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Down Hullbeck

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Down Hullbeck

Isabella King

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in English
under the advisement of Marilyn Sides.

April 2018

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Preface

After my first year at Wellesley, I returned to my hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio with an altered view of the place that I had taken as the epitome of normalcy. It wasn't so much that the world of home and the world of Wellesley operated on wildly different levels—although there were disparities—it was that being in a different place made me look at my hometown and its people in a different light. In some ways, to truly see my home I had to leave it. When I returned to Wellesley after that summer, I enrolled in Marilyn Sides' Short Narrative creative writing class. I found myself gravitating towards telling stories about Kentucky and Ohio, the places I viewed as my cultural homeland. This was a change in focus for me, since much of my previous creative writing efforts had featured stories about long adventures and magical worlds. These new stories were remarkably grounded and inward facing in comparison. After completing that class, I knew that I wanted to pursue a creative writing thesis. I wanted to produce a cohesive set of work that addressed the people and places I cared about most.

Down Hullbeck is a collection of stories following the lives of eight different characters living in Hullbeck, Kentucky, an imaginary town in the Appalachian foothills. With each consecutive story, characters reemerge, helping the reader not only understand them more deeply, but also to understand the town itself. The inspiration for these stories comes primarily from my own family history and from stories told by friends.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Marilyn Sides for her invaluable advice and guidance throughout this process. Without her commitment to editing and talking with me about my work, this project would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my friends and family for their unwavering support, and for allowing me to use them, and their stories, as inspiration.

Kelly Baker

Leanne and Kelly sat on the steps of an old apartment building just off Main Street. Kelly could see the door to Edith's Ice Cream Parlor swing open and shut as children and parents entered empty handed and exited with full cones and paper cups of ice cream. A group of younger boys, maybe twelve or thirteen, sat along the curb in front of the parlor. In the hot sun, their ice cream dripped urgently down the sides of the cones and onto their hands. One boy with a cone dipped in chocolate struggled with a constant stream of vanilla ice cream escaping from a crack in its shell, forming a puddle on the pavement in front of him. The other boys laughed and made slurping noises to egg him on. Kelly recognized a few of them as friends of her younger brother Scott, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The day was hot, with the kind of stagnant, hazy sunlight that zapped Kelly's energy, making even the smallest exertions difficult. The sisters had taken refuge on the steps to escape the blazing sun. Kelly realized that they must have been sitting there a while because Leanne's legs were now directly in the light, her pale freckled skin already tinted red. She burned easily, like most red heads. Leanne did not seem to notice or care. Her head was buried in her phone, unaware of the encroaching sunlight.

"You're gonna get burnt," Kelly warned her.

Leanne looked up from her phone. Kelly knew she feared sunburns above most things and she didn't blame her, because every time it happened her skin bubbled and peeled. Not to mention her nose turned almost the shade of her hair, and that was not a pleasant sight.

"Scoot over," Leanne ordered. Kelly scooted over so her sister could sit in the shade.

Leanne resumed texting and Kelly resumed people watching.

“We should go get some ice cream,” Kelly said, looking past Leanne. The boy with the melty ice cream cone had dropped part of the chocolate shell on the pavement and the other boys were trying to get him to eat it anyway. He picked it up and split the piece in half. He and the boy next to him popped the chocolate shells in their mouths with satisfaction.

“I don’t really want any ice cream,” Leanne told her, “but you can go get some if you want.”

“I don’t want to go over there alone,” Kelly said.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” Kelly admitted.

“Well don’t be a baby, if you want ice cream go get some.”

“Don’t call me a baby.”

Leanne glanced up from her phone and looked over to the ice cream shop. The boys still sat on the curb, one was poking the melted puddle of ice cream with a stick.

“Ok fine, let’s go then.” Leanne stood up abruptly from the stoop. She spun on her heel and marched over to the Edith’s Ice Cream Parlor with the quick precision of a dancer. Kelly scurried up after her not even looking for cars as she crossed the street.

Soon they were through the door. Behind the counter, an older woman whose dark hair was streaked with white prepared ice cream for a group of little girls still in their soccer uniforms. Edith Garvey, who owned the shop, was notoriously sarcastic to adults, forgiving to children and indifferent to teenagers.

“What can I get you?” she called over her shoulder while still scooping ice cream for the last of the soccer players.

“Can I get a scoop of chocolate cherry?” Kelly asked.

Edith nodded her head yes.

“And for you?” she asked Leanne.

Leanne did not answer.

Kelly swiveled her head to look back at her. Leanne was staring out the window at two boys around their age were standing on the sidewalk beside a spectacularly silver motorcycle. The younger boys that had been sitting on the curb investigated the motorcycle with notable envy.

“Leanne?” Kelly called.

Leanne turned to face Edith.

“What can I get for you?” Edith repeated, throwing sour looks over at the boys on the curb. She had never been married in her life and could not suffer the absurdities of men displaying themselves like fat tom turkeys strutting around the yard. Leanne, however, was intrigued. She skimmed the menu quickly, hardly interested in what she was getting.

“I’ll have a sundae.”

“What kind of sundae?” Edith asked, her tone growing stonier by the moment. Leanne glanced over to the boys. The taller of the two sat astride the motorcycle leaning his weight on one leg then the other. She looked back, head swiveling gracefully.

“Neapolitan,” she answered. Edith turned away from her. She dug at the ice cream aggressively. With a flourish of finality she placed the scoop of chocolate cherry and the Neapolitan sundae on the countertop. Kelly’s simple scoop looked impossibly plain beside the Neapolitan sundae.

“I thought you didn’t want any ice cream?” Kelly asked her sister.

“Well, I changed my mind,” Leanne snapped

Kelly snorted. She could see the wheels in her sister’s head turning. Kelly too looked over toward the boys.

The door dinged on their way out. The girls sat at a round, shaded table just outside the shop, only a short distance from the motorcycle. Leanne made a point to take the seat facing them, to easily survey the scene without appearing too interested.

Kelly recognized the younger of the two boys. He was a grade below her. His name was Wallace Wang and his parents were Chinese. They worked for some Chinese tech company based out of Lexington. People said that Mr. and Mrs. Wang drove nearly an hour to and from work every day. They couldn’t imagine why the Wangs had settled here of all places. Of course, there was a river not too far away and if they wanted to get out of the city, this was pretty well out of it. Kids at school called him Wing Wa, because he was the only Asian kid in the whole town. Wallace didn’t seem to mind it, or if he did he didn’t show it. Kelly knew that he was on the football team and perhaps one other sports team too, but she couldn’t recall now which one. The other boy who was vaguely familiar to her seemed to be several years older than her and even Leanne.

Kelly leaned forward in her chair. She disliked the way her thighs and bare shoulders stuck to the rubber coated metal. “Do you know the taller one?” Kelly asked her sister.

Leanne was picking at her ice cream carefully, her red hair stood out against the green and white painted bricks on the front of the ice cream parlor. She gave Kelly a sharp look. “It’s Dylan Greene.”

“Oh,” Kelly sighed, leaning her body back onto the rubber coated chair. She remembered him now. His grandmother lived on their street and his older sister Lydia used to babysit them when they were kids. Kelly figured that he was only a year or two older than Leanne. She wasn’t sure how he would have met Wallace, but the two seemed to be good friends. They were an odd pair. Dylan was tall and lean with a mop of sandy hair and darker bushy eyebrows. He had a long face and large mouth, but nonetheless he was handsome. Leanne clearly thought so. Wallace was stocky and muscular with straight black hair that looked almost blue in the sunshine. He had dark slanted eyes, and high cheekbones.

Suddenly Leanne stood up from her chair with her ice cream sundae in her hand. She had eaten almost all the chocolate, but the strawberry and vanilla poked out from under the whip cream and fudge largely intact. She walked toward the trashcan, which stood only a few feet from the two boys standing by the bike. The younger boys had begun to disperse, leaving only Dylan and Wallace.

Once she reached the trashcan she paused and looked over to the boys as she raised her hand slowly to dump the rest of the ice cream. Dylan caught her gaze and smiled broadly.

“Leanne?” he called to her.

Leanne quickly brought her ice cream away from the garbage can. “Dylan!” she said warmly, closing the short couple steps between her and him.

“Woah, woah, woah, I hope you aren’t throwing all of that away,” he said.

“I was thinking of it,” she laughed.

“Could I persuade you otherwise?” he said with mock gallantry.

“You could,” she said smiling.

“How about a trade?”

“What do you have to trade?” she asked.

“Considering you were gonna throw it away I could give you almost nothing for it,” he pointed out.

“Not now that I know it’s worth something to you,” she said, giving him a wry smile. The one that made her seem impish and unearthly. Dylan scratched his chin in thought.

“Well,” he started, pausing to heighten her interest. “I could give you a ride?” He gestured to the sparkling motorcycle behind him. Leanne pretended to think about it for a short second.

“Deal,” she agreed. She handed him the ice cream.

“Wait a minute,” Wallace said, speaking up for the first time. “What about my cut?” He smiled, enjoying the flirtation.

“Hey now Wing Wa, I made a deal with the lady, *you* should have spoke up sooner,” Dylan quipped, taking on that oddly gallant style of speech he used before.

“We should see what the lady has to say about that,” Wallace scoffed, matching Dylan’s tone. He turned to Leanne expectantly.

Leanne was practically fit to burst with laughter. “I...” she paused looking from boy to boy. “I think that a good man would share, but a *true* man would fight.”

Kelly rolled her eyes.

“A true man?” Dylan asked, eyebrows raised. He gazed up at the sky, one hand on his hip, posed theatrically and ridiculously like a knight standing to claim his titles. “What do you say Wing Wa, shall we fight to death over this bowl of ice cream?”

“Well on any given day I might, but today is a bit hot for that sort of thing, it would all be melted by the time I got your head off your shoulders.”

The three of them stared at each other, smiles lurking at the corners of their lips. Finally, Leanne couldn't contain it any longer. She burst into a fit of giggles. The two boys dropped the knight act to join her laughter.

“I don't even like strawberry ice cream,” Wallace admitted still laughing. “I'm going to get my own.” He walked jauntily into the store. Dylan and Leanne watched him pass then Leanne led him back to the table where Kelly still sat.

“Kelly!” Dylan exclaimed as if they were best friends being reunited after months apart. He sat down beside Leanne scooting the chair an inch or two closer. The gesture did not go unnoticed by either sister.

“What are you girls up to this summer?” he asked.

Leanne smiled. “I'm working at the pool a few days a week, but not much else, mostly just hanging out.”

Dylan looked expectantly to Kelly.

Leanne spoke up for her, “And Kelly is working at Family Pets Center in the Kennels.”

Kelly was slightly annoyed that her sister had answered for her, but she said nothing.

“That's cool, I'm just home from training, I joined the National Guard last year.” The girls nodded their approval. Leanne especially loved a man in uniform.

“How do you know Wallace?” Kelly asked.

“Oh, you mean Wing Wa? He’s been helping me fix up that bike,” he said gesturing to the motorcycle. “I’m no good at the electrical stuff, but Wing Wa is a damn wizard.” Just then, Wallace emerged from the store holding a towering cone of soft serve vanilla.

“Wow, that’s bland,” observed Dylan.

“What’s bland?” asked Wallace.

“You got vanilla soft serve? Where’s your adventurous spirit?” Leanne questioned him.

“It’s just simple and sweet, nothing wrong with that” Wallace said, smiling as he sat down. Kelly thought that maybe he was smiling at her. *Sweet and simple*, she thought.

The boys were quiet for a time, too focused on the ice cream in front of them to make decent conversation. The silence was oddly comfortable. Kelly tried to look at the boys the way Sherlock Holmes would on TV. Were the red stains on Dylan’s shirt evidence of a love for ketchup, a display of slobbery, or an accidental embarrassment? Was the tan line on Wallace’s wrist evidence that he played baseball? Was that the other sport that he played for Fischer High?

Before long, Dylan finished his ice cream. He folded his hands on the table and looked Leanne in the eye.

“So, what about that ride?” Dylan asked.

Leanne smiled broadly, a smile that could knock a man over. No wonder the boys loved her.

Leanne and Dylan got up from the table. They didn’t give a thought to Kelly and Wallace, until they were already seated on the bike, Leanne with her arms encircling Dylan’s torso.

“You two will be all right?” It was framed like a question, but had the tone of a statement.

“They’ll be fine,” Dylan said, throwing a wink in Wallace’s direction. Wallace laughed nervously and avoided looking at Kelly. The bike sped off, away from the center of town. Kelly stole a look at Wallace who was still staring off in the direction of the motorcycle. A puff of gasoline and exhaust floated past them.

“So,” Kelly said. “You’re going to be a junior next year, right?”

“Yeah,” Wallace said. He paused as if unsure of what to say to break the ice. “Have you taken any classes with Ms. Bellini? I’ve heard she’s crazy.”

Kelly grimaced, she remembered Ms. Bellini all too well. The woman was spiteful, but then again, she dealt with some terrible kids. “She’s Mrs. Handleson now, she got married this summer,” Kelly said, remembering that the only time she saw Ms. Bellini truly smile was when her fiancé came to school during lunch one day after most of the students had already left for the cafeteria. “She caught Leanne and me smoking a cigarette on the loading dock behind the woodshop classroom last year. I thought she was going to burn me with my own cigarette butt.”

Wallace raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yeah! She snatched it right out of my hand and started waving it around while she yelled at us. Some of the ashes fell on me.”

“Did you get in trouble?” he asked.

“No, she told us to go back inside, and then *she* smoked the rest of *our* cigarette herself! I think she just wanted a free cigarette.”

Wallace laughed at that. "Sounds like I have something to look forward to."

There was a pause between them. Kelly thought she heard a motorcycle riding down the street, but it was only an old white truck. It felt like Dylan and Leanne had already been gone a long time. Kelly allowed the silence to grow, wondering if Wallace would begin the conversation again. He seemed content enough to sit there and watch the street and the people passing by. It was growing late and the sun was sinking lower in the sky, almost disappearing behind the western mountains.

"How long do you think they'll be gone?" she asked him finally.

"That depends on how well they like each other's company," Wallace said shrugging.

Kelly smiled at him.

When Wallace saw the smile, he blushed softly. "I didn't mean it like that." He looked at his feet through the table's grated surface. The door to the store rang loudly, making both Wallace and Kelly look up. Edith Garvey stood in the doorway glaring at them. She pointed at the sign posted to the left of her door that read *No Loitering* in faded, peeling red letters.

"You both have been sitting out here for more than an hour, I don't mean to be rude, but I have customers looking for seats."

Kelly looked up to see that she was right; a few groups of kids and one family with young children were sitting on the curb. Even so she muttered something about having paid for her ice cream. All the same they stood to go.

Edith returned to tend to her next group of customers. The family with two small children quickly took the table. The mom balanced the youngest baby girl on her lap while trying to stuff a napkin in her collar.

“Where should we go?” Wallace asked.

“Do you have a phone?” Kelly asked him.

“No,” Wallace said sheepishly. “It’s on the bike.”

“Then I don’t think we can go far or else they won’t know where to find us when they come back.”

“Where is your phone?” asked Wallace.

“My dad took it for the week,” Kelly explained.

Wallace nodded.

Kelly crossed the street and sat down on the same stoop that she and her sister had sat on earlier. Wallace settled in beside her and the two waited together, making sparse small talk about school. The sun was getting ever lower.

A big boat of a car stopped at the curb. Its navy-blue paint was rusted near the corners of the doors and on the wheel basin. Kelly’s body froze. Her dad’s car. If he had come looking for her, that meant trouble.

Her dad rolled down the window of his Buick and leaned his blonde head out the window.

“Kelly Baker, I have been driving all over this town looking for you and your sister,” he grumbled.

Kelly stood up quickly.

“Where’s your sister?” he barked before she could respond. At that moment, the back window of the Buick rolled down revealing Kelly’s younger siblings. Scott’s freckled pale face

and fuzz of red hair poked out the window. Shannon, with her mad auburn locks, tangled and curly as ever pushed her brother over to get a peek.

“Where’s the motorcycle?” Scott demanded. He strained his head out of the car and looked around. “Ben told me there was a motorcycle.”

“Where is your sister?” her father asked again, even more impatiently than before. “Neither of you have answered your phones.”

“You have my phone,” Kelly pointed out, with the slightest hint of sass. Her father gave her a stony look and Kelly realized that she ought not to push him. “She’s out with Dylan,” she offered.

“Dylan who?” her father asked.

“Dylan Greene!” Scott yelled. “He’s got a motorcycle, Ben said he let him sit on it.”

“Hush up,” her father commanded, waving him off with a hand. “Where?” he asked, looking at Kelly.

“I don’t know,” Kelly said.

“You don’t know?” he roared, “Like hell you don’t.”

“She went for a ride on Dylan’s motorcycle. We don’t know exactly where they went.” explained Wallace. Kelly cringed. She knew how her father felt about motorcycles, Wallace had clearly missed the hint.

“On the motorcycle?” he demanded. Before she could answer he turned his gaze to Wallace. “And who are you?”

“Wallace Wang,” Wallace answered politely. He was standing a step behind Kelly at the base of the stoop.

"I should have guessed," he said, eyeing him carefully. He turned back to Kelly.

"Get in the car," he told her. "And you," he said to Wallace, "when they get back you tell Leanne to come straight home."

"I will," Wallace promised. Kelly looked back at Wallace apologetically as she climbed into the passenger seat.

Scott and Shannon were stifling giggles in the backseat; nothing was funnier to them than their older sisters getting in trouble.

"You both need to hush up," Kelly's father told them. That just made them giggle even more. Kelly looked over at her father. He had both hands pressed stiffly against the steering wheel. The wind pulled at his reddish beard and short blonde hair. He said nothing until they reached their street. "You know how I feel about motorcycles."

"Yes," Kelly answered.

"Besides, you and Leanne are too young to be dating."

"They aren't even dating," Kelly protested. "We just saw him today and he offered to give her a ride."

"Oh, even better! Getting on the backs of motorcycles with strange men, without a helmet I'd reckon."

"It's Dylan Greene! His sister used to babysit us and his grandma lives on *our* street!"

"Dylan did not babysit you, did he? So, you don't very well know him, never mind his family."

“Dad!” Kelly protested. Scott and Shannon sniggered in the back seat. Kelly glared at them, wishing she could push them both from the car. Scott stuck his tongue out at her. Kelly crossed her arms and leaned back into her seat with a *humph*.

Her father backed into the driveway, parking so close to the hedge that Kelly couldn't help but scrape against it as she climbed out of the car.

Her father opened the front door. The younger two Baker children bolted past him. Kelly waited for her father to walk in first before following. She started to go outside to the back porch, but her father's voice stopped her.

“Where do you think you're going?” he asked her.

“Outside?”

“I think you're going to your room. Get ready for bed.”

“Bed?” Kelly asked, astonished. “It's eight o'clock.”

“Eight o'clock or no, you are going to bed, and so is your sister when she gets back here.”

“This is ridiculous, where is Mom?” Kelly asked, hoping her mother would look differently on the situation.

“She's upstairs, napping.”

Kelly rolled her eyes, frustrated beyond belief. She stomped past her father.

“Don't wake your mother up!” he warned.

“I won't.”

“Then don't stomp like that.”

Kelly shut herself in her room and went to the window to sit down. She and Leanne shared the largest bedroom where three tall windows looked out over the small front lawn and the street. A tall hedge separated the lawn from the road, with only a small opening for the gate that led to the front door. The hedge was tall, but sparse in places where the summer heat had seared the needles. Without her phone, or much else to do, all that was left to her was to wait, and absently doodle until her sister returned. What her father would say to Leanne. He had very strong notions about what was appropriate for girls her age and exactly when that could change. An extremely religious man, he went to the Jehovah's Witness Temple frequently and totted pamphlets around the surrounding neighborhoods to Kelly and Leanne's embarrassment. Her mother was not religious, and in most matters deferred to her husband's judgement, but she did insist on being allowed to take them to celebrate Christmas and other holidays with her side of the family, while her husband sat alone in the house or went to Temple. Whenever Kelly's father began a religious rant, her mother's face would become as impassive as stone. The words seemed to wash over her, but over time they wore her down, like the rivers that form great gorges and canyons. As of late, though, she had shown more fight than she ever had before. She thought that her daughters deserved more freedom in their social lives. Kelly had heard them fighting over the details on several nights ago. Her mother tried pleading, she tried reason, she tried threats, but her father was stubborn and unmoving. In the end Kelly knew her mother was losing the battle.

The sun was beginning to set when Dylan finally pulled up to the house with Leanne clinging to his waist. She did not look afraid as she dismounted from the motorcycle. She sprang off and whirled around to plant a kiss on Dylan's lips. Kelly wondered if her father was watching

from the window downstairs. To her credit, Leanne did not seem to care who in the world was watching her. Dylan laughed at something Leanne whispered in his ear. Then he sped off, waving as red tail lights disappeared around the curve. Leanne turned back to the house. Kelly lost sight of her when she stepped onto the porch, but she heard the scrape of the weather strip and the screen's hinges squeaking their protest. Heavy footsteps, that could only be her father's moved from inside the house. Kelly tiptoed to her bedroom door and opened it only slightly. She put her ear there to listen. She heard her father's voice drift up the stairs.

"Is that boy gone?" he asked.

"Yes," Leanne said pleasantly, so far impervious to his anger.

"Wipe that grin off your face girl." There was a pause. Kelly could hear her own breath and feel the pulse of her blood. "I don't want you hanging around him anymore, motorcycles are dangerous and *you* are not going to parade around the town like some harlot."

"Where would you have me meet people *father*?" Her tone grew sour on the word *father*. When he did not immediately offer an answer she added, "Church? Temple?" in a similarly acidic tone.

"Well that would be a start," he said coolly. "You're always welcome to come to Temple." This was a pointless offer, Kelly knew. Leanne had not set foot in the Temple since she was thirteen years old.

"The world stretches far beyond the walls of that godforsaken Temple, and those people are far from the only people in the world!" Leanne had begun to raise her voice.

"I don't meet any scum like *that* in Temple," he said harshly.

"Scum?" Leanne scoffed. "Dylan is not scum, you don't know him."

“And neither do you,” he countered. “Kelly said you only just met him today.” Kelly cringed at the mention of her name.

“We knew his sister! Lydia? Don’t you remember she used to babysit us! And his grandma lives on *this* street!”

“I know. Your sister said the same thing, but as I told her, just because we know them does not mean you know *him*.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

Kelly heard her father’s fist come down hard on the table. Dishes rattled against the wood. “You do not use those words with me,” he shouted.

“You know your own wife isn’t even a Jehovah’s Witness?” Leanne was yelling now too. Her voice rang clearly through the house. Kelly heard her parent’s bedroom door open. She looked through the crack in her door. Her mother stood there, her pink bathrobe tightly wrapped around her waist. She looked weary. Kelly held her breath, hoping her mother would not look in her direction.

“I know that better than you do,” her father said. Kelly looked to her mother’s face. What she was thinking? No answers. Her face was as smooth and impassive as ever.

“Where is mom?” Leanne asked. Kelly watched as her mother opened the door slightly more. She seemed to teeter on the edge of decision. Fight or flight?

“She’s sleeping,” her father said, “but the ruckus you have made probably woke her up.” Kelly’s mother closed the door, leaving only a small crack open. Kelly’s heart sank into her stomach. It hurt her to watch.

“Good. She will tell you how ridiculous you’re being.”

Kelly could hear her sister marching up the stairs. There was flurry of movement behind her mother's door, she could hear soft, quick footsteps on the carpet then the rustle of sheets. Another set of feet began their march up the stairs and Kelly did not dare stay listening and watching by the door any longer. She darted to her bed and sat down, but still strained her ears to catch every sound. Her parent's bedroom door opened.

"Mom?" Leanne cried, urgently. Had she feigned sleep? "Mom," Leanne repeated more gently.

"Leanne, what is it?" her mother mumbled as if still groggy. Kelly heard her father reach the top of the stairs and open the bedroom door. He closed it sharply, muffling their voices so that Kelly could not make out a word. She listened intently, trying to quiet her own breath to hear. Their voices rose and fell with the pitch of an argument, but the words remained unintelligible to her. She sat on the edge of her bed, waiting. Eventually Kelly and Leanne's bedroom door opened. Leanne came in and sat down on her own bed on the opposite wall. The sisters waited until they heard their father return downstairs before speaking to one another.

"Our father is an asshole," Leanne said.

Kelly smiled and nodded her agreement, she loved Leanne's fire. "Where did you go?" she asked.

"With Dylan?"

"Yeah."

"We drove to the trestle in Stratonville."

"Dad was pissed," Kelly said.

“No kidding.” Leanne’s anger was fading. The hint of a smile touched the corners of her lips. Kelly smiled too, it all seemed funny in a way.

“What about mom?” Kelly asked.

Leanne’s smile vanished. “Mom doesn’t seem to care.”

“She was awake before you came upstairs,” said Kelly.

“She would pretend to be asleep.” Leanne snorted. The sisters grew quiet. Neither had anything left to say.

They sat on their beds alternately staring at the ceiling and reading to occupy the time. Their father had taken Leanne’s phone away too. The hours passed slowly. They heard their younger siblings be shooed into bed by their mother. Soon after their parents went to bed too. At 11:30 Kelly decided that even though she was wide awake, there was nothing left to do but sleep, so she crawled into bed. Leanne soon did the same.

Just as Kelly was drifting off, she heard a sharp sound like a walnut falling on the roof. She listened, and the sound came again. She swung her feet out of bed to listen. There it was again on the far wall with the windows that overlooked the street. She got out of bed and went to the middle window. As she reached the window she saw an object flying toward her. It hit the window with a loud crack that nearly made her fall backwards. She regained her footing and peered out. There, under the streetlight just past the hedge, Dylan and Wallace sat together astride Dylan’s motorcycle. The engine was off and Dylan pulled forward slightly using his feet. They waved to Kelly, beckoning her to the street.

Leanne stirred in her bed. “What are you doing?”

“Look,” Kelly said, pointing. Leanne rubbed her eyes and moved to the window. When she saw Dylan and Wallace a smile broke out across her elfish face.

“Did you know about this?” Kelly asked.

“No” Leanne laughed, shaking her head. She opened the window as quietly as she could. She pressed her face up to the screen and called softly to them from the street.

“What are you all doing?” she asked. Dylan cupped his hand behind his ear so Leanne repeated it a little louder, though still no higher than a whisper. “What are you all doing?”

Dylan grinned and shrugged. Wallace smiled goofily behind him. Suddenly Dylan stood up from the bike. “We’re here to rescue you!” Dylan said, making a show of gallantly sweeping his hand away with a flourish. He started to laugh at himself, suddenly embarrassed at the ridiculousness of it. Leanne giggled, too.

“We’ll be down in a minute!” she called back to them. She shut the window quietly. Kelly and Leanne dressed quickly, grabbing clothes off the floor to avoid their creaky, ancient dressers. Leanne opened the door a crack. She peeked her head out, looking from side to side quickly before darting out the door and down the hall to the bathroom. Kelly followed swiftly behind her. Their mad dash was brought to a standstill as they quietly turned the knob. The latch snapped open. The bathroom window was shrouded in a soft yellow curtain. They pushed it aside and opened the window. A rush of warm, damp air whooshed into their faces carrying the smells of damp earth and the sounds of crickets, katydids, and cicadas.

The roof slanted to the right toward the front door. Leanne climbed out, easily traversing the sill and the slant of the roof. Kelly followed behind her. Dylan and Wallace still sat astride the bike, just past the hedge, looking in the direction of their bedroom window. Leanne

and Kelly waved to the two boys until they caught their attention. Kelly turned away to draw the curtain closed. Her excitement was oddly fueled by the fear of being caught.

The sisters began to inch down the slant of the roof, at the end there was a wooden box where their father kept the hose, rakes, and shovels. All it took was a short jump to the box and then they were free to run off into the night. Kelly and Leanne crept to the edge. They dangled their feet over the gutter. Suddenly they heard the front door open. They froze in place. Soon their father came barreling across the dark lawn at full speed toward the hedge. Wallace and Dylan still sat beyond the hedge looking at the two girls, frozen on the roof, wide grins on their faces, unaware of the man running toward them. As their father neared the hedge, he did not turn. The sisters stood up quickly on the edge of the roof, staring in confusion. Their father hit the hedge at a full sprint, it rustled and shook like a slumbering beast come to life. He burst out the other side with a flurry of small leaves fluttering behind him like a cartoon. He did not slow down. He was running at the boys with surprising speed.

“You two get out of here!” he roared.

Dylan and Wallace cried out in alarm, too surprised to escape right away.

“I said get out of here!” he yelled again.

Dylan pushed back the kickstand, but in his hurry to escape he nearly caused them to fall over entirely. Dylan started the motorcycle and kicked it into gear. They zoomed off into the distance, howling and hooting with laughter now that they were out of danger.

“I don’t want to see either of you here again!” he called out after them, panting.

“Goodnight Mr. Baker!” Dylan yelled out after him, defiant and laughing. The motorcycle quickly sped out of sight, leaving their father huffing and bent over, coughing in the middle of the street.

Now that the boys were gone, a delayed panic took hold of the sisters. They scrambled up the side of the roof and pulled themselves into the window. Kelly looked back to her father still coughing in the middle of the street. He cleared his throat and spit on the pavement. She prayed that he had not noticed them.

They scrambled down the hallway toward their room. They dove onto their beds, their breath coming fast. Their heaving lungs were the loudest noise in the room until they both looked toward each other at the same time and burst out in laughter.

“Did you see the way he just burst through the hedge?” Leanne asked.

“It was like Tom and Jerry,” Kelly laughed.

They heard their parent’s bedroom door creak open. Soft footsteps that could only be their mother’s padded down the hallway.

Mrs. Jane Bellini Handleson

Jane Bellini Handleson sat at her brand-new kitchen table staring at its honey oak color with the kind of fixated fascination that can only be found in someone really thinking about something else. As her eyes followed the veins of the wood, the small annoyances of the past months gathered and whirled around tangling until they became an unmanageable mess of discontent. She could hear her husband still snoring in their bedroom just down the hall. Drifting in and out of his dreams. So effortless for him. She looked at the clock above the new stove top. It flashed red, insistent numbers. 9:57. He had told her the night before to wake him up at 10:00. When she had asked why, he simply said that he wanted to be up then. A fine answer she knew, a reasonable answer, a reasonable request. But Jane did not feel equal to the task. Her bones seemed to melt into the grain of the honey oak chairs. She had come to know over the course of the two months she had been married, that Marcus Handleson was not good at waking up, a fact she had never realized, nor took into consideration.

On the table in front of her the evidence of the baking she had done that morning sat cooling. She and Marcus had been invited to have dinner at his mother's house. Per his mother's "request," Jane made a jelly roll cake with the raspberry jam she canned not long ago. The cake looked oddly pristine surrounded by the chaos of her cooking. Yet among the empty measuring cups and opened ingredients, it sat perfectly topped with powdered sugar, carefully centered on its white plate. *While he lay snoozing, there lies my labor.*

In the first few weeks they had been married, she had noticed that if Marcus wanted to get up at 8:00, he would set an alarm every fifteen minutes, starting at 6:00am. Then he would proceed to snooze through every single one with no intention of actually stirring until the last

one went off at 8:00 or even after. Jane had never really considered herself a morning person exactly, but when her first alarm went off, she was awake and out of bed in ten minutes. So, every time his first alarm sounded at 6:00am she was awake, whether she wished it or not. No wonder he was so tired all the time. He took away two hours of good uninterrupted sleep every morning and destroyed her own sleep schedule in the process.

After three weeks she had had enough. She told him that the earliest he could set his alarm was a half an hour before. She thought that was reasonable, *very* reasonable, but apparently, he did not. In the next week she asked before bed every night when he had set the alarm for, and when the morning came it was always earlier than what he had told her. At first, she thought she was crazy because he denied doing it, but after a few nights she wrote the times down and knew that he had been lying. The knowledge of it curled up under her fingernails and made its home there.

When she confronted him about it, he had become angry with her. He told her she was unreasonable and that not everyone could be morning people. He did not seem to see that she had compromised, and that infuriated her. After a few more days of the same fight, he relented and began setting the alarm half an hour before and only snoozing two or three times. Jane thought that would be the end of it, but no. He began snoozing past his last alarm at 8:00, then wake up in a panic, angry at her for not waking him up. She kindly pointed out that it was not her job to be a human alarm clock—she suspected that his doting mother had never forced him to wake himself up. Her reasoning was not taken well. They fought and this time she relented. She agreed to wake him up so long as she could set just one alarm.

She told herself that this would have been fine, but she found that he did not make the task easy on her. The whole process took much cajoling, tempting, and cooing before he would begin to stir, and even then, he would sometimes crawl back into bed after she had left the room, then blame her for letting him fall asleep again. It made her morning needlessly stressful. She was constantly worried that if she did not wake up neither would he.

So now she sat at her nice new oak table, studying it as if it could give her relief from these small annoyances in her newly married life. Perhaps an answer lay there in the grain.

She looked at the clock above the stovetop, it had stopped flashing red. The oven was no longer hot. 10:13. She realized with a start that she had been staring at the table and her cake for nearly fifteen minutes. She started to get up from her chair, but a wave of stubborn resentment washed over her. She sat back down in her chair with a sudden impulsive desire not to do as she was told. She would not wake him. It was not her job. That was something his mother had done, not her.

With her resolution in place, she stood quickly to retrieve her book lying on the countertop and brought it back with her to the kitchen table where she had a clear view down the hallway to their bedroom door.

Despite her efforts to read, her eyes flitted towards the bedroom door down the hall much too often to absorb any real information. Her thoughts returned again and again to the sleeping man inside. She forgot the sentences as soon as she read them. Frustrated, she lay the book down. She stared at the bedroom door for what seemed like hours until suddenly she heard movement. She quickly picked her book up, pretending to read while sneaking glances down the hall.

Her husband soon appeared in only his plaid boxers looking puffy eyed and exhausted. When he finally reached the table, she put her book down as if she had only just then noticed him.

“Good morning honey,” she said in a false cheerful tone.

“Good morning,” he responded automatically, squinting past her to the clock above the stovetop. “Why didn’t you wake me up?” he asked her in a wounded sort of way that made her feel both guilty and angry. She considered saying that she had forgotten, but she mentally scolded herself for her weakness.

“I am not your human alarm clock,” she said calmly staring up at his handsome sleepy face, carefully gauging his reaction. His eyes grew a little wider. She could tell that she had his attention now.

“I’m not asking you to be a human alarm clock Janie, but if you’re already up why not wake me up too?”

“What if I wanted to sleep in?” she protested.

“Well you didn’t.”

“Because I couldn’t, I had to worry about being up to get you up! I don’t need this stress every morning.”

Marcus rolled his eyes and turned away from her.

“Where are you going?” she asked, once she realized he meant to walk away from her.

“To take a piss,” he answered crossly. Jane watched him shuffle to the bathroom. She knew she could not rightly yell at him for needing to go to the bathroom, but the timing seemed awfully convenient to her mind. *God, he took his sweet time in there.* She picked up her

book again. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. When he finally emerged, he smiled at her as if he hadn't left her sitting there stewing. He leaned his weight onto the far edge of the honey-oak kitchen table and stretched, first leaning to the right, then the left. She watched him with calm appraising eyes, wondering whether to drop the subject.

"You've been hard at work this morning," he said gesturing to the jelly roll cake in front of her. She looked at him hard, trying to decide whether he was purposefully antagonizing her or not, however, his face was placid and impossible for her to decipher, the former irritation forgotten.

"Yes, I have been," she answered carefully.

"Maybe I would have helped if you had woken me up," he said smiling, oblivious to her anger.

"I doubt it."

"What?" he said, looking hurt.

"You wouldn't have woken up for anything, let alone to make a jelly roll cake."

"Yes, I would. I wake up for you every morning." He gave her his most charming smile.

"Look Marcus, I know your mother woke you up every morning when you were growing up, but you are not a child anymore, and I am not your mother, I am your wife."

Marcus stood up straight before answering. "I don't see what the big deal is. Why does everything have to be a fight with you?"

"Everything is not a fight with me," she protested. "Maybe if you weren't so selfish about these things we wouldn't have anything to fight about."

At that he began to pace about the room. "Selfish? Jane, you are better at getting up in the morning than me, why can't you help me out? Isn't it selfish not to help someone do something they know they are bad at."

"You don't want to be better at it!" she cried. "If you did then you would wake up at the first alarm every morning rather than shoving it off on me, your bad habits are not my responsibility."

"It's not that easy!"

"It would be if you wanted it to, but you wallow around in bed and wait for me to make you breakfast like a good little wife." She crossed her arms in front of her chest defiantly.

"What's wrong with making me breakfast if you're already up?" he asked.

At that Jane stood up, completely exasperated. "What's wrong with it is that I get stuck making breakfast every morning because you would never wake up early enough to do the same for me! This is about reciprocation Marcus."

"I didn't realize you felt that way, maybe if you woke me up earlier I would make breakfast for you sometimes."

Jane wanted to scream. "I'm not going to wake you up early to make breakfast!" she yelled.

"Why not? Isn't that what you want?"

"No! I want you to want to get up early without my help at all, and if you're feeling up to it make breakfast!"

Marcus's eyes grew wide in surprise at her rising pitch. He rubbed his forehead and eyes roughly.

They were silent.

“Did you make any coffee?” he asked, attempting to change the subject.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I was making the jelly roll cake.”

“Ok,”

She looked at him dead in the eye. “You don’t get it do you? I am not your maid, or your cook, or your goddamn personal alarm clock!”

“You’re overreacting Janie, you need to calm down.”

Before she hardly knew what she was doing Jane lifted the pristine jelly roll cake into her hand. Then she threw it at his bare stomach with all the force she could muster. To her surprise—and his—the jelly roll stuck to his stomach like those odd little sticky hands they used to get as kids from the gumball dispensers. Marcus looked down at his stomach then back at Jane with his mouth hanging open in shock. The jelly roll began to slide sluggishly down his stomach, leaving a trail of gooey raspberry jam behind it, like an open wound.

Jane stomped past her husband, who had begun to scrape off the gooey mess. Once she reached their bedroom door she shut herself inside. She began to cry. Tears rolled down her cheeks and into the unmade bedsheets, yet another task that would go undone unless she did it. Her tears of frustration soon morphed into tears of grief. Had it been a mistake to marry Marcus? Was she, like so many others, destined to become a divorcé at the ripe old age of thirty with nothing to show but a fear of commitment? She imagined herself at divorce court, standing in front of the judge, explaining the details of what exactly had gone wrong. She

imagined divulging to this man in black robes the trivialities of their fights. His long face looking down her from his wooden pedestal, dark eyes glinting behind thin spectacles. Dark robed arms crossing his chest.

Suddenly an odd thought entered her head. She began to smirk through her tears, and slowly her sobs turned into a hysterical fit of laughter as she thought of telling the Judge about the jelly roll. *And how did the fight end?* The imaginary judge asked. She would hesitate before answering as calmly as she could, *Your Honor, I threw a jelly roll at him.* The court room erupted in laughter. *And then what?* The judge asked in a serious tone, his jowls shaking as he spoke. *It stuck to his stomach.* The court room exploded into another fit of laughter wilder than the first. Jane's body heaved, tears streaming down her cheeks.

A knock at the bedroom door pulled her out of her own reenactment. She wiped away the tears and attempted to stifle the hysteric giggles that would not quit.

"Are you ok?" Marcus asked her from the other side.

"I'm alright," she forced between fits of laughter and tears.

"It sounds like you're crying."

"I'm not," she lied.

"Can I come in?" he asked timidly.

"Yes," she answered, wiping at her tears and trying to breathe normally.

When he opened the door she saw that a thin line of red jam still streaked his stomach. She set off into another fit of giggles stronger than the first.

"Are you laughing?" he asked surprised and alarmed.

She nodded, too incapacitated to speak.

“What is so funny?” he asked sitting down beside her on the bed and wrapping one arm over her convulsing shoulders. Once her giggles slowed she explained, “if we got divorced I’d have to tell the judge I threw a jelly roll at you.” She glanced into his serious eyes. She felt giggles rise up in her throat and escape out of her mouth.

He looked at her completely baffled, then he began to laugh too. Big, hearty laughter that rolled out of him and soon brought tears to his eyes, too.

“No one is getting divorced,” he said between bursts of laughter. He reached over to wrap his other arm around her waist and she did not pull away. They sat hugging and laughing until the laughs all died down. His phone alarm went off declaring it time to start the day.

Lydia Greene

Lydia Greene sat on her mother's couch scrolling listlessly through online job boards. The morning light poured in through the sliding doors at her back, forcing her to shrug her shoulders and squint to see past the glare on her screen. The mock enthusiasm and soul-sucking company mantras made her stomach curl.

Three months ago, the start-up company, Del Rey, she had been working for in Columbus went belly up, so here she was, gathering her thoughts and hopefully applying for more jobs. At first, she had been in denial. She couldn't see how something she put her heart and soul into could fail so miserably, but the evidence was there in her dwindling bank account. She lingered in her nice Columbus apartment after everything went sour, until necessity forced her to return home—student loans paired with a nonexistent income. Her parents eagerly welcomed her back and seemed more or less unconcerned about her fledgling professional hopes being dashed into little pieces. Of course, they showed sympathy as one would expect them to, but it was the kind of sympathy that attempted to make her feel better by suggesting the company wasn't all that great to begin with. That logic stung her pride because to her it had been a worthy project regardless of its failure.

After being home for all of one week, Lydia began to feel trapped. It wasn't the house or her family that she found so constricting, although they had their moments. Her home town with its small-town ways and even smaller-minded people irked her to no end. She could not leave the house in her pajamas to get coffee without seeing someone she would rather not.

Lydia heard her mother's loud footsteps coming down the stairs. Her movements always seemed to announce her presence rather than conceal it. Lydia glanced up to see Annabelle Greene beaming at her daughter through short, messy brown hair.

"You're up early," Annabelle observed.

"No, I'm not, it's nine o'clock."

"You never did appreciate sleep," her mother said, now in the kitchen fiddling with the coffee maker. She went about the business of making coffee rather loudly, making it impossible to focus. Lydia set aside her laptop and wandered over to the window. She stretched her arms into the air and set her gaze on the back yard. The bright white wicker chairs on the porch shone in the morning sun against the dark stained boards. Lydia noticed without much surprise that the chair cushions were different from those she remembered from her last visit home. They were white with little gold paisleys that glinted in the sun.

Lydia knew her mother loved to redecorate. Maybe it was just something all interior designers did out of boredom. Her mother's improvements usually caused other things to no longer match, a fact that Lydia had always thought ironic, considering that she was successful in her field. What would her mother's clients think if they saw her own home? The problem as far as Lydia could tell was that her mother had many grand schemes locked away in her head, but not enough concentration to finish any of them. Upstairs, in her mother's studio a half-finished painting sat abandoned on its easel where it had been for at least two years, the palette dried up beside it, so old the paint cracked and peeled. Unfinished projects gave Lydia a strange sense of foreboding. She had always believed that she would not be a person of grand schemes and unfinished projects, but she began to worry after Del Rey fell through.

Although she had driven to The Stop for a cup of coffee already that morning, Lydia followed the aroma of coffee to its source willingly. At The Stop, the same old men sat out front on the same little folding chairs smoking and eyeballing the people who came in and out. The last time she came home it was Christmas time and the men wore beanies with heavy woolen flannels, but now in the summer months they had switched to those ball caps with the mesh backs and light cotton shirt sleeves. She had come with her father, he had greeted the men warmly and clasped their hands. Without him there the men stared at her with their sunken eyes through clouds of smoke as if they did not recognize her. Perhaps they distrusted her now, too much time in the big city, too much time up north. Inside The Stop Ms. Gables still worked behind the counter looking as tired and over-worked as she ever had, but she had smiled at her and asked after her brother and her parents. She poured her a hot cup of coffee, apologizing profusely that they did not have a latte machine. Lydia had been embarrassed because she hadn't asked for a latte in the first place.

Annabelle Greene carefully measured out coffee beans from the two bags of coffee open in front of her.

"Are you mixing them?" Lydia asked. One bag was an exotic organic coffee from Jamaica, the other was Kroger brand.

"I'm trying to make it last a little longer," her mother answered.

Lydia shook her head. "The Jamaican one or the Kroger brand?" she joked.

Her mother gave her a playful look. "The Kroger brand," she answered, letting her eyebrows waggle back and forth before adding, "No, the Jamaican one. Really, Lydia, who do you think I am?"

Lydia did not answer this question, she only turned the bag over in her hand, observing the way the bright metallic logo glinted on the crinkles. "You're only going to ruin this pot," she said finally. Lydia had become somewhat of a coffee snob while living in Columbus and was far fonder of Starbucks than she cared to admit; most people in this town had never stopped in "one of those overpriced coffee shops" in their lives.

Lydia's mother turned up her nose at her daughter. "It will be fine, just you wait." She pressed the power button on the grinder and watched the grounds swirl around behind the glass as they made their way to the blade. Suddenly she took her finger away and waved it at Lydia. "You wouldn't even have noticed if you hadn't come strolling in here snooping around."

"Yes, I would have." Lydia said, somewhat indignant.

"Ha! Fat chance, my dear."

Lydia crossed her arms.

"I'll tell you what, we'll have an experiment. I will make the coffee, with or without Kroger brand added, and you have to tell me whether I did or not."

Lydia rolled her eyes, but laughed in spite of herself. Her mother's ridiculous, wry smile had a way of worming into her heart. "You're on."

Her mother nodded and pressed the button again. The blades chomped away at the beans in a violent flurry of motion.

Lydia's father came down the stairs still in his bathrobe, which was practically rotting off his body. Lydia knew that at least two new robes, former Christmas gifts, hung in her parents' closet, untouched with their tags on. Periodically her mother would threaten to return them, but he always told her that he would "get to them in his own good time," which meant that he

would get to them when the holes in his old robe became too revealing even for family. He came over to the stove, ruffling Lydia's short hair along the way.

"What are you working on?" he asked Lydia's mother.

"She's marring our coffee," Lydia answered for her.

"You need to stop being such a purist. Let the coffee breathe," her mother said. She closed her eyes and raised her hands in the air, thumbs to pointer fingers like a proper zen master. "Ahhh," she said snapping her eyes open.

Caleb Greene shrugged. In his mind a pot of coffee was a pot of coffee was a pot of coffee, and it was just that simple.

"Does anyone want eggs?" he asked, lifting the pan from the hook on the wall.

"I do!" Lydia answered quickly.

"Ok, so six eggs? Two for each of us?"

"What about Dylan? He'll want some eggs," Annabelle chimed in.

"That boy is dead to the world, I'll bet he won't get up 'til two. He was out late last night with his new girlfriend," Lydia's father said, raising his eyebrows and winking. He pulled the eggs and cheese out of the fridge.

"Oh! Is it still that Baker girl? What's the oldest one's name?" Annabelle asked, clearly pleased. She took pride in her son's ability to attract pretty girls.

"You mean Leanne? The girl I used to babysit?" Lydia asked.

"Yes, that's her," her father answered.

"Wait, Dylan is dating Leanne? Why didn't anyone tell me about this?"

“Well it’s not *official* you know,” Annabelle answered in a tone that meant it wouldn’t be too long until it was. Lydia had not seen any of the Baker children since before she left for college. It was difficult to imagining Leanne grown and leaning into a kiss from her little brother. Leanne had always had a certain talent for making herself the center of attention.

“She seems like a very nice girl,” Caleb Greene said as he cracked the eggs into the pan.

“And very pretty,” Annabelle added.

Lydia rolled her eyes, for someone so genuine, her mother could be surprisingly shallow. She watched the eggs sizzle in the pan. The smell of melting cheese filled her nostrils. When they were done, her father slid them onto fresh plates and Lydia laid them out on the table. Her mother followed behind her with the toast, alternating it between her fingers gingerly so as not to burn herself. She let them drop onto the plates. Crumbs scattered onto the table.

Caleb put the pan in the sink and turned the water on.

“Don’t do that! You’ll warp the pan!” Lydia’s mother cried.

“It’s fine Annabelle, it’s a ceramic pan.”

“Well at least open the window to let the steam out,” she said as she leaned across the sink to push the window open. A shower of dead stink bugs fell onto her arms and into the sink below. Lydia’s mother yelped, swiping the dead carcasses off her arms. They crunched as they fell onto the counter and floor. She turned on her husband angrily. A short, frustrated scream escaped her lips.

“It is the year of the stink bug!” Caleb said, marking the grand pronouncement with a grand sweep of his hands. To her father, Lydia knew, it was always “the year of something” whether it was the stink bug, the cicada or the Japanese beetle killing the ash trees. Her father

saw these blights as sad in one way, as a lover of all things green, but he also saw them as a blessing. With the pesky bugs eating up people's trees and flowers, his landscaping company could swoop in and fix the place up or fell a dead tree—all part of the ebbs and flows of nature. Lydia could see this point of view, but she was sympathetic to her mother's panic. The bugs themselves were repulsive beetle-like things with long antennas and creepy little legs, not to mention they stank like sour cilantro and traveled in droves. If you tried to pick them up, or disturbed them at all, they sprayed that awful smell all over your hands and it wouldn't wash off for days no matter what you did.

"They need to get out of my house," Annabelle said.

"Honey, we've tried what we can, they'll be gone by the end of the summer, just be patient."

Lydia knew her mother was never patient. She also knew that her mother had made herself half-crazy trying to get rid of them. She had scrubbed every window in the house in mint oil, she had lined the edges of the house with diatomaceous earth, and she had sprayed the kitchen with a strange garlic mixture, that smelled worse than the stink bugs themselves. Lydia's mother had even taken to setting jars of soapy water around the house so that the bugs would fall inside and not be able to escape. To her dismay, in the throes of their watery deaths the stink bugs emitted the same awful smell. In truth, Annabelle Greene was at her wits end as far as stink bugs were concerned. She looked to her husband, "Please?"

"What do you want me to do about it?" He shrugged as he dutifully cleaned up the carcasses, making sure to only pick them up with a plastic bag so the smell wouldn't get on his

fingers and ruin his appetite. Some must have been still alive because their legs wiggled and that putrid cilantro smell hung in the air.

Later that day, after Lydia came back from the grocery store, she found her mother hunched over her laptop obsessively scrolling through an article. Lydia began to unbag the groceries slowly.

“What are you looking up?” Lydia asked.

Annabelle pulled herself away from the computer screen to look at her daughter. “I’m looking up how to kill stink bugs,” she said cheerily.

“Haven’t you tried everything already?”

“Not according to this article.”

“What does it say?”

“It says that the best way to kill stink bugs is to introduce their natural predators.”

“Like what?” Lydia prompted, looking over her mother’s shoulder.

“Like praying mantises!” she answered, laughing at herself.

Lydia looked over her mothers shoulder, scanning the page quickly. “This says to release them in your garden mom, that won’t work for the house.”

“Ha!” she cried, “that’s what you think.”

“What? You’re not thinking of releasing them in the house, are you? Really?”

“Yes really, this company will send me thirteen of them right to this house, you know in case one dies in transit. Like a baker’s dozen.” Her mom spun in her chair laughing.

“And you’ll just set them free?” Lydia asked. She pictured a praying mantis doing its strange karate dance on the kitchen counter.

“I could build them a little terrarium, and they can walk around in there while they aren’t killing off the stink bugs. A base for my sweet little bug army,” she cooed.

“Sounds like a great plan,” Lydia laughed.

“Isn’t it? I could name them too, they can be my little pets!” She said this with the same joking tone as before and screwed her eyes up a bit in mock craziness.

“What would you name them?”

Her mother’s thumb rested gently on the side of her jaw while she stared at the article in front of her. “I know!” she said bringing her hand up, pointer finger extended, “I will name them after the twelve disciples.”

“And Jesus? You said they’ll send you thirteen.”

“No, I wouldn’t name him that, that’s a lot of pressure for the little guy...let’s name him Carl!”

“You aren’t serious though, are you?” Lydia asked, stifling her laughter.

“About naming him Carl?”

Lydia rolled her eyes. “No, about buying praying mantises to release in the house.”

“Well I could be serious about *that*,” she said raising her hands up in the air.

Lydia shook her head. How did someone so ridiculous end up successful? Was she like this with her clients?

“Oh honey, don’t worry,” she said. Her mother’s mantra, *don’t worry*.

The next day Annabelle Greene left town for a business trip in Indianapolis. Her small design firm in Hullbeck would travel as far as the client was willing to pay for. She had been to New York, Los Angeles, Kansas City, and Columbus to do her work. While most people in town

saw this a positive thing, some said that it made Annabelle “forget her roots.” She no longer talked quite like they did, and it was true that she had concerns that went out past their little town and even out of Kentucky. How did her mother get along here? How could she stay here after seeing those other places?

While she was gone, things went about as usual, if not more smoothly. Lydia’s father was a notoriously practical person and lived his life according to a check list in his head that he meant to check off one item at a time for as long as he lived. In the morning he got dressed, drove to the mailbox, separated out the envelopes and packages onto their appropriate shelves designated to each family member, made his coffee, and set off for his day of groveling in the dirt and mulch. At night he would return, open a beer and watch baseball, or golf until he fell asleep. Lydia found her father’s routine habits comforting. It was nice to be able to predict exactly what he was doing and why, but it also made her feel woefully unproductive. She would wake up without her alarm clock every day before eight, only to stare at the walls of her childhood room and wonder whether something would pan out today. She had lost track of the number of jobs she had applied for, not to mention the number of hours she spent looking. Her dad told her that it was all a numbers game and that she should just apply to whatever she qualified for and hope for the best; this was coming from a man who had never looked for a job outside of this town, and didn’t know how to open Google, let alone a job board. She appreciated her father’s advice, but it felt like he wasn’t in touch with what it was like in the present day. When she told him so, he said she ought to go to a job fair and meet people. Caleb was sure that her lack of success was because of a lack of human connection. Lydia knew that

to a certain extent he was right. The startup had been founded by a group of friends from college. She got the job because she knew them.

So one day she drove up to Lexington for a job fair at the convention center. Being in a city again after her brief hiatus felt strange. The air itself was different, heavier, and loud. In Hullbeck at night the chirping insects drowned out almost everything else, but here city sounds filled the air, ricocheting back and forth between the concrete buildings.

The convention center was so heavily air-conditioned that she spent the majority of the morning attempting to not shiver in front of prospective employers. She surveyed the rows of folding tables, carefully avoiding eye contact with the representatives until she was certain she wanted to approach the table. She kept her eyes on the tacky company banners hung in front of the tables or on poles near the sides. Suddenly she heard her name called out behind her. She whirled around, looking for the first time at the row of faces behind the booths. The representatives smiled at her, cocking their heads to one side expectantly, arms folded neatly in front of them with piles of brochures. A tall man stood up and approached her from the table—Bruce. She had worked with him at Del Rey. He had been part of their marketing and social media team. He looked down at her, his face sunburnt and his eyes bright, welcoming. She had hardly recognized him with his hair cropped so tightly to his head. The last time she saw him he had a pony tail. This was the first time she had seen him in a full suit.

“How are you?” he asked her, touching her elbow lightly to bring her out of her shock.

“Oh. I’m good. Sorry, you just...you look so different.”

“I know,” he said sheepishly, running his hands over his short brown hair. “After I cut it off I kept catching glances of myself in the mirror and thought, *that isn’t me*, but it looks good

doesn't it?" He ruffled it up a bit with his hands, the same gesture he used to do when it was long, but now the hairs snapped quickly back into place.

"Yeah." He did look good. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, well I went and stayed with my brother for a bit, and then his roommate helped me get a job with Duke Energy, he said they wouldn't hire me if I didn't cut my hair, so I did." He shrugged again.

"What a quick turnaround," she said, trying not to sound too jealous.

"Yeah," he said. He looked at her and then to the tables around them. Her pride was wounded. She had consoled herself that three months was a perfectly normal amount of time to look for a job. Sensing her distress, Bruce touched her elbow again. "You worked on the financial side, right? Maybe I could get you something at Duke?"

"That would be great," she said, but inside she was not sure it was great. A large company like Duke didn't have that spark she was after. So far, she had gravitated to booths for small start-up companies. She didn't want to end up trimmed up and perfectly packaged like Bruce. Bruce returned to his table for some brochures and a clip board. Lydia wrote in her name, her email, and her phone number at the bottom of a long list of hopefuls. She thanked Bruce and politely excused herself when another woman approached his booth.

She applied to a few more things in the Lexington area, and even made plans to return for a follow up interview at two different smaller financial consulting companies. While driving back she did not feel excited, what were these places doing that she could be passionate about?

At home, her father was watching baseball in the living room.

“How did it go?” Caleb asked her.

Lydia decided then not to tell her father about running into Bruce. He wouldn't understand why she felt so put-off by it. She herself did not fully understand. “Good,” she answered. “I have two interviews next week.”

“See, I told you! All they needed was to meet you, that way they know what they're missing out on.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, allowing her body to fall into the couch. Her business clothes made her feel heavy and constricted.

Caleb looked puzzled for a moment. “What is it? Did something happen?” he asked.

“Nothing, it was fine.”

“You don't seem all that excited.”

“It's just that, well...I'm not sure that any of those places are things I could really get behind or be passionate about.”

Caleb nodded as if he understood. He fiddled with the remote, turning the volume down a few notches.

“I was so excited about working at Del Rey, and everyone else was too.”

“Honey, the thing is that sometimes work is just work, there is a reason they pay you for it,” Caleb said plainly.

“I know, but I still want it to be something like that, something new, something innovative.”

“People who truly love their jobs are few and far between, if you find a job like that you are truly lucky. Like I said, there is a reason they pay you.”

Lydia shrugged and looked out the back porch sliding doors. "I feel so idle, I'm starting to get antsy, but I don't want to just settle for anything."

Her brother Dylan came down the stairs and made his way to the kitchen. He slid across the floor in his socks until he reached the fridge.

"You could always get a job in town just for a few months while you figure something else out, it might take the pressure off," her father said.

Lydia had considered this, but even so she scrunched her nose up in disgust. The idea of slaving away at a minimum wage job was not appealing.

"Yeah," Dylan chimed in, holding a cup of yogurt in one hand and a large spoon in the other. "You could get a job at the pool where Leanne works." He scooped out a glob of yogurt and raised it towards his lips. At the last second, he stopped and pointed it at his sister, "Oooo" he said, "Or you could work with Kelly at the Family Pet Center." He popped the yogurt in his mouth.

Lydia rolled her eyes.

"Or not," her father said waving off Dylan with one hand, "You aren't bothering us. As long as you can still pay your student loans you don't have to do anything really."

"I had a plan though, everything seemed to be going my way until Del Rey collapsed."

Caleb looked at Lydia as if he had many things he wanted to say, but few things that he ought to. "Sometimes things don't work out. The world doesn't really care how much things matter to you."

Lydia suddenly felt her throat tighten up. The impulse to cry confused her, it had been months now since she had been laid off.

Her father scooted closer and put his arm around her shoulder. They said no more on the subject.

After five days Lydia's mother returned to the house, exhausted, but pleased. Caleb greeted his wife in the driveway then carried her suitcase up the stairs.

"It went well?" Lydia asked from the stoop.

"Yes, I'll be going back in a few months once they start construction."

Lydia's mother walked up the porch stairs to give her daughter a hug.

"Where is Dylan?" she asked, looking past her daughter's shoulder into the open door.

"He's in the kitchen, I think."

Her mother released her grip and set off into the house. Dylan was sitting at the kitchen table with his legs stretched out across two more chairs. He held a full-size dinner bowl in one hand while shoveling Cheerios into his mouth with the other with a large serving spoon.

"Put that cereal bowl down and give your mother a hug."

"You've only been gone five days mom," he protested, but he put the bowl down and gave her a hug anyway. Soon she too sat down at the kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal.

Caleb went out to drive to the mailbox. He returned minutes later with a short stack of envelopes and a newspaper which he began to separate. Lydia's mother jumped up suddenly.

"Did anything come for me while I was gone?" she asked her husband, padding across the hall in her socks, her shoes lay under the kitchen table.

Caleb looked up from his sorting. "There's some bills here," he said thumbing through the envelopes on her corner of the shelf, "Oh, and this little box." He gestured to a package about the size of a book. Lydia's suspicions had been roused. Her mother returned to the

kitchen table with the box. It was plain, except for a large red stamp on the side that read *Live Insects*.

“You going fishing?” Caleb asked.

“No! It’s my praying mantises!” she cried, searching the drawers for a knife or scissors.

“Your what?”

“They’re for the stink bugs, they’re their natural predators.”

“Annabelle, you can’t be serious?”

Annabelle chose not to answer that question, she instead set to work cutting the packing tape. Dylan’s curiosity was piqued too, and he hovered over his parents and his sister, Lydia’s mother opened the box like a magician revealing a magic trick. Inside were thirteen little vials that looked like little terrariums. Lydia’s mother picked up the first one and held it to the light.

“Are you sure there’s a praying mantis in there?” Dylan asked.

Annabelle still did not answer. It was clear to everyone that nothing was moving inside. Lydia’s mother gave the vial a little shake, but nothing stirred. She carefully unscrewed the cap and dumped the contents onto a napkin. The four of them hovered over the napkin like children. Among the little bits of moss and twigs was the tiny carcass of what must have been a baby praying mantis.

Dylan burst out into a fit of laughter. “That thing was supposed to kill the stink bugs? It isn’t even as big as one!”

“How was I supposed to know they were babies?” Annabelle cried, trying to laugh a little to mask her disappointment.

Lydia read the packaging label, "Contents: thirteen praying mantis nymphs," she read aloud. "I think nymphs mean babies," she added.

Dylan let out another snort and took a seat at the table.

Lydia's mother pulled the rest of the vials out of the packaging. She held each one up to the light, hoping to see some movement. Lydia could see her mother's spirits dropping.

"Why didn't you open the package?" Annabelle reproached her husband.

"How was I supposed to know there were insects in there? I thought you had ordered a pair of earrings or something."

"But it says *Live Insects* on the side!" she said, pointing to the red warning stamped on the package in all caps.

He threw his hands in the air. "How was I supposed to see that, these things have all sorts of stuff printed on the sides."

"You could have read it."

Caleb turned toward the kitchen. Lydia felt for her father. After all, her mother hadn't told him that they were coming.

Annabelle resumed her work of examining the vials. Suddenly she yelped out in surprise. One little praying mantis nymph was alive and crawled across the napkin, its strange alien-like legs pulled against the paper uselessly.

"It's alive!" Annabelle screamed in triumph.

Annabelle tried to coax the tiny praying mantis onto her finger. It would not be persuaded, so she gave up and began dumping out the contents of the other vials with more excitement than before. Only one other nymph had survived the journey. Soon Lydia's mother

had a little terrarium set up in a glass bowl. She placed a colander on the top to let air in to the nymphs below.

“So, there are only two,” Lydia said, taking a seat beside her mother, who was now poking a twig inside the makeshift terrarium, attempting to lure the praying mantis nymph onto it.

“Yes,” Annabelle said sadly. The nymph at the end of her twig was not willing to climb aboard. She withdrew the twig and glanced at her daughter. Suddenly her face lit up with a mischievous smile. She held the twig up like a pointer, then gestured toward the terrarium. “This one is Peter,” she said, pointing toward the greener of the two nymphs. “And this one is Carl!” She pointed toward the paler of the two.

“How do you know those two lived?” Lydia laughed.

“I just have a feeling,” Annabelle declared. Lydia shook her head, but did not question her mother’s judgement.

“They don’t look so good,” Lydia observed after a moment of silence.

“Don’t say that you’ll offend them,” Annabelle said while pretending to shield them from her.

Lydia rolled her eyes. “Do you even know what they eat?”

“Stink bugs,” she answered simply.

“But they’re babies mom, I don’t think they could kill a stink bug right now.”

“I suppose not,” she agreed. “Why don’t you look it up?”

“Me? They’re your praying mantises.”

Lydia’s mother gave her a pleading look.

“All right I’ll look it up.” Lydia retrieved her laptop from the coffee table in the living room. Soon she had a page pulled up with everything and anything you would ever want to know about praying mantis nymphs.

“It says they eat fruit flies and small insects when they are small,” Lydia said.

“Well I’m sure we can find those,” her mother said.

It turned out that finding and catching small insects was not as easy as it sounded. Their hunt inside the house proved fruitless, so Annabelle and Lydia took their search outside. In the twilight, lightning bugs were starting to light up the yard.

“We could feed them lightning bugs,” Lydia suggested.

“Do you think they would eat those?”

“I’m not sure, they are small insects though, right?”

Lydia and her mother stepped out into the summer evening air, holding small jars in their hands with holes poked in the top. Annabelle removed her shoes and took one step out into the grass. She let out a long breath then looked back at her daughter, inviting her forward. Lydia removed her shoes too and placed them beside her mother’s. She stepped out onto the damp grass, humidity seemed to rise up from each individual blade. She let out a long breath. The whole world throbbed with the sounds of life. Insects, birds and night creatures were pulsing along with the very grass on which she stood. The pulse traveled up from the balls of her feet through her body and out her fingertips. She looked around at the familiar yard, the air itself was throbbing too with little flashes of yellow and green light. Her mother’s form darted across her periphery, both hands cupped, ready for a strike, with her jar wedged under her arm.

Lydia laughed out loud as her mother leapt forward like a child capturing the creature in her hands.

“I’m sorry little bug,” she said as she unscrewed the lid to deposit him inside. She looked at her daughter smiling broadly. “Your turn,” she said.

Lydia spotted a flash of light and leapt out in its direction, but lost it as soon as the flash had vanished. She narrowed her eyes, willing them to adjust to the darkness. There’s one! She darted out to snatch it out of the air with her hands. Did she get it? She wasn’t sure. She opened her hand only slightly. The little bug crawled out of the crack. She frantically trapped him again before he could fly off.

Lydia was having so much fun that she didn’t realize how ridiculous they looked. A grown woman and a senior citizen by Goodwill’s standards, running around in the backyard flailing after glowing insects. She paused for a moment to watch her mother, so alive with passion and careless joy, prancing around the yard like a little girl. Lydia wanted that sort of freedom. Her mother may not carry out her grand schemes, but she lived for the moment. She lived for those little bursts of joy. Those little moments of absurdity. That was the thing that was most beautiful about her.

The back door opened, and Caleb emerged from inside still wearing his filthy work clothes. “What are you two doing?” Caleb called to them from the porch.

They both froze and then laughed at themselves. “We are catching food for the praying mantises!”

Caleb shrugged and went back inside. He was used to his wife’s antics and preferred not to interfere.

Nearly half an hour later, they came back inside with two jars of lightning bugs.

“Should we kill them first or leave them alive?” Annabelle asked.

“I don’t know, I could look it up,” Lydia said sitting down in front of her laptop. While she researched praying mantis nymphs her mother was inspecting the terrarium with interest.

“One of them is gone!” she cried suddenly.

“Did it escape?” Lydia looked around her.

“No, the colander is on tight.”

“Maybe it’s just camouflaged?”

Annabelle sat down at the kitchen table and hunched down to look into the terrarium with her glasses. Her bare elbows supported her weight.

“I don’t see it,” she said.

“Mom,” Lydia said, lifting her head from her computer screen. “It says here that they will eat each other even if they have other food to eat.”

“Oh no! Carl ate Peter!”

“Or maybe “Peter ate Carl,” Lydia suggested. “Was Peter the one that betrayed Jesus?”

“I think that was Judas.”

“Then maybe it’s Judas.”

“Maybe!” her mother laughed and threw up her hands in defeat.

They deposited the lightning bugs into the little terrarium and headed off for bed.

The next morning when Lydia walked down the stairs, she found the colander knocked aside. She looked inside the makeshift terrarium then all over the kitchen, but she could not find Peter, or Carl, or Judas, or whoever the lightning bug was. An hour later Annabelle came

down the stairs in her usual morning cheer. Once she saw the open terrarium her cheer transformed into panic. Her mother's panic confused her, hadn't this been what she wanted all along?

"You wanted to release them into the house. That was your original plan."

"Yes, but...I didn't really want to release them, at least not as nymphs!" Then her mother began to laugh. "We already have so many bugs in the house. What's one more?"

"One of them escaped?" Caleb asked, coming down the stairs in his robe.

"Yes, we can't find Carl," Annabelle admitted.

"Judas," Annabelle corrected.

"They say you swallow eight spiders in your sleep every year," Caleb said, "maybe he'll make a good midnight snack!"

Annabelle looked horrified for a moment, then laughed. "That can't be true! I don't sleep with my mouth open."

"Yes, you do! And you snore!" Caleb said poking his wife and clasping his arm around her.

"No I don't! You're the one that snores," she said indignantly.

Lydia stared at her parents with a new sense of understanding. In a way this was all just a hat trick of theirs to be repeated over and over as long as they lived. Her mother's ridiculous scheme had shattered into a million pieces and her father's meaningless encouragement, going around and around like a broken record.

Scott Baker

It was the fourth of July and the town had dressed all the light poles up with red, white, and blue banners. They lined the street one after the other in perfect order, like the lines of veterans and the high school marching band from the parade that morning. The banners were wet and hung limp on the poles, flicking and snapping when a particularly strong wind blew down the street. Bits of trash and patriotic confetti stuck to the asphalt and sidewalk like brightly colored wet leaves. Scott surveyed the scene with some dismay, he hoped it wouldn't be too wet to light fireworks later that night.

Mr. Ahlborn, Gunther's dad, was picking confetti out of his front lawn, grumbling about his back and "damn parades." Scott Baker and his two friends, Gunther and Ben, had been set to the task, too. They periodically looked up from the grass where they pawed at the parade's debris with none of the manic enthusiasm of Gunther's father. Mrs. Ahlborn watched her husband's slow progress from the front porch.

"You oughta wait until things dry out, you're only making yourself crazy," she said.

Mr. Ahlborn chose not to honor her suggestion with an actual answer. He only grumbled and picked at the mushy paper.

"This is pointless," Gunther told his father.

"I'll tell you what's pointless, this whole damn parade," he said.

"Ryan!" Gunther's mother exclaimed taking one step down the porch stairs in the direction of her husband. "The parade is a nice event, they are honoring *you* and the country."

"I'll tell you what," he said, not pausing to stand when he spoke to her, "there wasn't any damn confetti overseas and that was good enough for me." They continued picking up the

confetti in silence. Scott wasn't surprised that Mr. Ahlborn was in such a bad mood. Although he was usually easygoing, he hated mess. His yard and house were impeccably clean.

Scott had no idea how long they had been at this. The sky was growing darker by the minute, but bits of brightly colored paper still littered the driveway. The boys grew restless, because the darkness meant there would be fireworks soon. They wanted to go down to the river to watch. Gunther looked up pleadingly at his mother, who returned his stare with sympathy. She walked down from the porch steps and began collecting confetti herself.

"You boys go on, I know you want to go see the fireworks" she said.

Gunther's father shot his mother an annoyed look, but he didn't contradict her.

The boys quit their work. They ran to the back where their bikes lay in the wet grass. Gunther ran into the house and came out with a small black backpack filled with fireworks of their own.

"Do you have the matches?" Gunther asked Scott. Scott nodded and felt the small box in his jean pocket. He had slipped the matches off the mantel that morning and had all but forgotten about them. Pulling them out of his pocket, he checked to see if they had gotten wet during the day. All good.

As they rode onto the street he adjusted himself, sitting awkwardly on one side so as not to crush the matches. They sped down the main road of town, past the ice cream shop toward the river. They wanted to sit on the train trestle that crossed Millhap Creek before it emptied into the river. It had a perfect view of the community dock where the town held the show.

They peddled hard all the way to the trestle, eager to get a good spot. The road to the trestle was hilly, as was any road in Hullbeck. Even the roads cut out of the mountain rocks sloped up and down. The boys breathed hard as they climbed each incline, but on the downhills they stood up on their pedals, the wind catching their thin rain jackets like sails.

The damp patches on the metal made the trestle look oddly spotted as if the moss from the surrounding trees had found its way onto the metal frame. They dumped their bikes, then darted down a path that hugged the curves of the cliff-like bank and led to a gate blocking the entrance to the walkway underneath the trestle. The gate was pointless. Scott stepped onto the first in a series of beams that supported the length of the walkway. He scooted along its edge until he was close enough to swing his leg over the side of the railing. His friends followed behind him. A few teenagers were already sitting on the trestle in small groups, they whispered and talked amongst themselves as the three boys wove past them.

They sat down with their legs dangling over the side facing the community dock, just barely visible in the half light. The dark green water below looked so much higher than Scott thought it should. He could hear the faint trickle of creeks and waterfalls emptying into the river. Boats had already begun to gather to watch the fireworks. Their red and green bow lights marring the smooth reflection of the moonlit clouds.

The community dock looked oddly naked with so many boats gone. It was taped off with caution tape on all sides. Men moved from one end to the other setting up fireworks and lines. Rows of people sat on the landing ramp in disorderly groups. A firetruck glinted red behind them. It too was reflected in the dark water. The firemen sat on the ramp among the people in their bright yellow hats and suits.

Above them the boys heard the roar of an engine. Scott looked around his shoulder and through the railroad ties above his head. The driver killed the engine. All the teens on the trestle looked up, wary to see whether it was the cops coming to clear them out.

“Come on, let’s go to the walkway,” a man said.

“Let’s sit on the tracks!” a familiar voice said. Scott took a few quick steps towards the voices. It was his sister Leanne.

“Dylan come on, let’s sit on the tracks” she pleaded.

Scott’s first thought was to wonder what his dad would do if he knew Leanne came here on the motorcycle with Dylan. He smiled with satisfaction. But no sooner had he rejoiced over his newfound leverage than he remembered the sleek silver motorcycle Ben had described to him in detail the day his father went to find his sisters. He had not truly cared then whether his sisters were in trouble or not, he just wanted to see the motorcycle and maybe sit on it the way Ben claimed he had.

“Leanne?” he called up to her. Suddenly her head appeared over the side a few feet from where he was standing. He could see her body laid out on the track. Her red hair fell down around her face creating a fiery halo.

“Scott!” she said surprised. “What are you doing here?”

Scott’s friends were all looking up at Leanne.

“Is that your sister?” Gunther asked.

“Of course it’s his sister,” Ben said, jabbing his friend in the ribs with his elbow.

“I came with my friends.”

“Hi Leanne!” Ben called up to her. She smiled at him indifferently. Scott always suspected that Ben had a crush on his older sister. While most of his friends agreed that his sisters were annoying and condescending, Ben always defended them. He would hang around when she was in the same room and ask her stupid questions. Scott looked at his friend with suspicion. Ben shrugged.

“What are *you* doing here?” Scott asked, diverting his attention away from Ben.

“I’m with Dylan,” she said simply. At the mention of Dylan, Scott craned his head to try to get a glimpse of the motorcycle, but he couldn’t see it. Another head popped over the side of the tracks. Dylan Greene smiled down at him, his mop of blond hair fell on either side of his face making his own golden halo. Scott wasn’t sure what to say, he had been teasing his sister about Dylan the entire week, but now that he was staring down at him he had no words. They stared at each other for what felt like a long time.

“Dylan!” Ben called up to him.

“Hey little man.” Dylan said. Normally Ben would have fumed at the diminutive, but from Dylan he accepted it without so much as a twitch of his eyebrow.

“Did you bring your bike?” Ben asked, trying to sound nonchalant, but failing to hide his excitement.

“Sure did,” Dylan answered smiling.

“What are you doing on the top?” Scott interrupted. Dylan’s friendly gaze turned from Ben to him.

“It’s a better view from up here,” Leanne answered for him.

“What if the train comes?”

“We’ll jump!” she said. Her red hair wiggled from side to side around her face.

“What?”

“Yeah its only like forty feet, it would be fine,” she said. This made Scott a little queasy. He shrugged, not wanting to look like a coward in front of Dylan Greene. He was dying to see his motorcycle. He imagined himself riding down the road on his own silver motorcycle. In his mind, it was polished like a mirror and fast as anything. Even as he was imagining it, he could hear his father’s voice in the back of his mind *Motorcycles are a death wish*. His father had been repeating that so often this week that he was starting to not hear the words. They became an echo between his ears, meaningless syllables.

“Where is Kelly?” Scott asked, he knew that they were supposed to be together. Leanne pointed across the water toward the ramp. Scott looked across the water, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to see her. The only people he could pick out were the firemen in their yellow hats and reflective jackets.

“She’s with Wing Wa,” Leanne answered, a mischievous smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. Scott had not been expecting that, and it must have shown in his face because Leanne laughed at him with delight. Scott’s stomach turned a little tighter picturing Kelly, quiet and watchful, leaning into Wallace’s shoulder just across the water.

“Don’t worry about her,” Leanne said, smiling broadly now, “she’s a good girl.” Leanne laughed again and Scott grimaced.

A sudden flash of light filled the sky followed quickly by a thunderous cracking. They all looked up. The firework spewed sparks of red and gold into the night. The absence of stars only made it more spectacular.

Scott looked back up, but Leanne and Dylan had disappeared from view. Scott went back with his friends to their spot. The fireworks started going off one after another. Scott was surprised by how utterly dark it became in the short lulls between fireworks. The clouds were blocking everything now, even the moon. Although his eyes were glued to the show, his thoughts were above his head and across the water where his sisters sat with Dylan and Wallace. He imagined Leanne scooting closer and leaning into Dylan's shoulder. He imagined Wallace's hand resting on his sister's leg the way he had seen older couples do. He imagined each of them kissing in the light of the fireworks, reds and blues reflecting on their cheeks. The thoughts made him feel odd. After thirty minutes the fireworks stopped. Everyone on the trestle hooted and hollered at the top of their lungs, chanting "USA, USA, USA," over and over again. Scott yelled with the rest, but he was looking above him to where he thought Dylan and Leanne were sitting. He could see movement. Were they standing? He could hear his sister's yell pierce the night, followed by Dylan's deep laugh. The people in the boats answered their cheers. The whole riverbank echoed with patriotic clamor.

Scott's friends stood to leave. Scott's head was still twisted looking above him. *What would his father say? What would his father do if he knew?* The shapes above moved out of sight. He heard Dylan's motorcycle speed off into the distance along with howling laugh from Leanne. He was a little sad that he wouldn't get to ride Dylan Greene's motorcycle tonight. He didn't realize until then that that was what he had been hoping for all along.

The boys got back onto their bikes. The night was so pitch black that they couldn't see the road lines.

“What about another firework show?” asked Ben. He peddled up to be even with Gunther. His black backpack blended in behind him. The boys yelled their agreement into the night. They could hear fireworks going off in the town.

About half a mile down the road Scott could see the glow of streetlights that marked the start of Main Street. Ben peddled out ahead. He stopped in front of the used car dealership on the edge of town. The other two dismounted their bikes on the sidewalk and let them fall in the berm separating the sidewalk from the road.

“Give me that backpack!” Ben called to Gunther.

“In a minute.” He unzipped it and pulled out several different rockets. He lined them up on the ground. He handed the backpack to Ben. He rummaged around inside until he found the bottle rockets. Their sticks were tied together with a twisty tie.

“Can I have a match?” he asked Scott. Scott took the matches out and handed a few to Ben. He lit them on the side of his shoe. Then he lit one of the bottle Rockets he had stuck in the ground. They screeched loudly as they soared into the night sky over the pavement of main street. The wet American flag banners shone bright with a quick burst of light.

“How did you do that? That thing with the match?” asked Scott. Ben smiled broadly, glad that his trick had been acknowledged by his friends.

“My dad showed me how to do it. The trick is to hit it really fast.” Ben took a match out of the box in Scott’s hand and struck it on his shoe. It lit up quickly. He let it burn until he couldn’t hold it anymore, then let it drop into a puddle near his feet with a hiss. The smell of gunpowder mixed with the damp smell of the day. Scott tried a match on his own shoe, but the stick snapped. The lighter end fell forlornly into a puddle. He tried two more with no result, so

he pulled out another and lit it on the side of the box. Ben looked happy that Scott hadn't been able to do it.

Scott bent to one of the tubes and lit the fuse. The two other boys scrambled backward, surprised by the lack of warning. Once it was lit Scott scrambled away too. The tube was filled to the top with eight firecrackers. They shot out one after the other. They were nearly as big as the ones the town had set off on the community dock. They exploded well above the trees and powerlines lining main street. The boys watched with awe. It was much more satisfying to watch fireworks if you set them off yourself.

"Next year we should take some fireworks to the trestle and put on a real show," said Gunther. The other two smiled at the idea.

"Yeah, we would put the dock's fire show to shame!" said Ben.

"They would be so surprised," Scott laughed. He could imagine the strange call and response as they competed with the dock.

They set off almost all of their fireworks. Each one reflected a thousand times on the windshields of every car in the lot like stacks of TV screens repeating the same show. It was dazzling.

Scott grew bored with the larger fireworks, so he grabbed another bottle rocket from Ben. He stuck it in the ground and lit it almost in the same stroke. The firework squealed and flew sideways, directly towards a cluster of powerlines in front of the dealership. Scott felt panic rise in his throat. The firework hit a box hanging from the lines. *The transformer*, he thought slowly.

Upon impact the transformer box exploded magnificently into the air. The fire and fumes shot up toward the sky in the shape of an atomic mushroom cloud, higher and larger than any firework they had set off all night. Its image repeated a thousand times on the same windshields as before, a red plume like an atomic bomb. The boys cowered from the blast, covering their faces with their arms. Instantly the row of streetlights and all the houses on their side of Main Street went dark. Black, putrid smelling smoke filled the air. Limp, broken power lines hung only a few yards away. They buzzed and crackled loudly, much too close to the wet pavement for comfort. The ground around them was blackened, as was the side of the car dealership.

People emerged from their houses down the street. The cars stopped. They heard sirens in the distance. The boys looked at each other in shock, fear written on each face. Scott was the first to run to his bike, his ears ringing. The explosion had made him deaf. He thought wildly of his father's angry face, of his hands grabbing him by the collar of his shirt. Scott's heart raced, he peddled away quickly, vowing not to say a word about anything to his father about this night. His friends caught up to him, peddling hard. Water and grime slinging from their tires. Only when they were half a mile away did they slow down enough to breathe evenly. They stopped their bikes at the top of the first hill before the trestle. Scott looked at his friends. Their faces were white and unsure. They said nothing at first, Scott wondered if their ears were ringing like his. They all looked back toward the town, half-clothed in darkness.

Ben's face broke into a devilish smile. Gunther and Scott couldn't help but smile too. Ben thrust his two fists into the air. He threw his head back, hooting and howling triumphantly.

Scott smiled in spite of himself. They took up their bikes again, turning right to take the long way back to Gunther's house following the river. Now they all were yelling into the night.

"Damn that was a big one, boys!" Ben yelled. Scott's stomach turned again with a mix of excitement, fear, and exhilaration all tangled up together. They stopped again to look back down into town. Still only half of the town was lit. The firetruck's lights glared red and blue against the pitch black of their own creation.

Eliot Sulzberger

Eliot Sulzberger was bent over the junk drawer searching for a special star-shaped screwdriver, when his son Ben came down the stairs. He looked up. Sometimes it still surprised him to see his son walk down those stairs in the morning. Seeing him every other weekend meant that most weekday mornings were spent alone. Ben was still with him only because of the long fourth of July weekend. Eileen would pick up Ben tomorrow. He looked back down. This drawer ought to be cleaned out, he thought as he pushed bits of wires and bread bag tabs around. He paused at the sight of two unpaid bills to the bank for the Ford sitting in his driveway right now, then shoved them aside. He glanced up at Ben again who looked like a zombie, brown hair ruffled and shaggy on one side and flat on the other, eyes still half closed and watery as if he hadn't slept at all.

"When did you get home last night?" Eliot shoved a large chip bag clip to the back of the drawer. Something metal beneath it. Could it be? No.

Ben shook his head as if to clear out the sleep. "I don't know." He slumped into a chair at the kitchen table.

Eliot eyed his son, trying to wrap his head around the exact tone of that response. Defiant or just thoughtless? Did the intent matter if the effect was the same? Ben rubbed his eyes, his elbow grinding into the plastic tablecloth. Just thoughtless. Eliot's own father's words bubbled up in his throat. *Respect your elders. Speak when spoken to. Answer direct questions directly.* Words from a father's script. Still, he could not let the words escape. Ben was old enough for some freedom, especially on a summer holiday. Did Eileen enforce a strict curfew?

She probably did, knowing Eileen. He ought to ask her when she came to pick him up tomorrow. On second thought, maybe not. He could hear her chiding him. *You need to take this more seriously. Ben needs consistency, Eliot.* He needed to give her the alimony check tomorrow, too. Would the check bounce? He couldn't let that happen, the embarrassment would kill him.

He tore his thoughts away from Eileen. "Did you see the fireworks?"

"Oh yeah, we went to the trestle to watch them."

"Nice," Eliot said. A long time ago, when they were teenagers, he had taken Eileen to the trestle. No fireworks that night, just the moon passing behind the clouds and the water shining below. He had taken other girls to the trestle before her, but they had been shy and uncertain looking up at him with doe eyes, waiting for him to act first, to speak first. Eileen looked him right in the eye and placed his hand boldly on her knee. She stared at him then leaned in for the kiss first. Later that year at the fireworks, she pulled him along the trestle to the center spot, looking back at him, with playful eyes and curling lips.

He stopped rummaging through the drawer. When exactly had he become too old to go to the trestle and watch the fireworks? A fence between one day and the next, climbed over, but not noticed.

"Who did you go with?"

"Just Scott and Gunther," Ben said.

So lackluster behind the eyes this morning. "Do you want a cup of coffee Ben?"

"Uhhh," he said surprised. "Ummm maybe? Mom doesn't let me have it."

Of course. Eileen had at first looked down on his coffee drinking as if it made him weak. Evil coffee enslaved the adult population. After they brought Ben home as a baby, the late nights and lack of sleep had made her crazy with exhaustion. He woke up at 5:00 am one morning to a strange rattling sound and found Eileen in the kitchen wrestling with the coffee machine and a filter. The wild look in her eyes made him afraid of questioning her, so he just asked if she wanted help. She had snapped at him. From then on, she drank coffee every morning, even though she did not enjoy the taste. She would inject it directly into her veins if she could, skip the mug all together.

Too late to withdraw the offer.

Eliot abandoned the drawer to pour two cups of coffee. He took a sip of black, unsweetened coffee, the bitter taste sliding down his throat. Ben took a sip and nearly spit it out.

Eliot smiled and pushed the sugar shaker across the counter. "Milk's in the fridge."

Ben's coffee was soon a light caramel color. He took another cautious sip and smiled.

"Better?" Eliot asked.

"Better," Ben agreed.

Eliot set his coffee down on the counter beside the flash light, an extra dish sponge, sinkers and other odd things from the junk drawer. Better remember to put those sinkers back in his tackle box. How had they ended up here?

Ben suddenly announced, "Mr. Ahlborn made us pick up all the wet confetti in his yard piece by piece."

Eliot snorted, Ryan Ahlborn was anal about many things, his lawn chief among them. Eliot believed his hardware store held out against Home Depot and Tractor Supply, by keeping his ducks in a row. He remembered your face, and what you did, and your favorite brand of paint. Ryan knew where every single item was in the store. Yes, that's over in aisle six, four steps down and to your right, middle shelf.

"It took forever!"

"Well you ate at his table and stayed at his house most of the day, if he wants you boys to pick up some confetti that seems fair." Eliot returned to rooting through the junk drawer for the screwdriver.

"What are you looking for anyway?" Ben asked his father.

"A special screwdriver."

"What for?"

"Whoever installed the doors at the house I'm working at used star-shaped screws and I don't know if I have one. I thought I did." Nearly every metal object in the drawer now lay out on the counter in an uneven row, glinting in the morning light.

"So, you're working this week?" Ben asked.

"Yes," Eliot answered. Did Ben think his normal state was not to work? This year had been especially slow and any work he could get, even if he severely underbid himself, was lucky to come by. In the back of the drawer Eliot spied a handful of screwdrivers and wrenches.

Aahaa, finally....Damn. Not a single star-headed screw driver in the bunch. He looked up to see Ben staring at him from the kitchen table. His mother's eyes. Eileen's eyes.

“Looks like I’ll have to go to the hardware store,” Eliot said. Checking his watch, he saw that he had to leave now to get to the jobsite on time. He didn’t mind stopping at Ahlborn Hardware and talking with Ryan, an old friend. Of course, most people still here were old friends, or old enemies. Their sons were friends now. The cyclical way of things, that was another thing his father used to say.

“Can I come?” asked Ben. “Gunther might be there.”

“You can come, but I don’t have time to drive you back here afterwards.”

“Can we put my bike in the back?” he asked.

“Alright, but get dressed quickly. I’ve got to get going.”

On the porch Ben’s bike was propped against the railing only partially out of the rain. Why had Ben bothered to bring it up the steps under cover, only to let it get rained on by leaning it on the railing? He tipped the bike toward him. Droplets fell from the rim and left trails along a blackened patch toward the front of the frame. He wiped his finger against the black. Soot? It came away on his finger in a fine, wet powder, leaving a shining fingerprint on the frame. How had soot gotten on Ben’s bike? *Must ask Ben about that. Maybe not. A boy’s adventures are his own, but should I play the stern father, preaching safety and hard work?* Again, his own father’s words echoed in his ears.

Ben sat in the passenger seat, still, except one hand tuning the radio. He changed the music almost every thirty seconds, not waiting to even hear a full chorus of any single song. Listless or bored?

“What happened to your bike?” Eliot asked, brushing Ben’s hand away from the dial. Ben stiffened for a split-second then rolled the window down. The truth was there in that split-

second, Eliot knew. The split-second before the lie was born. The damp air swirled around in the truck smelling of dirt and grass.

“Nothing, my bike is fine,” Ben answered.

Trying a little too hard to be nonchalant. They begin lying at a young age. No Dad, I didn't eat the cookie, with crumbs on his face.

“It looks like it's covered in a layer of soot.”

“Oh *that*...”

“Yes, that.” At the stop sign, he turned to look his son in the face.

Ben looked away out the window.

“Why is your bike covered in soot?”

Ben squirmed a little in his seat, eyes still averted.

“One of the fireworks hit it,” Ben admitted.

“Ben, look at me.”

Ben met his father's gaze with nervous eyes. Was there more to the story? Always more of course. He could mine it for every detail for a thousand years and still not get at the truth.

A car pulled up behind him. Eliot broke their gaze.

“You need to be more careful,” he said. Eliot really wasn't all that angry, but he should make some show of disappointment. A little anger strikes fear, or so it had with him and his father. Well, it worked, and it didn't. A little trouble and a few secrets weren't necessarily a bad thing. He suspected that Eileen kept Ben on a fairly tight leash and he wanted to be the kind of dad that his son thought of like a friend, not a dictator.

“What if you had hit a car’s gas tank, or one of your friends?” His son’s silence obligated him to bring up these obvious questions. *Blind to the obvious dangers, they think they’re invincible.*

“I don’t know,” Ben said, annoyed, but also resigned.

A large row of brightly colored kayaks leaned against the side of the hardware store in size and color order. Ben went to investigate the new arrivals and Eliot went into the store. Gunther sat hunched over on a stool behind the checkout desk with his fingers in his mouth chewing his nails. He straightened up and wiped his fingers on his maroon polo just above the left breast where it read *Ahlborn Hardware* in crisp yellow letters.

“Good morning Mr. Sulzberger, can I help you find anything?” Gunther recited.

“No, that’s ok Gunther. I think I can find it myself. Ben is outside looking at the kayaks.” Gunther brightened. Ryan Ahlborn emerged from the stairs behind the desk that led to the storeroom.

“Run on, then,” Mr. Ahlborn said, “but don’t be acting like a goddamn fool out there, you’re wearing your uniform.”

Gunther scurried out of the store.

Mr. Ahlborn turned to Eliot with a satisfied smile. “I’ve got that boy properly shaking now.”

“What’s he done?” Eliot asked. Old friends. They raced their first cars down Lakeside Road, howling in the night. When did Ryan tighten up? He did always wash his car after every muddin’ trip. Tires, undercarriage, the whole shebang shining like new. A clean car was his religion.

“He was out too late last night. I told him, be back by midnight. He crawled in at 2:00 in the morning, with nothing to say for himself neither. You know Penny can’t sleep when he’s out and about, so I made some pretty good empty threats and drug him to work today.” Ryan laughed heartily at that and gave Eliot a knowing smile. Eliot smiled, too, at the ridiculousness of punishing their sons for the same things they did a mere twenty years earlier.

“Ben was out late last night, too.”

“Scott Baker was with them, too, probably. Playing with fireworks or what not.” He looked Eliot in the eye. “Too young to get girls just yet, but then again who knows.”

Ryan gave him a light shove with his shoulder, an old familiar gesture between them.

“To tell you the truth,” Ryan said, “I think our boys have something to do with that power outage last night. Some kids out on main street near the dealership hit a transformer with a bottle rocket I think it was. Half of this town went dark.”

The wheels in Eliot’s head started turning. “I didn’t know the power went out last night,” he said.

“Well, only on our side of main street,” Ryan said.

“I found soot all over Ben’s bike this morning. He says a firework hit it.”

Ryan Ahlborn laughed a little, but also looked concerned. “Drive past the dealership today on your way to the job, and then tell me what you think. The corner of the building and all the pavement below is pitch black from the explosion.”

“An explosion?”

“Well, yeah, they hit a transformer! Gerald said the explosion was taller than the building, and even taller than the trees.”

Eliot's alarm increased. Ben's bike had been close enough to that transformer to have soot all over it. He should have been harder on him that morning, 'got him shaking' like Ryan said.

The doorbell jingled. The two fathers looked toward the door. Gunther and Ben stood just inside the doorframe. Gunther's left shoulder and half his head were soaked. Ben was laughing at him, doubled over and pointing.

"What happened to you?" his father asked.

"Gunther tried to turn one of the kayaks and it spilled all over him," Ben managed between fits of giggles.

"It didn't fall did it?" Ryan asked quickly. Eliot pictured the kayaks all falling in a row like dominoes. "I've got to go take care of that if you don't mind," he said to Eliot.

"Yeah, go ahead, I can find what I'm looking for."

Ryan nodded his thanks and turned to face his son, who followed him out of the door looking like a wet puppy. Ben stayed behind and stared at his father with big eyes.

"Mr. Ahlborn seems pissed," he said.

"No, he really isn't," Eliot answered, turning on his heel to head back to the hand tools section. Ben followed him there and leaned against the metal shelving while his father inspected the screwdrivers. Eliot was aware of his son's eyes on him. Should he bring the power outage up? No. What was there to say? Be careful? Don't do it again? Empty words. Ben remained silent and Eliot realized that he didn't want to know what happened. Did that make him a bad parent?

After finding the correct screwdriver, he walked back to the front register with Ben close on his heels. Ryan came back in with Gunther following behind him. He maneuvered behind the register like a snake, leading with his head and letting his body follow. He rang the screw driver up.

“Who are you working for right now?” Ryan asked him as Eliot handed his money over the counter.

“I’m redoing the flooring at Patel’s place,” he said.

“Spencer Patel?” he asked, giving Eliot a knowing look.

Spencer Patel had gone to their high school back in the day. The kind of guy to stick it to you for no reason except for his own enjoyment. An asshole. A ‘touch of a mean-streak,’ people called it. Still he had always been somewhat successful with the ladies, a fact that had especially vexed Ryan.

Eliot was surprised when Spencer called last month to give a bid on his flooring. In all the years since high school, Eliot had only run into Spencer a handful of times. Every time Spencer treated Eliot like a piece of gum stuck on his shoe. Something to flick off. He paraded around town in his suit like a bigshot and disregarded everyone with a lower paygrade. His voice on the phone had been so exaggeratedly familiar, it made Eliot’s skin crawl. But he needed work and Spencer had work to be done.

“You don’t want a bag for that right?” Ryan asked.

“No that’s fine, thanks.”

Ryan handed him the screwdriver with his receipt.

“I can’t turn down work, Ryan. You know that.”

Ryan Ahlborn shrugged.

Eliot said goodbye to Gunther before heading out of the building, Ben following him to get his bike.

“Don’t be a nuisance to Mr. Ahlborn, alright? Gunther is working, so if a customer comes in, you let him do his job, alright?”

Ben nodded and waved goodbye as Eliot pulled onto the road.

A transformer exploding in the background, a bike engulfed in a brief flash of flames. A chill ran down Eliot’s spine. Should he be worried? He told himself that if Ben really had caused that explosion, surely, he would lay low today and tomorrow he would be off to Eileen.

Eliot checked his watch. Still time to drive the long way past the dealership. A crew of electrical workers scaled the poles and fiddled with new lines and wires. The two-story building looked ominous covered in a layer of pitch black soot behind the charred pole where the transformer had been. The sidewalk and even the small strip of grass before the road had smoky wisps marking the outermost edges of the explosion. The sight of it suddenly made him feel sick. Not just a bike engulfed in flames, but a boy too, burnt flesh and charred hair. He looked away.

He gripped the steering wheel. Ben could have died or been maimed by fire, and what had he been doing? He had gone to bed and slept soundly. He could hear Eileen’s reprimanding voice reproaching his lack of vigilance, his lack of guidance. If he reminded her that their parents had let them run wild around town so long as they were back before supper time and they had survived to adulthood, she would remind him, *you know not everyone survived*. In their high school class there were two car accidents and one drowning. Kids at school one day

and gone the next. He had watched the assistant principal guide Ray's distraught mother to her son's locker after school. She emptied its contents into a shopping bag, sorting out the school's books from her son's personal items, looking about apologetically at the pairs of eyes watching her. His among them.

Eliot could not allow himself to dwell on that. He thought about Spencer in high school. Once during a basketball game against the Sutton County Trojans Spencer and some other boys on the team bought boxes of Trojan condoms and threw them at the cheerleaders like dollar bills for strippers. At the time Eliot had laughed, but he could still remember the girls' tears and their mothers' anger. The cheerleader's bodies heaving in embarrassment beneath their constricting uniforms, their mothers' arms encircling their shoulders, protecting them from the watching eyes. The fierceness of a mother's gaze stopped Eliot's laughter. You are complicit, her eyes said. You might as well have thrown them yourself. Eliot shuddered and felt that old shame all over again.

A mother's eyes. Eileen's eyes.

Spencer would alternately egg on and terrorize Aaron Gill. Aaron Gill was an odd duck, no denying that. He came to school every day of freshman year with an army helmet on his head and carried a briefcase instead of a backpack. One day Aaron came to school in a suit entirely constructed of duct tape. Spencer pretended they were great friends, but pushed him to do ridiculous things for his own amusement.

Spencer told Aaron that Katherine Price, a beautiful girl on the cheerleading squad, was in love with him, dreamed of him every night and talked about him after class. All lies. Before homecoming Spencer announced over the loudspeaker, *Aaron has got something to say*. Aaron

had cleared his voice. *For you Katherine.* Then he began serenading her over the loudspeaker, a badly rendered Sinatra tune. Katherine had been standing on the track with the other cheerleaders. The color drained from her face. Stifled laughter filled the bleachers. Katherine stood quite still, staring up at the press box with large sad eyes. When Aaron emerged from the press box, the students parted for him like he had the plague, then sniggered or cheered. Spencer followed behind, smiling broadly. A few of the boys gave him fist bumps as he passed by. When Aaron made it to the bottom he halted. Spencer stopped too. Katherine and Aaron stared at each other. Then Aaron's nervous voice built up only by a false friend's confidence proposed the question. *Will you go to Homecoming with me?* The stands erupted with an outpouring of cruel laughter.

Katherine was graceful in her refusal, *I'm sorry Aaron, I already have a date, I'm sure someone else will go with you.* Then Spencer pushed past Aaron to where Katherine stood, holding her arms around herself. He walked up to her smiling and threw a genial arm over her shoulder. *Give poor Aaron a chance, aren't you in love with him? Who is this date you say you have, huh?* The crowd was silent, all ears straining. Spencer's joke was as much on her as it was on Aaron. Katherine threw Spencer's arm off her shoulder, *I don't want to go with him,* she pointed an accusatory finger in Aaron's direction. Aaron shriveled into himself. The crowd seethed like a pit of snakes. *And I sure as hell won't go with you. You petty, selfish prick.* She said to Spencer. Her voice had reached a fever pitch. Spencer did not look wounded, he smiled at her and then at Aaron, whose face was now the color of the moon and trying to wane himself out of existence. *Well old chap, you miss all the shots you don't take.* Aaron darted away, wiping tears from his face. Katherine's friends descended on her, shielding her from

Spencer and the watching eyes from the stands. Their fierce eyes trained on Spencer's triumphant face.

Spencer's house came into view. Eliot stepped out of his truck and made his way up to the path to the door. The flower beds had been freshly mulched. He rang the doorbell twice and waited on the stoop, aware of the small peep hole in the door. A secret eye for spying, for observing. A few long moments passed. Spencer opened the door with a grand wave of his hand and a big, fake smile to match.

"Hey there Eliot, long time no see!" Spencer said, claspng Eliot firmly on the shoulder. Spencer greeted him with white teeth bared in a snarl masked by thin smiling lips. The place looked like a staged apartment, full of luxury and fine detail, but void of any pictures or homey decorations. Spencer showed him through the rooms, his crisply ironed pants turning the corners in predictable folds. Eliot followed with his measuring tape, making notes of the square footage and counting the doors and trim, rechecking his numbers from the bid. Past the kitchen and the living room, a hallway stretched back with three rooms branching off. First came the two bedrooms. The absence of personal touches made it difficult to discern which room was Spencer's. The last room was Spencer's office. An intimidatingly large wooden desk sat in the center with a very expensive leather chair.

"Ok, so what now?" asked Spencer in his most jovial tone.

Eliot disliked the way Spencer spoke to him, the tone so familiar and so fake. As if, this time, he was Aaron Gill, a pawn in Spencer's game. "I need to go to the lumber store and order the boards, and I need to start moving furniture out of the rooms that I'll get to first," Eliot explained. He paused and looked around the office. He opened the closet door carefully.

Spencer's two best tailored suits hung inside, one navy, one black and a few boxes in the rested below. "This seems to be the room furthest away from the door. I should start in here, then work into the bedrooms and the hallway, so I don't trap myself into a corner."

Spencer laughed at that and patted him on the back. "I'm sure you can manage not to get yourself in a corner."

"You would be surprised," Eliot joked, but the words felt forced.

"Ok, then I guess I'll leave you to it," Spencer said.

"One more thing," Eliot said, calling him back in, "I can move the furniture out of the room, but could you clean out the closets so that I can get to the floor? I don't want to go through your personal things."

"Alright man, you got it."

Eliot left for the lumber store not long after with the sample of hardwood flooring that Spencer wanted. When he returned Spencer was making himself coffee. He offered Eliot a cup. Eliot refused, then Spencer headed off to some meeting.

Eliot went about the business of moving the furniture from the office and back guest bedroom into the living room. Then went out to his truck and got his crowbar and circular saw to pull up the flooring. He started at the back corner with the baseboards, pulling them off until he had made his way around the room to the closet. Spencer had not cleaned out the closet, so he pulled the suits and the shoes out of the closet with care, making sure not to get any paint chips or dust on them and lay them neatly onto Spencer's slate gray bed. Files and boxes of paperwork he moved into the living room alongside the desk. The last thing in the bottom of the closet was an open shoebox. He reached back to fish it out, grunting with annoyance. He

took the lid out from the bottom and almost placed it back on top to stack with the others, but a photograph caught his eye.

A square photo of a woman in her late twenties or early thirties with long brown hair, sitting on the edge of Spencer's bed, naked, but pulling her panties up from the floor. Her breasts hung from her chest toward her knees, partially covered by her long hair. She stared at the camera with an expression of anger and surprise that made Eliot a little sick. Below there were more photographs like it. He told himself to throw the lid on and put the shoebox with the others. Instead his hand reached in to retrieve the stack of thick glossy polaroids. He flipped through the photos quickly. Each one was of a woman either partially or completely naked in Spencer's bedroom. Some looked bewildered, some looked embarrassed, covering themselves from the intrusive flash. As he felt himself hardening, his stomach turned in disgust at himself. Their eyes all a mix of surprise, and anger, and violation. He went through them one by one. He stopped. He knew this woman. She was in her late thirties. Thirty-seven, he knew. Eileen's accusing eyes stared back at him through a polaroid photograph. Ben's mother, his wife...his ex-wife, in Spencer's bed.

His first impulse was one of longing. Her slender legs. The notch on her hip, angular, like an anchor to rest on. Three years since he last saw her bare flesh. After the divorce, desperate for intimacy, she came to him. There had been few words. Her hands clung to him, pulled him tighter. It was dizzying and confusing. Afterwards she had cried. Maybe she regretted leaving him. She had asked him if he remembered when they were kids? Yes, of course he did, but what about it? Did she expect an outpouring of his heart? She was the one who wanted the divorce, she had asked him, and he had not fought it. Why should he? Eileen never changed her

mind, she told you what she wanted. She never came to him like that again after that. After that final outburst of feeling, so rich like their first times together, teenagers clinging to each other in his father's borrowed truck bed. Laying out under the stars together afterwards. There used to be a bold caress in her eyes, almost like taking ownership. Now, after that last time, her eyes were only critical. Eliot wondered whether this photo had been taken before or after that last time. Anger and despair welled up inside him.

He studied the photo. She was in motion, sitting up, the gray covers of Spencer's bed pulled partially over her lower legs. She stared the camera down with the clear and unapologetic rage. He knew that expression well. Anger boiled inside him and he threw the polaroid photographs back into the shoebox.

He wanted to escape, take off. But the photograph loomed behind his eyes. He thought of tearing it into pieces. He thought of burning it, burning all of them. All those eyes staring back at him accusingly. He imagined Spencer and Eileen together, and disgust coursed through him like poison.

He went out and sat in his truck. What now? Drive off somewhere? Drive home? Escape. A neighbor's garage door lifted, a woman in her fifties walked around her car to the trunk. She glanced over at him and did a double take. Eliot waved and made himself look busy searching for nothing in his glove box. She waved back and shut the trunk. She backed out of the drive slowly and sped off down the street. Eliot let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding. He closed the glove box with a snap.

The photo of Eileen was there, in that house, waiting for Spencer's perverse eyes. He thought of Eileen waiting for Spencer in his bed. His smile, bared teeth veiled by thinly

stretched lips. The cat's smile to the mouse. When Eileen had been with Eliot she used to go to bed early then wait for him under the covers naked, reading some racy romance novel to pass the time, or to give her ideas. Then he would come in and she would place the book down on the nightstand allowing her breast to escape the covers. She smiled at him, inviting him. Her light brown hair lay over the yellow pillows, her deep brown eyes looked at him, not through him. He smiled too and undressed slowly to join her. Her warm body against his bare flesh. *Damn it.* He hit his hands on the steering wheel.

Suddenly another thought occurred to him. The box had been left with the lid off. What had the closet looked like when he first opened the door? A pair of suits, two pairs of shoes, some boxes. Open? Think! Did he remember the boxes being shut or had Spencer opened it so that he would find it? He stared at the house as if Spencer were in there laughing to himself.

What should he do with the shoe box? Should he go back in and put the lid on or leave it off? Which way would make it seem as if he hadn't seen them? In either case what to do with the picture of Eileen? If he took it there was no way to deny that he saw the pictures. Yet, the thought of the photograph staying there, waiting for Spencer's eyes made him sick.

He went back into the house, down the hall, and into the office. He squatted down to the box and plucked the picture of Eileen off the top. Her eyes. Her anger. He folded it four times over before stuffing it into his back pocket. He wasn't sure what he would do with it next, he just wanted it out of Spencer's house. He put the lid on the box and stacked it along with the others. Then he went out to his truck and stuffed the picture into an envelope then tucked it in his briefcase.

He returned to the house agitated. He stared at the stack of boxes. He took the lid off again. A woman's anxious gaze stared back at him. He put the lid back on. His gut told him to destroy them all. Too risky, Spencer would notice. He paced around the room and stared at the stack of flooring he was supposed to be installing. He ought to walk out right now. Tell Spencer to go to hell. He couldn't. He owed Eileen alimony, and he had a car payment. No, he had to leave, he couldn't endure another one of Spencer's growling smiles knowing that he had seen Eileen's bare body, had touched her. He swallowed hard. He hadn't had a piece of steady work in weeks...months? Two? Maybe three months since his last car payment. They could repo his truck. Eileen's alimony always came first. He wanted her to be able to rely on him. He realized his hands were obsessively fiddling with the tools at his belt. With effort he forced himself to begin his work.

For the rest of the day Eliot pulled up flooring with extra vigor fueled by his anger. Spencer's bared teeth alternated with Eileen's violated eyes. Back and forth they played at dizzying speeds in his mind alongside memories of her touch, the birth of their son, the divorce, that last time she came to him. He hadn't thought of all these things together in such a long time.

By 4:30 his anxiety grew to be too much. He packed up his tools methodically, channeling a stiff, surface-deep calm. He would destroy the photograph as soon as he got home. Eileen deserved better. Spencer's evil eyes wouldn't own her anymore. Rip it into a thousand pieces, light it on fire, something to erase those angry eyes. Something to free her.

Once back in his truck, the presence of the photograph seemed to radiate and inflame his feelings. It took the entire ride home to breathe normally.

In the drive way Eliot paused. Should he take it into the house? It called to him from its place in his briefcase.

The fingers that enclosed the briefcase's handle were alien to him. They clasped it firmly of their own volition. The inside of the house was so quiet he could hear the soft buzz of the refrigerator and the AC humming in the background. He set the briefcase down on the countertop of the kitchen and opened it slowly. A mess of bills lay inside, but in the pocket attached to the lid was the envelope with the photograph. Just a small white envelope. He ought to burn the photo up while it was still in the envelope. Never lay eyes on it again. He fetched the Bick lighter from the stove top. He sat down with it in hand, as if sitting down to a test. Holding the opposite corner, he lit it, then watched the tiny flame engulf it like a disease spreading. As the flame crept closer to the photograph, his heart hammered louder and louder in his chest and his ears. So close. The flame split, following both sides of the envelope where the bulge of the photograph lay. Suddenly the flame sputtered out, never reaching the photograph. He stared at it, his heart pumping madly inside his chest.

He dumped the folded photograph and bits of charred paper into his cupped hand. The picture looked oddly non-threatening folded up. Just a piece of trash waiting to be discarded. He unfolded it slowly. The folds had made crinkled creases on her body and down one side of her face, disfiguring her and disarming her penetrating gaze. Without both eyes staring at him evenly, her face no longer seemed defiant. It was lost. She was lost. He sat down at the counter and stared at the photograph. He flattened the photograph out with both hands, watching the anger return to her eyes through that simple action. It's always about the angles.

The phone rang. He jumped, nearly dropping the photograph. Better not answer it. He waited for the rings to run through. One. Two. Three. *Hello. This is Eliot Sulzberger. Sorry I'm not home right now. If you're calling about a bid please leave your full name, address and phone number at the beep. Thanks for calling.* The phone gave a long beep.

"Hi Eliot, it's me," Eileen said. Her voice sounded strangely grainy through the recording.

Eliot stood up quickly still gripping the photograph in his hand.

"Why aren't you answering your cell? Anyways, I'm supposed to pick up Ben tomorrow and the check too, Ben hasn't answered me either so I'm wondering where I should pick him up? Your house ok? Maybe 11:00..."

Eliot looked down at the photograph in his hands, slightly bent. It was like she was speaking to him through it.

"Could you write the check out to me as Eileen Sulzberger? They gave me a hard time about it last time."

He almost smiled, she couldn't be rid of him either. She still got mail with his last name on it.

"Call me back when you can. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

Eliot thought he heard a hesitation on the end. The ever so slight trailing off of her voice. He smiled sadly. Just after she had moved back in with her mother, she left a message. *Bye, I love you...pause...uhhm, I...sorry goodbye, Eliot.* His small hopes shattered into pieces by a simple pause. It meant nothing. From the photograph, her eyes still stared back at him. It was all so hopeless.

He tore the burnt envelope into pieces and tossed it into the trash. He plucked another envelope from his briefcase. This one was greeting card sized, big enough to fit the photograph unfolded. He slid it inside and stared at the envelope. *No, I won't burn it.* He went into his bedroom with the envelope. Where to put it? He first considered stuffing it under his mattress, but he didn't like to think of her under there. What about the dresser? The quintessential sock drawer? No, what if Ben found it. Suddenly he knew where it should go. He went to the closet and pulled down a box from the top shelf in the back corner. Inside were their wedding photos, and their marriage certificate, now void. He forced himself not to look at the wedding photos. He set the envelope on top, then replaced the lid and slid the box into its place.

Eliot sat on his bed. He heard the front door open. Ben's footsteps pounded up the staircase.

Michelle Lussa

Michelle walked into the grocery store trying to clear her mind of the junk and snot of her day. She had just gotten off from work at the daycare. There was something exhausting about talking to five-year-olds all day. The things they played at were just menial chores. *Let's play Drive to School!* Only a child would find a morning commute to be worthy of pretend. Of course, they did play at other things; cowboys and Indians, robots, princesses, doctors, those kinds of things she understood. Hell, even she wished she could pretend to be one of those things every now and then, but to play *Drive to School*? Sometimes she wanted to pull the kids aside and look them straight in the eye. *You think this stuff is fun? It won't be fifteen years from now.*

Let's play go to the Grocery Store. She smiled to herself. It didn't take much to keep them entertained. She wished she could say the same for herself. There was some beauty in their simplicity. As ridiculous as their games were, she envied their sense of wonder.

She grabbed a small basket from the stack. It had a layer of sticky goo at the bottom, so she sat it down and picked up another. Should she tell an employee? No, no one would want to deal with that, and she didn't blame them. Cleaning up goo and throw up was a daily occurrence for her that she didn't wish on other poor souls. *Let's play clean up the goo!* No, that wouldn't work, the kids somehow knew to differentiate that chore as more menial than the rest. Something for the teacher to do.

The store was fairly crowded, people milled about pushing shopping carts through the aisles with their faces tilted to read the signs at the beginning of each row. Sometimes their

carts bumped into one another, eliciting embarrassed laughs and apologies. Two women stood in the middle of the aisle, as if they were not planning on moving anytime soon.

“Lord knows...I heard she ran off with that boy to Louisville,” the taller of the two said.

“Bless her heart, ain’t young love something?” the other replied smiling, maybe remembering a fond memory from her youth. She had tight curls, a faded shade of red that happens when old women try to dye their white hair. Young love wasn’t all it’s cracked up to be. They were too old; the years had erased heartache and replaced it with a nostalgic golden glow. Michelle brushed passed them.

Michelle threw things into her basket, barely pausing to deliberate over the brand or the price, and certainly not the calories. She wanted this chore to take as little time as possible so that she could go home to her silent apartment and watch a standup comedy special full of jokes that would go over a five-year-old’s head. The kids would probably laugh at them anyway if they saw her laughing, mimicking her like little monkeys.

She saved the ice cream section for last. She didn’t want the tub to melt on the drive back to her house, but also because she looked forward to it the most. She scoured the fridges, foggy with frost that crept in from the edges of each pane of glass. She couldn’t find the mint chocolate chip Graeter’s ice cream, her favorite. She realized that an irrational bubble of anger was welling at her throat begging to escape. She wanted to go home and be done, but she could not find it anywhere. A balding man with a nearly empty basket in one hand came strolling down the aisle toward her. She gave him a precursory glance before returning to her search, becoming more annoyed with each moment.

“What is it you’re looking for” he asked her.

She turned her head, surprised and irritated by his intrusion. She looked back to the fridge quickly. "Graeter's ice cream," she said not taking her eyes off the foggy fridges.

"It's right here," he said, bending over to point to a section right in front of her knees. She felt embarrassment and anger well up inside her. *Of course, it's right in front of me*, she thought bitterly.

The man laughed heartily. "You know I thought that was a man thing to do, to miss something right in front of our faces." He smiled at her genially. His eyes wandered down her body.

She opened the fridge door and put a tub of Graeter's mint chocolate chip in her basket. *What a creep.*

"Well I was raised by my father," she said offhandedly. She knew that the man was being nice, trying to lighten the mood, flirt with her the way old men do, but she felt mean. She looked at him, trying to absorb a wealth of details in only an instant. His face was a mix of bewilderment and concern.

She left him standing there, as she headed down the aisle toward the registers.

Gerald Herzog

Gerald Herzog walked slowly through the main hallway of his home. His knees ached painfully when he turned to grab his keys from their hook. As he closed his fingers around them he felt as if he were seeing his hand for the first time in fifty years. His hand was not his own, yet it extended from his body and did what he thought his hands should do. Even so, they did not look like his hands anymore. The hair on his fingers and the back of his hand had grown white and wild, kinking in every direction. Purple spots now added to freckles. His veins shown prominent below his thin skin.

Every day since his wife passed away, his awareness of his own frailty increased. A glance in the mirror or at his hands or legs triggered a strange disconnect. Who was that man standing in front of him?

Keys in hand, he ambled down the hallway toward the garage door. Today was Sunday, church day. This morning he had woken up at 5:00am as had been his habit for the last ten years. Then he stared at the ceiling fan realizing that there was no reason for him to be up. Renee, for the last ten years of her life had been confined to a wheelchair. A massive stroke stole her ability to speak and walk properly. Getting ready for church meant getting up at five in the morning to help Renee bathe, dress, and eat. He had even learned how to help her put her makeup on, a thing he had never imagined happening.

Renee had her stroke when they were out shopping for jeans. He had never been good at shopping for himself. She had been tired that day and complained that her arm hurt her. A few hours later she passed out while he was in the fitting room. Soon after they were at the

hospital. His fear of losing her consumed him. He had prayed to God to save her. At first, he was so thankful when the doctor came back and said she was alive. That joy was soon masked by worry and uncertainty. She would be permanently paralyzed on her left side, and unable to speak. It was all on him. Weeks later, when they were back at home he was surprised by how quickly he adapted, and by how good it felt to care for her. Although she could not speak more than a few garbled words, she sang to him all her thanks through those liquid brown eyes. Now, without her, he felt empty.

He climbed into his car slowly, pain shooting through his hips. How had he lifted Renee in and out of the car only a few months ago? Where had his strength come from? The garage door inched higher, revealing the oranges, reds, and yellows of fall. He pulled out of his gravel driveway and turned onto the pocked, bumpy road. Two clear ruts ran down the length of the four miles it took to get to highway 27. The car could steer itself through the well-worn ruts without his help. A sudden chill crossed his body, as it often did these days. He turned the heat on. Musty warm air blasted into the small space. The chills; his old body giving up, or just the first signs of winter?

He heard a strange rustling noise, but he dismissed it—Old car, old ears. Then he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Sitting on the dash above his radio was a little gray mouse almost the same exact color as the car's interior. It stared at him calmly with little black eyes. His first thought was to be quiet in the hopes that Renee would not see it. She was deathly afraid of mice and would hysterically scream "kill it!". Even after her stroke that seemed to be a phrase she could still muster. Before her stroke, she would climb up onto the

nearest table or chair, but afterwards she only flailed her right hand in a mad, but fruitless effort to escape. But Renee was not there.

He glanced over at the passenger seat then back at the mouse. It twitched its nose at him curiously. He laughed then for the first time since he could remember.

“Well you’re a bold little fella aren’t you?” he asked the mouse. It looked up at him with opaque mouse eyes. “If Renee were here you would be dead as a doornail, didn’t your mouse friends warn you about me?”

The mouse of course did not respond, but Gerald swore that it cocked its head.

“So, you’re still not afraid. Just because Renee isn’t here doesn’t mean I won’t mash you.”

The mouse twitched its nose.

“Do you like music?” When Gerald reached for the tuner the mouse scurried across the dashboard and leapt onto the passenger seat. Then it scampered across the seat and disappeared. Gerald craned his neck around the passenger seat, but he saw nothing.

He knew that he should kill it. He could not have a mouse pooping, peeing, and building nests in his car, and you couldn’t just release them, they always came back. The thought of loading the mouse trap and pulling back the spring made a sudden and violent repulsion fill his body. He would give the mouse a chance to move out of his car, and if it did not...well, he would have to see.

Amber Wilkins

Amber could tell that the ride to Memaw's house was coming to an end. The trees began to crouch closer and closer to their car as it dipped around sharp bends and crested over small hills. Mountain streams bubbled through narrow pipes under the road. Amber's mother nervously flicked her hand on the steering wheel. Every time she leaned down to change the station the car swerved. Only once had another car come towards them. It had honked furiously at Amber's mother for taking her half out of the middle. Amber's mother looked up from the dash where she had been fiddling with the stations and flung a string of curses out the window. Then she looked back down. "I can't never see this damn thing," she said. "Why don't they have 92.5 here?"

Amber did not answer her mother. She just looked out the window. How long would she be at Memaw's this time? Her mother's jittering fingers told her it could be a long time. Soon they came to a small bridge with a creek below. The water line was high, almost touching the orange and black flood sign on the side of the road. It leaned as if it had been hit by a car. "Over the River and through the woods to grandma's house we go," she sang softly to herself.

"I just need a little time darlin'," her mother was saying as she lit a cigarette. "Memaw will take good care of you, don't you worry about that. And you'll have all your cousins to play with." She took a drag of her cigarette. Perhaps she did not remember what had happened last time. Her yellowed fingertips cased in their shining pink acrylics still shook, belying her calm assurances. "It's really better this way, don't you think, honey?"

"Yes ma'am," Amber agreed, but she wasn't so sure. It would mean less time alone.

Out the window, she saw the familiar row of mailboxes. One was shaped like a largemouth bass, its mouth opened wide. The rain and sun had worn away the paint on the top leaving an oddly translucent white plastic with the bumpy texture of scales. Small houses nestled into the woods like chained dogs sleeping in their muddy corners. Amber's mother pulled up a gravel driveway. A rust colored convertible sat beside the house in front of a tow truck with flat tires.

Amber's mother opened the car door. Her hands shook harder than before without the wheel to steady them. Her cigarette wavered dangerously in her fingers, so she hastily transferred it to her lips. She opened the back door and went to pick Amber up.

"I can do it," Amber said, scrambling out of the car. Her mother swiveled, and her trailing ashes fell onto her daughter's back.

"Ouch! Mama!" Amber began to cry. Hot shameful tears.

"Quit that right now," her mother said without taking the cigarette from her lips. She yanked at Amber's arm. "You want to put on a good face for Memaw, don't you honey?" Her tone changed from abrasive to tender half way through the sentence. Amber's heart wanted to embrace her voice, wrap around it like a vine, but the twitching of her mother's fingers encircling her arm kept her firmly in the present. She stared into her mother's shifty eyes. Days of unwashed makeup made her skin look dull and corpse-like.

On the porch her mother turned away from her, letting loose of her arm with a quick flick of her wrist. She knocked on the screen door; there was no doorbell. The screen rattled and reverberated along the corrugated metal siding. Amber's mother shifted her weight to one

hip and looked down. A small dirty face appeared, Amber's cousin John peering at her through two little mean eyes. She shrank from him.

"Auntie Jen," he said, his voice rolling out from his lips flat as an ironing board. He was an unnatural child.

"Go get Memaw," Amber's mother told him. She shifted her weight again as John darted away into the house. The screen door slammed shut and the corrugated metal rattled. It reminded Amber of the time her uncle Rooney had found a rattle snake in the garage. He put it in a trash can for animal control to take away, but before they came, he had opened the lid and let the kids lean in and get a look at it. It had raised its rattle up behind itself, shaking with a soft warning. She remembered the way the sound had reverberated inside the metal trash can and vibrated softly beneath her fingers.

Memaw's old, painfully thin face emerged behind the screen door. A tall woman with skin like thin vellum leather, dark, yet oddly translucent near her eyes, that hung from her bones like drapery. When Uncle Rooney said that Memaw had a thyroid condition she hadn't known what that really meant, other than Memaw must be sick. Her dark eyes stared into her daughter's face with a tired resentment. Amber's mother itched under her gaze, squirming like a reprimanded child.

"How long?"

"What?" Amber's mother asked, squinting up at her own mother.

"I said how long."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

“Bullshit. I can tell what you’re after, you’re shaking like a leaf and that child is scared silent.”

Amber was scared when her mother had swerved the car, but she wasn’t exactly afraid now. Her eyes watched for signs of her cousin John lurking in the hallway past the screen.

“A few days,” Amber’s mother said.

“Ha. We’ll see about that.”

“I can’t deal with her right now, she’s in the way. It don’t mean anything.”

Memaw raised her eyebrows, the skin around her eyes sagged like curtains. “It don’t signify anything? Well I can tell you you’re wrong about that.” She turned to Amber, opening the screen door slightly for the first time. Amber stepped forward. Her grandmother’s soft hands pulled her inside the dark house. The screen door slammed shut. Memaw still stood facing her daughter through the mesh. Amber turned to look at her through the screen. It was almost like watching her on an old TV. She wished her mother would acknowledge her, say goodbye, offer a hug, but her mother just stared at her grandmother with bulging raccoon eyes as they talked in low tones.

“Where’s she in school?”

“I can’t remember the name, it’s that place down the road from...” Amber’s mother’s voice trailed off.

Memaw’s mouth curled down at the corners in disgust. How did she manage to move her face like that without making her jowls tremble?

“Jen, you need to find God or something. You can’t keep on like this”

Amber’s mother’s face scrunched up in scorn, “I’m fine just now, thanks mother.”

“You and your sister...” Memaw began.

Amber’s mother turned away sharply. Memaw watched for a moment, her dark form silhouetted against the doorframe, her arms folded neatly into her elbows. She turned away only after the car had driven off. She started when she saw Amber standing there, still listening.

“You scared me child. You ought not to listen to these things.”

Amber looked up in Memaw’s tired eyes.

“You’re mama’s not well, honey.”

“Yes, Memaw.”

Memaw’s body shifted as if to start a new topic, but her face fell into a resigned relaxation, and she said nothing.

“You know where the fresh sheets are, why don’t you change them for you and Delilah.”

Amber turned away, feeling more than seeing John’s little mean eyes looking at her from the corner as she opened the hall closet.

“What do you want?” she asked him, wheeling around with an armful of bedding.

“Why’d your mama drop you off again?” he asked her. His strange mean little eyes made her feel sheepish carrying sheets in her arms.

“I don’t know,” Amber admitted, running from him.

Delilah lay on her stomach with her feet crossed in the air on the double bed mooning over a calendar picture of a boy band. She held a pen up to a day and wrote a heart neatly in the confines of the little box. She swiveled her head when she heard Amber’s armful of sheets scrape against the door. Delilah moaned and threw her pen down. She was thirteen, three years older than Amber and did not want to share her space. An impossible desire in such a

small house with so many cousins and siblings coming in and out day by day. She, however, was the one that was constant, and therefore she laid claim to this room and its contents, while the others passed through like the ghosts of cattle marching along well-worn routes.

Amber stood in the door frame, unsure, the pile of sheets slipping from her fingers. She struggled to hold onto them without losing her dignity.

“Well, come in, then,” Delilah said.

Amber stumbled into the room, her knees catching on fallen sheets. Delilah threw the quilt off her bed.

“You can set those on the floor, it won’t dirty them,” Delilah assured her. Amber set the sheets down. She had to remind herself that the clean, starched sheets could not be so easily soiled. She took a corner of the fitted sheet off for Delilah. Beneath the sheet the bed was made of a soft yellow satiny material that had splotches of brownish stains like a map of an imaginary world. Delilah tried not to look at the stains, holding her nose high, but Amber was fascinated by the shapes, so much like landmasses. She wanted to trace them with her fingers like they did to the globe at school. She thought sadly of her abandoned map project at her school in Cincinnati. She had spent days cutting out each state in the US, labeling them, coloring them, and arranging them together like a puzzle. She was supposed to glue them down, but she liked the way she could take scramble them up and rearrange them as she pleased.

They silently put the new sheets onto the bed, covering up the stained map beneath. It looked clean and inviting once again.

“When did Auntie Jen come?” Delilah asked.

“A few minutes ago.”

“Have you seen Carla?” she asked.

Amber shook her head no. It was always strange to her that Delilah called her mother by her first name. She never called her Mama, not even when they were face to face. “Mama talked to her on the phone, I think she said she was in Knoxville somewhere.”

“That’s in Tennessee,” Delilah said. She looked thoughtful for a moment, then with a shake of her head the spell was lifted. She stood rapidly, snatching up her calendar and her pen.

“Knock when you come in here,” Delilah instructed her, “and don’t go messing around in my stuff, and no ,you can’t borrow my clothes, so don’t ask.”

A mumbled ok was all Amber could muster. She knew it was time to leave.

John and Alicia sat in the hallway pushing a ball back and forth between them. Alicia looked up at Amber with strangely large blue eyes. She had a very thin face, low cheekbones and a long nose.

“Ambie Tee-tee,” she called. When she was little she couldn’t say Auntie Amber, and instead called her Ambie Tee-tee. It was awkward for both of them that Amber was technically her aunt and not a cousin, although Alicia was only two years younger. Amber’s older sister Donna had Alicia when she was still in high school when Amber herself was still very small. She had always thought Alicia was her sister, too, because she did not remember Donna being pregnant, so it was a shock to her when she was told otherwise.

Alicia stood up, forgetting the ball. It bounced off the baseboard then back to John’s waiting hands. Amber hugged Alicia briefly. They sat down together near the baseboards, opposite of John, who looked put off by Amber’s arrival.

"I've got something I want to show you," Alicia said. She drew back her pant leg to reveal a little anklet with gold crosses on it. They dangled prettily against her tan skin.

"That's real pretty," Amber said leaning to get a closer to look. The gold finish was rubbed away on the corners of some crosses, revealing a dull gray metal underneath.

"Mama Donna came by last week. Her new boyfriend gave it to me."

Some object suddenly flew past Amber's head and struck Alicia just under her eye. Amber looked over at John's sneering face. Alicia covered her hurt eye with her hands.

"What'd you do that for?" Amber yelled, she put her arm around Alicia as tears began to well. John ran off toward the back porch.

Alicia was balling. Amber cradled her, whispering softly, "Come on now, we need to get you some ice."

Memaw's slow shadow appeared on the opposite wall. Amber looked up. She was standing there with a spatula by her side. Her face was unmoved.

"What happened now honey?" she asked Alicia. Her voice was both flat and gentle.

"John threw a ball at my eye," she sobbed.

"And it wasn't an accident," Amber added.

Memaw sighed. She scooped Alicia up in her thin arms and carried her to the kitchen where she set her down on the loveseat by the window.

"Let me look," Memaw said. Alicia turned her narrow chin towards her face. Her eyes were red from crying, but the splotch below her left eye was tinted deeper than the tear stains. Memaw brought a frozen bag of peas over wrapped neatly in a cloth. Alicia held it up to her face pitifully.

Amber patted her back and Alicia smiled up at her.

“You’ve got to leave that on for at least ten minutes,” Memaw said.

“Will you read to me Memaw?” Alicia asked.

Memaw sighed heavily and turned to her stove. “I can’t right now honey, ask Amber.”

Alicia looked up at Amber with pleading eyes.

Amber agreed. She ran back to Delilah’s room. Delilah was sprawled on the bed with a magazine. She turned on Amber with angry eyes.

“I said to knock!”

Amber stopped in the doorway and muttered an apology.

“Well don’t look so whipped,” Delilah said, an apology edging the words.

“Can I have a book?” Amber asked, “...to read to Alicia, John hit her in the eye with a ball.”

Delilah looked momentarily worried before she remembered to be annoyed again. She went to the closet, pulling out a box of old school notebooks and papers. She shuffled around, extracting a few books.

“How about this one?” Delilah asked, holding up a book with a green cover and two little girls with a lion.

“What is it?” Amber said, taking it into her hands.

“*The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, it’s about kids in England that find Narnia.”

“What’s Narnia?”

“It’s a place, like Neverland from Peter Pan, but it’s in a wardrobe instead of an island.”

Amber nodded and took the book with her back to the kitchen. Alicia was looking down at the

ground, propping her elbow on her knee to support the weight of the peas. Amber took a seat beside Alicia and opened the book.

She began, *“Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when they...”*

At first Amber stumbled over the words, but soon she found herself lost in the story. Alicia was equally enthralled listening to Lucy’s encounter with Tummus the half man half goat in the snowy woods. Memaw had to remind Alicia to take the ice away from her face so that she wouldn’t give herself frostbite. The peas sat beside the girls on the floor growing soft and soaking the towel. They stopped only when Memaw made them set the table for dinner.

They gathered the plates and silverware in their arms carefully. Alicia was already developing a dull bruise on the rim of her eye socket. John came in from the back porch looking dirtier than he had before. He had a stick in his hand covered in thick black mud.

“Put that thing back outside! And strip down, you’re filthy,” Memaw commanded.

John threw the stick down on the porch, where it landed with a wet thud against the clean wooden boards. Without closing the back door, he darted past Memaw’s to his and Alicia’s room. He emerged moments later with a clean shirt and basketball shorts, but his legs and arms were still streaked with mud.

“Go wash yourself!” Memaw told him firmly.

He did not move and instead stared at his grandmother, defiant.

“Get on now! Go!” she said shooing him off to the bathroom by waving her dishrag in his direction. He scurried away, and she heaved a sigh of relief. She disappeared to the back bedroom where Papaw sat watching TV and helped him use his walker to traverse the thick

carpet that often caught the rubber feet. Papaw's left arm was permanently crooked up into his body, and his head hung at an odd angle. Amber had never known him before his stroke, but her mother said that her father had been a handsome man, though lazy. Mama would always say that she didn't care what a man was as long as he wasn't lazy. Papaw was trained as a carpenter, but according to Mama he never really put those skills to good use. Memaw, however, loved to point to the porch swing and ask, "Did you know your papaw made that? He could really make something when he had proper use of his hands. It's a shame what happens to old bodies. The scourge of time, they say." Then she would settle into the swing and sigh, the scourge of the day releasing itself through her deep breaths. It was the only time Amber ever saw her grandmother wistful. It truly was a glorious porch swing. The back curved expertly along your spine, like a strangely firm cushion. Before he trained as a carpenter, Papaw whittled. Memaw had all the small things he carved displayed in corners around the house. There was a large collection of little whittled shoes and boots only about the size of Papaw's thumb, with glossy ribbons for laces, a collapsible fruit basket on the kitchen table, a little wooden teddy bear held together with twine, and the strange chain carved from one piece of wood that lay coiled on the book shelf. Amber liked to fiddle with the pieces. She liked to see the small strokes of the knife.

Papaw hardly did anything anymore. He sat in Memaw and Papaw's bedroom watching TV all day with his arm crooked up to his body and his head bent to one side. Amber would sometimes peek into the room just to watch him. His eyes always seemed blank, so void of interest, but he would groan and shout if the TV was turned off. He hardly ever spoke even though Amber knew he could still say a few words.

Memaw helped Papaw settle into his place at the head of the table. She set a spoon and fork on his good side. The plates were hot, piled high with thick white sausage gravy from the morning that clung to the sides of the meatloaf without falling down. Canned green beans and creamed corn swam together.

Memaw said a prayer over dinner and they all said Amen, even Papaw. Amber wondered whether it was the first words he had spoken all day. Alicia's bruise deepened over the course of the meal as if the food gave it color.

That night Amber crawled into bed beside her older cousin feeling oddly at a distance from the world, as if she were occupying a bubble that flitted across the familiar landscape without touching down anywhere. If she came down, she knew her whole world would burst.

Amber could hear Delilah's even breath get slower as she drifted off into sleep. Amber stared up at the pink ceiling fan. One glow-in-the-dark star swirled around on the edge of a fan blade. Amber watched its orbit for a moment, then felt strangely dizzy. She felt the fan sucking her in at the same time she was sinking down. With a jerk she rolled onto her right side to stare at the baseboards. She struggled to keep her breathing quiet so as not to wake Delilah.

Sleep would not come. She swung her feet out from under the covers. The soft breeze from the fan brushed her feverish skin. She shivered. She wasn't sure exactly what she was after, sneaking out of her bed in the middle of the night compelled by restless feet.

She found herself in the kitchen staring at *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* resting on the loveseat where she had left it hours before. She picked up the book and began to read from where she left off. Soon her eyes grew heavy, her eyelids drooped low. She crept into Delilah's bedroom and set the book on the night stand.

While settling into her covers, she kept imagining a map of Narnia and a map of England. Were they side by side, or did they occupy separate layers of the same place? She knew that England was across the ocean, separated from her by a vast expanse of water and waves. She had never seen the ocean, but she imagined it looked like a field, only blue. If England was across the ocean, where did that make Narnia? Amber wasn't sure. She opened her eyes, remembering the odd map of stains below the bedsheets.

On the table beside the bed. Delilah's thin sharpie marker sat silently waiting. Amber reached out and picked up the marker, so light in her hand. She pulled up the edge of the bed sheet. She took the marker's cap off and carefully wrote *England* on a smallish stain in an ocean of yellow satin. She stared at it a moment, then she drew a tube from one stain to the next, inscribing *Narnia* on the stain at the other end. She was about to let the sheet fall again, but then she noticed another stain that reminded her of the Kentucky that she remembered from her school project. On it she wrote *Memaw's* with a little star in the bottom right.

The next day Amber awoke to the sound of Delilah's blow dryer. Amber sat up on the bed and rubbed her eyes, realizing suddenly that she was now over 100 miles away from her school in Cincinnati and her Cincinnati friends. It was difficult to be truly upset when she wasn't sure if or when her mother would come to get her, and school had only been in session for a few weeks. How long she would be here? Days? Weeks? Months? Usually Memaw waited a week before enrolling her in the school, but today she stood in the doorway of Delilah's room looking down at Amber with calm eyes.

"Get dressed, I'm taking you to school with the others." She turned away toward the kitchen.

Delilah drew her face away from the mirror to give Amber a long, probing look. “So she won’t be back for a while then?” Delilah asked, her brown eyes boring into Amber’s forehead.

“I guess not. I didn’t know, I guess I thought that...Memaw must know something I don’t.”

Delilah laid her eyeliner on the bureau and snapped the eye shadow case shut. “You don’t need Auntie Jen anyway, what’s she ever done for you huh? About the same as Carla’s done for me. I’ll bet they’re off in Knoxville together right now high on whatever and getting ready to blow some guy for money...”

Amber began to cry. She looked up at the ceiling fan swirling around and around. She wanted to pitch herself into it.

“I’m sorry,” Delilah said softly. She sat beside her on the bed and laid a hand on her shoulder. “I didn’t mean all that. Your mama loves you more than Carla loves me.”

Amber wiped her tears from her eyes. Delilah stood up.

“Let me braid your hair for school,” she said.

Amber sat at Delilah’s makeup table and let Delilah run her finely cut nails through her hair. She enjoyed the soft scrape against her scalp. Delilah fastened the end of the braid with a pink hair tie. Amber inspected her hair in the mirror with Delilah looking on proudly behind. Her head looked too long, and her forehead looked too large with all her hair pulled back, but she smiled and said thank you anyway.

They all piled into Memaw’s rust-colored car—Alicia, Amber and John in the backseat and Delilah in the front. Memaw’s steering wheel was large and covered in soft black leather. The black stain had faded at the sides from Memaw’s steady grip. The top of the steering wheel

was almost raw from when Papaw used to drive the car. Amber had never seen him drive a car, but she could hear her mother's cutting words. Everything that man does is lazy, you should have seen the way he'd drive, leaning back with one hand on the wheel. If a deer came his way he'd just run it down. Too lazy to turn the wheel.

Melbourne Elementary school sat back from Main Street behind the local grocery store, a strange building with a fortress-like feel despite being made of wood. Across the street sat the new Fischer High School. Memaw had gone to Melbourne back when it was the only school in the town and all the kids in the town from kindergarten to twelfth grade went there. Memaw, like many of the other girls, married before they reached graduation. Memaw had told her once that when she was little a doctor would come to town once a year, and he would remove all the children's tonsils at the same time in the largest room in the school. Memaw called it a gym, but it was really a sort of long, wide hallway in the center of the building.

When Memaw ushered her inside Amber imagined the smell of blood and iron seeping into the walls. What had they done with the tonsils once they were removed? Memaw hadn't been able to remember that detail. Did they slop them all in a metal bucket like scraps at the butchers, or did they have little burial for each one?

Memaw pushed through the crowds of children and parents, towards a desk in the front corner of the hall where an unnaturally blonde woman was speaking to a young mother holding the hand of a little boy with a bowl cut. She handed the mother some forms, wished her well, then smiled toward Memaw. She was very, but her skin did not swing from her bones the way Memaw's did. Her hair was permed, and her blue eyeshadow caked up in the crevices of her sunken eyes.

Memaw and the secretary exchanged a few words about Amber's enrollment, which Amber did not hear. Her eyes were searching the crowd of children to find some familiar faces.

The secretary cleared her throat, a smoker's voice, and looked down her nose at Amber from her perch at the desk. Her eyes were not without pity, but there was judgement in them, too. "There's not much more we need, since she's been enrolled here before. What school did she most recently attend?"

Memaw knitted her eyebrows together looking tired, "I'm not sure." She nudged Amber's arm lightly, "Honey, do you remember the name of your school in Cincinnati?"

The school in Cincinnati was a brick building larger than any building in this town, and very close to the river, so close that it had to be on stilts. Below the building, there was an entire parking lot and a playground shielded from the hot sun. It often flooded in the springtime when the Ohio river swelled with rainwater and muddy silt. She could not recall the name.

"I don't remember," Amber said.

"I see," said the secretary looking at her computer screen. The screen illuminated her unnaturally blonde hair with a faint blue glow. "Was it the same school you went to last year?" she asked not looking down to meet Amber's eyes.

"No," Amber said. The school before the stilt school was made of rounded stones and looked like a castle of sorts. Mama said it used to be the town's armory and that's why it looked so much like a castle.

The secretary made a note in her computer. "It hardly matters, I suppose. We're only three weeks into the school year. She'll be going to Mrs. Meyer's class, I'll take her there in a

moment. Oh and Grace, Mr. Roth would like to speak with you about John again. So why don't I buzz him and then I'll take Amber to her class?"

Memaw was stoic as she agreed to wait.

"Yes, Mr. Roth? Grace Henshaw is here...Yes I'll send her in."

The secretary lifted herself from her chair with precision and Amber was surprised to find her long legs capped off by a pair of dull brown flats. The rest of her was so done up that the plainness of her shoes seemed at odds with her image, like a Barbie doll head on a normal human woman. A man emerged from a corner behind the office, clean shaven, and barrel bodied. His shirt fit just a little too tightly over his thick middle, and his dress pants hung a little too low on his bottom.

"Just the woman I've been meaning to talk to," he said greeting Memaw with a handshake.

She took his hand with the cool air of indifference, not giving him a smile, or even a greeting to work with.

"Well," he said wiping his hand on his bursting belly, "Shall we then?" Memaw gave Amber a small pat of encouragement before allowing herself to be led around the corner.

The secretary leaned over so that her long face was level with Amber's. She could see the map of the creases in her face where the makeup settled like sediment. Her smell was overwhelmingly sweet, like the lotions Mama sometimes bought from the mall, or the fancy perfume Mama wore when she went out on Saturday nights, sweet almost to the point of being pungent.

"Amber, honey, will you follow me?" The secretary held out her hand, not unkindly.

Amber took it with hesitation. Those thin fingers did not feel soft the way Mama's did, but they were yellowed on the tips like hers. The secretary led her down the long hall in the center of the building, the room Memaw had called the gym. It had a high two-story ceiling and thin creaky floorboards. In a room at the end Mrs. Meyer, plump with thinning white hair stood in front of a full class of children her age.

The secretary released Amber's hand at the door and gestured for her to stay there. She whispered a few words to Mrs. Meyer, then hurried from the room, leaving Amber alone in the doorway.

Mrs. Meyer waved her into the room. The eyes of vaguely familiar faces stared back at her. Patrick Rodemeyer, he was a mean one. Janson Vance, Ben Cox, Molly Saussure, Lily Pooley and others whose names eluded her. Then her eyes settled on Shannon Baker and her stomach turned to ice. Did Shannon tell anyone what John had done? Shannon's eyes lifted for only a moment before darting away, fear there. Amber swallowed hard trying not to cry.

"No need to introduce you again then?" Mrs. Meyer said gently, but with a sadness that made Amber's color rise.

"No," she muttered, and took her seat in the space left beside Lily Pooley who greeted her kindly. Shannon must not have told them. Amber felt her worry slip away some.

Patrick Rodemeyer with his dirty knees and grubby hands pulled himself closer to Amber's spot, nudging her with one filthy shoe. "Where'd you go?" he asked.

Amber turned her head around to meet his gaze.

"Get your foot off my shirt," she said.

Patrick held his shoe against her and leveled his eyes, repeating again, "Where'd you go?"

"Cincinnati, now get off your shoe off my shirt." Amber's anger was rising, but she held herself in check to avoid a scene on her first day back.

"Oh, a city girl, have you forgotten how to climb a tree then?"

"I'm no city girl, I know how to climb trees better than you do and get your foot off my shirt," she said pushing his foot away. She wiped the mud from her palms on the carpet.

By that time Shannon and Lilly were watching, but their gazes fell away when Mrs. Meyer called their attention to some exercise at hand, releasing Amber from any further embarrassment.

The class went on as usual, with only the most minor logistical hiccups, partners had to be switched and desks rearranged to accommodate Amber's arrival. Mrs. Meyer carried out these changes swiftly, and without fuss, for which Amber was grateful. At the end of the day the children shuffled out of the classroom to where busses and parents waited. Amber and her cousins, along with a host of other kids that lived in little hollers deep in the hills without bus access waited in a cluster behind the bus line. The bus that stopped closest to Memaw's stopped at the spot where the highway branched off into the hills and no further. On the corner there was a white church in need of power washing, and most importantly a large enough parking lot to allow the bus to turn around. Past the church the road narrowed, and became windier. Eventually pavement gave way to gravel once it reached the rows of dilapidated cabins used by fisherman and hunters.

Amber had made the two-mile trek through those winding roads before. A few years ago, after Mama had broken up with her boyfriend at the time—Tom was it? Or Glen?—and they came to live at Memaw’s for a while. Mama was supposed to pick the kids up from the church stop, but three days in a row the bus let Amber and her cousins off with no Mama in sight. Delilah had decided that dilly dallying wouldn’t do, so she herded them all towards the road. It looked awfully different walking, and at times she thought it was the wrong road entirely. Around one bend two chained dogs snarled and snapped at them as they passed. In another yard a pair of thin meth-heads stared down at them from their porch covered in leaves, a pile of trash burning in the yard. The black smoke rose, mixing its pungent smell with the fresh moss of the forest. Delilah had hurried her cousins along as the couple watched. The woman scratched her nose over and over. Eventually the familiar row of mailboxes was in sight and soon they crested the hill. Memaw’s car was gone, but Mama’s was where it had been the day before. What had happened to Mama? Surely something had happened to make her forget, but no, there she was on the couch asleep with an empty mug in her hand. Papaw’s tilted head had turned to them with emotionless eyes.

On the sidewalk at school Amber was soon joined by John and Alicia. John kicked pieces of mulch until the monitor told him to stop. Other children waiting for their rides congregated informally at the end of the sidewalk. Shannon Baker stood among a small group of girls. The busses departed with a great rumble. A stream of cars followed close behind them. Shannon was staring across the street, past the line of cars. Amber followed her gaze in time to see Delilah crossing the parking lot from the high school with a boy as tall as Delilah, with soft red hair that lay flat on his forehead, but stuck out in odd angles at the back, as if he had slept on it

wet. At the crosswalk they were so involved in conversation that they didn't see the walk sign right away. Shannon's older brother, Amber was sure. Did he know what had happened that day at Shannon's house? If he did he wouldn't be talking to Delilah. Amber looked back at Shannon, standing as far as possible from John, watching the progress of Delilah and her brother. A large navy-blue car with rusted wheel basins rolled down its window. A woman with light auburn hair waved to Delilah and the boy—Shannon's mother. Surely, she had not forgotten what John had done. Shannon's brother looked sheepish and darted away from Delilah. Then Shannon, too, dashed away from the crowd, opened the car door, and slid in beside her brother. Amber hid her face as Mrs. Baker pulled away

Delilah navigated the line of cars easily. The other children stared up at her as if she were a tall alien being. Amber scooted closer to her cousin.

"Is that Shannon Baker's brother?" She asked.

"Yeah, that's Scott Baker."

"Does he know about the..." she trailed off. John was still kicking the mulch behind the monitor's back.

"No," Delilah said quickly, shutting down any further questioning.

John pulled on the zipper of Alicia's backpack.

"Stop it," Alicia cried, swinging her back pack away from him. The zipper unzipped with a sudden zap, before snapping off the backpack completely. "You broke it!" Alicia wailed, pulling herself behind Delilah.

"No, I didn't!" John said, still holding the zipper handle in his small fingers. "You broke it! You're the one that moved away!" John threw the bit of metal at Alicia. It narrowly missed her

as she ducked, but the contents of her backpack spilled out on the pavement. Alicia looked as if she were about to cry.

John stood only a pace away. "I didn't do it, you did it!" he kept repeating.

Alicia really did start to cry then.

"Stop," Delilah said to John, "Leave her alone."

John wound up his leg and kicked Delilah hard in the shin. She cried then lurched at him, grabbing hold of his backpack so that he nearly dangled from it. He kicked his legs wildly around him, catching a few muddy shoe marks on Delilah's clean jeans.

"That's enough!" the monitor cried, finally deciding to intervene now that it seemed John was under control. She stepped up to Delilah, who was still holding John at arm's length. "Let him down." Her hair, was dark and smooth, glinted in the sun.

Delilah let go of John unwillingly. As soon as she let him go, John wheeled around to give Delilah another cruel kick to the shin. Delilah yelped and grabbed her shin in pain. Alicia fled behind Amber, with John heading in their direction. Amber looked at him charging forward, his eyes were wild with anger directed at her. For an instant she wanted to push Alicia out in front of her and felt ashamed of the impulse as soon as it crossed her mind. Amber held out her arms and pushed John to the ground, hard. He had not expected her to fight back. He got up again and charged at Amber. She closed her eyes, waiting for the impact.

It never came. She opened her eyes. The monitor's thick, fleshy hands had snatched John back towards her. He wiggled and huffed, but her corpulent, strong arms held him firm. "John! Apologize to your sisters."

"They aren't my sisters," he spat toward Alicia and Amber. *"That one is,"* he said flailing a kick in Delilah's direction. The monitor looked dumbfounded.

A rust colored convertible pulled up. Memaw's head peered out from the open window.

"John you better quit that right now," she said sternly.

John wheeled around on his heel and gave Memaw his best evil smile, his lips curled around the corners. Memaw's dark eyes stared back at him with a level look that seemed to offer up a view into the void where her mind rested. Amber felt herself magnetically pulled toward Memaw's eyes, but she was afraid to move before John did. Eventually, John broke his gaze, but he did not relinquish the smile. Amber knew that Memaw had won the battle, but the war still raged. He opened the car door and slid in, leaving it open behind him. Alicia and Amber stared at the open door. Neither moved.

Delilah, who would normally take the passenger seat, scooped up the spilled contents of Alicia's ruined back pack and scooted in beside her younger brother. Alicia followed her, leaving Amber to take the passenger seat.

The ride back to Memaw's was quiet, the radio drowned out the silence. Memaw did not ask what had happened before she got there. She didn't ask how their days had gone. She was silent. Amber accepted her silence readily.

As soon as they pulled into the driveway John opened the door. He tossed his backpack in the gravel then shot off toward the woods. Alicia and Amber watched him go with relief.

"Dinner's at six," Memaw called after him.

Amber wished John would be punished, but she knew that even Memaw with her stern gaze was afraid of John. Memaw's stern façade had cracked that day at Shannon's house. Now

that Amber was away from school, where she feared people could read her thoughts, the memory of that day intruded on her mind and made her stomach curl. Last year, Shannon and Amber had been in the same class together. They had played together during recess and braided each other's hair. Amber thought she had made a friend. One day Shannon invited her over to her house because she wanted to show Amber the kittens her cat had. Amber was ecstatic. She wanted to hold them and perhaps convince Memaw to adopt one. She also knew Shannon lived in one of the large town houses behind the school and she wanted to see what it looked like inside. When Shannon's mom came to get her and Shannon, Alicia and John were waiting for Memaw with Delilah. Shannon's mom had smiled at them and had invited Alicia and John to come along too. Alicia beamed with happiness, eager to visit a house in town and eager to see the kittens too, she had been moping for days because Shannon had not invited her as well. Amber and Delilah exchanged a look of foreboding. How could they tell Mrs. Baker to take Alicia with her but not John? They couldn't, so John had climbed inside with them while Delilah waited for Memaw. Shannon's house was large with two stories and a tall hedge that circled the entire front yard with only an opening for the gate that led to the front door.

Shannon's mom had set up a little cardboard pen and a litter box where their cat nursed four small tan kittens. They played with them together until Shannon's mom said the kittens needed a rest. They went and played in the backyard. Amber was having so much fun that she didn't notice John's absence for a while.

"Did you see where John went?" she asked Alicia and Shannon.

They shook her heads no. Amber and the other girls stopped their games to search for John. They found him in the front yard wiping his hands in the grass.

In the front yard, the door to the Baker's navy-blue Buick was open. John was leaning over the seat to look inside. He turned, surprised, then smiled, lips curling like he had a secret to tell.

Amber took a step forward. "What are you doing?" she asked.

John positioned himself between her and the car.

"Nothing," he said, but his smile invited her to pry further.

Amber's throat tightened. She pushed past John, who stepped aside easily, too easily. The car appeared clean at first, then she saw it. Amber screamed. Inside one of the kittens lay mangled, its limbs twisted at odd angles and its head crooked back. Amber was too stunned to stop Shannon and Alicia from looking in. Shannon screamed for her mother and Alicia sat down on the pavement and sobbed. John stood beside the car, rubbing his hands on the sides of his shirt.

The sight nearly made Mrs. Baker vomit. She stared at the broken kitten then back at John who stared at her with blank eyes. She grabbed Shannon's shoulder and backed away slowly from Amber and the others, her face petrified. Shannon sobbed uncontrollably.

Within minutes Memaw had been phoned. When she arrived on the scene and looked down at the mangled kitten that calm face finally cracked. She looked at John in fear, and John had smiled.

Not long after that, Amber's mother came to retrieve her. After she heard about what John had done what remained of her maternal instincts forced her to come rescue Amber from that place. But that had only lasted so long.

Back in the present, Delilah shut herself up in her room, the door slammed. Amber wanted badly to shut herself away too, to escape. She looked around the room, where was *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*? She realized she had left it beside the bed stand. She knocked on the door timidly.

“What?” a hostile voice answered, wavering as if on the verge of tears.

“Can I get my book?” Amber asked through the door.

“Fine.”

Amber opened the door only enough to slide her body through. Delilah was sitting on her bed, with a notebook open on her knees. She wiped her face with the back of her hand.

“Are you hurt?” Amber asked, placing one hand on the book on the nightstand.

“No, it’s fine, it’ll be a small bruise,” she said moving her hand to feel the place where John had kicked her. Her soiled Jeans lay in the hamper behind the door.

“Is that the book you wanted?”

“Yeah, Alicia and I are gonna finish it tonight,” Amber said clutching the book to her chest.

“If you do, I have more books you can borrow. Do you like that one?”

“I love it,” Amber said simply.

“Don’t you wish we had a wardrobe like that one, we could go to Narnia.” Delilah looked down at her notebook, back to reality and homework. “Without John.”

Amber did wish that, but to say so felt like a painfully inadequate answer.

“I’m sorry,” Delilah said.

"It's not your fault," Amber said, taking a step forward. She thought of reaching out and placing a hand on Delilah's arm. Would she accept the gesture when she so often brushed them off? She took another step forward. Delilah looked up, her eyes red and watering.

"He's evil," she said.

Amber wanted to comfort her, but she also didn't know what she could say.

"It's ok," Amber said, closing the small gap between them with a small half step. She placed her hand on Delilah's arm and she did not swat it away. "It's ok."

Delilah smiled at her sadly. "I've got homework to do," she said, pulling her arm out from under Amber's hand. She got up from her bed and went to the closet. She pulled down the same box of notebooks and books. She rummaged through the pile, throwing books onto the bed after looking at the titles.

"I'll put these on your night stand when you want them."

"Thank you," Amber said, approaching the stack cautiously, still angling to leave the room. She took the book on the top of the stack and left the others. It had a large tree on the cover with a boy leaning against it.

Amber watched Delilah take her seat on the bed with her notebook. Amber left the room with both books tucked under her arm.

Alicia was waiting on the love seat with a dolphin stuffed animal. She held it to her mouth, whispering to it softly and nestling it against her cheek. She looked so much younger than seven.

Amber flipped back past the pages she had read on her own. She didn't mind rereading the story to Alicia again. Memaw tended to Papaw in their bedroom, helping him shower and

get dressed. Though the door was closed, Amber could hear Papaw struggling and cursing, trying to get his pants and shirts over his crippled form. How come he remembered those words but hardly anything else. Those words came out clear as a bell, but any others came out garbled. Memaw had tried to explain it. Language like that travels on different circuits, shorter ones than other words take.

Amber read to Alicia while she leaned against her shoulder holding tightly to her dolphin. They stopped for dinner. Memaw called John's name off the back porch, but he did not return until the sun set. By that time Amber had finished reading and Alicia was asleep with her head on her lap. John gave Amber a look that made her blood turn cold before Memaw ushered him into his room.

That night Amber began reading *Bridge to Terabithia* on her own in bed by the light of a small flashlight, below the covers so that she wouldn't wake Delilah. When she felt her eyes grow heavy, she reached for the pen still on the night stand and lifted the bed sheet from the mattress. *Terabithia* she wrote on a stain past where she had labeled Memaw's house.

She woke suddenly to Delilah's scream. When Amber opened her eyes, she saw the bright red glow of fire. Her face was hot, very hot. Her hair was burning. Delilah screamed again and hit Amber with a pillow and put out the fire. The fire had spread to the pillow and the mattress. Delilah swatted at it wildly. Amber rolled off the bed onto the floor.

Memaw, roused by the screams, came into the room, frantic. "What happened? Amber! Oh my God." Memaw joined Delilah's efforts and soon the fire went out, but not before significant damage had been done to the bed and the night stand beside it.

Delilah's eyes still streamed with tears from the heavy smoke. Memaw pulled them both into her thin body, kissing both of their heads and shaking. She ran her hands over Amber's charred hair and tried to wipe the dirty tears from Delilah's eyes.

"John, It was John," Delilah sobbed into Memaw's shoulder.

Amber was too shocked to cry. *Bridge to Terabithia* lay charred on the floor near half-burnt blankets and pillows. The mattress itself had burned so much that springs popped out of the charred fluff. She reached up and touched her hair, it cracked off in brittle strands. Amber began to sob, not for her hair, but for her map. Memaw and Delilah held her tighter in their arms and tried to soothe her. "It's ok," they cooed. "It will grow back; your skin isn't burnt."