and Nick suggests I give him some milk bones. In the kitchen I wonder if we still have our plan.

"I'd like to make a toast," Nick says, making his way to the buffet with that slinking walk that causes not one creak from the hardwood floors. A flat mirror holds our liquor bottles and garage sale goblets. He pours amaretto into two silver leaf thimbles. "To Bonnie and Nick." We

WHEN THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER

chink our glasses and sip. Lukewarm licorice. I reach up to touch the eyelash shadow on his cheek. “Okay, shall we get to it?” he snaps. “Let’s trim the motherfucking tree.”

He screws the base of the tree into the red and green stand and soon the spruce is upright. Taking one end of the popcorn string he loops it through the branches and I loop the other. Now the cranberries have their turn. We both inhale. There’s a beautiful aroma in the house—wood smoke and spruce and dried fruit. In the flickering light the tree appears like it came from the past. A time before Nick and I were alive, something viewed through a stereoscope, like palm fronds and velvet tassels and a woman all brown and forgotten except for the pink roses the photographer painted on her lips.

Nick shifts from leg to leg, opening and closing his fists. I see him in burgundy graduation robes, on his dirt bike, his hair wild, electrified, there he is after his first deployment, a body who couldn’t lift himself to his feet, good at flopping on the couch and staring at the ceiling and more than once a cockroach skittered over his chest and he didn’t notice. I see him under the piano and on top of me, the pedals bumping into my head each time he pushed deeper inside. Then biting until we didn’t feel anything but our breathing, taking his flesh between my teeth, him taking mine. I told him I want to be sober when I leave. I want it to be beautiful. But the night is here and I need the drink to steady me.

A sudden popping noise, the wind picking up and rattling the screen door. A triple bang. Nick lunges, grabs and pulls me under him, flattening his body over mine. An eight-legged beast behind the velvet tangerine chair.

“Nicky, it’s the wind. It’s just the wind.”

His chest rises and falls, his breathing echoes. He rolls off me, sits on the floor, rocking. His head must be full of scribbles. Torn post-it-notes. I rub his neck, his shoulders. “Listen, I’ve got doubts,” he says. His longish nails scratch his chin and jawline.

“About what?”

“What if I told you to stay behind?” He runs his fingers through his thick black hair.

“Then you’d have to stay behind too. Where you go I go.”

“Good,” he says. The rocking stops.

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I set out Loyal’s water in a roasting pan. Also, I lift the toilet lid. Potable water. Nick’s grinding Xanax, crushing it into a powder and

sifting it into individual containers of Mott's applesauce, two for me and two for him. Applesauce coats the stomach and helps with absorption. Now he's fortifying our go-pack with alcoholic beverages, which double the potency of any tranquilizer. He slings the pack over his shoulder.

"Hey, baby, are you ready?" His eye is bright and dark, the pupil has eaten the blue. Black star. Like the upstairs completely cold and lusterless. Underneath the tree he's folded his dress uniform and set out his Purple Heart and medals and an envelope with Dad written on it, which has a Father's Day card signed by both of us. *You're the best Dad ever*, the card says. Inside there's a tissue and the words. *If that chokes you up, use this.* Fare thee well, Elizabeth, my sweet little sister, I tell her picture on the bookshelf. Elizabeth in a royal blue velvet dress. Kneeling, I kiss the beagle. Darling, Fritz will come for you. Goodbye tree dressed so prettily, wearing necklaces of cranberries.

Nick walks around the vehicle and opens the door for me to get inside. He's calm, quiet. I hear the ignition turn, the tires crunching over gravel. Nick toots like always to Loyal and then guns the accelerator.

He doesn't want to talk anymore. The time for talk is over.

We drive following the Yellow Medicine River north, then Nick pulls over onto a section road. I know exactly where we're going. He stops our vehicle beside a tube mailbox. I'm watching the ditch fill with snow and seeing Elizabeth's petal skin. There's the darkened outbuildings and farmhouse where I was raised. Pines still grow in shadows roaming the yard. My parents were hired hands. They rented the place and the two brown Swiss milk cows. The second I graduated from high school they pulled up stakes and headed south to McAllen, Texas. The place has been empty since. Nick didn't believe me when I told him they'd never phoned. Not once. He is the only family I care to have. I did a good bit of shivering in that upstairs bedroom I shared with Elizabeth. I love her still. I've always wondered if she would have lived longer in a warmer place.

Nick stopping here means a lot to me. "Baby, this place taught you how to work from dawn to dusk. I always liked it that you could."

Back then I had to milk the brown Swiss cows before I went to school. Bonnie milk pail. I didn't mind squeezing and pulling their calloused udders but I hated my father's hard use of their bodies. A cow is happiest looking out in the distance. It can stare for hours and be at peace.

"Your calloused hands turned me on. Still do."

I move across the seat and bite his earlobe, touch one of those leopard spots. Fire.

WHEN THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER



The boy's hands are always doing, working, smart hands, polishing, packing, carting, washing socks. A couple of my buddies have mascots, one has a monkey, two have yellow dogs. They tease me. Father and son. Why not? He's a war orphan. The last day with the boy is the first day of the assault on U.S. Army Outpost Dallas. We operate a 155mm Holwitzer and wait for coordinates on a Taliban position. I tell the boy I'm going to try to make him my son. See if I can adopt him. Bring him home to Granite Falls and Bonnie. I show him her picture. Wavy dark hair and blue-green eyes. She smiles with what's inside her mind not her teeth. He points to her freckles, what are these. I tell him Minnesota was once long grass prairie, switch grass to your shoulders and miles in every direction. Would you like that? I asked. To see green instead of dust? His eyes widen. The coordinates don't come in and meanwhile the insurgents are creeping up the mountain. They ambush us, sneak inside the rock perimeter. Too close to fire the big gun. A sniper shoots the boy in the leg, hits the femoral artery. Blood bulrushes. An explosion. I tie a tourniquet on his leg. Don't die, I say, and hold his skinny body in my arms. We lost Sgt. Kyle that day as well. A Chinook helicopter flew in with supplies, plenty of breakfast burritos and wet wipes, we substitute for showers. They lift Kyle off the mountain in a sling. The boy we scrape a hole for in the rocks.



There's a gate ahead across the road and the sign says Road Not Maintained Proceed at Your Own Peril. Nick hits the brake and puts the Hummer into park. I get out, open the gate and wait for Nick to drive through, and then I close it. The winter trees cocooned in ice creak. I hurry back inside the Hummer. We're heading onto a gravel road that's pitted. The vehicle hits the holes and bounces us. Nick steps on the accelerator, drives off the road and we're bumping along until a stump jumps up in front of us. That stops the Hummer. Both of us can't seem to stop laughing. Trees are roaming around the headlights. It must be the snow but they don't seem rooted at all.

Nick buzzes the window down and cold snow blows in. He's wearing his sheepskin jacket and I'm in my cape. He hands me a plastic spoon and unpeels the foil back from the applesauce container. There's only the slightest hint of bitter. He slips the two remaining containers into his day-pack. All that dissolving Xanax but with applesauce there's no throwing up.

“Ready?” he asks.

I nod.

The wind has picked up here along the river and Nick leads the way through silvery piled snow. There’s a numb feeling in my tongue but other than that I’m wide awake. As I follow him a sudden gust lifts the hood of my cape and twists it. Like it’s trying to pull me in a separate direction. We’re walking down the trail that leads between the rocks and trees. Frozen oaks. Poplars. “Hold it,” Nick says. He hunches over taking a swig of whiskey and then pulling me to him, kisses the sticky liquor into my mouth. I taste our wedding on his soft lips, the Granite Falls Courthouse, my cream-colored satin mini really a 20 dollar slip but who knew the difference, the red velvet ribbon around my neck.

Another gulp, another kiss, then he takes off running. “Catch me, Bonnie.”

“Wait up.” I am racing after Nick.

His jacket hangs open and now we’re scrambling and kicking through a forest of broken cattails. When he stops I take off my gloves and drape them from a taper. Once the hands go bare the body works hard to keep the vital organs warm. I read that in an Army manual. Nick leads us higher and all the climbing makes my mouth go dry. Sweat is rolling, trickling down my back and the tunnel between my breasts.

Nick doesn’t stop until he finds the spot we’ve loved in before, a cove between two boulders. He huddles against the rock, takes the bottle from his pack and gulps, and then passes it to me. His long fingernails brush my neck; I imagine his half moon cuticles, the ones I used to examine in study hall. Because my fingers are stiffening I have to paw the bottle between my palms. I laugh at the heaviness of the whiskey on my tongue. I take off my cape and make a windbreak. He unpeels the second applesauce, no spoons this time. Left back somewhere. I tip my head and suck it in. Must drop the container but don’t hear it fall.

Nick talks under his breath. “Lie on me, Bonnie, like you used to.” He stretches out in his jeans and sheepskin jacket, pushing off his boots off like he’s planning to spend the night as a couch potato. I’m light headed, reclining in the snow beside him. I scramble to my knees and straddle his rump and push my hands under his jacket. My skin temperature must be dropping because I can’t feel my toes at all and my legs are numb. But they still move when I tell them. The muscles at the back of my neck ache, not a close up pain but farther away. A voice in my head yammers, *Jesus, rub them, Bonnie, put your hands under your armpits. Warm them up as quickly as you can if you don’t want frostbite.* No-one talking I recognize.

WHEN THE SNOW LEOPARD STALKS THE RIVER

Nick starts to tremble. Then I shiver uncontrollably, shaking so hard, my teeth clatter. The shivering stops. Nick's too. There's a door in the cold we need to fit through. I clap my hands. How can they come back from being blocks of ice? I'm hearing Nick's thoughts. I'm truly in his head.

Drone bones. The drones make a chuffing sound before they strike. Over there I got mixed with the snow leopard. He is a killer and so am I. Believe me the Pentagon is building killer robots to stalk bad guys like prey. They're messing with the forces out there in Korengal Valley. Camp Blessing. Outpost Dallas. Everyone gets a pill cocktail just to keep semi-sane. They're cloning leopard DNA and fucking enlisted guys. We're eating and shitting depleted uranium. We're 50 caliber machine gun men. It's bloodthirsty nuts over there but what's nuttier is over here. Like not a thing is going on. No supreme sacrifices. Kids living on the internet, everybody wired to the web highway. I can't stand it. How about the ten best pizzerias in the USA and what ten best ways to build your stock portfolio and the ten best grilling tips. How about the fifteen weirdest roadside attractions. It's not war that kills it's peace.

I hear gravel being churned up behind me. Truck, must be Fritz. I'm between two sets of headlights. Then I see the tow hook in the snow like my father's truck brought back to life by milkweed stone. It's Marlon Hickey. *Motherfuck, I knew someone wrecked out here. Stink Things, get in before you freeze. I'll carry you home. Mad Cow. I see you.* Then nothing. The trucks disappear. I'm constricting.

We haven't moved for awhile. We sit in the snow bushes. Iced over, the blood root and blazing star. Ice blossom. Frozen bulrushes and cattails. Elizabeth is running toward me, wailing my name, *Bonnie, Bonnie*. Struck by moonlight, lovely girl, she slips out of the birch tree. The heat, the blood vessels on the surface of the skin, the capillaries are about to burst. I'm hot. I'm warm, hot. I have to take off everything.

Nick, are you there? I'm pulling the angora dress over my head and fluffing my hair and it could be the first night we were together in my father's barn. Nick's sex beautiful, a summer tree, greenness. The hay in the loft made marks on our thighs and legs and the bits of wires poking from the bales. And all that moon coming in through the pigeon roost. Feathers of moonlight drifting down. Nick? I snuggle onto his back, fitting against him, two snow leopards together. My breasts settle on either side of his spine. I try to reach under him and fingertip the nest around his naval. I rub my fingers on those spots that feel warm. I was never afraid

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

of going to sleep as a child, fearing I wouldn't wake up. Look. There is a cow patiently staring into the distance. Now she's gently moving toward me with Elizabeth on her back.

BIG AIMEE'S PINK
RATTLESNAKE
BOOTS

I had a scoop of pistachio and peppermint. My tongue went licking around the little belly of peppermint. God made me short and round and pink. I was a young thirty-six and had been entrusted by some of the best families to nanny their heirs. My flesh comforted children. My idol was long ago Mamie Eisenhower, another female God had made pink. Her First Ladyship oozed powder-puff pink, jelly donut pink, shrimp-pink, she-crab and escartes pink. Like I do.

“Mee, do you like green ice cream better than pink?” the red-haired girl-child Unity Cloud said, looking precious in her polka dot sunsuit. She held her strawberry cone in one hand and my hand in her other. “Trade you pink for your green.”

We turned under the tulip tree onto Harmony Street.

“Sweetheart my green is under my pink. By the time I get there yours will be melted. We’ll share. But if you and your mommy lived with me I’d let you have pink ice cream on Saturdays and Sundays.”

Unity Cloud’s hand smelled like grass. She was my favorite of all the children who passed through Big Aimee’s Tot-Land. With my shoulders broader than a wrestler’s, I had started my own daycare. I protected them from the strangers New Orleans grew in its own neighborhoods. But I had given it up and gone back into tarot card reading. Less liabilities and less traffic. This four-year-old who could spell her name U N I T Y C L O U D was all that remained of Tot-Land. We’d been for ice cream at the K&B and now were strolling. Her feet wanted to run with the bubbling inside them, but I made her walk. See that sidewalk, I told her, all buckled with tree roots. You could go flying and then where would you be? Never any traffic. Behind those windows stained with fat drops of rain was time that had already happened. I could smell all the sadness of men and women

BIG AIMEE'S PINK RATTLESNAKE BOOTS

whose day was over, all the partying and adultery done. Now they sat on their porches drinking Dixie beer. The women still made *pouponer*, powdered their noses. I sure wasn't done with my good times yet.

"Pink makes my lips hurt." Unity touched the cone to her nose. "Mee, green tastes better than pink."

"Pink is the best, Unity. Just you wait and see. I see pink in your future."

Mamie Eisenhower wore pink kimonos when they brought her breakfast tray in, a pink grapefruit with a maraschino cherry in its navel. She had blue eyes and little square bangs worn over her a high pink forehead. I used to wear a pink moo-moo to tell fortunes at Amber Dufrene's in. Under the tablecloth with its stars and comets printed on it, Wayne crouched, fondling my thighs, the fleshy crease behind my knees. We pretended he was from the Rice Coast, a slave from the Congo, and I was his pink mistress who could sell him up river. His mistress could feast on his fingers or tickle him unmercifully with feathers and fans or order him to the Sportsmen's Palace for a few pounds of crawfish, saltines and Tabasco sauce.

My tongue did another rotation around my peppermint scoop, and then I took a bite.

"Mee bites ice cream. Don't Mee's teeth hurt?" Unity asked, streaks of melted ice cream crisscrossing her chin.

"I never hurt, precious," I told her, but if pleasure is close to hurting, I hurt plenty when Wayne tickled the back of my knees, I felt so pink I floated over the bayou and cypresses, I sucked crawfish from the shrimp grass where they spawned, holding them in my mouth and then spitting them out. When Wayne quit me, I quit Amber Dufrene's. My young womanhood ended. I was almost 300 lbs. and Wayne had been afraid of me. Now all these years later the club had called me back and I was going. O Wayne, my slave, the only man I ever loved and the one who never proposed.

I stood five feet in my bare feet and was now down to 240 lbs.

"Almost home," Unity giggled, tugging on my arm to hurry.

My Creole cottage sat like a tinker toy on the lip of Lafayette Cemetery where the dead rose and sank. The same Lafayette Cemetery where Peter Fonda high on LSD climbed one of the winged tombs in *Easy Rider*. Now they were crumbling. Bricks held together by prayer. I wondered what Wayne would think now that I'd lost sixty pounds. Two months ago I underwent the stomach stapling operation and my digestive system now had only enough room to hold a donut and pimento. Instead of three big meals I ate thirteen little ones.

Unity asked, "Can we stop at Mawmaw Versie's?"

"Maybe later," I said.

We were passing my mother Mawmaw Versie's wrap-around porch Victorian, the windows filled with raggedy bamboo shades blinking back the sun. Usually, Mamaw would be relaxing in her lawn chair on the porch while her eyes scouted the neighborhood. "They broke in at my honey-chile's!" I heard Mawmaw moan. She was leaning against one of the columns in her yellow terrycloth robe, her hands cupped to her eyes. Then she pointed to my cottage. "They robbed you, Big!"

I tossed my ice cream into the grass, picked up Unity and ran. The scoop of ice cream plopped off her cone and hit the sidewalk. Then I felt the stitches across my stomach pull and my heart start to pound in my mouth. I slowed way down. The tarot cards in my bag were stupid and blind. They hadn't foreseen this. Well, I'm going to personally decapitate whoever turned my potty-chair upside down, (the kids liked it and when I had my stomach stapling operation I made use of the damn thing too). The robbers took and smashed the front window with it.

My pink flamingo lawn chairs and home accents were gone. "Ohhhh," I let out a groan. Unity's eyes got wide and I set her down. She hadn't cried when she lost her ice cream and I wasn't going to cry either. A tail of the curtain was caught between the bowl and lid; the rest of the curtain was filled with glass. What would Mamie Eisenhower have done? She would have marched right in and that's exactly what I did. The front door hung open and inside was a room I'd never seen before. The TV had disappeared and furniture shifted. The recliner was thankfully still there but facing west instead of east.

"Unity, Big Aimee had some visitors. They sure made a mess. Now I'm going to put you down for your nap in the recliner same as always and then make some phone calls. Big Aimee has to see who made themselves at home while we were gone. Are you okay, darling child?" I asked.

Her blue-green eyes widened. "Mee afraid?"

"Big Aimee never knows fear, my precious gem."

Before this was all over I'd show whoever did this fear. I'd fry their fingers with my curling iron, I'd close their hands in a waffle iron and sit on it. I would personally pluck out every short hair on their body. I grabbed the cord to the wall phone and hand over hand made my way to the receiver. I bounced on the edge of the hospital bed where I'd slept since the stomach reduction. The bed was missing its sheets and pillowcases, the paisley seashells. I'll be licked sick, I thought. What kind of pathetic loser would steal someone's sheets? I could see myself in the empty picture frame. What kind of lowdown mutt would take a photograph of Moon Landrieu, the ex-mayor of New Orleans that Mawmaw

BIG AIMEE'S PINK RATTLESNAKE BOOTS

Versie had a fling with back in the sixties, out of the frame and hang it back on the wall? My eyebrows lifted into the middle of my forehead, and then relaxed. The green band of color in my rainbow eye shadow settled back on top of the blue mist. You could sure see in my face that I'd lost some weight. I punched in 911. This neighborhood used to be an orchid forest. Birds-of-paradise flew over the walled courtyards. Now look.

In the Big Easy even 911 felt like an old-time long-distance call. Five rings before a police operator answered and hung up on me. The Big Sleazy. Unity Cloud was carefully licking the stickiness from her fingers. "Nap time, precious. Your maw expects you to rest," I say, shooing Unity to the recliner that I could see from here was missing its afghan. "If you're cold I'll cover you with a towel."

And the precious girl-child did climb up into that recliner and started talking to her fingers.

I hit redial 911. The robbers had used a key to rip my wallpaper border that featured the sock monkey. The red feeling spread. I imagined the burglar. Which of my ex's had done this? I could see all five sets of their beady little eyes. Babineaux, Bourg, Bruce, Bouzigard and Touns.

I heard the door rattle and Ashling, Unity's mother, ran inside calling "UNITY, MY BABY. UNITY." The sight of Ashling yelling her head off and twisting around in cowboy boots and a tight little denim skirt and skimpy black sleeveless top made me mad. Did she give Big Aimee a thought when she saw the busted window?

"Ashling, don't have a canary," I yelled. "She's fine. Napping like she always does."

Here was the one female I considered a friend. Maybe she reminded me of Wayne.

"Where is she?" Ashling panted. "Where's Unity?" A good-looking brunette with perfect skin who was a blend of a chocolate truffle and Kit-Kat. It was the Kit-Kat in her that caused her to marry the biggest piece of junk this side of the Mississippi. Beau Joe, III. Don't let that 'III' fool you. Three generations of men who did time.

I wiped my palms on my yellow terrycloth shift that matched the butter yellow wallpaper, and pointed to the recliner. "Unity Cloud is napping like always." Wasn't she going to see about me?

The Lazy-Boy was turned toward the bookcase. Unity Cloud hugged herself on its cushion. Instead of the afghan, she snuggled under her long red hair. Her raspberry mouth let out a breath.

"She's cold. She needs to be covered." Ashling knelt beside her. "Still sleeping, Unity?" There was a crumb on her lower lip from the ice cream

sandwich I always let her have before the cone. True enough that Ashling had asked me not to give so many sweets to her daughter but I couldn't see my way to say no. She brushed it off.

"I could stay right here for a long time," Ashling said to the sleeping child like the girl was a long lost love. "You smell of apple blossoms. It's just dirty old ordinary air made better by being inside you. Unity, we're going home soon."

The child's mouth kept making sleep sounds. With that kind of mother you had to fear for the girl. But she did not have insects eating inside her like most of the parents I'd known.

"I'VE BEEN ROBBED," I shouted when an operator answered. "My house has been broken into. DON'T PUT ME ON HOLD!"

All I could hear was an accordion down at the station-house. They were listening to KEUN. Blind Uncle Gaspard's "Jolie Blon." No one expects much of the New Orleans Police Department. A few months ago officers shot off 500 blanks around the Desire Street projects. No one bothered calling 911. Read the *Times-Picayune* and you didn't have to wonder about the wave of mayhem and why around here cops were called polecats. New Orleans police were corrupt and brutal nincompoops. They had one polecat, Officer Abe Brain, who ordered the murder of a prostitute over his police radio.

"Ashling, where's my notebook? I don't know where the where is but could you find it?"

She brushed off her little denim mini and came over to me and rubbed my neck. Then she took my head in her hands and pressed thumbs against my temples. It felt nice. Her fingers were strong. Instead of stripping and handing over her tips to that idiot, I had told her until I was blue in the face that she should dump Beau Joe, go to masseur school and give real massages for \$75 an hour.

Ashling's upper lip wore a tropical rose shimmer and her bottom, a red berry crème. That mouth left temptress kisses on telephone receivers, on Unity, on forks, on sandwich bread. If I was the kind that liked other women I'd sure go for this one.

"Thank you, hon. I've got the worst pain. They took even the *traversains*. What kind of burglars would cart off pillowcases?" I cradled the phone under my chin and scratched at the eczema on my wrist. "YES," I wailed into the mouthpiece like pieces of my body had been carried out when an actual voice spoke. "I'm on Harmony Lane. Between Lafayette Cemetery and Rocky's Gourmet Pizza. It's the little brown cottage. How soon until you officers will be here?" I asked.

BIG AIMEE'S PINK RATTLESNAKE BOOTS

When I reached for my cigarettes, I could see curds of deodorant hanging from the hairs in my armpit. I'm going to have to change my brand from that Secret roll on. "Two to three hours? They've cleaned me out. I'm down on the balls of my ass." I slammed the phone down. They could go shit in their hats. They wouldn't want to come if there wasn't anything left for them to steal. They'd probably send someone like Officer Suzette George who walked into a New Orleans East Vietnamese restaurant and shot the security guard, shot the brother and sister counter help while another brother and sister cowered in the cooler. The same Suzette George responded to their call for help. She didn't bother to disguise herself. "Now I have to find a light."

A few hours ago, I would have dug into the elephant-size brandy snifter filled with matchbooks from the restaurants my ex-husbands took me to. The snifter used to sit on top of the TV. The robbers had taken both. "I'm shaking and I'm going to throw up." I jammed a More into my mouth, a skinny long brown cigarette that looked like an anorexic cigar.

"Here, Big Aimee," Ashling said, reaching into her pocket for matches. "Are the cops coming?"

"Yeh, they're coming and so is Mardi Gras. Did you find that notebook? I want to get paper somewheres? We're gonna make a list of what's missing."

Ashling found one of Unity's black and white speckled notebooks. See how efficient and quick you are, I thought, what is a brunette hot mama like you doing living with a man who would let you take off her clothes for other men just to put beans on his table. My tongue worked the space between my front teeth. "We have to do a walk-through and write down what the bastards stole."

"Big Aimee, I'm going to take Unity and go home. The cops make me nervous. You know they come in the club all the time. I didn't want my Unity to be around police, you know, their walkie talkies, their guns, their citation pads. I hate their eyes, the way they look at your mouth, and every word that comes out of it."

"Well, if they come into the club they're looking at more than your mouth."

Ashling pressed those two pillow lips together, shaking her head. "I didn't want to tell them my name or my daughter's."

I convinced her a walk-through wouldn't take long. "Let's start in the kitchen. I couldn't go in there alone. I didn't have the stomach for it. Ashling, I'm so glad you're here. You're smart. Even Mawmaw Versie thinks you've got brains. You're smart about everything except that little

turd you live with and that place you shake your booty in. That shack-job Beau Joe. A *coo-yôn!*”

“We’re married, Big Aimee.”

“Ouch. You make me sad. I don’t call going to the courthouse being married. I had five church weddings. I came out richer than when I went in.” My five weddings: the first was Catholic, the second, Baptist, third, Hammer of God, forth, Seventh Day Adventist, and the fifth, Christian Missionary Alliance. She was living knuckles to the sidewalk with a man who couldn’t provide for her or their child.

I led the way into the kitchen. The table and chairs were still there, the crayons and construction paper, the mobiles of flying paper fish, and the red and green squares that made me feel like I was about to disco on shag carpet. The cupboard that held my clown mugs and statuettes shone with sun, bare except for kiddy scissors and tape dispenser. Then I staggered against the doorway. “My clowns! I have a bruise on my heart. The pony clown. The crying clown. The merman clown. Fifteen years of clown collecting. Write that down. Fifteen years. I feel like fainting. This list is going into State Farm Insurance. My clowns are worth thousands of dollars.”

Ashling drew a line in the notebook under the word KITCHEN and started listing what was missing. I loved my clowns because Mawmaw hated them. Clowns with cherry tomato noses and bitter chocolate eyes, the city clown swinging his feet over the side of a skyscraper who had seemed to know my secret when I sat at this table, the rag picker clown, the rodeo clown with his lasso who mocked me with his puckered lips.

I threaded my fingers through my bangs. “And where’s my hand-cut crystal punch bowl with matching cups? Ten years ago I bought that for seven hundred and eighty nine dollars and now it’s worth ten times that. Oh, my poor amethyst Cinderella shoe.” I felt my face twist and my tongue lap ferociously back and forth across my lower lip. I was hungry for a pizza. A Creole pie with anchovies and crawfish and boudin sausage and pineapple and cheese. “Ooooooooooh,” I moaned and clutched my middle. “My staples are killing me.” What if fat had been the source of my power? Would I lose my pink the more weight I dropped? Then I wondered if that was why I’d been broken into. I’d lost some of my heft and someone out there thought I was weakening. I needed a jelly donut.

“My wall.” I threw a glance at the naked wall where a painting had hung of three whinnying horses, their eyes huge, fire in the sky behind them. Horses escaping a burning barn. Mawmaw had said it was a popular painting of her mother’s day. It didn’t cost *pistaches*, peanuts. “They took the horses that belonged to my great-grandmother.”

BIG AIMEE'S PINK RATTLESNAKE BOOTS

Then I saw the clock. They must have tripped it when they carried the stuff out. "See it's stopped at 2:15 p.m.," I said, "Someone must have been casing the place out. They know I take Unity to the park between 1 and 3 p.m. You can set your watch by it. Then we go the K&B for an ice cream sandwich. 3:15 p.m. Then we stop for an ice cream cone."

"Big Aimee, you promised you'd stop giving her all those sweets. An ice cream sandwich or a cone but not both," Ashling said, studying the stopped clock with her big brown eyes, and then checking her watch.

"What's loser Beau Joe doing today? Take a sick day or something?" I asked.

Ashling stood back and blinked like I'd hurt her feelings on purpose. "He's on a job for Levee Plumbing running sewer line."

"Can you prove that?" I asked, trying to visualize that mullet Beau Joe with the big mustache palming his hair down under the muggy sun, a shovel in hand. I couldn't see him breaking a sweat in honest labor.

"I'm not going to honor that question with an answer. I'm going to forget you said that. Believe me Beau Joe's standing in two feet of mud as we speak. I'm as sorry as you to see the horse painting gone." Ashling touched the wall like she was about to give it a back rub, trying to find the crick in its neck. "Big Aimee, I loved those horses. I'm so sad." Tears rolled down her face and it was almost worth being broken into to see that.

"Whoever broke in had a vehicle and must have backed it up to the porch." I told her, straightening up. "That old fool next door probably saw everything but she won't spill the beans. Especially if it was that gigolo you live with."

"Big Aimee you really don't believe that. I can prove he's on the sewer truck today."

"Even sewer trucks have wheels. He could have backed it right up to that porch."

Ashling went back into the living room to check on Unity. The precious child was awake now and reaching into a shaft of sun that made her hand look like she'd painted it in glitter fingernail polish. Ashling ran over and knelt down. "We're going to go home soon. Ready to get up, darling sweetheart? Are you thirsty?"

Unity Cloud nodded and smiled at her hand spreading her fingers and releasing the dust motes.

"Juice?" I asked. "Come on into the kitchen and we'll get some."

There was a knock at the front door. "BIG, IT'S ME," Mawmaw Versie called.

"Yeh, yeh," I barked, "DOOR'S OPEN."

In strolled my mother Mawmaw Versie who carried a platter covered with a paper towel that gave off a greasy charbroiled odor. “There’s my little *peunez*,” she cooed to Unity. “How you be my little stinkbug?”

“Mawmaw Versie,” Unity yelped, her face brightening as she slid from the recliner and rushed to Mawmaw, hugging her legs. I felt a twinge of jealousy. The old lady could still hoodwink kids and adults of limited intelligence. Over forty when I was born, she was upwards of seventy-seven.

Mawmaw claimed she could get in touch with whomever had passed over: human, stillborn baby, dog, cat, bird. Folks still came to her house and she would hold onto a ring or a keychain and close her eyes until her second sight kicked in. She’s tell them the dead calico cat they had loved like a child was right there right beside them, that dog they were still holding onto like a rainy afternoon on the cattail couch. When I was in elementary and junior high she worked as a dancer, doing old-time burlesque, calling herself Lily Brigrlette. She taught me how to lay out the tarot cards making sure the money and love card came up for just about everyone.

“Lookee at this. Big, your cupboard’s been wiped bare. Who would have wanted those catalogue clowns? They’d be better off going down to Wal-Mart.” Mawmaw Versie still wore her hair in yellow clots when she wasn’t wearing the brown wig I’d bought her on Canal Street. When she let it down in public she got more than a few looks. Almost to her knees, her hair was dry from a lifetime of dye jobs, and took all her strength to hold it up.

“I figured you might not want to cook,” she said. “I got some home-made alligator sausage.”

“Gator under there?” Unity’s asked, trying to see under the edge of paper towel, and then jumping away. “How’d you get him under?”

Ashling lifted the corner of toweling. “Mmmm, smells delicious. May I?” she asked and popped a sausage into her mouth.

I’ll give you the recipe, Ashling. Two pounds ground alligator, add Nawlins gold pepper.”

“Mawmaw, not now.”

Mawmaw Versie ignored me. “Then get your casing for stuffing. I made a sausage plate for all the neighbors. I want to send some home with you, Ashling, for that darling girl. And that handsome man of yours. The men can start out pretty and sure disappoint. I made some with just vegetables for you and the doll baby” She set the platter down on the table, and then her eyes crisscrossed the kitchen, rolling this way and that. “Looks like they had a thirst. Cleaned your wine out. They’d been better off going to Giant Discount Store Liquor.”

BIG AIMEE'S PINK RATTLESNAKE BOOTS

“Who were they, Mawmaw?” I took a step toward her. “You sat home all afternoon. Nothing happens on Harmony you don’t know about. Was it that slimeball Beau Joe?”

She shook her head. “I was grilling out back with the pecan chips.” Her hand with painted nails clutched at the leather pouch around her neck. Unity had once asked what was inside the gris-gris bag and Mawmaw told her cayenne pepper, toenail clippings, and chameleon skin. Mawmaw claimed our family was descended from Marie Laveau, the nineteenth century mixed-race Vodun queen, who had fifteen children, some of them marrying lighter and lighter until you got the feta white of Mawmaw’s complexion.

“You shouldn’t be traipsing around in that see-through nightgown, Mawmaw. It’s been awhile since anyone wanted to look at you.”

“Quit criticizing me, Big. And don’t be telling me what I saw.”

It was hard to imagine Mawmaw Versie raising me, Big Aimee, but she had. Most afternoons when I strolled by with Unity Cloud she was stretched out in her chaise lounge and watching my cottage like it was *Guiding Light*. She accused me of having a number of alcoholic men friends when I was between husbands. Stan, for one, who worked offshore drilling rigs and sometimes climbed in my window if I’d already fallen asleep and didn’t hear them knocking. Mawmaw Versie only saw what I didn’t want her to.

“Big, I don’t know who’s supposed to be here and who ain’t. The kind of layabout men you take up with. It could have been a blue truck. Maybe it’s a blue truck I’ve seen over here before. That fat man Stan you sent over to wash my windows. He had a blue truck.” Her eyes brightened, greasy-green like the collards her alligator sausages rested on.

“No, Stan most certainly does not have a blue truck.” Now I was getting somewhere with the old busybody. “So you saw a blue truck?”

“I saw one but it might have been yesterday or the day before.”

Beau Joe had a blue truck or rather Levee Plumbing did.

I heard the unsticking of the freezer and saw Mawmaw Versie opening the lid. I hurried over to take a look, and then rubbing my eyes as if to rub the sight from my eyes. The deep freeze was empty except for two packages of chicken wings and one can of pink lemonade concentrate. Mawmaw let out a long low whistle.

“They cleaned you out, Big. *Qui C’est q’ca?* What is that?”

“They took my meat. I had a whole cow in there. My own beef butchered. WRITE IT DOWN, ASHLING. My rib eye, my prime rib, my tee bones. That’s the truth. Lord, my filets, my porterhouse. *Poo-ye-yi*, that stinks. They took all my steaks. They left the chicken wings. Why

didn't they go on and take the wings and leave me completely on the balls of my ass? "

I saw Ashling write in FREEZER and underline it.

Mawmaw patted my hand. We were both still peering into its depths. "They weren't the best cuts of beef. I had steaks over here with you, Big. The marbling was never very good. Be glad you don't have to chew on those tough cuts of gristle."

My head felt so hot my brains must be boiling. "Upstairs, I have to see upstairs. Get me a drink. No, forget it, we need to get upstairs."

"Big Aimee maybe Mawmaw could take the notebook over so Unity and I can go home. Beau Joe likes me to have his food ready when he gets home."

I gave a snort. What kind of brain washing had Beau Joe done to get this sweet warm young mother to dance at a strip and on top of that make him dinner. Yeah, right he's standing in two feet of mud. He's laying up on the couch at home while my rib-eyes broil in the oven, he's drinking my wine.

I begged Ashling again, letting her know I hadn't been upstairs since the surgery, and I wanted to impress upon her the items taken so when they started showing up in her own house she'd know. I turned to Mawmaw Versie. "Go home, Mawmaw, and start thinking about that blue truck."

"*Je vas te passé une collotte* I will pass you a slap. I'm going upstairs with you to see what they took," she said.

I positioned myself at the bottom of the powder blue carpeted stairs. "Ashling, get right behind and brace me with the notebook just in case. If I find out it was Beau Joe who was in here, you're going to *be en d'oeuille* in mourning. You're such a pretty little thing. Like a shy bayou breeze. You could find a rich man."

"Beau Joe doesn't like you either, Big Aimee," Ashling said, and when I glanced back I caught a little pout to her lips. "He thinks you're jealous of him."

I harrumphed. That would be the cold day in hell when Big Aimee was jealous of anyone. Not one instant in all those school years when the skinny girls in their cloud dresses and butterfly hair went twirling by did I want to trade the power of my beginning flesh for their next-to-nothingness. Not even when during gym class we gathered around the trampoline, and I was singled out to always be spotter, 'Aimee might hurt herself or the trampoline.' the PE teacher saying, nervously, did I feel jealousy. Once, Antoinette Valentino, a girl who looked like her name, got too close to the edge and instead of raising my arms to warn her I stepped back and let her fall.

BIG AIMEE'S PINK RATTLESNAKE BOOTS

Unity Cloud stretched and smiled, "Mommy, I like upstairs too."

That precious child! Her red lips reminded me of Wayne's the first time I'd seen him. Red like cherries, like hearts. I had to pinch myself. Each step I climbed caused me to moan. Ashling pushed against my butt, complaining that my bottom felt like a bushel basket of soft peaches.

"I'm worried you might topple backwards. You'll squash us all," she went on.

"If we don't get to the top soon I'm going to die. Burglar bars. That's the first thing."

"Those bars are expensive, Big," Mawmaw Versie called up from the bottom of the stairs. "You should collect from that last husband Stupid Touts who rented Budget Cars and played the drums. When he gave you a black eye. You could have sued him for a million dollars."

Mawmaw and Unity were on their way up. I made the top of the stairs, lowered my head and went into the bathroom where the roof sloped. "The shower curtain! They took the shower curtain. And my towels. My beautiful blue towels. I had enough blue towels to choke a horse," I threw open the bathroom cubby. "They took all of my towels. Blue and burgundy. Are you writing everything down, Ashling?"

BATHROOM she wrote in the black and white speckled notebook.

Unity scampered into the bathroom, looking confused when she reached up to the towel rack. "Mee's towels gone. Where did they go?" Then Mawmaw Versie shuffled into the bathroom. "I bet they cleaned your prescriptions out, Big."

My Valium. My blue Valium. They better not have taken my nerve medicine. Stealing drugs was double triple sin against the laws of civility. "If I find it was that *con-yôn* Beau Joe, he is a dead man." I leaned against the sink to open the medicine cabinet. My odor of cake mix, baby powder and Blue Grass filled my nose. It was strong but good. All the prescription bottles that had stood on the top shelf were gone.

"My refills. I'm going to buy a gun and teach myself how to shoot," I shouted. "Ashling, leave that *con-yon* Beau Joe and move in with me. I won't charge you and Unity rent. I'll pay for you to go to the masseuse school. You're way too good for him. Put tranquilizers down on the list. Too smart to be dancing at that strip club. Put antibiotics and antihistamines."

"You're bossy, Big," Mawmaw said. "Don't listen to a word of what Big says. She was a bossy baby and by the time she was four years old she'd say, 'Maw get out of my house.'"

I opened the drawer where I kept my cosmetics. I owned lipstick shades with names like *Spy Girl* and *Shivers* and *Nudie Bar. Bitter Envy*

eye shadow was a dusky black with green glitter. The drawer had been cleaned out.

Ashling lifted her pen and put it between her lips. Even when she pondered and went pensive her cheeks wore their dimples. Who would send a girl with smile dimples of pure sunlight into the caverns of a strip club? The worst of the worst, that's who.

"Beau Joe's better than you give him credit," she huffed in the cutest way. "He loves Unity and me more than life itself. He doesn't cheat; he knows we'd be finished. If he stole from you or anyone he would be dead to me and he knows that too. I've seen what bad couples do to each other. I grew up in apartment house with voices going off in the middle of the night, traveling down the long hallways. We had a manslaughter or rather womanslaughter. The cops found Mrs. LaFeur sitting on the couch in her robe, hands wearing red evening gloves, holding her throat closed. Like a second mouth had opened there. Her pink milk glass poodle lamp smashed into her head. The cops woke Mr. LaFeur up and he was still drunk with no idea what he'd done. Beau Joe would never lift his hand in anger."

That didn't say one damn thing about Beau Joe's positives!

I shooed them away so I could use the throne. Who was my own father? Mawmaw Versie would never tell me, and that meant she had no idea because there were too many candidates. Other than that the old lady never kept anything to herself except her age, which still kept shifting and changing. For all my high school years she celebrated one birthday. Did I ever throw her slutty ways into her face?

The three of them hustled into the bedroom while I peed. Mawmaw was wearing out Ashling's eardrums complaining about Stan, her storm windows, and the bone she still had to pick with me. "That Stan she sent over to wash my glass. What a *yat*. He broke my picture window."

When I reached for the toilet paper my hand hit the empty TP dispenser. I screamed through the door. "MAWMAW, YOUR DAMN WINDOW WAS HELD IN BY TAPE." That old yellow-haired woman had nerve accusing Stan of throwing a stepladder through her picture window. "HE'S STILL WAITING ON HIS PAY!"

I knew what waited for me in the bedroom I hadn't visited for months or in the closet where I kept clothes that graced 300 lb. Big Aimee, and dresses that strained to cover little Big Aimee at 175 lbs. in seventh grade. Emptiness. Like the house I came home to growing up when Mawmaw Versie was strutting her stuff down on Royal Street at an age she should have known better. And the fancy sized five footwear. How right I was. "My pink rattlesnake boots! They're gone. Damn, they got my rolled pen-

BIG AIMEE'S PINK RATTLESNAKE BOOTS

nies. I had a hundred dollars worth of pennies.” I backed out of the closet, and then went to the dresser and pulled out the top drawers. “Wayne used to like the feel of my silk. Bastard Beau Joe didn’t bother with my cottons.” I staggered to the bed, and sank down.

Mawmaw Versie scratched her head. “Besides the TV they left all your furniture. It was knick-knacks and whatnots and linens and edibles they went for. It must have been the Mexicans. I can’t see the Vietnamese bothering with those clowns. Maybe it was that Stan or some of those knuckleheads from the Ninth Ward. They’ve got big women down there. Who else would bother taking size 45 underwear?”

“Wayne, O Wayne,” I groaned. “Wayne, where are you when I need you most?”

Ashling wrote BEDROOM in the notebook. Then CLOSET and DRAWERS.

“Wayne,” Mawmaw Versie whispered to Ashling, “was Big’s high school beau. Both were pretty. Now Wayne’s an alcoholic and heavy into betting on chickens. Big is herself. Wayne, Stan, Touts, you put a different name to them but they’re all the same.”

“WHAT ABOUT THE BUMS YOU BROUGHT HOME, MAW?”

I buried my face in my hands, and when Unity Cloud snuggled against me on the bed I draped my arm around her. Big Aimee, Unity Cloud, and Ashling would make a nice family.

Unity hugged my neck and climbed into my lap. “Mee’s sad. Unity’s sad too.”

And it was true; the precious little girl in the sundress felt my grief. I worried that she might be too sensitive. She needed to grow more skin. “Thank you, sweet love,” I said stroking her hair and rocking her. I looked to Ashling. “If he didn’t rob me Beau Joe could at least pick me up a couple of pizzas at Rocky’s on his way home. The Mojo Supreme including anchovies.”

“I like an..to..vies,” Unity said, trying to make the word come out right.

Ashling rolled her eyes. Then a police siren shrilled, still far off, but sending a chill through the bedroom. Ashling stiffened and threw the notebook onto the bed. She put her arms around Unity and swept her off my lap. “Say goodbye to Big Aimee. We’re going home now.” Ashling’s face flushed. Maybe she was bluffing, maybe she had been worried all along that her Beau Joe had broken in.

“Run, go on and run out on me, Ashling. Run when I need you. Ask your shack-job where he was this afternoon. Ask him.”

The siren came closer. Ashling stood with Unity in the doorway, trem-

bling. I could see from here her knuckles whitening around her child, her knees knocking below her tight denim jean skirt. “Beau Joe thinks you’re a big spoilsport. He says you feed our child too much ice cream so she’ll be fat like you. That you’re forever trying to come between us so you can turn me into your servant. I didn’t believe him. I told him you were sweet through and through. That you didn’t have a mean bone in your body. Now I see that you do.”

“Big is filled with mean bones,” Mawmaw snorted with a shake of her yellow hair. “Let me go down and wrap some alligator for you to take.”

I bet Ashling would keep crying how I was crazy to suspect Beau Joe.

I got to the window in time to watch Unity Cloud and Ashling walk down the street just as a police car pulled up. I remembered my first year of life. Most people couldn’t but I did. I didn’t babble, or croon to myself. I was afraid of the light, whimpered if taken from my crib. There I drank in the darkness and the thousands of sounds, I noticed any movement of insects, cockroaches, mosquitoes. They must have had voices as well as wings. And there was Mawmaw Versie tearing on home. Taking the story of the blue truck with her.

The police came inside and yawned. When I signed their report I noticed the scrawl of their handwriting was so bad they’d never find the culprits.

And they wouldn’t.

I waited for dark to march to my shed a few yards in back of the house. I had my flashlight and the first thing I saw in the gloom were their faces. Tomato-nosed clowns. Fat bloody lips. Bruised eyes. They swam around me—city clowns, circus clowns, rag clowns, they batted their six-pointed false eyelashes at the powder-blue bath towels and powder-blue hand towels. Avocado sheets stared me down safe in their cellophane, bottles of red wine steadied by the tire jack. I picked up a rattlesnake boot and penny rolls fell out. My size 45 tangerine underwear tangled in fishing line. The shed reeked of baby powder and Blue Grass. Strong but good. Under a mound of D cup brasseries was the afghan that Unity always napped with. I told Stan to break in and take a few small things that would later end up at Memory’s and Beau Joe’s. The idiot didn’t understand American English even though he was born in Westwego, Louisiana. I didn’t expect him to move my whole life out back. And my meat! That glutton must have taken that for himself.

I felt restless and out of breath. Once I tore a crawfish while it was living, and then I sucked its brains while it was closest to still being alive,

BIG AIMEE'S PINK RATTLESNAKE BOOTS

it was so kind to come out of the grass for me, and I squeezed its liquid because they don't have blood like us. It was pure pink, the quiver of it, and the crunch of its wings coming off. And I found out how the crawfish make love in their warm teemy world where it's more crowded and fear-some even than this godforsaken human space.

I slumped down in the dark.

I had dreams. I was a tiny Big Aimee and yet I could feel the hunger stirring inside me. I wanted the fat of my body back. I wanted the flesh felt like a heavy blanket around a thumping hot heart. I was in a flatboat on the moonlit bayou with Wayne, who was young and golden again. The unspoiled boy oared the flatboat through the shrimp grass. Lightning flashed, lilies ran out from the banks. He lifted the motor from the water, weeds trickling oil through his fingers. Sloppiness he left on my body. Then I caught blue crabs with chicken necks, grabbing a water snake with my bare hands, wrenching the trout from its jaws. Trout. The bloodiest fish, so silky and white-skinned. I was Big Aimee spreading my legs. Wayne licked me. You're huge as a house, he said. My house. A silver trout went swimming inside me. Trout babies I needed to eat.

LUCKY 7 &
DALLOWAY

Lucky Seven squawks and wakes me. A wind tunnel of heat shakes the pickup. The windows are rolled down and Pepita's long hair, so thick and heavy it drapes her like a shawl, suddenly flies up and my head almost vanishes in it. Hector at the wheel keeps us on the highway, and the rooster goes quiet. They're salvage people. Pepita sits with the stick shift between her pretty terra-cotta colored legs and burgundy sling-back shoes. She has the silkiest black hair I've ever seen. It probably weighs more than she does. In the bed of the truck are two hot water heaters. They're the rusted color of deep fat fried shrimp, and so is every tree and rock, every piece of scenery that passes by the window. They also raise and show roosters. I shift under the weight of the cage across my lap.

"Something bad must have happened for you to run, kid," Pepita says, patting my hand.

"Nothing really bad." I shrug. "I'm going to see my grandmother in Corpus Christi. I was on the bus and then someone stole my bag and my ticket was in it." Suddenly, I worry that I already might have told them she has a condo in San Padre Island. I am a runaway, that part is simple. Hector and Pepita picked me up in Corsicana at the Dairy Queen when they stopped for chili dogs, and to get ice to cool down Lucky Seven's water. The rest gets complicated. My parents split up for a new set of partners. My father traded himself in and became a woman, my mother takes Botox injections. Her face looks frozen, and when she tries to smile her laugh lines land like knee drops on a trampoline. How can either of them believe they love anyone? They are terrified of quiet and talk and talk. I want to become silence.

"Dalloway, if Lucky Seven's too heavy for you, Pepita can hold him for awhile," Hector says glancing over his wife at me. "She's used to it."

LUCKY 7 & DALLOWAY

Pepita laughs. “But what you put in my belly isn’t.” She has on a red halter-top and her stomach bump shows above the waist of her jeans. A cross hangs from the rearview mirror and a pickle jar sits on the dash.

“Are you bragging or complaining?” Hector asks her.

The wood crate on my lap is fitted with chicken wire for an entrance, and inside is a carpet sample for his talons to scratch. Also, a water dish attaches to the wire, and a newspaper is folded into a dainty triangle for his seaweed-like droppings. His feathers look like the duster Daddy used on his chandelier, a bouquet of dark brown and green, and hints of royal purple, but Lucky Seven’s feathers explode with color, tropical fruit colors, mango and kiwi, passion fruit. I’m comfortable in the passenger’s seat holding him even if I can feel his sharp eye piercing through the slats.

“If you like we’ll train you to be a handler,” Pepita says. “Maybe Hector will let me adopt you.”

He laughs, “She can be the nanny for the bun in your oven.”

The word *bun* doesn’t sound graceless in his mouth. I do think of warm bread. I glance into the side mirror. I left Manhattan over seven days ago, and Hector says we’re in Hill Country, stretches of dirt road and scorching sun. We’re about thirty minutes from where the gamecock show takes place. In the distance, turkey buzzards circle, some so high they look like specks of pepper.

Pepita taps the crate with a perfect burgundy fingernail. “You’ll be dancing soon, Lucky, honey.”

Hector squeezes her thigh, which is not much bigger than my forearm. “Poor Pepita, there weren’t even toilets in her village. A stream ran under their house, and that is where they would go. Just a board with a hole in it.”

Pepita elbows him. “Stop it, Daddy.”

“When we married I had to buy her father a pair of shoes.”

Another jab into his ribs.

“Ouch, oh slugger,” he groans. “Seventeen bridesmaids. I paid for everyone in the village to be in the wedding.”

“When I first saw Hector I was on a payphone and he was standing behind me. I thought he was Chinese.”

He throws back his head. “I’m just good old Tex-Mex.”

In an hour I’ve learned a lot, I’ve learned that Hector is a native of Tyler, Texas and older than his wife by three decades. His eyebrows and hair are blacker than hers. In Bali, Pepita was the youngest of seven sisters. Hector tells me women rule the roost over there, women and roosters. “Instead of loving him, Pepita’s mother gives her father black eyes and bloody noses.”

This time Pepita pinches his arm, pulls one of the coarse salt-and-

pepper hairs. He brought her to Texas as his wife. He was over there shopping for roosters, the most beautiful in the world.

“Pepita had a pair of flip-flops and one dress when she married me.”

I think of my closet and all that my parents have given me. Expensive junk. Stuff probably sewn in countries where people receive a dollar a day, if even. Like in Macy’s. Brown velvet jackets and tulle skirts, taffeta with spaghetti straps, front bows and back ties, party frocks for a lifetime, sugary outfits for a child, not a girl of fourteen.

“And how do you think I get treated over there when we go back to visit Pepita’s parents. I’m an American and Jemaah Islaiyah terrorists will kill me if they get wind of any Great Satan citizen. Pepita’s mother throws a rug over me in the truck and they go into the restaurant and leave me there for hours.”

“Daddy, we’re trying to protect you.”

I laugh and feel almost warm inside. Like I could belong to this family. I’m at that special twilight age when I’m leaving the dock of twelve and thirteen and heading into the turbulent waters of fourteen. I’m not one of those girls made of marzipan, or belly-pierced peach ass, who can sneak in wearing a baseball hat but with a jut of the chin turn the room moist as marmalade.

It’s a mirage out the window. Instead of Broadway and Times Square I’ve gotten myself off the beaten track. I was frightened before Hector and Pepita picked me up. Cattle everywhere on their knees, tens of them in semicircles. They belong to no one, no order, answering to nothing but tangling strands of barbed wire. Then we crest a rise, and a cow climbs unsteadily from the ditch into the road. Cows wander in the ditch

I look out at the fields of brush, and think of the city’s dim crowded sidewalks hemmed in between cliff-like buildings, horns honking, and garbage blowing. Home of New York style cheesecake, the island named after a cocktail, pasta primavera and egg creams, Eighth Avenue and Broadway. It’s Shakespeare, the whole language of city. Puerto Ricans in gold high heels pushing a stroller with two babies. Homeless men in Hefty garbage bags and milk cartons on their feet.

“Hector, a cow!” Pepita cries out, “Daddy, watch out.”

Hector hits the brake. The cow is so thin it must be sick. Its eyes are like mouths. It staggers across the road and into the opposite ditch. “Let me see Lucky Seven,” he says, panic in his voice. “Open the crate so I can see if that thrust hurt him.”

Pepita unlatches the crate and Hector peers across her lap. “Lucky Seven, did I jostle you? How are you doing, my little machismo man?”

LUCKY 7 & DALLOWAY

“He’s fine. See, Lucky Seven is smiling. Daddy, let’s go,” she says.

Each time she calls Hector, *Daddy*, I think of my own. From thousands of miles away I can see clearly, my father and me in the old days walking for miles of blocks. “There is something I’m trying to tell you,” he said three years ago. My heart skipped a beat. “I’ve decided to have my sex reassigned. I’m going to become a woman.” We stopped in front of Paradise Bakery just as a girl roller-bladed down the sidewalk. She was a Latina beauty, dark ringleted hair, large breasts in an aqua tube top, and tight cheeks in watermelon-pink short shorts. My father seemed to lose himself in watching her. Like Hector is doing, looking at his rooster. He didn’t want her, he wanted to become her.

I brush away my father, and try to see more of where I am. There seems to be a different hunger in this land than in the city. “What’s wrong with that cow? It can hardly walk,” I ask, feeling that choking sadness when animals are in trouble, and I’m not going to be able to help.

“It’s probably loaded with ticks and running a fever,” Pepita says, opening her lap notebook, a speckled black and white.

“Can we help? Please.”

Hector reaches around his wife and pats my shoulder. “Say a prayer to the Maker. That’s as best we can do.”

I remember saying prayers to the Maker about my father who is now a good-looking middle-aged blond named Kim, asking Him to change Kim back to Daddy. I thought of our last date at the Holiday Inn Crown, when Kim asked me to attend a seminar with her. I squinted but couldn’t raise my father from the beige skirt and coral jacket. She whisked her and me up the escalator. INTERNATIONAL GENDER DYSPHORIA CONFERENCE was printed in block letters on a banner behind. I followed her into a frigid half-empty banquet hall that didn’t have a drop of music in it, the tables under sheets of white paper.

Everything couldn’t be more different here.

Pepita isn’t interested in cows or sky; she’s running a column of numbers on a sheet of paper with dollars signs, debits and liabilities. I feel huge and stupid next to her, although I’m supposed to be gifted. I like being with them because they chatter and I don’t have to think about Daddy and Mommy and what they’re doing in New York City, and if they’re waiting by the phone or going about their business. Eventually, I’ll drop them a postcard and tell them not to worry.

“We run a salvage store right out of the back of our truck,” Pepita says, “We save rent that way.” She takes out a notebook and shows me how much money they would have to pay for utilities if they had a shop. I like

the nearness of the rooster who smells like cinnamon. “We make our home in Ft. Worth. Hector can’t provide better than a stockade of red dust.”

Then we stop in the middle of the road; it’s time to feed Lucky Seven. A mixture of maize, corn, sunflower seeds. Pepita sifts it through a strainer before she opens the cage. Hector’s eyes shine at the sight of him; Lucky Seven struts out like a runway model, a preening weightlifter, his head up, his comb trimmed and flushed pink. “Look at him.”

They take turns feeding him kernel by kernel. Hector picks up Lucky Seven and with his forefinger and thumb fluffs his feathers. Pepita massages his legs, and then bounces Lucky Seven up and down in her lap. She takes out a hand mirror and runs it between its tail-feathers, combing him for blemishes. Their eyes shine with true love. Lucky Seven is stretched and preened, then touches up his own feathers, pulling them through his beak, which glistens like a polished agate. He’s the cock of the walk. Magical. Male.

I think of Kim nudging me at the seminar when Dr. Hickey from Manitou Springs, Colorado, a pioneering surgeon, stood up. “He’s the doctor who operated on me.” I tried to imagine Dr. Hickey who resembled a Gold Rush prospector with his suspenders, grizzled sideburns and goatee, this man with a clicker in his hand that controlled the slide show carousel, bending over Daddy to cut off his male membership. The organ Daddy made me with dropped into the recycle bin. The overhead lights dimmed. A movie screen descended, and then a blurry image that might have been an alligator or a tree trunk appeared.

Hector waits for Lucky Seven to step back into his crate before shifting the pickup into drive and pumping the gas. “I wonder how high the center bets will be today,” he says, nudging Pepita.

“They better be higher than in Laredo. Don’t forget, Daddy, you owe me a twenty for the side bet you lost,” she snaps.

It sounds like they’re talking about boxing, and I let the hot breeze from the window and the sound of their voices, far away, wash over me. Three days I’ve had hardly any sleep, first the Greyhound from the Port Authority on 42nd Street to Pittsburgh, and then on to Dallas by way of Knoxville and Little Rock.

“Dalloway today is my 52nd birthday and my wife has no gift.”

“Hector’s gift was being born in America.”

“I’m a Mexican-American. Look how much better off Dalloway is. White bread.”

“She was born with two presents every day,” Pepita says. She keeps track of their mileage in a wide-ruled composition book. Funjino

LUCKY 7 & DALLOWAY

Stationary out of Mahwah, New Jersey. “And she has rich parents, I bet.” She turns her pretty face with the black eyes to look at my mouth like she’s waiting for an answer.

“Not really. My mother is a secretary. My father examines bank loans.”

The truth is I’m forgetting them. I still have one hundred dollars. I cut my hair in the Trailways bathroom with a plastic razor, shaving off my skinny hair. Now I’m a boy soldier with a buzz cut. When they look for me, they’ll be trying to find a girl with long thin brown hair. I’m forgetting them, they’re not the same people, and I’m different too. We were a family and now we’re not.

Pepita coos through the chicken wire at Lucky Seven. The road is pristine. The sun reddens, a blood diamond, and the sky, boiling lobster. All the heat in the sky is nothing. She takes a perfume out of her woven purse, spraying her wrists and belly. The more she sprays, the more it is like humidity, the hottest summer day, the whitest petals. A Venus flytrap, the living flower that devours insects in its cloying aroma. Can you imagine a more beautiful death? Pepita sprits her endless black hair with those petals, her twiglet wrists, under her chin. Then she aims the decanter and sprays Lucky Seven’s hind side. “Lucky Seven was born with luck and he will bring its blessedness in the form of money. And seven is the beautiful number of transition. Seven,” she repeats. “I expect him to win.”

A classmate of mine raises golden-ruffed pigeons. He is always going to pigeon shows.

Hector smiles and shows his fine white teeth, his incisors are pointed and sharp. I hadn’t noticed that before. “Lucky Seven’s bloodlines don’t reach back generations. He’s one of those exceptions, born with that special something. He has it.”

Like Shakespeare had no before or after. Hector recognized Lucky Seven’s qualities when other birds were being talked up.

I try not to, but my mind goes to Kim, who slapped me a month ago, the only time in my life anyone touched me in anger like that. Mom was on her honeymoon and when she got back I didn’t tattle. Now I want to tell Pepita. How nothing makes sense. I’d tell her what a perfect father he’d been. And then how it felt to be sitting at that seminar next to Kim, while the surgeon—who made women from men, and less successfully according to him, men from women—talked. The slide show displays seemed to go on forever. Like the stopped time in a classroom. “As we will see in these slides the most serious post-op problem is that the vagina will close.” In the twilight, the surgeon looked gray like Dr. Kevorkian. He clicked and another grainy slide appeared. “In this case the vagina did

close and had to be cut again.” There on the screen was an unsuccessful outcome. The vagina crooked, the gash too pink, like defrosting meat. The patients wore black squares over their eyes to assure their anonymity but it would be obvious to anyone who knew them who they were. Their hands rested on the inside of their thighs to part themselves wider if required. The blindfolded bodies made me flinch, I wanted to cover them. Another click. Another execution about to take place.

We pass a shack, and an old woman sits on a kitchen chair beside the road. A sign nailed to her mailbox reads GLASS FOR SALE. Lined up for yards are green bottles, milk jugs, mayonnaise jars, and medicine bottles.

“Almost there,” Hector announces, “once we see the bottle lady.”

We turn at an intersection, one corner of which is occupied by one gas pump under an awning. The outside of the station is plastered with Salem and Pabst Blue Ribbon advertisements. Brands that I don’t think they make anymore. But I could be wrong.

“We’re almost there, Pepita. Better prime the boy.”

We’re in the middle of nowhere.

Hector takes a snap comb out of his pocket the kind that guys used even before Daddy’s time, and he licks the comb and then slicks it through his hair. When he catches me looking he winks and I laugh. Daddy used to be a winker, and make me laugh like that. Hector lifts a rabbit’s foot necklace that dangles from the radio knob and puts it on. “We have to pile on the luck, right Pepita? Both of us thought you would bring luck to us when we saw you. A shiny girl is always good luck. Right, Lucky Seven?”

Pepita chimes in, “Lucky, my hero. Most beautiful and strongest. My gladiator.”

“Like me, I’m her gladiator too,” Hector winks, scrunching his eyes so you can see the laugh and tired lines scribble themselves over his face.

He hits the turn blinker although no one seems to be coming from any direction and pulls off the highway. We take another clay road toward a tin warehouse set down in the middle of a brush field. BMWs, Tercels, pickups, campers, motorcycles and a boat rigged to the back of a Ford truck; almost every shape and size of vehicle has found its way here.

“You’ve probably never seen roosters compete, Dalloway,” Hector says in a fatherly voice. “Stay close to us and you won’t have to pay to get in. You’re with us and Lucky Seven is competing.”

“Lucky, honey, we’re almost here. He’s been a good boy, all cramped inside the box. Hasn’t he been a sweet good boy?”

Lucky Seven shakes his feathers off. He’s alert and aware, his head

LUCKY 7 & DALLOWAY

holding those fierce eyes jerking back and forth. How big is his brain? Any thoughts in there? Day hot. Stomach full. What to fear?

Will this be anything like the Westminster Dog Show? I wonder.

“You stay there, Dalloway, I’m coming around to get Lucky out,” Hector yells.

When my toes hit the ground I feel the suck of raw earth. There’s a car unloading its passengers, one of them a lady in her seventies trying to keep up in her blue spike heels pecking through the rivered dirt. A girl calls, “Grandma, where are we going?” Her grandma tells her they’re going to visit the roosters. Then she smiles and I can see that her mouth is a red, brutal flower. She stops before we follow her inside to flour her face white and mark up her mouth until it bleeds fresh. I think of Daddy, in the beginning before he learned how to apply cosmetics. Daddy. Lipstick smeared on his lips, red but only in the center, the corners pale as cut bait. Daddy.

The tin shed looks like storage, nothing not even a sandwich sign advertising the rooster show.

Inside a ticket man sits behind a rickety card table. Sawdust coughs itself across the floor. “Now there’s a real Clint Eastwood,” Pepita says lowering her already low voice, squeezing my hand.

The grandma in the blue high heels stops the line from going anywhere. She must think the ticket taker is Clint, too.

“Ten dollars for adults. Your daughter’s free,” he says his Adam’s apple prominent.

“I’m a bit long in the tooth to be this one’s mama,” she says like a drag queen, patting the little girl’s head.

Pepita giggles when the ticket taker lifts a long silver eyebrow and says to the woman, “I’ve seen stranger things.”

“I’m still making gravy the old way with flour and blood,” the granny says, laying the flat of her hand on one of her skinny hips.

“I can see you do, sweetheart,” he says, shooing them along. “Remember the little one gets in free.” Next to one of his bony elbows is a pile of black t-shirts with flame-colored roosters printed on them. His hand rests on burning feathers. His cold blue eyes check out Pepita and her stomach bump and the waist of her jeans and woven belt. “Twenty dollars for two adults. I believe you’re both over ten although not by much.”

Hector’s arrives, carrying the crated Lucky Seven. “Mister, my bird is competing this afternoon and these ladies are his handlers. No charge, am I right?”

“Whew,” says the ticket seller, raising two lanky eyebrows. “Lucky Seven is one lucky bird. Ladies, nice to see you.”

I follow Hector and Pepita inside the open room; you can see the rafters in the ceiling. I'm expecting long rows of tables with teams of judges roaming through, like the pigeons show. There's the English Trumpeter. There's the blue and there's the violet. But it's not like that. No rows of cages, no beautifully groomed rooster after rooster. In the middle is a dirt pit surrounded with chicken wire and tiers of aluminum bleachers. "Let me find out whose match is first," Hector says.

"Daddy, try to see that Lucky fights late," Pepita says, "that's when the bets get bigger."

Fights, I've never heard of roosters fighting, dog fights yes, pit bulls in Brooklyn and the Bronx. There are hundreds of people here: women in baggy t-shirts with writing on them, silver blond hair with one black strand to match the black circles around their eyes in tight jeans and fingernails; bikers with strings of gray hair that haven't been cut since the summer of love; doctor men, oil rigger men; boys pressed to the fence, fingers pushing through the chicken wire. Toward the dirt ring, a tall woman is dragging her shoe through lines of cornmeal. All the people who don't look like themselves or too much like themselves are everywhere.

"Daddy, I'm hungry. I want fruit, tangerine and pickles," says Pepita. "You know I always get famished before a match."

Hector shows us a table with fruits, bottled water and plates of shrink-wrapped cookies.

"Look, Pepita, it's Cort Kinker. He's going to be the pit master," Hector says, pointing to a short stubby man who looks like a grand ole Opry banjo player in one of those shoestring ties and a fancy black shirt with blue stars printed on it. His whiskbroom ponytail sticks out in back but on top three strings of hair are swirled and take the shape of the letter K.

He waves at Hector. "You're up, first. Lucky Seven versus Excalibur."

"Daddy, give me some money," Pepita says, and reaches out her hand. "I have to eat a tangerine for luck. Right away. You know I have to."

There are men carrying cages, big men with bigger fancier cages between them. They put their roosters down on the ground, their hands still caging their birds. Others hold the roosters stiffly, like they're carrying dynamite. Some arenas are the same as Manhattan, like somewhere in the Port Authority, past the Sea Delight, Pizza Cuba, Blimpie's, deeper into the atmosphere of despair and vomit. I don't know anything about this place.

"Dalloway, you sit with Lucky Seven in the handler's stall while I get my tangerine and Hector makes the bets. Guard him."

The handler's stall is just a dirt aisle with a folding chair. I sit on the ground next to the crate. Lucky Seven's bright eye presses between the

LUCKY 7 & DALLOWAY

slats, he's alert, wary, and watchful. I crouch down and peer into that intelligence. I wonder what he thinks. Maybe it's hot in his mind because the jungle country is where he's from.

When Pepita returns almost panting she smells of tangerine, a tiny golden dribble around her mouth. She has pinned her hair up, and opens the cage door, coaxing the rooster out. "Now hold him, Dalloway."

"How do I do that?"

"Did you ever have a cat?"

"Yes."

"Hold him like you would your cat."

I place a hand on either side of this beautiful feather duster and feel a shudder go through both of us. There is so much pent-up tension. I'm surprised how soft his feathers are. Pepita kneels down with Lucky Seven and winds a string with a steel needle slowly around his leg. Like a medieval knight being mounted on his saddle with a lance. Her fingers are small and limber and I watch her make deft and deliberate movements.

"Stand back, Dalloway, this spur could put a hole in you."

I feel like I'm walking on a wire and there is nothing on either side. I'm stretched between the Empire State Building and MetLife. "What are you doing to him? You're not going to make him fight?"

"Make him? It's his destiny. His fate. What he was born and trained to do."

Hector comes back, his red face pale, his black eyebrows blazing. "Our Lucky Seven is up. He fights first. No changing it." He opens a ladies' makeup case, dresses his right hand in a rubber glove and then unpacks a spice jar of red pepper buds. "Okay, Lucky, my son. Open your beak." When the rooster's beak parts Hector feeds him red peppers. Then Hector has Pepita hold Lucky Seven as he lifts his tail feathers and slips a red pepper into his behind.

I take a deep breath but I can't find air. My heart races and I say nothing. What are you doing to him? I try to ask.

"Look at that Excalibur," Pepita hisses.

Across the dirt pit, the other rooster is being groomed. Excalibur has black wings with a tail of purple. Once, had I wanted a party dress, I would have asked Mommy to buy me those lilac wings and tails. Where would I go in such a dress of shivering feathers? Fly out of those lovely colors, fly, I want to warn Excalibur.

Pepita and Hector are huddled over Lucky Seven and I can't see what they are doing with their hands, but they're talking to him and now they're praying; Jesus and the saints. I know their hearts are racing. At the trans-

gender seminar, there was a woman more beautiful than the others, willowy and white-skinned with luminous green eyes like a sea waif. Her wispy blond hair set off her fragile features and echoed the face of the young Marianne Faithful. Now Marianne was an old raspy-voiced songstress who Mommy loved. Once she took me to hear her sing, and I fell in love too with the song performed in wisps and pieces.

“Sorry,” the sea waif at the seminar whispered into my ear. “Dr. Hickey did me. Do you mind if I share your chair? There’s nowhere else to sit.” Her hand brushed mine. Cold as a wax lily. Dr. Hickey droned on. “The desire to be rid of one’s genitals and live as the other sex is an issue of human suffering. We in the medical profession must ensure fruitful outcomes. Outcomes depend on how successful we are in fashioning a functioning vagina.”

Bare bulbs pour glare down from the rafters. Cork Kinker promenades into the middle of the dirt ring. The pit master bellows like the first man to have walked on two legs out of the slime, pointing to the auburn rooster with the glistening feathers. “From Bali and Ft. Worth...Lucky Seven!”

Hector hoists the cock above his shoulders; the mouths in the crowd open all at once. The rooster for all to see is feathered like the duster for Karma Sutra body talc.

“That rooster is one beautiful bird, I’ve got three hundred bucks on him,” one of the bikers shouts.

I understand how far Lucky Seven has traveled.

“They’re wearing gaffs,” a man behind me says, his Panama hat pitching low to his nose.

Then the pit master points to the lilac-tailed rooster. “Defan Excalibur!”

“Defan Excalibur’s got red pepper up his ass,” another man hisses.

It all swims together.

“Release your roosters. One! Two! The handlers let them go and the roosters fly at each other, like rage that has come uncorked. Like genocide. Lucky Seven, the bright-eyed cinnamon-smelling bird from the truck, has erupted, wings flapping and legs kicking. Defan Excalibur’s talon gouges like a chop-o-matic of hatred.

Why do they hate each other?

It is all the savage things, people loving a bowl of a beautiful girl’s blood, homeless men having the floats in their head, and space for bones in their shoes.

“Twenty on the red,” the man with the Panama hat slurs.

“Fifty on the black.” A man waves a greenback.

LUCKY 7 & DALLOWAY

Pepita of the shining black eyes and hair like a sunrise, the body that moves like breeze through hot trees, leaps into the air.

Lucky Seven lands his spur in Defan Excalibur's breast but he can't pull it free, and the wounded bird hacks at Lucky with his beak.

I want my father of long ago. I want him to stop this, to make it all right. "He's going to be hurt. Oh, no." Then there is a lull in the fight. Hector goes in and pulls Lucky Seven's foot free from Defan. One of his wings is broken and flops at his side; the purple-tailed rooster kicks a gaff.

"ROUND," the pit master calls out.

Pepita and Hector scramble. Excalibur's handlers swab him with a cotton ball, squirt water with an eyedropper into his beak. Pepita is bright-eyed, she and Hector fluff Lucky's good feathers, salve the scratches with antibiotic ointment. Lucky Seven's shivering, beating the air with his good wing. I want to take him home, to the hospital; he must go to the veterinarian.

Hector lifts Lucky Seven, blowing air into his mouth. Then Pepita puts Lucky Seven's whole head into her mouth and sucks the blood from its neck and spits it out.

"Don't let him go back there. Please I'll give you a hundred dollars if you don't hurt him. Please don't hurt him."

"PIT!"

Eyes already stoned, Lucky Seven and Defan shiver with rage. They bite each other's necks; peck the other's head, their beaks quiver when they draw breath.

A fat woman rises from the bleachers, "Three hundred on Excalibur!" She hikes up her blue terrycloth shift. Hector, on the other side of the pit, places his own bets. Pepita has a bill in her hand and waves it, shouting. "Three hundred and fifty on Lucky Seven. The gladiator!"

"Four hundred!"

"Sit your fat ass down. Hear me. You wouldn't know a fighter rooster if one flew in your face."

Blood spurts. The roosters are spurting because the crowd starts to moan. Lucky Seven gaffs Excalibur but this time he can't get free and his opponent pecks his eye. The crowd cheers. Blood is a hole you can fall into, taste and touch, stick your ear into; blood the shape of mouths and slippery fingers. In the bleachers the human faces turn to chins and teeth. The people are in pieces like the roosters they've come to watch who can't escape and run. Hector and Pepita spin. Defan collapses.

"AND THE WINNER FROM BALI AND FT. WORTH. LUCKY SEVEN."

Hector and Pepita are screaming about having won hundreds.

“Next is the long knife cockfight,” the Panama hat behind me says.

The handler picks up Excalibur by his wilted feathers and pitches him into a giant wastebasket.

Now can we take Lucky Seven home? Pepita and Hector are jumping and hugging each other. I run to Lucky Seven who is falling and getting up, falling and dragging himself. I have him in my arms. I lean over him trying to stop the blood. No eye, his head is bleeding. Oh no.

I remember the first signs in my father. A cluster of red bumps on his neck above his collar. Tiny polka dots. “What are those?” I asked. The bumps went all the way around his neck. Like he had tried to hang himself. “Electrolysis, kiddo,” he said. Electrolysis like a destination for the black ships from the *Iliad*.

I keep rocking Lucky Seven.

The pit master touches my shoulder. “Young lady, take your rooster and go.” Then he snaps his fingers and says to Hector. “Come on, come on, get the kid out of there.

“Dalloway, let Daddy take Lucky. You come to the ladies’ room with me. I don’t like to go alone,” Pepita says solemnly, but she’s smiling.

“No, we have to take care of him.”

“Hector will take care of the champion.”

Then Hector’s big hands ease the twitching rooster from me and he twists his rooster’s neck, pitching Lucky Seven into the same basket with Excalibur.

I hear screams inside my mind but not in my mouth. I run to the barrel. Thousands of hearts beating in my body. “Why did you do that?” I shriek. “Why did you do that? HE WON! HE WON!”

Where the basket stands I lean against the chicken wire to see in. There is a pile of unmoving roosters, and one alive strawberry rooster twitching, trying to breathe through a gash in its breast. I press my face against the wire wanting to reach in and save it.

I don’t even know why Kim wanted me there. I focused on a pitcher and poured-melted ice into my glass. Dr. Hickey adjusted the focus on the projector lens. The tree shape sharpened. “Presently, we’re experimenting with creating sensitive folds of skin with bowel lining,” he said, reaching for his water glass. I stared at the screen. The crotches looked orange-red in white or dark brown in black like cancers spreading between legs. “No ovaries no uteruses no menstruation,” the doctor said. Mostly the vaginas were furred tongues. I tried to picture what my own looked like. Not a vagina or cunt. Not glossy or fluffy or slick, it was the rip between my legs that Granny Dunkin told me had to be washed and washed.

LUCKY 7 & DALLOWAY

Pepita takes my hands, threads her fingers between mine. “You’re a long way from home. That’s why you’re sad. I miss my mother and father too. Listen, for three years Lucky lived like a pasha. You’ll get used to it, if you stick with us.”

The clay road is still potted with ruts. The sky seems fiercer and bluer. Hector loves shortcuts and he’s bragging to Pepita about how close he can get us to Austin without driving on asphalt. They both want to eat at Coco’s, a family style restaurant, although Hector warns Pepita that they have to live within their means no matter if they did win a little today. In the side mirror I can see into the pickup’s bed where the empty rooster cage rattles between the hot water heaters, crusted with red rust, like every tree and rock, every piece of scenery that passes the window.

THE SWEETNESS OF IRAQ

The road shimmers before me; the trees are cocooned with ice lick and kiss the headlights. I'm taking the long roundabout way from the farm into town. I can't put off any longer looking for Moses. The pickup seems to know where it's going down the deserted road that stands out clear between the banks of snow. My wipers are icing over and I stop and open the window and reach out with the long handled ice scraper and give the wiper a whack. I take the curve by the power plant, its blinking red lights lonely in the snow. The pickup swerves. My right hand grabs back the wheel. I substitute my knee for my left hand.

More gravel ice is pinging against the headlights and I'm hot like I swallowed Red Bull and cayenne. Straight ahead in the road a piece of rubber tire sits and I jam on the brakes. My heart races as I ease the door to the pickup open and slide out. I move toward the ditch where branches broken from the overhang of hardwoods jut. Their still clinging snow leaves are frozen. Milk nipples. I pull the branch free and turn, scouring the periphery of ditches. This is the long slow walk in the shadow of a trip wire. Something skitters from the brush. Dog, rabbit, wild pig. Native ghosts. I whirl, the crust of snow is blank, no phantoms of prairie grass. I listen for the muffled hoot of a snow owl.

Idiot, get the job finished, you're good at this. I prod the rubber for a timing device. The left side of my face itches, each pore seeps its own fear stink. Work the stick, do it easy, yes, now lift it, easy now. Boom, you're dead. I stay in my crouch. Nothing. The piece of rubber tire is plain rubber. I look up. The moon waxes full, the face of a pale blue Persian cat floating in the sky. Her litter torn from her womb and scattered into bits of fur and gore to make the stars.

THE SWEETNESS OF IRAQ

For an instant I'm back in the Land of Two Rivers. The Tigris and Euphrates. First cuneiform writing. The Iraq cave fish are colorless and blind from living underground. They detect vibrations in the water. Their heads and lips and barbells are flecked with taste buds. They taste their environment. In still waters they flick their tail slowly. When obstacles are met, the fish simply turns gently away at the last possible minute.

Maybe I'm calling the snow when I sit in the truck with the engine off in the parking lot of the Tender Trap, slugging back my bottle of Demerol. The flakes are falling like strings of a gauzy shawl. Lillian's bound to be bartending and she may know where Moses is. Liquid Demerol and I make a pretty couple giving me a good reason to go into that tavern and show myself. Blizzard, the owner, used to serve my underage butt when I was with Lillian, all the while making goo-goo eyes at her. Moses, he'd card and kick out. I'm twenty-two and legal now. I click the interior light and grab the rearview mirror and twist it vertical. The scar runs like rickrack from the corner of my mouth over the dent in my jaw where the bone is gone and then divides into two rivers on my neck. I untube my lip gloss and smear it on. I spit. There's six-year old Bethany running down the farm lane, ice under the new snow catching her boot heels and tripping her. "Mom, Mom, the snow hurt me. Do you love me, Mom?" Boom, you're dead.

I take three steps toward the back entrance. The Tender Trap is an old slaughterhouse beer tavern. Across that vacant lot is where Lillian and Moses lived in a trailer after their parents separated and their mom moved them into town. Nothing remains, not the propane tank and front steps, not their inebriated mom tiptoeing between the snowdrifts in her bare feet, her sad brown eyes laughing. *Catch me, if you can.*

There are garbage cans on the back step and scruffy weeds poke up in the snow. I stomp my boots and make myself walk inside over the black and red linoleum. The narrow hallway turns into a bar room with a pool table, a foosball game, and the last jukebox in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The Pabst Blue Ribbon beer clock gives off a blue glow. Older guys shoot pool and broad women in flannel shirts sit at tables drinking pitchers of beer. It could have been yesterday, not years ago.

"Hey, chickie," I say, approaching her.

The bartender Lillian leans against the till. "What do you want, partner?" The light is bad but I take all of her in, her long dark hair and permanently tan skin. Lillian, looking like the Delta Lady, a native woman in Levis. Then she does a double-take. "BETHANY! Damn, it's Bethany."

She rushes out from behind the bar in her tank top and pierced belly button and child size turquoise high heels in the middle of winter and throws her arms around me. Her hair smells of smoke and snow. "Let me get a look at you. "When she steps back her eyes fill. My brunette hair is growing out thick from its bald fuzz and I've got it parted on my left side. Bits of shrapnel inside my eyelid make a purplish shadow. I leave my cape on that Mom made. I'm dressed in black and white, black jeans, black boots, a pressed white shirt with the left long sleeve pinned up over the residual of my elbow, which is Walter Reed speak for stump.

"Damn," she says letting out a low whistle. "So you blew yourself up." A laugh boils out of her throat. Her stare frightens me, then she holds my face between her hands and kisses me smack on the lips.

I have to laugh too. Lillian leads me to a stool and presses a napkin on the bar in front of me. "Take off that Zorro cape and stay awhile or are you planning on robbing us?" She touches my cheek and her fingertips feel cool. I wrap the cape around me, black satin swirls around my hips. I'm taking in how much the same everything is, those abalone chip mobiles that tremble whenever the front door opens. Packets of Sugar Rite and ketchup in silver pitchers, a crusty bottle of horseradish. I scratched my initials on the horseradish label before I deployed and sure enough the letters BT are still there.

"Nobody's used that horseradish in twenty two months. I've been around the world and that bottle hasn't moved."

"Trust me, it's moved. Blizzard likes it nice and clean in here. His wife finally passed away and he wants to make it legal with me." Lillian struts over to the pickled egg jar, lifts the lid and sticks her hand into the eggs that look like eyeballs bobbing in vinegar. She holds it out to me and hooks one of her spike heels over the rung of the stool. "Here have an egg. You still love them?"

"Yup."

"Where you living? On the farm with Mom?"

"Yup." I take a bite of sour egg. "Come spring I'm planting an orchard."

Lillian jangles her armload of silver bracelets, gets up and goes behind the bar. She slits the cellophane wrapper on a cheeseburger and roast beef sandwich and sticks them in the microwave for one minute and forty seconds. "What kind?"

"Apples, nectarines, peaches." I bow my head to the fire that sizzles through what is left of my left arm, the hand that is not there clenches.

I can see the orchard in my mind's eye leftover from my great-grandmother's time. Planted in the days when diphtheria and smallpox traveled the roads. A few straggly apple trees but in spring festering with blossoms,

THE SWEETNESS OF IRAQ

lip-skin pink, every twig sweated in scent. Lillian and I would wade into the orchard, chin ourselves, swing legs up, and then rub blossom on our neck, wrists, and beginning breasts.

Lillian buys me a draft. I sip the foam off a dark beer, and then turn to check out the guy at the end of the bar. He's staring. I take another mouthful of sour beer. "Yup, that's who you think it is." She sets a tequila shooter in front of me, a saucer of cut lemons and a salt shaker. How's that going to mix with my Demerol? The stuff I have to take to sit up straight. "Moses bought this for you, chickie." She lifts an eyebrow that she's blackened in. "My twin brother got out of Anamosa a year ago. He's still on parole. I won't serve him anything but soda and water."

Moses, Lillian, and Bethany. The outcast trinity. Moses dropped out of high school the year their father was arrested for public lewdness, and then the son started getting in trouble. You never saw the sheriff's vehicle on Jappa Road until Moses held up Bob's Polka Barrel Tavern. The sheriff claimed he took the whole damn cash register.

"Bethany?" the guy at the end of the bar says.

A foosball player kicks a goalie, a spin around the metal pole.

"Moses," I answer. I don't intend to say anything stupid like "How are you?"

He's wearing black jeans and a sheepskin vest, his black hair is cowlicky and tied into a pug tail, and a few shorter wisps hang down. His skin is clay and his eyes are dusty black skins of concord grapes with long sticky eyelashes. I don't need him up close to know that. He gets up off the stool and walks over. We shake and when I lift my fingers to my nose afterwards it's there—the odor of grape jelly. I've always known him, his face in the kindergarten class picture, and his twin sister right next to him. We rode the same school bus. I pick up the tequila, pour it down and then bite into a lemon to cut the burn. It mixes with the pain meds. "How's your dad doing?" I ask, like I care and maybe I do. Their father was a wrinkled hired man who drank at Bob's Polka Barrel and once pissing on the street exposed himself to a child. Moses and I keep looking. Handsome, better and leaner looking than he was, muscle wound to bone like pipe threads. The bruises on his neck must be hickeys, the red and purple giant kind. I picture his girlfriend with soft lips and inch long fingernails dipped in stardust. "That's some suck mark." It comes out of my mouth without passing through my brain.

He chuckles, "Darling, that's a spider bite."

««—»»

Moses orders a sandwich. Blood shimmers on the sliced raggedy beef. He dips his finger in it, and then licks. Since his release he's lived over at the Tin Lantern Motel, details cars, and does custom paint jobs, some hieroglyphics and gang tag vehicles. My eyes fix on the crease of his jeans. The cuff of his shirt, how it rides his forearm, the hairs there, and the last button stitched with red.

"Want to play some pool?" he asks, rubbing chalk on the end of a cue.

"I'd like to watch you play."

He orders me another shooter, but sticks to soda for himself. Moses plays, pocketing the balls. "Do you want to see where I live?" he asks, explaining The Lantern's not far and that he's on foot.

"Sure," I say, my cheeks flushing. We first had sex when we were fourteen, and the last time we were nineteen. I'd just enlisted and wanted him to sign up too. The Army's hard up and letting in those who have morally lapsed. Moses had laughed.

I give Moses the keys to the pickup, ask him to drive, and then he opens the door for me and tucks in the hem of my cape before going around to the driver's side. I like the way he uses the stick shift, smooth glances over his shoulder. I remember how the ground breathed and whenever the furrows made fog we crawled to each other, pretending to be earthworms. After he robbed the tavern they kept him in jail while they searched his car, ripped up the floorboards and finding jack had to let him go. "Maybe this will slow you down," Lillian said, when she bailed him out. A week later he failed to stop for the highway patrol and they put on their cherry top lights. He just didn't feel like stopping and took off in an old Toyota down Waubek road doing ninety-one miles per hour and there was Farmer Zach's pickup in the middle of the road with its hood up. Moses swerved for the ditch, but fishtailed and ran the old man over.

Cedar Rapids seems pretty much the same surrounding us with a few low lying lights. K-Mart and Subway and the silos of the Quaker Oats Factory, Wilson's Meatpacking Plant. Then the 16th Avenue Bridge with its balustrade and broken lions, Cedar Rapids, whose sister city is Prague. Those crippled beasts mimic the older city's bridge.

Moses riffs on the conditions of life and how even here far from the market machine the devolution is happening. "Who says evolution operates in only one direction, Bet?"

Under the snow all the rich black soil is choking from chemicals and anyone who worked the fields is getting sick with lymphoma, including his old man, who drove tractor for Zach Farms and used to come home with his skin white from insecticide. They called him snowman. Everything the

THE SWEETNESS OF IRAQ

pioneer whites made from blackberry preserves to lavender talc, from church and chicken noodle soup suppers to scrub boards and anvils, has vanished. The work horses plowing, the sweating shoulder-high July corn, the patchwork quilt homesteads and fencing, the hay mound and vegetable gardens, the windmills and cisterns, all finished. What's left? Factory animals, factory farms, control of the seeds. Everyone drugged. A meth epidemic. Everything gone to fast foods and pharmaceuticals. You call this a free country? You think you fought for freedom? Pretty soon you'll need a prescription to buy Vitamin C. There's darkness around the bend. The slaughtered wolves are angry. So is the blue grass. He's seen them in dreams, the headless chickens that search for their eyes, feathers trying to attach themselves. All the sacrifices gone to farm sales and sell outs, die-offs of wild geese, cloned cows with two heads giving milk, mad cow, mad dog. The native peoples will reappear when the market whites have killed the water, the air, the earth.

And then Moses laughs. "I'd like that to happen. A die-off of people so the animals left on this planet could survive."

"How would you cause a die-off to happen?"

"People restricted to a diet of Skittles and Diet Coke. That doesn't include you, Bet."

All bets are off. *Bet*, his nickname for me.

It's a man's room. When Moses opens the door the smell of grape jelly and incense rushes at me. The bed takes up most of the room with its bed board painted gold and there's a tapestry pinned to the wall. On the dresser a pile of books and CDs and pennies and dimes and on the little round table with the room's one chair are knives and squares of sandpaper and chunks of wood and birds and figurines, a wooden dagger. He's still whittling. Pretty things. He closes the door and pulls the chainlock. I sit on the bed. It needs fortification like the perimeter of a checkpoint. The green bedspread is beautiful as a willow grove, but the ceiling seems too low. My belly aches from the tequila. There's an alleyway up on the ceiling and a gray house and a boy riding his bicycle through brown liquid where the sewer has exploded. In the alley, piss and graffiti on the walls.

Moses sits next to me on the bed, he jiggles his legs like his foot is doing some thinking on its own and might want to run. I need Demerol. "You want to talk about anything, Bethany? Like why you didn't contact me and my sister. I know we're bums but three months you've been back and not a word."

I shrug. I intend to be a one-armed orchard farmer, who raises apples

and those peaches with blond flesh that are smaller and tougher than Georgia peaches. Peaches with a bite of winter in them.

He lays his hand over mine. I don't know if I ever want to be touched again. I move my hand.

His dark eyes widen. "You're among friends here, you know that, Bet."
Yeah, sure, easy to say.

Moses stands against the dresser, plugs in a coffee pot. An outlet with a thicket of cords.

"Give me your cape, woman, you're staying." Moses reaches to untie the bow at my neck that my mom tied earlier. I can hear her words trying to help. "It's more a dent in your face than anything. A dent isn't so bad. And hold your shoulders straight, even if it's a beer tavern you don't want to look crooked. Honestly, Bethany, why don't you wear that prosthesis?"

The satin and flannel slides off me and there I am in a white shirt with a pinned-up sleeve. I'm shivering fully dressed. I'm too naked. The mirror is right there staring. Moses kneels before me. He goes quiet and I'm watching those wisps of hair trailing over his ears, not too large like satellite dishes or tiny like dollhouse teacups, just right.

I jut my chin out, wait for him to say something, dare him. I clench my fist.

"You know I don't judge."

I'm remembering how once we played King of the Hill in the soybean bin, both of us nine years old and not knowing until it was too late that soybeans sifted, rolled against each other and sucked you in like quicksand. We were sinking and panicking and I was closer to the opening we'd crawled in through. I ripped splinters through my fingers trying to grab onto an old board and pull us in. His life belonged to me.

He kneels in front of me, "Here give me your boots. I'll pull them off." A bottle of apricot whiskey appears like something left by a hobo. It tastes of wild leaves that curl and brown in my mouth. It tastes of 104 degrees and the flamingo and Mesopotamia crow and a soldier kneeling over the body of an Iraqi. The man's skull is split and the soldier gets out his spoon and pretends to eat his brains.

I'm barefoot and my socks are in Moses' hand. "These feel like cobwebs," he says.

"I'm not in the mood."

"Just wait." He turns on the TV keeping the sound down and switches off the overhead light. The blue static is candlelight, and then he undresses down to the patch of fuzz between his breastbones, the black curls between

THE SWEETNESS OF IRAQ

his legs. "I want to look at you," he says, unbuttoning me. When he tries to take my shirt off I hold on. No, I keep shaking my head. The stump is private. I let him unzip me and lift my legs for him to ease down my jeans. "Lift your right foot," he tells me. I do it.

On the ceiling three men in their long dishdashas do as they're ordered. Hands tied behind their backs, they wait by the roadside as their car is searched, and the gray oven world stretches in every baked direction. The soldier holds his assault weapon on the men in flowing desert clothes. He appears alien, as a grasshopper Andromeda in his neck armor, his body armor, his knee pads, and helmet and night vision goggles resting there, his Ray-Bans, his desert boots. His hands, gloved with the fingers cut out and his naked chin are the only places where his weakness is revealed. That he is made of skin and tissue. "Sergeant, look what I motherfreaking found." Soldiers clamor toward the car trunk AK-47s aimed. From the trunk a sheep lifts its head and baahs, a bush of fleece and weak pink eyes like cherries floating in cream. All the high-tech soldiers crack up laughing.

Moses pulls the pillow from under the bedspread and tucks it under me. His head falls against mine. I stare at the ceiling. The room starts to go away, the TV flickers, a world without sound. Chills zigzag over the mattress when he scratches the back of my neck with his fingernails. "How about a massage?" He squeezes my neck above my shirt collar and I flinch, biting my lip. The shrapnel hit nerve thickets. We're side by side running our fingers together. His chest rises and falls. He studies me. Like in the old days when he whittled the shape of my body into wood. His knuckles brush the inside of my thighs. My flesh thinks it's being tested, that he's just another doctor. His finger frames the red eye above my left breast. The chest tube scar.

"These are your souvenirs."

I whimper. My rib cage wants to climb out of me.

He kisses my mouth. "Close your eyes."

No. I need to see what he's looking at.

"Trust me. Close your eyes."

He arches above me, his hair falling into my face. When he pulls the shirt away from me it feels like he is peeling away my skin. His tongue flits over my shoulder and down my left upper arm, each place his tongue lights is a surprise. I roll over onto it, grab a pillow shove it under. "You can have anything but that."

"You're a soldier, right? Stop acting like a little girl." He rolls over onto his side and punches his pillow; his brows meet over his nose and his

forehead furrows. "I'm trying to show you it doesn't matter. That you're still my baby."

I hear the oaks shivering in the ice outside.

"I'm pissed at the Army you left me for. Look what they did to you," he says.

I am thinking about the three of us, running with our mutt Black Dog, through the ditches, trying to find standing water deep enough to get wet in. Frightening the bullfrogs with our kicks. Later that summer Black Dog's ears were festered with wood ticks so engorged with blood they hung like fat white grapes. Lillian screamed that she couldn't look. Those things made her sick. Moses and I took lard and painstakingly eased the feelers from Black Dog's ears and smashed the ticks on the sidewalk until it looked like a blood asteroid had crashed.

I hear the crackle of gravel in the parking lot. A car is pulling in. "Do you want this? I don't want you to be scared," he asks. "I'll stop if I'm hurting you." In the Army they don't stop. I want to be kids again in the slough, spitting twigs at him. Moses moves the pillows to the foot of the bed, his hands running over the insides of my thighs. "Honey, you've got it coming." He lowers his head, wedges my legs open. I'm creamy. That thing has its own mind; it doesn't think right, it's just butter and mud. He tongues me, flicking in one spot.

I push his head away. I don't want to feel.

He gets up and goes into the bathroom. I hear him digging. "Here," he says, holding out a bottle of bright green mouthwash. "It's gin. I put green food coloring in. I meant to send this to you in Iraq. Drink it, baby."

I let the gin trickle down my throat. Hot like an ice cube you let melt inside you. Moses scoots me nearer the edge of the bed. "Stay still." His hands clamp my legs. I'm seeing the moon of Iraq, brighter than the garbage fires of the Baghdad dump. I'm changing color. Like a lizard molting from green to pink.

"Stop," I cry, looking up at the ceiling. A sheep is dead there, its pink eyes gone to fog.

He lifts his head. "Let it out."

His tongue is making me high. I hear a buzzing. The buzzing passes by. It is beautiful up here. Dust stars. Sand Venus. His tongue is making me shake. I'm a rooster's comb. My cheeks puff and I turn indigo blue. He enters me and we make love. I'm melting into dark Arabic words, the way they hang from the chin in loops.

Then he lies with his head on my chest, his arm over me. "My feelings haven't changed. You're still my thing." I push his arm away; even its

THE SWEETNESS OF IRAQ

lightness is too heavy. Before I can tell him about the orchard and the apples and the snow peaches he's asleep. The song *November Rain* is playing on a car radio, the car that must be parked outside. I picture listening to Mom's radio on the farm that picked up Little Rock. Even the disc jockey announcing the time in a far off place excited me. I listen to Moses breathe. His sleep is warm as baking bread. I close my eyes.

It must be hours since Moses went to sleep. I'm speeded up inside, restless. Molecules wanting to push out of my skin. It's airless as a shed inside my hand, the one that's not there. Phantom pain. Dust more explosive than gas. I pull the bottle of Demerol from my bag and gulp. I moan. In the hospital the night medicine kept me from this. Thorazine and Seconal on top of morphine. That was the warm milk the hospital served and I needed it. Hot hot, hotter, hot elbow on the hot plate, fingers in the French fry basket. If I could only open my hand, if I could pry it open, the electricity might stop. But it's not there. It's a world away. More jolts of electricity. I huddle then stretch; I push my face against the bed board. I make a fist and stuff it against my mouth. God, make it stop.

I creep into the bathroom. There isn't a shower, only a tub, the old fashioned kind. Water has rotted the floor under it, chunks of damp wood and soft mold float under the bathtub. I crawl in and turn on the cold water. I dunk my stump under. I let the water flow over the invisible hand. Moses. He hadn't moved at all. I pick up one of his knives. I want to stab the hand that isn't there. I swallow Demerol. Outside the sky begins to lighten into an ugly gray. The floor may help. I crawl off the bed onto the floor. Cooler. I twist and turn; I hate Moses' sleep. Then I hear someone scream. It's me. Moses is on the floor with me, "Honey, honey." He doesn't tell me it's going to be okay. He knows better. He rocks me in his arms. "I want you to love me again."

"Don't ask that," I finally answer, taking deep breaths.

"I'm asking."

Afternoon and we're on the street looking for food. The burning surges through my left side, I bow my head to it.

"Are you praying, baby?" he asks.

"I don't know."

I have on one of Moses' flannel shirts and it feels like I'm inside his skin. I wear Moses' skinny gold pinkie ring on my index finger. We walk arm and arm down the street. "Hey, there's something," he points.

The Tastee Freeze. An all year-round hot dog and ice cream place. We

walk through the snow and sit under the awning. I tell him that when I was four years old, I wanted to be a floating ice cream cone. There was the tiny screen that banana splits came out of. An old menu peeled from the side of the stand.

“I love these places,” I say.

“You’re pretty easy to please but only sometimes,” Moses tells me, smiling, his eyes crinkling up at the corners. Then he knocks on the screen window. “Anyone home?”

A girl slides the screen back. She’s eating a jumbo golden fried shrimp. “May I take your order?” she asks.

“I’ll have a vanilla cone,” I say.

“Make that two.”

We sit in the cold at the picnic table on the side of the Tastee Freeze. He tells me in summer we’ll fish from the Sixteenth Avenue Bridge. We’ll eat here. He points to the paper cutouts taped to the Tastee Freeze—vanilla ice cream cone girls floating in the window. For an instant I think of plastic explosives. A car bomb packing Semtex. Body parts.

I hold my ice cream for a long time. I don’t want it to disappear.

Like this, Bethany,” Moses says. “Lick it.”

And then I do. It’s like kissing a cold cloud.

THE VILLAGE OF BUTTERFLIES

The fish swim slowly by the roof of the van but not close enough for me to catch. The fish are more dead than alive in the black water. The oxygen must have been eaten by the poisons and there is no air for them to breathe. I lie on my stomach and reach out. My hands make a net. Like I am a girl again in the forests of Truong Son. The net catches the fish that is covered in sliminess. A sunfish. The fish is swimming at a snail's pace, almost falling out of the water, its eye frozen wide in the heat. I knot my hands around the fish. It took years but the fates have finally come for me in the form of a hurricane.

"Elders, first," my nephew Huy told me yesterday when the boats came to evacuate Viet Town. New Orleans East. I waved him away, pointing to his wife and two children. Since when did he care about tradition? Hadn't he named his son and daughter carelessly—Jimmy and June Huynh? The boat filled, another boat would come back. The levees had been breached and Lake Ponchartrain was filling the cup of the city. "Ma Lang come on, you're a weed. We have room for a weed." The boat had already gone when the voice reached my ears.

I have the fish in my fingers. Silvery, darker on its belly. I feel its fright, its terrified eye meeting mine. Its lips are fleshy. There is a split in its dorsal fin. Forgive me, I must harm you. I set the fish on the van's roof where the sun shines hardest. Sun is death to the fish without clouds of water for shade. I watch the gills take in this glare. It gulps only for a few beats of my heart and then its life ends. Now the tin roof and the sun will bake its flesh.

No, I rightly refused the boat, first the children, and then the parents and lastly the old ones. Patience should have been the only thought in my head while I waited, but I worried about The Flying Fish restaurant my

THE VILLAGE OF BUTTERFLIES

nephew owns. I feared for the rice steamer and knives, the mortar and pestle, the spice grinder. A good knife makes a good cook. The Flying Fish's kitchen is my pride and I tied up my skirt and waded. The black water pushed between my legs, forced my flip-flops off. Soon up to my shoulders in dirty lake, my bare feet struggling, and feeling for the bottom. The straps of my evacuation pack twisting around my arm, filling with water. Then I stepped on a half lifted manhole, some slippery foulness squished between my toes, but I went on, no longer knowing where I was going. The streets were gone. When I neared the roof that might belong to The Flying Fish, my heart pounded. Floodwater had beaten me. Suddenly, the black poison struck me from behind, knocked the air from my lungs, and swept my feet out from under me. I no longer touched the bottom. But I was lucky. The evil genie had forgotten I know how to float and I paddled to the nearest high thing. The roof of a van.

I crouch here among the big trees. The leaves are green fleshes that grab hold of the sun and drink it. The creeper vines catch it in their twining. It is a struggle between the sun and the trees to see who is stronger. Down here in the fallen leaves it is cooler. I watch the butterflies. My sister is jumping trying to seize them. She is younger than me and much prettier. Hair of black silk. Brows of black lacquer. The noon heat chases us. Our aunt shouts "Lang! Cam!" Work to be done. Lucky butterflies, it's easier for them. Dê cho tôi yê. Higher up the monkey watches the butterflies too. The red-shanked douc tries to pluck them from the air. Look at his red legs in the heat against the green. Look at his grayish vest, his blue eyebrows, and his ruff. We want to drink green sun. We want to climb and live in the village of butterflies.

I eat the head of the fish. It would be wasteful to throw it away and an insult to the fish. Madam Lang or Ma Lang as they call me in The Flying Fish kitchen is unashamed to be squatting here on this van roof with black water all around, barefoot and showing long curly toenails, wearing for days a sleeveless orange shift. Lang means sweet potato. Like those orange blisters on my legs from the sun. Ma Lang, not even five feet tall, with wrinkles like irrigation ditches along her upper lip and furrows in her forehead, an old scar on her left ear. Yet my hair is black still without a white thread and when my hairpins are unfastened it falls to the back of my knees, but only for my grandnephew and grandniece are the clips unclasped. Always work to be done. Ma Lang can do the work of three. Chopping vegetables, garlic, onion, jellyfish, chopping all day, telling the

busboys what tables to clear and which to set. Afterwards, sweeping and mopping. As a girl my favorite pastimes were sleeping and doing nothing. It makes me ache to think of the water in the kitchen, the snakes swimming over the counters. Tourists from all over America come to taste Ma Lang's Dipping Sauce.

I am still chewing, trying to swallow the fish. Is it the eyes that refuse to go down my throat into my gullet? I'll have to take another swallow from the water bottle. Precious swallows. Nine small ones left in the quart. Three and a half large ones. My lips are glued together and my tongue is dry. To chew food you need saliva. I try to make my mouth water by picturing a grilled fish seasoned with chilies and onion and Nuoc Nam. No meal is complete without fish sauce. The mosquitoes begin to bite. I slap them in the stagnant air. From around the next stand of roofs comes the steady hum of an outboard motor. Perhaps it is my nephew coming for me. His Ma Lang, the only mother he's known. First I chew the soft bones, and then rinse my mouth with them. The hum of the outboard grows distant and then fades away.

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My sister loves to tempt the jungle, but she's afraid of its clutching creepers. I go with her. Her beloved waits for her in a puddle of sunlight under huge dark leaves. His name is Trung, loyalty. Son of the ear cleaner, the richest man in our village. We are the highland peoples near the border with Laos. People of the Truong Son Mountains where the forests of the North and South meet. His father thinks he can do better than Cam, a girl with both parents dead, niece of a midwife. I watch Cam go to him; her eyes are drops of dew, her slender orchid arms. Trung says his father is weakening. Soon he will give his permission for their marriage. Trung takes her fingers in his. They lag behind, tell me to go along. Leave them be. High up I see the langur's long white tail sweeping the leaves. The monkey king knows I too like the ear cleaner's son, the thin boy with the narrow handsome face. The boy and Cam look at each other through the heat and shifting sun shadows. They eye kiss. The monkey swings down to look at us. Red-shanked douc most colorful of all creatures. Little pot-bellied leaf-eater.

Night air is stifling. The fumes rising from the floodwater burn my eyes. A shot rings out from a few rooftops and streets over. A boat is moving, carrying loud voices and flashlights, throwing big beams into the dark that seems darker than the faraway village. The village is nestled in

THE VILLAGE OF BUTTERFLIES

the humid night of long ago. The jungle breathing against its neck, no electricity or running water. Thoughts crowd my head but I refuse to think about the past. My insides burn, my tongue is swollen, but I must save the water for when the sun comes up. I squeeze my eyes and make myself see into the kitchen of my nephew's house. "Ma Lang is here, Ma Lang is here. Make us Banana Sago Cream," chants my grandniece June. Her dark eyes like her grandmother Cam's. Already the language of her ancestors is lost in the child. "Say Che Chui Chung and I will make it for you." The little girl stamps her foot, shakes her head. "No." I pretend I'm mixing all the ingredients, heat and simmer four ripe bananas and cups of coconut milk and coconut cream, add sugar and pearl sago, keep stirring. After it cools it will be delicious and refreshing. That way I make myself sleep. All night I toss half awake listening. In the jungles the bats fly, they drink the blood from the leaves and the monkeys sleep on branches.

Near first light another boat approaches, this one a quiet flatboat with oarlocks and paddles. I hear the dip of the oar and the pull. Dip and pull. Should I call out? No, never call out in the dark to what you can't see. I think of my younger self. A short wandering girl, a daydreamer who has a misshapen ear from being dropped as a baby. A lazy girl. My aunt worried no one would marry a girl like me. Marred. She knew how to help babies enter this world even when they turned themselves around fighting to stay in the womb. When the women's water broke they sent for my aunt. Her words coaxed them out. Auntie tried to teach me the coaxing words. I pretended not to understand. I didn't want to be her, dragged from sleep, from this birth to the next. I was selfish. My younger sister was a good helper, better in every way. I was drawn to the forest, the trees upon trees, each feeding on another.

I listen to the dip and pull. Could it be swimmers? Then the dipping stops and something glides toward the roof of the van. Figures of mist. Auntie in her cone hat and pajamas. Then Cam in her red wedding dress rises out of the black water, tangerine-lipped Cam whose name means mountain sunset. I hear her voice inside my head. "Why don't you remember me to my son? You don't burn incense before my portrait. You don't bring my name up before my grandchildren. You have dishonored me." Her hips like marzipan, long-waisted, graceful. She turns onto her side, swimming slowly like the fish.

Then the figures dissolve. There is something floating out there.



I watch the old man in his black robe, a joss stick smoldering in his fingers, leading the wedding party. His robe made from shadows casts itself over the procession winding through the paths of our village. Trung and Cam. They each make a verse. My leaf, he calls her. My green leaf. Ache, she answers him, my ache. Like the rib for its blood. Their happiness doesn't last. Cadres from the North appear asking Trung and the other village boys to join the struggle for liberation. From the South arrive flyers teasing young men into their army, with promises of red envelopes of money, enlistment pay. Trung and Cam talk long into the night after licking each other on the face and neck. I see them love each other like that. There is worry. Fires in the night. Over the forest with its green canopy and elephant vines planes carry strange mists. Rain grows sticky and scorches the skin; rain wilts the leaves causing them to shrivel. The forest's tiny deer turn into skulls. Odor of excrement seeps from the earth. I kneel before the altar of my parents; I burn ghost money and incense. Two months after their wedding, the cadres surround our village; demand that all young men be ready to leave immediately. Trung refuses. They beat him. His hips are kicked, slammed, his ribs broken. When he raises his right arm the pain frightens him. He tries to whistle his bird-calls, make the sounds of barking deer, his mimicry that drew Cam to him, but nothing. No choice. Trung has decided to snatch the red envelope. Fate is pulling him to the South to join the Army. But first he will give Cam a belly, and then he will leave. He embraces her, tastes her perfect ears. I imagine him kissing my melted ear; hear him whispering "I love the fault." But it is not to be.

A helicopter overhead wakes me. I jerk, shiver, curl into a ball, trying to hide myself. Wave if you're trying to save your skin. I can't, I'm afraid of the helicopter. The sky is broken by the chitchat of whirling blades and loud male voices. Surely, they saw me and soon they'll come back. I am U.S. citizen and this is not the village. This is New Orleans. Huy will be sure to send a boat back. The boat that carried him off with his wife and children two days ago will return for me. No one seems around. It is like our village after the bombs fell, but little by little the alive things showed themselves. I roll onto my side, lift my dress and pee. Then I kneel on the other side of the roof; dip my hand into the black water, wash. Everything smells like the forest of long ago. The day the bombs fell where people were hiding and Auntie was killed.

The helicopter has not come back. I'm dizzy. Hungry. Sluggish fish swim by little by little as if this were the leisurely Perfume River. I slip

THE VILLAGE OF BUTTERFLIES

my hand in the water. A fish quivers into my fingers. I want to lift it to my dry mouth and run my tongue over its living gills to wet my lips. The corners of my mouth have split. My lower lip is beginning to crack. I am sure the helicopter saw me. The pilot could tell I was Vietnamese. He went to find Americans to help instead. I hear Cam's voice and slowly turn my head. "You didn't call out. You're only good at being invisible. Hiding, you hid. You didn't stand up. You abandoned me." Why is Cam so angry at me? Unlucky girl. Was it because I carried my nephew across an ocean in a sling and not her? First Huy and I settled in Lake Charles in the refugee community, and then in Viet Town's Little Versailles, New Orleans. I worked in kitchens twelve hours, six days, and I saved until Ma Lang was able to make a down payment on The Flying Fish. My nephew has no pictures of his mother, and I wish I could draw so he could see how she was. In the water Cam loosens her black hair from its wedding pins and kicks free of her red gown.

Some fish float on their sides. My tongue protrudes from my mouth. I reach into the water and grip another slow moving fish. It gives a jerk, a futile motion, to escape my hands. I thank you, silvery thing, with a stripe under your gill. I set the two fish in the patch of hottest sun. When they have cooked I will take one swallow from the water bottle. I'll save the eight small swallows. A single sip, otherwise it is too hard, not enough saliva. I take another bite of fish, try to wet my mouth with its flesh, drink it down. Ca-Kho, raw fish.

I need to talk, to push away the past. "I'm Ma Lang," I tell the fish digesting inside me. "In America all I know is kitchen. In The Flying Fish we have cook, cook helper, salad boy/bus boy, and Ma Lang. We serve Ma Lang's specialty chicken stock with crab meat and mushroom and asparagus. Our lunch features Ma Lang's sticky rice with crawfish and Huy's Catfish Po'ah Boy. All utensils available: chopsticks and flat spoon and a bowl held under the mouth, fork, knife, napkin. Modest prices. "Shut up, Lang, with your stupid kitchen. Who do you think cares?"

I doze off in the heat, a dullness spreading through me. I think I hear barking. In my doze an animal must have swum to the roof of the Hoagie House. The tops of the tree that grows between the Hoagie Shop and King Grab Take-out poke out of the water. In the sleep I can't wake from I hear the dog race from one end of the roof to the other, his nails tapping the tin. The sun is cooking me like the fish. I open my eyes expecting to see a mangy yellow canine on the roof opposite, but only the sun is beating down without shade.

Nothing on the roof but in the water many things float: an enamel box,

mother-of pearl chopsticks, dust-covered espresso machines and blender, cutting boards, a tea pot. There's a large object moving up and down, bobbing. I cup my hands to my eyes, squint. A chaise lounge and a crate seemingly tied together. Like those chaises my nephew has in his backyard, one for himself, one for Thuyen. They stretch out nicely in the backyard evenings. "Ma Lang, sit with your feet up," my nephew's wife always pleads. "Stay out of the kitchen. You are the guest of this house." Yet for all her pleadings I never sat on her chaise lounge. But I could use it now to make shade, build a little lean-to. The blisters are breaking on my feet because I feel the pain on my face.

Without luck and a lunar calendar you are nothing. I shift my body to the edge of the roof, concentrate on reaching out far, I gesture to the bobbing backyard chair and use Auntie's coaxing words. It comes to me and I grip and pull the lounge and crate onto the roof with me. Even today is an auspicious day. I will use the lounge to make shade and shadows. I settle the chair in the center of the van's roof and untie the crate. Something is looking at me from between the slates, something is alive in there. I hesitate, and then I lift the lid and peer in. I can't breathe. The trembling starts, from my feet to my fingertips. The fates are playing with me. They've sent me this. Hardly alive, it whimpers when he sees my face. Long and skinny, sitting with its knees up, a red-shanked douc langur. I rub my eyes, pinch my cheek and look again. Maybe the monkey is no more real than Cam, a figment of thirst and heat. But the langur is still crammed into the tiny crate and too weak to raise his arms. I've never seen one up so close. Its black eyes with blue eyelids stare out of its reddish yellow face and framing his cheeks and chin is a white ruff of hair. I've heard bus boys in The Flying Fish talk of smugglers and the enormous sums the rich will pay for exotic animals. Some poacher of endangered beings has brought the most beautiful monkey on earth to New Orleans and crated him.

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The smoke rises in the forest and a blue mist is wisping down from the wet trees and patterns of leaves. Trung has been home only twice since his son Huy was born. He must never wear his ARVN uniform of South Vietnam. Uncle Ho's cadres are closer. Cam watches for him slipping into our village in the ragged pajamas of a rice farmer. It's been two months since we last saw him. Cam has thrown up lately, but tries to hide it from me. She speaks sharply to Huy, who is the most well behaved baby the vil-

THE VILLAGE OF BUTTERFLIES

lage has seen. Never an extra cry out of him. Cam's face is smudged with tears. She's afraid of her belly getting big again. The war is everywhere. I hear Cam talking to her stomach. Daughter, I hope for a girl who will grow up and not have to fight. The war goes on for lifetimes. She worries that her husband might have a war girl in Saigon. The girls are everywhere. Motorbike prostitutes, Americans, Vietnamese. Fish sauce fermenting together. They are silencing our ancestors. Cam declares that she does not have luck either. Beauty, yes, but taking Trung for a husband was unlucky. Thuy Le, Trung's father, the ear cleaner, sees to Cam and Huy's needs. Farmers journey from neighboring villages to sit in his chair or Thuy Le travels to them. Whisperers say he works as Dan Cong, civilian labor for the VC. If insects leave a leg or whisker inside, the tiniest feeler causes fierce pain. Then Thuy Le blows water into the ear through a glass tube and suctions it out with his lips. Thuy Le went into deep forest to clean ears for soldiers from the North and has not returned.

The douc langur pants. Carefully I lift him from the crate. A young monkey, his chest is gray, his buttocks black and his legs maroon. Poor thing, his belly feels sunken. The costumed monkey, he too is from Vietnam. Now I understand why I saved the eight swallows. I tear a piece of my dress and soak it in water and moisten his lips. His tongue tries to lick the dress rag. I hold him in my arms and pour the swallows into his mouth. He's left his excreta in the crate and on himself. I'll clean his bottom with floodwater. He must be starving. It dawns on me. The langur can eat only leaves and stems, berries. No human food. Fish would make his belly sick. It might kill him.

The monkey wants to drink more and now the bottle is empty. Nothing but the filthy floodwater. Can I feed him the remains of this fish? His hands are like mine only his fingers appear longer and hairs sprout on their backs but his palms are hairless. He is panting, trying to gulp the air. Like the sad fish lifting its lips from the swill. My body trembles with heat and nausea. I raise my head and thrust out my chin. Vomit spills into my mouth but I make myself swallow it down. That too would be an insult to the fish. I might shake apart. And when I turn my head Cam is holding onto the roof of the van and pulling herself out of the water. "You look hot, Lang. Swim with us." A little girl crawls behind her. This is the child who the fates didn't allow to be born. Again, I hear my sister's voice. "You know who this douc is, don't you?" I tear off another length of my dress for shade and now that I've freed him from the crate, the monkey clings to me. He can't keep his head up. I hold him close for it is him. I

feel his heart, a rapid weak beating. His eyes are dull from thirst. In the forest the douc langur rarely drinks from puddles, he stays high in the canopy and chews the green. His shoulders shake and shivers wrack his maroon legs. We can't stay here. I must swim us to the Hoagie House's roof that a tree overhangs.

It is difficult for him to close his mouth. Should I put him back in the crate? Or is it better to make sling from the straps of my empty evacuation pack and tie him to my waist. Then I will swim us to the roof of the Hoagie House, to the tree whose limbs still have leaves. One roof is all the same for Ma Lang, but for the douc langur the tree is a meal.

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I take the baby Huy to play in the forest with the butterflies. His mother tires now that another baby is starting inside her. How he laughs when I show him the Striped Ringlet, its black and white bands, the many eyes staring out of its wings. When he claps his hands they fall and fly, and when he stands still the Ringlets light on him and fold their wings. The tawny ones with spots of yellow and blue circle a vine of sunlight. Huy smiles and jumps. "Where have you taken him?" his mother calls. "Huy! Lang!" I put my finger to my lips, shush. I am teaching Huy how to be quiet. How to hide. Then we break into giggles and show ourselves to Cam. When she glances at me something passes between us. The hairs rise on my arms and a chill stabs through me. Then a butterfly lands on her hand, her left, the second finger. Beating its wings as if it wants to lift Cam by her knuckle into the clouds. Cam is sure that is a sign from Trung.

It is better to have the crate. If the boat comes, the monkey has his little house. When I squeeze him back into the crate he whimpers, reaches feebly. Don't worry, my friend. His people are gentle creatures, who spend most of their time digesting their green food, dozing and burping and leaping through the branches high up as skyscrapers. Who would want to harm the harmless? I weave a strap through the crate and tie it around my waist. The crate feels almost as tall as me. We are going now. We may drown even if the roof of the Hoagie House is close. I lie on the roof of the van and slowly float out. Leaning my chest against the black water, I kick like a frog, kicking like my sister taught me. The water is thick as the leakage from a grease trap and tries to push us back no matter how I use my hips and stomach to kick. The monkey weighs little but the crate drags me down. I put my face into the water that smells like a body. I spit.

THE VILLAGE OF BUTTERFLIES

The sun burns whatever it looks upon. I wish I wore the cone hat, the one Huy warned me I must not wear in this country, not even in the kitchen of The Flying Fish. As I frog-kick through the heavy water I make believe I am in The Flying Fish. Nicer there. Customers are Vietnamese and American. Many tourists. We have peace. There are lacquer trays on the walls and tables with glass tops. When customers finish eating we scrape the glass and the next customer sits down. I prepare menus of the day's specials. My nephew's wife Thuyen writes them on the blackboard in Vietnamese and English. I can see the half-erased chalked dishes. Jumbo Shrimp Tu Do. Bo Xao Salad. Thuyen wears her favorite hostess dress, a sleeveless burgundy shift. Her tiny arms hardly bigger than the wire basket holding bananas and oranges beside the cash register. Last week a fat white woman in a red sweatshirt and bare feet entered the restaurant. She pointed to the fruit beside the cash register and demanded a banana. "You won't give me a banana? I'm handicapped." Thuyen took the chopstick out from behind her ear and bit on it. When she does that she is determined. "No shoes. No service." The heavysset woman did not look handicapped. We don't owe her a banana. "My stomach is hungry," she wailed until all in the restaurant heard. "My stomach is hungry," she kept repeating in her huge voice. I did not care if her big stomach was hungry. I sent her away without a banana. Perhaps the fates are making me pay.

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My sister sits in the middle of the hootch. She's brought her birthing chair. "My husband," she moans. Her knees are up and she rocks herself back and forth. I hold her son Huy who knows nothing. "I want you to hide my son if the VC or Americans come," she insists. "If they surprise you, stay standing. Only if you run they shoot you. I tell you not to run. The bullet is faster than your feet." Yesterday we found Trung lying in the forest in old leaves. At first Cam thought he was a soldier from the North because of his sandals, the rubber peeled off a truck tire and glued onto their soles. The body's fingernails and toenails were blackened nails and sores blotched his legs. His mouth stayed open and ants traveled in and out. Mouth that once took Cam's flushed pink kisses. Trung wore filthy black pajamas. He must have crawled here. His feet looked wrinkled like an old man's, a hundred year old one. Cam picked up his cold hand. The coldest thing in the teeming canopy. Cam lifted him and pounded her fists on his chest. "You're not dead. You're not." We trembled in the heat of the day. Had he deserted the ARVN? Above us the douc langurs were eating.

They shook a thousand leaves down. Then we saw a monkey staring at us through the leaves. Such wise eyes. Cam was sure Trung's last words were heard by this douc. Her husband's spirit had been swallowed by a monkey. Why else would he stare at her?

I pull myself and the crate up on the roof. I lie still and breathe in and out. Before I free the monkey I splash floodwater over the tin to cool it. The treetop sends its branch over the roof of the Hoagie House. I rest the crate on the side and open the lid. "Little friend, we are here. There are leaves." The monkey stays still in the crate, skinny arms folded over his chest. Oh, no. Look there is a treetop. I nudge the red-shanked douc. I think of Cam beating Trung. You're not dead. From here I can see one boarded up restaurant after another. The sun pours into the dark water making little jittering suns. I rest my head against the crate and sob. Then I see the long black fingers try to grip the side of the crate. The little man is alive. Do you hear Cam and Trung? The Flying Fish is alive too.

First I pick the leaves that have begun to wilt, some are yellowing but most still keep their green. Then I take him into my lap and feed him leaves and rock him. Because his mouth is so dry the first leaf is the hardest. Slowly, he chews the moisture in the leaves. I pick more leaves. I look out across what they call Versailles, Little Vietnam. I love the spiral of the Lady's Church. The Lady with her long black hair, her lips parted just so.

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Cam must be hiding in the forest. She likes to be alone. She hardly shows a belly but it is her sixth month. Our village is disappearing yet we stay behind. Trung's father might return and Cam must tell him of his son. Cam searches for the monkey who has Trung's spirit. The red douc teases her, breaking sticks and sending her leaf messages. Then suddenly he peers out at her from the lid of a creeper. "He's always smiling. Trung is happy inside the monkey," my sister says. I carry Hug or he stands and squeezes my hand and we walk. Cam has little time for him.

Dusk. The sun is dropping, about to close its red eye. I think of walking with my nephew and the children, through dry then wet neighborhoods. Hurry, Lake Pontchartrain is spilling and about to the swamp the whole city. I forget where I was. Not New Orleans. It was the village of my youth and the smoke from cooking fires kept rising in white puffs

THE VILLAGE OF BUTTERFLIES

above the green. Following my nephew through Versailles, fleeing the water overtopping the levees, the poison water from the Industrial Canal, the back of Huy's head could have been his father Trung's. In my arms Jimmy, my grandnephew, a little hooded tree sprite, could have been Huy. It was that other escape. The blisters are breaking on my feet because I feel the pain on my face. It is almost dark but my little friend has eaten nicely and now he sleeps. Lawn chairs laze on a soggy carpet and drift in the dusk. Flotillas of plastic bags. Like empty throwaway heads.

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There are a single file of them in the forest. Men from the land of giants. The American War will never end. What do they want? The tall loud men who burn villages and give away chocolate bars. They can't keep silence like the Viet people can. I hear them stomp through the undergrowth. I hold Huy against me, put my finger to my lips. We will think ourselves into a creeper, become that green vine with its tendril. The butterflies are flitting, drifting through the air. I see the red-shanked monkey sitting in the branches. Why is he always alone? Not with his family group. The costumed monkey in the branches is giggling and eating. Leaves filter down in bands of sunlight. Danger, little man. Stay up there. The giants push their guns this way and that. They see with the eye of their weapon not the ones in their head. Smell of burning cigarettes, the little fires they carry in their mouths. The monkey leaps from branch to branch, curious. He's never seen an American. Down down he swings to look at them. So curious, he thinks danger is beautiful. His red legs like colorful birds. "Holy shit, look at the slope monkey." The soldiers raise their weapons, aiming at the yellow red face. Boom. Boom. Cam shrieks when the guns fire. The monkey cries out like a human. I hold my hand over Huy's mouth. Hush, little boy. We're in the village of butterflies. Be silent. More shooting. I hear the monkey drop like ripe fruit to the forest floor and the men cheering. I hear Cam running from her hiding spot to the monkey. "Trung. Trung," she is shrieking. Then the men surround my dark-haired sister and I cover her son's ears so not one sound enters his mind. I have to listen to their laughter and Cam's screams as they rape her. Afterwards silence, then a boom.

I hear a boat. The douc langur's eyes go wide and he cowers. A motor boat is rumbling, and the monkey buries his head against my chest, clutching me. I must resemble his mother. I look out and I see them come

into view. Not the boat that took my family away, a different one. There are two men in the boat and they cruise around the other side of the Hoagie House. A drawer that had been pulled by the storm out of its cabinet bobs in the boat's wake, every utensil battered and thrown, a bloom of red plastic spoons.

I squint and try to see the faces of the men more clearly. They wear t-shirts and baseball hats. Giants. The big man seated in front of the boat holds out a life preserver. He has a round pink face with the brim of his cap level with the bridge of his nose.

"Don't shoot," I shout. The words leap out of my mouth. I pray they do not carry.

Now it is a water bottle and a smile the man holds out. Soon I am facing two giants, the man in front and the one gripping the throttle, two sets of dark eyes.

"Ma'am, is that a monkey?" the pink faced man asks.

"Yes. This is Trung," I say.

"We'll take you in to the Convention Center but you'll have to leave the animal."

I shake my head. No, I won't go with them, I won't leave the monkey.

Words pass between them, and they nod. "Okay, both of you carefully get in the boat."

We are on our way. There were a few old people for the escape boats in that faraway place. Children and their parents first, the old can wait, death is closer to them. Now I know the old love life too. A truth. A selfish one. Cam swims behind the boat, frolicking, legs and arms flashing, her tangerine lips smiling. The city of New Orleans is like a gigantic melting water flower.

VALLEJO TO
ISABELLA

There are in life such hard blows...I don't know!
– Cesar Vallejo

The woman sleeps and you, her soon to be born Isabella, are becoming inside her. I jump onto the daybed and lie beside the woman whose face on the pillow breathing softly in and out is a purity floating there. I am Vallejo. I must rub against her stomach and impart my wisdom to you, Isabella. I can feel life moving, your hand holds the other, puts a thumb to your mouth, now closing your eyes you doze in the warm water. I'll talk of my time before the two silver bowls in the kitchen and the shell chair. Listen, I'll speak of treetops in the city where I learned the air. I'll tell you of my own roof beginning, born into blurred dark, eyes sealed, ears shut, swimming, finding the mam, stumbling on it with others. Drinking and sleeping, I struggled only to be close to the milk-giver.

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My eyes opened and I saw the sky, not the bowl of blue that will dazzle you, but the shining colorless aboveness. The roof world was born, bright cardboard boxes and tarps, the shiver of a single spider's thread. My siblings, six of us tumbling, wobbling, stayed close to the teats, fat nipples like bits of gravel. Cowering at the hugeness of the all around my ears awakened to the spark and snare of every sound. Isabella, you too will be born out of the darkness, having to yawn and stretch, to find the teat, like bits of gravel, the gruel warmth and white sleep. Someday, I'll

VALLEJO TO ISABELLA

be adopted by a man and a woman, and they will call me Vallejo. The man will be your father and the scarred woman your mother. Caesar Vallejo, the poet of suffering. They say an animal is not a *who*, Isabella, an animal is a *that*. If you name a beast, it becomes *who*.

««—»»

Boys climb to the roof because they live in the building under it. Third Street. East Village. They've been told of the mother and her litter, of the ugly black things wiggling at the teats, rolling now, learning how to be in the upside down, kneading in the brightness and loudness. They come when the milk-giver is away, gone to feed herself.

"Let's throw them off the roof." A boy shouts.

"They'll explode."

Hands pick up the squirming brother next to me, the fur that smells like milk and seeds. We burrow, twisting into each other, brothers and sisters, those left in the nest.

"Throw," the tall one says. "You first."

The one who smells most like me, gone, off the roof.

"Wow. It evaporated."

The roof boys laugh. "That way. Get them all!" Being chased, my brothers and sisters scattering. Hissing, the milk-giver returns biting me by the nape, carrying me across boards laid between buildings, leaping into a tree. Dropping me, she goes back for more of her litter. I stay in the tree where she leaves me and wait. The one who gives milk does not return. Isabella, there is a nowhere, a somewhere and between them stretches the grey murk. I wait for my wriggling brothers and sisters, while the roof begins to call out in voices of black and yellow spiders prideful of the white silk intricately spun, the mother having just hung her two egg sacs in the web. "My life is short and I will die before my spiderlings hatch."

More echoes from the roof, old human voices caught between leaves. "All my life we got cats up there. This is the first time you have kids throwing them off the roof into the street. Kids are monsters now, hooked into their i-Pods and earphones. Little monster microchips, I call 'em."

Dark came and the voices went out.

I want to impart my story to you, the unborn who will hear. I speak from the outside of my eyes to the inside, to be heart to heart with the one whose vision already sees. I sheltered in the treetops in the green of the city. I hid in the thin air there.

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Wintering. Alone, I struggle in the cold. Shivering dead earth. Water trickles from cast iron, root-snared pipes rust. Frozen.

««—»»

It warms and branches breathe out. Green breath in the leaves sets them twitching with bird song. I listen all day to the humming and whirring. They dive at me, birds puffing their feathers. I flatten myself on the branches and hide in tree crotches. I make myself small, hunting songs. The tree teaches me the difference between what lies motionless and what I have to catch full of gizzard and heartbeats. I am divided between hunger and music. Isabella, you too may know what it is to be of two stomachs. Do I feed or starve? Then I see the bird. A small blue dove closes his beak to press the singing from his chest, along with the sound of treetops and breeze. A plain blue dove full of throbbing song.

Reaching up between leaves, claws spring from my paws. I snag and pierce the feathered being, snare him from the branch. Flurry of heartbeats struggling to fly up, frantic, and then spurt of sweetness around teeth, incisors, blood.

I kill quickly, biting up and down.

Between the chattering of my teeth its small life enters me. I watch the passing over of the sky ready with rain. Breeze blows up a cupcake wrapper, impales it on a twig. I release the dove and make his body my food. Later I learn to pounce, to stare for hours at birds. I feel the hunt inside me, the tensing and watching until I see the sharp light radiating from each feather, each quick movement.

Once I possess the bird I keep it in my mouth to protect it. Until I find a place to be with it, I hold the soft meat jewel between my teeth. I look all around before I break into its body and eat its four-chambered heart. I leave bones for the ground to swallow. Far below, the streets cross each other. Never asleep. Their laughter frightens me. Manhole covers lift and crash.

««—»»

So I keep to the treetops sniffing the sap in branch and bark. I keep to the leaves springing up and birds stirring and weaving through the breeze. The air slivers against my body and lifts the fur strands one from another.

VALLEJO TO ISABELLA

When the breeze stops the tree shudders and sweats and cannot fan itself. Tarsus and thigh bones litter the below.

More heat. Breathlessness. The stink of street reaches into the tree. Manhattan, the sky stews until it is unbeautiful, a broth of exhaust and the wilting moon, a wishbone. My three eyelids sweat.

Below the tree there are people. A moving crowd of black jeans, t-shirts, some with orange fluorescent skeletons painted on the outside, white greasepaint smeared on faces.

“There’s a bird killer in the tree.”

The leaves dry, crackle and break. I listen to them frying in the sun. Birds trickle through the limbs, gather, counting themselves. Men drag packing crates with bread wrapper windows under the tree. Others sleep with splayed legs in doorways until the sirens come. Then they run.

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The limbs brim with water. Rain soaking into cardboard boxes, rain like headlights, mice rain.

Cold comes, frost stiffens the tree. The birds fly off and take the leaves with them. The tree is naked, empty. Then I listen to the ground, learn to climb the tree backwards down to chase scampering sounds. I yearn to catch the soft scent of a quick moving mouse. I climb the tree back up to the branch where my mother left me.

Hunger. Nothing to eat. Boys in hoodies and sweatpants, a laughing knot of them. They stammer and smoke and skateboard around the tree.

“Watch this,” one of them says, pointing up. “See that cat? He lives up there.”

Another pushes his hoodie back showing off his fat round face. “Hey, killer cat, come on down. We’ve got chicken breast sandwich.” He is crinkling a paper sack. “Mister cat, how about some McNuggets?”

The tree is starved and branches click together sparking the dark with ice flint. I smell the flesh scraped off a bun and soaked with grill marks. The meat is not singing. Not moving. The flesh lies plucked and sorrowful on the sidewalk. Many cold daynights since I’ve eaten and the stomach hole inside grows bigger.

The round face looks up. “Hey, yellow-eyed killer cat. I can see you in the dark too. Want this chicken?” He kneels, breaking the unfeathered flesh with his chubby fingers. “There’s more. We’ve got lots of chicken. Come down.”

“That cat is smarter than you, dude. Let’s go.”

I smell an oily yeasty flesh odor. Come down, the meat beckons. No, I must not leave here. But should I always wait for the milk-giver in this tree, staying where she left me? *Yes, otherwise, how will she find you.* I must keep off the ground. Then my stomach hole growls, forcing me from the tree. I’m climbing backwards by my claws down the bark river. I hear in the sound of their boy voices the ring and skitter of secrets I don’t understand.

They hoot. The boys are all big like buildings. “That’s the longest cat I’ve ever seen,” one of them snickers. “It’s a cat and snake mix. A snake cat.” They live in those black buildings with many lights, the stars you can’t see in the sky shine out of their windows. Alphabet City. Avenue A. The moon sleeps there too.

“See him, man, that’s a weird animal. He’s cocking his head.”

“Watch this,” the round faced boy lisps, nudging the chicken with his foot. Picking up a square can, he uses all of his fingers to carry it. Then one of his hands hides the can behind his back. “Here’s chicken for you, skinny freak of a cat.”

My stomach hurts with hollowness. I’m ready to snatch it.

“Bet he doesn’t like dark meat,” a boy says, sitting on his skateboard. “Give him a thigh. I bet he likes white meat.”

I crouch toward it, preparing to pounce. My mouth wet, teeth chattering hungering. I wait for them to step back before I lower my head. The round boy charges me holding the can. I startle, leap, hissing. From all sides boys run at me, some roll on their boards. Hands grab hold of me, hands lift the creaking can above me.

“I’m drenching him.” The round boy sloshes stickiness over me. A splashing, soaking my back. Without flame the liquid burns through my fur. Cold hot. I mewl, arch my back. The liquid makes me burn like fires set in the park. My heart is beating everywhere. Hands clutch and clench, pull my tail, keep pouring the liquid until it dribbles.

“Light it, light it,” they shout. All together now, all the same. Five boys make one.

A lighter flares. Wind comes up. The tree blows the fire out in his hand and the chubby boy yelps and lets go of me.

I bolt, race, my heart fast faster. I must get to the tree. The milk-giver has come for me, she’ll save me again. The boys block the way back into the tree. I run into the street. Tires screech. Headlights. They’re laughing, rolling on their boards, chasing me.

“Killer cat!”

“Black snake cat!”

VALLEJO TO ISABELLA

They have lighters. They are throwing fire after me.

“What are you doing, you animals?” One of the cat women who live close to the tree street waves her bony arms at them. She has seen the baptism, this lady with the wild flowing hair and the dirt-leaf smelling sweater. The boys hurl curses, spit at her.

I race through the garbage and fire hydrants, leaping over sidewalk cellars trying to outrun the burning. The battery acid moon watches. The fiery liquid creeps over my body, like loud noises of wings, like hissing, clattering beaks. Burning fur, flesh. Cassiopeia, the polestar. I stop, frantically lick my back, trying to tongue the stinging from my fur. Flesh taste. My own back in my mouth. Terrible taste, acrid and gluey like melting plastic, every molecule. I quiver and itch. Run again. If I run harder I can escape the unlit burning.

I burn. I burn. I burn.

I am going into darkness and it is molten. Orchid eyes of streetlights follow me. I climb onto a fire escape. The birds punish me, the souls I've eaten are here with me.

««—»»

I climb the fire escape, higher. I enter through a half-boarded window. Crawl into an abandoned apartment of broken rooms where people wrapped in scraps of blanket sleep. Their teeth make cold chatter and their bodies give off tree aroma. Dust in the air where the plaster ends. Walking on my claws, keeps me going. The stain on the ceiling is a sky-boat rowing petals and stamen. I learned the parts of a flower from birds. I give out in the hallway, curl against a window that faces a tree. My breathing rises and falls. The death purr starts in my chest. I remember that first darkness and the milk-giver's purr calling me and my siblings to drink.

Abscesses in my flesh open and ooze pus. My back raked and wet. Human hands reach for me, place my body in a box, carrying me to a place of bright light.

Silver tables.

Syringes.

Voices. Human. Cat. Dog.

They push sleep into me made from the singing of blue doves. I stay in sleep for days. Behind metal bars I wake in ointment and bandages. Around me other wild cats in cages, one-eyed, three-legged, tailless, ears

chewed. Mewling cats, empty lot cats, parking garage cats, tunnel cats, tree cats. Bernie, they call me. Bernie is the sound in human mouths when they smear cool salve into my wounds, when they push the pills into my throat. I can't lift my head. I dream of high places made of branch, leaf rattle.

A bowl of brown pellets comes twice a day. Everyday.
The faces of the cats in the cages change.

People come to walk through the cages. "This is Viola." "This is Banjo." "This is Ferbit." "This is Solomon." The people are here to adopt. They ask, pointing. "Oh, what happened to him?" "Bernie, the burned cat?" I hear my story, that kids threw battery acid on me, then lighter fluid. That chemicals scalded my epidermis, killed the hair shaft, fur can't grow back. "But he has an exceptionally beautiful face." People come and go. They bring empty carriers. They take kittens, they adopt the calico Ferbit. Even the orange Banjo goes to a home.

One day the cage door opens and I am lifted into a carrier. "Bernie's the nicest cat in the shelter. There isn't a staff member who hasn't given him his medicine. He's been here so long."

I don't look at the people studying me. They came twice, couldn't decide.

Then I do look, Isabella, and see the burned ones, a man and a woman, who have come for me. The man is burned on the inside, his woman on the outside.

"We can't call him Bernie," the woman says. "He's a Vallejo."

"Vallejo," the man agrees.

They are poets of burning who struggle to reach the ice planets or one of Saturn's shivering moons. Pandora, Iapetus.

They are the milk-givers.

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Isabella, I impart my story to you, who presses her ear to the water, who is pure listening. Head swaying, I press my odd shape, my elongated body like a partially furred salamander against your mother's stomach. Inside I am songbird and rodent, pliable, hinged, long haunches that can suddenly collapse, melting into jelliness. I am surprise. Three years on this earth and I've learned these things. Isabella, little ear, you may have to outrun the ones who have harm in their hands. Little feet, little toes. Always be ready to gather up every bit and bite of your life and run.

GOATSUCKERS

The fire hydrant I'm sitting on is fast becoming my only friend in this strip shopping center in Lynchburg, Virginia. Neither of us knows how to find a ride. There's a Ho Lan Oriental Foods, Big Fat Gyros, and a Hock 'n Lock pawnshop, all lonely for customers. Only the Girls Girls Girls is doing business. The sign to the club blinks above the doorway to a fake stockade. An eight-foot neon woman with purple light bulbs for nipples stands outside the windowless cinderblock. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. I'm tired of wearing my best worship dress with blue flowers and a white collar. Flower prints I've worn all my life.

Men stumble from the door of Girls Girls Girls clutching brown paper bags. They peer over their shoulders before falling into their pickups. Peeling away, the men hang out of their truck windows and leer. "Bible girl," one of them shouts. "Baptist church is that way." They remind me of goatsuckers. Those owlish birds with wide soft mouths that feed at twilight near the she-goats. I uncurl my hand and see the scratches from where I held the rock. One deep slice between the thumb and the meat of my palm is turning a purple red. When I press it milky water seeps out and makes my stomach rumble.

The Girls Girls Girls door bursts open. "Grow some whiskers before you come back," a heavysset man growls, and shoves a young guy out, rear end first. A clot of music follows him out; it's a smoldering blue red, not like the singing of mourning doves, that white sweetness that almost sobs.

"Still here?" the young blond man grunts, dusting himself off. His blue eyes strike me, cut-out-of-the-sky eyes, the color of gooseberries mixed with blueberries, the kind that don't stick around Calico, Arkansas. The male eyes that stay are middle-aged or older, and look out through reading glasses. I nod, dropping my glance. My eyelashes feel stuck to my eyeballs. It's not my nature to look directly into a man's face.

GOATSUCKERS

The blond makes a complete circle around the fire hydrant where I'm settled. "Are you attached to that hydrant?" he asks, dipping his hands into his side pockets and brushing off his fancy black shirt with embroidered red roses.

"I am not," I say, unsticking my dry tongue from my mouth.

"Damn, my keys have run off on me." He has a clean face but his black stovepipe jeans have seen tidier days. "Hells bells, I know." He balances on one leg and pulls off his pointy boot, shakes out a key, and steps back into his footwear. "Now can I offer you a ride, ma'am?" He bows low from the waist. "Vernon Cash at your service."

"I'm Raleigh, North Carolina bound to see my brother."

"Raleigh, I'll be a cowbell ringing. I'm headed there myself," he says, and gazes into my left shoulder. Then he lifts his glance, lets it go roving through the parking lot. "Now there's a fine set of wheels. My classic Cutlass Oldsmobile." His button nose overlooks a lip trying to grow a mustache, hairs glistening lazily. "Where in Raleigh are you figuring to get, ma'am?"

I read the address printed in red pen. My own block capitals. DUNLEAVY STREET.

"I know right where Dunleavy Street is. My destination is just a few blocks from there. Will you give me the pleasure of giving you a ride, ma'am?"

I get up off the hydrant, extending my hand. I can't be any older than him, I'm sixteen and a half and I figure him to be twenty or better, but ma'am is nice and respectful and I'll accept that. Although he was in that Girls Girls Girls he gives me a feeling I'll be safe in his car, as comfortable as I'd be beside the creek at sunset, when the goatsuckers begin to awaken, and prepare for dark when they rise, noiseless, to feed upon the milk of the goats.

"Can you part with your name?" Vernon says, in that rushed voice, almost as nice as those bits of blue sky under his brows. Like when it's a whole day at the creek, and you lay your head on your hands watching clouds wisp from tree to tree.

"Marigold Winters. Pleased to meet you."

"That's a pretty name," Vernon lets out a low whistle. "Marigold, you know I wasn't in that strip club looking. I was talking to one woman in particular, my mother. I've been trying to get her out of that life, but she tells everyone I'm trying to kidnap her. So they throw me out and threaten to get a restraining order."

I pick up my coin purse, a lime-green beaded thing. Other than to hold

quarters and dimes for goat cheese, women don't need purses in Calico. I sniff my underarms. My blue prairie flowers are grimy and I smell goaty, although I did soap my privates this morning.

Vernon seems to be checking around my feet for the suitcase I don't have. "Shall we?" he says, like it's marrying day. It's an old red car, the kind I saw once in the dry creek bed, abandoned and rusted. I've never seen one like it riding folks, especially one with its fins crushed and windshield wipers caught in midwipe. "Pretty lady, isn't she?" he asks, and lets out a whistle.

When we get closer I see the cross dangling on a chain from the mirror Vernon uses to see the back of the road with and shudder. He opens the passenger's side, waits for me to take my seat, and then lifts the hem of my skirt so the door doesn't close on it.

The sun visor is down and when I look up, I startle. All the bus depots had a piece of metal for a mirror and my face looked dented in them. Now I hardly recognize the girl with strange eyes in the mirror, those black irises more square than round floating over gold eyeballs. I blink, and my eyes go back to their normal yellowy selves. I'm not as pretty as my sister. Pansy is five feet seven inches and willowy for thirteen; her legs go on forever like her flowing hair. Her eyes are green and oval. She's too pretty for Calico, and sometimes I want to smudge her with dirt, put her in sackcloth, and hide her in the mudroom. Since our mother died because of a shadow in her stomach, I've held Pansy's care above my own.

Vernon slides his key into the ignition but it doesn't work. "Sometimes this happens," he says, sticking his hands under the dash. "I'll have to cross some wires together. These old cars forget the shape of their own key." He fidgets with the wires until the car coughs to life. The front seat starts shimmying. I tremble too.

Then the engine dies.

Vernon's blond head dives under the dash and he fiddles with the wires. I keep worrying about the ladies. They love weeds: itchgrass, blackberry, and blueweed. I wonder who's milking my she-goats. Besides Ruth and Esther, there's Delilah, and Lilith. My favorites. Once in the morning, once at night, getting them between the milking stalls, and then the pull squeeze pull. I was milking the goats when I first noticed Ulius Cumberbatch noticing me. He would stop in the door to the milking barn and look in. "He is the most special of men," Pansy told me. "Consider it an honor that First Prophet Cumberbatch finds you pleasing."

Sometimes you can't see the goatsuckers, open-mouthed, fluttering around the goats, bird after bird, insects disappearing.

I settle my coin purse in my lap. Folded inside it, a bus ticket receipt, one dollar and two dimes, and a menu from Masamoto Sushi Hut. That menu must have been thrown out of a car and the wind blew it into a hickory where two-hundred-pound Sampson was standing on his hind legs, reaching into the tree. I couldn't imagine the food they'd serve. And it was a café in Little Rock, in the very state where I lived. *Godzilla's Eye*, yellowtail deep-fried in tempura butter, avocado topped w. toasted eel. *Spicy Spider Roll*, eel and shrimp tempura, *Futo Maki Madness*. I knew it was strangeness I wanted to taste.

The wires won't spark. Vernon pumps the floorboards. Nothing. "You a Bible girl?" he says, glancing at me. Still the car won't go, and oily smoke seeps from the hood.

"That's the same question your friends coming from the girlie show kept asking," I say, wondering if I have a sign hanging from my forehead. "I do come from a Bible family in Calico, Arkansas. I left my little sister Pansy behind so I could find my brother. I tried hard to take her with me."

I had pleaded with her to come but she balked about leaving the hills for the flatlands where the cities were. Hadn't we been taught that in the cities they cut away your brain and replaced it with TV circuits, and didn't our First Prophet teach that among crowds your footsteps weren't your own? God's oceans were dying, oxygen would be next, the rain would stop, every root and branch would burn.

"See, I thought my brother Hawthorn lived here in Lynchburg. But he moved on," I try to explain. I had walked from the bus depot to his street but I knew as soon as I saw the house, dilapidated, split into halves and painted separate colors, pink and grayish green, that he wasn't there. I knocked and a girl with wavy red hair answered and told me he'd moved to Raleigh. I asked her for a glass of water and she obliged. "Hawthorn's my brother," I told her, trying to smile. She blinked, and said she'd see if she could find an address.

"See, Hawthorn and Thomas John and Macey all left together. Most of the boys leave Calico to make their way in the wider world. The Prophet picks the few who stay."

Vernon's head pops up. "That doesn't sound like much fun for the girls if all the boys leave." He brushes his brow where kernels of perspiration cluster, pop, and trickle down his cheeks.

"Well, we're not put on this earth to have fun, I guess."

He swings himself around, leans himself into the back seat, shifting

and shuffling whatever stuff is there. "I guess this damn car needs music to start." He grabs hold of a pink square of plastic. "This is Roger Williams on an eight-track tape singing 'Little Green Apples.' They don't make these decks anymore. Let's see if this here one works in what I just installed." He sticks it in the dash and a tinny voice crackles out. Then he stops and stares at me. "How about something to drink, little Marigold?"

"I've been thirsty, and nothing sounds better," I tell him.

"I'll rustle in my Captain-Keep-It-Kool ice chest. How about a root beer?"

"I'd like that very much but I can't pay you. We make our own delicious root beer in Calico. We believe in making from scratch, and not forgetting how to grow and cook our own food. Ulius preaches that most people in this United States would starve if their ATM card melted and the grocery stores shut down."

"Sounds so pretty there, why'd you leave?" Vernon asks, balancing himself over the seat into the back, rustling around and clinking bottles together. "Here you go." He hands me an already opened root beer. Then he ducks back down and finds the wires and the engine turns over. "Yippee! I've got serious driving to do," he says, sitting up. He grips the wheel, hits the gas and the red car goes flying down something he calls a feeder road.

I feel my brother Hawthorn already a few feet closer with every turn of the wheel.

It's the coldest sweetest root beer I've ever tasted. I swallow and rest my throwing arm against the breeze. This is the hand that threw a rock against the Prophet. If all he preached had been true, my hand would have fallen off instead of just turning purple.

All the warm air swirling around makes me feel relaxed. I must be thirstier than I ever imagined. All I've drunk for days is lukewarm water mostly cupped from bus station sinks. I couldn't find any fountains, only soda machines that asked a dollar and two quarters for a bottle of water. I saw the face of greed and I wanted to hurt that machine, pick up a rock and pound it. Suddenly, I'm beat, all those miles catching up. Vernon takes the empty root beer bottle from my hand and slides it under the driver's seat.

"What is it you do for a living, Vernon Cash?" I ask, sleepily.

"I collect eight-track tape players and reel-to-reels and hi-fi consoles and even phonographs. Equipment they don't manufacture anymore. I've got DECmate computers and some of the earliest Silvertone transistor radios. Happen you have a tape recording of your dead grandpappy's

GOATSUCKERS

voice, but there's no machine you can stick that into to hear it on. You come to me. I have one of each. It's a growth industry."

Vernon talks fast, like someone is chasing his voice with a pitchfork. I'm so relaxed I like that. We're almost past the string of restaurants and whatnots. Iron Skillet Truck Stop, Dean's Pizzeria, Chili by the Quart, and Peppermint Lounge where Cities of the Dead is playing. The car swerves onto the shoulder, gravel sputtering under the tires. That sun's shining right into my eyes when we hit a red light intersection. Vernon says we could stay on this most of the way, but he has tape decks to drop off for customers who live on two-lane highways. Here's to hoping I'm not in a hurry. "Little Green Apples" keeps rolling out of the dash, and it's good to hear the noise instead of my own thoughts. I can still feel the hours of fire hydrant poking into me.

"Still thirsty?" he asks. "Go for another?"

"It'd be nice. But wouldn't I be putting you out?"

He hands me another root beer. It tastes sweeter and darker than the last one. The cold bottle soothes my cut hand, which is burning pretty good. I try to pace myself with this one and not guzzle it down. I'm thinking about Calico, and how our three biggest families go way back. The Winters, Wallaces, and Cumberbatches. It's a town of holiness. Vernon thinks there's an atlas under the seat, and asks would I mind finding Conetop, Virginia? That's where his first drop-off is.

"First drink up, you'll need both hands."

"I'm afraid of hiccups."

"Root beer's no good if it gets hot."

I lift the bottle to my lips. There's a sickly sweet odor. "It smells funny."

"That's all in your head. Drink up."

I drink up and he takes the empty bottle. I guess I'm more tired than all get out. Takes about two tries before I lug that old atlas out from under the seat and get it proper in my hands. My fingers tremble lifting and turning the states loaded down with cities and towns. I feel them slide off into my lap, the blue rivers and the thumbprint lakes. When we home-schooled geography, Aunt Ladyslipper used maps from the filling station in Calico. Mainly maps for Arkansas and surrounding states. Then in writing and reading Aunt Forget-Me-Not taught from the Bible and the three books: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* stayed on the shelf. I manage to find Conetop; it's north and west of Raleigh. My fingers have to crawl back to Arkansas. I look for Calico and I find the towns around it—Delight, Stamps, and Reader. "Would you

believe this, Vernon?" I ask, the words hard to get out of my mouth. "My whole world is Calico, Arkansas and I can't find it on the map."

"Maybe it's gone," Vernon says.

I can't find where I tended goats. It's true they'll eat almost anything. Grasses, oats, mimosa, but their favorite treat is cabbage leaves. It's all disappeared. Hot Springs. Blue Springs. Poison Springs. All mixed up. Hawthorn will help straighten it all out.

The song about the little green apples is stuck inside my head. I feel like I'm milking my mouth for words. Pull squeeze pull. Pull squeeze pull and I can't get much out. I keep tasting that sweet dark root beer and what I wouldn't give for a bottle of water. I slept sitting up for two days, and not much at that. I ask him what those funny looking plants are that look like sick cabbages.

"Marigold, you are a Bible girl. Those are tobacco plants. Fields that produce cancer," he says, laughing.

I must have nodded just for second. Bittersweet taste in my mouth.

Now there are tobacco fields on either side of the road, plants yellow and jaundiced. They remind me of Ulius. Even from this distance he gawks. The Prophet. Always looking, waiting. We drive. The cross dangles from the rearview mirror on its gold chain, a slender pendant. Ulius. More tobacco fields and here and there a straggly barn with cracks in the wood to let the dead breeze in.

I can hardly keep my eyes open. We fly by a sign that reads Family Dentistry. Vernon's saying he recently acquired an original Motorola phonograph. Do I know how much it is worth? He bought it at a yard sale from one of these old ladies. Vernon Cash talks and talks. I like how his words hurry, but it's hard for me to keep up because we talk slower in Calico. We're a people of few words.

The stalks of tobacco are yellow, like Ulius. Like his haunches, and the leaf straps are his limbs and the folds of his flesh that look stitched to him. All that skinniness when he's got a kitchen full of women tending to his foods.

Once when I was chasing stray goats, tethering them to branches, I fell down panting on the ground. I closed my eyes and let the dragonflies fan me with their fragile wings. I reached out to the mold flourishing in stumps. I felt flushed as the pink gills under mushroom caps. How lucky I was. Dogwood with its thin red bark and foamy white flowers shaded me. I fell asleep, sure that where I lived was paradise. Even without mother no harm could come to me. When I awoke I saw his face above a dogwood branch. Ulius standing in the trees, his wrinkled neck floating in the blossoms. I cried out, startled when I saw him.

GOATSUCKERS

“You look a little green. Tired, Marigold?” Vernon says, and I see his words dropping out of his mouth like little apples. “You can trust me to watch over you.”

I fall into the thickest sleep. I’m thirsty and Grandmother Winters is sitting with her feet in a soak bowl of water telling me stories about how a son was born to the old Prophet’s fifth wife. His first son. The old Prophet ordered his son to be washed with ice and a curry brush. To feed him mulberries not milk. I cup my hands in the water Grandmother soaks her feet in, but she forbids me to drink it. “That’s so dirty, child.” Then I notice she is rocking a baby in her lap, and when she turns down the blanket I see scratch marks covering his little body, and trickling from his mouth a red drool of mulberries, seeds and stems.

It’s too hot in this sleep. I can’t move my hands.

I’m wearing a white dress printed with blue flowers. My hair is braided and my uncles escort me to the marrying through the virgin’s garden of curling squash. My feet are bare, and my long toes kick through a sea of vines and floating blossoms. Okra puffs, sweet corn tasseling, cantaloupes and watermelons ripening in their sand baths. He’s waiting in the arbor. I’m not trying to pull away from my uncles, their hands encircling my upper arms. I’m happy. This is the honor I was born for. Only the women and children of Ulius’s house are at the arbor. Pansy watches from the upstairs window of the old homestead across the way. I am fifteen and he is sixty-five years.

I try to wake, crawl up the leather of the seat, grab onto the armrest, but I sink back down. It’s dark outside the car, and we’re not moving. I make out the lights of a gas station. Night. Chuck-will’s-widows are salying back and forth across the creek, whistling their name over and over. Those poor goatsuckers. Vernon pulls a blanket over me, and then we’re going again. We’re traveling in circles and crooked lines. A red siren follows us like a fire spilling out of a skillet. Aunt Ladyslipper and Aunt Jessamine repeat the teachings about what waits for girls outside of Calico. A wish doesn’t come true. The siren closes the distance between it and us before vanishing. The clay road is passing us, chasing another cloud of dust.

Vernon says, “That a girl, that a Marigold. Just keep on sleeping.”
He sounds far off.



I'm still in the garden. The sun boils down, and the steam the garden gives off is wilting my underthings. Ants crawl over my toes, a daddy long-legs climbs my leg. His voice is soft on the top, but on the bottom, hard. The white chairs gather around the garden while First Prophet Ulius says the prayer, saliva collecting in his throat. All around are his seven wives, tens of children, my aunts, my nieces, and nephews. I shift into the shade while the light wrinkles and makes itself smooth. I am special. Not all girls are chosen to enter his presence alive. I belong to God and the Prophet. He rambles on. The gnat-like heat hums, birds jitter. The goat-suckers are asleep. Their pointed wings, fluffy feathers, and weak feet are at rest until dark when their mouths will open. His lips have flecks of dry skin on them. My new husband talks on and on and the ball of saliva grows; he smacks and a web of spittle grows between his upper and lower lips, it thickens and thins. A living thing. Like milk. I can't see anything else. A white spider. I'll scream if he doesn't swallow soon. Beyond the ooze of creampuff blossoms, asparagus birds, lovebirds, yard birds. Then at last the boulder of spit is gagged down.

I turn and face the white chairs. I am happy.

He tells me I am now his wife for all eternity. He takes my hand and leads me past his wives, all of them smiling. Goldenrod, my mother's cousin, Day Lily, his first wife with enough years to be my grandmother. Black-Eyed Susan, nineteen. Daffodil and Tulip, their bellies so swollen they have a hard time hugging.

A bed fills most of the room. The bathroom hides itself down the hall that I will share with Black-Eyed Susan and Daffodil. In the tub, a rubber duck with blue eyes and yolky yellow beak, a building block. My room is on the second floor next to the steps, a set of seven and then they turn into a hall of knotty pine with eyes that gape. The doors latch rather than lock. Inside the room is plain except for a woven rug. A dresser and mirror with a wavy line running through it. Two windows, two chairs. No curtains.

A girl must be clean.

I press my lips against the sink as I sit on the toilet; I press them until they are numb. My grandmother was married at fourteen. Nine wives came before her, and two were her sisters. "Better to have women to help with the children. Help in the kitchen and bed. You'll want your husband off you. You'll see this is the best way."

I hang onto the sink; I don't want to go into the room.

Right now the clock on the dashboard says 4:10. It's dark but already bits of light are breaking through the sky. We've been driving and driving.

GOATSUCKERS

My head feels broken, fuzzy with sleep. I need water or I'll die. Any old sink water. On top of that I'm starved, too embarrassed to ask for that chocolate cupcake in an open wrapper that is staring me down from the dash. When will we be in Raleigh? Shouldn't it be soon? How much farther? I can't wait to see Hawthorn. He'll feed and water me. He'll understand about the rock.

I don't tell my hand to but it does anyway, reaches for the cupcake and stuffs it into my mouth. Crumbs tumble from my chin. Vernon Cash leans toward me. "Throw those things out the window."

"What?" I say, gripping the cupcake. I'm hungry. I'm not giving this up.

"Throw them out. They've been there for months." Vernon slams on the brakes and grabs the cupcake out of my hand. "Now you spit. Wipe your mouth out," he says, reaching into the glove box for Kleenex. He pulls the tissues onto my lap. "Food's full of ants. I'll buy you a meal. They'll have to reimburse me for expenses."

They. Who are they? I hear the ticking of the clock in the dashboard. His pretty face is turning not nice.

"I'm thirsty," I say. I don't want to be in the car with him anymore.

"Root beer's all I got. You want that or nothing."

"Root beer then."

The ants are crawling in my throat. My lids close, and the car must pull over for Vernon to rustle and clank in the back seat. "Here," he says, "and be careful you don't spill."

He holds a hand under my mouth while I swallow. The sweetness has a bitter inside it; the root beer is dark and wet and I'm glad to moisten my mouth. Then time stops and quarter after five is staring at me from the dash. The time of day I don't like as much, the restless time before dawn. The twins, Daffodil and Dahlia, are stirring the oatmeal, preparing the table for those who have to feed the animals. The Prophet is asleep, so one of the twins says breakfast prayers, and they're the lookouts, the ones who go tattling to Ulius that so and so didn't close her eyes.

Goldenrod and Day Lily hold my legs apart and gaze between to be sure I am pure. They put me into my nightgown, puff-sleeved and high-waisted. They tell me to lie on the bed. The sheets give off the breath of green leaves in breeze. My body trembles when I hear the stairs. I count seven creaks.

He wears a robe, which Day Lily and Black-Eyed Susan lift from his shoulders. Underneath, a dressing gown. His kneecaps are the color of tallow with scratch marks up and down them. They frighten me.

Goatsuckers hunt in fog and storms. Once the Prophet cut a goatsucker open and counted thousands of bugs in its stomach. Whip-poor-wills come out when the moon is up. They make a murmuring sound. The chuck-will's-widow hisses when it seizes a moth. Ulius asks the wives to leave. Then he bids me to make room for him in the bride bed. "Child," he says. "Beautiful child." I make myself stay beside him when I want to rise into the sky of the ceiling and hide among the branches. His feet are tiny, yet the third toe on each is pointed, almost a claw. His body is slender, his chest hardly wider than the pillow, his ears stick out like quills. I am giving him my skin to replace his flakes, my oils to smear into his dust, new hair, and new breath. His old hair that he leaves on the pillow like bent whiskers. The dust of gravity draws his eyelids down. The spittle grows between his lips. The white spider drops its web onto my face. Then he gives me his kisses with his pointy tongue, it quivers and darts. The kisses of God.

In the dawn my head clears some. We are sitting still. The car is parked in front of a little brick house. Rest Area the sign reads. Trucks are everywhere on either side of us. Men peer down on us from up high. In the first light Vernon Cash's face is scrunched against the driver's window, a little line of spittle working itself down his chin. He reminds me of someone back home, but I don't know who. I read the huge words painted on the trucks. Hubbard Feeds. Logex. Ox Express. I have to make water. On one side of that little brick house I see the word LADIES. I'll wash my face and drink from the sink. When I reach for the door handle it's not there.

Vernon snorts. I'm about to negotiate climbing over him, out his door, which I see has a handle. "Hold on, little Marigold. I'll go with you. I forgot to tell you, the handle fell off."

I'm groggy. I feel like I've been sleeping for days. My body is hungry. I don't want any more of that root beer that makes me feel like I've eaten a whole apple pie.

Vernon opens his door and he gets out, and I get out and he half carries me into the rest area. I don't know what kind of trees—sweet gum or hickory—those are, but they smell like the creek back home. We walk by the parked cars and I read the license plates. Arkansas. The Ozark State. Arkansas. Missouri. Arkansas. Vernon calls into the ladies' bathroom and when no one answers he escorts me inside. Then he enters the stall next to me and he makes water.



Ulius makes me say out my lessons, the ones he teaches me on Thursday nights. The nights he spends in my room. He has eight wives, but goes to Goldenrod and Day Lily, the two oldest, every other week. "After I touch you," he says, "what are you to do?" I study the floor. "I'm not to bathe for two days. It being a sin to wash the smell of God from one's body." His dark eyes look at me like they're holes in the trees. "Do you understand my words?" he asks. Then I answer, "Yes, Prophet, yes." And what else is he to me? "Sacred flesh. Husband." Kids in custardy diapers play on the floor above, wives arguing, laughing on every side. Dust. A barn door exhaling moldy hay. I hear whimpering from the next room. Black-Eyed Susan listening at the wall. He tells me to kiss and make my tongue do what Black-Eyed Susan does with her finger, when she takes her baby from her breast, pushing her finger into his mouth. All through the kisses I think of she-goats wandering. He-goats clearing brush for an old man in the forest. I think of the rotation. Eight wives, seven days of the week. Thursdays, Marigold's night. I tell myself I'm used to the steps creaking seven times. That I'm used to falling asleep beside him. But I fight sleep. The claw toe, his skinny shanks clamping me between them. In the farthest part of the night he rises high into the air over the bed, partially feathered on his thin wings. The moon is up and I am silhouetted against the sky. He makes his sallies back and forth. He tells me God has appeared to him, and he must take one more, his last bride. He will feed once more, and then he should have no trouble surviving many years of bad weather. Prophet Ulius is taking another wife. Did he tell me or did I hear it in the milking barn, the whispering?

Vernon and I wash at the sink and when I try to cup water he tells me that it's filth. We go to the two smiling machines where he cups a handful of quarters and dimes. Bright pretty things fall with a thump-thump.

He lets me into the car from the driver's side and then gets in. He rolls down part of his window but none of mine. "I bet you don't eat like this in Calico," he says, "but this stuff will fill you up." He dumps into my lap barbeque potato chips, which I've never eaten in my life, and corn chips and peanut brittle and crackers and a little tub of cheese with a red plastic stick. Vernon starts the car with the key, he doesn't have to reach under the dash and fuss with the wires. It's minding him now. We back out away from the little brick house. Then I read more license plates. Arkansas. Arkansas. Tennessee.

When I look at Vernon's face he reminds me of Ulius, the knobby chin. I look up and cry out. Pines are coming back, all the brooding trees, their tops shrouded in mist. The hills with their gray wood shanties. The blue shadows. He is taking me back to Calico. I recognize the Reader grocery store, its screen door tied down with clothesline rope. He accelerates toward the arrow in the road, spewing dust on the black and white sign.

"I tried to kill someone once," I say softly to Vernon.

He mumbles, "Yeah?"

"Maybe I did, I don't know."

Then I swing my leg over the hump and push it down on top of Vernon's foot, causing him to press the gas pedal to the floor. I grab the wheel and twist it.

There is a menu in the kitchen written in chalk on a board. Each wife prepares the meals on the day of the week the Prophet stays in her room. Thursday dinner: chicken noodle soup, the noodles made from scratch, the loose leaves of lettuce picked from the garden; apple crisp with homemade ice cream. The ice cream is always my chore because I have a good churning arm.

I hear the room next door to mine being spring cleaned. Day Lily does the scrubbing and Goldenrod strips the bedding. They knock, tell me it's time to move my things into the next room, this one is needed. Day Lily is in charge of the rotations, moving the wives from one room into another, the children, too. I refuse to budge. No one has refused the Prophet and no one knows what to do. I should pick up my things and be going down the hall. Black-Eyed Susan whispers to me about the other wife coming. "You know who he will wed next? Perhaps you know her. The newest wife gets this room because of its woven rug."

The window faces the creek and the goats. I can see the milking barns and the forest and the house where I grew up. Ulius stands outside the mudroom, waiting. He lingers in the dusk in those seconds after the sun sinks into the goat pens. Seven of his wives are at work in the kitchen, children running between their legs, footsteps gallop up and down steps. I don't wait. I run for the forest. I'm following the beginning moon, a pale splash of buttermilk hovering. I run believing I can convince her to come with me. I'll beg her. We'll find Hawthorn. "Pansy, Pansy." I find her next to the creek. She's lying beside the she-goat Ruth; she looks up and sees me, disappointment in her glance.

I pant, "He'll promise you eternity but he's got no right. He's got no more rights to Heaven than you or me." I have an iron cup in my hand, the

GOATSUCKERS

one I used to scoop meal from the pail to feed goats. “He’s an old goatsucker, Pansy. Don’t you understand?” My sister smiles shyly, shaking her creekwater hair out. “But he’s so nice to me,” she says. Then Ulius finds us, his black jacket flapping. He wears his starched white shirt, his asking shirt.

“Marigold,” he says, scowling, his mouth opening not centered under his eyes but off to the side, “go off with yourself. Today your duties are in the kitchen.”

No, I’m not going to the kitchen; I’m going to stand between him and Pansy. “Let her go, old goatsucker.” I feel the iron cup leave my hand, I fling it at him, and it bounces off his jacket. He points a finger at me and laughs. Pansy joins in his laughter. He has me. That’s enough from my family. I will not let him take my sister. I keep walking back and forth until my insides turn to that hot dry that breeds black widows and snakes. I know where the cheese profits are. After I take the money I wait to see the blood moon that Prophet Ulius says will be called forth. It means the slayer Lord is coming and the end-of-time moon is shining. Nothing happens. I hear the whip-poor-wills.

The Oldsmobile hits the ditch, Vernon’s head slumps against the driver’s window. He’s looking at me. “The Prophet’s not dead,” Vernon says. “I’ve been hired to return you home.”

Dust taste on my tongue.

I sleep with Ulius; bathe in the morning and that angers him. I refuse to smell of him, the dust and dead beetles. He wants me to taste the flesh of infinity, the moon pushing the sun deeper into my throat. The odor of the buck sometimes erupts in the middle of the afternoon, a soft suffocating cloud, sometimes in repulsive blasts that scatter like buckshot. Here take the curry brush and open your flesh. Ulius is sure the goatsuckers are suckling his nannies to the bone. Maybe I hit him, maybe I waited until nightfall, when he took those seven steps, maybe I beaned him hoping to touch the brain of God. Maybe I walked and then ran. Once I held a dead goatsucker, either a nightjar or a whip-poor-will, like cupping a piece of the dark so brown and gray I could not see it in my own hands.

KLARA'S BOY

I have the boy, his little hand in mine, and we are walking toward that bunch of leafy trees, to an arbor between them where bees buzz. I wipe a smudge of tangerine-colored dust from my nose and study him. Sun through his brows makes spiked shadows on his cheeks. The boy's eyes are just now getting used to the daylight after being in the classroom. Four fingers extend from each of his hands, the thumbs are on the longish side like big brothers. His fingernails are flat, everything as it should be. Just six years old, his mouth is pink and smooth. "You're Klara's boy," I say, expecting his warm not quite trusting hand to squeeze mine, but then it doesn't. It wiggles out of my grasp. There is a discoloration on his ear, a plush yellowish blue, but whether it is fresh I couldn't say. A bruise. He shows me a better place where we can sit, next to the creek. Then I open the cake box tied with string. "Do you care for a sweet?" Marzipan. Sweet almond. *Topfenstrudal*.

Was it weeks or a lifetime ago when we were debating in an Good and Evil philosophy class whether it was ever right to take a life? One student argued that it was morally indefensible to ever kill and I brought up the boy. If I hadn't the professor likely would have, the boy being the supreme example of an "upsurge of the deviant into history." Wouldn't you eradicate him and save the innocents if you had the chance?

Green water rises between his knees, against my legs and thighs, warmer in places, then cold again. It is still forenoon, the same glowing tangerine sun, the same late spring day. The school room windows are thrown open and you can hear voices of the students reciting. Adam naming the animals. Each voice has a green leaf in it. Tinkling. I get up from my crouch, the boy floats face down in the water, my arms mindlessly stroke the thick air as if I am swimming. I am wading in clothes that

KLARA'S BOY

want to strangle my flesh, knickers and underskirts that swirl and billow. Painted Lady butterflies and bright light from all sides, and then I go back to the boy and draw him farther into the water.

««—»»

But let me return to yesterday.

My eyes tasted so many shades of green since I arrived and although I knew where I was—Fischlam, Austria—I needed time to acclimate and find appropriate clothes. I had no money, only my mother's engagement ring to turn into schillings, so I asked in the quaint shops until I found a jeweler who bought and sold stones. The sun shone brightly outside but it went dim as soon as I stepped inside. Lifting his splintery eyebrows, the jeweler examined the cut of the diamond, the spherical white gold band. Mustiness exuded from his clothing.

"*Gestehen*, confess where you got this?" He nodded at me to take a chair. "*Sitzen.*"

But I kept standing. How stiff his shirt collar was and impossible for him to turn without taking the whole head and right shoulder with it. Then I noticed how ornate the solitaires and broaches the jeweler surrounded himself with were. Amber stones in vaulted crowns like gobs of marmalade. A mélange of pink sapphire and diamond-studded lozenge silhouettes. He'd never seen anything like the clarity of the stone in my ring. "American," I said. That explained it. He had a sister in Chicago.

I asked him the date and the day as I'd been traveling, and had lost my sense of time, along with my wardrobe. 1895. April. Tuesday. My ear found a clock with gears and cogs, a pendulum ticking away the minutes so frightening to children. It began striking the hour. Three times. A sound I hadn't heard since my great-grandmother stopped the grandfather clock and purchased a digital radio alarm. She was a mother at twenty, a grandmother at forty, and at sixty, a great-grandmother. She turned sixty-three when she became my sole guardian. My mother and grandmother were killed when a grain elevator exploded. Our farm had been called the Three Mothers.

"*Wie?*" the jeweler snorted. Who would buy it? It was a beautiful ring, and I could see that he thought so too, its simplicity was its genius. My mother's engagement ring didn't sanctify marriage and a blank line appeared on my birth certificate where the father's name should be recorded. "*Es Tut mir leid aber.*" He was telling me sorry, it's too austere. The ring winked between his thick fingers.

I mentioned that a great-great-grandmother had worked as a lady's

maid in Linz. I spoke High German as a child. I did not alert him to the fact that the last time I set my alarm clock and got into bed it was April 2007. My great-grandmother believed fissures existed in time. You could stumble through one of those rips and weren't people constantly disappearing especially children and young girls. Everyone laughed when my great-grandmother claimed her father had been born in the Black Forest of the eleventh century. It was in the blood of some families to be time murderers.

The sun falling through a row of trees just outside perfumed the shop. You could almost lick the green from the air as light seeped through the window and pulled in the branches and leaves. I was warm, not a fan or air conditioner in sight, nowhere a three-prong plug where a dedicated wire might fit. Perspiration beaded my forehead and chin. A bell jingled and a woman in her early twenties strolled in, lost in her clothes, she had so many of them on. Knickers, an under slip, over slips, petticoats. "*Guten Tag.*" The jeweler and the woman addressed each other politely, "Frau Kepler." Her high-necked black dress fit her hips, and then flounced out around her thighs, trailing on the ground in the shape of a large garter snake. "Herr Schoender." She placed her gloved hand on the counter. Whatever garments she wore made her move like a rose dragging the entire bush, her face the bloom, the rest of her the roots and webs. She inquired after his health and tried not to stare at my naked hands. Then she saw the sparkle of my mother's ring between the jeweler's fingers. Her eyes were a brilliant blue above the lace and tucks of her dress collar. Frau Kepler could not pull them away from my mother's ring. "*Ich mag.*" I like.

Herr Schoender asked me to step with him to the opposite side of the room where he paid me in schillings for the ring. I had to let him look at me and not tremble. What did he see? A traveler in a flowered spring dress made from a fabric not familiar to him. In Chicago, he might be thinking, they present themselves like this. The absence of jack hammers and car alarms and sirens and cell phones hurt my ears but then I noticed the presence of a leaf brushing the window.

"The Fischlam school building. Do you know it?" I ventured to ask this jeweler with the weed antennae poking from his brows as he'd probably lived all his life in this green whisper world.

He told me he did, pronouncing the place name Fischlam quite differently.

"How would I get there?"

Providence had sent me it seemed. Sometimes there was a reason you'd gotten through an orifice of the time turtle, an undertaking you'd be bound to carry out. The boy's family farm was in Hafeld on a small hill

KLARA'S BOY

hidden by orchards on both sides. Apples. I knew much about the boy's family, especially his slow-witted sister, the elementary school in Fischlam, and then Lambach where the boy studied in the third grade and lived in the Benedictine Monastery. He had a lovely singing voice. An old wooden staircase led to the classrooms and up another staircase to the sleeping rooms. The stones used in the Monastery were beautiful and in the yard over the well, an archway and a shield where the crooked cross had been carved. I thanked the jeweler and took the money.

Frau Kepler had recommended a dressmaker on the next street and I made my way there. Horses neighed and bicycles flew by, one having one large wheel and a high seat. The streets were narrow, splitting into two and then three lanes, some leading nowhere. Handsome trees everywhere, a whole street grown over with frothy seed leaves like clotted green lace. The dressmaker Frau Bee was a tiny woman who cocked her head when I told her my fib of an ocean crossing and a lost trunk. That I liked to hike and bird watch. The clothing I desired would allow me freedom of movement. "*Ja. Ein deine schuluniform.*" And I nodded, yes, like a school uniform. Exactly. And it didn't have to be new, it only needed to be quick. Already impatient I asked her for a glass of water. I was terribly thirsty, having not drunk anything since arriving, and I needed to pee. "*Das bath?*" I asked. She showed me to a door behind which stood a chamber pot with a lid. From a hook a bouquet of dried flowers tried to mask the silty scent of urine. Was there running water anywhere? Flush toilets? I relieved myself and wiped my hands on a towel. Frau Bee did not offer me water.

My feet ached as it took energy to walk dragging these dresses, the undergarments and petticoats scraping against my thighs, while the pointed boots tightened their grip around my toes. There wasn't anywhere to rush to yet it was all so slow that I felt as if I were suspended from a piano wire. I strolled past a beer garden; there were trellises and vines and a group of young men in caps, toasting each other. Grasping their mugs, they rubbed them against the table until they made a humming then lifted them toward the sky streaked now with sunset. They drank and the mugs came crashing down, almost as one man.

It was too late to go to the school and find the boy. I kept searching for a café with clean water and a hotel where I would practice being confident as in a woman from America requesting permission to escort her nephew home from school. That might not be enough; a note from the father or mother might be required. I would have to write one. I passed through the spring's breath, the trees seeming to walk also past the houses and shops. Green larval cocoons strung themselves from new buds, alongside the twig

and leaf. I slowed and the dress bunched around me, and then I tripped and put the heel of my boot through the bottom of the skirt. Like the women many of the windows were overdressed in damask and lace.

The thirst made my blouse's high neck tighten at my throat. I took a right down one of those narrow streets where I stumbled upon Café Linz. Dusk entered the small sweet shop with me where tea candles flickered. I asked for strong black coffee and water, a carafe, if possible. Chairs huddled around tables and in the corner a balloon-back armchair and a writing desk offered solace to a man hunched over a pen and paper. He spoke aloud as he wrote searching for the correct words. Like politicians who start out at a trickle and then fanned by applause build to a wave surge of smoldering sophistry. In his mature years the boy's voice threw out so much blackness you needed your hands to see with. A charred bird of a voice. Words like wrought iron doors hissing not growing kisses or lilacs.

"Sachertorte?" the waitress suggested. I agreed. It was served on china, the shiniest plate, like those licked chicken bones that my great-grandmother would nibble on. I slid my fork through sweet chocolate dough as if it were a newly scooped ditch, one that was terribly soft to excavate because the diggers were allowed to use only spoons. The sweet chocolate dough was like that. And then the layer of apricot jam in the middle. "The Sachertorte is too dry," the serving maid said, coming with a saucer. "A heap of whipped cream needs to be added." In the demitasse cup I tasted coffee brewed in slowness and musky cinnamon. "This dessert was created for Prince Klemens Wenzel von Metternich," she informed me.

From a low table I plucked up a book by Dr. Daniel Gottlieb Schreber, edition 32, which I leafed through. The objective was to keep an infant from crying and the use of spanking. Never comfort a child when he cries. *Nein*. A spanking will make you the master of the child. I could hear words of the boy's feeble-minded sister. "*Our father was of great harshness in the education of his children and only spoiled me as the pet of the family. Often my brother was late getting home from school and got a spanking. Sometimes our father used his hand or belt and if supper had long to wait, he employed the stick.*" For my thesis I had written an analysis of the boy's syntax as compared to his sister's.

The serving girl wanted to gossip, around here it was mostly the same old faces, stiff like fir trees, nothing new. "What is it like in America?" She'd heard I was from Chicago and that a distant ancestor had lived here, a lady, a baroness who owned a deciduous forest. A baroness wouldn't have left her home country absent a revolution, but a lady's maid like my

KLARA'S BOY

great-great-grandmother was a different story. She would have wearied of emptying the slops and stringing up corsets.

My journey began to catch up with me and I could have curled up under the table or against the door that was kept open by an iron cocker spaniel door stop. I asked the serving girl if she knew of a hotel where I might stretch out. After the coffee and chocolate my blood pressure was rising into the red zone. I've always had a racing heartbeat and at six-years old, the same age as Klara's boy, I was condemned to bed for months. My illness was spent in great-grandmother's huge bed, eased by homemade chicken noodle soup and kolaches. The girl tried to press on me the Sachertorte's closest competitor the Sacher-Masoch Torte that used red currant jam and marzipan. "There was yet another—a puff pastry filled with vanilla cream. The Shillerlocken. "In honor of the German poet, Fredrich von Shiller," she said.

Luckily the sweet shop owner also let rooms and the serving girl led me up a narrow flight of stairs. Two doors opened off a landing and she showed me into the nearest. After the girl lit the Aladdin's lamp, I pressed a coin into her red-knuckled hand and she bowed and left me. Here a wash basin and a pitcher. The scent of a spring day struck me and I trembled in the breeze from an open window. The kerosene's clots of soft yellow suffused the darkening room. A fly buzzed, fidgeting inside a rose-painted floor vase.

I raised the window and looking up I thought of the feverish stars where I came from knocked out of the sky by the false light of the cities, the traffic all headache and ears, electromagnetic signals bouncing back and forth, sleep stolen by boom boxes and midnight road repair and satellites orbiting the planet and instant communication crisscrossing all creation. Death of silence. All the chatter and in-car navigation devices giving coordinates and everyone knowing exactly where he is by the insomnia that stretches in every direction. Death of solitude. I washed my face in tepid water and undressed, one layer after another, finding myself in the mirror, a pale anxious face with large brown eyes and dilated pupils like signals of another future. I shook the pins from my auburn hair and let it unravel over my shoulders.

Providence had chosen me and I knew how to do it. Hadn't I been raised on the Three Mothers Farm and witnessed my great-grandmother at sunrise slip the gunny sack over the shivering hen, letting the sack's dark put her almost to sleep before bringing her back into the sun. Then a sweep of the axe and the hen's body dropping and running, dropping and running and the neck spurting blood like a little boy peeing. I would

shake. I always wanted to comfort the blood and ask forgiveness of the feathers. My skin would goosepimple in the seconds between the taking and the killing—the awareness moment.

I fell back onto the bed, smelling the line-dried pillowcase. To taste the wind from sheets was something I'd almost forgotten. Piano trickled from the roof of a house into the gutter. *“He wanted to go to the Academy and become a painter but nothing came of it.”* I heard that sentence the instant I closed my eyes. The sister's words. *“My brother liked to throw rocks and lead other boys to chase rats. He believed that all boys like marching and painting their names on the sides of buildings and brawling. Once our mother asked if she suddenly became a rat would her son throw rocks at her. My brother answered that it was better to be prey than predator.”*

I pummeled my head against the pillow until at last my body disappeared into sleep. My brain waves went walking along a road under a sky gray as a grist stone. It wasn't long before I came to four women huddled together in the ditch: the mother in an undershirt and shorts, her daughter, maybe seven years old, naked with arms at her sides and not trying to cover her flat pink nipples or pubis, the grandmother in long underwear bottoms, forearms crossed over her breasts, and another woman, the daughter-in-law backhanded her beautiful hair out of her face, a reddish color like a strawberry before turning blood-ripe. They did not speak. They crowded together, the mother's arms around the grandmother, the girl against their bodies. The pretty one with all the tangling hair cocked her head, staring them down, the ones barking orders from the opposite ditch. I heard myself say, “I will do it. You can count on me.” Then the women were surrounded by men in black uniforms who wore the crooked cross.



I awoke to a bulkiness in my head. It was opposite of the hollowness that filled my awakening in the 21st century. I must get up, bathe, take the subway, buy coffee, tip the love cup, and pass the security sensors. This was the heaviness of the task compared to the comfort of the goosefeather quilt and the stretching of my toes over a mattress that went on forever. The house had long been stirring and I could hear the sheets in the next room being changed and a serving girl muttering to herself. Coffee brewing scented the hallway with its dark strong breath. It was the deepest quiet I'd ever listened to and I lifted my hands to the blurred light. My face felt sticky as marmalade and that same jelly trickled between my

KLARA'S BOY

breasts. Nerve sweat could turn fever-sticky. I could smear my fingerprints over the morning light like sticky entrails.

I ate a big breakfast. Boysenberries in cream, *palatschinke*, pancakes, cup after cup of delicious coffee. I bought the desserts which they put into a cake box. My stomach began bubbling and I tried to take my mind off the boy. I started to recite the highpoints of the year 1895 where I'd found myself. The word *feminist* was used in an English literary journal for the first time to describe a woman with the strength to fight her way to independence. A motorcar designed by Elwood Hayes was tested on Pumpkinville Pike and Germany's 53.2 mile Kiel Ship Canal connecting the North Sea with the Rhine was completed. Schwinn bicycles had their beginning as did the Underwood typewriter.

The sun shone pale as the rim of a water glass put down among the clouds. I set out on the long walk to the elementary school, the pointed boots biting my toes. A mass of gray clouds pushed away the blue and the whole sky filled with the quaking of leaves, a rustling that drove itself into my body. The beauty of that tinkling sky was proof that a creator existed. The ugliness of a sow eating her imperfect offspring a proof that He did not. I was hearing other words in my head, that interview I'd read with the boy's mentally deficient sister. *"When our mother was sick my brother bought her sapphire earrings. I remember them dangling on thin gold wires. Our mother's ears had always been pierced but our father did not buy her any jewelry. Uncle, she called him, always Uncle. Once he beat her about the face. He pulled one of the gold wires through her ear. Please, Uncle, she cried. Please."*

I shivered, yearning for my great-grandmother's wisdom. Shouldn't the father be stopped instead of the son? But how much of the father already seethed inside the son?

Beech trees and fir grew at the edge of the clearing and in the center of the acre sprouted a gingerbread structure with stairs and gabled roof and a door of patterned wood. I recognized the schoolhouse and on the far end of the property the creek that burbled between rooted banks, a stream with grazing sheep and a thickening of honey locust. I felt a beating in my body as if I had ten hearts not one. Like my great-grandmother's hens were scratching through flesh and trying to scuff seeds out of my chest.

I walked through the grass but a rain must have fallen earlier. The eyes of the grass blinked and their lashes wet themselves to my stockings. I took small steps dragging the dress through the damp meadow and by the time I reached the edge of the clearing recess had begun. I glimpsed the

sour schoolmaster, grey-bearded with a monocle. Seven or more of the bigger ones were playing. They chased something, a ball or can. A student with pale spectacles kicked the object, not looking to the left or to the right or even straight ahead but down past his rolled pant legs. I stayed hidden behind a tree, watching. When I looked up I noticed the next stand of hardwoods where a gigantic spider web encased a tree. I'd never seen such a thing, as if snow covered the beech in shimmer.

One student stuck out his tongue. They were leaping over each other, their mouths wagging. Another ran past kicking and stopping to scoop something up. "Adolph has a hunchback aunt," the taller one in pale spectacles jeered. "Adolph's sister is an imbecile." I saw the boy for the first time. The one who would disturb the sleep of history. Dark-haired with that cowlick many remarked on, a lock of hair that would sweat itself across his forehead when he pontificated, and his mother Klara's large spooked blue eyes. He scowled at the jeerers and his chin went up. My hands clenched. The string of the cake box cut my fingers. He lifted an eyebrow stopping them in their tracks and then waved for the taller boys to follow. Each scrambled to pick up a stone or a stick, galloping and guffawing, even the spectacled boy chuckling, but not the dark-haired boy, he did not laugh.

I heard more scuffling and saw they'd surrounded an animal that at first I took for a black cat but soon recognized to be a rat, thin and elongated. They must have flushed it from its burrow, and the creature, a brownish black with a tail longer than its head and body, blinked at the brightness with its poor eyes. It must be sniffing and listening for a way to escape, between which boy's legs. The boy with the cowlick, the six year old going on seven, took from his jacket pocket a wire contraption and baited it. From where I hid I could smell the sweetness of bacon. One of the boys threw nut meat on the ground and when the rat went to it the rest of the pack shouted and threw stones and hurled sticks striking it. The rat tried to flee pulling its strange cordy tail, skittering one way and then the other. These students could not know that in a hundred years scientists discovered that rats were not only excellent climbers and swimmers but that they were intelligent and laughed making vocalizations not audible to naked human ears. Yes, rats chirruped when tickled in certain areas so sensitive they were named tickle skin. The sticks seemed to have pointed tips and after a flurry of thuds and whacks and excited laughing, they'd succeeded in wounding the rat who squeaked and dragged its little body and the group seemed content with that.

"*Nein*," the dark-haired boy shouted. He gave the contraption to the spectacled boy who looped the wire around the rat's neck and swung him

KLARA'S BOY

up over his head. Then all the boys clamored to swing the rat now that its blood was trickling through the air.

“*Schüler!*” the schoolmaster called out. Pupils return to your desks.

The tall spectacled boy freed the wire from the neck of the rat and gave the contraption back to its owner. A whistle blew. The students in their lederhosen trotted toward the schoolhouse of a waning nineteenth century. The dark-haired boy walked at a jaunt but did not run. His face wore a smearsy expression as if the lips were sucking on an anise candy. I came out from behind the trees and found the dying rat, its neck almost severed from its body, the snout frothed with blood. I knelt down and the rat's hind paws quivered and the body relaxed. I set aside the cake box and scooped the newly dead creature into my hands, cradling its head in my right, its body in my left. I took the corpse to the creek and washed it, tore off some cloth from my underthings and wrapped the animal and placed it in the grass.

I saw how the boy had ordered the bigger boys with one word “*Nein*” to attack. “*Nein.*” His family was inbred like many others in this Austrian backwater, his mother happened to be his father's niece. And his sister commented on other oddities. “*Our mother's sister lived with us. We called her Auntie Cluck because she resembled a chicken with the stone of bone on her back and her shoulder lades sticking up like wings. Auntie Cluck kept the two fowls Herr Rooster and Frau Hen. I often watched the rooster as he rooted about at the end of the orchard. He was tame and a companion. The day came when my brother plucked up a stone and told me to toss it at Herr Rooster. It was only a game yet he ordered me again to hurl the stone. I threw it and Herr Rooster toppled over. Like a charade. But no matter how many tears fell on him, my feathered friend would not get up.*”

Standing beside the door holding a wooden pointer, the schoolmaster's brows arched like daddy-long-legs, the rest of his face trying to hide under the overabundant shrubbery of his facial hair.

“Herr Schoolmaster,” I said.

He bowed from the waist. “Fraulein.”

At last inside the schoolroom I breathed in the quiet of desks with inkwells. I explained that I was the boy's aunt, his father's youngest sister visiting from America. Aunt Effie. I'd been sent to fetch him home. I had a note because the boy himself would not recognize me. The schoolmaster took the paper and unfolded it. He held his head to the left side, and stared at me and the cake box. Always beware of an offering especially sweets, vinegar and rotten eggs might be more acceptable, his expression seemed to say. First I must offer him a pastry, I thought. I must look at him like he

is a man first and a schoolmaster second. The students pretended to be making their alphabet letters. The schoolmaster, his beard yellowed around his chin and soiled with tobacco, his lips almost black, glared out over the boyish bent shoulders, each clad in a white shirt and blue suspenders. I expected him to object, ask for my passport, some proof I was who I claimed to be. I lowered my head and then looked up at him shyly. “*Du magst Deine Topfenstrudel?*” So do you like strudel? I tapped the top of the cake box. “Marzipan?”

“Tasty. Tasty, indeed.” He smacked his lips. “Sweet almond.”

Sun shafted in the windows and struck the students’ hair. I had to stop my hand from reaching out to touch the shine of them all. After the schoolmaster threatened the class with punishment if they misbehaved, we stepped outside onto the veranda where I offered him strudel and cookies, watched the crumbs rain from his black lips, saw the pointy tip of his tongue extend to fetch them. The schoolmaster inquired after the boy’s parents and I answered that the mother had been ill and the father had written to me in America. I waited to hear his reply. But he rewarded me with the sounds of his jaw cracking as he chewed each sugary mouthful a disciplined twenty times. He mentioned apple beer in the cellar. Maybe another time I would like to sample it

Beyond the veranda I could see the three women and the girl climbing the hill in their bits of underwear. Like doilies. Arms at their sides, the mother, daughter, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter tottered on the lip of a ditch, wavering before the spring leaves, in the degrees below zero between.

“Fraulein, I will prepare the boy for his journey home. His parents complain that he arrives well past supper.”

The boy’s sister seemed to whisper in my ear. “*Our Auntie Cluck, the hunchback, cooked for us when our mother was too tired. The pork she’d bake in a cookstove and then pour lard over. The leftovers we’d take to the cellar where we had a cupboard and a pantry and the stone floor. Our father sat with us for supper although he ate only bread and curdled milk and my brother and I liked to watch him cut his thick slice of bread and whittle it into five strips and then dip them into the milk. Then he could always sleep well.*”

The boy followed the prints of his teacher’s boots across the stone landing. Tracking up the walkway he wiped his soles in the schoolmaster’s marigolds.

“*Tante,*” he said, squinting up at me. You could see the red marks a

KLARA'S BOY

thrashing had left over the backs of his legs. His lips had already taken on a permanent pout.

"I am your aunt," I said, nodding. "Your father sent for me."

Would he suspect a trap like the wire noose he used for swinging rats? His father illegitimate yet ever the household tyrant kept his side of the family hidden. The customs official might somehow have produced a relative, a long lost sibling. Aunt Effie of Chicago. The boy's face brightened, becoming pleasant when he spied the cake box. His eyes focused on my hands cracking the lid so he might take a peek at three tortes like royal triplets.

A paradise. The Sachertorte. Sacher-Masoch. The Shillerlocken.

Two petite flies lit.

Before his hand reached out I pulled away and opened the cake box even wider letting the treats blow him their kisses. His eyes widened, becoming enormous.

I told him, "We must walk."

He did not care to; instead he wanted to sit on his haunches and gnaw chocolate dough and apricot jam. Nein, his favorite word, that he spoke like a boy much older than six and a half, a precocious boy filled with misery, a father's daily beatings.

I started out and he stood unmoving. Would he follow me to the water? A shiver started in the center of my forehead and I felt it in my teeth. A quivering bird in my stomach. I twisted my wrist and if it had been a chicken neck, I might have wrung it.

"Right here." His foot stomped the ground and then he wheedled. "*Tante.*"

"Can we walk along the creek?" I asked, "It's so pretty." I promised I would let him eat all of the sweets and not make him choose one if he showed me the stream. Yes, all three. He agreed and we headed toward the trees that guarded the flowing water. I asked him about the sheep and who they belonged to, scratching their straggling fleece on the bark all day beside the creek. Were they unhappy? They had weak eyes and confused stomachs. In the stillness when the willows could be heard breathing, their switches striking each other, I opened again the box of sweets and watched his eyes widen with the blue light inside them, but instead of taking the torte he grabbed for the box with both hands. My turn to say the word. *Nein*. He wanted everything all at once, and then perhaps he would run. I had aroused his suspicions.

"So do you like your school uniform?"

He didn't answer.

“Wie viele Schuler sind in Deiner Schule?”

His lip curled as if I'd been enunciating badly.

Two more sheep were trailing along the trees, their fleece caught on the bark fluttered like hair caught in a comb. I asked the boy if he liked sheep. Nein. He preferred wolves. I offered him his first choice of a pastry. I tried to guess which ones his fingers would pick. He took the Sachertorte and held it almost daintily. In went the moist apricot jam. My head swam with watching him. Some of the gestures were already apparent, a bite of torte, then holding a portion of the sweet in his cheek, mulling it around like a political epithet, almost sucking it through his teeth. Then I saw them in the trees. Two girls raised by the neck from opposite ends of the same rope thrown over a limb. Slowly they went up and down. The dark-haired girl was larger and weighing more managed to reach her tiptoes, but gravity pulled at the blond and eventually both girls' necks broke. Black leaf shadow. Twigs and leaves in their hair like they'd been hiding with animals. There were men in dark uniforms watching, their trousers wrapped around their calves so they would slide inside their jackboots. *“Das Seesaw,”* one of them said, lighting a cigarette. Then he went to the body of the light-haired girl and raised her skirt.

We reached the bank of the creek and I opened the box and let him again choose between the two remaining tortes. He picked the Sacher-Masoch with currant filling. Like a gill now his lips gulping in the torte with the jam. A piece of chocolate smeared across his chin and a fly settled upon the lid of his left eye and I brushed it away. *“My brother was a scrapper. A little rogue.”* I felt the intensity of his gaze although he appeared not to be looking at me, but licking up the tips of his fingers. An ant crossed his knee next to a dollop of red. The boy asked me to press my finger on the ant who clearly wasn't intending to stay.

I shook my head. *“First we'll wade before we eat another sweet.”*

His chin jutted out, he refused to take off his socks. I sat and pulled the hem of my dress above my ankles and began to unhook the horrible buttons. This time I noticed that he watched with growing interest; perhaps women didn't take their shoes off in the presence of their children, or else women did not have feet. The breeze wanted to waft the green from the creek and willows threw their hair into the water. A perfect spot to ambush the Moloch lying in wait for this child. I would save him. How many words had been thrown into the air trying to explain him? Madman, neuter, racist, spellbinding orator, charismatic, vegetarian. The boy saw so much human meat in the Great War that he could not stomach the feel of slippery flesh in his mouth. He was terribly fond of pastries.

KLARA'S BOY

How cool the air felt to my cheeks yet the inside of my head burned. I followed his tongue straining at crumbs. He stuffed the rest of the red jam into his mouth and hesitated, stealing a glance at me. I nodded and set the cake box between us. You must eat, little psychopathic god. Eat. The boy squeezed up the last of the torte. The Shillerlocken sat firmly upon its paper lace. He slipped his fingernail between and the doily lifted. Under it were twin girls lying in a wooden bunk told to sit up by the black-haired doctor who caressed their cheeks. Afterwards, he had them put their hands over their heads and when they raised their trembling arms he used a hypodermic needle to inject poison into the first twin's heart chamber and then the second twin. Their beautiful intelligent eyes went out. A lullaby concocted with phenol, petrol, chloroform.

The boy's eyes almost rolled in his head. The child before his crimes. Innocent before the last marzipan jewel encased in white chocolate. He promised his followers a fuller life in death. Already the Eastern Front simmered in his eyes, the little Cossack ponies bleeding in his nostrils, the soldiers at sixty degrees below zero, anuses congealed. The pack horses lugging the supply wagons and guns, muzzles pulled back, mares and geldings grinning wildly, freezing in bitter black night while the men groveled on all fours, a herd of mud neighing and dying. Master race.

I heard the leader's sister's voice burbling with the creek. *"I lent my brother money when he was broken. After our mother and Auntie Cluck died, I sometimes tried to cook but the fire in the stove burned hot, the food dried up and was too crippled to eat. He liked apples only if they were cut for him, sliced into fours with the bark peeled."*

The sugar made the boy seem drunk and he swayed, taking off his shoes. He dropped a stone from his pocket, and then tiptoed down the bank. His eyes traveled over the bushes. Had Providence warned him? Schoolboy with the red jam and chocolate greed, his eyes not without their suspicion. In the brightness I could see the hand of the father on his body. A bruise on the ear gray like a piece of mold and a yellowing under the right eye, a red welt on the chin, a black and blue fingernail on the left hand. There among the trees, sitting on a fallen log are the three women and a girl of seven. In each of their hands a pale blade of grass.

The smell of green rot in the willows swept downward toward the ground.

It was time.



Flies sup on the last crumbs of white chocolate. Their feelers twist like jeweled umbilical cords. I knead the water, wade deeper toward the middle of the creek where the fleece and turds are golden against the foam. The sun is shining through his earlobe, small and threaded like a cat's ear. How like lilies the bottoms of his feet. The water passes my hips and wraps my skirt around my legs. Yes, he has five toes on each foot, flesh feet and not hooves, eyes not ant pilgrimages in his sockets. And when I turn my head there is the dark-haired woman and the blond see-sawing in the trees only now their hands are free and they sit in a swing, kicking, enjoying the breeze. The sky turns to a heavily wooded cleft, tiny embankment with no place to climb. His narrow chest is whiter and his lungs have filled with water. I close my eyes and use my fingers, to feel for the inside of praying, a slightly indistinct mutter. The women draw closer, their bodies covered in leaves and whisper.

THE GIRL WHO
WATCHED

light a cigarette, the one cool thing in the room. Through the hole where the air conditioner used to be I watch the S&J Deli and Liquor sign blinking. Gasoline fumes push inside along with white lilacs and black fruit, a street beginning to rot. Two puffs and I grind out the butt and light another. One of the headlights traveling back and forth might be Demetrius. There's the river and across it, Manhattan's shining buildings twinkling like they're filled with drowning stars.

In the bottom dresser drawer a hundred and seven dollars are waiting for him. At first I wouldn't do the work but he kept telling me he'd love me more if I did. The sun's about to come up. It's better in the dark. I don't see the three hooks in the wall they call a closet or the thin quilt that covers a stained mattress or the chicken bones under the bed. He'll want money when he gets here. When he sent me over to the Great Wall of China 24 Hour Take-Out, he said, "Don't give cash unless you have to." When I got back with his crab lo mien he was gone, rushing out so fast he'd dropped his key. Demetrius loves Chinese food almost as much as he does women. In Newark there's a restaurant called The Red Egg. For his birthday he ordered braised shark fin soup. \$55 a bowl. That cost a little more than two blowjobs. I picked up the key and squeezed my hand over its teeth.

Demetrius and I met in a program. I was a runaway from Bromley Brooks School for Troubled Girls and he'd been arrested for possession. In group we sat next to each other. He took me, Tabitha, and broke her and made TeeTee out of the pieces. I reach for my cigarettes. The pack's empty. That means I've smoked twenty Newports since he's been gone. I take a drink of red wine from a sippie cup. I didn't know my real mother. Whoever she was left me with her boyfriend and took off. Was the

THE GIRL WHO WATCHED

boyfriend my father? My adopted parents tried to find out, but couldn't. I don't have a birth certificate. Maybe someone custom ordered a baby who didn't exist.

A cab turns the corner, cruising up to the hotel. The hairs rise on my neck when Demetrius gets out and there's a girl with him. Footsteps on the outside stairs stop, starting again. My eyes burn, I rub them but it still feels like sand is crawling over them. Maybe I've always cried in my sleep. There's a banging on the door. I stare at the sound. It gets louder.

"Tee, open up," he says in his medium nice voice.

"Who's that with you?" I press my check to the metal door. I'm not letting her in.

"A girl who needs help. Her car was towed."

She has a car. More than we have. I crack the door with the chainlock still on. He's in the hall with a mulatto girl who is dressed in a jean mini with silver buckles and black halter. Over her arm she's carrying a jean jacket, silver epaulettes on its shoulders. She's tiny and beside her Demetrius appears like a giant. He's thirty-two and keeps his head shaved but on his perfectly shaped face he wears a mustache and a tiny goatee. An asteroid tattooed on his neck spurts blue.

"TeeTee this is Danielle," he says, his lip curling. "Let us in."

"No," I grunt.

"Listen, Danielle's had a bad night. After the car got towed, her friend passed out on the street. EMS showed up and so did the police. Her purse got locked in the trunk. She was wandering along West Side Highway, trying to get to River Vale."

"So you were in the city," I say softly. "Thanks for leaving me a note." I slide off the chainlock.

Demetrius pushes into the room but the girl stays in the hallway wobbling in her sparkly pair of sandals. She rests a shoulder against the wall. Her hair is spiral ringleted in Shirley Temple curls. "Thank you so much," she says, trying not to slur. Demetrius goes back and she leans on him because she's having trouble standing up. From far away you might take them for a couple but I can tell she doesn't want to come inside. She doesn't want to be a couple with him. He flips on the overhead light, a stained bulb without a shade, and then he escorts her into the room, a rich girl from River Vale. How do you get dirt on a light bulb she must be wondering? She needs a ride home and her calls to her boyfriend aren't going through. Demetrius takes her jacket, shows me the label, Jean Gaborit, then looks down at my white jeans. There is a handprint on each knee. He glances at the sippie cup dirtied by the print of my lip.

“Go pay the cab driver,” Demetrius orders, his dark eyes glazed.

I don’t move. The burning fills my cheeks. I don’t want this girl here. What’s he going to do, try to turn her out? This is my home no matter what. The girl standing in her expensive outfit makes the room dirtier. She looks about eighteen, younger than me by two years or so. Her brown eyes slant like she’s a mix of Chinese and black. Really pretty. She glances at my unwashed hair with her chink eyes. It’s blond and long and you can see the comb marks because there’s no water in this room and the shower drain is plugged in the bathroom down the hall.

“I’ll give you the money. You go pay the driver.”

His eyes flash and his cheek twitches. “Go pay if you want some of the present I bought.”

I snatch two twenties and head outside. The cab’s waiting and the driver beeps the horn. I miss a step and almost trip. So you bring a slinky Jersey girl home with you. What does she think about a guy who doesn’t even have money to pay the cab? Not really a way to impress a River Vale girl. There’s a breeze outside and for an instant I feel like walking away from Demetrius and the Park Avenue Hotel and the pipe. I’ll become a Luna moth with huge pale green wings. I’ll fly away.

“You’re an extremely intelligent girl,” the counselor at Bromley Brooks School for Troubled Girls babbled. She had a flat-top haircut and a stomach. The rest of her was scrawny. I’m sure she said that to all the girls. “I’m not smart,” I sassed her, “and neither are you.” She flinched, like I’d slapped her. Then I felt bad. But how could I be smart? I hated history. I hated literature. All the stories people told about themselves, as if they were so important, as if being two-legged gave you bragging rights. I liked chemistry and the combinations of ethers to make new compounds. Rocks on fire, hurtling through space. “The liberal arts aren’t smart enough for you, Tabitha. Physics would be a challenge,” the science teacher said.

Instead of flying I lean in the cab window and ask “How much?”

“Thirty dollars,” he answers, his face made of brown stone. He wears a burgundy turban, this Indian Jain. Weehawken has a whole community of Jains, who are vegetarians and believe everything has life and you must eat very little and cover even your mouth. I know because Jains own the hotel.

I walk back to the outside stairs and stop at the vending machine. When Demetrius first found me we cuddled at night and he sang things he made up or second grade sing along songs. I loved waking late in the afternoon and treating myself to breakfast from the vending machine. The M&Ms always hang up after the coin slot swallows 75 cents, so you have

THE GIRL WHO WATCHED

to drop in another three quarters and both bags fall. If it's your last 75 cents never hit the M&Ms. I haven't told Demetrius that. My secret. Like the fact I was dropped off at Child Welfare Services at around age five, holding onto a stuffed animal. I don't remember much from before my adopted parents brought me home. Maybe the sound of the M&Ms reminds me of the before time. I can picture a little blond girl who hasn't learned to talk. She's in a room crowded with boxes and feeling her way between them to the box where her stuffed dolphin sleeps. He's made of terrycloth, blue and white, with a button eye, only one. Maybe it's a motel room and there's a vending machine in the hall where candy bars fall. She tucks Dolphy under her chin, curls up on the floor and licks his button eye. It's dark except for bits of light shining in from under the door. Sometimes feet walk by and block the light, sometimes the door opens and the feet have legs and eyes. They march in and belong to the father man. "Please," the little girl wants to say. The feet have hands that pick her and Dolphy up and put them to bed. Then the feet get into bed.

The clerk is at the front desk in the lobby. He's studying, doesn't look up. When I climb the stairs to our floor the smell of diapers hits me. The broken ice machine. Demetrius is waiting outside the community bathroom, his blue shirt unbuttoned over his black jeans. He's a big man, likes to eat. "What are you going to do with her?" I ask, inhaling. "Did you just put cologne on for her?"

He scratches his nose. "She's inside. You better close your mouth."

The toilet flushes and the girl sways in the doorway. She's tugging her skirt down and wobbling. Demetrius' eyes bulge like a toad's. "The call to my boyfriend didn't go through," she says, shivering. "But he'll come for me. I'll go downstairs and wait."

He cocks a thumb toward the street. "You can't wait out there. It's a bad neighborhood." He's using his mild voice, pure whipped cream.

"No, no," she protests wiping her almond eyes. "I'll be fine. It's almost light."

"Danielle," he says, like her name is his favorite word, "we're going to smoke a little bowl."

There's the hook, the same one he used on me. But it might not work because of the dirty linoleum in the bathroom and the pee puddles. She doesn't want to touch anything or even breathe through her nose. He keeps coaxing her in, come take a few tokes, inside the door, a little farther now. "Sit down," Demetrius says once he's persuaded her. He points to the unmade bed but she chooses the rickety chair. Her eyes sweep over the squalor, the framed pictures of dusty trees and clouds, the burn marks

arrayed over the carpet. On the dresser soggy containers of take-out trickle brown liquid. Fish maw in broth. He finds the pipe and lighter and hands them to me. “Get the rock going,” he says. “I have some reefer to finish off.” Demetrius lights a joint, then turns the lit coal around in his mouth, blowing smoke into her mouth. The girl pushes her ringlets away from her face, coughs. Shakes her head, no more, doesn’t want any. Her chink eyes meet mine. She’s glad I’m here.

He crushes the joint out on the carpet, pops Lil’ Wayne into my CD player and pumps up the volume. I focus on the pipe. There’s a beige chunk on the steel wool I can’t help smiling at it. He’s teasing the girl, trying to get her to stand up and dance. She stiffens, tells him no. His Adam’s apple is prominent when he clenches his jaw, he doesn’t like anyone to say no to him.

I inhale and let the white smoke envelope me. The room fills with light particles. I want to stroke the air, kiss it. I swallow more smoke until my eyes feel crooked in my head. I drift somewhere in that blankness before my parents adopted me. I see the little blond girl again. She can’t find Dolphy. It’s the room with boxes only something is different, the boxes are stacked to the side and there’s a sheet hanging from the ceiling. The father man pours red juice into a cup. “Here, baby, drink this,” he says, smiling. The blond girl won’t open her mouth and his smile goes out. “Mind your daddy, understand? Or I’ll part your hair.” That means he’ll pull her hair. She swallows the sticky sweet like raspberry jam, burps. Gooiness trickles down her chin. “Drink up if you want Dolphy back.” Another swallow, but better. He calls it dew from a bleeding water lily. Maybe she imagines that. Then his calloused hand holds hers and he leads her behind a curtain. He won’t let go of her fingers. She whimpers when she sees the bed and a tall man lying in it. “If your kid doesn’t dig Chilean wine, I’ll finish the bottle,” he says. There’s a stocky short man holding a camera and looking at her through it. Her stomach tosses with the red that tastes like her tongue cut up. “There’s your dolphin, baby.” And there Dolphy is, her blue and white terrycloth friend, beside the tall man. He’s tapping Dolphy’s button eye. “Come get your dolphin.” A chair leg squeaks. “I’d like to see her white body. Pull down her pajamas. Powder her.” I smell talc. A dry snow accumulates on my skin.

I pass the pipe over to Demetrius, brush the strands off my forehead. He gulps at the pipe until veins stand out in his neck. When it’s spent he sets it down, half sits on the girl’s lap. His face glows from the smoke and he laughingly pulls the girl up from the chair, wedging her against the dresser. “Greyhound, I’m not going to leave you alone until you dance

THE GIRL WHO WATCHED

with me.” It happens fast, his tongue flicks over his full lips and he smacks her. You can hear the crack of his hand.

Danielle rocks, cupping her cheek. “You hit me.” There’s surprise in her voice. Her halter sags away from her body. She wants to go home. Forget her boyfriend, now she just wants her father to come. Caught underage drinking or not.

“Dance with me. I know a greyhound like you can move,” Demetrius snorts, chuckling. “I intend to see you shake your booty. Come on, Danielle, I’m not going to hurt you.”

The sun is trying to dig into the room through the dusty drapes and the air conditioning hole. Let her be, Demetrius, let her go.

She’s shivering in the sweaty room. “One dance? Then you’ll let me go?”
“One dance.”

In the beginning we always danced and he bragged that I could really move. He told me about his mother and her men friends. My adopted parents were proud of my white-blond hair and blue eyes not because they were brown haired and brown skinned, but because any color pleased them. When I was seven and eight strangers would ask me where I was going with that black man. “He’s my father,” I’d tell them, proud of his strong arms and broad shoulders, proud of how handsome he looked in his favorite gray suit with black shirt. My mother supervised a child welfare agency and that’s how I floated into their lives. She taught me my first word. Thumb.

Demetrius takes her wrists and draws her against him; his hands go to her buttocks squeezing each cheek. She’s quivering like she wants to be a moth too but trying to dance. And he’s grabbing her up against the dresser where the take-out is stacked. Lo mien noodles are slithering out of the containers like hair skeletons.

I cross the room. I stir the silver fish broth with my finger, breaking its golden skin. I eat a bean pod so bright it tastes like the green was shel-lacked on. I tug at my lucky necklace. A long silver chain with a house key attached to it. It belongs to an apartment in the Theater District where my adoptive parents and I would spend the night after taking in a Broadway show. Their friends owned it and would invite us all. In case we got separated my parents made me a key necklace. A good luck charm. Now I’d like to be inside the keyhole. I sink against the wall and drift off. Sometimes when we went to the special apartment for whole weekends I cooked. My parents liked how I could make something out of nothing. I must have been twelve. In the apartment I found their coin collection. Not

exotic coins but quarters and Susan B. Anthony dollars. I took some of them every time we'd spend a night. I'd find a way to get to the desk with the drawer filled with silver dollars.

The squeeze dance ends and Danielle tries to disappear from him, prying her slowly free. He grabs under her skirt, throws her on the bed. "Please," she whimpers, trying to turn her head to find me. Please doesn't work. Demetrius yanks down her skirt and rips off her halter. She lunges up from the bed, grasping anything. Fish maw soup, the plastic forks wrapped with napkins, rice, fortune cookies scattering. This time he throws her hard. I hear the thump of her head against the wall. Another thump. "Don't," she cries out. Don't doesn't work any better than please.

I can't move. The little blond girl uses the please word too. The camera keeps looking for her. The tall man keeps his arms around her. Too bright. The red juice goes down her throat. Red juice poured over her body. Heat burns through her mouth into the bones of her face. On the wall there's a picture of a woman lying in an aquarium and long strands of hair wrapped around her neck.

Danielle must scratch him because he's hitting her. She must cry out because his fingers are on her neck. I watch her fingers tap along the dresser, find a plastic fork. I don't hear anything as the fork rises and falls. He doesn't even feel its prongs. I can taste that far-off stickiness, that musky red. My mind goes out. My tongue sticks to the side of my mouth. Danielle screams again and he covers her head with a pillow and presses down with his elbows. Don't, Demetrius. You can't hold people down; you can't make them do what you want. All the movement of a mattress and the softness you can't get a grip in.

He told me stories from his childhood. That once he dripped Karo Syrup onto his cat's fur, then pulled its tail and laughed at its tongue quivering like a bleeding heart flower petal from its mouth. Flies formed a cloud around the cat. How can you care for a brute? What's wrong with you? Wake up. But he's strong, his legs, solid and well shaped. "You have the smoothest skin I've touched," he said. I told him my softness came from a bottle of coconut deep tanning oil. He got angry. "You spoil everything. Why would you tell a man that? You take a compliment and throw it back in his face. Stupid."

Fish swim in. Eel-like beings with bone rings instead of scales. Vertically swimming fins vibrating into tiny propeller blurs. The green beans are swimming too. Fortune cookies bob. A pompadour fish quivers past. My hands are too heavy to lift but they move when Demetrius tells

THE GIRL WHO WATCHED

them to. I help him. The floor seems a long way down and my shoulders weigh too much. We roll her onto her side, one inch at a time until we lift her off the bed. The room is perfectly still. His thumbs still show against her windpipe, pushing. Her eyes bleed two drops of rain. I saw her heart stop, and then he made me touch her. The floor smells of decaying lilies. He pulls her into a gym bag. The room begins to die. "She did it to herself. She didn't have to scream. Who was she kidding; walking dressed like that along West Side Highway? What are you looking at? You want to be next?" The sky has begun to crack open. I'm deep in the ceiling, leaving behind all that remains of me. Buoyancy. I'm not bobbing to the surface or sinking. I've achieved weightlessness.

I'm walking but don't feel the sidewalk. The air has a metal taste and a heat welding it to my skin. Bleach, ammonia, Pine Sol. The sky is yellow and heavy. I want to push it away. We walk into the Denise Grocery on Park Avenue in Weehawken. "TeeTee," the cashier Denise greets me, already plunking down a pack of Newports. She's a mannish Latina who loves to sell the Mega-Million numbers. I'm watching her eye the scratches on Demetrius' arm, jagged where the girl's fingernails dug in. Like the cliff edge she hung onto. He's changed into blue jeans with the back pockets stylishly frayed and a red t-shirt. He pulls me into the aisle where the cleaning products are. "Ammonia and bleach. That's what we need," he tells me under his breath, but he might as well be shouting. There's Mr. Clean with his shaved head. A bleached Demetrius. His white eyebrows lift like angry question marks. Maybe he's about to uncross his arms and scold. Now you've done it. Don't expect me to wash that. The rest have grinning faces. Choreboy. Ajax, Bounty. Scouring, scrubbing, wiping.

"Looks like you've got a big cleaning project," the dark haired Denise comments.

"So we do," Demetrius says, cutting her off, then walking back to the cooler section and grabbing a Coke. "You want a drink, TeeTee?"

I shake my head. Maybe I won't ever be thirsty again. I'm hoping that the girl won't be there when we get back to the room; that she wasn't really hurt. If she's still there then as awful as yesterday was, today will be worse and every day after. He needs me to help him clean; he needs me to get to work today, immediately. Why did you have to do that?

Denise has given me free packs of Newport's and Cokes before. She wears a pink t-shirt and a blue baseball hat turned to the side and her cheeks are rosy and smile even when her mouth doesn't. "Do you know you can't smoke in jail anymore?" she asks.

That can't be right can it? Who would need cigarettes more than people in jail? Why did she ask that? I'm sure she knows. Like everyone in the hotel. Like the desk clerk.

I lift my feet, press them down. We pass the front desk. The clerk Mani must be doing a double shift. "What's he looking at me like that for, huh?" Demetrius hisses. Mani's not staring at all, he's studying. The front desk phone rings. It sounds miles away.

Demetrius opens the door, pushes me inside. I don't recognize his hand. I used to always respond to his touch. I liked his build like nothing could ever hurt me when he was by my side. I look around. There is the same air conditioning vent hole that I stared out earlier. Now early morning sun trickles in. Everything is different in a place that has a body in it. The whole room is stopped now.

"I saw this on TV; bleach gets rid of DNA evidence," he says, then his hand tightens around my forearm and he pulls me to him.

His fingers could press all the way through my arm and I doubt I'd feel them at all. I can't look in his face; I turn, crook my neck, and study the blinds and the mustaches of dust that sun brightens. Sun disinfects. There's nothing like sunlight. Not even Mr. Clean. There is the laundry bag, the shape of the girl inside. "You're going to look at me," he says. "You're going to kiss me. Then we're going to clean her and you're going to pick up this nasty room." I keep straining to see into the ceiling crack. There's my parents' house. They have three real grown-up children of their own. Belinda, Wallace, Emma Wild. But they've gone off to college, married, moved away. They were afraid of me. Thanksgiving they all came home and filled the house in Summit. I made centerpieces for mother. Indian corn, acorn squash, butternut squash and assorted gourds around a crepe paper turkey. I could peer through the orange of the crepe paper tail. I liked the color it made whatever was behind it. At the table everyone laughed. I was the only one alone, even when Demetrius sat with me.

"Are you afraid to look at me?" he demands.

"Why did you bring that girl here?" The words fight their way out of my mouth. I'm seeing through the orange of the crepe paper.

"Come on, TeeTee, you know that didn't mean anything. I'm a one woman man."

Next door someone coughs, starts, stops, and then can't stop. There's a movement in the bag, I see a drawing in of breath, I startle. Demetrius hears it. He grabs the plastic bag with cleaning products, dumping them onto the floor. He unknots the laundry bag, pulls the girl up by her hair. There's hair missing from her scalp. He puts the plastic bag over her head.

THE GIRL WHO WATCHED

There's still time. I'll run. I'll scream. But I can't. I can't move at all. I brought Demetrius to meet my family. He ate the Virginia ham topped with pineapple slices and the new potatoes. My stomach shrank. I picked marshmallows out of the Jell-O salad. They reminded me of teeth. I mixed marshmallows and chunks of new potato. They asked him where he worked. He told them he was a bouncer. But you could tell that Belinda and Wallace didn't even believe that. I didn't want to be there but there was no where else to be on Thanksgiving. I liked best being alone in the house. What little noise I made the willow carpet absorbed. I wandered looking out the windows. I had different thoughts for each window.

The body is quiet now and there are bruises, huge black and blue blossoms on her neck and breasts, everywhere the blood settled. Her skin lightens and her green eyes stare. Two Luna moths. I can't stop looking into her eyes. I didn't want her here at all. Wasn't it enough that Demetrius had me? I suffered for him. The cockroaches skitter over the dresser, the shrimp lo mien. One has rolled over onto its back and all its legs are shivering. Poor thing, I pick him up on my fingernail and flip him onto his stomach.

We carry her body into the shared bathroom. I've never carried anything so heavy. He hooks the door from the inside, takes a towel and wets it with bleach. Pour it on," he tells me. I unscrew the Mr. Clean. The white eyebrows arch higher. The earring shines like a golden knife. The girl's clothes are gone, her white mini and black halter must have crawled away. She's tiny, but long-waisted. Her head falls back, thumps on the sink. Demetrius rips open the paper towels, runs the shower.

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Lord Camelot Apartments. I open the refrigerator door, reach inside. An envelope of soy sauce and four pitted olives in a jar of yellow water. When I look out the window I'm high enough up so no one can see me yet I can still make out people on the sidewalk below, slipping through the mist that the street sweeper stirs up. Demetrius isn't out there. He's under arrest and the police are trying to find me, but I'm not anywhere they know about. I'm in a safe apartment where it's Tuesday and the couple who own it come to Manhattan for theater weekends and not every weekend. They're those friends who haven't seen me since I was ten years old. My key necklace opened the door. After my hair dries I'm going out for milk. I'm going to bake a cake and I need milk. I'm going to make this

cake from scratch, because there are containers here with flour and sugar and cupboards with vegetable oil and vinegar cruets and oregano. A saltine cracker is shipwrecked in the sugar that disintegrates when I nudge it with a fork. Flour reminds me of snow and coconut flakes and dried apricots are especially nice. I like separating egg whites from yolks but I feel sadness for the yolk. I wish I hadn't been born. Not to be like this. A ceramic cow on the stove stares at me. Sad sweet eyes. She's so covered in grease I see the whorls my thumbprint left when I touched her. If I make this cake things will be better. I'll eat it all or I'll give it away.

In the bathroom everything I touch feels old. Products I've never seen on deli shelves. Henna. Packets you mix with warm water and pour over your hair. You would think the electricity might not work, but the couple keeps it on always wanting the possibility to exist, that they could do a weekend in Manhattan. I stir the henna with a fork and lean over the sink and pour it over my hair. I try not to meet my own eyes. I will not look at what they saw. Such an odd bathroom, dark and small with a red shower curtain. The apartment has a pall like the air has been breathed over and over.

While I'm waiting for my hair to change color I explore more of the kitchen. It eases me to measure the flour into cups. I like the friendly feel of leveling it off with a butter knife. Brown sugar is my favorite after flour, the way you can pack it and try to be happy.

At last my hair glows black. It makes me look pale and spooky, my blue eyes pointy like the tips of icicles. I walk into the bedroom and the desk is there under the window with the yellow curtains. Funny scalloped curtains. I slide the drawer open. She's not so pretty is she? Susan B. Anthony silver dollars. At least a hundred of them.

Any sounds I make are lost in this big building of actresses and singers. I lie down on the floor, reaching for what I took from the hotel. The one thing that belongs to me. I pull Dolphy from the paper bag that I stapled and taped. Dolphy smells spitty like long ago. I hold his terrycloth body. I kiss his eye. Oh, Dolphy. He stays cool and soothing against my burning face. Feet pass outside the window. All these flights up. Hello, I say. Will you come in?

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