

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE DARCY SONG AND OTHER STORIES

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The Darcy Song and Other Stories brings into focus a series of characters who find themselves in awkward, desperate points in their lives as a result of various brands of loss. They have each suffered a loss on some level: a friend, family member, or childhood and each attempts to grasp an understanding of his or her role in this loss and where to go from this point in their lives. The stories span a character's path to awareness not necessarily of how the loss occurred, but of how to move beyond his or her specific void. Some are stuck in a rut of unchallenged acceptance, while others are obsessed with changing everything except what needs to change in order to move on.

THE DARCY SONG AND OTHER STORIES

by

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The Darcy Song

The Honeycutts moved out of the blue-gray house and the lady who moved in chopped down all the green bushes and shrubs all by herself and reduced the sycamore tree to a stump. She had a professional stump-maker do that but the girls saw. The girls saw her peeking from behind the screen door, not even flinching. In pure enjoyment. Why she insisted on keeping such a large stump, nobody could figure out. A stump as tall as Meredith, Darcy's best girlbud, and to Darcy's shoulders.

Mr. Bon from across the cul-de-sac understood the Honeycutt house lady's reasoning, that all those shrubs outlining the yard made great hiding places for any kind of bad guy imaginable—robbers, rapists, ax murderers, you name it. He figured the girls, those two girls whose frolics and sashays he

always watched with squinty eyes and a stiff neck, he figured they did not have a clue. But they would. Soon they would have more of a clue than just about anyone on any circle, in any part of Ohio, could ever wish upon them. Even the lady in Honeycutt's house, and you could tell just by looking at her that she hadn't, not once in her life, given a damn.

When you are a girl—when you are one of these girls—Darcy from Maple Street or Meredith from Maple Circle—there are games. There are sidewalk chalk drawings. There are races from any point a to any point b. There are things to sell the neighbors. Already-clipped coupons, Kool-aid Popsicles, weed bouquets, crowns of woven ivy.

There are bathing suits.

It is a fact of girlhood, from morning to night. There might be jean cutoffs, there might be enormous t-shirts, there might be sundresses—but there are always bathing suits. They are neon, unraveling at the armpits, loved, and underneath it all.

Girls fray. They unravel. But before they do these girls spend their evenings, their after-dinner time, throwing the ball to each other over the Honeycutt stump. Playing hard catch, playing soft catch, being girls, but throwing like boys. Throwing over the stump just for the thrill of sending something soaring over something else. Just to reclaim air and sky that had,

before, been eaten up by a tree—a very large tree—that never bore fruit or blossoms, that could’ve made a decent tree house tree, but had never gotten the chance. It makes the yard look so much bigger, one would say, and the other would argue that no, it’s smaller, but not with the intent of really changing her mind. They would never have the new Honeycutt lady to worry about, even if they were all up in her yard; she was the type of person who ate macaroni and cheese TV dinners. But it’s not like the girls went through her trash. She used those clear trash bags. Creep-y.

Darcy was from the street. Meredith was from the cul-de-sac. The girls, for the most part, played in the cul-de-sac, that circle of no-man’s-land pavement, but when it rained cats and dogs they had to play at one of their houses—usually Meredith’s, since Darcy had so many brothers. When they played at Meredith’s they had to follow many rules, one being that they couldn’t add any more stickers to her walls because it messed up the paint. Another being that they couldn’t take any of the stickers off the walls because that’s when it messed up the paint. Another being that they could share a glass of RC but they had to drink it outside and they had to not want for any more. But the most important being that that they had to either play outside or in her room the entire time, no in between. Meredith’s parents liked to keep the house dark and still, and their boundless girl-energy threatened that. When Darcy went to Meredith’s, she had

to climb up their dilapidated aluminum shed and scratch at Meredith's screened window. When it rained, Darcy had to make sure she didn't leave muddy handprints and footprints on the side of their house because it spooked the neighbors out, namely Mr. Bon, who Darcy should've felt watching her from his tiny bathroom window as she ascended her way into her best friend's house.

Moth guts in that heavily traversed window clogged up the crack between the screen and pane but it was unclear whether the moths had lost their wings try to enter or trying to escape. A dusty bedsheet hung oblong over the curtain rod with a thread count so low it billowed even when the windows were shut, when the girls sat on the hardwood floor Indian-style, whispering secrets.

The peeling wallpaper revealed a color more appropriate than the paisley trying to cover it. The lavender underneath it all belonged on Easter eggs, backs of tongues, and on the walls of girl rooms. Meredith must've agreed. She had been chipping the paisley away little by little. She had exposed hardened rivers of glue that smelled like pearl onions and flowed on the walls as the Nile, from south to north. Occasionally, one of these streams trickled into a hole punched through the wall long ago, a place stuffed with the shiniest candy wrappers and Lego pieces. Sometimes Meredith and Darcy stuck plastic Fisher Price people in the openings, little worlds for little people, but they were growing fast out of that.

Inside Meredith's bedroom, anything was allowed but they had to be sure they didn't make too much noise, because depending on what kind of day they were having, her parents might make them get the hell outside after all. The first thing they usually did was each other's hair. Darcy would french braid Meredith's against her head, and since she'd never been taught the technique, Meredith would wind Darcy's into a million loosely twisted strands. Meredith's hair was greasy blond, which made it look gray in certain lights. She had lice but Darcy didn't think she knew it. Darcy herself had kept coming home with it and her mom asked if she had any idea who she was getting the little devils from since all her brothers had had their heads shaved to avoid this very lice problem. Darcy, of course, said she did not have a clue. She'd been treated for it so many times that summer, that last summer of Meredith and Darcy, that Darcy's mom bought a bulk-pack of Rid-X at the wholesale club. Darcy hated the whole process—the scrubbing of hair with the stinging shampoo and then parking herself in front of the TV on the long Saturday night so that her mom could locate every tangle with that fine-tooth comb. She always showed Darcy the comb before she cleaned it, all jammed up with aborted lice eggs. She flicked them into an ashtray with a toothpick. Darcy never, never told Meredith that her own head had to be bombed every week because they played together, she just tried to braid her best friend's hair so tight that nobody could see the oily parts

and stringy strands, and all the parasites underneath. She did a pretty good job. After she fixed it, it always looked like Hollywood hair, all slicked back and serious.

After they got their hair out of the way they'd roll the thin gray carpet up and skate around the bare floor in their socks, slamming right into the walls. They rolled up all the givens of girl-life with it—peanut shells, apple seeds, Christmas glitter, snapped hair elastics—all of which were nestled in the carpet, deep. The chunk of rug under her daybed was fluffier, but just as littered, though with different things—dead AA batteries from the flashlight and dirty socks removed in such haste they resembled roses in their fullest, tightest bloom. Hairs hung down from the springs, mere inches from the ground. They had become tangled in the coils and ripped out of their heads, one by one, but that never stopped the girls from slithering under.

They never really played house or with Barbies since Meredith didn't have more than one doll. They played vet since she had a million stuffed animals thrown all over the room. Some of them wore each other's outfits, but most of them were just naked. Every single one had his or her own special history. Helen the Hen escaped from her coup and floated over from Spain in an inner tube because one of her wings was permanently broken. Kenneth the Kangaroo was born in Australia but hitchhiked around Canada and sold hotdogs

and balloons to children. Meredith would tell their stories to Darcy again and again as she patted and stroked and tickled her animals, adding and subtracting details. She had clumsy hands but curious fingers. Her brain was in her fingers. She stroked the taut hems of Darcy's clothes and picked at her own ragged edges.

Meredith called Darcy one Saturday afternoon while she was helping her mom put up enough groceries for three boys and one girl.

"Do you want to come over?" Meredith whispered into the phone.

"What?" Darcy could barely hear her. Her mom was folding all the paper bags at once.

"Do you wanna play?" Meredith's voice sounded like she was pressing her mouth too close to the phone. Darcy told her she would be over in a minute. Just one minute.

Darcy could hear Meredith's dad's yelling before she even slipped through her window. Meredith looked as happy as ever to see her best girlbud, and at first everything seemed normal enough except that she had stuffed all her days-of-the-week panties into the gap between the bottom of her bedroom door and the floor, Sunday through Saturday, in perfect sequence. Meredith had also tidied up. Her bed was made, the quilt tucked tight into the mattress, really

tight. Her stuffed rabbits and lizards and teddy bears had arranged themselves in three perfect rows at the foot of her bed, from tall to short.

Darcy plopped down on the floor. Despite the panty-stuffing she felt the bizarre electricity inside the house's atmosphere seep through her pores and change things inside of her that day, messing with her hardwiring, overloading and short circuiting connections in her belly, especially. Darcy tried to listen to the words Meredith's parents were yelling at each other but Meredith was chattering incessantly over them, more than usual and louder than usual. Want to write stories to each other? she asked. Want to play Hungry Hungry Hippos in slow motion? Want to be acrobats? Want to fly around the world in a hot air balloon when we grow up, or how about right now? Want to want to want to? While she was listening to the questions Darcy noticed that on the inside paneling of Meredith's closet someone taller than her had at one time tracked his height. Meredith noticed Darcy noticing, and they both heard her dad scream her name, and so she said to Darcy, "Come here let me show you something." They tiptoed over to the closet and Darcy watched as her best friend slipped out of her flip-flops and stepped up each of the closet's built-in wooden shelves, her toes gripping the edges, helping her to the top. She disappeared into the top of the closet and all Darcy saw was her hand dangling down, and all she heard was "come on come on come on!" Darcy climbed up to the top shelf of the closet and

the girls crunched their bodies next to the boxes of jigsaw puzzles with the torn and taped and torn again lids stacked all the way up to the roof. Meredith slid the door shut and they braided each other in the dark.

Meredith disappeared. People assumed Bon did it, but he didn't. Bon had served his time for manslaughter, finished before his fortieth birthday, before he even thought of buying a house on a cul-de-sac. The closest he ever came to anything worse than murder was on the very day of his release. He walked into a park playground where all the kiddies were playing. Bon, he didn't really have a hankering for small children, but you pick up all sorts of things in prison, diseases of the brain, and of the body. So on that day it wasn't that he got off on children, he just wondered what's the point, really, of everything, might as well say everything. He parked himself on a bench, noticed how all the children gripped the equipment without getting splinters. This was how he saw the world because he never didn't get splinters grabbing like that. He was checking the little bastards out, smacking his lips between the gulps of whiskey, but before he could do anything about it he felt someone snatch his left hand. He looked down and sure enough a little girl had just grabbed his hand. She went on playing like she didn't even realize she was holding on to the wrongest person. Bon found himself following her play-lead and he thought of

his childhood dog, Samaritan, who was the most erratic dog to walk, and how he'd go out of his way to walk this wonderful, faithful pet. As the park girl pulled him around the playground equipment, through the crevices and under the dimpled metal slide, he didn't do a thing besides let himself be had. She lead him to the tire swing and, with the weight and strength of every girl on earth, plopped down and swung backward into the sky. She slipped like a wet bar of soap from his hand and he was not sad, was not any more empty as he finished his whiskey, dropped the bottle, and walked away, having been chosen first, for the first time in this life, ever.

My family and I drove out of Ohio to Pennsylvania after Meredith had been gone too long for hope, almost a year. My mom wanted to keep me on the street, off the cul-de-sac. She thought we could take a little break from the neighborhood and go to the farmers market people from all over the earth came to see. I told my mother I would stick close to my older brother but I told my older brother that I was gonna stick close to Mom. I wanted to get myself a little lost. There were three enormous tents of fruits and vegetables and flowers and tons of homemade stuff like dreamcatchers and scented sachets and so I wandered. Occasionally I would bump into one of my family members, and I would show my older brother the huge bag of dried papaya spears I bought with

Mom's dollar or my second-youngest brother the hat I found, and my older brother would show me whatever kind of intricate wood carving stole his heart and my second-youngest brother would show me the blueberry muffin he was finishing, and would I like a bite, because I must still be hurting.

After I finished looking I ventured outside of the tents for a stroll around the block. It was downtown Lancaster, which my mother had said over and over in the car is the safest place our side of the Mississippi. Still, during that time I couldn't figure out why everyone had stopped worrying I would disappear, since Meredith and I played together, breathed in each others' faces, shared everything inside of us—not just already-breathed air. I was following a little old lady pushing an empty flea market cart down the street when this huge black guy wearing number 32 sauntered up beside me. He cocked his head and asked, "What's your name?"

"Susie," I replied, figuring he was about to ask for my number or if I had a boyfriend or something else, something worse, something someone had asked Meredith before they stole her. I knew how boys worked. I lived with too many. But I was wrong.

He didn't say any more words or ask any more questions, he just started singing: "Su-zie que-zie su-zie que-zie suzie-suzie que-zie que-zie su-zie que-zie," each lilt pretty and random and perfect. Composing his own upbeat tune

and snapping his fingers to Susie's song, he turned off onto a narrow Lancaster street, where it only echoed.

I wished hard, right then, that I would've said Darcy, that I would've let my guard down for one second—two syllables. Dar-cy. I wanted to know the Darcy Song right then, right after I said Susie, and sometimes at night when it's not dark enough and too quiet, even now that I'm all grown up, I need to hear it.

I've learned some simple things the hard way, like never tighten the screws of your Kmart furniture until the very end. Don't spend too much hot water time lathering up. And that there will come a time when your little son is too big to be held. Then what? Then you hate yourself for not cherishing or even remembering the very last time. What a joy it is to be someone's only contact with the ground, to twirl around with him and make him forget gravity.

My son is Meredith's last age. He is a boy, but he is her last age. The other day I dropped him off at a birthday party and drove down Hucklebird Road, alone, in the rain. As I rounded a bend I caught sight of what I thought was a possum about to dart out in front of my car. I slammed on the brakes, as we here in the Midwest don't have to worry so much about rear-endings, and stopped right next to it. Not a possum. It was two teddy bears strapped to a railing, mangy from months, years out in the weather. I had seen them before, before when they were much more alive, and I admit I had also, like everyone

else in this town, driven past their corpses a million times. Not sure what scared me about them this time, but I got out of my car with my umbrella and approached the Siamese twin bears, deciding to set them free. As I squatted down in front of them I had to face the fact that they were too hurt, too dead. I set my umbrella down and wrung one of the bear's legs out, then hurried back into the pine-scented warmth of my car.

About six miles down the same road it was too much. I made a U-y and sped back to the bears. Did they look happy to see me? I didn't think so. I ripped them off the railing as gently as I could, and with all the girl-strength I could muster I flung them out into the woods. It was so dark I couldn't see where they fell, or even if. They only ascended, according to me, and that's all we have in the Midwest—stories and accounts and sightings.

Snow Angel

Lucy calls her mother and gets the machine. "Mom, hey, guess what, it snowed." A small puddle of refrigerator drainage on the floor distracts her for a moment. "I took Davis to the vet yesterday and he's doing fine." Lucy doesn't want to wipe the puddle up just yet. She crouches down in front of it, trying to identify the flecks of debris resting on the puddle's skin. "Ben's fine. We, we, well, broke up last week but we're trying to get back together again, work things out." She pauses, hears her mother's machine recording her silence. "OK, well call me back. Three-one-four, eight-nine-seven, two-three-oh-two." She dilutes the coffee she'd made earlier before Ben left, then pours herself a cup and takes it to the wobbly armchair by the window.

When Lucy was eight, she slipped in a puddle of snow water she had tracked inside and chipped her front tooth on a brass doorknob. What came of that was more than just a sparkling white new tooth that didn't quite match the rest of her teeth—she and her mother, their small little family, stopped going to church and started eating large Sunday breakfasts in front of some televised service out of Austin as a result. They stopped believing in God little by little. Lucy's mother blamed the church instantly. As she crawled around on her hands and knees searching for the missing chip, she reasoned that if the church van had come on time to pick Lucy up for children's choir rehearsal, that Lucy wouldn't have kept trekking in and out looking for it. All the snow would've stayed outside—where it belonged. She told Lucy that 15 percent of all snow accidents occur inside the home. She memorized statistics.

This was not the only stat of hers that made Lucy feel rare. When Lucy later heard that churchgoers have a longer life expectancy than non-churchgoers, but that those who watch church on TV have the shortest life expectancy of all, she wasn't afraid to report this to her mom. How interesting, her mom had said, and from that day forward they spent their Sundays far away from Austin.

A couple of noisy kids stumble outside across the street as if someone had picked their house up, tipped it sideways, and shaken them out of it. They live in the old mansion-turned-apartment building that mirrors the one Lucy lives in.

In fact, theirs could be an exact duplicate of her own place—the same stained awning, busted trellis, scrolled edges—but she’s not sure. She realizes she’s never really noticed where she lives, the actual building. The kids are both boys, and they look like twins—same height, weight, puffy Starter coat—only one has bright red hair and the other jet black. Lucy tries to see through the mirror-like windows of the boys’ apartment building for clues about their life. Is their mother behind one of them watching, just watching? Lucy wants to know but the windows only reflect her own building back to her, distorted and shiny.

The red-haired boy kicks snow up into the air above his head. Lucy gets a fuzzy look at his expressionless face and tries to place it behind various windowpanes of his building to determine which room is his. Seems maybe the second one down from the top right corner belongs to the red-haired boy. A flap of blue and white plaid hangs straight down from the curtain rod, the kind of fabric a mother would pick out for a young boy—his favorite color but her favorite pattern. Lucy suspects his mother has given up keeping the flap bunched up and poofy. He probably stretches it straight when he’s angry or just bored. The way Lucy places him, the bottom of the curtain skims the top of his head when he stands at the window, looking down at the street for something, anything, to do.

Lucy microwaves a giant bowl of instant oatmeal and eats it in front of the window, fast, so that it enters her stomach still steaming. Davis sits beside her, rests his chin on the top of her thigh and begs, as if he'd actually eat the oatmeal if she put it down for him. She watches the boys shuffle around, then wraps herself up in her winter clothing and ventures out into the whiteness. The forecasters promised eight to twelve inches, and Lucy intends to hold them to their word. She plants both her feet into the snow, crunch crunch, and bends over to see exactly where the snow comes. Well, well past her ankle, and no doubt the heart-shaped birthmark at the bottom of her calf underneath the sock underneath the boot. What's more, along with snow came ice; the trees, the mailboxes, the street lamps—everything—has been crystallized. The night has iced over Lucy's world, and she has the intense urge to touch all these familiar objects in their strange new glass. After acknowledging all the familiar, the pipes and branches and mailboxes, she starts to notice all the unfamiliar, bizarre parts of her world that the ice has boldly encased. A yardstick protrudes up from the ground at the end of the driveway. Lucy pulls it up to find that it has been snapped in half. It starts at inch 19. And above her, high up, a plastic grocery bag hangs in the old oak tree whose dying branches scratch and tap at her window at night. Lucy doesn't wonder how it got up there, or what it was once filled with, or who it belonged to—she wonders why it isn't gnarled and tangled

up, battered and torn. Instead it floats, almost, like a perfect orb, the puff of snowstorm wind from the night before blown into it so hard so as to fill it forever.

Lucy can't remember where she's seen the redhead but it feels important to know, like knowing her own blood type or which cabinet the canned goods go in. Perhaps she's seen him waiting for the school bus at the end of their long, bare block, except then if that were true she should feel like she's seen the black-haired boy, too, with him. She wonders, for a moment, if she recognizes him from week ago, when a boy came to Lucy's building. She had lay down for an afternoon nap which she'd hoped would help her clear some things up in her head, but instead a banging on the door of the building, not even her own apartment door, jolted her up and out of that possibility. It wasn't the same red-haired boy, she remembers now. It was some other redheaded boy selling toffee for his baseball team. She scrapped the nap idea.

Lucy heads back inside to warm up for her next bout outside. She has grown more and more sensitive to cold. She thinks of what her mother would tell her when she was young, that if she ever thought she had frostbite, that the worst thing she could do would be to apply heat. She should run the frostbitten extremity under the coldest water. Lucy had done this several times, often watching her hand closely, just waiting for half of one of her unusually small

fingers to break off, swirl around in the sink, and ultimately wash down the drain, irretrievable. Perhaps she shouldn't have even come inside. Perhaps she should just stay out for the entire day today and let her body forget warmth. She considers this while she puts a pot of canned chicken noodle soup in the somewhat dirty saucepan already on the stove. Her mother might've called, so she checks her phone for a blinking light. Nothing. She grabs the phone and hits redial while stirring the soup. Six rings. No answer. The machine clicks on. "Mom, are you there?" Lucy waits a good while. She knows that when she's screening her own calls, sometimes she wants to pick up but most people don't leave enough time after the are you there question. She can't honestly believe this is really the case with her mother, though. Her mother is probably hovering over the machine, over Lucy's voice, picking at her nails and waiting for a real reason to pick up—a death or marriage. "Well, the snow, it's really incredible. It's as deep as they said it would be. But, well, I don't guess you wanna hear about that, so I'll let you go for now." She lets there be a pause. "Give me a call, OK, and let me know what you're up to. OK?" She pauses once more then hangs up and pours her soup into a giant mug which asks, in bold yellow letters, Have you had your fill?

She sits on the edge of the bed and slurps her soup, following a squiggly pattern up the wall and wondering where it might lead if it continued beyond

her apartment. Lucy spent the morning after she and Ben broke up in a foreign-feeling mania—soaking patterned bed sheets she bought at a discount store in a mixture of powdered starch and water and then sticking them to her sterile white walls. It gave the walls not only new color, but most significant to Lucy, a new texture. She rearranged the furniture with no well-thought out plan and threw out armfuls of outdated food from her fridge. She quarantined pictures of him and gifts he'd given her in a cardboard box and shoved it under the bed. She didn't know he would return that very night, and when she saw through her peephole that he did return she didn't think he'd have nothing to say, but he did have nothing to say. She pictured him on the other side, scrutinizing her eyeball which the peephole magnified to the diameter of a coaster. It made her nervous to think he could be staring through her pupil into her brain, so she pulled away and yanked the door open. He cried in her doorframe, half in and half out, until Lucy pulled him into her own frame and whispered, "Stay?"

Since they broke up a week ago they haven't spent a single night apart. They haven't discussed their arrangement, haven't given it a name. All either of them knows is that Ben will come over around ten each weeknight and midnight on the weekends. Lucy will leave the door unlocked for him so he can slither into bed if she's already asleep. They will give their bodies, their warmth, their familiarity, and nothing else besides the comfort of each knowing where the

other one is at all crazy hours of the night. Ben will slip out early, so as not to be a part of her actual day.

Besides the fact that he never has commented on their breakup or why he needed her to take him back, it bothers Lucy most that he hasn't said a thing about the changes she made to the apartment. The transformation was dramatic, and he should've acknowledged that she accomplished, in a matter of hours, making her apartment look like she'd moved—especially considering her general reluctance to life's shifts, ebbs and flows. Lucy had shocked even herself with this newfound capacity to put herself in a seemingly different world. She doesn't remember if they made love that first night of Ben's return; she cannot, for the life of her, remember if she slipped out of her pajamas to sleep nude with him as she always had, or if she kept the plaid flannel a thin barrier between them. What she remembers is a feeling like fizz behind her heart—like someone had dropped an Alka-Seltzer tablet back there and swished her around inside herself. She thought she would be able to change anything, anytime, everyday, forever. She'd be able to will anyone, including Ben, completely in or completely out of her life. She would never worry about ringing bells and not having a means of un-ringing them. She considered in what ways Ben was a bell. A bit round. A bit cracked. A bit useless. And yet, occasionally if she says something to him in the right pitch it'll echo inside of him to the point that he'll repeat it hours later,

back to her, sounding more like a question. Ben has a way of phrasing things that makes the answers come easier for Lucy. He makes her feel safe in her decisions, no matter the fact that she knows that he has never cared either way.

Davis thumps his thick tail against Lucy's leg. It's time to go back outside. Lucy slips back into her boots and tucks her scarf in a little bit tighter. She asks Davis if he'd like to come along, and he would. When Lucy and Davis step out they both take notice of the boys still playing across the street. Davis cranes his neck up to look at Lucy. "It's a snow day," she explains. "Stay," she tells Davis. "Stay." He obeys, and she scrapes the thick blanket of snow off the bottom step for the two of them to sit down. The boys are building a snow fort across the street. The redhead orders the other around a bit, telling him to build a certain spot up higher, pack a particular corner in tighter. The black-haired boy enthusiastically obeys. Lucy can't tell if it's sincere; he's seems to use gestures too big for his body. Maybe he's tired of someone always ordering him around. Or maybe he's not even old enough to care about conserving his energy. Lucy wants, more than a lot of things, to have the ebullience she had as a child.

She got an extravagant gift on her ninth birthday—a waterbed, on which she would flop around and play trampoline for hours. Once her mother started to walk in on her doing this, so Lucy stopped jumping and stood, frozen, in the center of the bed. Her mom opened the door and stood there, still gripping the

doorknob, her long, bare arm bent like a boomerang. The water still swished around under Lucy's feet, telling on her. You look like a flower, her mother said, pointing at the bed's bottom sheet which had, with all the commotion, curled up around Lucy's feet. They both slept in the waterbed that night, and for several other nights during that time in her life, her mom afraid she might disappear again, even adamant at times that it was destined to happen. The odds are simply against some people, she said. Not fair, but it's a proven fact. Lucy felt trapped there, squished against her mother for eight solid hours at a time, their bodies pooling together. If they lay face-to-face Lucy would have to synchronize her breathing with her mother's so that she didn't breathe in the air her mother had just breathed out, inhale its weird warmth.

The little boys trace the outline of their fort with the tips of their black plastic boots. Lucy jumps up to try and keep her blood from freezing inside of her. "C'mon, Davis, let's play fetch," she says an octave higher than usual to excite him. It works. The boys stop tracing and turn their heads towards her, noticing Lucy for the first time. The red-haired boy starts moving his mouth. He's looking at her and moving his mouth, saying what? The black-haired boy runs around to the side of the house for something and snow beings to fall again with an almost absurd slowness. Despite what snow does to the speed of sound, though, Lucy still can't really hear, can only watch his mouth move. She

imagines what he's saying to her, that he likes her dog, that he's always wanted a dog like that, that she looks familiar to him. She inches closer. "Huh?" she asks quietly, but loud enough for him to hear. He cocks his head back and hocks something up into the air, a piece of gum, then catches it again and turns away from her.

"Go find a stick!" she yells to Davis, pointing towards the oak tree where he usually finds fallen branches. He trots over to the tree and starts burying his snout in the snow. Lucy's a bit embarrassed that he can't see the sticks she can see, that he's searching. Then she remembers how Davis came into her life and she feels guilty for expecting him to see the world, sticks and all, as a human would. She'd rescued a lab-mix puppy from the pound after hearing how much happier owners of pets are than non-owners. While she was walking him through a patch of thick woods, the puppy slipped away, leash and all, so she placed a LOST ad. An old lady called, said that she found a dog and, easily enough, Lucy's was the only ad in the paper. I've been calling him Davis, she said, after my late husband. Lucy hurried to the woman's house who turned out to be less old than Lucy had imagined, and watched at this stupid hound dog that had absolutely no resemblance to her lost puppy chase grasshoppers. She and the old lady watched him for a good twenty minutes before Lucy thanked her and carried Davis, without a leash or collar, into his new life.

The boys make snowballs from the slushy snow in front of the fort. The red-haired boy has taken off his coat and laid it flat on the ground so they can pile the snowballs on top of it and carry them behind their fort with ease. Lucy's surprised that the red-haired boy didn't force the black-haired one to give up his coat instead. As she stares at the redhead to try and gain understanding of the relationship dynamic she realizes two things, simultaneously. First, there's no doubt about it—she recognizes the boy. Sure it could just be because he lives, presumably, across the street from her, but Lucy has a very strong sense that she knows him from somewhere far back in her life, no matter the fact that he's just not old enough to come from twenty years ago. The second and most important thing she realizes as she watches this red-haired boy pack slushy snowballs and drop them on his coat is that he is not cold. He doesn't feel the temperature.

Lucy and the redhead's eyes meet for a second. He still has his coat off. Lucy wants him to feel cold but he seems to feel nothing. She wonders what's wrong with her that she doesn't want him to put it back on. As he stares at her she notices his pale skin, but can't remember who told her that albinos can have red hair, or if the source was credible. A car rounding the corner distracts the boys. The black-haired one picks up a snowball and re-packs it in his cupped hands. The redhead glances back at Lucy, then grabs his own snowball and pitches it at the small teal hatchback. It falls about ten feet shy of the street. They

try again with three more cars, then lift their stash of snowballs and reposition themselves in front of the fort. It seems they've built the fort too far from the street. A dark Cutlass rounds the corner onto the street and slows down in between Lucy and the boys and the boys stand up and amble over to it. Lucy takes several small steps back. She can't make out the two figures in the car, but knows that the one's in front and the other's in back. The one in the back rolls his window down on the redhead's side and the redhead leans down on his elbows and sticks his head halfway inside. They talk for thirty seconds and for a moment the eyes of the red-haired boy and the eyes of Lucy meet, connect, through the car, and suddenly Lucy remembers. He looks away, fast, and as the car creeps on by he snatches a red baseball cap from the guy in the backseat and sticks it on his head as he saunters back to his spot.

One of Lucy's front yards growing up wasn't quite level. It sloped down towards the busy street and also down towards the washed-out yellow house to the left of hers. Lucy liked to lie on that slope so that her feet were most elevated and wait for her head to tingle with life. She and her friends would make an entire row of upside-down snow angels at the edge of the yard and watch the cars going by slow down, the drivers in confusion. One day, during the year of Lucy's new front tooth, while Lucy's mom was hanging laundry in the basement, Lucy's dad was behind the wheel of one of those slowing-down cars. He stole

her right up out of a snow angel and drove so far away Lucy thought it had to be Canada.

“Dad, I’ve met you before, right?” Lucy asked as soon as she saw he was taking her past buildings and scenery she didn’t recognize. She already knew the answer but wanted to see if he remembered. He had showed up intermittently throughout the first few years of her life, then faded out.

“Your first, second, third birthday party. One two three,” he replied.

“You know I already had my birthday this year, right?”

“Yep.” He dug all the change out of his jean pockets and dumped it in the center console, all the while accelerating onto the highway which made Lucy think he could probably skate and sing at the same time, like an Ice Capade. She jingled the change around with her pointer finger. “We’ll need this for later,” he explained. “You don’t have any money on you, do you?” He turned his head and winked at her.

Lucy shook her head and then realized he was just joking.

“Dad, what was my third birthday party about?”

“About?” he asked.

“Yeah about,” she said.

Snow White was the answer.

“It was about, well let’s see, a young girl starting a new phase in her life, I guess.”

A pause.

“Do you feel like you started a new phase in your life back then?”

Lucy didn’t know what this meant. “Maybe,” she said, shrugging up then down with each syllable of the word.

“Maybe is a good enough answer,” he said. He turned his face completely to the road in front of him, his profile looking, to Lucy, just like a key.

For three days she rode in a car which felt entirely too bouncy with the feeling of oops in her stomach. Oops my dad is my dad but he is also a stranger and so I shouldn’t have talked to him. Oops I chose my father over my mother without realizing it. Oops I let someone steal me, no matter if it was my real dad. But this is kind of fun. Oops I’m not supposed to think that. They drove for days, and each time they stopped for a cheeseburger or what her dad called a “pit stop,” Lucy felt the air get colder and colder and colder than that. She felt something truly exhilarating, though she could not tell at the time if it was the cold creeping into her bones or if it was the stranger father.

And so Lucy understands the difference between knowing it’s cold and feeling it’s cold. The little red-haired boy across the street knows it’s cold—he can see it on his blotchy red and white skin all exposed, offered without thought,

to the winter. He probably learned about temperature and seasons in school long before now. He knows how snow forms way up in the atmosphere and that it takes no fewer than 32 individual degrees to keep it from transforming into something nothing like itself on its way into his and Lucy's small world. But he doesn't feel it. Lucy has felt the cold ever since that trip when her father plucked her up and wrapped a different world around her, a world where people seemed to talk with a different alphabet than her own.

On the long car ride to what seemed to be Canada, Lucy and her stranger-father kept passing the same old dirt-colored car. Each time, Lucy would crane her neck to get a glimpse of an orange-haired boy sitting in the backseat, staring straight ahead. Once, as Lucy's dad swerved into the left lane to get ahead once again, Lucy didn't know why but for some reason he looked back at her. His eyes were enormous and empty, like someone had just taken all his toys and sold them in a garage sale. When Lucy and her dad got to where they were going he showed her the school he would enroll her in and for some reason she figured that she would see the orange-haired boy again, there, both of them having their first day in their new school. She just knew she would see him again.

The sun shifts to a place in the sky that makes the boys have to squint their eyes but lets Lucy open hers up wide. Davis frolics around the edge of the yard and noses around in the gutter. The boys pack snowballs mindlessly and

watch him stick his head in a storm drain. Lucy is sure, quite suddenly, that they should have a dog. Children should have animal friends who follow them no matter where they go without question. She wiggles her nose side-to-side, pressing the membrane of her nostrils against her septum to warm them. They're colder than maybe any other part of her body right now and it's changed her ability to smell. She's picking up scents she cannot recognize: musky, sweet scents from down the street, maybe, or even the surrounding states—any place that's part of the snowstorm. From the edge of the world, perhaps beyond, the smells even astronauts can't smell when they voyage with all their high-tech equipment beyond the pull of the earth. She smells something she thinks is from the boys—a musty, chemically smell, like a mix between neck sweat and brand new Sharpie, but she cannot determine if she is smelling boredom, apathy, annoyance, or maybe just the boys' natural God-given scent. The redhead separates from the black-haired boy, wanders to the very edge of the yard and looks upward and outward, beyond his block, beyond his world. He's testing his boundary.

Lucy decides to leave Davis outside. She sneaks indoors so he doesn't notice he's being deserted. The kids don't seem to notice, either, which is good, Lucy thinks; they won't figure they're part of some adult experiment. She leaves her door wide open just in case she sees something from her window that will

call for her bolting out to retrieve her dog, to claim him once again, but Davis keeps his head hidden in the storm drain. The boys continue to stare into the sky and kick around the snow they've grayed. Someone in the building across the street closes the mini-blinds in a very small window so slowly that Lucy isn't convinced it's happening until they're fully down. Lucy's ability to smell like a dog has worn off like Novocain—undetected.

After returning from the trip to what seemed like Canada, Lucy's mother monitored her outside activities a lot more, stationing the recliner in front of the window and using the flaking sill as a very narrow coffee table. She'd play solitaire there as she supervised her daughter, leaving sticky rings of soda on their playing cards. Very gradually, though, Lucy's mother weaned her off the outdoors and started keeping her inside. They'd play go fish and slapjack but Lucy began to hate those games, began to require snow and the possibility of a trip with her father it brought.

And so when the time came for the three of them to meet at the Juvenile and Domestic Court to resolve the issue of what to do, Lucy had a very clear idea of what she would tell the judge. She rode in the backseat of her mother's car rehearsing, in her head, the words she would use and in what order she would place them. Lucy stood in the front of a room with her mom on one side, her dad on the other, and testified that her dad wasn't neglectful, wasn't mean-spirited,

wasn't self-serving, and in general, wasn't all that bad. She helped her dad win her for half a year at a time, the wintry half. On the ride home her mom cranked the radio up and sang along, loud, so that Lucy couldn't speak to her. It hurt Lucy's ears.

That's when Lucy and her mother stopped playing games altogether, age 10. They haven't had a conversation in five years, ever since her 21st birthday party, when Lucy refused to hate her dad right then and there for not showing up at the restaurant gathering as promised. Her mother tried to remind her of all the letdowns, all the absence, but Lucy wouldn't hear it, wouldn't take a stand against him even as an adult looking back. Her mother could not accept this.

Lucy makes some tea then pulls a folding chair up to the window and watches. Davis has come out of the storm drain and the boys have crossed the street over to Lucy's side. They stroke his head and under his chin and then the dark-haired boy picks up a stick and throws it—far—so far Davis only looks up at him and then starts searching for another stick. The redhead finds one for him, and tosses it just to the edge of Lucy's yard. Davis charges. Lucy sips her tea and tastes that she forgot to dump some sugar in there, but she stays, just cupping the mug to take partial advantage of its heat. She slouches in her chair and holds it until it turns cold, and until the boys have lain completely down in the snow, letting Davis circle them very, very slowly.

When Lucy's mom finally got a hold of her brand new dad on that trip she threatened him, probably telling him what statistics do to little girls stolen by their parents, and got him to promise to return her after only a couple days. After making the promise he slammed the phone down so hard it made the bell in the belly of the phone ding. In the middle of the long drive back, her dad pulled over at a welcome center to get a free map and a weather report and when he came back out to Lucy, she was sitting on the curb next to a snow angel she'd made while he was inside.

"How long, Dad, 'til we're there?"

Lucy's dad sat down next to her, stretching his legs long so that his boot tips pointed straight up. "Probably four, five hours."

"Will you make a snow angel?"

"I can't, Luce."

"Why not?"

"There ain't any such thing as a boy angel," he said, and reached under his coat in his shirt pocket for his pack of cigarettes.

"Hmm," she said.

"Hmm," he repeated, and lit a match, holding it in the air for a second before he drew it to the tip. An old man with a cane that creaked hobbled past them.

“Can I have one?” she asked.

He laughed, then tapped his pack and let her pull the loose one out for herself. It reminded Lucy of pickup sticks. She examined it for a minute, shocked by its virtual weightlessness, then stuck it in her mouth, deep, so that she felt it against most of her tongue.

“Can I have a match?” she asked, keeping the cigarette in her mouth when she talked like he always did.

“Don’t have any more. Guess you’ll have to go ask someone else for a light,” he said with the straightest face. It made Lucy smile.

Lucy then proceeded to show her dad, who didn’t say a word, how he could give his angel pants instead of skirt. “Just don’t touch your legs together, that’s all,” she said. Once he saw this he complied, reclining back into the snow slow and stiff like someone had strapped a board against his spine. He formed the angel carefully, keeping his legs far apart and only moving his arms a few inches to give his angel more of a cuffed, masculine look. When he was done he just lay there, his cigarette still lit between his lips, smoke trailing up like a delicate ribbon, then disappearing into the sky. Lucy lay perpendicular to him, the side of her head resting on his pillow belly, listening to rumblings in his stomach she thought all strangers had.

Later, after the sun makes its early departure and after the boys have gone inside, Lucy slips outside and lies down in the center of the yard to make a snow angel. She rests in her deep angel pit and gives a solid stare into the low gray sky. She waits for the wetness to seep in through first her knit hat, second the bun tucked under the hat, third her skin, and ultimately, her brain. Now, though, this particular moment on this first snow of the year, her hat seems impenetrable—snowtight—despite the open gaps knitted into it, and she figures she could be good for hours if she wanted to be. Lucy imagines the red-haired boy behind his window with his eye on her, testing her on what she can and cannot do, which makes getting up even more of a challenge. When she was little, her two friends would lift her by the arms and legs up out of the angel and fling her away from it. Now, alone, she would like to leap. If every muscle in her body tensed at the same time she should be able to snap up like a rubber band, catapult herself, at will, up into the air. She attempts this, then gives up and gets up.

Ben comes in that evening holding his laptop case in one hand and a Styrofoam coffee cup in the other. “Hey,” he says, dropping his keys from under his arm onto the table.

“Hey,” Lucy replies, unable to take her eyes off the tiny straw in his cup, gnarled and knotted at the end

"Your button," he says.

"Huh?"

"Your button. It's chipped." Ben points at a button on her sweater then walks past her.

"Oh. I know." She fingers it, surprised at its sharpness.

He had pointed it out before.

They slip into bed soon after.

There's a string on the wall behind Lucy's headboard dangling from the partially unraveled bed sheet-wallpaper. The moonlight illuminates it, transforms it into a sliver of silvery thread. Lucy wants to pull it, to pull everything around her loose, but she can't quite reach from where she is. One of Davis' leg muscles spasms a few times; the moonlight illuminates this, too, a ripple under his smooth surface. Before she finally drifts off into sleep Lucy tries to reach her mother one last time for the day, taking the telephone to the window. "Three-one-four, eight-nine-seven, two-three-oh-two." As she whispers this into the machine, she counts the number of boot prints around her angel. Eleven, as if the angel had been anxious about where to lie down, where to appear.

How to be from Iowa—Translated from Spanish

She comes into the room and she just starts with the English. This and that. All that will happen for her that day. For her day, that day. Her boyfriend, her school, her plans. I'm sitting at the table with my daughter, Veronica, trying to plan my granddaughter's birthday party when she, Maureen the boarder, barges on in, starts the teakettle, and chits and chats about what, only God knows. God only knows because God speaks English, and hears it with both spirit-ears. But what about Jesus, mm? Don't bump into many Jesuses in Iowa, do you Maureen? One day I will ask her this, just not anytime soon.

She's been doing this since she moved in just yesterday. She gets to stop and start English in my family's house. *My* family's house. With the kettle heating she plops down at the table and continues to talk about her day. Outside. Her day in her world as her self. She's from Keokuk, Iowa, and we're

not, not in any sense, though I'm learning very quickly what it means to be Iowan. Garbage must be set out at the edge of the driveway twice a week. Windows must be covered with an opaque plastic in the winters. Strangers must smile at one another then look down. My daughter, Veronica, and her husband, Carlos, moved from San Salvador, El Salvador, to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, United States about five years ago for a job and bought a white house with a long driveway they'll have paved next summer. After my husband of fifty-one years died two weeks and one day ago, God rest his soul, my daughter and my son flew to fetch me from El Salvador. God bless them, too. What Maureen doesn't understand is we moved to the United States—not Iowa. There are places in this country—I have heard of them—where there are more of us, where we aren't so different. I didn't realize until I got here that Iowa is not one of them.

I can pick one word out of Maureen's conversation with my daughter: waffles. Maureen says "Eggos," and then my daughter looks back at the refrigerator, which leaves me to assume that Maureen is worried that her waffles might get too frozen in our freezer, or perhaps she's afraid we'll eat them. My daughter asks Maureen something, raising her eyebrows very sweetly. Maureen shrugs and starts pulling at the air as if she is pulling a soft pasta noodle from the bottom of her esophagus. Veronica looks at me and I at her. After about a minute of this we realize she is trying to pick a single yellow strand of hair out of

her lip glossed mouth. We only realize it when she succeeds, smiles, and drops the hair onto the floor next to her. Only one day and I have already found her hair everywhere: on the floors, on the end tables, woven into the throw blanket draped across the back of the couch, and yes, even in the bottom of the dishwasher.

Someday, maybe, we will get a new refrigerator. I'm sure the transference of magnets and papers and photographs from the old refrigerator to the new will be quite a project for me. Right now, though, it's just not in our budget, which is the reason, of course, we opened the room up for rent, gave a stranger her own shelf in the freezer. The reason we let a young white girl move in. The reason Veronica let a foreign girl move in with a close, close Salvadoran family. Maureen just goes on and on about what I imagine is how disappointing her breakfasts will be in the house and then says never mind, shaking her head back and forth, perhaps suggesting that she'll find a way to get by. They both smile at each other and Maureen zips back upstairs.

Amazingly, my daughter manages to resume her earlier thought, as she always does. Bianca, her daughter, is turning twenty and has asked if some of her new college friends can attend the party, along with family. "How many friends?" I ask.

"I don't know, Mama, maybe fifteen. You will be in charge of making her a banner this year? Or should I do it? I can do it." Veronica shifts the flowers around in their vase, positioning a daisy a bit higher.

"And they are from the university, these friends?"

"Probably, yes. Her dormitory. Do you need help with the birthday banner? I understand if you aren't up for it, Mama."

"What will we do with Maureen?"

Veronica lifts the spoon from her saucer, gives her tea an unnecessary stir.

"What do you mean what will we do with her? She can stay in her room or she can go to the mall that afternoon. Or who knows, she might even be friends with Bianca, in her classes."

I lift up in my chair and straighten my long skirt underneath me. "I can't imagine that," I say.

"Who knows," she says, and kisses me goodbye, then heads off to work. I turn the teapot off just before it's about to whistle, just before Maureen is about to burn our home down, and wave to my daughter in her white Toyota as she drives off to the middle school, where she heads the cafeteria. Today she is making something called taco pockets. My daughter, she doesn't really even like Mexican food, tacos or burritos, but all the ladies on the school board who plan out menus a decade at a time think she's Mexican, and they think she's loving it.

She *is* loving it, but only because that's the kind of girl I raised her to be.

Respectful, courteous, versatile. Twice a week Veronica gets to bring home all kinds of leftovers from the cafeteria kitchen. It's usually a little of everything. Sometimes it's necessary to doctor it up a bit with cheese or spices, but the real trick is getting everything hot at the same time. Veronica knows to call me on her drive home and give me an idea of what she's bringing so I can prepare if needed. We have an oven, a stove, and a microwave, but I'm still learning how to operate each, given the short time I've had to settle into the kitchen.

Maureen is enrolled in the university studying something or other. Or so she says. I've yet to actually see her studying. This is how it is in the United States. Students and young people they are punctual, they are always on time, but they never bring anything inside of them when they get to where they're going. Bianca tells stories of how, already, she is the star student in her classes, how the professors marvel at her preparedness and love for her to answer their questions. She doesn't say what the American students do, but I can imagine. They take it all for granted. They would have someone else store their thoughts for them if they could.

I turn the teakettle back on for myself and brew a cup of Peruvian tea, the kind my husband, Orlando, grew up on. I carry a plate of honey and toast into the family room. *Primer Impacto* is on at 10 AM every weekday, and I usually

watch at least the first twenty minutes. I'm having trouble lately with hot and cold. I can't immediately feel the heat of my tea in my mouth, there's a delay, so I have to dip my lip into my cup to test it. My fingers are too tough and insensitive. For fifty years I've been finger-testing my homemade stocks just before they come to their perfect rolling boil.

There's a story on about a man in Miami who has decided to donate his kidney to a small child he has never even met. This gesture draws me in even though I know there are things that must be started in order to ensure the day goes smoothly. He heard about the child through word of mouth, and has grown children of his own but still feels called to offer such a sacrifice. I want them to show the child but the show's host says they'll be following this story and will bring an interview with the child after the transplant. Still, I want a picture.

After Primer Impacto, the whole show, and three pieces of honeyed toast I set pork out to thaw, set two pots, one mixing bowl, and one skillet on the stove for later, and get the Pine Sol from under the sink. There's no sound from Maureen's room, which used to be Bianca's room before she left for college, so I figure it's safe to go ahead and do floors like I do every Monday and Thursday morning. It's a huge kitchen, almost the size of a bedroom. I start at the corner closest to the stairs and wind around the table, then scrub all the edges around

the cabinetry with tiny, viscous strokes. Needing a break, I rest the mop diagonally in the doorway and sit on the loveseat in the family room. The trash truck goes by. I hear the men hurl the garbage I rolled out last night into their big green truck. My daughter says they'll haul it to the edge of town and burn everyone's at once, light a huge fire. They can do this because it is Iowa.

I resume the mopping promptly. I try to focus on the floor but sometimes my hands distract me. My grip reminds me of the first time I mopped for Orlando. I mean really mopped, you see I'd mopped for my mother but nobody cleans your own house as deep as you do. The first time I cleaned a floor that was mine was very early one morning while Orlando was still asleep and the sky was still dark. We had been married two, three days before, and I'd been eager to clean my home but Orlando wouldn't stop holding me. That morning the sun rose while I was finishing up, you see we didn't have any carpet, just floors, and it rose on my hands, washing my deep skin with an orange glow as if I was porous and could take to color as a piece of old, stained fabric. I had never gripped anything like that. The hands holding onto that mop-stick looked old—my veins plump, everything inside of me circulating. Now my hands look like that even when I'm not mopping.

I'm staring into my grip when of course what does Maureen do, she hops on down the stairs just as I'm finishing the corner by the door to the driveway

and she doesn't say anything, just stands there and watches me finish. Our eyes meet and I don't smile even though I have my teeth in because I can't—I'm mopping, and American women don't mop like we mop. I will be exhausted by the time I'm done. So we stare at each other while I grind the cotton mop head into the floor, in between the tiles. This is how you clean. My grout looks as fresh as toothpaste. This is how you clean, Maureen. I'm sure nobody has ever showed you. Maureen has her purse in one hand and keys in the other, and she just shakes them at me as if I'm a dog or something, as if I'm supposed to know what she means by it. I feel the sweat on my upper lip, it's cold, and I can hardly believe she shakes my own family's house keys at me and wants to walk across my floor.

She wants to walk across my floor.

And she does. She waits for me to finish then tiptoes across it, smiling and shrugging at me and I smile back but she'd have to be an idiot to believe I mean it. Maureen leaves, swinging her ponytail from side to side as she feels she must do every time she exits a room. I hear car tires squeal rudely, but to be fair I can't be 100 percent sure it's Maureen, though we do live on a dead-end, not much traffic. I re-mop where I think she's stepped. Later on, just before my nap I have to re-mop the entire floor because it's unevenly shiny. This becomes a

daylong ordeal, and I am only part to blame for having wasted an hour in front of the television.

When I came to the United States I flew with my daughter and son-in-law to Chicago, the big airport, and we took a Greyhound bus to Iowa. It was in the middle of the night, so I wouldn't see any of the states until the sun rose. Since we were boarding a coach from New York it was already full of people, most of whom seemed to be riding until Los Angeles, California. The three of us were separated, but I found a lovely Puerto Rican lady, Elena, who picked her plastic bags up off the seat and let me sit by her. We chatted for a while and I looked outside the window, to the left of me, at the oncoming traffic. The headlights hurt my eyes because I had the wrong glasses on, but I started watching them inside, watching the light race along the metal aisle strip, front to back, front to back, front to back. I spoke with some Chicanos who sat diagonally ahead of us, Marta and Luis, who were getting off in Iowa but only to transfer south for El Paso, Texas. They had been to El Salvador, and even the neighborhood where I was raised. If I would've had time to name everyone I knew back home I'm sure they would've recognized some of the people. They would've known Orlando. My bus mates nodded off, one by one, and I watched the sun rise on Iowa, watched how the sky turns a fast, bright blue before yellows or oranges find any kind of place in America.

I don't dream about this trip, I just think about it. I just remember.

Dinner calls for 1 lb. ground corn flour, 1/3 C. melted butter, 1 C. water, 2 T. lard, 1 medium onion, diced, 8 oz. roasted pork, 8 oz. grated white cheese, and 1 egg, slightly beaten. Pupusas. Corn dough stuffed with cheesy pork filling, pinched around the edges. I recite my mother's recipe into her grandmother's quilt before I get up from my daily nap, trying to visualize each ingredient in its current place. There's no doubt I've got the corn flour, butter, and lard. There might be an onion in the dark corner of the pantry if there isn't one in the vegetable drawer. I already set the leftover frozen cooked pork out earlier, and there's a dozen eggs in the refrigerator door.

I go downstairs and stand in the doorway. The kitchen looks, finally, perfect. I know because I'm not sure if the floor is still wet until I reach down test it and it's not. When I look at the kitchen just before I start cooking each night it doesn't look right. So it looks perfect, but not right. I sigh at this because it will get right very soon. I step into the kitchen and place the remaining ingredients on the counter, in order: the flour, the stick of butter, the container of cheese, the onion to-be-diced, the egg carton. I drop a chunk of butter into the saucepan and by the time I've dumped about a pound of corn flour into the mixing bowl it's all melted, bubbly, yellow-yellow, not yellow-brown.

I whisk the flour, butter, and water into a dough. Halfway through the mixing I stop to get the lard melting. When I finish the dough I set it aside to rise for exactly one hour and sauté the pork and onions in the lard. As soon as the onions turn clear, I'll yank the skillet from the heat, crack an egg into the mixture, and stir very quickly so it scrambles evenly over the pork. While tending to the browning meat I reach without looking into the egg carton and tap an egg once, hard, against the corner of the counter, but when I hold it over the pan and slip the tip of my thumb inside it doesn't feel wet; it feels soft. The egg is hardboiled. I keep stirring and try another egg. Still hardboiled. I crank the heat down low, rest the spoon against the pan, and take the whole carton to the sink. After holding a few up to the light and realizing I can't see anything, I remember the trick my husband once showed me to tell if an egg is hardboiled or not—you stand it up on its wide end and if it stays standing when you let go it's hardboiled. I brace the counter and kneel on the floor but have to get back up and fetch a couch cushion from the family room to protect my knees. The floor is, after all, clean. I get back down and try to stand an egg with the tip of my finger. It doesn't stand. I hoist myself back up and stir the pork extra for the time I spent looking for a raw egg. It's not overcooked. It will be fine. I keep the spoon in my left hand and start to press my thumb into the egg, but I know I press too gently, too cautiously, because I can't even get it to crack. "Forgive me,

Orlando. Where is my faith," I say to my husband, and set the spoon down to break the egg open with both hands. I just now remember cooking the entire dozen last Saturday, though I don't remember why.

It crumbles into the pan. White and yellow and green from an improper boiling temperature, the egg falls apart. I get back down and test the rest of the eggs one by one. None of them stand. I stand up and first tap then smash egg after egg against the counter expecting yolk. None run. I smash the rest not expecting yoke, just to smash them. I can't imagine why I boiled them in the first place but I'm sure I did; it was the day I moved in and I remember standing over my daughter's brown pot and letting the steam rise up to my face. It makes no sense and shames me to think that not only did I boil twelve eggs for no reason at all, I did a poor job of boiling them. This would've never happened in El Salvador.

I call Veronica and ask if she can pick up eggs on the way home. She would, but has to run some errands so it'd be too hot for the eggs in her car. She's letting all this talk of salmonella and cancer-causing eggs get to her. She is, at times, strangely American. I call Carlos, at his office, and ask my son to pick up eggs. He will be working late, but asks why can't I just get some? The convenient store is, after all, convenient, and half a block away. It will be good

for you, Mother, he says. Good to get your mind off things. Good for your joints.

Good for my joints.

I am going to the store. I shower, dry my hair, and dress in a flowery blouse and long pink skirt. I slip into my sandals, find my purse, and cover the burnt pork with a wrong-sized lid, disgusted. On my walk to the store, I don't talk to Orlando. I talk to my mother. I tell her I need eggs. When a rock gets stuck in my sandal I stop and bend over to pry it out with a stick and while I'm prying I don't talk to anyone.

My mother used to get headaches that blinded her. As a little girl in El Salvador, if I ever walked into a room and found my mother lying on the floor, unable to open her eyes or mouth any wider than wide enough I was to slice a potato, soak it in alcohol, and stack it on her forehead. She would also need a light apple tea, which I would have to steep while I stacked the potatoes, then pour into a bowl and bring to the floor. I'd dip my small fingers in the hot tea and poke them in her barely open mouth, rubbing her gums, her tongue, her teeth. Coating everything with medicine, but not the back of her throat or else she'd gag on my hand. I'd feel her start to breathe again on my wet fingers. My mother would sing to me while I did this, after this old home remedy started to

work. She'd sing me this lullaby which would start very, very quietly and I could always count on a crescendo:

Now sleep, little baby; don't cry, little darling

The angels are coming with shadows of evening

The rays of the moonlight spin fine threads of silver

To shine on my baby asleep in the cradle

The rays of the sun, the blue of the sky

Will wake you from dreams when morning is nigh

Now sleep, little baby, with eyes bright as diamonds

And brilliant as starlight that shines from the heavens

I miss her, even the dark, fuzzy hair on her lip and cheeks that I could see only

when she sang and that I hoped to never inherit. I wouldn't be able to

understand the words coming out of her mouth until she was well into the

second verse. The first round of the first verse always came out in a strange,

scary mumble, but after the first time I ever found her on the floor and

understood what to do to fix her, I knew to listen for melody, not words. I knew

how it could sound. She would sing herself to sleep. Once Orlando witnessed

all of this. It was the day he was to ask her permission to marry me, and he thought that she was putting on a show to keep him from asking but I later explained to him that no, this is my mother.

I don't know what the name of the convenient store is but it has a picture of a cat holding a steaming pie on the sign. A young man holds the door open for me. I nod and smile. The cashier clerk says something to me as I walk past the counter. I nod again, to the floor. The eggs should be in the refrigerator case, but they're not. I go up and down all six aisles and I find postcards, sweatshirts, white bread, homemade cookies, but no eggs. The man behind the counter is staring at me, I can tell. I can feel it. He looked kind when I passed him but this is Iowa, and I'm not entirely sure how kind looks here. I search several minutes longer until I feel him behind me in the canned goods aisle and turn around. He asks me a question. I feel like crying, but smile and shake my head once, slowly. He holds up one finger, then dashes to his counter and brings me a notepad and a pen. I shake my head three more times.

"Uh," I say. "Um, I need eggs. Eggs. Do you have eggs, Sir?" I ask, gesturing the dimensions of an imaginary carton, holding it for him.

He says something else and shrugs.

I shake my head. "Eggs," I say louder, opening the imaginary carton with the palms of my hands, making a little oval with my thumb and first finger, then dropping the egg in two rows of six.

"Ah," he says. "Ah," he says while he rushes to the back of the store. I'm not sure if it's appropriate to follow so I shuffle to the front counter. Someone else enters the store, a middle-aged man, who tips his hat to me and passes behind me to get what he needs. I smile and stare at my hands folded on the counter and try not to move much. The clerk returns with a carton full of eggs in his hand and says something else, something happy, I know, because of the way he turns the ends of his words up. He opens the carton on the counter for me to inspect. I lean myself over and rotate all twelve eggs to make sure none are cracked, then look up at his face and nod to him. This is merely a business transaction. He bags my eggs, takes my money, and waves goodbye.

I step outside, remove the carton from the plastic sack, and cradle the eggs against my belly, cradle them home. When I get to the door I peek inside and see Maureen standing at the sink. I debate for a moment whether to go inside but finally decide I must. I have to finish the pupusas even if it means being all too near to her. When I open the door Maureen turns around and smiles a small, fake smile at me. I set the carton down on the counter next to the stove, then turn the burner back on to heat the blackened pork just enough to scramble the

egg. It will all be fine, I tell myself a couple of times. I pivot to the sink, beside Maureen, to wash my hands, and see she's peeling an egg, one of my cracked hardboiled eggs. I watch her out of my peripheral vision finish the egg, rinse it, and plop it back into the empty carton next to two eggs she's already peeled. She then reaches for another of the eggs I left on the counter and proceeds to peel it. She notices I'm watching her and says something to me, but I can't understand so I pretend not to hear her. I pick a hardboiled egg up and stand next to the sink to take over, smoothing over the firm rubbery whites with my arthritic fingers. I deliberately brush her skin to let her know that I am peeling eggs now, and there is only room for one at the sink. She shrugs and smiles and picks her purse and keys up off the counter, mutters bye. I turn the pork off. I put the fresh eggs away and look for my mother's tomato-egg-avocado ensalada recipe, the one with fresh cilantro and garlic. Maureen doesn't come back home until well after we have dinner that night, but I put the leftovers in a plastic container and ask Veronica to tell Maureen that she should help herself. She is, I must admit, entitled, and though I don't believe it was polite of her to touch someone else's eggs, for her to eat some will prove to me that in peeling the eggs she meant a silent apology.

I sleep in the highest part of the house, right under the point of the roof. Sometimes, at night, I hear noises beneath me and I worry that the family has

gathered there to discuss what cannot be discussed in front of me. The night I moved in I heard rustling and so I slipped downstairs to find Carlos, Veronica, and Bianca convened at the table. Without thinking I started the teakettle and began to take a seat at the table when the three of them looked at me with eyes I could not decipher. Their conversation had stopped, and I waited for them to resume it until I became uncomfortable, until I knew whose name would come up if I let them break the silence, so I left the teapot and escaped upstairs.

I check the level of the ensalada the next morning to find that Maureen has not touched it. Carlos asks if he can take it to work. I snap no at him. I don't mean to, but it irks me that this ensalada must go to waste. And it must. I would rather make a new batch with eggs peeled only by my own hands than to send him to work with mush. That morning, before she must leave to cook for the grade school children, Veronica and I prepare more for the party. After asking me if I'm sure I can do the banner, she hands me rolled up banner paper she got from the art teacher. "I will do it today," I tell her. "English or Spanish?"

"English."

I snort.

She writes Happy Birthday in bold letters on the back of a receipt and hands it to me. "Here. Happy Birthday," she says, pointing at the Happy first, then Birthday.

“Are pink and purple still her favorite colors? Or has it changed since she started attending the University?”

“Mama, I’d tell you they’re still the same, but I’m not sure you’d believe me anyhow. I have to leave,” Veronica says as she stands up from the table. She crouches down and kisses my cheek from behind. “You pick the colors, OK?”

I decide right then and there that I will make two banners, one in each language. I take the paper to the living room, flip on the Spanish channel for some background noise and roll out the paper in the living room to see just how much room I’ve got to work with. I anchor each end under a piece of furniture and try to imagine all those letters on the paper. They will need to be scrunched, but not too badly. I’m examining this paper when Maureen passes through, and I worry about what she thinks of what she sees. I haven’t seen too many handmade banners here in Iowa, but here again is where my imagination softens these United States for me. I know there are parts of this country where brightly colored handmade banners drape across large fiesta rooms and stretch between patches of awning, advertising fun and food, places where families come together and celebrate one another. I get glimpses of these places on the Spanish channels; even in the story about the man who is preparing to donate his liver to the young child, I see Miami and what it means to live there.

I can observe Maureen in her car under the carport from the living room window, trying to start her car. Something's not catching; she keeps revving the engine but nothing happens. I watch for awhile. She flails her arms around like this is the end of the world. In America everyone needs their own car, even if they don't even have their own home. My television program is on but I watch Maureen until she gets out, slams her car door behind her, and proceeds to stomp back up the driveway, into the house. I roll up the banner paper and retreat to my bedroom to sit in the antique blue chair by the window. Veronica and Carlos furnished my room with items from the second-hand store just before I came. This chair looks like part of a dining set; it has no arms and is rather unornamental. I have not seen Maureen's room, not since she moved in. It crosses my mind that her room could be furnished with the same furniture that Bianca used; I don't imagine she took everything with her.

When I come back down I find Maureen, at the table, writing in a notebook and drinking a Coca-Cola. She lifts her head, a sort of acknowledgement, and I blink to acknowledge her back. I begin to wipe the counters down with a bleach solution when the phone rings. People are calling all the time on the telephone to reserve their place at the party; messages collect on the machine when Carlos and Veronica are not home to answer. As I'm searching under the sink for the steel wool scouring pad, the call goes to the

machine: two recordings, one in English and one in Spanish, both I assume saying essentially the same thing: “You’ve reached Carlos, Veronica, and Bianca Burciaga, please leave a message. Thank you.” Beep. The voice leaving the message is female. Young, but older than Bianca, it seems. I set some dishes in the dishwasher and wait, pretend to listen, try to understand even a word, two words. Maureen has stopped writing, is listening *and* understanding. The woman speaks in long sentences with long breaths in between. It could be a simple reservation she’s making but it doesn’t sound like the other reservation phone calls I’ve heard—quick, high, simple. I watch Maureen out of the corner of my eye to gauge her reaction. She still holds her pen, its tip is pressed against the paper, stopped, her eyes are looking neither at the book nor at the paper but somewhere else, above her hand, at nothing in particular, just looking, the look people give when they’re listening.

I am not sure how much Maureen knows about me, what she has been told. It’s possible she thinks I have been living here all along, and it’s possible she knows everything. When the woman ends her message I lag behind in the kitchen for a few extra seconds to see if Maureen has anything to say to me, anything to communicate. She doesn’t even look at me. I know she can feel me staring at her but it’s not even worth a turn of the head. I’m not even worth that to her. I withdraw from the rest of the house to my room.

Our house in San Salvador, Orlando's and mine, was my house growing up, our room once my room. When he and I married, my mother just moved into the funny-shaped room in the house's center. The house had quirks, and like a member of the family we embraced them. The floorboards wiggled, the roof leaked, and the doors swelled in the heat every year and refused to be closed. Orlando would talk to them, saying "Close! Close! Close!" and still, they refused. I would laugh at him which would only cause him to become more ridiculous, engaging in entire and entirely one-sided conversations with these doors. He didn't understand the house as I did. After my mother died in the hospital I shut her door, shut her room off to the rest of the house, and tried to open it a year later only to find it had swollen itself shut.

Veronica comes home later than usual because she teaches a Friday evening Bible study to a very small group of Spanish-speaking women at the church she attends. She asked me to go along but I told her no, not this time. Though I raised her to believe that you feel God, you experience God, that you don't learn about him, the idea of gathering together with people to whom I cannot even express basic concepts—where I'm from, who my family was, how I raised my daughter—seems a waste of time, and I do not want to be left out of worship. At the one English church service I did attend I stood up and sat down

a second behind everyone else, and so I stood out even more than I had expected to.

Carlos watches football on the television while Veronica and I finalize the plans at the table. I will serve a full-fledged meal at the party, a sit-down meal, despite Veronica's insistence that it's too much for me to take on and the guests will celebrate in the living room and on the patio until it's ready. "I will finish the menu tonight and start cooking early tomorrow morning. You'll have to remind me what Bianca eats these days."

"She eats all the same things she used to eat, Mama. Why are you so sure she's changed?"

"Why wouldn't she have changed?"

Veronica looked at me like she didn't know how to answer that, which is what I would've figured. "Here, here's a list of all that I brought home from the cafeteria." She flips over to a clean page in her notebook. "Write down everything else we need and I'll pick it up at the grocery store. I've got to go change out of this sweater," she says, and leaves upstairs.

Carlos comes into the kitchen. He's light on his feet; his team must be winning. "Halftime," he says, and asks how I am.

"We're planning the meal. Do you have any requests?"

He digs into the pantry. “Whatever you make should be fine. How are you doing, Mama?”

“I’m fine, of course. Fine. Do you want me to make you something?”

“Do you want *me* to make *you* something?”

“Hush,” I say. “Go watch your game.”

Carlos takes a bag of potato chips and goes back to his game. Veronica comes back down to the kitchen—with Maureen. They walk side by side, talking quietly, and sit at opposite ends of the table. I start to rearrange the flowers. Maureen’s voice goes up and down as if it’s still finding itself. I can pick out some words: bus, red, telephone, maybe. Veronica nods politely and folds her hands together. It seems like small talk. Maureen doesn’t even look at me. I wait for a pause and ask Veronica, “What are you discussing?” Maureen shoots me a glance, finally.

“Oh, Maureen just mentioned she saw some Hispanic people on the bus the other day.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“She’s just trying to be nice to us.”

Maureen says something.

Veronica says something back.

Maureen.

Veronica.

Maureen.

"Veronica," I say. "What is she saying?"

"She's just talking about her car troubles and I'm telling her about the time Carlos drove over the curb."

"When did this happen? What happened?"

"Oh, well a while ago he drove over a curb and caused a lot of damage."

Maureen starts fixing her ponytail.

"What sort of damage? How come I don't know about this?"

"Not that much damage, Mama, OK? Don't worry. He broke the oil pan or some such thing." Veronica starts tapping her fingers on the tiled tabletop.

Maureen says something. I recognize: five o'clock.

Veronica responds. I recognize nothing.

Maureen responds. Nothing.

Veronica. Nothing.

Maureen. Nothing.

Veronica. Radio, program.

Maureen. Water, cat.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, my own voice a little high.

“Mama, it’s just a regular conversation.”

“We need to finish the party.”

“I know, but Maureen will leave in a minute, and I can’t just ignore her.

Why don’t you go watch the game with Carlos?”

I leave the room, but not to see Carlos. I go to my room and sit by the window where all of a sudden a pang comes to me, a deep one, and “Orlando,” I say, “I’m still not sure why.” Outside a group of birds gathers together on a tree then flies away, one by one.

I lie down for a nap and dream about a feral cat I knew growing up. I named it Blackie. It never let me get within fifteen feet of it, but I got close enough to see it had an extraordinarily long tail with bristly fur. I’d see it every so often when my mother would have me take chicken bones out to the dogs or when I’d be lingering outside after my friends had all gone home. I saw it enough for it to seem like a strange pet of mine, but once it disappeared for years it seemed until late one night I saw its head emerge from the darkness and its tail, not the body just the head and the tail. This is the moment I dream about, except I’m much older and the cat is even farther away from me. When I wake up, I swear I see it dash out of my peripheral vision.

I must hurry downstairs to start dinner. It’s six o’clock. It will be a bit late tonight; I haven’t even set the ingredients or utensils out. In the hallway I stop to

straighten a crooked frame. Down the stairs I grip the banister, as they seem especially steep just after I wake up. I enter the kitchen with my mother's recipe for a quick cabbage dish in my head only to find a bucket of fried chicken and a box of biscuits on the table.

"Mama," Veronica says as she enters the kitchen. She must've seen me from the living room sofa. "Carlos went out and got dinner. Thought you could use a break for a change."

I poke around in the bucket. The chicken skin crumbles to the bottom. "Break? I'm still going to have to make dinner."

"What are you talking about? This isn't so bad. It's actually pretty tasty." She picks a piece of chicken up and sets it back down on the pile. "Let me make you a plate."

"Veronica, honestly, I'd really rather you didn't." I pass her to bend down into the pots and pans cabinet.

"What are you going to do, Mama, cook an entirely different meal?"

"Don't worry about it."

"But that makes no sense."

"Don't worry about me," I say, and watch Veronica leave. "Why couldn't you have just waited for me?" I ask after she's gone. I cook an elaborate meal and eat it alone.

When Orlando passed I ate nothing for weeks, just drank broths and juices and teas because that's how he spent his last month with me. He couldn't keep anything down, even the softest, mushiest foods, and so I spent my days steeping vegetables in water for broth and brewing teas to soothe his stomach. It came to pass that I had nothing but liquid in my kitchen, and so I adapted to his diet so much I was frightened to let it go after I let him go. When my daughter and son-in-law came to take me back to the United States they helped me dump the weeks, months worth of liquid food down the drain. Veronica said it was sweet that I was so hopeful, but I couldn't believe how much I had prepared, quart after quart after quart, and to watch it all wash down the drain, all the time that went into making it, all that time spent away from Orlando's bedside, wasted.

I manage to fulfill my responsibilities planning the party. When Saturday morning arrives I'm so on track there is nothing to do to be more ready for the party. My daughter and I have a quiet breakfast of toast and jam. The plates we're using have a green ring around the edge and blue dots in the center; they're from the cafeteria. I can feel deep scratches on the surface. The children Veronica serves are very eager to eat her lunches, she's told me. Sometimes they thank her for what she scoops onto their tray. If they purchase a dessert ticket they can take one of these plates with a slice of pie or cake from the dessert tray.

She has invited me to come visit her workplace when I am ready, to eat a free lunch. I tell her I look forward to that but I know myself that this will not be happening anytime soon.

Veronica and I review what will happen today. I will cook and she will help except for when she has to leave to pick up the balloons and preordered cake. When Carlos wakes up I will instruct him as to where the banners should hang, and the three of us will work together to hide all the breakable knick-knacks in the closet. After we go over all these details we settle back into our silence, but it's comfortable enough. I look out in the driveway to see Maureen's car is gone. One less thing to worry about. I get up to help myself to another piece of toast because I'll need extra energy for the day. When I sit back down Maureen pops in the room. Before I even get a chance to scoot myself up to the table, there she is. She walks past us, saying hi, and starts rummaging in the refrigerator.

"I thought she was gone," I said.

"What? Why?" Veronica asked.

"Her car is gone."

"She took it to a mechanic," Veronica says.

Maureen sits herself at the table, her usual spot. I turn my head sharply so that I don't have to see her from the corner of my eye.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask Veronica.

"I didn't know it mattered so much to you, Mama. Why do you care?"

"I don't like this," I say.

Maureen says something.

"I don't like this," I say again, louder. "I don't like her."

"I know," Veronica says.

"I miss El Salvador," I say to my daughter.

It throws me off a bit.

It throws her off a bit. Veronica sets her toast down, folds her hands together in front of her, gently. "I'm sorry, Mama, I'm really sorry to learn that. Maybe we can talk about it later, after the party."

"Well I don't know what there is to talk about. There's nothing to talk about. I'm grateful for all you have done for me," I say. "That's all there is to say."

At three o'clock, a party comes to this house and fills it with noise, laughter, squeals, and clatter. I cook, I make about half of what I'd planned to make and then I hide. I stay in my room the entire party. I can feel its vibrations under my bare feet and I can track the tops of heads entering the side door. A beat of music pulses, music that could be English, could be Spanish. Maureen

may or may not be here; it feels OK not to know. I slip into my softest
nightgown, lie on my bed, and miss my family from above and below them.

Aceparanza

Any progress that we made, we made at night. The girls would cry out for their mother, and I would come. I would come with the smile I'd learned the day of her funeral—small, steady, and perfectly symmetrical. The girls' facial muscles would droop at the sight of me—devastation—as they saw over and over again that calling out for Mom actually meant Dad. I had removed their nightlight a week before, months after the funeral, so I wouldn't have to witness this. It's a ceramic firefly, hand-painted by their grandmother—their mother's mother. I didn't throw it out, just set it on the top shelf of their closet. Eventually, they forgot.

The girls woke up late on the Fourth of July, long after breakfast had cooled on the table. I didn't want to wake them because the littlest things set them off. They shuffled to the round solid oak heirloom of my dead wife's and stared at their plates. Cassie kept her hands under the table and bent down to touch the egg-over-easy with her bottom lip while her little sister, Tecia, watched.

"It's not really that cold, Teesh," she told her sister. "It's OK."

I left my lookout in the kitchen and sat at the table. "It's OK?" I asked Cassie.

She bent down to break the yolk with the same lip. Her round brown eyes looked up at me, and she didn't answer but she licked the yellow off her mouth. I sipped my coffee and the girls slurped their eggs right up.

"So, any plans for today?" I asked.

Cassie looked at her sister and said, "We wanna swim. And we wanna see the fireworks on the pier."

They both turned their faces towards me. I stared at my two little girls, first one, then the other, darting my gaze back and forth from face to face as if each were one big eyeball and I was having trouble deciding which to look into. They sat close together. They always sat close together, but even with their cheeks nearly touching I wasn't able to see all of both of them at the same time.

The proverbial which one is my favorite question came up in my head, and I felt I had to answer or they'd both be lost, so I chose Tecia.

"Sounds great, girls!" I sprang up and stacked the breakfast dishes in my arms. They zipped off from the table, giggling, to change into their swimsuits.

"That's *our dad!*" Cassie squealed from the bathroom, like I was some new species. "Our dad is *so weird!*" It bounced off every single tile.

"Our dad *is* so weird," Tecia said. It was a whisper, but it was also amplified. It hissed.

I am so weird. I had to agree. I'd seemed a bit too excited at the table. Compensation. I changed my choice to Cassie. I would save Cassie from a burning building if I absolutely had to choose because I always knew what she thought of me. Tecia kept her secrets close to her, just like her mom. After the funeral, when they moved across the country to live with me, I'd asked the girls what their favorite flavor of ice cream was. Tecia waited four days to answer.

I carted them to SuperSplash USA, which, thankfully, was open on summer holidays. I walked them poolside and the lifeguard looked at me as if I were one of those uncaring parents who leaves his kids at the pool to be babysat, but my girls just liked to swim.

"Look, Dad!" Tecia yelled as I was on my way out. I watched her do a handstand on the bottom of the three-foot pool.

She came up and I yelled back, "Really good!"

"Look, Cassie!" Tecia said to her sister very close by, then began swirling and somersaulting and doing things I couldn't appreciate from so far away. She came up and I watched the girls for about five more minutes but neither seemed to notice I was still around, so I left.

I met my wife in May. At the beach. We were both visiting the same East Coast resort, and we were the only two out each morning before the sun rose. I'd run up and down the length of the resort's private beach, passing this dark-haired, oblivious woman four times before the sun had completely detached itself from the horizon. She always sat holding an oversized cup, wearing long corduroys and the same cream-colored hooded sweater, all zipped up. I spoke to her only once on that beach, or any beach, really.

"Hey!" she said.

"Hi," I said, running in place. I think I smiled.

She reclined on one elbow. "You know, jogging in front of me, like you do, is really rude. I could be trying to watch the sun rise. I'm not, but I could be."

I tilted my head to look at this woman, to follow the square tea tag fluttering between her fingers, to get up the nerve to ask her out. And I did.

We were married three weeks later in her Connecticut hometown. I got her mother Juanita's consent because Juanita and her late husband, I forget his name, who had been late for decades, got married themselves just a week after meeting. That night, on our drive from the courthouse to the bed and breakfast, Day 1 of our honeymoon adventure, we passed her old high school and she made me stop the car.

"What in the hell," she said, putting her window down. "What in the hell is all that?" She put the window back up.

The entire football field was overrun with corn. It was up to the goalposts. She burst from the car and sprinted into it. I cut the engine off and followed her to the very middle of the field. It must've been the 50-yard line. She held her arms open and twirled around in it for a while. I started to feel dizzy.

Then she stopped. "Sit. Ray, sit."

"It's wet."

"Good god, Raymond," she said, and pushed me down. Then she stepped out of her blue dress and started to do her old cheers for me. Give me a two, four, six, eight! She flailed her arms and did all her high kicks, slicing stalks with her machete legs. I wanted her to take off her bra, but then a plane flew over us and I jumped up to try and dress her. She shoved me back down. I kept

looking at the plane, trying to figure out if they could see her. I knew intellectually that they couldn't—I estimated they were about 30,000 feet up but then I thought, well why not? All that's between my new wife, who I don't yet know well enough to trust, and a plane full of strangers, is nothing. We've got spirit yes we do! We've got spirit how 'bout you? She got louder.

I sprang back up. "Uh, Maria, damn it, Maria, come on let's move to a more secluded area," I said, trying to take her arm.

She knocked me hard on my ass. I felt my tailbone. I screamed something at her, I don't remember what, and she softened.

"Sorry," she said. "Sorry but god, Ray, what are you so afraid of?"

I stared up at Maria, her skin looking lit-up from the inside like a toy globe. She stared right into my eyes and unhooked her bra, flinging it deep into the field of sweet corn, the field of her high school cheerleading days, the field of the 1975 Warriors football team. I looked at her gentle face and her wide hips as she chanted and cheered and I thought nothing of children, not a thing about two little twin girls, as she set aside her cheers and settled on top and into me, filling my sharp-angled absences—the crooks of my elbows and bends of my knees—with soft.

When I got home from the pool I washed the breakfast dishes, then strapped myself up with my heart rate monitor for a run. I stretched my hamstrings on the front porch, then dropped my cell phone in the mailbox since I'd already locked myself out of the house. My front lawn is long and slopes down pretty steeply to my suburban Washington street, so finding my pace on the pavement is always a disappointment because it always seems too slow. I ran for two hours, at least one and a half of which was in my optimal heart rate zone.

The town I live in is perfect. It's close enough to Seattle that I can drive into the city once every couple weeks after work for a beer. It's close enough to the Pacific that I can end up there in the middle of my run. It's clean. The lawns are manicured. Wood fences are whitewashed regularly. The dogs don't get too small and yippy. Everyone recycles. Everyone keeps to themselves. I only know my neighbors' names because of mis-delivered mail. The girls didn't take to it right away. They were used to living on the East Coast with their mother. There's much more space between things here, much more room to move around, to get away.

I didn't jog to the ocean that day—July Fourth—but wished I would have, because as soon as I stepped on the porch my phone rang from inside my mailbox and I didn't have the presence of mind to check the caller ID. I just

pressed YES. YES, it was Carmen, my wife's sister. She lived in Las Vegas and wanted the girls. Not for a weekend; not for the summer. Forever. But this was all old news on the Fourth of July, so I made small talk.

"Got any plans?" I asked as I sat down on my top step.

"Plans?"

"Plans. For the Fourth. You know, Carmen, kids depend on these things. Holidays and such. You can't just treat these days like any other day, even if there are no clocks or whatever in Vegas."

"Shut up, Ray, will you? God."

"I'm serious, Carmen. If you ever want the girls, you're gonna have to think these things out. Any judge would tell you that."

"What do you have planned that's so special? You gonna dump them off at the pool?"

"My girls like to swim, damn it. No, they don't like it. They love it. And if they decide they want to swim today you can bet I'm gonna let them."

"They're there?" she asked.

"Where?"

"There."

"Here, you mean? With me?"

"There. With you."

"Where the hell else would they be? They're right here. It's a holiday for Christ sakes. We spend holidays together—as a family. It's what families do."

She didn't say anything. Carmen lived alone. Had never had a steady man or even a friend, besides Maria, in her life.

"Look, Carmen, can we have a cease-fire today? Just one day? I promise we can resume the battle tomorrow. I'll answer."

"Let me talk to them," she said.

"To who?"

"To Tecia. To Cassie. Them."

"Now you can't talk to two at once. They *are* individuals." Our trauma counselor told me, after she spent an hour watching the girls color in her office, that I needed to start treating them as separate beings. They risk losing their individuality during this time of, well, trauma, she said. Take one to piano lessons and the other to ballet, she suggested. Or else they'll end up Siamese twins, emotionally-speaking.

"Let me talk to Cassie. Put Cassie on the phone."

"Cass is busy. She'll get back to you later. And I will too," I said, and hung up the phone.

I spent the rest of the day asleep. Woke up in time to pick up the girls and take them to the pier. Actually, the pier was too crowded, so we just lay back on

a patch of grass not too far from the pier and watched the Fourth light up in the sky. The bugs were nagging the girls so Cassie made me go back to the car and get the bug spray. When I got there I couldn't find any, so I made a quick trip to the drugstore. I gave it to them when I got back, but I'm not even sure they used it.

I had to replace our washing machine the next day. The sand from all our time at the beach killed the motor. The girls and I rode in a GMC truck I'd borrowed from a guy I worked with. I'm a seaman of sorts here on the West Coast. I work on a tour boat, so I have lots of connections to guys with trucks. We strolled into Sears the day after the Fourth and I let them pick the model. They were a bit pissy that morning because Carmen had called and I had not let them answer, so I gave them the opportunity to choose. It had to be a Kenmore, I told them, but they could pick the model. They went with the X3500, the only black one on the floor, and I said to them that we'd have to get a black dryer to match but they liked the idea of half-and-half. I let them ride home in the bed with it, and for once I got to crank up the radio. Springsteen.

The first time I heard a live version of Thunder Road by Bruce Springsteen I was down at the Hartford Farmers' Market with Maria about a month into our marriage. She was pregnant; I'd seen the test with my very own eyes that

morning. We were wasting time there on a corner; it was Sunday, and our road trip honeymoon had finally come to an end, come full circle. I was due back at my financial planning firm in New York that Monday—a self-imposed and self-extended deadline. We were standing near a fresh flower stand watching the cars speed past because we had been thinking about buying a new car, having put ten thousand miles on the Honda during the past month. A LeBaron stopped in front of us at a stoplight, and the tender, bare words of that song drifted from the car with cigarette smoke. All I could see of the driver was his lap. He wore blue jeans and had a woman's cream sweater, like the one I met my wife in, draped across his thighs. He kept opening and shutting his legs, stretching the garment out then smooshing it up again like a broken accordion. I looked at my wife. I thought it might be hers. I figure now, in retrospect, it probably wasn't, but I didn't get that assurance from her eyes at the time. When the light turned green the LeBaron lingered for a moment, then sped off. Maria threw her head back in laughter and I took her arm, led her through the rest of the market. I've never, to this day, found her sweater.

When we got home from Sears I asked Cassie to help me unload the washer.

"I'll help," she said, hopping out of the back of the truck.

"It's not as heavy as it looks."

"C'mon, Dad, let's just do it."

"Just do it!" Tecia yelled. She ran to the door on the side of the house and held it open.

I could see my neighbor, Reginald A. Bledsoe at 8773 Farmham Ln., out of the corner of my eye, standing in front of his flowerbed with the hose, staring. I shimmied the Kenmore to the edge of the bed. "OK Cass, on the count of three. One. Two."

"Are you coming?!" Tecia called.

"Oh Jesus, Cassie, your sister drives me crazy someti—"

"Yeouch!" Cassie let out a yelp as she dropped the washer.

I'd forgotten to say three, just started lifting. I ran around the large box to Cassie's foot. It looked fine. Cassie started cracking up.

"Is your foot—your foot's OK?"

She laughed harder.

Tecia started laughing. She couldn't even see us.

My neighbor held his hose, the limp water pressure trickling out, and just stared.

"It was a joke!" I screamed at him. He set the hose down and went inside.

I laughed with my girls. I think they thought it was real.

I ended up having to take the washer out of its box outside because it was too wide for the doorframe. I flung the box into the driveway and while I was installing the new machine the girls made a home of it. I had fallen asleep after I completed the process, right there on the laundry room floor on a pile of dirty towels, some sandy and some chlorinated. I woke up and spotted a hair on the Corona beach towel—long and dark like Cassie’s but a bit coiled like Maria’s. Well, Maria’s was dark too, I thought, so it had to be hers, never mind the impossibility of it, the fact that she’d never stepped foot in my house, maybe never even in the state. I wondered if the girls could be wearing clothes from before she died. I decided to spend a morning the following week washing all their clean clothes. But suppose, I wondered then, somehow, they go to the beach to meet with her. I was still half-asleep.

The box house was in the living room when I got up. They’d cut out a door on the front under the THIS SIDE UP, and small square windows on the three other sides. The door could open and close but the window cutouts had been tossed in the sink for some reason. I guess their mother had led them to believe that was a more general disposal. Tecia was drawing flowers and single blades of grass along the base of the house and her sister was fixing the jagged edges of one window with a box cutter.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked.

"Huh?" Cassie asked, both girls jerking their heads around. They hadn't known I was there.

"The box cutter, Cass," I said, and took it from her. "Why do you think it's OK to get in my utility drawer?"

Tecia resumed her landscaping.

"I don't," she said. With attitude.

"You don't? You did."

"How come everything is off limits?"

"Everything isn't off limits."

"We can't go anywhere. We can't do anything!"

"Well neither can I!" I knew I'd yelled because what I said silenced Cassie. She leaned back.

"I'm the one who got it, Dad," Tecia said lying there on her belly, not missing a single stroke of grass.

I stared at her and then she jumped up and ran to the kitchen. "I got it from right here," she said, pulling out the utility drawer next to the microwave.

They both looked at me with a what-are-you-gonna-do-now look.

The telephone rang.

"Is it Carmen? Is it Carmen?" they asked.

I looked at the Caller ID. I spoke over the ringer. "I need to feel that I can trust you enough to take care of yourselves when I'm occupied with something—"

"Is it Carmen? Is it Carmen?" They bounced up and down in my face.

"Is it, Dad? Is it? Let us talk!"

"Get in your house, now!" I yelled in my deepest, most serious voice, extending my arm to point to the box. They scurried inside it, whispering. I answered.

"What's got you all flustered?"

"What do you want, Carmen? What the hell do you want?"

"Well, among other things, I want to know if you want help."

"I don't need any of your goddamn help."

"I'm not asking if you need it, I'm asking if you want it, and it's not even my help."

"You're offering someone else's help?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Because I'm tired of worrying about what's going on with the girls. I've got my own life to live too."

"Fine."

The next morning Juanita arrived on my doorstep. I opened the door and said, "Hola?"

She stood outside for a few moments, blinking her big brown droopy eyes at me. Then she smiled and peered behind me into my house's inside. I hesitated to let her in. Once she's in, she's in. Once a Gomez is in, a Gomez is in. Then she started in her Spanish: "Kearo a la blah blah blah," so I had to let her in. I sat her at the table and dialed Carmen from the other side of the kitchen, facing away from my ex-mother-in-law or whatever she was to me then. I got Carmen's machine.

"Carmen, I would like to know what exactly your mother is here for."

Juanita nudged me aside from behind. I turned around to see that she was helping herself to the kettle on the stove.

"If you think she's somehow gonna help you get the girls you're very, very mistaken."

Juanita was swishing soapy water around in the kettle.

"The games you all are playing on me, Carmen. They're just, they're just—"

Juanita got up in my face and started asking me some question over and over again. "Don days tall tay? Don days tall tay? Don days tall tay?" She made bizarre hand gestures. She still wore her wedding ring.

“Damn it, Carmen, you know I don’t speak one goddamn word of Spanish!” I said, and slammed the phone down on the counter. I opened the pantry doors for Juanita. Every single one of them. And the fridge. And the utility drawer. “Here,” I said. “Is it in here? What do you want?” She looked me straight in the eye and laughed, then reached for the teabags. Of course. I didn’t make tea too often. Bought the kettle for Instant Lipton Chicken Noodle Soup the last time I caught the flu. I left her there in my kitchen. She didn’t stop me from leaving.

Maria and I crossed into Canada towards the end of our honeymoon loop around the US. I’m not even sure what province. She’d been sending Carmen drugstore postcards along the way, the last few written entirely in Spanish. She lay on our hotel bed with her wet mass of hair soaking both pillows and flung a field of caribou at me with a speech bubble over one’s head that read ‘GOOD GRASS, EH?’

“Mail it,” she said.

“Right now?”

She nodded.

“You want me to trudge down to the front desk right now? It’s late.”

“It’s important.”

“What is it?” I tried to decipher the writing. “What is it besides Spanish?”

“It’s a sister thing, Ray. You’re not my sister.”

I huffed.

“Besides, I’m naked,” she said, kicking the covers back and rubbing the bottom of her right foot against the inside of her left knee. I looked at her body, specifically her obliques and quads. They seemed to be softer than when we met, softer than what I’d found with gusto under her cords and sweater the first time we made love, less than 24 hours after she’d asked me not to block her vision, on sand which felt rough to me but didn’t seem to bother her. Softer. Despite the fact that I thought we were *both* having the most sex of our lives. She laughed, I thought, at me, but I had learned not to be so bothered, and so I completed the task of mailing the secret postcard. After I gave it to the man at the front desk I started to head back to the stairs when I caught a glimpse of him in the large lobby mirror—reading the postcard. I climbed up to the third floor—two and three steps at a time—before I realized I could just ask him what it said. So easy. I skipped back down and asked. He had no idea, he said. He didn’t read customers’ mail. But it’s a postcard, I said. Not real mail. Oh but it is, he said. Fine, I said. Well can you read Spanish? Yes, he said. Then read me the postcard I just brought you.

“I already dropped it in the mail slot.”

Translation: You'll never know.

I had avoided dealing with Juanita for about an hour, shut-up in my bedroom, when there came two tiny knocks on my door. The girls opened the door and shut it behind them. I was lying on my back in my bed, pretending to be asleep, as they scooted across the carpet in their socks. One of them shocked my nose. I acted jolted, and asked the girls what was up.

"We want to know why is our grandmother here?" Cassie asked.

"That's a great question. The question of the hour."

"She smells funny," Cassie said. "She smells like the basement." Tecia nodded.

"I know," I said. Faked a yawn.

"We were trying to get some pudding cups out of the cabinet to put in the freezer so they'd get cold so we could eat them and she said NO," Cassie said.

"She made us get down," Tecia added.

She made them get down from standing on the counter, Tecia means.

"So can we have some pudding, Dad?"

"Didn't you two spend time with your grandmother while you were living with your mom?"

"In Connect-icut?" Tecia asked. This was how she always pronounced it.

"In Connect-icut," I said.

Tecia looked at her sister to respond.

"Yeah but it wasn't like *this*," Cassie said.

Whatever that meant, it was a wonderful surprise. "You know what, though?"

"What?"

"The good thing is we can talk about her when she's around because she doesn't speak our language."

"English?" Tecia asked.

"Yes, Teesh, English," I said, annoyed that she liked to play the dumb game sometimes.

"That's true," Cassie said.

"Yes, girls, that's one thing we know is true," I said, and got up.

Juanita presented many problems, one being the problem of dinner, since the girls were usually content to make themselves some Easy-Mac or homemade Lunchables, cutting deli meats and cheeses into squares, then stacking each kind high on the bare kitchen table along with saltines and eating only about half of what they'd cut. I usually ate a large lunch on the tour boat I drive for a living because the crew served a wild Alaskan salmon buffet daily. Shouldn't eat after 5 PM anyway. Juanita had been experimenting in the kitchen with what little

was in the cupboard and had some weird bean concoction simmering on the stove when the girls and I left my bedroom and came downstairs. Luckily, she didn't know how to say 'This is dinner' in English, so I just decided to order one cheese and one supreme pizza from Domino's.

As I dialed, Cassie said, "But Grandma's cooking dinner."

"We don't know that, though, do we?" I replied.

Juanita seemed puzzled when the guy arrived on the doorstep with dinner, but I figured that it was her turn to be surprised by someone coming to the door. She must've figured that she deserved it too because she ate just a small bowl of the bean stuff and three whole pieces of supreme, crusts included. That night, after the girls went to bed, I sat at the kitchen table and watched Juanita hand wash dishes. I tried to remember if she had even left the kitchen yet that day.

"Juanita."

She looked at me, still scrubbing.

I picked up her suitcase and pointed down the hall towards the tiny spare bedroom. "I'm going to put you in this bedroom."

She nodded.

Setting her stuff right inside the door I noticed that the blankets and sheets were all twisted. Those girls, I thought, but then as I was remaking the bed I

recalled having fallen asleep there a few weeks before. I reentered the kitchen and opened the dishwasher for Juanita. I think she saw me do this out of the corner of her eye but she just ignored me.

“Juanita.”

She looked at me, rinsing.

“We have a dishwasher. Look.”

She grunted.

I left it open and sat myself back down at the table. She dried and re-stacked all the dishes. Then she took the three pizza boxes and soaked each in the sink, one-by-one. This was a mystery to me until she folded each one up into a much smaller, much flatter square, using her muscular hands and the front of her body, her stomach—the cardboard no longer cardboard but a stiff brown fabric. Her hands shone as if she’d been dipping them again and again into a sink full of wax—they seemed, suddenly, like the wrong hands for this woman. She fit all three boxes in the trashcan with room to spare, dried out the sink, and turned out the light, leaving the dishwasher door down.

With Juanita staying with me I could return to work. I had taken about a three-month leave—I really had no choice since the girls were thrust back into my life and too fragile during the first month, and too moody during the next two, for a babysitter. I wasn’t sure how one went about finding a babysitter,

anyway. Especially for girls who weren't babies, were little grown-ups with a dad they thought they could order around and make answer questions about their mother's past. When did we fall in love. When did we stop. When did we decide to have two babies. Did they think Cassie would come first, or Tecia. (I've yet to figure that one out.) Was mommy good at school. Did she really sew her own dresses. Where did the scar on her cheek come from. How high could she sing. These were questions that Juanita, if she spoke English, could really come in handy for. They were with her eight to ten hours a day then, starting around the end of July. Juanita could stay a couple weeks, answer ten questions a day and satisfy all the curiosity they, having know their mother only seven years, could ever have. Having not really known their mother. I, on the other hand, could move in the same room with Juanita, quit work, and place the two of us under house arrest and still not get all the answers I needed. The good news was, though, that I didn't really *want* any more answers. I'd moved to the West Coast before our divorce was even finalized, put an entire country between myself, for that very reason. I'd gotten a new job out on the ocean, away from land, for that very reason. There was nothing more I wanted from this woman.

But Maria sang. She sang to the radio down the eastern coast—mostly oldies and some '80s stations. She reclined her bucket seat and hung her bare, baby-oiled calves out of the window, drawing circles in the air irrelevant to each song's time; slow songs often got fast, vigorous circles, while fast songs got long, drawn out and dramatic movements. When a crosswind whipped in from her side of the car her baby scent would smash into me. Not just through my nostrils—any open orifice—to the extent that one night in a South Carolina hotel she hopped off of me and spat into the sink.

"You taste like me," she said, and spat again. "Blech." She'd been tonguing the inside of my ear. She didn't ask why I never complained about how she tasted, just kept licking and licking again each body part either baby-oiled, baby-lotioned, or baby-powdered. Her legs oiled. Her arms and tummy and breasts lotioned. Her chest and armpits and back of her knees powdered. Such an ordeal just to smell like new. She didn't ask how I put up with it, but she did ask me to throw some cologne on. To smell like a man.

In Miami she found a Spanish station. She sang along and, at that time, it was cute. I thought, I should know Spanish by the end of this trip. But after Texas it all started to change. Instead of singing in Spanish when there was a Spanish station and staying in English the rest of the time, she started turning the radio off when she couldn't sing in Spanish. And then I was left alone in the

quiet with a scent that told me nothing about the woman next to me. A scent that somehow lied.

I came home from my first day back at work, a long but familiarly serene Monday, to find Juanita sitting on the living room floor next to the box house, which was turned upside-down. Standing in the kitchen with a water I'd grabbed from the fridge, I watched as each of my girls said, "Ready Abwelita?" and then hoisted the house up and over her so that what was the floor of the house became Juanita's roof. The original roof they had opened up to slide over her.

"Ooooh," Juanita said.

"Here we come in now, Abwelita," Cassie said.

"Abwelita, we are coming, make room for us in the living room," Tecia said, and then they both opened the upside-down door and crawled inside. There was commotion, some bumping against the walls.

"Dad, can you shut the door!" Cassie yelled out, her voice sounding deep and trapped. I didn't think they'd heard me come in. I went into the living room and peered through the door. Someone had painted a doorknob on the box and added '3218,' just above the THIS SIDE UP, which was, of course, upside-down. All three of them were sitting with their ankles crossed and their arms wrapped

around their knees. They all three looked at me with big eyes as if they were about to start a secret meeting as soon as I shut the door.

I shut the door.

The rest of the week they seemed to complete a new project each day. Tuesday they trekked to the grocery store and stocked the fridge and pantries with food, very little of which came in a brightly colored box. Wednesday they painted bricks on the outside of the cardboard house and cut a slit in the door for mail. Thursday they dusted the furniture, vacuumed the carpet, and mopped the linoleum. Friday they rearranged things around the real house, placing handmade doilies Juanita had brought under lamps and trays and bowls, under everything. And Saturday, I was told, they would cook.

"We don't wanna swim today, Dad," Cassie said.

I had scrambled them eggs and toasted about half a loaf of white bread so the provisions wouldn't seem so paltry. Sat three flavors of jelly on the table. Got up early to claim the kitchen before Juanita had the chance to. She ate my eggs, too, but only after adding about five different spices and seasonings.

"I thought we could all go to the pool this time, though. Or the ocean? Don't you want to spend a day on the beach? I'll make cheese sandwiches and we'll stop and get Capri Suns."

"We gotta cook," Tecia said.

Both girls looked at me. Juanita didn't, just kept smacking her eggs around in her mouth.

"We gotta cook for the week," Cassie said. "We got enough stuff to make a bunch of different meals."

"Gotta cook in the kocina, Dad," Tecia said. "That means kitchen."

And so I went for a run while the women of the house seized the kocina. I had hoped that going back to work would invigorate me, but so far this had not been the case. Running eventually made me tired, but for the actual time my feet pounded the pavement I forgot what it meant to be weary.

The girls served a shrimp and rice and vegetable dish for dinner; I forget what they called it. We ate in silence, Juanita, the girls, and I, I imagine because we were all exhausted. Cassie ate with her head tipped in her hand, which was propped up by her right elbow on the table. Tecia did the exact same thing, only with her left elbow, and so, of course, their heads were almost touching—hair definitely touching. Juanita and I sat at the ends of the table; I squinted and tried to see her daughter in her, tried to see Maria at the dinner table with me. There was no avoiding it. I wondered if this was how she would've turned out. Would Maria have ever chosen flowery tunics and long, dark skirts? Would she have spent her Saturdays cooking? Will my daughters, now? Forever and ever? I

couldn't really imagine any of it, and so I tried to start a conversation, asking Cassie if she had ever wanted to play the piano.

"Mom played the piano," she said.

I noticed an ache in the back of my neck. "I don't think that's true, is it, Cassie."

She popped a shrimp in her mouth. "Dad, our Abwelita has been telling us a lot about our mom while you're on your boat all day long."

"It's called work, Cass. Work. Now do you want to take piano lessons or not?"

When Monday rolled around I brought Cassie to work with me. My job was to stand at the helm and take a group of about seventy-five tourists through the San Juan Islands, then drop them off at Victoria, BC for the afternoon. I would then bring the overnight group back with me. The trip there usually took about three and a half hours, while the returning trip took an hour less. I explained all this to Cass on our drive to the tiny port town of Bellingham, WA. I guess she never really knew exactly what my job entailed. The second she stepped foot on the boat she was off—zipping around the perimeter, up and down the upper deck, testing out the flusher in the bathroom, ordering a soda at the bar. After we left the dock, though, she stationed herself at the bow, slipping her tiny body into that tiny angle at the front-most part of the boat where the two

sides converge. I could see it from my window. She held onto the railing, her neck craned towards the sky, her mouth open at its widest for the ocean's salt kicking up into the air. At the end of the day, as we were docking, she burst into my cabin and asked, with sea-whipped hair and an extra-tanned face, when I would teach her to drive a boat.

Cassie convinced Tecia to come to work with me the next day. Her reaction was a little different. She didn't ask much about the boat on the drive to Bellingham. Once she stepped foot on the boat she strolled around the perimeter, then perched next to the railing at the very back of the boat, above the wake. Before we were about to set out I checked up on her. She seemed bored, like she was about to doze off, so I told her she had a very serious job to do. There was a rope attached to the back right side of the boat that she needed to hold onto because it had a tendency, what with the fierce ocean winds, to fly out into the water. Then we had to send the guy at the bar overboard to get it. And sometimes he didn't come back. (After seeing her lack of response, I felt foolish adding the last part.) Whether she bought this or not, she agreed to guard the rope, seemed to believe it was important to me.

The trip started out fine. I got to point out a pod of whales to the passengers. They all rushed to the front of the boat when I made the announcement over the loudspeaker, and even though it was really far away

they believed with all of their little tourist hearts that they were seeing them. The sky was overcast and the ocean itself looked like a wet black blubber that day. I realized after the group had dispersed that I hadn't seen Tecia, and she loved animals. I had another crewmate take the helm and I headed to the back of the boat. She was absent from her station. The rope hung over the edge of the boat and dragged in the water. I cursed God and prayed to him under my breath over and over as I ran around the boat, searching the bathroom and the top deck and behind the bar. I would save Tecia, I vowed, from sinking to the bottom of the ocean. If I had to choose I'd choose her.

I finally found her scrunched up in the compartment where half the lifejackets were stowed. After yanking the door up I caught my breath, relieved that it was a joke just like it always was with them.

"Tecia, damn it, you scared me," I said, out of breath.

She just looked at me with a brow too furrowed for a seven year old.

"Oh well. I caught you. I caught the joke."

"What joke?" she said. And then she asked me to slide the door back down.

Juanita and Cassie had dinner ready for us when we got home. Some sort of raw pork-filled pastry and some greens, which I hoarded. When I asked

Cassie how long they'd cooked the pork she said she didn't remember. I asked her if she was sure they had even put it in the oven and she said, "Well, duh."

I set my fork down.

"Have some Aceparanza, Dad," Tecia said.

"Some what?"

"Aceparanza," Tecia repeated.

"OK, where is it? Is *that* cooked?"

"It's not a food, Dad," she said.

I looked at her.

"Aceparanza," Cassie said for her sister. "It's Spanish. It means hope."

I looked at Tecia, who didn't seem to disagree with her sister. Hope. See, I thought I could go around and label all the stuff in the house to learn Spanish if I really wanted to: trashcan, faucet, garage, stairs. I figured I could learn Spanish that way—through my own regular day-to-day living. But how could I stick a label on an idea, and how could I find ideas around the house?

I got up from the table, dropped my plate in the sink, and dialed Carmen. Got her machine. "Carmen, I know you're there."

All three ladies at the table watched me, my arm outstretched, gripping the counter, the phone mashed into my face.

"Carmen! Don't mess around with me!"

Cassie stared at me, chewing with her mouth open.

“What does Aceparanta mean?”

“Aceparanza, Dad. *Zaaaa.*”

“*Zaaaa.*” Juanita made the sound.

“Aceparanza,” I repeated into the phone.

Carmen clicked on. “Hope,” she said.

That night I couldn’t fall asleep. I’d gone upstairs around 8:30, leaving Juanita and the girls to play in their little house. I heard them for at least two hours, and I didn’t really want to stay in bed—I wanted a run—but didn’t know how to come back downstairs and pass them after seeming asleep, seeming content to be alone in my bedroom. And so I listened as they rummaged around and giggled and squealed and opened and shut their little door. When the commotion had died down for a long enough time that I could safely assume they’d gone to bed, I got up and went down.

The box house was still upside-down, so I flipped it right side-up. It felt heavier. The whole thing *was* bricked. They must’ve soaked a gallon of paint into the cardboard. I opened the door and crawled inside. I found that if I curled up into a tight ball on my side—the only way I could both fit my entire frame into the house and lay down—I could feel a deep, deep stretch in my

spine, which had been compressing over the past three months. I closed my eyes.

The Honda, as one could imagine, was trashed by the first leg of our trip. Maria, I was learning, was a mess. She tossed her wrappers and bags from snacks and meals in the backseat. Cheetos crumbs had been ground into the upholstery of the front seats. Orange soda stickies covered the dash and cup-holders. I pulled over in the middle of nowhere in the middle of Texas because she needed to pee and I needed to unload the car. It was getting to me. Parking right next to a dumpster made it easy—I just flung crap over my shoulder, thinking I would be about a quarter done by the time she returned from the rest stop bathroom. I ended up having completely finished my task when I spotted her hurrying back. When she got to the car she asked me for fifty cents.

“What took you so long?” I asked, digging in my pocket.

“I had to go to the bathroom, Ray.”

“Uh, yeah, I know, but it took you twenty minutes.”

“Long line. That’s the problem with women’s restrooms. You men just don’t understand.”

The parking lot was empty except for trucks.

“Plus,” she said, “it took me a long time at the vending machine to decide what I want.”

A man meandering around the parking lot seemed to be watching us. I leered at him but he didn’t turn away.

“Now you know? Now you know exactly what you want?”

“Yep.”

“What?”

“Why’s it matter? I’m gonna go get it and then you’ll see.”

“Why do you have to do everything for the shock value?”

She looked at me like she didn’t understand what I meant. I didn’t know exactly what I meant, either.

“Fritos, goddamnit! I’m gonna buy some Fritos! Now do I have your blessed permission or what?”

I handed her the quarters and she left the car. If she doesn’t come back with Fritos, I thought, it will mean the machine doesn’t have Fritos. It will mean she didn’t spend time at the machine, and then I will know everything. I will leave her in this very parking lot.

She came back with Fritos, though, and so we continued. She flipped the radio off, and I noticed her wedding band was missing. I said nothing.

Minutes later, she turned to me and shouted, "Ray! You threw all the bags out!"

"Yeah, I threw all your crap out."

"But my wedding band!"

"What about your wedding band?"

"I had it wrapped in Ding Dong cellophane and tucked inside a Doritos bag."

"What? You—why?"

"We gotta turn back."

"Why would you do that?"

"I dunno, I just, I just did. Why would you throw it away?" she said.

"Why wouldn't I if it was in a bag of chips?"

She started laughing. Laughed for a good minute, for a good mile and a half at the speed I was driving, then pulled her wedding ring out of her jean cut-offs. "Gotcha," she whispered, shoving the ring in my face. "Gotcha."

I woke up inside the house. My eyes adjusted to its own special lighting. Someone, it could've only been Juanita, had painted a fireplace on one of the walls with a roaring orange fire. A long candelabra rested on top of the mantle, each candle lit with a tiny white flame. Crown molding with intricate scalloped

edges divided the vertical from the horizontal. I'd slept on a tasseled rug woven with blues and purples which must've seemed like a flying magic carpet to the girls when they sat in the inverted house with their Abwelita. Someone had stapled unfolded paper napkins over the windows as curtains to keep the neighbors from peeping in. One picture hung on the wall—a 30-something woman with dark hair and dark eyes, a CoverGirl magazine ad. An elaborately carved wooden frame had been painted around it, complete with shadows and antiquing. I wondered how long she had been there, in this house, in my house. I stood up. I stepped out.

I carried the house down Farmham Ln. so as not to wake the neighbors, but dragged it the rest of the way. The grass was wet, so it slid pretty smoothly through the yards. At one point I picked my pace up into a jog and let the house bounce up and down with me but I could only sustain that speed for about a mile. The cross over from pavement to sand felt right, and it felt right that the beach was completely deserted; it felt right that the sand was colder than ever; it felt right that the moon was dim, sleeping, so that nobody except Maria would see what I would do. When I descended down the beach the house picked up sand so that I had to stop and dump it once, and that's when I looked in it one last time before sending it out into the ocean.

What I saw when I looked inside was an ornately-framed Maria, upside-down, smiling with lip-sticked lips and no hint of mystery in her eyes. A new Maria, gazing straight ahead at a cardboard wall, with a brain empty of desires and memories and want—with no dimension or curves or depth or texture.

What I saw as the house rode the waves was a house full of Maria, and what I heard was the question ‘Who would you save, Raymond? If Maria were trapped in a sinking box, who would you save? If Maria were, for once, too empty to be buoyant, and if you had two strong arms, and, for once, a deeper kind of strength—who would you save?’

The house collapsed in the seawater and the tide kept drawing it in and kicking it back onto shore, each time moving it down the coast a few feet. I collapsed on the sand, woke up with the sunrise, and found my way back home.

The girls were at the table with their grandmother. It was covered with food—pancakes, a mix of fried potatoes, bell peppers, and onions, along with a few poached eggs, biscuits, honey and jellies. I sat myself at the table—they had set a place for me—and waited. Neither Cassie nor Tecia ate a bite; they just stared at each other and at their Abwelita, who was eating so fast she had a little bits of egg stuck to her chin.

“Dad,” Cassie said.

I turned to look at her and wondered how tired my face appeared.

"Have you seen our house?"

I stared and pondered what in the hell I would tell them. The girls whispered back and forth for a minute in each other's ears, then sat silent for another minute.

"Dad, Abwelita took our house," Cassie blurted.

"Hmm," I said, and spooned an egg onto my plate. "Why do you say that?"

"She was the last one we saw with it because last night she was hanging the curtains when me and Teesh went to bed and you were running this morning so she must've just stolen it while you were gone and I don't know why but she's kinda weird Dad and—I don't know," Cassie said.

"Hmm." I swallowed my egg whole and snagged a pancake. "Teesh, what's your say in all of this?"

Tecia rubbed her eyes and put her head down on the table. "I think Grandma is weird," she said.

"OK. Well we all agree. I'll get you another box to decorate, OK? I'll get a new fridge. It'll be even bigger."

"But what if Grandma takes it?" Cassie asked.

"After she's gone you won't have to worry about the house disappearing." I ran the idea by them.

"She's leaving?" Cassie asked.

I nodded.

"Dad, can we have a tree house instead?" Tacia asked.

They looked at each other with wide eyes, forgetting Abwelita, maybe even forgetting a little Spanish, then looked at me.

I would give them their tree house.

Up With Family

I don't totally regret flying into the city to fly out with my family until we're in the long corridor attached to Newark—all twenty of us filing into the same 737. United has these posters of happy travelers from places like Fiji and Nepal plastered on the thin walls that protect us from the miles and miles of bare concrete tarmac. We step over the threshold and into the plane, from a small space to a smaller space.

"Row 16," my mother says.

I say nothing.

"Row 16, Sara," she repeats, reaching beyond me with her pointy index finger. I pivot halfway around toward her, raise my eyebrows and tilt my head

at the slow-moving line in front of me, as if to ask where do you want me to go? She puts her arm down, turns her back to me, and says something to my father. He's silent but he's breathing—his nose whistles.

As we take our seats, the flight attendants announce that it's time to review emergency procedures. They stand at four different points in the plane, but the one in the front of coach who refers to herself as Miss Mandy does the talking, and everyone watches her. She's wearing two small pearl earrings in each ear, a lifeless navy blue scarf and pantyhose that make her legs look just a shade or two darker than her face.

"We don't expect this," Miss Mandy says, "but in the case of a sudden drop in cabin pressure, oxygen masks will release from up above you." She dangles one above my Uncle Mathis' shiny head. He seems extra attentive, proud to be the example passenger. She stretches the mask down towards his face. "Pull the mask down and secure it over your mouth and nose. Mothers, be sure to secure your own mask before helping your little ones." The cord slips from her fingers and snaps Uncle Mathis in the face. Miss Mandy's face shows no sign of remorse and my uncle sticks his head in the aisle and looks with shock back at the entire plane to make sure everyone saw.

"He probably touched Miss Mandy's thigh," Dad mumbles.

Mom gives him a look.

“Now in the case of a water emergency, your seat may be used as a flotation device. Just hold it against your chest until rescue,” she says.

“How do you get the damn thing detached?” Uncle Mathis asks loudly while hovering over his seat, yanking at the foam cushion.

“Take a moment to locate all four emergency exits on the aircraft,” she continues.

He looks back down the aisle again. His puzzled face asks, can you believe this broad?

I reach for the flight menu while Miss Mandy finishes her routine and I start thinking about what to order. Dad grabs the Air Mail Gadgets and Gizmos Magazine. Mom looks over my shoulder and reads little snippets aloud. I’m debating—tomato juice or orange soda. Something vibrant. It’s just that kind of day. Of course it all depends on what Mom orders, another thing I’m uncertain about. Will she get a Bloody Mary or will she ask for an unopened bottle of water? Will it depend on which spring the water came from? If she goes with the Bloody Mary, I’ll definitely go with the orange soda.

Right after the flight attendant finishes, the pilot’s microphone clicks and any leftover airplane chatter dies down. The Captain coughs, announces we’re flying to San Francisco, then tells us to “sit back, relax, and enjoy.” The flight attendants scurry to secure themselves in their little jump seats and the airplane

backs up, turns ninety degrees, and hurtles us down the runway. A roar fills my ears and the only other thing I can hear as Flight 1316 lifts into the air, as gravity pulls my heart against my spine, is my own deep breathing.

We're flying over where I used to live, and once in a while it changes something for me, in me. Sometimes if you see the same stupid streets and buildings day in and day out, it helps to change the velocity at which you see them. Looking down on your world all carved up by roads and bisected by rivers that look as traceable as wrist veins can shift something inside you when you get back to it, can make your world new again, if only for a moment. Every Christmas and every Easter, I fly home to my family then jet out of my hometown with a bad taste in my mouth, only to find that at 40,000 feet, it isn't nearly as jam-packed with CapeCis and LaMoras. The first few times I flew back to my Midwestern college, leaving the East Coast on bad terms, I returned home on the soonest flight back, gave every unworthy part of New Jersey a second chance. It took me a year to be able to fully separate myself from my home, my family. By the second and third year, I left school only for these family holidays, opting to spend my summers on campus working in the financial aid office. I peer down on the earth, my fingers smudging the glass, while Mom taps her acrylic French manicure on her armrests. She doesn't even care what's outside

the plane or her brain full of numbers. She could climb Mount Everest with zero desire to look down.

"I know what to do! I've been in a jillion weddings." My baby cousin, Samantha, in the seat directly in front of me, says this to her own mother, who's briefing her on what it means to be a flower girl. Her mother, the grown-up, uses United Airlines honey-roasted peanuts as a visual aid, arranging them on Samantha's tray table.

"Picture this, Honey," she says, trying to get her daughter to look at the food in front of her face and to not think about stuffing them into her mouth; to not think about flicking the nuts on the backs of heads or cramming them between cushions.

Miss Mandy comes to us with her notepad in hand. Dad wakes up to order himself a Coke. Mom orders a Bloody Mary.

"See? Here is the aisle, and here are all the people. Here is Aunt Patti and here is Aunt Maria."

"Aunt Patti is a peanut?"

Aunt Patti is a peanut.

Mom pulls her briefcase up onto her lap, flips it open, unzips her purse and pays the flight attendant six bucks.

"Aunt Maria is a peanut?"

Aunt Maria is a peanut.

Mom crams her purse back inside.

Evidently we are all peanuts, because Samantha asks for and receives confirmation for every family member—all the aunts and uncles, all the first, second, and third cousins. We are all flying to second cousin Jaime's California wedding—Baby Samantha, her mother Michaela, Uncle Mathis, and around fifteen more, all scattered throughout the plane. All the New Jerseys are on this flight except for Uncle Anthony and his family, who got left behind in the airport. Overbooking. My father said it had to be intentional. It's been so long since I've attended one of these functions that I don't always have a clue, while scoping out the passengers, who's a relative and who's a true stranger. It's my mother's side of the family, and since she scored her white-collar job several years ago, she doesn't usually take family reunions, weddings or funerals seriously, as they don't fit well enough into her schedule. Normally she sends my dad to these functions along with a well-rehearsed explanation of why she just couldn't possibly have made it. Every once in a while, maybe twice a year or so, she'll actually haul herself to one, and in this case, haul me along with her.

Thankfully, I managed to snag a window-seat close to the front, but my mom managed to snag the only seat next to me, so I am stuck between a rock and a 40,000-foot fall to my death. I brought a backpack full of anthropology-major

homework, but I'll be lucky to get to any of it on the flight. My mom likes to talk, and my father in the seat on the other side of her has been fast asleep since page 33 of Gizmos.

"It should be any minute now, Sara," she tells me. She has been counting down to when the little overhead seatbelt light turns off.

"Do you have to pee?" I ask.

She shakes her head. Of course not. She just wants to be able to shift around, to leap up and pirouette, should she have the urge. She's gotten in trouble several times on the express flight from NY to DC because nobody is allowed up on that 40-minute trip for security purposes. She pushes things, and I guess to her fellow passengers on those flights she's a rebel, but what I know that they don't is that unnecessary toilet trips are the closest she gets to the edge.

"Are you hungry?"

I shake my head. My mother has nine hundred deli sandwiches in her briefcase, more than enough for everyone. Smoked Havarti cheese and spinach on whole wheat; I know because she had me pick them up the day I flew in. These are sandwiches no one asked her to bring because no one in my family would want to eat them. I don't remind her that I am vegan because I don't want to get in a debate about protein on a plane full of strangers. The overhead light

dings and I check my mom's lap. She has already unfastened her seatbelt. I roll my eyes while they're closed and turn towards the window.

Part of why I agreed to take time off from school and go to the wedding is that I've been needing to tell my parents something. Anthropology isn't working. Art didn't work my first year of college. Social services didn't work my second. And anthropology isn't working now, no matter how much it should. What's left, my mother will ask. Math is all that's left for you, Sara, she will say. Viewing this complex world in terms of black and white, black and red, numbers and bottom lines, it's what you're destined to be good at. And she will be right.

Mom taps on my shoulder. "Are you sure?" she asks, pointing at me with her sandwich triangle. I nod and turn back to the window, but she taps me again.

"They've re-opened that deli, that Sal's Deli on the corner," she says.

"The one with the infestation?" I ask.

"Mm hmm. Can you believe that? I am going to write a letter."

Oh, God. "To who?"

She thinks. "I am going to write a slew of letters. It just isn't right. It's a bunch of crapola, that's what it is."

I look back out the window for a while but I can feel her stare on my neck. What difference would writing a letter make? Why in God's name does it even matter? If she doesn't like it then she doesn't have to eat there. No one appointed her head of the neighborhood.

"You know, it isn't called Sal's Deli," I say without turning from the window. "It's called the Mistro."

"Sal is the name of the gentleman who owns it," she says.

"Yeah, Mom, but the name of the place is Mistro Deli."

She looks straight ahead.

Dad lets out a snort in his sleep.

"I'm just saying, so you can get it right in all those letters," I say.

"Oh don't you worry," she says after a pause. "They will know what I am talking about. They will know exactly."

And I have no doubt they will.

She rattles on about how things are going at work; how she saved the day when some lower accountant miscalculated some large and important figure—I don't know, it's hard to follow, hard to pay attention to anything but the screech in her voice, how she draws certain words out, passes judgement on them. After a while I really wish I'd have at least tried to find another seat. Could've struck a

deal with Uncle Mathis. You sit next to Mom and I'll take all abuse Miss Mandy doles out.

The deepest I ever got into her investment banker world was when we were at a restaurant eating a pasta dinner, my mother and I, with seven of her closest coworkers. We sat with our perfect postures at a table near a window, and though the restaurant considered murkiness and dimness key elements of its ambiance, they wore me out. I got tired of straining to see these people, these accountants and investment bankers, who probably did belong in shadows if we were going to be honest about it. That evening I was stuck at a table with my mother but I stared out into places I had never been—emptier, quieter places where people took time to breathe. Part of me got up and left, never looking back. The rest of me stayed behind as a witness to the following: the sun melted and oozed into itself like a box of Crayolas fallen in the oven—a sunset that displayed more of an urgency than a grace—and nobody else at the table even bothered to look.

“As of 8 AM this morning your father and I aren't speaking,” she says almost loud enough to wake him up, then looks over to see if she has. The information doesn't mean much to me because they argue all the time, and since she's so busy, even when they are talking, they aren't. She pauses, waiting for me to want to know more, but I just don't. What I want so acutely at this

moment is physical, substantial space between her and me that I've come to need.

"I can't believe he dragged me to this," she says, reaching in her purse for some spearmint gum. She still carries the same soft patchwork bag around that my dad gave her while they were hippies, falling fast in love. It's as grungy as you would expect, and a source of security for her. She keeps it in her Italian leather attaché case—something else that's always bothered me, that she stuffs it in there. It smells like sandalwood incense and marijuana and free love, the life that she has left behind.

I pull a pile of homework and graded quizzes out of my backpack and set them on my lap, waiting for the motivation to get started. I look back outside and Mom quiets down. There's a large body of water under us—still, like a leech-shaped blue sticker. I stare into it to try and find currents, to familiarize my eyes with its currents—to gain assurance that it is water.

"What is *this*?"

I look at my mom. She's pointing at a circled 54 at the top of one of my papers.

"What *is* this?"

"God, Mom, it's just homework."

It's my mid-term.

"Let me see." She tries to pull it out of my stack.

"Hey Mom, you know what I've been wanting to talk to you about?" I say to distract her, debating whether to get into something in such an enclosed area, with so little oxygen. I place her hand back on her armrest.

"What, Sara?" she asks, eager to answer a question, to know something I don't.

I look outside, then at her, then outside, then at her, then outside.

"Why do you still use that purse?"

"Is that really the question you want to ask right now? I believe I should be asking the questions right now."

"C'mon, Mom, just answer. Is it that hard of a question?"

She thinks for a moment. I think too. About the question.

"Your father gave me that purse when we had just started dating. He bought it at a—"

"Mom," I interrupt. "I know where it came from. I'm asking why you haven't even considered a new purse in all these years."

"You know your father and I have been together twenty-seven years," she says. I wait a few moments before I realize she thinks this somehow answers my question. She expects the statement to stand on its own and have as much of an impact as showing me a scar from a kindergarten recess mishap might have.

“Actually, twenty-eight if you count the time before we got married. Did I ever tell you how your father proposed to me? We were at his mother’s house, and—”

“Mom, just answer the question. Why do you still use that purse?” I ask again, my voice lower, the words slower. The way I ask it surprises me, tells me that I really do need an answer.

“It’s special to me,” she says. “And it means a lot to your father that I cherish my gift so much.”

“You cherish it?”

“Did you not hear what I just said? I cherish it.”

“You cherish it. Mom, you cram it in your briefcase. You’re ashamed of it.”

She glides the tip of her tongue over her front teeth, her upper lip bulging out from left to right. My mother is wordless. She turns away from me and stares straight ahead at the tiny polyester diamonds that adorn all our seats. Her breathing is slow and deep. Her sapphire pendant on its 18K gold herringbone rises and falls, high and low, with her chest. I stare at her profile, her tight black chignon and her over-plucked eyebrows, and I just don’t get it. I rotate back to the window and imagine tumbling out of the plane straight into the sun.

She bends down and yanks her attaché case from the floor, flips it open on her lap and yanks her purse back out. She jumps up and says, “Here. Take it. I’m tired of this,” and throws it into my lap. She buttons her blazer, the transition from Mother to Professional taking place in a matter of seconds, then squeezes past my dad and leaves for the lavatory.

I sit alone for a while. When Miss Mandy comes by with our drinks I perk up. She intentionally brushes my dad’s arm with her hip but he doesn’t move. I have to release both my parents’ tray tables and place their too-full drinks in their cup holders. When Miss Mandy hands me my orange soda I can tell she’s smiling—I hear it in her voice—but when I finally have all the drinks settled I look up at her face and realize she’s not smiling at me, but above me. At the plane in general.

Dad’s ice has almost completely melted into his soda by the time I figure Mom has been gone too long. I put Mom’s drink on my tray table and slither under it to her seat, where I gulp down Dad’s watery Coke, flip his tray table up, and climb over him. Heading back towards the lavatory to retrieve my mother I spot her, sitting next to a bottle-blond lady at the very back of the plane, chatting it up as if nothing has happened. I’m disappointed in myself that I hadn’t thought of this possibility, that I imagined her sad or sulking on the toilet.

I start to turn around and go back to my seat when she catches sight of me. I groan under the rumbling engines and continue on.

“Remember how our generation was raised? I tell you that’s the biggest difference between how our generation was raised and how kids today are raised.”

She glances up at me like a stranger would, like the stranger beside her in the unraveling crocheted shawl does. The exact same not-interested glance from four eyes instead of two.

“We never got the luxury of alone time, did we? After school and so on. We never got the luxury of someone caring about our every move.”

All the stranger does is nod.

I jiggle the lavatory handle. It doesn’t budge. It’s only then I see the red OCCUPIED flag right in front of my face.

“The first time I came alone to an empty house was when it was my own house, paid for with my and Bobby’s own money. You know, not for nothing . . .”

I can no longer hear my mother, but that’s by choice. I stand outside the lavatory, shifting weight from side to side in an effort to stabilize myself, but the imbalance, it’s not all from being suspended in the sky. I wait.

My mother doesn't reach back and grab my arm, though I am easily within her reach. She doesn't say to this person, hey, let me introduce you to my daughter. I don't know what she does, I don't know what to do, but I wait there until a male flight attendant approaches me. He cocks his head and smiles. He has dimples. I smile back. "Uh," he says. "I'm sorry, Miss, but federal law prohibits the formations of lines inside of the aircraft. You're gonna have to sit down and wait for the occupant to exit."

"But, um," I say. "I'm not a line, I'm one person."

"Look up there." He points at a red light on the front wall of the plane. "When that light turns green, you can try again. OK?"

I stand and stare at this man, thinking about challenging him, until Miss Mandy stands up and starts to approach us from the opposite end of the plane. I shuffle back to my seat.

My father looks like a bird the way he sleeps, with his head tucked down and his chin nowhere to be found. His dark hair is ruffled into a loose triangle like the feathers on the top of a mad blue jay's head. I really want to smooth it down because I'm worried like I often am that people might laugh at him. There's no doubt my mother would also want to fix it if she saw it, however, so I leave it be.

Outside, squares of farmland unfold below us. We are flying out west, where the states and sections of land are more geometrical, where the people are more sensible. My family members on the West Coast certainly believe that they have figured something out that the rest of us have not. My Great Uncle Jimmy always tries to brainwash all the younger kids in the family. I can remember from a very early age, him telling me that the only way to be in New Jersey is by accident. He's given up on me, but I see him whispering to my younger cousins when their parents aren't around and I watch him lavish them with Californian tourist toys in hopes of a conversion. My mother always manages to shut him down, has no problem standing up for where she's from, who she is.

I grab her rectangular quilt bag up off the cushion and unzip. I slip my hand inside, afraid at first to touch anything. My hand just hovers. A jerk in the air bumps it against something inside, and so I begin pulling pieces of my mother out one by one. Tube of lipstick. Paperback. To Do List. Lancôme freesia body butter. Parking pass. Leather gum case. Bottle cap for a free Diet Coke. Another To Do list. Two bobby pins linked together. Key chain. I gather everything in my lap except the piece of sugar-free hard candy stuck in an inside corner. I realize I haven't been in her bag since I was a little girl with that child's need to chomp and I would ask for gum all the time. No matter where we were she would toss her bag to me and I would dig in. It was one of the many little

games we played before she became a grown-up. We'd be on the subway or in a store and I'd shout, "Can I have a piece of gum!" and she'd toss her purse up in the air, over the heads of strangers, for me to catch and have all I wanted. Sometimes she wouldn't even ask for it back until the next day.

In my new mother's purse I expected to find a wallet, a calculator, travelers checks, things of that nature—but I emptied it all, save for the candy, and found none of the above. I cradle the junk in my lap until my inner thighs start to quiver and burn, then return everything back where it belongs, but only after dipping in the jar of body butter and getting myself a stick of spearmint. Opening the gum case, I find yet another something that hasn't changed after all these years: she still tears the sticks, chewing only half a piece at a time. I pop a full stick into my mouth and for a second it tastes like perfume. I drop the bag back in her seat. The only thing I haven't replaced is the book, which I keep on my lap for a while until I'm bored enough to look at it.

It's an Oprah book. I imagine hundreds lining any given used bookstore shelf, and thousands listed at Internet auction sites. I imagine a jumbo display burying me when I enter my next Barnes and Noble. Turning the first couple of pages I find an epigraph, which reads: "Beyond myself / Somewhere / I wait for my arrival." Someone else's genius, it doesn't belong in an Oprah book and it might not belong in my hands, but I hold it there and gaze outside.

The world has transformed itself below my fellow passengers and me but I don't think anyone's noticed. The Rocky Mountains can sneak up on you. Somehow, from the airplane, they look larger. Altitude trivializes everything else—houses, rivers, plots of land—but it gives you the ability to see mountains with God's eyes. For a moment you understand His big picture, whether you're supposed to or not. The snow blanketing all the acute angles is pristine and white, like there are places on the earth even our Creator doesn't want us to touch. The universe is unraveling, becoming more and more chaotic, but it looks like the mountains are still mounting. Are they? I wish Dad were awake so I could ask him. He knows these kinds of geological things.

I flip through the book to find where she's at in her reading. Page 92. The corner is dog-eared but she's also stuck a 4 x 6" photo in as a bookmark. It's a picture of my first Halloween. I've seen it before. I flip it over to see if there's any meaningful handwriting on the back, but all I find is a sticky yellow film. She's peeled it from the photo album. Every day she opens her book to my face.

In the picture my mother is holding me and we're dressed as gypsies. Draped in deep indigos and blues, we're wearing the colors of the galaxy. She has beads and bells in her hair and I have ribbons wrapped around my bald head. She looks like I do now. We have the same pale lips and pudgy cheeks.

It's like I am there in the photo, holding myself up. Our gypsy faces touch, and we're looking the camera straight in its eye.

My dad has, at some point, woken up. "Where's your mother?"

"Talking."

He nods once and starts smoothing the wrinkles out of his khakis. After several minutes of silence I lean over and show him the picture. He squints at it as if he hasn't seen the people in it for a long time. "Ah, yes. My two little gypsies," he says, grinning.

"Were you a gypsy too that Halloween?"

He shakes his head.

"What were you then? Why aren't you in the photo?"

"I'm the one who took it," he says. "And I didn't dress up that year, anyway. Your mother wanted you all to herself that night." After a long pause he continues. "She said she needed to introduce you to the city. The river. All those lights."

Neither of us takes our eyes off the photo as my dad shares certain random memories that it conjures up, up in the sky like we are. How they used to eat breakfast for dinner more often than dinner for dinner. How he scarfed down three bowls of cereal that night—first Grape-Nuts, then Raisin Bran, then Lucky Charms. How right after the photo was taken my mom and I disappeared

into the night, and didn't come back home to him until early the next morning.

"She loved to dance," he says, and shrugs.

After looking at it for a bit longer he hands it back to me. I replace the bookmark, careful to put it back exactly how I found it. I proceed to slip the bag back into her briefcase. While I'm in there I snag a sandwich to open up on my lap, to poke at so she can see I still need her; still need her sandwiches, at least.

A little while later the pilot turns the seatbelt light on. Passengers sit up and gather their trash and secure their tray tables and fasten their belts. My dad does it. I do it too, without thinking. Michaela struggles to buckle Sam up in front of us. Sam, who's kneeling sideways in her seat, staring out the window at the world we're about to reenter. We are all to return to our original seats, the flight attendant announces twice through the speakers, and I know who she's talking to.

Rubberbanding

The first day I played with Rachel she showed up at my house in her bathing suit. When the sun passed behind a cloud we stared into it. The small plastic pool filled up very slowly but it was important to be in it to help it keep its form, so we held it up with our backs and let the cold hose water give our legs goosebumps. My mom told us we could fill it to the top of the cartoon animal design on the outside, no higher, because our splishing and spashing around would kill the grass. The sun couldn't seem to make up its mind whether to come out into the blue sky or to hide. I'd learned about eclipses on the last day of school and about the danger of looking into the sun even when nature dims it.

After the pool filled up we swam around in circles, made a whirlpool, then let it all settle.

The first time I ever saw the inside of Rachel's house was after we spent one of our mornings in that pool. "Are you hungry?" I asked.

Rachel dunked her head back to get her wet hair off her face, wiped her eyes, and said, "Yeah, let's go get something to eat." We put our clothes on over our swimsuits and walked down to her house, which was about five houses down.

"Don't even breathe," Rachel whispered her instructions as she slipped inside her house. Loose newspaper blew around a bit inside, barely lifting off the ground, hovering. I stood as still as I could, holding the screen door about a foot open and peering inside at her tiptoeing across the kitchen. She lifted her leg to the counter, smearing her tanned thigh on the gold-flecked Formica, and hoisted herself up like a gymnast on a balance beam. Standing on her bare feet, she reached deep into the top cabinet and pulled out our lunch. She held it for a second but her grip on the shiny-labeled can must've been too sweaty, too eager, because she dropped all 15 ½ ounces. It clunked on the counter then rolled across the filthy linoleum. She whipped around, shot me a nasty look, and motioned for me to *Shh!* I waited nervously because Rachel's parents were strange. They acted like they didn't want her, and especially not in their house.

Rachel had told me that they used to live in Mexico and surf everyday before she was born, so I understood why they'd be a little mad at her all the time.

She crouched down and slid off the counter, picked up the can, and looked down the hall. Her parents must not have heard it fall because she got into the silverware drawer, took one last glance down the hallway, then squeezed her scrawny self past the screen door back out into the sun. I closed the door as slowly as I could but it still creaked. We dashed out to where her yard ended and collapsed into the tender grass just before the gravel road.

"Shit, I thought I heard something," she said as she pulled her can opener from a back pocket. It was actually a bottle opener. I offered to go home and get a can opener, and she snapped back that *was* a can-opener, for my information. I let it go because I understood that she knew it wasn't, even if she didn't admit it. Rachel stabbed two triangles into the top of the can—one on each side, one for each of us. She flung the opener in the air, fell back in the grass, and drank her spaghetti. She took a long turn but I didn't mind because I wasn't really all that hungry. I watched her nurse on the can and noticed a dent in it that may or may not have been from the drop. Even though damaged cans were discounted half price at Safeway, my mom never bought them because she said that even little dents released toxins into the food that would work their way into our bloodstreams. Rachel's mom probably didn't worry about those

kinds of things. I took my turn, coaxed the tiny rings of preserved pasta through an even tinier opening.

Rachel squirmed in the sunlight next to a pile of furniture parts left for the garbage man to pick up. Her family kept setting junk out even though nobody would take it, not even the trash truck. Every time I rode by with my mom she would make a comment about how peculiar it was, how peculiar. I wasn't sure where the stuff came from because the inside of their house seemed bare, like ghosts were living there. The patch of weeds underneath the heap was overgrown but so was the whole yard, really. The blades of grass had grown so tall that the weight at their tips tilted them back toward the earth in delicate arcs. I twisted chunks of green until they got slimy and then smelled my fingers. Not only had Rachel's parents been putting more and more out for the trash truck, they had started stacking cardboard boxes against the side of the house for what reason, I wasn't sure. I counted them from my spot in the grass by the road. To my right, a rain-soaked mattress molded on a rotting bed frame, and to my left the sun lit the blond hair on Rachel's legs like fiber optics.

"Where did all this stuff come from?" I asked.

"What stuff?"

I pointed at the heap.

"This old junk? The basement. Our basement isn't like yours probably is, it's crammed full of junk from the last people that used to live here before us," she said, scratching the backs of her thighs. "Do you wanna go exploring it?"

"Your basement? Yeah, but we're not allowed, are we?"

"Well then do you wanna go play in *your* basement?"

"Yeah, but not right now," I said, because I spotted the mailman rounding the corner onto our road. "Rachel! There he is!" I poked her in the side of her belly and she slapped my hand away.

"I have to pee. You wait here," she commanded as she leapt up, and then ran around to the backyard bushes. I loved watching her run. She looked like a sprite with some important mission, like Tinkerbell but much tougher. I could see the muscles in her legs and lower back flex to get her places before anyone else and she soared in every step.

I took one last swig of Spaghetti-O's, chunked the can into a shrub, and tucked my face into my shirt to wipe the orange off my mouth.

"Hi Julia," he mumbled as he walked past me.

"Hi Mr. Simmons," I chirped back as I followed him to Rachel's mailbox. Mr. Simmons was a bald man who didn't look old enough to be naturally bald but who wore glasses that really old people wear. Very confusing. He seemed to give us more of what we wanted the more polite we were.

"How are you today, Mr. Simmons?" I asked him. He stopped and looked at me.

"Just fine, Julia," he said, then looked over my head. "How are you, Rachel?" Rachel had snuck up behind me.

"I'm good. Got any rubberbands?" She cupped her hands open before he even responded. Rachel had taught me that mailmen love to give away rubberbands, so whenever we spotted him from the pool at my house we ran around front to ask for some. He looked a little confused that we weren't at my house, where we usually were.

"Yeah. Got any rubberbands for us today?" I chimed in.

"I don't know girls. Let me see." He dug in his bag like he always did and made different facial expressions like he was touching really interesting things inside, not just bills and more bills. He always exaggerated this part. Rachel and I looked at each other and she rolled her eyes. He must've thought we were six years old and still liked clowns at birthday parties.

"Ah yes. Here we go girls." He pulled his hand back out of his bag with what must've been a hundred rubberbands clenched in his fist. Rachel bounced up and down and her eyes got really big, I'm sure mine did too. Maybe this is why he thought we were six, but we couldn't help it. I held the hem of my tank top up and he dropped the rubberbands into my shirt as Rachel dove down to

snatch up the ones that fell in the grass. He left saying that he would see us tomorrow. Even though he reassured us, I sometimes worried that we would get a new mailman in our neighborhood who wouldn't understand how things worked.

Rachel ran around to the backyard shed and I followed. We slipped inside. "Now what?" I asked. "What do we do with all these, plus the ones at my house?" We had been trying to sell them door-to-door but nobody was buying. We kept them at my house, stored in a pillowcase.

"I don't know," she said. "We could go shoot them at people walking up and down the street."

"Yeah, I don't know," I said. I knew she could get away with that but I would get in trouble. We sat down on our butts. Rachel ran her fingers through the pile of bands. I picked up a band and snapped it lightly against the side of my foot. "I know!" she said. "Watch."

I watched as she held one band in each hand then looped them together, pulling each end through the other. Again. Laid one on top of the other then pulled both ends on through, forming a chain of rubberbands, each connected to the next one with a small, loopy knot. A ray of light shone through the shed's opening, reflecting off the dust, making it glitter above us. I picked up two rubberbands and tried it myself, looping them together then pulling them taught.

I showed Rachel to see if she approved. “Then you add a third, a fourth, a fifth,” she said, “until you run out. Make a chain. That’s the game.”

That was the game. We each kept our own individual chains in her shed. It was the easiest place to work. We poked holes with a screwdriver in the aluminum walls for light, and we sat in the dirt since it didn't have a floor. When it rained we laid out a blue tarp Rachel's dad kept squished between the metal panels of the shed and a crossbar that probably held the whole thing together. When we pulled that tarp out it just expanded on its own and it grumbled like thunder.

Nearly every single day that summer we collected rubberbands from the mailman so we could loop them together to form our own long stretchy chains. I'm not sure where Rachel learned that mailmen carried such large quantities of rubberbands around—she had lived a lot of places before she joined my fourth grade class a whole six months late. Sometimes, of course, it got hot there in the shed and just as hot outside, but unless we wanted my mother pestering us all afternoon, asking us if we're sure we're not hungry, if we're sure she can't get us anything, we had to buck up and bear it at Rachel's. It was OK by her parents if I came over to play all day everyday but we both had to stay outside and we couldn't run the hose, waste water. Most of the days that's what we did except when Rachel would suggest, despite warnings of my mother's neverending

fussing, that we play at my house. I preferred not to, but every once in a while we'd spend the morning before the mailman came inside my house watching TV or playing a video game that I was tired of before I even met Rachel.

In the middle of a movie at my house she left to use my bathroom then came out smelling like the raspberry body soap my grandma had just given me as a Fourth of July gift. She plopped down on the couch next to me and I told her to her face that she used my special soap, I was so shocked.

"Why would I want to steal some stupid soap?" she asked, spitting her P's in my face. She had a point. I shrugged and almost didn't wipe my cheek. I snuck into the bathroom while she was in the kitchen watching my mother make her a bologna sandwich with mustard, and saw the bar of soap I had decided I would save for a special occasion all sudsy. I told my mother that night and she asked me why didn't I just give Rachel the soap, that maybe Rachel didn't have a grandma to give her such lovely gifts. My mom didn't understand anything.

We spent the next morning just hanging around her front porch waiting for Mr. Simmons. We wove in and out through the boards of wood that jutted out from the partially built deck. Rachel had explained to me that her father was building it, but I knew that skeleton of a deck was leftover from the last family who lived there. She started at one end and I at the other and we raced to see who could get to the exact middle first. It was usually her, but these races didn't

matter nearly as much as the rubberband chains did. The chain-making became more of a contest than anything else in my life had ever been, including the church Christmas pageant and the school's annual spelling bee. We each worked on our own chains everyday and when we finished them for the day we took them out front to measure. We laid them across the yard side-by-side to see whose was longer. Mine was rarely longer; once it was by maybe only four or five rubberbands. It deflated Rachel. She couldn't say a word. While we were double-checking I spotted one of my barrettes buried deep in her hair. I knew I hadn't given it to her as a gift. "I guess I should go," I said, not knowing what else to say. She nodded. We scooped up our chains and took them back to the shed, dropped them in the bucket which hung from a nail near the corner. I stepped out of the shed but Rachel lingered inside, in the darkness, for a moment, just staring at me. On my way around to her front yard I stopped and peeked inside of one of the cardboard boxes against the side of her house. It had mismatched plates and saucers stacked one on top of the other.

There were other kids in our town to play with but most the girls in our grade had started growing boobs or at least wearing bras, which meant that they couldn't run like we could. It also meant that they couldn't do handstands without carefully tucking their tops into their bottoms. Well Rachel and I figured that when you tell a girl to do a handstand and have to wait for her to tuck

everything in, God, never mind. Most of the time they just said they didn't feel like it anyway. Nobody felt like anything that summer besides Rachel and me. We spent it weaving through the railing and throwing rocks high up past telephone wires, not even caring if we knocked one loose.

We were rail racing when my old friend Lizzy rounded the corner onto our road. "Act like you don't see her," I told Rachel. I zipped faster and harder and Rachel must've too because I still didn't win the race.

"Hey," Lizzy said, prancing towards us.

"Oh, hey," Rachel said, out of breath. She stopped.

"Hey," I said. I stopped too. "What's new with you, Lizzy?" I said from behind the railing, trying to sound uninterested.

"A lot. Just about everything. I'm going out with Alex now. We hang out every single day," she said, then averted her eyes to Rachel. "I don't think you know him though, do you?" she asked her.

"I don't know. Is he from California or Texas or Florida?" Rachel said. She had told me that she had lived all these places.

"He's from Nebraska, just like me."

"Oh, well then no," Rachel said.

"That's what I thought," Lizzy said.

"We gotta go, Lizzy, we're busy, so see ya," I said. Lizzy rolled up her jean shorts one more roll then left. Later Rachel asked me about Lizzy, about what our friendship was like. I lied and told her we were never really close, hadn't even ever spent the night together. I ran around back to pee and peeped around again in another box, only to find my white scarf with the zigzag trim that I had been missing for a good month right there with a bunch of Rachel's stuff: a yo-yo, snapped in half, a plastic baggie filled with crayon nubs and several miniature glasses that said the names of states on them. I wondered why her stuff wasn't in her room, and why my stuff was with her stuff. I crammed my scarf in my pocket, stole it back.

When the mailman brought us rubberbands later that day I suggested we make it a rule that if, for some reason, one person couldn't rubberband then nobody could rubberband. In other words, no stealing the rubberbands from one another. Though she seemed to agree it was a good rule, for ten days straight after that Rachel's strand was longer than mine was. Each day her chain grew more and more longer than mine, until the day I laid mine out along the street next to hers only to find she was a good five feet ahead of me. She counted the feet herself and said, "Wow, five feet."

"Yeah right."

She looked up at me. "What do you mean yeah right? You wanna measure yourself?"

"Rachel, how come yours is so long, huh?"

"I won today," she said.

"I know, but why?"

"I've been winning for a long time now. I dunno why. You used to win sometimes too and I never told you you were cheating, did I?"

I thought about cheating, what it meant, if it could mean anything besides just collecting bands on days when I was at piano lessons or home sick.

"Rachel, you've been cheating and you know it's true."

She rolled her chain under the sole of her shoe, back and forth. "I am not," she said, then picked her chain up off the ground and said, "I guess if I'm a cheater then you don't want to play with me, so you might as well just go on home."

I did, and I took my chain with me. From that point on I stopped keeping mine in the shed with hers, brought it with me and took it home with me each and every day. I found a lot more of my stuff in those boxes, too: my package of stationary, my monogrammed hairbrush and a toy mouse that didn't even belong to me, belonged to my cat. It was all crammed in there with things that should've been inside the house, not outside up against it. I couldn't figure

out how she could sneak so much stuff out of my house; maybe she was raised a pickpocket, stealing gold coins and expensive jewelry from strangers. I worried about her sneakiness because I had piano lessons at the Mormon Church every other Tuesday and couldn't work on my chain, had to trust she'd abstain. After a particularly hot day when it was just starting to dusk I said that I had to go home, and she said that she would see me tomorrow.

"I have piano, remember? Don't forget not to get any rubberbands tomorrow. Be fair."

She picked up a pebble and flung it high up in the air. "How can a Baptist take piano lessons from a Mormon Church?"

"Why do you care where I get my lessons?" I responded. She squinted at me, trying to look mean, but I could tell she was thinking about what to say next.

"I don't care. I just don't think it's right," is what she finally came up with.

I asked my mom the next day on our bouncy ride to the church why I took lessons from an old Mormon lady and she said, "Oh Honey, haven't you ever heard of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir? The Mormons know what they're doing." I also asked her if I had to take lessons, if it was really all that important

over summer break. "Is Rachel moving?" she asked me, disregarding my question.

"No."

"Well, what about all those moving boxes? Has she even gotten her teacher assignment yet?"

"No, but that doesn't mean anything," I said. I had gotten mine weeks before—Mrs. Mole.

"I'm just saying, Julia, if it's not happening it's not happening but if it is, you just be prepared for that," she said. I wasn't positive she was still talking about Rachel.

I didn't come right out and accuse Rachel of collecting rubberbands on those piano days without me again, even though I could never seem to catch up. By August we had to measure completely in the road because her yard wasn't big enough. Once we measured and hers stretched out along the road almost half a lawn longer than mine. We stood at the ends of them, staring down at the rubberbands and I thought she was going to start walking heel-to-toe to count how many steps better she was, like she usually did, but instead she reached down and yanked my strand back like my mother did with the vacuum cord and said, "How long will it stretch if we put 'em together, I wonder." She snapped our chains together and I sprinted back to the other end. We each tugged and it

stretched more than halfway down the block. "Shit!" she yelled. "Look how long this is." I nodded my head yes enough for her to see. We held the rubberband chain taut for longer than I expected and it was digging into my fingers, but I didn't let go. Lizzy walked by and said something to me but I didn't respond, didn't care. I squinted at Rachel down at the other end of the block, but she was standing in front of the setting sun and it burned my eyes. Before I spotted her movement I felt the rubberband tension release and then I saw her run straight to me, her face looking serious, her chin tightened up like she had just swallowed something sour. She handed me her end, panting, and said, "Here, I gotta go eat supper. You take it home this time." She darted past. My eyes watered on my walk home, even after the sun sank its whole self into the edge of the world.

I didn't go back the next day. I had piano. But then I didn't go back the day after that, or after that. I wanted her to come get me, to show up on my doorstep. I stayed in my room a lot, made a collage, moved my bed to the opposite wall, played Sorry by myself as the yellow game piece, then the blue, then the green, never the red because she was always the red. All the while I waited for my mom to knock on my door and say "Rachel's here, you can play until dinnertime," but she never did, she just knocked to give me cookies and milk. The next time I went to Rachel's must've been that Friday, because I remember waking up early and seeing my dad's scrap metal truck pull out of the

driveway. I slid into my flip-flops and grabbed the rubberband chain, stuffing it into my jean cutoffs and then pulling it back out when only half of it fit in my pocket. The screen door slammed on my way out, but it always did that. Some of the chain dragged in the gravel. I remembered my father saying that it was a damn shame there were still unpaved roads in this country but I never minded. Sometimes Rachel and I found rocks that looked like fish fossils and ancient arrowheads from worlds before ours. On my walk to Rachel's that morning, though, the gravel pebbles I shuffled through looked as boring as those mixed vegetables that come in a can—the corn and carrots and lima beans all diced into square-centimeter cubes.

When I got to her porch she wasn't there, which didn't surprise me though I wanted it to. I wanted to all of a sudden remember a huge fight we had had a week ago that explained our separation, but I didn't, and I couldn't even make one up in my head, so I just started weaving in and out through the railing, catching glimpses of the inside, darker than ever. There was more stuff stacked out for the trash truck than ever, too: broken chairs, a coffee table tipped upside-down, bags and bags of empty cans and bottles, and a broom. When Mr. Simmons came I asked for rubberbands, I almost whispered it, and he looked around me and peered into the deserted house. He asked, "Where's Rachel?" I told him she would be back. He shrugged and smiled and reached into his bag

for a handful. The shed in the backyard was locked up with a dead bolt, which I thought was stupid since one of the metal panels on the side pushed in enough so that you barely even had to duck. I kept weaving and looping and measuring every single day, alone, and the chain got long, so long it almost reached from her yard to mine. Still, it never got as long as it did that day with Rachel tugging on the other end.

My mom walked me to the bus stop on my first day of school, my first day as a fifth grader. She took a picture of me in my new denim jumper wearing my new blue backpack and said through the viewfinder, "My you've gotten dark! People will think you went to Bermuda for the summer!" I hugged her goodbye and she wished me luck. I could see Rachel's house from the stop. It looked very still. My mom got me to the stop early so I was alone until Lizzy came. We had used the same stop since kindergarten. She wore a white dress with puffy sleeves. We greeted each other quietly. "Did you have a good summer?" I asked, but had never cared less.

She set her over-the-shoulder book bag down. "Yeah. Really good. I went to the carnival with my boyfriend five days straight. He won me, like, three teddy bears and ten pairs of earrings."

"Oh." I kept looking away from her to see if the bus was rounding the corner, Rachel's corner.

"Did *you* go to the carnival?"

"No."

"What'd *you* do this summer?" She licked her hand then smoothed her bangs down against the side of her head, something she'd never do in front of a boy. She was wearing a pair of her carnival earrings.

"A lot of stuff."

"Like what, like playing with rubberbands and playing in the grass all day?"

I had brought the rubberband chain with me; it was stuffed in the bottom of my backpack underneath my new notebook and my clear box of pens and pencils and scissors. I reached behind me and felt the rubber knots through the canvas bottom.

"Well, what'd you do? Just play with Rachel all the time? What did you do?" she asked, stomping her foot a little.

"We went to Bermuda, Rachel and me."

"No you didn't."

"Well we did so many things I can't even name just a couple. Why do you care so much? We're not even friends anymore."

"Just curious," she said, then turned away from me toward the road.

When the bus came I let her get on first. We were the first stop on the route.

I looked for Rachel in the cafeteria, and when I asked to go to the bathroom I took the restroom pass and peeked in the three other fifth grade classrooms. Whenever we got a chance to get up and move around in the classroom I went to my backpack and unzipped it enough to stick my arm in and feel it in my hand, to pick the giant, messy ball of chain up a few inches and remember its weight. Nobody knew.

The bus ride home dumped kids off one by one until only Lizzy and I were left. She sat towards the front, me in the back. I could only see her ponytail above the seats, the polka dot ribbon tied in a bow around it. I lowered my window and rode for a few blocks with my arm hanging outside, the chain on my lap inside my backpack. It still seemed like summer outside, everything green and tall, the occasional whiff of chlorine. When the bus driver let Lizzy and me off I stood at the stop until Lizzy was out of view, then I walked down to Rachel's house. I had to hurry; I knew my mom would be waiting for me, wanting to know everything. I unzipped my backpack and dumped the chain out on the street in front of her driveway. I lodged one end under a rock and picked up the other end, started to walk home. I laid that chain out along the side of the road and left it there.

Kites

Larry Jasper woke up two minutes before his alarm was set to go off and fixed himself a high-fiber breakfast, just like he did every morning. Edie was gone and Larry had little left to live for if he were to put it down on paper, but he still took in all this cancer-fighting heart-healthy fiber by 9 AM. The cereal had 16 grams per half-cup serving, but he always measured out a heaping cup of the fierce little nuggets and sliced half a banana on top, so we're looking at 35-plus grams in that one bowl. He was a mess, but a healthy mess with a long life ahead of him.

Larry found that in the mornings he was most thoughtful. If he didn't flip the news or the Weather Channel on right away he had thought after thought, thought inside thought, thought during thought, thought wrapped in thought.

He would start his decaf and ponder the big ideas like hope and mercy, heaven and hell that hadn't touched him yet. By the time his cereal had settled and softened just enough his coffee would've perked. He'd shuffle with his matching bowl and mug over to the round birch table by the window. The crunching always drowned out all thoughts before any single one of them had time to finish, to complete itself. His country kitchen had a lot of movement, what with the checkerboard wallpaper border that seemed to race around the room's perimeter and the light fluttery curtains, so he didn't mind if his head took a break. Let someone else do the thinking for a change.

Larry squinted outside his breakfast window. He could hardly see anything this time of day, with the mid-morning sun bouncing straight off his tool shed. He couldn't see it but he knew there were the remains of Edie's old vegetable garden out there right next to the shed. He knew there were a dozen tomato stakes still stuck in the ground, rotting away, and that he needed to get out there and pull them up one of these days. There were rows and rows of all sorts of weeds. There were faded-out plastic plant markers he always poked back into the soil whenever he happened to be out there, close to it all. When she first started the garden she planted two or four of each of their favorite vegetables: bell peppers, tomatoes, onions. Towards the end of it all, the end of their marriage over a year ago, Larry knew she had changed because she started

growing mustard greens and cabbage and eggplant, all these vegetables neither of them liked too much. She spent hours a day out in her garden, as far away from indoor-Larry as possible without giving the neighbors something to gossip about. And when it came time to harvest her crowded garden she didn't preserve much of anything, just erected a vegetable stand on the other side of town.

Larry got up when he heard the thump of a newspaper against his front door. He got two papers every day, one from each of the two closest medium-sized Kansas towns he lived between. They came late in the morning because he was the last person on both routes. He actually had two newspaper boys, and despite what an outsider might think, his neighborhood wasn't in black and white. Everything was color, vibrant color, at least in his recollection. Even if his cataracts were something else those days, and even though dust had accumulated on all of Edie's fake flowers, making them grimy and dull, Larry remembered how they used to look—alive—and generally saw them in that light.

Jacob was his name, the first paperboy. He was a wrestler at the middle school. Muscular and confident, he hurled his papers shirtless from the farthest side of the street, smacked each *Tribune* hard against the aluminum siding Edie made Larry install a good decade ago. When he stepped out and bent over for

his paper he couldn't ever help but slide his hand down the side of the house. He swore that he was feeling new dents all the time but he couldn't point them out to the boy because he couldn't, himself, actually see them. Alex was the second paperboy. Big Al, the kids called him around the neighborhood, but he wasn't big at all. In fact, when he rode past a crowd of children and they shouted, "Hey Big Al!" he pedaled away so fast Larry couldn't say for sure that he could've beaten him if the two of them had somehow grown up together, raced each other up and down the roads. Larry watched out for him whenever he could. He'd spent many an evening on his front porch listening for unusually cruel redhead jokes or anything at all vulgar, anything to cause a man to step down off a porch and intervene. Boys will be boys, Larry knew, but Alex for some reason, wouldn't. Alex had been around since before Edie left.

Larry wiped the dew off both papers with a napkin. He slid each out of its tight plastic skin and proceeded to unfold them side by side on the table. He always compared the two, marveled at how the same news about the same basic people could be so different. Larry lived almost exactly between both towns, and felt the truth could be found somewhere in between the two papers, but never on either one. There was a happy medium somewhere, and he thought it had hovered like an ether above his house when Edie was around. Did it ever seep inside, he wasn't sure, but at least it was close enough to step outside at night

and look up at.

He usually only cared for the headlines and the pictures. Sure, Larry could get out his magnifying glass and read each god-forsaken word, but he'd seen those conjunctions before, and the more he concerned himself with the details of any given article the inkier his fingers got. He didn't want to walk around all day with someone else's story on his skin. Larry refolded both his papers, re-creasing each fold, trying to make the news look and feel as fresh as possible, then stood up and scooted in his slippers to the window on the other side of the table. He thought he found a smudge during breakfast. The windows stayed shut, even on warm days, because wind blew the dust around and there were a lot of complicated dust-collecting knick-knacks he wasn't sure how to clean. Take the Hummels, for instance. Edie didn't even clean those because she said you needed special German Hummel polish she wasn't sure how to get, save a trip over there. He couldn't really find it, the smudge, but he kept looking until the doorbell rang two, three times. "Coming!" he yelled, tying his terrycloth robe shut as he headed for the door. He peered through the peephole. It was Roger, with the curly brown hair Larry thought he needed to slick back if the boy ever wanted his career to take off. Larry groaned and untied his robe, relaxed, as he opened the door halfway. "Morning, Rog," he said.

"It's a beautiful day, Larry," Roger said. "Good morning to *you*."

Larry gazed out past Roger for a second, trying to find something about this day that wasn't beautiful. Not that he was a negative fellow, just that this kid always flaunted his optimism. Larry, however, could not find a single flaw in the sky or a dandelion in any lawn on the block.

"So can I come in?"

"I'm kind of busy."

"It will only take a second, Lar. I just thought we could talk about the house."

"What's there to talk about?" Larry rang his own doorbell. Still in working order.

Roger looked up and scanned the gutters, then the base of the house as if he didn't know where to start.

"It's such a beautiful day." Larry motioned at the sky, at the general world out there. "Like you said. Why don't you spend it outside." Larry eased the door shut, a gentle slam. He hurried to the guest bedroom and peeked through the corner of a window. Roger lingered on the porch, looking down, looking up, and looking side to side. Just when his awkwardness was beginning to embarrass Larry, Roger backed down from the front steps and sped off in his blue Buick. Probably the car his parents bought him when he graduated real

estate school, Larry thought. He also thought about the fact that he was no longer capable of reading license plates. If Roger was a criminal peeling out of his driveway, he'd have no way of providing the police officers with anything to go on; even the make and model he only knew from memory. His eyesight seemed to decline towards the end of his marriage. The obviousness of it all irritated Larry, his failing eyesight, his failing marriage, but somehow he still managed to believe in it, that if they reunited his vision would slowly fix itself.

He tied his robe shut again and walked outside to the edge of his yard, stopping at the FOR SALE sign Roger had planted there six months ago. The grass around it had grown past Larry's knees. He still cut his own lawn, half-blind, he was sure the neighbors all gathered somewhere just out of his vision to witness his every-other-Saturday-morning ritual. Driving around his yard, he got as close to the trees, and the sign, and the curb, as he safely could, which meant each obstacle had a ring of overgrowth around it. Once Roger had asked if Larry would like him to weed-whack it for him, free of charge, but Larry reminded him who was paying for whom, and who was already thirty-some years old when the other was born. Roger backed off.

After inspecting the sign, testing its sturdiness with a good shake, Larry headed back inside. He checked the answering machine in the kitchen for new messages even though he'd only spent a couple of minutes outside. "You have

FOUR saved messages," the lady-machine said. He dragged a chair from the breakfast table over, sat, leaned forward, and watched the machine. "First message:"

"Hey, Larry, it's Jean from Dr. Abrams' office. We've got your test results back and you're looking great, as usual. OK? We'll see you in a couple weeks, Buh-bye."

Larry nodded and made a mental note to bring the nurses some discount chocolates.

"Next message:"

"Larry, this is the public library. Your requests are in and we'll hold them for six days. Thank you."

Larry glanced at the stack of borrowed cookbooks on the counter.

"Next message:"

"Hey Larry, it's Jean again. I forgot to remind you that your next appointment is the 19th at 9:30. OK. See you then, Buh-bye."

"Next message:"

He started to turn up the volume but it was already as high as it would go.

"Larry, where are you? Anyway, I can't find my pink sweater. You know, the one we got at Pike's Peak when it got chilly at night. I think it's in the

bedroom closet mixed in with all my thick sweaters. Could you look for it? I'll be over sometime to get it. I need that sweater."

Larry replayed the message. It was a few weeks old, but he hadn't gotten around to erasing it just yet. Every time someone left a new message he replayed the old ones to make sure nobody recorded over it. He had found her sweater. It was, in fact, with all the other sweaters, and all the other shoes and blazers in the closet from which it looked like someone still dressed every morning. He had packed it in a brown paper bag along with a few other things she might need—socks and underwear, hotel soaps they had hoarded over the years, a can of tuna, a jar of peanut butter, and some banana nut bread he'd made with the brownest, sweetest bananas he could find at the store the day he packed the bag. He'd set it by the front door, but she hadn't been over for it yet. He had to toss the bread after it started to mold.

Larry turned the volume down a little and got himself dressed just in case today was the day. Slipping on a pair of gray Dickies and a light, plaid, button-down shirt, he again considered changing his look sometime soon. He did wear a lot of plaid; Edie even joked about it when they were together. I'll get myself one of those leather bomber jackets when it cools down enough, he thought, just like he did every year. He sunk into his mattress, pulled his socks up to his knees, and lay back to rest for a while.

With his eyes closed and no television or radio playing, Larry could locate every single pain in his body: his right toe, left knee, lower back, and every joint above his midsection. He isolated his mind on one hurt at a time, letting each have its opportunity to take center stage, to intensify so the others diminish, if for a moment. He had seen a holistic healer a few weeks before after making a list of things to fix: his health, his house, his debts of various kinds to various people. She told him to lie back and imagine a pebble dropping from the sky into the center of each pain, to imagine the pain rippling outward until he could no longer locate where it began, where it ended. This technique worked, though it left him with a temporary but very real and very general malaise. Instead, he decided he would try to focus on each pain, try to squeeze it so it feels worse, then release so that, in comparison to what it could be, it's not so bad.

Larry blinked at the giant red numbers of his alarm clock and tried to figure out if he had fallen asleep. He rolled off the bed, checked his face and smoothed his hair back down in the bathroom mirror while debating between turkey and ham. He ended up fixing himself a ham sandwich on wheat with mustard on both pieces. He sliced it corner-to-corner, grabbed a canned iced tea from the fridge, and sat himself at the table right when the doorbell rang. After taking a couple of bites he answered. It was Edie. She hadn't been around in over two weeks but there she was.

"Hi, Hon," she said. She called everyone that. Larry opened the door wide and she stepped inside. "What are you up to?"

"I was in the middle of lunch." Larry tilted his head towards clock on the wall.

She didn't say anything, rushed to the bathroom. Larry wondered where she had been all morning that there wasn't a toilet. When she first moved in with her sister across town he timed the drive over there, just out of curiosity. Eight minutes. He jiggled the doorknob to make sure he hadn't locked it, then sat back down at the kitchen table. Edie came out and washed her hands at the sink. She smelled like the gardenia perfume she still kept in the bathroom.

"What can I do for you, Edie," he asked, understanding from her swift movements that she came to the house to come to the house, not to see Larry. He couldn't decide if he wanted her there or not. Maybe the old Edie, but not necessarily this one today. After splitting up they still saw each other pretty regularly, usually Larry the one making an excuse for her to come over.

"What's the rush?" She spun around. "You have plans this afternoon?"

"I do. Do you?"

"I do," she said. They stared at each other, still, for a moment. "Well, I really can't stay long." Edie leapt up. "Any news on the house?" she asked with her head in the icebox.

"Oh yes," Larry said, staring at Edie on her tiptoes, her calves.

"Oh really? That's pretty hard to believe." She pulled out a carton of butter pecan and reached into the silverware drawer for a spoon. Edie whirled around the kitchen not only like she knew where everything was, but where everything would always be.

"I don't particularly care for your tone," Larry said. "You think I need you to sell a house? Because I don't."

"This is disgusting," Edie said after tasting a spoonful. She turned the ice cream carton upside-down in the sink. "Good God, how old is this?" She searched the bottom for an expiration date.

It was her flavor, not his. Larry did some quick math and figured it to be at least 14, 15 months old. "For your information, I've received several offers on the house, it's just a matter of picking the best possible owner. I have to do most the work because that real estate agent you insisted on is quite incompetent."

"Look at you, Larry." Edie shook her head. "Would you just look at yourself? You're eating off a paper towel." She pulled a dish out of the cabinet and walked over to him, their knees touching. Then she picked up the paper towel and slapped his sandwich onto the plate, fast. Larry felt her confidence, her certainty, in that gesture she did right in front of him. She knew he couldn't stop her, couldn't stand up for himself and say no, Edie, I'm going to eat the way

I want to eat, and so she let him watch. The worst is that, all the while, he could smell her perfume. Damn it when one sense goes the others heighten.

Larry lowered his voice. "Edie, did you come over here to nag on me just for old times sake or what?"

"I came for my pink sweater," she said, her own voice lowered.

Larry took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. "Your pink sweater."

"My pink sweater. From Colorado. Didn't you get my message?"

Larry took a swig of water from his glass. "To tell you the truth I haven't even had time to check my messages." He pointed at the blinking four on his answering machine. "Been busy, Edie. What can I tell you."

She rolled her eyes and stomped down the hall to their old bedroom.

Larry finished his sandwich and when Edie came back out she told him the sweater wasn't in the closet, and did he have any idea where it could be? He hadn't a clue. She let herself out, stormed right past the bag.

Larry figured the pink sweater must be for a date. He tried to make himself face that truth. The day he bought that sweater they ate at a lodge that seemed rustic enough from the outside but which failed to follow through on that promise once they got inside. Larry was really bothered by its lack of authenticity, all the plastic and fake wood inside, the cheap camping and fishing supplies sitting on shelves around the place, arranged in a way that made no

sense at all to Larry. Even the menu itself seemed inappropriate, offering cheeseburgers and chicken fingers and some run-of-the-mill surf and turf combo. He wanted to leave. He told Edie he wanted to leave, that they shouldn't have to stand for this, but she told him absolutely not, they're not going to leave after being seated because it's rude, quite rude. They ended up staying and making a good time of it all. Edie ordered pasta and Larry tried the scallops even though he knew they were probably imported from somewhere absurd like Florida or Mexico and even though he wasn't even certain he liked scallops. Edie made fun of the fake moose head hanging above them and Larry rapped on the plastic log walls, reminding her to knock on wood throughout the evening. They made love in their hotel, quietly, starting just when it seemed they were both about to fall asleep. It was a conscious choice on Larry's part to do what a man was supposed to do, to take his wife in his arms and make her feel loved, no matter the threat of flat-out rejection. She allowed it to happen that night, though, for the first time in too long, and suddenly Larry realized that it was also a husband's duty to do this no matter if not one ounce of him felt worthy.

He'd had an affair. One single affair, one single encounter with a checkout girl from the pharmacy. Larry told Edie about it not long after they returned from their trip to Colorado, the guilt overwhelming him, even affecting his stools, embarrassingly enough. I suppose she knows all about my arthritis,

Eddie had said. And my thyroid problem. You two probably, you probably do it while you're waiting for my prescriptions to be filled. Larry continued on to explain the whole situation to her, how it really truly was a one-time thing. She sat quietly on the bed she had no idea he had his affair on while he paced in front of her. He thought she was coming around until a horrible, ugly look came upon her face and she asked, is that how you pay for my medications? And Larry knew for certain right then that he had done some serious damage.

Eddie kept telling him he had changed, and asking him how could he have changed? He figured that his wife, a country girl, didn't really understand need, how a person could crave something so badly they looked for it in a drugstore. Before he met her he used to change jobs, change women all the time. He'd gone through a dozen dogs. She'd inherited the house they lived in so quietly for four decades from her parents, and when they had their little trouble like married couples do where did she run to? Her sister's house about a mile away as the crow flies. The woman had always been terrified of trying anything new, but when she started to get a little uneasy, a little detached about their old, easy lovemaking routine, well that left Larry a little helpless.

Eddie phoned later. Larry was straightening the junk drawer. "Larry, it's me. Look, I really need that sweater."

"Where are you?"

"Can you check the hope chest in the guest room? And then check to make sure you haven't stuck it in one of your drawers."

"Edie, where the heck are you?"

"I'm at home, where do you think I am?"

Larry thought about it.

"Can you go check again? Sometimes you overlook things. I'll hold."

"You won't hold. I'm busy right now. Maybe I'll check later."

"Larry. Please. You're not busy and I have to have that sweater. It's driving me crazy."

He groaned OK into the receiver, then set it down on the table. He didn't lift his feet, just stared around at his kitchen, trying to see it as it would look if he weren't in it, if he really was rummaging through the hope chest like Edie expected. What's the difference if I'm here, really, he thought. Aside from his body being there he wasn't all that there.

He picked the phone back up. "I found it."

"You found it. Oh thank God."

"But I'm going out this afternoon, so I'm not sure when I'll be here for you to pick it up." Larry stretched the corded phone out of the kitchen, just into the living room so he could see his truly empty kitchen.

“What are you talking about? I don’t need you to be there. I still have my key.”

Larry stepped back in.

“*My* key to *my* house.”

Larry stepped back out. “Yes, but you can’t come over while I’m gone. I mean, you can if you want but I’m taking it with me, the sweater.”

Silence.

“Bye, Edie. I’ll talk to you later.” Larry hung up the phone before she had a chance to get another word in anywhere else. He stood up, pushed his chair in, took his plate to the sink, then hurried out the door, snagging the sweater from the bag on his way.

Larry wandered downtown to the antique bicycle shop, the library, and eventually to the drugstore. He bought a couple of bottles each of 99-cent hydrogen peroxide and rubbing alcohol and dropped the sweater in to the sack. After hanging around the back of the store a while, checking his blood pressure on the blood pressure machine over and over, getting different readings each time, he finally spotted her, the woman. Ruth. She seemed to be counting pills or something behind the pharmacy counter. He said hello.

“Hello,” she said back, not all that surprised by him. “I haven’t seen you in so long,” she said.

"But I've seen you around," he said, then thought about how that might sound. "I guess you can't help that in this town."

"Of course," she said.

"Yes, of course," he agreed. He got as close as he could to her, what with her behind the plastic partition and all. She looked the same, really. Fairly ordinary. She started to look down and around so Larry said, "Well, about the blood pressure machine, I've been meaning to ask you, to ask a professional. Is it accurate?"

"The store has no real association with the company who manufactures those stupid machines," she told him. "And mostly those ratty boys play on it."

"Oh." Larry had seen them before, sticking their sweaty arms and feet in at the same time and crushing empty pop cans.

"Yeah, so I wouldn't trust those numbers if I were you."

"Would you like to spend some time together?" Finally he just came out and asked it. "Just a little time? Today?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not suggesting anything more than that. I miss our friendship, the way we used to talk about our lives and just be pleasant together."

"We were hardly friends, Larry. And I am a different person these days, you must know that."

“No, I do, Ruth, I really do. And I am too. I’m not married anymore, but even if I did have a woman in my life I’d be here, asking for your friendship, your forgiveness. It wasn’t right, what we did.”

She didn’t respond right away. A man wheeled his cart between Larry and Ruth, stopped to look at the display of gel sole inserts. “Well, unfortunately I’m working,” she said, then started to get back to whatever it was she was doing before he even said hello.

“But what about after work? I have some errands to run in town anyway. One conversation and then I’ll leave you be.”

She seemed to finish what she was doing behind the high counter. Larry stood there for a good minute or so and waited, patient, nothing better to do than to stare at someone who had once touched him. Finally, she looked up. “Just for a little while, OK?” Larry couldn’t see her exact facial expression but she seemed sincere.

And so he left the drugstore at 3:46, 71 degrees, according to the bank clock. Larry strolled up and down Main Street, slipping into two or three specialty stores, then parked himself on a bench outside the frozen custard shop. Some kind of business they get here, he thought, as kid after kid entered with a buck and exited with a cone. He thought he saw Alex at one point but Alex would’ve said hi, delivering all those mornings to Larry.

About six months after she'd learned of the affair Edie had run into Larry's ex-mistress on her power-walk through the park. In a strange response to the infidelity she'd taken up cardiovascular exercise and caught a glimpse of the girl eating her sack lunch in the grass. "She's pregnant," Edie had said over dinner. He had hated how anytime Edie mentioned a she, or a her, that they both knew instantly who Edie meant. Who she was. Not just in her own life but who she was in their life, how she lived and breathed between them, even in their bed at night. They both knew he could not be the father, that his biology had never let them create anything together in their 40 years. But somehow Edie must've figured Larry had some mysterious role in the conception because he heard her frantic packing that very evening while he was doing dishes. After rinsing the chunks of meatloaf off her plate he had the urge to stop and eat them straight out of the sink, and he did.

Edie had kept on with her fitness routine. Every weekday she was friendly with the girl, and she kept Larry posted about the pregnancy. She would phone him and discuss what a lovely conversation the two of them had had. When she had her baby Edie knew all about it; was invited to the baby shower, and a little later, the wedding of this girl to her baby's father, an old high school sweetheart. She told Larry how much in love they were.

At about ten to five Larry moseyed on back to the drugstore. He hung around the pharmacy, watching her move, curious where their conversation would lead. He wanted to confide in her, to ask her advice about Edie, to get a woman's opinion about, well, a lot of things. After her shift ended they ambled to his house and he was relieved to be able to look straight ahead instead of at her face. He was afraid she thought he couldn't find her eyes. He believed he could but he wasn't sure when he looked at her, what he was looking at. Her hair was long enough to tickle his forearms if he timed his strides right. The sun set and she dazzled, but he knew that was the cataracts. Too damn bad.

"Your house is for sale? Where are you moving?" They stopped at the yard sign.

"Not sure," he said, smashing the tall grass down into the ground with his foot. "I just thought that now, since the wife is long gone, I should move on to bigger and better." They stared at the sign for a while before he asked if she'd like to come inside. She hesitated, so he assured her that he, too, was a different person these days. She let him open the door for her. Once inside the living room he told her to make herself at home, then started some coffee in the kitchen and arranged Nabiscos on a plate. When he came out with the crackers she wasn't where he'd left her. Oh my God, he thought. Could she be in the bedroom? He tiptoed down the hallway, still holding the plate, poking his head

in each room before entering his own. His bathroom door was shut, light on.

Larry sat on the edge of the bed, set the plate of crackers down beside him, began to smooth the wrinkles out of his pants, and tried to slow down his breathing, center himself. How could he turn down this woman? What words should he use? But when the door opened she was still in her baggy blouse and loose skirt: a disappointing kind of relief.

"What is this?" She held a bottle of something he couldn't quite make out from across the room.

Larry was confused.

"And this." She pointed at the doily on his dresser. "And this." She tugged on a dress from Edie's side of the closet, still open from the morning.

"Well, they're, umm, they're things," Larry said.

"Woman things," she said. "I thought you weren't married. I thought you said you didn't have a woman in your life."

"I don't."

"Do you think I'm an idiot? You must think I'm an idiot." She rushed out of the bedroom. "Everything's the same as it always was," she said on her way down the hall, Larry following. "You're still pretending you're the same lonely man you were before. Well I'm not the same, Larry." She stopped and turned around to face him. "You are. This is," she said, waving her arm all around the

place, “but I’m not.” She left. Larry watched her from the guestroom. He could not see her unique features but he could see the outline of her general, human shape. The long crinkly skirt she wore billowed wildly and he thought of kites, what it meant to see that high.

Larry checked his answering machine. A blinking five.

The lady machine said he had one new message.

Larry hovered over her. His neck stretched and hurt. He glanced at the bag on the table to make sure he hadn’t forgotten it in town.

“Larry. It’s Roger. Look, I’ve been thinking there’s probably a reason nobody’s made an offer on the house. If we just did a little sprucing up and if we came down a little, maybe—”

He pressed the delete button.

The remaining saved messages started playing: Jean, the library, Jean again, then Edie, but they faded fast as Larry trudged back down the hall, back into the guest room. He opened the window, surprised that it wasn’t painted shut. Larry sat rigid on the bed, then slowly raised his legs to lie down like he was afraid to shift the pillows, the quilt, anything around too much; like it would all unravel head to foot, top to bottom.

Larry had slept in the room a few times. The pale, pale green walls had a stick-on border around the top just like the kitchen and all the other rooms in the

house did. Edie loved them, thought ceilings would cave in without them. He'd begun to peel that particular one in the guestroom off a couple days after she left, but stopped when he saw how the paint came off in large chunks with it. He'd meant to find a way of re-sticking it but five or six feet of paisley wallpaper border still hung down near the window. The wind blew in, fanning it stiff against the wall. Larry thought about how much one of the neighborhood boys might charge him for a paint job. Then he started to think about color.

Melon

Scott went with the girls to his mother's up in Oregon for an entire week. He left with six pb&js on white and a trunk full of Fourth of July fireworks. They were planning to watch the parade with his mother and then light the bottle rockets and sparklers after they had tucked her well-into bed. After buckling my girls in the back I kissed him goodbye and he made some joke about contraband but I was already halfway back inside, and pretended not to hear.

I slid the cloth cover over the toaster and put the Pop Tarts away, deep in the pantry. After brushing the crumbs off the counter into my hands, I pivoted to drop them in the sink as usual, but remembered I'd scoured it hard with Ajax late the night before. I couldn't drop them in the garbage, either, because I'd taken it out when I said bye to the kids. The crumbs were brown crumbs—chocolate—and against the white garbage bag they might've looked like dirt.

What would my mother say about dirt in the kitchen? What would she say about chocolate for breakfast? I uncovered the toaster and flicked the crumbs back inside the slots.

Because Scott got suspicious the night before, I had to do most the deep-cleaning last minute. I'd vacuumed under all the furniture the previous day, while he was at work and before the girls woke up, so I ran the sweeper over all the exposed carpet right after they left for Oregon, and moved the couch about six inches to the right to cover the hard, black wad of bubble gum that neither of my two girls, nor my husband, has ever claimed.

My family left me alone on our modest Arizona farm with acreage so dry I had to take off from work just so I had time to water everything. Scott left me alone at such a crucial time, a time when, in the course of a single afternoon, vibrant green plants could wither, crust over, and blow away to Mexico. But someone had to stay. I'm always the one who does the has-to's, but truth be told, I was looking a little forward to not going, which had nothing to do with his mother but everything to do with mine. I'd decided I would drive down to Tucson, pick my mother up from the nursing home, and give her a week on the farm, give her something to make up for all those short, short every-other-monthly visits. So about 10 minutes after they headed north on the 202 I headed south, and we drove in opposite directions. When my car lagged in the heat just

after Bakersville I blamed the air conditioner, but thought for a split second about the game of tug-of-war being played with the same strip of pavement.

The trip was only a couple of easy hours. Two Law and Orders. A single outing to the wholesale club. At one point on the drive I got a little lost, had to pull over, order a diet soda and whip out a map. I thought about Scott, about how he'd been reading all the maps ever since we got together, and I realized I'd forgotten a lot, like what all the different symbols meant. Got to keep myself sharp, I thought, and tried to make a mental note to add STUDY MAP SYMBOLS to my to-do list when I got home. I then remembered I'd forgotten to move the hose before I left. If I didn't keep everything alive that week I didn't think I'd be able to face my family when they returned. It was supposed to be my sole purpose for staying home.

The nursing home stood lush there in the middle of the desert. The burnt oranges and siennas and adobe style felt right for the setting, as did the tacky tin coyotes they had erected along the wheelchair ramp up to the main entrance, but the land itself was greener than it should've been. Sprinklers watered the grass, and me, as I followed the ramp up to the door—sprinklers which probably never, ever, click off, I thought. She is well taken care of here, I told myself.

When I asked for Pearl Barrett, the receptionist told me she was in room 35A and pointed down the hall to her left. I shuffled down that hall almost to the

very end before I found my mother. She was sitting on the edge of her bed with one of her slippers on, the other one dangling, her eyes fixed upon what sounded like an infomercial. I stood outside her room and watched her for a minute. She looked older—more than half a year older, which was the last time I'd seen her. I tried to estimate how much older she looked—two years? Three? Difficult to say because old people, they age so rapidly—more like dogs than humans.

“Kimberly. Won't you come in already,” she said without ever taking her eyes off the TV to notice me.

“Mother. Hello.” I came in. We hugged. “What are you watching?”

“My bag is over there by the window, but I still need to put a few things in it.”

“What do you still need?”

“I'll get them, Dear, if you could just get that thing up off the ground. That's all I need you to do.”

I went over to the window and lifted the bag up on the wide windowsill. Outside bulldozers were pushing dirt around and construction workers were hoisting part of a roof onto a building that looked like it belonged more in the Southeast than the Southwest. This was my mother's view. “What's that gonna be?” I asked her.

"That?" She looked up from the turquoise nightgown she was folding.

"Oh, that's the new building."

"What new building?"

"The building that's going to house the new tenants." She brought the nightgown over to the window. "They've been building it for awhile now but I guess it's been awhile since you made it to visit me, hasn't it."

I ignored the last part. It was fair enough. "You mean that building, it's part of the nursing home?"

"Of course it is," she said, placing the nightgown in the overnight bag. "It has a built in chapel."

"But it looks so different from the other buildings. It looks a little like the mansion back home that the Turner boys lived in, doesn't it Mama?"

"The Turner house? Not at all, Dear. The Turners had a wraparound porch and the most intricate wooden shutters. Bay windows. Fans in every room. Peeling paint." She said the last detail like she'd just remembered it. "I don't know what it was about the Turner house, some kind of exotic wood, I know that much. The kind that thought it was just too special to take paint."

"Well, at least this one won't have that problem. It's siding. It's gonna last forever. Still, I just think there's something wrong with adding on with something so, so different. It's not Arizona."

"I'm moving in there."

"In there?" I asked, tapping my fingernail on the glass. "Why? Because of the chapel?"

"Do you know about the Turner boys?" she asked.

"Why do you want to move in there, Mother, when what you have here is so nice?"

She gave me a strange look. Her strange look. The one where she puckers her mouth tight and smushes it way over to one side of her face.

"Let's go," she said. "Someday I'll tell you the one about the Turner boys."

The one. The story.

And so we left. My mother slept the whole way home. I wondered how Scott and the girls were doing in the car. There was no way anyone in that car would be sleeping. They're probably playing the ABC game with billboards and license plates, I figured. I hadn't told Scott about my plans for the week because I didn't want our two daughters to feel as though they needed to choose whose mother they liked better, and mostly because I didn't want them to choose mine. When we all visited her in the nursing home the girls were her little girls and somehow I turned into more of a nanny-figure, watching them dance around my mother and watching my mother stroke their hair like she used to stroke mine. I

also didn't want them around because I needed a quiet week, a week with the damper pedal on. I wanted my mother to rest on our patio furniture drinking tea as sweet as she'd grown up with in Alabama, and I wanted to be able to run out into the garden every quarter-hour just long enough to move the hose and rejoin her under the awning extending over our narrow porch.

I fixed the guest room up special for her, filling it with bowls of flowers and hanging pots of ivy from the ceiling because I wanted to surround her with living things. I was going to admit that the daisies and hydrangeas were store-bought if she asked, but I was hoping that she'd assume I had a flower garden somewhere out of her vision, that I had inherited her plant-charming abilities. The truth was I had a medium-sized food garden and an apple orchard. I could grow functional plants like fruits and vegetables, but as far as the more aesthetically pleasing flowers or shrubs, I had never been lucky. When I guided my mother into her room she cupped and inhaled each bunch of flowers without saying a word. She was forever a Southern lady. Silently critical.

"Would you like some tea, Mother?" I asked.

"Yes, that would be lovely," she said, twirling around with the beauty pageant smile that hardly ever left her face. I took her arm and walked her down the hall. She stopped in the middle of it to smooth the wrinkles on her forehead and cheeks. She started to reattach her hair comb but had trouble gathering the

gauzy wisps together in one hand while combing them back with the other, so I did it for her. We made it to the porch and she exhaled through her smile as she relaxed into the wicker rocker. I brought tea and Girl Scout shortbreads out on a tray and fixed her a plate. I knew she couldn't chew anything so the cookies were just for looking. I never liked tea so I drank a Diet Coke.

We talked about the girls a bit. She asked if they were eating enough, if they were involved in Sunday School, if their babysitter was qualified enough. The sitter, of course, was not, and although my mother's age had zapped the energy out of her she still managed to show her dissatisfaction by nodding her head at certain things and not at others. Dissatisfaction was par for the course, though, and I was proud of myself for finally, at age forty, reaching a point in my life where I could take or leave her gentle but consistent disapproval.

The week went as planned. We spent the light hours of every day on the porch, nibbling and sipping and listening to memories that spanned her entire life, from the story she told of her father preaching at the Baptist church when she was six to her accounting for all the roommates she'd gone through at the home. She told me about the time she made thirty rhubarb pies for the church bake sale, all of which were sold, and about the flood of '38, or was it '39, when one of her girlfriends almost drowned in a river.

Then she told me something I'd had no idea about—the afternoons she spent volunteering at the children's museum working the puzzle machine. Her job was to slip pictures the kids had drawn on thin sheets of cardboard into a metal device which cut the drawings into miniature puzzles with a single crank of a lever on her part.

“You need to know, Kimberly, that I was their favorite,” she said. “I was their favorite puzzle lady.”

“Why is that, Mom?” I kicked my sandals off.

“Could you make some tea, Dear?” she asked. “Before I tell you, could you make some tea.”

I let out a sigh as I stood up, not out of annoyance but because of the temperature. It was Thursday afternoon and the sun had made its way over to the sky above the porch. It hung a bit lower than I expected, seemingly bloated by its own heat. I slipped my sandals back on and went to pour her a glass of sweet tea, but when I brought it back out she sent me back in.

“*Make* some tea, I said. Not get, *make*,” she said. A hundred degrees and she wanted hot tea. “People need to listen, that’s the problem with people,” I heard her say as I slipped back through the screen door.

When I finally brought the right tea she sent me in once more for an ice cube. I snagged one from the freezer, carried it out in my hand, and plopped it

into her teacup. After I sat back down she resumed her story and I rubbed my wet hand across the back of my neck, dipping down beneath my shirt between my shoulder blades, thinking briefly of Scott and how he nuzzles circles there when I let him.

“I volunteered there for three years,” she said. “Right after you ran off and got married. It was hard work, but I don’t call it work, because as soon as you start thinking about your volunteer job as a real job, well, then the whole spirit behind the idea is snuffed out like a flame.” She looked down into her untouched tea, sitting there on the edge of the table pulled up close to her. “And do you know what the good book says about the subject?”

“About puzzles?”

“About works.”

“Faith without works is dead, Mother?”

“Faith without works is dead,” she repeated. I don’t think she heard me. Or rather, I don’t think she wanted to admit that I had said it—that I remembered. That someone can leave Alabama and Alabama’s God and still know the scriptures.

“How about we get back to the story,” I suggested.

“We’ll get back to the story when I’m good and ready. You know, Jesus dropped what he was doing all the time to stop and share a parable.”

“That’s what I’m asking you to do, Mom.”

“But he didn’t just do it whenever one of his disciples asked him to.”

“Am I one of your disciples?” I asked, laughing. “Are you Jesus?”

She glared at me, her eyes asking, what happened to you? Then she closed them, leaned her head back, and whispered, “I don’t think I’ve gone wrong, but if I have, Lord, show me where. Show me where.”

She fell asleep.

When she awoke nearly an hour later I was inside, hand washing and drying some dishes. She called out my name a few times, half-frantically. I hurried to her and she motioned at her cup, still full to the brim. She coughed wet coughs and when it subsided for a second I brought the cup to her lips and gave her a sip. Her hands wrapped around my wrists and the tip of one of my fingers was actually inside the cup, in the lukewarm tea, brushing against the corner of her loose lower lip as she held my wrists there, letting me know that she would be finishing the tea then and there. When she did I set the cup, and myself, back down and waited, phrasing in my head my apology for what I had said not about her, but about her God. That’s what would be bothering her.

“I would go there after school let out,” she said. I could see the muscles in her face and neck and shoulders start to relax back as if the tea were washing over them, smoothing them out.

“To church?”

“I would go there after school let out,” she said again, louder, to the porch’s ceiling.

“Where Mom? To church? Tell me where. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She paused. “I would go there after school let out.”

I realized she wanted to tell this one from start to finish, without me.

“And the children would always be so happy to see me. They would say, ‘Mrs. Pearl is the best puzzle-maker in the world.’ Now of course they could only see me—they could only go to the craft room—after they went through the museum, after they learned about the Presidents and the Wars and all the brave young men who made everything good for you and me. It was no secret, though, that the children weren’t coming to the museum every day after school for the history—they were coming for me and my puzzle machine. Now it wasn’t mine, of course, but they didn’t know that. So I would sit on my stool and watch them all still around the table coloring their little pictures on their little squares of cardboard the card shop donated to our organization. The little girls would draw rainbows, and the little boys would draw the nighttime sky. And then, all of a sudden a little boy would bounce up on his little boy feet and say ‘I’m finished!’ and then what do you know, suddenly all of them are done.

They form a neat line behind that first little boy and watch me make puzzles. What I do is slide the cardboard in just right so that the pieces cut evenly and then I pull the lever back—pull it back real hard so that the dull blade cuts right through, no raggedy edges. Then all the pieces fall into a tray underneath and the little child slips his little hands underneath the machine to retrieve them. Sixteen pieces it makes. Sixteen puzzle pieces.” She squeezed her hands together in her lap. I was afraid to move. If I did it might jolt her out of the story and she’d see that I was there—that I had been there all along, listening.

“They gave me notice. A volunteering position and they gave me notice. Well if that don’t beat all. One week. They said I had to go in one week. Said someone complained about me. A parent, no doubt. No doubt a parent whose little son or daughter told their mama that they loved me, the puzzle lady, Mrs. Pearl, that they loved me more than they loved their own mother. That’s not how it was supposed to be. That’s not how I intended it to be, but I’ve learned two things on this Earth. The first,” she said, extending her index finger and holding it in her other hand, “is that this is not my home. Our real home is in heaven. The second, the second is that the reason this can’t be my home is because this world makes you do crazy things—things you would never do if you were living where you were supposed to be living. Unexpected things.” She extended her second finger after making this point—she extended it in the

silence. She had forgotten to do it when she was supposed to. "But God, he understands. He understands how this world turns things upside-down right before your very eyes so that one day you think you're hugging your husband, when you're really hugging some other man. And how things can get so upside-down that you keep doing it day after day in this other man's home, when you're supposed to be making puzzles, but they've fired you because—because—because some little child had his own world turned upside down for a day and said something untrue about you. Said you did or said something you didn't, something you couldn't have, and decided to turn your world upside-down so that he didn't have to be the only one."

She turned very quiet. I tried to take it all in. The silence lasted for so long I was afraid she would forget to finish the story, to clear it all up for me, so I took a chance: "Mama," I said. "Mama what are you talking about?" I asked as gently as possible. "Who is this other man and what did the kid say you did and are you saying that you did something with some other man besides Daddy when he thought you were working the puzzle machine?"

She raised her head, then dropped it back again. "Do you know what we did the last day together, Kimberly?"

I wasn't sure if I wanted to know about an affair, and I wasn't sure if I could believe it even if I did know. My mother was growing old, almost growing old right in front of me. She had to be losing credibility.

"Do you know, Kimberly?" She was looking down her face at me.

I shook my head.

She pointed her gaze back up at the ceiling. "After I made the very last puzzle I had the children gather around the table and dump all their pieces in the middle of it. I told one of them to mix them all up real good. Then I told them to make a puzzle. They didn't think they could—not out of someone else's puzzle pieces—but I told them they had to. So each one made a puzzle that made no sense at all. They were crossbreeds, these puzzles. They were worlds turned upside-down, inside-out. And all of these beautiful children looked at their puzzles and didn't know what to say about them. I didn't know what to tell them about them. Should I tell them that these are the worlds that each and every one of them, each and every one of these beautiful children, is living in? I just didn't have the heart. They would have to learn for themselves, just like I did."

She started to nod off. I turned my chair away from her to face my garden and make sure the sprinkler was sprinkling correctly, and also to try and lay my life out in that open space, to see the hovering puzzle pieces, how they fit and

how they didn't fit. Then I gazed at my garden, for the first time, in light of her, and in light of the setting sun. I wondered if she would approve of what I'd done with the land. I had hoped when bringing her up there for the week that she would be well enough to walk down the rows of tomatoes and peppers and cabbages with me. I wanted to show her all the southern vegetables, the chard and butter beans, and I wanted her to see I was growing okra even though nobody in my family ate it. I thought maybe it would smell like growth and home to her, and she would see some of herself in me. It was my ultimate goal, but I hadn't been realistic. She could hardly walk on level surfaces, let alone tilled soil, and the woman couldn't even chew creamed corn. I had to stock the fridge with strawberry Ensure. And even though I cherished her memories it became more and more evident as the week wore on that she was telling me these stories as if I were an outsider, and could never fully understand even if I tried.

Since she was sleeping I left her to move the sprinkler. I stepped into my garden and pretended she was with me, holding onto my arm. I introduced her to all the vegetables, mentioned that I was growing three new kinds of greens that year and had cut back on the tomatoes since we were getting tired of my marinara. I told her to step over the cantaloupes, and she did, but she stopped

and marveled at my watermelons. We knelt down beside one and she smoothed her bony fingers up and down the melon.

“This one’s ready,” she informed me, running her index finger along one of the white stripes. She bent down to smell the soft, quarter-sized belly-button end of the fruit. She groaned and then repeated herself. “This one’s ready.”

I smiled and hoisted the watermelon up off the ground. I wobbled with it out of the garden, its weight curving my spine, and returned to my mother on the porch, still asleep. After setting it on the table I retrieved my largest knife from the kitchen. I sliced right down the soft, fresh center of the melon, and as soon as the blade penetrated the thick rind the aroma awakened my mother. It was as if the speed of smell multiplied exponentially on my porch that evening, as if I had picked the perfect fruit.

“What do you have there, Dear?” she asked.

“It’s a watermelon, Mama,” I answered. I cut an inch-thick slice from the middle and held it straight up in between her face and the sun so that the rays lit it up, shined through all the pink fructose crystals, revealing to this nearly-blind woman every angle and facet. She smiled, just like she did in the garden. I held it there for her to see for so long that by the time I lowered the slice the sun had sunk down. As I tipped it sideways, before I was able to put it on a plate, the watermelon flesh slipped from the rind and fell to the ground in intricately cut

pieces. It was as if the rays of setting sun had carved it like a scroll saw. I picked a puzzle-piece chunk up off the ground and placed it in the palm of my mother's open hand. She held it until it dissolved.