

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE VANDAL AND OTHER STORIES

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2022

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“The Vandal and Other Stories” is a collection that sprouts at the intersection of humor and earnestness, of connection and desperation. It features unlikely relationships – a man and his father’s God-anointed replacement, a woman and her emotional bodyguard, a washed-up actor and the surrogate baby he steals. It finds characters on planes, in DIY greenhouses, in vintage stores and asks them who they are at their least comfortable, who they’ll become at their strangest. These are stories of parenthood, obsession, queerness, and magic.

THE VANDAL
AND OTHER STORIES

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
2022

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The Vandal

It is 12:01 PM on a sleet-soaked winter Sunday when Georgie curses out the pastor. He barely waits the sixty seconds for her to step down from the pew of morning service, ruddy cheeks aglow with on-loan holy light. He helps old Mrs. Park from her bench, gentleman that he is, before stomping down the aisle with infernal curses slipping from the forked edge of his tongue.

She knows what is coming before he reaches her.

“Let’s not do this here.”

“Oh, in front of all your children? Your precious little lambs? Don’t want to goad them any farther from the light?”

Paster Harper is barely a year on the job – her wrinkles not yet deepened with passion, her sermons not yet buffed clean of entry-level cliché. She stiffens, her black robe straightening with her spine as if thrown over a hanger.

“We can talk in my office.”

“We can talk right here, right in front of the big guy.” Georgie crosses his arms, juts his chin upwards to the sickly statue adorning the crucifixion. Jesus’s brow warps in the afternoon light, a mixture of holy pity and annoyance. “I’m sure he’d like to hear whatever bullshit you have prepared.”

“How dare you,” she hisses.

Now Georgie's mother hurries her way up the aisle. I, seated modestly in a middle row, pretend to rearrange things in my purse. "We would love to speak in your office, Reverend."

"We would love no such thing." Georgie has always been short – the stubbornness in his body manifests as a low center of gravity. He widens his stance slightly, immovable.

"Fine, then. I'll be quick. I won't do it." Pieces of dull blonde hair fray at the scalp of Pastor Harper's slick bun.

"What do you mean?" Georgie's mother is all quiet and corn syrup sweetness, all benefit of the doubt.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable doing it."

"You're our fucking pastor."

"Georgie," his mother pleads, whine deepening.

"Don't 'Georgie' me, she's the pastor of this fucking church, I grew up in this church, and I'm going to get married in this fucking church."

Pastor Harper settles in her nerve, face smoothing. "I feel that my case is obvious."

Georgie rolls up onto the balls of his feet, face red. "Obvious, my pale ass."

"I think it would be best if you left."

I resist the urge to stand, to spit on her scuffed, gently used loafers. I am here not as calvary but as witness, notary to injustice.

"Do you think you could reconsider?" Mrs. Nolan putters.

"No, ma'am."

Georgie steps quickly from the room in the kind of angry quiet that scares me most. He is almost never quiet. He looks at me for a second and shakes his head. I avoid eye contact with

Pastor Harper and stand down. Mrs. Nolan tugs at the bottom of her knock-off Chanel suit, waits politely for me to rise. I fall into step at her right.

“Are you seeing anyone, Patricia?”

“No, ma’am.”

“That’s a shame.”

I hum as if she is sharing the weather.

“You know, I always thought it would be you and Georgie,” his mother whispers in her mewling falsetto. “You’ve always been so close.”

We hear the front door whip shut. She searches her bag for her car keys. “It would have been easier.”

Georgie only returned to town yesterday. He called me an hour before pulling up my mother’s driveway in his cherry red Crown Victoria and bounding the porch to lift me from the ground. I opened my arms with childish glee as he spun the world.

“Look at you, daughter of a bitch.” He was slightly breathless, sweaty, but beamed with that smile that showed all his teeth.

“That’ll never catch on, it’s not quippy enough.”

“I only say it because it’s true.”

Summoned, my mother appeared in the doorway. “George, you piece of shit!” His smile deepened as he charged forward, head down like a bull, to wrap his arms around her.

The first time Georgie came to my house I was terrified. He’d asked me to hang out after school one day, all charm and nonchalance. I waited a few moments for him to offer his house –

a small apartment attached to the church I knew the outside of well but had never seen within. When he hadn't I reluctantly offered my own. I'd warned my mother, forced her to iron my skirt, sweat through my itchy nylon stockings in anticipation of the preacher's son visiting my house.

Georgie was immediately entranced by her vulgar mouth, the hostility with which she enforced hospitality, bent the world to her whims while hacking up profanity. *Take your fuckin shoes off, kid, God, those look painful.* He had kicked off his stiff leather loafers and adored her ever since. My mother loves Georgie with as much ferocity as she can muster, and he returns it tenfold.

"I'm here for you, Ma. Screw Mr. Pat, screw Pat, and screw my fiancé, let's run away together." He shifted his hands to hold her mid-back and right hand tenderly, as if at any moment they would float off the porch in a waltz.

"You couldn't handle me." My mother squeezed his hand with her wrestler's grip, and he laughed himself down to one knee.

"You're right, Ma. You're always right."

"Can you eat?"

His smile widened, eyes glistening in the afternoon light. "You know I can eat."

Georgie is always hungry. Even if he came to our house directly after dinner he'd eat ravenously, as if he'd never seen a brisket in his life. Of course my mother loves him more for it, another language of endearment between them. When I struggled with eating in high school I used to offer him my plate but he'd look at me over the rim of his glasses with an unnervingly perceptive stare. He'd insist I eat until he was satisfied with my portion before shoveling down the rest. He's always been kind like that, not in the open, light way of his late father but in his own sharpness. He watches, he cares. He knows how to step in without embarrassment. I

convinced myself for a short period in the spring of sophomore year that I loved him. I moved my mouth towards his in a rush one weekend afternoon in the middle of a movie. I could hear the clattering of my mother preparing lunch over blood pounding in my ears. He pulled back, not surprised, tensed as if he'd been expecting it. He gave me a look, and I understood. We didn't need to talk about it.

I pride myself on that aspect of our friendship. There is a lot we understand without having to drag it into the open. When I asked him to buzz my hair before college he hefted the clippers without question. The summer before I picked him up from the lake half-naked and full-drenched and all we talked about on the drive home was ABBA. When he returned to town after two conspicuous years of absence it was no different. If he wanted my help, he'd ask for it. If he didn't, it was none of my business.

"Come to church with me tomorrow." The potato pipeline between plate and mouth churned as he chewed around the words.

"Redeemer Lutheran?"

He nodded. I didn't know why I asked, as if he had come all this way to visit some unknown service in the next town over. A part of me needed the confirmation. He hadn't stepped foot in his father's church since the funeral. I didn't pry. The words were out of my mouth before I thought about them, "What time?"

I find myself watching Georgie pace angry circles in the parking lot as if repeated strain to the asphalt could gouge a hole to hell and swallow him up. Mrs. Nolan waves cheerily at stragglers, ever the proper lady of the house, as if swapping niceties at a sales counter while her

child throws a tantrum on the floor. I nod a few hellos of my own, an infrequent but recognizable attendee. I work at the only consignment store in town, have run my hands over the silky vintage blouses of half the congregation and sold them back to the hip grandchildren of the other half.

“I’m going to try talking to him.”

“Oh, won’t you?” Mrs. Nolan perks up, relieved. There is a hesitation about her that has always unsettled me, as if she is eternally poised with a hand reaching for the check, slowly, waiting for someone else to grab it.

“Hey, buddy.”

He stops walking to roll his eyes at me. I only call him that when he is upset. Sometimes I hope the sheer annoyance will calm him.

“Do you want me to call Jeremiah?”

Georgie’s fiancé is warm, pliant, polite. They are the strangest pair, two novelty salt and pepper shakers that you aren’t quite sure were intended to be sold as a set. I was surprised to find Georgie came alone on this near-biblical errand, it felt like a vast mismanagement of talent. If Jeremiah were the one to approach Pastor Harper perhaps they would be in her office now having tea, laughing tinnily but earnestly, coordinating dates and times.

“No, no.” He rubs his palms together and exhales sharply. “I don’t want him to see how much this is rattling me. I told him I could handle it.”

I’ve met Jeremiah a handful of times. He hasn’t come here, to the practical boonies of north Pennsylvania, but I travel to Philly on occasion for work. When we meet, he greets me like an old friend. He offered his phone number on our first encounter when they’d been dating only months. He is the kind of man who is sure about things, who doesn’t hesitate to invite you into his life.

“Is that the kind of ‘handled’ we were going for?”

“She’s been dodging my emails for months. Sending vague as shit scripture in a copy-paste font that doesn’t even match the rest of the message. I was planning to be cordial,” I try not to laugh, “but she glanced over me and I knew she’d let Hell start serving ICEEs first.”

His hands are shaking. I pretend not to notice.

“Do you want a distraction? You have loose ends to settle in town, we still need to get our marriage annulled.”

“Nah, I can get more from you in a divorce settlement.” He perks up, sly smile returning and crinkling his square face. “I’ve hired a real shark, we’re gonna get you for everything you’re fucking worth.”

I dutifully follow his decline into an exaggerated radio-drama accent. “You wish, you two-cent scoundrel, you’re not gonna breathe a penny.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to gather some cash, all these years. I’ve been playing the long con.”

I break character, wheezing slightly. “You’re in for a rude awakening, I ain’t got much to give.”

“Patricia, are you headed to the store now?” I’d forgotten Mrs. Nolan was there. The parking lot is empty save for our cars and her shivering, lace-ruffled ankles. “I’ll join you.”

At the sound of her voice Georgie’s face drops. I planned to spend more time with him before opening the consignment shop for the afternoon but he holds his arm out for his mother’s keys. “You go with Pat, then. I’ll take your car home.”

“Why, thank you dear.” She smiles, placated.

His demeanor is darkened once more –stormy and wet. I figure he wants to be alone.

Georgie and I were married on the playground in 3rd grade. It was a recess wedding, dutifully prepared for and modestly well attended. My girlfriends made paper chains from cream, red, and pink construction paper and the boys were careful not to scuff Georgie's church shoes playing box ball. We prepared the aisle with hole-punch-scrap flower petals. I remember feeling disengaged, perhaps bored, but we were the only opposite sex friendship in class strong enough to withstand the pokings and proddings of inquisitive eight-year-olds. We made an odd pair – me, a foot and a half taller in boys basketball pants and a tank top, he, black hair so disheveled it formed a frizzy visor from the sun. Mike Brown led the ceremony, shoulders pulled back and face stern. He copied Mr. Nolan's movements with an eerie reverence, nailed the stiff back but flexible and pliant hand motions. At least half the kids in attendance went to church with us on Sundays, knew well what kind of performance was fit for such an occasion. If Georgie himself felt strange about the impression he didn't say.

I remember Georgie's father. It isn't his good looks or his thoughtful, plodding sermons, but his smell. That smell sticks with me, even now. Pungent, surprisingly floral for a man, damp. When he preached his sweat seemed divine – it reflected colored light from the windows and streamed down his face like holy tears. In his dining room, sitting to his left at dinner, it felt more mundane, almost sickly. Maybe he was sick, even then. The sickness clinging and mutating. His palms were always wet. I remember watching sweat coagulate on the sides of his water glass, mix with the condensation there. Food sometimes tasted more earthy next to him or if he had just left the room, I discovered, as Georgie and I grew closer and I began to frequent his house to admire his Pokémon card collection.

What Mike Brown was missing as our prepubescent pastor was that smell. The sweat. The passion for preaching that generated that dampness as if God were wringing him out after doing the dishes. He smelled instead of mozzarella sticks and homemade slime.

I remember the way Georgie's father treated Mrs. Nolan like a precious object, something so delicate and marvelous it would shatter if it made contact with a single door handle, chair back, coat hanger. It was his profession to be kind, but she was special. I remember being jealous of her, then. My mother was all fierceness, sharp. My father lived in bemused, muted harmony like a catfish crawling the bottom of a beta tank. I envied the kind of reverence the pastor showed his wife, even as Georgie complained about their architected, dollhouse life.

"Your parents are *real*, you know? They don't give a shit." We were in high school then, talking in-laws. "Mine are always on, always performing."

"For who? God?" I snickered.

"You're joking but honestly, I think so. My mom probably prays before she wipes her ass."

"And what is that performing, exactly?"

He adopted her breathy pitch and pushed his palms together. "Cleanliness is close to Godliness."

"Stop," I wheezed. "She can't say that in real life."

"Who knows what's real for her?" His face dropped, no longer laughing. "There's this version of me she has in her head. Sometimes I don't know which one of us she's talking to."

He wouldn't formally come out to me for a few more years, from the distance of a college dorm room and the emotional safety of a phone line. The easy joy of that day is familiar,

warm. He would come out to his mother after yet a few more, with a kind of tense, impersonal formality, at a kitchen table set only for two.

I drive Mrs. Nolan across town and once again she is waiting patiently for me – this time to unlock the door to *Frida's Consignment*. Mrs. Frida has all but retired from store management, hopped on a plane to Reykjavik the moment I was trained enough to handle things on my own. I'm not ashamed to admit I'm woman who values sedentary comfort. I use just enough of my accounting degree to feel satisfied with the real estate it takes up on my wall. The pay is generous and the heating is the best on the block. Mrs. Frida insists on keeping it on even when we're closed, swears the shop must be kept at an eternal, ideal temperature for the preservation of more delicate vintage items. Mrs. Nolan audibly sighs behind me, nose already tipped red from the cold.

“Are you looking for anything specific, ma'am?”

“Oh no, just browsing.” She stands in the dark a few moments as I walk to the back to flick on the lights. Her petite silhouette cuts a sad figure against the snowy display windows.

“Let me know if I can help you find anything.”

I'm annoyed she's here but too scared of her to be snippy. Georgie's voice echoes in my head, reflects and refracts the reality his mother inhabits. Since I was a child I've felt a need to impress her, to be the most well-groomed, behaved, mannerly of her son's playmates. I feel guilty, have felt guilty, to seek her approval even as I dislike her, even as Georgie deepens the distance that has been gaping between them. I feel the version of me that she has most imprinted upon come out here at the store – straight-backed, smooth-voiced. She knows when to be

charming, when to be flippant, picks almost none of her battles to fight. I cannot imagine how a boy like Georgie gestated in her ever-contracted, sample-sized womb.

“What do you think about this?” She holds up a blush pink dress, structured and neatly tapered at the knee.

“It’s beautiful, good condition, in the style of the 60s but we believe it was manufactured closer to the early 90s.” Frida insists I say “we” even if it is I who appraised the garment.

“Would it work for the wedding?” She holds it over herself, almost girlish.

“The color may read as white under the wrong lights. If you’re interested in pink I would go darker.”

“Hm,” she nods, “you’re right. Clever girl.”

I try not to be proud of myself. If Georgie were here he would scoff. My mother has stepped foot in the store only once, my first day, and muttered to herself *why would anyone want old, used clothes?* She is proud of me, I know, for running it on my own. She made my father and I a fantastic pork roast that night for dinner. But there is something alluring, ashamedly alluring, about the second me in Mrs. Nolan’s head. The one I have curated, unlike Georgie, who had his forced upon him. I find myself at times wanting to be her. The guilt thickens.

“Do you think there’s anything you could say to Pastor Harper?”

“What?” she looks up from a rack of dark pinks like budding flowers. “Oh, no. She’s made up her mind, there’s no reason to fuss.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice for Georgie and Jeremiah to be married in the church?”

“I suppose.” She speaks slowly, reluctantly, as if filtering her words through cheesecloth. “Though a no is a no.”

“Don’t you think that’s unfair?”

“Homosexual matrimony is mandated as individually autonomous by congregation leader by Churchwide Assembly.” The words are skillfully mimicked with no force of will. “It’s her decision.”

I can feel myself grow hot, angry. She turns away from me slightly, unused to my customer service persona slipping.

“Wouldn’t Pastor Nolan want her to make a different decision?”

She stiffens, still poised over the rack. “I couldn’t say.”

There is a long pause. The heater whirs, filling the empty space between us with hot air.

“She would listen to you. If you talked to her. Everyone knows the pull you have here.”

Her mouth quivers, for once, with something other than demure hesitation, “You saw that performance this morning.”

I had. My hesitation is traitorous. “You could still try.”

She gathers her purse to her elbow as if collecting my doubt to-go. “I think I’ll take my leave for now, Patricia. Let me know if you get anything in that might work.”

“Do you have a ride home?”

“I’ll figure something out. Thanks, dear.”

She leaves, her heels clicking loudly on the tile then softly on the carpeted welcome mat by the door. Her rosehip perfume lingers and sways. I try Georgie’s phone only to reach busy tones, a full voicemail. I call again to hear his voice, repeating his own name brusquely and a bit annoyed. I order lunch. Only two more people come in during my shift. Neither buy anything. I call him at the top of each hour, left with only silence as the sun sets.

Pastor Nolan used to drive us to soccer practice. I remember how strange that felt, otherworldly. Riding in God's Chariot (what my mother called their 1993 Chevy but I would never dare repeat) to the short-cropped fields that were as much goose-shit as dirt. The pastor was always early, so Georgie and I would kick a ball around alone before the other kids arrived. The other parents brought folding chairs and Tupperware, younger siblings who built igloos from stolen umbrellas, but Pastor Nolan always stood. Arms crossed, arms at his side, chest forward, chin up to Heaven. He knew the rules to soccer better than anyone but never argued with a call or cheered too loud from the sidelines. He would wait until we were driving home, Johnny Cash playing on the third lowest volume, to mutter *number five was offsides on that last play*. Georgie would look at me and roll his eyes.

One particular practice, in the wind-rustled quiet of a space before two dozen fifth graders descend, I was practicing my net shots with Georgie in goal. I was a decent striker with a solid growth spurt and I blasted what I still believe to be my most successful ever kick directly into his golden, freshly sun-screened face. When the ball dropped blood poured from his nose like a water flosser and flooded the front of his uniform – our white “home” jersey. The pastor yelped, running over in a panicked half-hop but Georgie was beaming, blood catching on the curves of his gums and outlining the edges of his small white teeth.

“Oh HELL yeah! The other team is going to think I'm a beast!”

The pastor stopped moving. Georgie and I blinked at each other with the same regretful panic we would years later when he mowed down the Nolan family mailbox on the way back from his driver's test or when I ripped my mother's wedding dress dancing to Mariah Carey on his ping pong table. It was the first time his father had heard him curse. He was pulled from the game. Georgie swore he was fine, smiled and laughed as our teammates strolled up hooting at

the flash of blood. Our coach, really just Monica Harley's dad in a nicer shirt than usual, argued with Georgie's father about benching our goalie before realizing who he was speaking to, and by extension, Speaking to. He backed off.

They couldn't really leave – Pastor Nolan took his duty to my mother as extracurricular chauffeur quite seriously. Georgie and his father retreated to a far corner of the field. A few of us watched as the pastor bent his tall frame over his son. They stood there, too far to really see, just smudges on the horizon like errant brushstrokes on a landscape. That's how I remember the Pastor Nolan of my childhood. He felt like the kind of man who belonged more to a portrait than real life. His straight back and crisp collar was better suited to some pedestal or frame, than the reality of his two-garage house in the suburbs. His peculiarities, his humanity, didn't come to me until I was older. Until I was sitting with Georgie in the waiting room of the hospital, air thick with disinfectant and death. Pastor Nolan had taken to Rubix Cubes as the sickness settled. I could hear the soft clicking and shifting of the pieces down the hall. The creation of order from chaos, the sure guidance of hands that had spent decades lifting spirits, souls. I had tasked myself with refilling those silly cone-paper cups, pressing water into Georgie's palms and tossing the wet pulp remains every half hour or so. We listened for the clicking. Knew that if it stopped that meant it was over.

I find Georgie at the soccer fields. The sunset makes the chipping white goal glow orange, cages him in brilliance like the subject of stained glass. He's sitting in the middle of the net and I feel it again. The smudgy distance, the sensation of looking in on a painting. But the man sitting ripping up grass like a child isn't a haloed portrait but my friend.

“Hey, buddy.”

He throws a fistful of grass at me. It flutters softly in the air, smugly non-aerodynamic.

“Do you want to talk?”

I give him time to consider it. Georgie takes every question seriously. Has since we were kids. He used to drive my mother crazy, brows furrowed in the backseat, deciding whether to get the girl’s or boy’s Happy Meal with a calculated intensity. I know that if he were to say no I would still be here, in silence. Watch the sun go down over the cornfield across the road till the dead stalks are set to flame.

“It’s my father’s church, Pat. My fucking church.”

“I know.” I sit.

“I skinned my knees on those floors. I wiped my snot under every pew. I used to practice my times tables talking up to the fucking crucifixion. Every inch of that place is *mine*. How could I do it anywhere else?”

“Is that what this is about?” I begin plucking long pieces of grass to tie together.

“Ownership?”

He is quiet. I wrap my chain around his wrist a few times before tying it off.

“No. Maybe. In part.” He pauses. “I never got to tell him.” He is small, here. Dwarfed by the looming metal structure of the goal. I remember how he threw himself to the ground on this grass with such ferocity, how he stretched his arm sockets to their limit to hold this line.

“He loved you a lot.”

“He loved everyone.”

“Does that count for less?”

Another pause. It is pungent with the torn grass's wet pulp. "It's scarier. To not know if care like that has limits. Where they are. If you're it."

"I don't think so."

"*Think* is the problem."

"He was always better about that kind of thing." His mother lurks on the other end of the open comparison, her gloved hands crossed over the handle of a handbag, her lips pressed thin. Georgie has none of that closeness, that sensation of being pulled inwards like a collapse. Everything about him is open, pushed out. He is sprawled on the grass with his legs wide.

"It was his job to be respectful, empathetic. But he can't have meant it, every time. To be *that* guy, for everyone, you must have to lie."

"Do you think he would lie to you?"

"He didn't get the chance."

The sun has set behind the cornfield. The dried stalks pierce the inky blueness of the sky with a more pronounced darkness. The stars are out. I have run out of questions, come up against the unproddable. I cannot rip the approval of Georgie's father from the sky, reverse the process of heroic constellation. I would if I could. He knows that. It has no choice but to be enough.

I wake up in the back of my car beneath the old quilted blanket from the trunk. Georgie is in the driver's seat, grass stains on his white button down. He is fiddling with my keys between his fingers.

"I want to go back."

"To Philly?"

“To Redeemer Lutheran.”

I look at the dash clock. It’s 3AM. “Alright, you drive.”

The lot is empty save for Pastor Harper’s car, tucked in the reserved space near her apartment. We park on the far side. Georgie pops the lock to the church proper with his spare key, a remnant of early morning chores from our youth. It looks different in the dark, bathed in blue moonlight. The stained glass fall in muted patterns, silhouettes of Mary and Joseph cutting through shadow.

Georgie walks down the aisle to the front-left pew. It is where he and his mother sat every Sunday, twice a Sunday. My parents preferred the back. When I join him everything feels magnified, warped like a fish-eye. For the second time in my life I see the lines in the velvet where the stage pulls up to reveal the pool for baptism.

“I want him.”

I panic for a second, dart to look for some spectral echo of his father, pulled to existence by the force of his son’s longing. Then I follow Georgie’s gaze upward, to Jesus languishing below the chorus balcony.

“You have to be kidding.”

“For my wedding. Do you think he’ll fit in my car?”

“That’s a ticket straight to hell, for the both of us.”

“With the seats down?”

“I swear to God, Georgie.”

“Good place for it, he’s listening.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

“There’s a ladder in the supply room.” He slips from his seat and moves behind the stage with long strides. For the first time in a long time I bend my head over to pray.

When Georgie returns his sleeves are rolled up, eyes bright. I groan but step to hold the base of the ladder as he unfurls its metal limbs and begins to climb.

“Oh, he’s bigger up close.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Language, my lamb.” He pulls a screwdriver from his back pocket, no doubt also pilfered, and begins to work at the cross’s supports. After a few minutes and screws dropped to my waiting hand he begins to whistle, the sound of it echoing like the softest note from the organ. I watch the door, nervous at any second Pastor Harper will appear in her nightgown, dripping with the fury of the Lord.

When the cross comes free he hefts it with a grunt, twisting until his right shoulder supports most of the weight. “It’s lighter than I expected, I think it’s hollow.” I stare up at him, bearing the weight of the cross as the cross bears the weight of the son of God. Jesus hangs placidly – our abduction is not the worst fate he has suffered. Georgie takes slow, careful steps down the ladder. When he is within reach I steady him with my palms.

“Do you think your mom will let us keep him in her garage until I can come back with Jeremiah’s truck?”

I groan, “Unfortunately, yes.” I can already hear the cacophony of curses she will unleash, halfway between indignance and hilarity. He smiles, picturing the same scene with a fondness I will never understand. It takes some finagling, but we get the cross out the door and into the back of my car, seats folded down and trunk open. Jesus’ feet stick out into the cold. I find myself muttering apologies in a near-constant stream.

The sound of the engine starting disrupts the quiet of the church lot. Snow has fallen to coat the asphalt. I can see it piling softly to cover our footsteps from the door. I look at Georgie, grinning to himself as he tunes the radio by hand, chuckling softly as the static focuses to shape the opening chords of “Boy Named Sue.” Over his shoulder is the head of Jesus, looking piously upward, as snow melts on his bloody brow to drip like holy sweat.

The Bodyguard

Aspirin Jones was having the kind of week that warranted professional help. She spent her lunch break trolling forums for answers, a lunch break she usually spent with her girlfriend Theodora three floors down at the company café. They worked at the kind of company that funded its own café, but not the kind of company that funded a café that was good. Interns occasionally used the muffins to play floor hockey and the local unhoused population had learned to turn away leftovers of wet turkey sandwiches that popped and oozed in the mouth like old grapes. Nobody was quite sure what the company did, at least, no one on Aspirin's floor. They were a hip start-up in the vaguest, most soulless way – a booster of *synergy* for caffeinated fruit juices, or maybe a buy-one-donate-one project but only for tap shoes. The children of Tibet need tap shoes, after all. Theodora probably knew. Theodora made things okay. Theodora could make even the café of brick-stale croissants okay. She preferred to be called Theo, actually. Bore the abbreviation with the cool and finesse people like Aspirin practiced in the mirror, eye twitching unsultrily beneath bathroom fluorescents. Aspirin had never had a nickname. She had never had a hip corporate job. She had never had a fight so catastrophic with a girl so good and kind that her keyboard was slick with stress-sweat. She found the street address of the kind of agency she was looking for – only 6 blocks away, lucky – and made plans to go after work.

“I'm looking for a bodyguard.”

The woman behind the counter was scratching at a patch of eczema with the back of her pen. She had the kind of stacked, matching jewelry only people with their lives together had the time and eye to collect. “What kind of body are you looking to guard?”

“Well,” Aspirin pushed at her desk-wrinkled work clothes, “mine, I suppose.”

The woman looked at her carefully, then looked through her, as if appraising the clarity of a stone. “We can do that.”

“When would they be able to start?”

The woman sat up in her chair. “Are you anticipating immediate need?”

Aspirin thought of Theo, her voice cold and distant, arms crossed over her chest. “Well, yes. I was hoping to leave with one today.”

“I see.” The woman began to click at her computer more purposefully, less like a 4th grade extra in a theater production trying to convincingly play with a prop. “Let me check who’s available. Fill out this paperwork while you wait.”

The files were extensive and slightly invasive. *Allergies? Medications? Sexual preferences? Physical weaknesses? Adverse Childhood Experiences? Most used apps? Screentime? Phone log? Check all that apply: Addiction (Gambling, Substances, Online MMORPGs), Poor Relationship (Parent, Child, Sibling, Partner, “Ungrateful” Pet)...*

“These are,” she coughed, pen hovering over each box, “thorough.”

“Do you have any questions?” The woman’s dangly gold earrings clinked together as she raised her head.

“No, no. Thank you.”

“Let me know.”

Aspirin would usually not have the budget for this kind of thing. Bodyguards were rarely covered by insurance, and surely not by hers. *It's an emergency*, she thought as she scribbled her information below payment plan options. A few weeks of jasmine rice and pinto beans wouldn't kill her. Losing Theo? Well...

“You're lucky, I've got someone available via cancellation.”

“Are they good?” Aspirin felt her voice waver at the base of her undecorated throat.

“The best.”

And so Aspirin walked another 10 blocks to her apartment trailed by a very large, very suited professional. The suit was just like the ads – crisp and three-pieced and with very carefully pressed seams. She wondered if they all had their own, or if they kept a rack of them in the back of the agency like uniforms. She wondered what they wore on their days off, if they still carried that very largeness in the same way in jeans. When they arrived at the door Aspirin fumbled with her keys, nervous to be watched so closely. Her Bodyguard noticed and looked away to scan the porch, tip the flowerpot gently with their foot, shake at the railing to test the sturdiness of the grout. The lock finally caught and clicked.

“So this is it.” Aspirin announced, pulling at her shoes.

“Stay here while I scan the place.” The Bodyguard moved her to the side with their arm and stepped ahead into her living room. She stood still, tensed straight under her jacket like a coatrack.

“Oh, yes. Um, of course.” She regretted not tidying up more thoroughly. The Bodyguard walked in precise, measured strides around the perimeter of each room, winding inwards to peer into her lampshades and under her furniture. She tried to remember the last time she had dusted.

“Clear.”

“Oh, good.” Aspirin unfroze. “Can I get you a glass of water?”

“No drinking on the job.”

“No drinking water?”

The Bodyguard peered at her. She regretted not reading the handbook the necklace-stacked lady had slipped into her bag.

“What can I call you?”

“Don’t.”

“Alright.”

They sensed her discomfort. “It’s a privacy thing. I’m here for your protection, not your connection.”

“Is that a line from the ads?”

They stood upright with their hands clasped behind their back. No answer. Aspirin reached in her bag for the handbook, but was surprised instead by her phone buzzing cheerily.

“Crap, it’s Theo.”

“Theodora Wood?”

Aspirin nodded, thumb hovering over a photo of her own face kissing Theo’s cheek.

“Negative. You can’t take the call.” The Bodyguard pinched her phone out of her hands with a snap like a crab claw closing.

“What?”

It disappeared into some neatly pressed pocket on the inside of their jacket. “Phone break-ups cause brutal emotional damage to clients. It’s against policy to allow the acceptance of incoming calls from estranged lovers.”

“What if she was calling to say something nice? To fix things?”

“And what if she wasn’t? Are you prepared for that possibility?”

Aspirin looked down, wondered when the Bodyguard had removed their shoes as well. Questions like this consumed her. Her brain generated web after web of possibilities – Theo hated her, she was furious, she never wanted to see her again, she was dying, she was moving to Guadalajara, she had adopted a puppy but Aspirin was never allowed to meet it. “No.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I need my phone.”

“You don’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“In the last 24 hours you’ve spent 3 on Twitter, 2 watching Korean dramas, and 2 online shopping for chunky knit cardigans at work. You’ve ignored calls from your mother, your internet service provider, and your girlfriend.”

“Well, that last one wasn’t my idea.”

“I still fail to see why you need your phone as you will not use it to fulfill its primary function.”

“If you knew what it was like to speak to my mother you wouldn’t be so judgmental.”

“It is not my job to pass judgement, only to minimize harm.”

“Fine.” Aspirin resolved to fix herself a glass of water. The Bodyguard strode to the window to assess line of sight to the street, held their right hand up to the fading sunlight as if it could be cupped and caught.

Aspirin had met Theo at a frozen yogurt shop. Not in the tight period of a few years where that would have been trendy or cool but in the wake of that trendiness when they felt more like desecrated graves from a lost, mango-tinted era. She frequented an off-brand chain after work to drown her late-stage capitalistic sorrows in cookie dough chunks and baby Swedish Fish paid for by the pound, considerably more expensive than if she purchased such miniature luxuries at the store herself.

“You don’t like the yogurt either?” A voice like handbells at Christmas. A smell like vanilla beans scraped clean with a knife. She had dark hair like hot asphalt and a red trench coat that folded luxuriously on the lime-green pleather stool.

“Huh?”

“I’m lactose intolerant.” The stranger tipped her paper bowl conspiratorially, chunks of Reece’s Cups swimming in sprinkles like kids in a ball pit. “I just like mixing candy.”

“Me too!” Aspirin swiveled too far, barely caught herself with the heel of her foot. “Well, I can process dairy, not that part. The candy mixing. I like that.”

“Cool.” The woman smiled. It was absolutely not cool. Nice of her to say, though. Nice of her to say anything at all. Nice of her to exist so resplendently, so aromatically, so close in proximity.

Aspirin looked around the shop, empty save for the bored attendant. “Come here often?”

The woman laughed, the kind of laugh that showed the gums above her front teeth. She was someone who hadn't been teased into making herself small. She was beautiful and cool like that. She had the above-teeth gums of someone people were nice to.

“No, I'm starting work tomorrow at a building up the street. Figured I'd scope out the area.”

Her name was Theodora, Theo for short. Her new job was six floors up. She liked peanut butter and things that came in more than one color and pants that were tailored from the front but had elastic in the back and rhododendrons and husky-mixes and plants that grew in low light and Turkish coffee and calligraphy and historically accurate costuming in period pieces and popcorn with the caramel on it and women. That last one was important. Aspirin asked her on a date the third time they met. She wore the trench coat and brought snacks loose in a bowl.

Aspirin missed her very much.

“Your mother is at the door.”

“My mother!” Aspirin jumped onto the couch as if she were very young and the floor were lava.

Her Bodyguard turned to her from their position bent down to the keyhole, face professionally smooth. “What should I say?”

“I don't want to talk to her.”

“Ma'am, I must ask you to leave the premises.”

“What? Who is that? Aspirin, I know you're in there. Open the door.”

“Not a good time!” Aspirin said meagerly.

The Bodyguard repeated it louder, more forceful. "It's not a good time."

Aspirin coughed twice, "I'm ill."

"Too ill to open the door?"

"Um," She looked to the Bodyguard for support. They were impassive. "Yes. Just wasting away."

"You are the most dramatic, least sensical girl I've ever met. I'm coming in." She heard metal jingle against metal, cursed her past self for handing over a spare key.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. Door stays closed." The Bodyguard braced their large shoulders against the door and planted their feet.

"What? Did you get a *bodyguard*?"

Aspirin coughed twice more, projecting this time. "I'm probably contagious! It's best if you go, for now."

"You're a grown woman, Aspirin. This is a new low."

"Well aware!"

"Fine." There was a soft thud. "I've already gone through your mail, I'll leave it out here with some food. You really should stop giving your address away, most of this is junk."

"That's a totally appropriate thing for you to have done! Talk soon!" Her footsteps echoed down the stairs. Aspirin exhaled and fell to the couch. The Bodyguard did a sweep of the staircase, entryway, and parking lot before returning with Tupperware and a stack of envelopes ripped neatly at the base.

"This is a felony. Would you like me to file the paperwork to press charges?"

"No, thank you. She would have a heart attack and die. I know her will is just full of nasty tasks for me to complete. Maybe some insults. Not worth it."

“Understood.”

“You know she named me Aspirin because my grandmother told her children would only be a headache.”

“It would be unprofessional of me to laugh.”

“It would.”

Aspirin’s mother liked Theo. She liked Theo a lot. That was somehow stranger and worse than the alternative, the alternative she was used to and trained for. Rather than disapprove and critique like she did Aspirin’s past partners her mother gushed over Theo. What a lady, what good posture, what silky hair, what manners. Though they worked at the same company Theo’s position was more senior, more important. It involved more math. Her mother had always approved of math. Theo was charming and stunning and intelligent and empathetic. Aspirin knew these things. She loved this woman, angelic and flat-footed and allergic to cilantro and with a second soprano voice like chimes at the Renaissance fair. What she did not love was her mother’s insistence that she was *too* good, *too* charming, *too* smart to be dating a girl like her daughter. Theo could do better, couldn’t she?

To her credit, Theo laughed these comments away with grace. She didn’t show her gums. She held Aspirin’s hand a little tighter. But it wasn’t enough to ward off the insignificance, the paranoia. What if she was right? What had she done, in a life that felt fleeting and slapped together like an amateur scrapbooking experiment, to earn and deserve the affection of someone like Theo? She found herself lying in bed at night taking stock. She had hiked Machu Picchu. She spoke French with her high school teacher’s Canadian accent. She liked to think she had a

sixth sense for when avocados were ready without touching them. Were these the things that made up a desirable partner? No. Keep going. She had an impressive collection of pajama shorts. She and Theo were the same size, they shared. She played the cello. She was good in bed. She always held the door open. She kept sprinkles and Reece's Cups in her pantry. She got Theo's oil changed when the light came on, on a Sunday while Theo slept in. As long as they were dating she would never see that light. Could that be enough?

Aspirin exited the shower to find her Bodyguard standing over the Tupperware, a single spoonful scooped from the center of each dish.

"Poison control. They're all clear. The quiche is quite good."

"She cooks with a lot of hate. The ingredients behave."

The Bodyguard let out a low hum of interest. "I repaired the catch in your front door lock and installed the window privacy screens you requested at time of rental. Is there any other aspect of your security you'd like me to assess?"

"Can I have my phone back?"

"Have you decided how to approach and solve your conflict with Ms. Wood?"

"No."

"Then no."

"Fair."

She sighed, then sat to face her desk. It was littered with multi-colored confetti, gold leaf, and flecks of wax. Laid out next to crisp white envelopes were photos of couples smiling,

couples hiking, couples cartoonishly poised with mouthfuls of connected pasta. Some were more explicit, marked with sticky notes where there was no face.

“What is all this?”

Aspirin shuffled the polaroids into a messy pile she covered with her hand. “My side job. It used to be my main job but things got tight.”

“Invitations?”

“Love letters. I’m a ghost writer. People who want to send romantic notes but aren’t good with words hire me. They send over some details and maybe photos and I get something special in the mail in one to two business days.”

“Quick turnaround.”

“It’s easy. You should see the kind of things people send me. The trick is to have specific questions about their partners. They gush out some pretty touching stuff and all I do is rework it, glamorize it.”

“Have you ever written one for yourself?”

Aspirin worried the crisp edges of a new pack of silver leaf between her fingers. “No. I don’t do personal notes. There’s a power to anonymity – to taking on a new voice. Mine has the risk of failure behind it.”

If the Bodyguard had an opinion on this, it didn’t show in their face. “You do friends and family discounts?”

“Not historically. Why?”

“I’d like one for my girlfriend.”

“You have a girlfriend?”

“You think you’re the only person in the universe with a girlfriend?”

Aspirin dropped her head to the table with a thunk like a pathetic, lethargic woodpecker. “I’m sorry.” She rolled her forehead over the wood, felt glitter hearts imprint themselves on the skin. “Every time I speak, I mess things up.”

The Bodyguard did not respond. They stood in the door to her bedroom, blocked away the world outside. It helped.

It was two nights ago Aspirin sat on Theo’s couch, plush red velour, watching her girlfriend cry. Not soft movie tears that roll down the cheek in turns but big fast ones, river tears, unlevied by the palms of her hands to run down her wrists and fall on her lap and leave dark circular patches on the denim over her thighs. She had never made Theo cry like this before.

“I feel like you’re not really talking to me. Were you even listening just now?”

She had been, she had. She must have been. She cared so much. But it felt fuzzy now, like distant static. She could feel the back-prickliness of the couch and taste the snot on her lip – that’s right, she had been crying too – but the moments before, the talking, they were cloudy. She didn’t like talking this way. She didn’t like opening herself up for misspeaking, for faulty assumptions or insufficiency. Each moment of conflict felt like moving chess pieces, conceding losses, or revealing her vulnerabilities with each word not sufficiently calculated, cross-checked. She blocked out thinking like this. The feelings fell into some chasm inside her like toppled play blocks. It wasn’t the first time.

Aspirin liked to pretend bad things weren’t happening. It was the kind of mental habit that was pitiful and endearing in a child but delusional in an adult. That’s what she was – an overgrown child nurturing a misalignment of maturity that had stayed past its welcome. Nobody

prepared her for that, for the idea that your faults would fester and become less and less appropriate over time, that you needed to work that shit out before you found yourself in the splash zone of your lover's disappointment. She checked out of difficult conversations. After their last unresolved argument, she had shown up to a dinner with friends with a smile, had reached for Theo's hand beneath the table only for it to be pulled back with suspicion and hurt. She played dumb when Theo recalled a past conversation, a past failure. She doubled down when she sensed her growing frustration. These were mistakes. Aspirin knew that. But she couldn't hold all of them at once. There were easier things to hold. The red trench coat, remember to remind Theo to tie up the belt or the ends will drag. Remind the waiter no cilantro on the tacos. Theo's calligraphy pen had run out of ink, Aspirin had already found a local shop that sold replacement cartridges. It wasn't enough, it wasn't enough. It wasn't the right kind of thing to remember, not now. Not now.

The Bodyguard handed her a tissue. She had been crying.

She wiped at the founts of liquid. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We're to encourage crying or safe exhibitions of strong emotion whenever possible."

Aspirin was Theo's first ever girlfriend. Second partner period. The role felt precious, dangerously heavy, like an oversized infant you're not quite sure how to heft without seeming rude to the mother.

"It's time, for tonight."

Aspirin looked over at the cat-shaped clock above her bed. It tracked the room with its unsettling, ever-moving eyes. It was 8 PM. The full 24-hour package had been over double the cost. It was for the best, probably, that she couldn't afford to pay someone to watch her sleep.

"I will wait for you at the corner of Piedmont and Main to escort you home from work tomorrow." They slid her phone from their breast pocket and placed it on her desk. "I will check your call log in the morning."

"You don't have to worry about that."

The Bodyguard nodded and let themselves out. She locked the door behind them, felt the handle jostle as they checked from the other side. Her phone was silent, still. If she squinted and truly indulged in her cowardice, she could pretend it was another paperweight, a slate gray anomaly in the wood grain. She had been doing that more and more lately – warping reality to avoid confrontation, fear. *It's not fair.* She could hear the slight tremor in Theo's voice, fractured in her memory. *You can't pretend everything is okay all the time. I need you to be here.* She turned off her phone before flicking off the light.

It didn't take long to establish a kind of routine. Aspirin began packing lunch for work to avoid the café and the lobby in general, the only places their paths would cross. When she got off her Bodyguard met her down the block, straight-backed and formidable. Each day they asked her if she had decided on a course of action, and with each no they slipped her phone into their pocket. They insisted on walking on the street-side of the sidewalk, lightly corrected her path with their arm when confronted with an obstruction or puddle. People gave them a wider berth than she had ever experienced on her own. Most glanced over the Bodyguard then averted their

eye. She had never travelled the city so peacefully, so unperceived. She wasn't catcalled a single time in three days.

Her time with the Bodyguard was marked by a potent emptiness. She was too embarrassed to goof off beneath their watchful eye and finished three times as many love letter orders as usual. *My beloved, my dearest, my angel.* Each time she thought of Theo, pressed her embarrassment and self-hatred between dried flowers and glitter into wax.

"I don't know why I'm so afraid to face her. I'm the heartbreaker." She had gotten into the habit of speaking aloud while she worked. Partly to herself, partly to the Bodyguard, who spent a few hours each evening cleaning lint filters and oil deposits, fielding texts from ex-partners or her mother. Most of their time was spent in ambient space. It was nice to not be alone.

"Oh?"

"I've dated seven people and I've never been dumped."

The Bodyguard bristled.

"What? Be honest, I want to hear it."

They sighed, "People like you can make my work very difficult. Heartbreak prevention is one of our top referral requests. Tricky stuff."

"I would argue at least half of them weren't my fault. My high school girlfriend cheated on me, one in college got physical. Some situations force your hand."

"And this one?"

"This one," Aspirin crushed used tissues between her palms, compacting a plush sphere to coagulate and discard. "I want it."

"Was that the issue?"

“No. I’ve always wanted it. The issue is I’m a chickenshit coward who’s afraid to be vulnerable with someone I think is better than me.” She tossed the tissue sphere and missed the can. “I love her. What if she figures it out?”

“I don’t know.” The Bodyguard shrugged.

“Insightful.”

“I’m a guard not a therapist.” They held up a hand and swiped the air. “Protection, not connection. If you wanted to avoid her for the rest of your life I could make that happen,” they paused, “for a fee.”

“Do people do that?”

“Sure. Long-term guarding is nasty stuff. I could insulate this apartment, your entire world from external stimulus. Could carry you from room to room, beat back a nephew after your inheritance with a stick.”

She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“Metaphorically, of course.”

She didn’t believe them. “Of course.”

“Is that what you want? To never speak to your partner again?”

“No. Not at all.”

“You know where to find the renewal paperwork if you change your mind.” The cat-clock leered over them, 8 PM. “Tonight is the last shift you booked.”

“Can I ask, would you ever hire a bodyguard?” The Bodyguard was tall, broad, confident, sure. They had the kind of energy that made you feel safe. They had the kind of energy Aspirin wanted to extract with a syringe and keep for herself. “Do you feel qualified to protect yourself?”

“Oh no,” they chuckled. “I have one of my own who will pick me up from here and escort me home.”

“Really?”

“It’s nice to feel protected.”

“Why aren’t they with you all the time?”

“It would be unprofessional to bring my bodyguard to work.”

“Does that mean,” Aspirin hesitated, calculated her savings account, “you couldn’t come with me to work tomorrow? If I asked?”

“It means if I do we mustn’t tell anyone.” They winked, “And you will allow me to take your mother’s latest quiche home with me in return. Otherwise, you’ll be billed only the standard fee.”

“Deal. We’re incognito, then.”

“Affirmative.”

The next morning Aspirin’s Bodyguard met her at the stoop, suit draped in a large fur coat and hat.

“You look dapper.”

“You look scared.”

“I am scared.” Aspirin gripped the letter she had written Theo the night before, fussing over each character and detail until the floor of her room was coated in inkblots and silver leaf.

The envelope was sealed with red wax, pressed with winding florals.

“What kind of danger should we expect? Is Theodora Wood proficient in any martial arts?”

“I think she did karate as a kid.” Aspirin thought of Theo in a petite white gi and yellow belt, putting on a fierce face for her mother’s smudgy phone camera. “But no, no physical danger.”

“Emotional danger, then.” The Bodyguard rubbed their chin, “How would you rank her knowledge of CIA mental torture tactics?”

“On what scale?”

“One to ten.”

“One point five.”

“Understood.”

They walked a few blocks before Aspirin caught the faint curve of a smile below the hat. “Wait, were you joking?”

“I never joke.”

Aspirin had planned a lie about her cousin shadowing her at work that proved useless. The building receptionist buzzed them both to the elevator without looking up, bored. They were alone on the long ride to her floor.

“I can do this.”

“Yes.”

“I can.”

“Yes.”

Aspirin looked at herself in the warped chrome reflection of the elevator wall. She looked flushed, twisted, a bit diagonal. Her mother always told her she should stop sleeping on her side, try to even out her face. She pushed on her left cheek now, tried to make something sensible from the distortion. She was still pressing at the skin with her fingertips when the door opened to reveal her girlfriend.

“Theo!”

“Aspirin.” There she was. She looked, shockingly, relieved. She looked over Aspirin’s shoulder, then up. “Who’s this?”

It was only then Aspirin noticed a tall, suited figure behind Theo, suit poorly covered with an oversized yellow rain jacket. “Who’s that?”

“My notary.”

“My cousin.”

Both women blinked at each other, too nervous and tightly wound to laugh. Aspirin felt like a bobbin spinning endlessly at the top of a Springer, dizzy and bound with thread.

“I wrote you this.” She thrust the letter forward with both hands, bent formally at the waist.

“I haven’t heard from you in almost a week.” Theo took the envelope, grazed the hard-set wax with her fingertips. “And I thought you didn’t write personal notes.”

“I’m sorry. I say that in there, a few times. I say a lot of things. It’s not everything you deserve, not yet. It’s a start. I’m facing things.”

The raincoat wearer held out their hand for the envelope, but Theo shook her head. “It’s safe, thank you.”

Aspirin felt herself melt, loosen at the joints, pirouette counterclockwise to leave a pool of string at her feet. She felt the wide palm of her Bodyguard hover above her shoulder, anchored like the spring at the base of a music-box dancer. *It's safe.*

Exclusive Access: Joy Apology

If you're reading this, you probably know me. My name is Francis Manuel Gordon. I was born in Buenos Aires. I briefly attended private school near Fishkill, New York. My father was a trader at Goldman and my mother was active in the Laguna Homeowner's Association. Most of you won't know me from any of that. If you're cultured you may recognize me for a secondary role in the film adaptation of an old German musical – I've been told my death scene was particularly memorable, that it would take me more "serious" places (it didn't). If you have kids, I was the voice of the swashbuckling protagonist in that animated pirate adventure movie – yeah, the one on Mars, no, that didn't make sense to me either. If you're into music you may recognize my mugshot as the album cover to a popular alternative band's platinum record (they never asked for permission, I used to be mad about that but I'm not, anymore). If you are none of those things but you're of a certain age and have eyes you'll know me as Frankie Joy. It's my least favorite thing to be recognized for, even though I have a black eye and a missing tooth in the mugshot. At least the songs are good.

First off, I want to say I'm sorry. For this thing, of course, I'm getting to that, but also for making most of you victim to the Frankie Joy Experience. It wasn't my choice to be on billboards, commercials, bus benches, sky planes, internet pop-ups, airplane safety videos. My manager used to say all press is good press, all jobs are good jobs. She was a real piece of work. Towards the end we would take everything, and I mean *everything*. You've probably seen every part of my body somewhere or somehow, even if you didn't know it was me. I always know. Most of you won't know how it feels to turn on the TV late at night and see yourself dead on the

ground. Change the channel and your disembodied arm is holding a can of Coke. Change again and your hair is the wrong color, they've doctored it in post to sell shampoo. The editing isn't quite right, the edges are pixelated and squared off. You get up close to the monitor, sear your eyes in the dark. Is that what you look like? Your hair is blonde naturally. You used to be famous for that. It's red here, dark like blood. You feel neatly untethered to reality, here on the screen, as if you could trace a black line around the edge of you and cut you from lived existence with an X-acto knife. Paste you in a scrapbook. Leave yourself for dead.

I'm getting distracted, I'm sorry. I think I'll be doing a lot of apologizing. I don't want to look back over this, edit it. I'll send it out however I finish it. I'm used to edits. Frankie, change your weight, your clothes, the way you part your hair. Don't stand like that, shift your mass, squint your eyes, remind your assistant to get you a Botox appointment before next Wednesday – two vials this time, don't skimp. Even in post I'm always being cut down, “visually rehabilitated,” changed. When you hack the hair off a Barbie doll it doesn't come back. She's ugly and altered and her ears are exposed. My baby sister would leave them like that, naked in the sink. She'd strip the clothes off them. They were unworthy after their appointment at the “hair stylist.” She'd put the dresses on other dolls, other figures with the same face, box-perfect hair. To remove the ruined hair from a doll head you must first remove it from the body. They were like me – disjoined, detachable – and even before I knew that was my fate, I pitied them. I took them back into my room, filled the hollow neck with acetone, rubbed at the inside of the skull with Q-tips pilfered from my mother's drawer. After you weaken the glue, you can pull the hair out with tweezers (stolen, also) and you're left with the base head, riddled with holes. If you're messy with the acetone you can rub off her face. That's no good, that's not what we're trying to do. I always felt bad when that happened. If all went well, I'd put the head back on the

body. I'd fold some ill-fitting clothes from paper and put them on a shelf in my dressing room. To be bald, cleanly bald, felt more dignified than the lopsided mohawk or tangled mats of curls. I felt I was saving them. My sister never found out. If you're reading this, Maria, I'm not sorry for that. You shouldn't have left them in the first place. You've never been careful with your things.

The actual story begins with my manager. Tatiana Harlow "discovered" me at age one and a half. I called her Aunt Tati when I began to speak. I see myself as an infant on film – I get the appeal I had to advertisers. Curly blonde hair, big green eyes, mouth turned up at the corners so it looked like I was smiling even when my little brain was thinking or responding to nothing at all. It's funny how people will project onto babies – he's smiling, he's laughing, he likes you, he's got a girlfriend. I hear PAs and extras coo in the background of the BTS footage. I promise I was nothing of the sort – I was a mindless, mouth-turned infant. She swept me up into her arms in the cereal aisle of a grocery store. My mother was too surprised to be angry, though I think I would be. Tati had a way of predicting and overwhelming the emotion you might expect. I can call her Tati now, now that she's dead. She was never my Aunt. She wielded that false familiarity over me like a cudgel, I'll do the same with post-mortem disrespect. Let me set the scene.

INT. RALPH'S GROCERY - DAY

TATI

This is one *bea-utiful* baby. Just like his mother. How old?

MOM

Eighteen months.

TATI

Teeth?

TATI sticks her finger in the baby's mouth and pulls upward

MOM

All the main ones, so far.

TATI

Shame. Attached?

MOM

Yes.

TATI

They like 'em without teeth these days.
Who's your management?

MOM

Excuse me?

TATI

Talent manager. You must have one, gorgeous
woman with gorgeous baby.

MOM

We're unrepresented.

TATI

Why's that, Mrs...?

MOM

Gordon, though it's more of a formality. My
husband spends more time with his other
family.

TATI

Want to make the bastard jealous? Rip his
hair out jealous?

MOM

He'd hate that.

TATI

You've got the eye bags of a woman with a
male-pattern bald husband. Let's let...?

Tati hoists the baby, cooing

MOM

Francis.

TATI

Let's let Frankie fix that for us. Here's my card. Come by on Tuesday.

My mother went ahead and did it, who knows why. Curiosity, boredom, pride over having squeezed out a baby aesthetically pleasing enough to get model casted off the proverbial street. The thing about Tati is she was an expert in presentation. She knew how to make this look *good*. That office was spotlessly designed to trap people like my mother – hell, let's say my mother specifically, we were her first ever clients. Everything was all chrome and glass, single tufts of dried flowers bent artfully over faux designer vases. There were binders of headshots and model bios on the curved metal coffee table, black and white portraits of the beautiful of all ages. Tati used to spray rooms with musky colognes right before important meetings, ruthlessly expensive, like a tiger had just mated and been shot. I can see how my mother was dazed at the glamour of it all, wooed by excess. Maybe she was delirious with betrayal, it was around that time my father began spending more time “on trips,” his youngest bastard child only a few months younger than me. I think she was betting on the excitement of my birth to tie him down, shocked and pissed to find the other woman had something fresher within the year. I only hear of this time in snippets and drunken bursts, but I know the papers got signed, barely read. I know because I've seen them, pored over them, dragged copies to half the lawyers in town.

Moral of the story: baby-me is legally bound to the old-West railway of stardom and Tati cleaves 85%. Some of you might know this part, I've been told it's studied and mocked in collegiate entertainment law courses. They've since made new laws named after me issuing protections for future child actors. A couple vultures came to the house to interview me about it when they passed, and I threw my potted cacti at them. They cursed me off and I regret it now, not the assault but the destruction of my spiny little houseplants. I pricked my fingers to bleeding

scooping their petite corpses off the pavement, rolled their spiky flesh into a shoebox to bury. Nobody published that in the paper: Local Washed-up Child Star Lovingly Holds Service for Deceased Flora. Maybe that's for the best.

After being rebranded to something catchier and more palatable I swept the commercial circuit. You can still find my face (of which very little residual income is sent my way) on bottles of baby food, leaflets for life insurance, boxes of biodegradable diapers. It's just another refraction of the shattering of my body across time and space. Even the most innocent version of me – no DUI, no tabloid gossip, no divorce – is cursed to be pasted and plastered, beheaded and cartoonified. Frankie Joy grew into a lovable toddler, secured a barely-speaking role on a popular sitcom, sold only the newest and freshest back-to-school clothes. I'll spare you the shitty Wikipedia synopsis of "Early Life" and "Career." I did it all with varying levels of success – teen heartthrob, mediocre musician, aging bad boy, Attempting to Be Serious Actor™, corpse on Law & Order. And it was fun, for a while. Tati took the lion's share but I had plenty left. She "generously" used her own cut of our profits to set me up a college fund, if I ever wanted to go it would be paid for twice-over. I think she genuinely considered that a kindness.

It's not that Tati couldn't be kind in a sincere way, but more that her kindness was indiscriminate. I don't know what of her fondness for me was real or fake, innate or performed. She did love me. I loved her. I still do. You can only feel such bitterness and resentment over the memory of someone if you love them first, keep loving them after they're gone. She taught me how to tie my shoes, comb my hair, scrub at the space below your ankle bone where dirt collects. She always made my lunch on set – even if it was catered she would pick through the offerings to select what she knew I'd like, remove offensive ingredients from sandwiches, make sure I ate enough. My mother was often preoccupied with my siblings full and half, my father's latest

escapades. Tati was always there to listen. She would knead Play-Doh between her palms and nod me through teen angst, co-star drama, math homework haphazardly assigned by the on-set tutor. Her hands always smelled of the stuff – pungent and sweet. Sometimes the wrinkles of her palms would stay stained primary blue, red, yellow. When she shook hands to make deals she'd leave flecks of colored clay in her wake, a memory and a promise.

Today I am 46. The internet will tell you I'm 44 but that's only because Tati paid some very competent techies to scrub some numbers so I could turn 29 three times. In real life that's a perfectly serviceable age, but in my industry I am dust. Bones to be scavenged and sucked clean of their marrow, blended up with kale and yogurt to boost antioxidants and align the chakras. Maybe that's why she didn't hold on for longer – why she seemed to release herself from existence suddenly and without warning before she could brush 75. Heart trouble, the doctors said. Nothing to be done. Even though we hadn't spoken in years I felt a deep unease that morning, a disconnect in the order of things. When her assistant rang my private cell I was more annoyed than surprised – how dare she leave me behind so without ceremony? Without a final plea for forgiveness at her bedside like any medical drama worth its salt would script in a second? Was it not I who had built her fortune with my dimples and one-liners? I who sacrificed my dignity and my innards like Prometheus bound to stone to ignite the profitability of Harlow Talent Management? I had always imagined her crawling, skeletal and rainbow-palmed, to my doorstep in her final days, begging for absolution. It was a fine doorstep, I'll admit. I made enough to support my mother and my siblings, enough to fund a lawyer with extraordinarily pointy eyebrows to file a restraining order against my father. I live comfortably, out in the desert where the paparazzi sweat too much to bother taking photos of my chub and sweat and hairline to sell to WHERE ARE THEY NOW? rags. I am alone.

A small part of me was looking forward to the company, at the end of it all. To accept her into my home and let her grovel over tea and coconut mochi cakes. Descend from her glistening platinum tower built on the desecration of my corpse, sit at my coffee table, listen to me like old times. I didn't go to the funeral. It wasn't the same. It wasn't even an open casket – who in their right mind makes their peace with a decorative chrome urn? She has rid the world of her body, destroyed it. She never has to know the discomfort of lying there, still, trying not to breathe, while some B-listers swap portmanteaus over your closed eyes. The fear of feeling your entire self bound by tape, traced and trapped, a bug pinned to cardstock for the entertainment of women ages of 28-40. She was here, and now she's gone. How anti-climactic.

I did go to her lawyer's office. That's where the real story starts, I guess. Why you're reading this. But I didn't want to start here, I wanted to establish my character, you know? I want you to know where I'm coming from. I don't give anyone permission to abridge this before they publish it. You gotta let me take up as much space as I want. You all owe me that much. They called me in because she had left me something in the will. I was excited, that morning. I shaved and after-shaved and wore a nice suit, the one I wore to the red carpet of my last red carpet-worthy project. I was hopeful, I was foolish, naïve, even at my age, even after everything had been wrung out of me. I thought she might have been too scared to face me, resolved to make amends after her passing. I thought she might have handed over the fortune she had stolen now that she was too dead to use it.

INT. PARLEY & SMITH LAW FIRM – DAY

...

FRANKIE

Her *car*?

STUPID STUFFY LAWYER
Yes, Mr. Gordon.

FRANKIE
Which one?

SSL
The Subaru.

FRANKIE
THE SUBARU?

Frankie has been picking at the arm of his leather chair and rips a hole in the fabric with his fingernail.

I know for a fact Tati owned at least 6 vehicles, not counting those she had her driver lease short term. Her beat-up 1979 Subaru Leone was a rolling death trap she kept in the third tier of her below-ground garage, the car she had driven when she met my mother in that godforsaken grocery store.

CON' T

SSL
The late Mrs. Harlow describes the vehicle as having "irreplaceable nostalgic value, value which she is confident Mr. Gordon alone will appreciate."

FRANKIE
Can you kill a dead woman? Is that a thing? Is there some sort of witch I could contact to bring her back from the dead so I can strangle her?

SSL
You're being facetious but this is West Hollywood, and I do happen to know someone if you're serio-

FRANKIE
I AM NOT SERIOUS.

SLL

That's for the best. Enclosed in this envelope you will find a deed to the vehicle.

SSL (Parley or Smith, who really cares) slides a manilla envelope across the mahogany desk. It smells of Tati's horny-dead tiger musk.

FRANKIE

And this is it?

SLL

Yes, that's the deed.

FRANKIE

No, this is all she left me? After all that?

SSL

Yes.

FRANKIE

I'm going to fucking kill myself.

[PAUSE]

SSL

I really hate to ask, but my wife was a big fan of Child Genius Orthopedist. Do you think you could sign something for me?

I don't know exactly what I expected – best case scenario a heartfelt letter pleading for my forgiveness and a fat direct deposit. Instead, I had the keys to the rotting Flinstones-mobile I had vomited in at least a half-dozen times on my way from daycare to casting calls. I flicked the keys around my finger, considered my options. The idiot must be familiar with her estate. I was planning an elaborately charming speech when the door jingled and a blunt-banged woman entered the waiting room. The front half of her hair was cropped at the cheekbone, the back long enough to reach her waistband. She was wearing a thrift-store varsity jacket, three sizes too big, black tennis skirt, and massive sneakers that looked like they could transform into robots. (I read

for the main part in Transformabots, you know, I almost got it. My life is riddled with almosts. Sometimes I imagine myself flat like a hieroglyph, hanging from the ceiling at the shooting range of stardom. Tati shot the bullets. I'm not sure if she was meant to hit me or not).

CON' T

SSL

Ms. Harlow, I'm glad you could make it.

The sister. I had forgotten there was a sister. The woman couldn't be older than 25, an accident (or miracle) of Tati's father's "zest for life." That's what he called it, the few times we met. As a child I imagined him holding a lime and a microplane, showering green-flaked citrus skin onto a plate. As an adult I understand he had a taste for younger women and a lack of contraception. That was never my scene, personally. My ex-wife and I were co-stars on an otherwise no-name project. We dreamed about quitting the biz together, starting a family. I used to be traditional like that. An old project of hers got famous online, it booked her something big, bigger than me. She ended things. My recovery period was less than "zesty." I let go of much of the future we'd planned.

The sister glanced in my direction and I was embarrassed to yearn for the flash of recognition, even one of confusion, but her eyes passed over me dully. Parley or Smith ushered her into the office and I, still scrambling phrases like "human decency" and "a lifetime of objectification" like eggs, sat outside the door.

CON' T

MIYUMI

(Loud)

TEN MILLION DOLLARS?

SSL
(Muffled)
Please lower your voice, Ms. Harlow.

MIYUMI
(VOICE NOT LOWERED)
US dollars?

I pressed my ear to the door. Don't even pretend you wouldn't do the same.

SSL
Yes.

MIYUMI
What am I, an Easy-Bake Oven? What the hell
do I do with it?

SSL
She's stipulated the child cannot be put up
for adoption. As the sperm will be from a
donor you retain full parental rights.

MIYUMI
So I'm supposed to what? Birth and raise my
dead sister's kid? My geriatric dead
sister's kid?

SSL
Both you and the child will be generously
taken care of.

MIYUMI
And if I refuse?

SSL
If you refuse you're allotted...

[PAUSE]

SSL
One Princess Diana limited edition Beanie
Baby.

MIYUMI
Perfect condition?

There is a light thump on the table.

SSL
Shockingly terrible condition.

The receptionist returned from some break, and I shuffled quickly back to a seat. Tati had talked to me once about freezing her eggs, not having time for kids of her own. *You're my kid, you know? My boy.* I remember the first time she said that, how I felt light and dizzy in a happy way, like grinning in that moment of weightlessness as a plane takes off. My mother had children to tie down my father, children he was less and less fond of taking ownership over as they popped out, blonde and hungry. Tati had me, only me. Or so I thought. I found out later she had four other clients by that point. She was careful not to let us cross paths.

I tugged my suit legs down and stood to greet the sister as she exited the office. The lawyer eyed me suspiciously.

CON' T

SSL
Can I help you with something, Mr. Gordon?

FRANKIE
(Ignoring him, to Miyumi)
Can I buy you a coffee?

MIYUMI
(Squinting)
Are you the guy from the cover of that
Werewolf Tuesday album?

FRANKIE
(genuinely pleased for the first
time in a long time)
Yes!

MIYUMI
Why the hell not.

I like Miyumi, I really do. She's a good kid. If you're reading this, Miyumi, I'm sorry to you most of all. I hope you believe me. This got complicated, fast. I wish you weren't a part of it. If you were here right now you'd punch me and I'd deserve it. I'd give it to you, a freebie. You could give me a black eye and knock my tooth out and use the picture for your art show. That'd be sure to get the press's attention. I'm sorry Miyumi, I'm sorry.

I'm getting ahead of myself.

INT. GOOD OAK COFFEE - DAY

MIYUMI

So how did you know Tatiana?

FRANKIE

Tati was my agent.

MIYUMI

Oh, you're THE guy, aren't you?

FRANKIE

Yup.

MIYUMI

That's tough.

FRANKIE

(Restless)

So are you going to do it?

MIYUMI

How do you know about that?

FRANKIE

(Lying)

She told me the plan, back when we were close.

Miyumi sighs.

MIYUMI

It's a lot of money. A part of me thinks I'd be stupid to turn down that much money.

An uncomfortable amount of spit collects in Frankie's mouth.

FRANKIE

Do you see yourself with a kid? Kids?

MIYUMI

Not for another decade. But you know she wants the eggs defrosted within the year. Something about reincarnation.

Frankie nods and hums as if he knew that.

FRANKIE

It's a tough call.

MIYUMI

Why me? She barely even knew me.

FRANKIE

Family meant a lot to her.

That part wasn't a lie. The first time I saw Tati cry I was on set for the sappy family sitcom. My fictional father had returned from war (nothing screams family values like the military-industrial complex, am I right, kids?) and fallen to his knees in front of me and my "siblings." I remember how shiny his forehead was, the sweat coagulating and rolling his foundation into pills. He had to do the take a few times, fall to his knees and pull off his hat to clutch it to his chest. The inner brim was stained a dark tan. We had never even met the guy – it was his first day on the project – but tried to sniffle and lisp like we had been waiting for him an eternity. Louder than any of us was Tati, blowing her nose messily behind the camera, eyes red and puffed. *He came home for his family.* She'd whisper later in my dressing room, smoothing out my hair. *He came home for you, after all that time.*

Most of Tati's siblings and half siblings are men. They took after her father in the worst ways and so she kept contact with very few, if any. There were some sisters (maybe two?) closer to her age, unfit for this project, who she also kept at diamond-encrusted arm's length. The reality of family – of tense dinner conversations, bad presents, seeing your estranged parent reflected – was undesirable. It wasn't polished and crafted like the relationships we pretended into existence in front of cameras and below lights. I'd imagine she'd only known Miyumi briefly, met her in passing as a child. A blank slate with Harlow blood – the apparent currency of Tati's deathbed sentimentality – beneath her skin. The rest of her sisters are married, if I recall. Maybe it was the surname alone that hatched this insanity.

I didn't convince Miyumi to have the baby. I did my best to let her make that decision on her own, I gave her my contact details because she said she wanted to talk. She wanted to know more about Tati, I had stories to tell. I have good ones. I'll write them out one day, the way I'm writing this. I told her that, and she seemed relieved. The burden of Tati's legacy wasn't hers to bear alone.

INT. JOY RESIDENCE – NIGHT

MIYUMI
(on the phone)
Why did she do this?

FRANKIE
What do you mean?

MIYUMI
This whole thing. Is it, is it some kind of test?

FRANKIE
Why are you asking me?

MIYUMI

You knew her best.

I did, didn't I? That was sad to think. That someone she had royally fucked over was the last living keeper of her psyche. No husband, no real kids of her own. Just a balding hermit in the desert, out there sweltering and hating her guts. I wonder if she'd agree.

FRANKIE

It's not a test. She isn't - wasn't, a malicious person. It's a means to an end, a neat and monetizable storyline for her character. I doubt she spent much time thinking about how it would affect you specifically. No offense.

MIYUMI

None taken. I think.

FRANKIE

She wouldn't care what you do with the money.

MIYUMI

That's not what I'm worried about. The money will fix more problems than it'll make.

FRANKIE

Unlike a baby.

MIYUMI

Unlike a baby.

[PAUSE]

MIYUMI

(softer)

I didn't even know her.

FRANKIE

She didn't think about you, you don't have to think about her. Make the right decision for you, not her legacy. She's gone.

MIYUMI
She's gone.

I did my best to be honest. To say the kinds of things I'd want to hear. I told myself that was all the contact we'd have. My feelings were... complicated. I was angry at Tati, a familiar burning, but that didn't extend to Miyumi. It wasn't her problem. I felt the most respectable choice would be to leave her alone. When she texted the next week, I was surprised. It felt rude not to answer.

Miyumi 8:53 PM

what was Tati like as a kid? do you know?

Francis 8:55 PM

How old do you think I am?

Miyumi 8:56 PM

lol sorry. i mean did she ever talk about it?

Francis 9:00 PM

A little. Her dad was never around. Her mom didn't pay as much attention as she would have liked. I got the idea she's always had an entrepreneurial spirit. Biking around with newspapers, selling pet rocks to the other kids on the playground, that sort of thing.

I could tell she was fishing to picture her future. She had no lens to peer through and imagine the fate of her yet un-inseminated child. She would message me every week or so.

Miyumi 2:00 PM

what was her favorite food?

Miyumi 8:05 PM

did she ever mention what kinds of names she liked?

Miyumi 8:00 PM

did she and my dad get along?

I told her what I could but did my best not to sway her. No opinions one way or another, just the facts of things. Kind of like what I've done here. Perhaps kinder. After a month:

Miyumi 7:34 AM

i'm going to take the deal.

I congratulated her. We'd talked a bit about her art, her life, the difficulty of doing one to make another. I knew the money was transformative. I knew the draw of the financial security would mean everything, could mean doing anything. I don't want to air out the details of what she shared with me. Not any more than I already have. It was silence for a good long while. Three months after that:

Miyumi 4:00 AM

i don't know if i can do this.

I didn't answer.

We met in-person for coffee at the same shop a year after the first time. She asked, not me. I want to clarify this wasn't, wasn't premeditated in any way. She wanted me to see the baby. It felt correctly circular, I suppose, because I was there the day the lawyer made her the offer. I was the closest thing to Tati proper that she had. Maybe she could feel Tati was haunting

me, hanging over my shoulder, that it would be the quickest way to get her ghostly eyes on her new son.

I didn't know how I'd feel when I got there, how it would feel to duck my head below the canopy of the stroller and see myself. Not literally – not in coloring or shape – but I saw the future Tati had stolen from me, harvested, squeezed dry for the funds to put her own on ice. I saw myself at the supermarket with my mother, smiling absently at some cereal, then switched perspective, saw the world colossal and fish-eyed, felt manicured hands reaching into my stroller and digging under my arms. Miyumi looked miserable. I'm not making excuses for myself, by including that, I just want to give you the full picture. She was gaunt and red-eyed, draped in drab cotton lacking any of her usual style. Her fingers shook around her coffee cup. She hadn't seen anyone in weeks. The baby was calm, then, but hadn't stopped crying once the sun went down, hadn't once slept through the night. I looked at him, pacifier bobbing, and felt the unease, the placelessness. The child of a long dead woman, displaced in time, belonging nowhere. I can't explain the feeling that overtook me. I don't think any of you would understand. When Miyumi got up to use the restroom, I found myself reaching for the stroller handle. I left cash to pay for our drinks on the table. I unlocked the wheels like I'd done it a million times before. I made brisk pace back to my car.

I took him. I'm not going to lie about that. He's mine. But I don't own him, not in the way Tati owned me. He's going to have a good life, a private one. He will keep his body. Tati called me her family, once. I was like a son to her. Her son is like a son to me. By the time you read this we'll be gone, disappeared into the ether only the no-longer famous inhabit, a ghost land of non-existence. I'm sending you this to come clean, to apologize. But this is the last you will hear of him. This is the last you will hear of me.

x

Frankie Joy

The Knife Block

Despite the dry Arizona heat, Aunt Esther's house seeped with moisture. Water coalesced in the usual places: the mirror above the bathroom sink, the sill of the creaky kitchen window, the drying rack below hanging copper pots; and the unusual: in pools at the foot of the stairs, dripping in ochre sheets down the front door, clinging to the lips of thick glasses left on the mantle to cast a strange, frosted light on the carpet. It was as if Esther walked the house with her watering can dragging behind, tethered to her belt like a cowboy, shaking out droplets with each absentminded sway of her hip.

At home, his real home in the razer-bump hills outside LA, Kyle wore black cotton socks his mother pressed with the iron and left out each morning. At Aunt Esther's, he tucked his tartan pajama pants into scratched galoshes, rubber surface scarred with wear like rivers on a fraying map. He used to wear only boxers, but the dull rubber had chafed his ankles raw. It was Esther's tradition to buy him a new pair of pajama bottoms each summer, to celebrate the christening rip of tag from fabric like opening champagne.

He was adjusting his pantleg when he heard the clattering of the front door. "Kyle!" Esther called, her voice dampened by the wet. "Did Mr. Hernandez come by?"

"Sure did." Kyle palmed the surface of his aunt's latest charge, a droopy elephant-ear in a pinstriped terracotta pot. "And you're not going to like it."

She shut the door behind her, returned from some trip. She was dressed, as always, as a workwoman, a habit seemingly without gaps or stops. Her forest green boiler suit cinched at the waist with an old scarf hitched to rope, and her hiking shoes slapped at thin sheen of puddles

over the tile. The fabric at her knees, elbows, and between her thighs had long chafed to translucence.

She bent over to inspect the plant, waves of curly hair brushing the topmost soil. “Who have we got here?”

Esther made a living off guests. Despite her eccentricities, or perhaps because of them, people from town made the winding trek to visit her patchwork house, the wheels of their cars kicking up red dust like Holi powder. It was Kyle’s job to receive such guests when his aunt was out. He knew a foamy scarlet cloud on the horizon gave him 15 minutes to tidy, or something close to it, to clear the kitchen table of discarded charcoal dust and pupusa crumbs before a sunburnt couple or creak-jointed grandfather knocked on the door. For all the summers he could recall, Esther had provided three services: plant salvation, amateur cure-making, and accounting. Though the last was most profitable, the first took up the most of her time. Kyle had transported many a yellowed desert lily, primrose, or rhododendron from the dust-draped bed of a pick-up to an appropriate room of the house.

The house had once been her father’s. She and Kyle’s mother had been raised in these walls, then dry and clean and firm in a way that would be foreign to any occupant now. Kyle had only the most shifting, opaque memories of his grandfather. He had returned to them so often they had deteriorated with each recollection. The image of him hanging in the upstairs hallway was clearer despite flecks of paint and condensation. The man stood tall; shirt neatly tucked. Esther as a young girl hugged his leg, mussed pigtails pressing at the edge of the frame. He held Kyle’s mother on his hip, her face serious. It was strange to see her so small. Her gaze had a sharpness, even then, unsuited to childhood. He knew the man had raised Esther and then his mother in this house, that it was Esther who returned from a life in Tucson to care for him, at the

end. He knew he and his mother had come, together, to attend the funeral and clean. The events felt like something from a movie he had watched but struggled to recall, far away from reality. Nearer to the present, Esther had transformed the space. She made a hobby of refurbishing old air conditioners and humidifiers from the dump. She installed them in mixed-wood and glass additions to the main structure of her home and two sheds until, across the sloppy crimson expanse of her property, she could “send her soul soaring,” and, more pressingly, accommodate most any plant.

Earlier that afternoon, Mr. Hernandez from the general store had deposited the weepy elephant-ear and left with a bag of aloe stalks and methodically balanced fall budget. He had ruffled Kyle’s hair on his way out, as unaware of the personal space sixteen-year-old boys required as he was how often was appropriate to moisten a plant. Kyle had smiled in good faith, then watched as the man’s truck shrunk smaller, smaller, then just a drop, as if someone had pricked the faraway road with a needle and drawn blue blood.

Kyle eyed the deep black soil. “Drowned, I’d guess.”

Esther’s spine slumped in sympathy. “Poor thing, we’ll have to repot.”

“How big?”

She grasped the stem and pulled, shaking dirt over the floor. “No rot at the root, a 10 inch should work.”

“We’re out of 10 inches.”

“Would you mind hitting the store?”

Kyle nodded, cupping his hands to catch the toss of her car keys.

“You have a good day today?”

That morning he had taken Esther's beat-up convertible Bug to the closest trailhead, planning to hike a short while on his own, only to lay down in a patch of bluebells and bet against himself on the racing, wispy clouds. He won, then lost, then won again. There was no prize or ante, just the silence of his own company.

"I did, thanks."

"Good." She smiled, "Sloppy joes for dinner?"

It was like his aunt to ask, acknowledge, consider, move on. They rarely stayed on one topic for long. At home he worked in detail and nuance, in closing the fridge in just the right way and asking questions in just the right lilting tone that would earn his mother's ease. They would dance around topics for hours, spinning with platitudes and niceties: *Did you see the Nguyen's new car?* Yes, he did. *Very nice. Lovely people. Do you think they're nice?* Yes, he did. *Very nice. Does the yard seem clean? Do you think they think their yard is cleaner?* No, he did not. *Mrs. Nguyen waved to me this morning. Oh did she? Lovely people. The best.* It wasn't until dinner was done and the plates washed and dried that she would wind to her final thoughts like cat who must prowl in circles before she can sit. *Mr. Nguyen has cancer, stage 2. They told me this morning. Couldn't happen to nicer people.* The best.

The room darkened. Esther had taped the kitchen blinds together with painter's tape. The bottom bore painted florals and abstract tessellations, tape removed to reveal clean white borders. The top had only unfinished pencil sketches separated by blue bands that cast barcodes on the countertop. She pushed the whole mess aside.

"Looks like rain." She rustled in the silverware drawer and opened the sliding glass door. Without fanfare she gripped the handle of a butterknife and plunged it into the earth. "That should keep it off you for the drive."

Esther's spirituality was natural and strange, intuitive in a way Kyle rarely questioned. Knives in the dirt kept the rain away, sugar on the weathervane kept the winds sweet, eggshells ground to dust kept the house "clean." To part the dirt, to force herself upon it rather than nurture its charge, was a rare show of will. He blinked, and perhaps the storm grew slower.

"Thanks, cap'n."

"You got it, stud."

Kyle liked driving. It gave him time to collect himself. His thoughts felt more private outside the house, in the burnt orange car with the top down, no walls or roof to catch and constrain them. They began physical: the sound of dry grasses rubbing together like cricket legs, the muted green flash of a fleeing lizard, the sun-drenched danger of the last of the day's warmth on his tanned face. Then drifted: a drowsy-eyed girl who had smiled at him at the grocery last week, a movie he meant to rent from the town library, the ever-looming cloud of college application anguish. He thought of his friends, scattered throughout the country as if each were a single dandelion seedling, pushed to flight by the closing of school and wind-whipped on distant, private adventures. Cell service was weak here. He had sent a few half-hearted emails from the wheezing library desktops but found the communications formal and stiff. Peer contact unsuccessful, he took to rediscovering his own company. He had learned to tune the buzzing of nature and roar of engine to a kind of silence. His thoughts felt heavy, sunk to the bottom of his consciousness like rocks thrown in a river. His alone. Too dense and deep to be plucked away.

What do you want to do with yourself? His mother had asked before he left. She had coiled around his schoolwork and test scores and friends' kids' internships and for hours, finally

arrived at the center. *You're getting to that age now, wanting. What will it be?* She had levelled her gaze at him, eyes wavering, a focus strangely close to scared. He wasn't sure yet. He liked all his classes. He didn't see himself in an office or studio or on a mountain or in space. It was difficult to picture himself, truly himself, outside the architected perfection of their life together. The looming weight of college felt like the discomfort of his first sleepover – a terrifying aloneness, the nakedness of existence without context. He said only the first two. *Okay*, she mused. *Okay*.

Kyle never visited Esther's house with his mother. She travelled most aggressively in the summer: touring, presenting, visiting build sites. Despite muttered complaints from construction crews she often demanded her projects finish between May and July, when the heat poured over the walls in molten waves but *light was right*. The wealthier the client, the more important they be shown the property by the architect herself. When he was younger she would fly with him to Phoenix International, wait for Esther's rumbling Bug, peck his cheek, reapply her lipstick, and make her way to a connecting flight.

In the beginning Kyle left the lipstick mark until his first Arizona shower. A sometimes pink, mauve, or deep burgundy smudge that marked him as her son. He had watched her greet others his entire life, memorized the curve of her elbow as she touched their forearm and leaned forward, measured the space between the velvety, powdered surface of their skin and the empty air that received her kiss. He had been the only one worth the fuss of contact. The extra seconds of reapplication. The waste of product. The mess. She hadn't flown with him since he turned fourteen.

The Kyle he could be here, in Esther's world, in Arizona, in this car with the top down and dust on his face and mud on his boots, was a different model. Summer Kyle™, complete

with relaxed shoulders and kung-fu grip. It was an illusion. A place without reception or the reality that comes with it. He pushed at the gas pedal, unafraid on familiar roads. The man at the plant store was happy to see him.

“Back just in time, my hero. Toast these, will you?” Esther gestured to a pair of rolls on the counter as he placed the pile of pots by the door.

“Aye aye.” Esther’s kitchen lacked the surgically clean toaster oven Kyle’s mother maintained at home. He rustled through a cabinet of loose pans, pushed at handle after handle like he was climbing the smooth rungs of a ladder. Too big, too small, too inexplicably filled with a thin layer of potting soil. He found one of a desirable diameter and pulled it from the pile with a jostled clanking like music. Everything in Aunt Esther’s house made music. Hinges squeaked the role of sopranos and the stairs groaned with an oaky vibrato. Wind chimes both home-made, purchased, and gifted rang out in a mixed chorus of wind-tossed twinkling and thudding like ceremonial gongs.

“Have any trouble at the store?”

“No, ma’am.”

She gasped in mock indignation, “I am far too young to be a ‘ma’am’.”

“No, young lady.”

“That’s more like it.”

Esther acted as conductor, whistling and moving her hands in invisible paths to direct the orchestra. Even now, browning ground beef with pops and sizzles, she stirred with one hand and cut at the air with the other. Kyle put his pan on the burner next to hers, tried once, twice, thrice

before the flame caught and licked at the metal. He rustled for a spatula and found one he had never seen before – handle quilted with gentle indentations in the green ceramic. Although he had spent nine summers here, he was always finding foreign objects. There was a comfort in the obscurity, a sureness in the unsureness. He wondered if Esther threw out and replaced her things each year to keep him teetering on the edge of unfamiliarity. But it was familiar. It was warm and damp and the home-ness of it clung to the curling hairs on his arms like dew. He dug generously into the butter.

“Use more than that.” Esther had been watching, not so caught up in her music-making as it seemed. He laughed, spatula already wobbling under the weight. “I’m serious! Don’t skimp out on me.”

He obliged, dumping the load onto the skillet and going back for more. The rolls would not be toasted as much as drowned. His mother only allowed meals with bread once a week and never with any sort of liquid to grease its craterous, gluten-free surface. The occasional sandwich dissolved in his mouth like sand. Kyle knew that the measured silence of their chewing at mealtimes made his mother uncomfortable. All silence made her uncomfortable. The carefully curated music of home was his mother’s chatter, pen scratching paper as she fussed with her notebooks, the artificial birdsong of *Relaxing Forest Sounds (10 Hour Loop)* humming in the TV speakers. She and Esther had been raised together, after all. It seemed neither could stand air left empty.

“Table service, *garçon!*” Esther shook the last dregs of ketchup into her creation.

“You know, real French waiters hate that.” He said it without thinking, regretting it as Esther rolled her eyes. It was the kind of thing his mother knew. The kind of attentive politeness that kept her shoulders straight as if fastened to the backs of chairs and eyes wandering the other

tables of tourists when they travelled. It had been happening more, lately – the unknown invasion of opening his mouth and hearing his mother’s words come tumbling out. Or had he just begun to notice? Kyle imagined traces of her coalescing like cream on the surface of his psyche, wondered how if he could ever skim them out.

“Excuse me. Table service, *little bastard boy.*”

He laughed, and her face softened. The sharpness he had introduced to the room softened with it. “Oh, *bien sûr*, madame, right away!” He plated the bread and searched the cutlery drawer with one hand. It wasn’t until he had set down plates, forks, glasses, and napkins that he felt the familiar weight of the final knife in his hand.

Its chrome surface was unmistakable. His mother prided herself on uniformity and he had eaten with only one knife, this knife, for thousands of lunches, business dinners, Easters, Christmases.

“Where did you get this?”

“What, the plate?” Esther walked behind him with a steaming bowl of vinegar and glazed onions.

“This.” He held the knife pointed toward the floor.

“Oh. That must be a deep archival piece.”

“You don’t recognize it?”

“No.”

He did. His mother’s knife block contained a perfect set of 14. Each polished, sharpened, identical. One for each day of the week, for two weeks, for her, for him. A small space separated one set of seven from the other. She insisted they keep to the schedule – pull the first from the

left on Mondays, the second on Tuesdays, though each day all were clean and in their place. They both pretended that was the way it always was.

Kyle let the handle dangle between two of his fingers. The softened stupor of the summer lifted as if cut from its tether at his feet. Underneath was regular Kyle, anxious and too aware of the quickened undulations of his chest. He looked to Esther, searching for some imperceptible twitch or head turn, some sign that she was upset, might at any moment cry or scream, order disturbed. She only blinked at him, confused.

“Hey, hey.” Esther soothed, voice lowering as she watched his shoulders shake. She put down the plate and guided him to his seat. “We don’t even need knives tonight.” She pulled it from his hand and returned it to the cutlery drawer with the soft clink of metal colliding. “Let’s eat, okay?”

Esther heaped his plate with food. He thanked her. She left him alone to think.

Kyle slept in the room that had once been his mother’s. Any lingering trace of her girlhood was gone, it had been his and only his for years. Esther made a point of making it so, decorating and fossilizing its walls. Each summer, new additions stacked over the old like layers of sedimentary rock – when he lifted a movie poster or photo he found crayon drawings, birthday cards, or old concert tickets nestled underneath. When Kyle stopped supplying décor himself Esther began curating for him: printing blurry hiking photos of the back of his head, harvesting and hanging the dedication page of books he recommended she read. Kyle didn’t have the heart to tell Esther he hated the room. The jagged edges of the torn pages made him wince and the overlapping, under-layering, crisscrossed collage made his head hurt. Too many corners and

lines and edges shooting off into nothing, into each other, into infinity without resolution. He knew his mother would hate it, and that was why he hated it, and sometimes that was enough to drive him to love it. But he could never maintain the sentiment for long.

He also knew it was the sort of thing he should like. He recognized the flash of surprise and confusion when his friends flicked through photo albums for school projects and Kyle admitted he had none. No school photos or yearbooks or shoeboxes full of foggy four-by-sixes in some half-finished basement overflowing with memory. His mother kept two framed photos of him, rendered in a soft black and white, on the dresser in the guest room. One of an infant and one of a young teen. They were removed and tucked into the closet when the room was occupied by guests. It was a grounding principle of her design aesthetic that there be no human faces used as décor. He was the only exception. The frames crystallized his mother's affection, condensed it into a space he could grab and hold. Esther's flapped all around him, layering and layering until one day the walls would reach together and touch.

As the sun set, the window cast a soft orange line that bisected the room between marmalade and shadow. His mother loved windows. This was probably the first window she had loved. She would scrap an entire plan, entire intricate mass of slanting walls, roofs, concrete, granite, if it meant perfecting the way light sunk through a single window. A full wall of their living room in Los Angeles was glass. Floor to ceiling glass like a glaze of liquid sugar. She washed it herself, the only part of the house she forbid the maid to touch. Kyle closed his eyes and sniffed at the memory of Windex clinging to her moisture-wrinkled fingertips.

The first time the wall killed something, Kyle was only eight. A young deer, running from some invisible fear, smashed against his mother's window with enough force to half-snap its neck. The sound of the impact sent a chill over his brow, drew his gaze from his geometry

homework. He was home alone. Kyle remembered kneeling by the wall, eyes wide, and watching as the deer's chest rose and fell in quick bursts like there was water boiling beneath its tawny skin. Its head lay at an angle his brain could not make sense of. The slender neck had twisted to make something like an isosceles triangle. Or was it scalene? His mother would know.

He remembered looking at the clock, wondering when she would be home to help him make sense of things. She was good at that. Angles and lines and rules. The deer's writhing became more frantic. He couldn't remember if he knew it was dying. He reached out to touch it, to smooth its fine hair, aiming to comfort but also to feel the flesh of another creature, to reach beyond the forbidden. His hand hit glass. She was cross with him for the fingerprints.

What do you want for yourself? Kyle lay with himself in the darkness. What he wanted, more than purpose, was silence. An opening for him to fill rather than a beats of a dance to hit. Something in the hallway was dripping. Kyle listened to the wind rustle at the loose papers above his head. Beyond that, quieter, a steady plopping like the footsteps of a toy horse. He sat up, moonlight catching on hundreds of flapping corners. He reached for his boots and slid his socked feet into their cold rubber emptiness, pajama leg tucked.

It was only a few steps to the bathroom. He rummaged under the sink for a bucket and followed the sound of trotting hooves to a pool of water at the head of the stairs, inky in the near-blackness. He kicked at the puddle to flatten it before laying down the bucket. The first drops were loud against the metal but he squatted and waited until a thin pool formed and the drops swan dived in hushed tones with the ease of TV Olympians.

Esther's light was on. It seeped through the crack beneath her door to light the faded floral wallpaper. He knocked softly and heard a rustling before a gruff "Come in," phlegmy as if speaking through a cough.

She was sitting up in bed, reading. Her hair fell in loose waves over the headboard. A large cotton nightgown draped her shoulders, dwarfed her body. There was something older, frailer about her at night. She patted the space beside her.

"What's up, kid?" She turned to put her book on the nightstand. He didn't like when she called him that. He said nothing. He reached forward to run two fingers through her coarse hair, slate gray flecked with white. She shifted to sit with her back fully towards him. She had taught him to braid a few years ago on a whim, but he had taken to it. It was easier to talk without facing each other.

"What was it like before?"

"Before what?"

Kyle imagined the sharp-cheeked girl who would become his mother lying still in her bed, his bed. He imagined her now, pacing the den or perhaps asleep at the kitchen table. Alone in his house, her house. "Before Grandpa died. When you were kids here."

Esther hesitated, surprised. He had violated their unspoken covenant, the separation they maintained between his mother and this place. When she spoke it was in a tumble. "Well Sarah would never leave Dad alone. They were so similar, see? She never went through periods of rebellion, teenage anarchy like I did. The apple kept so close to the damn tree it used to bother me." Kyle felt her voice through the space between her shoulder blades. "I thought having a sister would be gaining a comrade, an ally in the fight against the Man. Instead I lived with two

squares who only ever wanted to talk math, statistics, stocks, lines, whatever.” She laughed, “And look at me now.”

“You’re not a square.” Kyle pulled the leftmost piece of her hair from the rest, detangling the ends with his off-hand.

“I try.”

“What happened?”

“Hm?” Esther relaxed backwards, closing her eyes as he separated the middle section of her hair from the right.

“Between them.” His mother spoke rarely about her time here. He had a sense of her life in the heat, the dirt, the general store, the trails, all things he’d come to understand himself. But rarely of the man whose face blurred towards the center in his memory, of her time staring out his, her window at the wide expanse of the desert.

“She couldn’t stand it, when his memory started to go. It was little things at first, tea in the microwave, birthdays. But it built. Places, faces, names. Then he passed. She stopped coming at all when I started building on the additions. I think a part of her can’t deal with the change,” Esther paused. “The emotional part of her. The professional side probably can’t stand it because she knows I do real shit work.”

Esther laughed until the springs of her bed shook. Kyle was far away.

It had taken her years to finish unpacking the boxes. It wasn’t like her, the mess. A corner of their minimalist garage had been overcome with brown moving boxes like a cardboard tumor.

The knife block was one of the last things to emerge. With weeks of pause in between, she held each thing she salvaged from the house. Stared at it. Felt its weight. Sometimes she would immediately toss the object, face contoured in disgust. Some spectral energy had haunted her at the house, even Esther was surprised at how much she folded, wrapped in bubble tape, neatly packed into the back of a rented truck. Over the course of Kyle's childhood she had donated worn woven blankets, rusted tools, old clothes that still smelled of cactus milk and cologne. Other pieces made their way into the unoccupied spaces of their lives – a brass candlestick on the mantle, a faded crewneck she only pulled from the attic when sick. He was eight when she opened the last box and held the oiled cherry block in her pale palms. The knives were wrapped separately, each in its own bubble corset. She had let him play with the scraps as she freed them, he remembered the pop of air like a tongue clucking as he crushed the plastic under his socked feet.

This isn't right. She bent over the box, threw strips of paper and tape to Kyle's delight. He only stilled in his play when she raised her voice, teared at the boxes with her hands. *This isn't right!* She rarely yelled. Their house was cavernous, open, empty. Sound carried. He was too shocked to cry. He watched her back heave, moisture collect at the wisps of hair near her scalp. She had lasered them off when he was ten but in this memory they were untouched, softened her features, shaded the space where taut skin met tight platinum ponytail. When she turned to face him her face was flushed, eyes watering.

Get in the car.

It was a short, stupefying trip. She played soft music from a CD – some sort of German discotec music, the kind with complicated beat progressions and timing shifts to keep her brain occupied. Kyle didn't understand it – still didn't – and toyed with a few marbles he had

squirreled into his pockets. At the hardware store she waved away employees with aprons who approached her with the soft, high-pitched voices one uses on vulnerable-looking women and dogs. Wood filler, putty knife, paper mask, gloves, sandpaper, stain. She didn't look at the prices. They got back in the car.

In the garage again she emptied the bag and began to work. Kyle sat against the wall, clicking his marbles together like champagne flutes. He hadn't had dinner yet, chose not to say so. Within an hour she was done. She'd always been efficient, exacting. Kyle sniffed at the lacquer-thick air as she wiped the block with a cloth and held it close to her face for inspection. A set of 15, perfect multiple of five, transformed to 14. Two sets of seven. Lucky. She nodded, brows lowering in relief. Kyle stepped out of the way as she vacuumed the fine wood powder from sanding. She looked at him in surprise, as if she'd forgotten he was there. He presented her a marble. She slid it into her pocket, nodding. She wiped the floor with a wet cloth. They ate.

Kyle?

He looked up from his plate. She rarely spoke his name in that tone, the last syllable trailing up, as if lost. She had washed her hands but streaks of brown mascara and wood dust marked the smooth expanse of her face.

You're going to stay the summer at Dad's house, okay? With Esther.

School was over in two weeks. Kyle had nebulous, open-air plans: pool parties, Lego structures, sandcastles. His grandfather's house held only must, heat, people sweating in black who cried and pat his head and ruined his hair.

It's nice. There's a lot to like. Sturdy foundation, Queen Anne style wrap-around porch, good natural light. Her eyes seemed to glaze over, looking somewhere over his shoulder. *I want you to spend time there.*

“Why?”

She returned to herself. Put her knife down and patted at her mouth with a napkin.

Because I've already booked the flights.

It was like that. She often asked him questions she already knew the answer to. *Okay?* wasn't a question, just an order sanded down at the edges. At times he found himself doing the same, caught rolled eyes or sideways glances from his friends. Kyle, *you know you can't always be right.* Did he? He knew more about French pronunciation, what font would look best for their English projects, if a friend's shirt clashed with a shoe in a way that if it were him, his mother would coldly demand he change. If these things weren't important what was the point of the sharpened syllables, the near-silences that followed, heavy with resentment, the feeling of her icy fingers brushing lint off of his collar? He knew well the whining scrape of knife on china, the force with which his mother cut at steak, the air, her son, when she was annoyed, when she felt some invisible facet of the universe was out of place.

He remembered how scared, directionless his first summer at Esther's had felt. The strict yet imperceptible emotional scaffolding his mother constructed was not just absent here but unraveled out of existence. There was no schedule, no goal, no dress code. He talked only when he wanted, left when he wanted, drank milk directly from the carton with the desperation and guilt of an impoverished thief from some fable. Now it was a time he both cherished and resented. Freedom, but freedom only in isolation, separation. He could only summon this version of himself, loose-limbed and calm, in this alternate world where his mother, as an adult, did not exist. Where the ghost of her as a girl, unformed, was all that remained. He felt an almost

malicious warmth coming through the floor, the knife rattling, orange with heat, scraping at the wood of its kitchen prison to escape.

“Do you like my mom?”

Esther hesitated for a moment, surprised. “Of course. Sarah’s my sister and I love her.”

He crossed each piece of hair to the center. “I don’t mean love her, I love her too. Do you *like* her?” Esther exhaled.

Kyle pictured the large, echoing metal parallelograms his mother was always picking at, ruler in one hand, drafting pencil in the other. He pictured her body, small and far away, dressed in a white pantsuit and staring at ceiling supports painted so brilliantly white against white he could barely make her out at all.

“Does it matter?”

Surprised, he pulled too tightly. Esther’s head jerked but she didn’t cry out. At home, sometimes, he could not tell where his mother ended and he began. They moved in sweeping paths around and between each other, intersecting and falling apart. His mother was an excellent designer. Their house was perfectly tailored to their patterns. He went to reach for something and it was exactly where he expected, at just the right height and angle and depth in the counter. She had designed it for herself but somewhere between his infancy and now he had grown to fit that mold, that pattern, that alignment between space and self. At times he felt himself fraying at the edges, the outlines of his being snapping, disconnecting, leaking out white over white over white into the walls and the scaffolding and the wainscoting until his inner spilled into the outer and all became outer and blank.

“Yeah, I think it does.”

She heard the coldness in his voice, turned to grab his hands with her brows knotted together. "I'm sorry, that was harsh. We're different, you know that. But you know that I would do anything for you? For either of you."

He did. She said it like a question but it wasn't. The warmth of her hands on his felt like flames. He wanted to stay in them, but felt his body pull away. The contact made him clammy and uncomfortable. He knew she would be hurt by that, the same way she would be hurt if he admitted to finding her sloppy joes too sour or his room too fossilized. The haven she had constructed depended on his discretion. Is that what he was calling it now? Is that what his mother would call it? Kyle felt a weight grip at his chest and wring out his insides like a damp cloth. "Am I different?"

She hesitated, he could see her decide not to lie. "You remind me of them, both of them."

He stiffened. Things felt different here. He trudged through cluttered rooms brimming with pools of water, he ate till his stomach felt dense with carbohydrates, he giggled and sang in a forest of overgrown plants with a woman who hadn't shaved her armpits in decades. He felt different. Had Esther constructed this for him too?

"Sometimes I look in the mirror and I see the worst of her." Her superiority, her pride. The way she picked around food she didn't like, the way she watched other people with contempt, the way she couldn't face things head on. Always drifting, slanting, returning, reshaping. Filling in gaps she didn't want to think about.

"If that was true, I wouldn't keep letting you stay here." He had dropped the braid. Esther pulled it over her shoulder to finish it herself, tying off the end with a bit of paint-stained elastic. Kyle couldn't banish the weight of the knife in his hand, the thousands of cut dinners beneath the pressure of his thumb.

“Do you really not remember where the knife came from?”

“No. Do you?”

“It was grandpa’s. Part of a set. Mom took the rest for our house, but that one was missing. She was upset.”

“Oh.” A glint of recognition. “It must have been the set from Mom and Dad’s wedding registry. You know Sarah is,” Esther paused, “particular. She doesn’t like change she can’t control. But that doesn’t stop things from being important to her. Important and frustrating and untouchable, unfixable. She couldn’t even look at Dad, at the end.”

Kyle’s mother spoke of her father often, but never in the present tense, even when he was alive. *Dad once carved me a chicory chess board, Dad used to play this song when the sun went down, Dad built us a tire swing and he would clean it each time before I sat down.*

“She cares so much but she can’t accept what things become when she’s not looking. I was surprised the first summer she asked if you could stay here.”

“Do you think I’ve changed?”

“Not fundamentally.”

“Do you think she’ll resent that?”

Esther lowered her chin, brows furrowed. “Sometimes I worry you don’t think enough about yourself.”

He waited to hear Esther’s snoring before he took the Bug. Its engine growled into the quiet expanse of the evening but still she slept. He felt guilty, but not a real guilt. He knew she would have said yes if he’d asked. Cheered him on, even. She was the type to encourage any sort

of innocent recklessness. Besides, he wasn't looking for approval. As he curved around the path he'd watched Mr. Hernandez carve that afternoon, he resolved to fill the tank tomorrow before she woke.

It was only a fifteen-minute drive to the trailhead. It felt different, flattened by darkness rather than soaked in sun. He sat in the car a few minutes after flicking off the ignition, waited for his eyes to adjust to the sprawling, blackened line of trees. He reached into the glovebox for the knife. Familiar, heavy. It had lost its heat on the journey. Perhaps sensed its end. Outside the car, Kyle's knuckles shone like pearls. He could just make out scattered patterns of stars reflected like speckled imperfections in its polished silver blade. Polished, even after all this time.

He made his way by memory, watched the still peak of the distant mountain range jut into the lavender twilight. His galoshes squeaked awkwardly against the grass as he climbed, careful not to fall and impale himself -- what a strange death that'd be -- to the head of the trail. He turned right, found his patch of bluebells. They seemed darker, heavier at night, necks bent closer to the ground as if in submission. He lifted a stem by draping it over his finger like an overcoat. Perhaps he should pot one, nurse it in the parlor. No, better to falter undisturbed.

He searched between the blossoms for a suitable spot. Some patch open to sun but shaded from the trail. He felt the grass part beneath his knees with the same tenderness it cradled his head, made space for his most personal thoughts. The expanse of twilight sky had an openness, rooflessness, that pulled at his very being. He let go of the boundaries of himself -- no walls, no windows, no dinner table, no garage, just an expansion as easy as breathing. Outside the marble and concrete, soil and wet wood, there were no echoes. No trappings. He smiled as he brought

the knife down. The earth parted noiselessly to accommodate the metal. He expected a kind of hiss, but all was quiet. A quiet that pushed away at any distant, raging sound.

Stilts

Teddy had always thought he was meant to be taller. Not in a machismo, domineering way but with the same lovelorn ache as a phantom limb. Like he had inches shorn off his head while he slept one night, like the space below his fingers churned with empty static. He often found himself reaching for salt and vinegar chips on the uppermost shelf at the store without looking, grasping at air for a full second before finding his grip inches short. He ducked under shallow doorframes that came nowhere near his head. He looked women in the eye at the end of mediocre dates, assessing the mediocrity and deciding whether to go in for the kiss, and was surprised to see their glazed irises at exactly level. Full, perfect spheres instead of foreshortened ovals. He rarely went for such kisses. He felt good in a shoe with a heel. He felt better standing one stair above a friend in a photo.

In fact, his penchant for stair-finding had brought him to his current predicament. Even outside the lens of a photographer he liked to stand on stairs just to feel the rush of it, to gaze out upon the deliciously beautiful masses of scalps. Few things satisfied him more than getting a birds-eye view of a tall man's head. Those over-worked, over-combed tufts of gray bending over bare skin as if in prayer made the world feel at peace. He'd seen less of them lately – the comb-overs, toupees, and cue ball baldies. It was true things were always changing; perhaps it was only the rise of rehairification procedures, or the increasing popularity of wearing pets upon one's head. But, from the deepest pits of most anxious possibility, the men of town could be growing. Or, worse, he could be shrinking. He shivered in terror at the thought.

Teddy was 15 minutes late to meet Reiko but couldn't muster the will to descend the stairs of the art museum and be thrust once more into the cruel reality of his vertical ennui. A

middle schooler, perhaps 11, ran by – her sparkling butterfly barrettes glinting in the sun first blue, then red, then pink. Teddy watched as they fluttered off her head and spun around her shoulders and braids, wings lifted by each giggle. Teddy envied their rise as he pulled his shoulder blades down and together to squeeze another millimeter from his strained spine. The girl’s hair was parted in careful zigzags, beautiful like distant mountains. The range shifted as she glanced up the staircase, squinting in the midafternoon light. Surely, he was a giant to her. He almost wept.

A vibration in his pocket.

“Ted, where the hell are you?”

“Coming, dearest.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Yes, light of my life.”

She hung up.

Reiko was not interested in men, and even if she was, would not be interested in him. It was a topic they had spoken of once, in passing, twice, drunkenly, then third, firmly, and never again. Teddy had wanted desperately to ask if it was his height that kept him from being an object of her desire, manhood aside, but knew it was a topic that sent her eyes rolling. Since they had met in the squeaky gymnasium of their suburban childhood she had dismissed the fervor of his self-consciousness. *You’re just fine the way you are.* Reiko had levelled with him in a rare moment of earnestness halfway through high school. *You have so much more to give the world than another foot of vertebra.* What he lacked in physical perfection he made up for, or so she claimed, with humor and compassion and other such traits no one could discern just by looking, hidden and inert. He was lucky, he had often been reminded, that he was kind, gentle, and a

long-time owner of a Nintendo 64 or he wouldn't have her as a best friend at all. In any case, her appreciation for his companionship but disgust for his theoretical advances kept him at showering her with endearments, an inside joke neither knew if they continued because it was funny or insufferable.

He was only a few blocks away. He descended the stairs with the weight of gravity and regret, Lucifer existing the gates of heaven. There was a drop in his stomach as his back foot at last met the sidewalk. Lost again in a sea of shoulders.

New shops were always opening on Fairmont. Gentrification couldn't keep up with the shifting interests and priorities of the generationally wealthy type who inhabited its refurbished townhouses. In the last few months, business owners had taken to throwing darts at names, wares and aesthetics – *Ernesto's Exotic but Locally Sourced Lizards*, *Dark Side of the Moon Coffee*, *Crossfit & Arcade*, *Velociraptor Yoga*. Teddy whistled as he made his way, window shopping with the zeal appropriate of a man in his 30s who could not realistically afford to purchase a luxury.

It was out of the corner of his eye that he saw them – so glancingly that if his head were turned a single degree to the right, he might have missed their gleaming. Two long, polished pieces of wood, oiled to shine under the soft spring sun. At the top of each piece a series of straps, molded to a men's size eight, he just knew it, and at the bottom black rubber molded in the shape of a foot. One of the planks had a sneaker half covering the foot, frozen in the act of coyly slipping in. They carried no label, no sign, only pushed at the ceiling of the display case with the kind of lengthened authority that kept him up at night. He pressed his face to the glass,

nose flattening, to see that the very top of the left rod had displaced a ceiling tile, so magnificently disruptive was its height. He felt himself sweating – crying? – perhaps both. He burst through the door so quickly the bell choked on its chime.

“Good sir, what are those glorious contraptions in your window display?”

A freckled teen looked up from his phone, gangly legs crossed on the counter. Teddy felt his fists ball in envy, how he had longed for the awkward pains of a significant adolescent growth spurt.

“The stilts?”

“Stilts!” Teddy exclaimed, much louder than the boy had spoken. The word felt wondrous and sacred on his tongue. “How much are they?”

The boy looked Teddy up then down, a feat he detested as it took barely any eye movement. “How much do you have?”

“I beg your pardon?”

The boy blinked, cradling his phone between his thumbs as if debating whether to give up on their conversation and return to it. Teddy patted his pocket for his wallet, hands slick.

“Let me see, let me see,” he pattered, pretending to flick through bills he did not have. “How does \$40 sound?”

The boy typed a few words, face impassive. “Sure.”

Teddy almost squealed with delight, body shaking. He placed one \$20, one \$5, and the rest in change on the glass counter. The boy glanced at the fare with distrust.

“You’ll find that’s the full amount.”

The boy sighed, then folded the envious gangle of his legs below the desk so he could lean forward to count. Teddy cracked as his knuckles impatiently. He did some anxious heel raises. He listened to the scratch of metal over glass.

“Alright.” The boy nodded at the window, fingers already drawn back to his phone.
“Thanks, man.”

“No, thank you!” Teddy reached both hands forward as if to clasp the boy in an elated, two-palmed embrace. He gave up mid-way to about face and bound over to the window.

“I can just take them out?”

“You can wear them out if you want.” The boy gestured towards a rack to the right of the display case. “They come with pants.”

Teddy cooed over the row of folded fabric, stumbling through the hangers for something in his waist size. The legs of the pants piled like scarves on the floor. He selected a pair of sensible khakis and squirreled the stilts and pants into the fitting room. Though the boy must have heard his grunts of effort assembling the marvel he did not check in or offer help. The most miraculous things in life must be done oneself. When he was done – straps secured and laces tightened over the new rubber feet – he invented a kind of wobbling squat to fit his head in the length of the mirror. His reddened reflection met his gaze at the very top, toothy smile cutting through his face like croutons in tomato soup.

“My darling, I’m sorry to keep you waiting.” Teddy approached Reiko, more comfortable now at the end of his journey. She was reading on a bench outside the restaurant. Her leg was crossed at the ankle to prop up her book in the kind of effortless, utilitarian style of those

naturally blessed with long limbs. She had played professional volleyball, danced in a ballet company, acted briefly, then given up all to become a camera operator. Her coworkers lamented her refusal to be on screen, but she admitted to him in confidence she hated watching herself on film, watching herself at all. Her apartment had no mirrors and she refused to be in pictures. Sometime in the last two days she had cut her dark hair into a short, asymmetrical bob.

Reiko looked up as he spoke and her brows furrowed. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I couldn’t know what you mean.”

“You’re taller.” She put away her book and stood. While she was usually a half foot taller, today he could have rested his chin on the crest of her hair.

“I am,” he huffed, grinning.

He could feel her gaze on the sweat pooling like spilt milk on his temples, armpits, and under the slight paunch of his belly.

“Are you irresistibly attracted to me now?”

“Can’t say that I am.”

“Well, good. We can still be friends.”

Usually, she would hold a hand over her mouth to hide a laugh but today her face twisted with dismay. Reiko was one of the few adults who had ever complimented his height – at least sincerely, without the cloy of pity around the edges. *It suits you.* He could appreciate the sentiment despite disagreeing with every sinew of his stunted being. He could admit it had its advantages – before being laid off at the end of the previous school year it had made him a good teacher for young students. They took to him more immediately, felt at ease with a male teacher less scarily huge than some of his colleagues, closer to the vertical limits of their existence. He found that dogs usually liked him, came up to lick at his palms despite cowering away from

Reiko's statuesque sharpness completely. But that was then, a past that already felt distant despite having only traversed a few blocks at his new stature.

Reiko tucked her book into her bag and swung open the restaurant door. Teddy fumbled to step through, bracing himself against the upper siding to keep from falling. The host, a mustachioed man with the blank face of someone who had seen weirder, waited patiently to seat them.

"How many?"

Reiko turned, "Ted, will your masculine insecurity be needing its own seat?"

"No, it's left the building. Just two for today."

The man's mustache twitched. "Very well." He nodded respectfully and flashed Teddy the lushness of his full scalp. Thrilling.

They followed the host to their table, Teddy's new rubber feet punctuating his steps with dull thuds. He clambered into the booth, sweaty back slick against the wall and knees aching. The stilts folded beneath him and well out into the aisle as if he were a perverse, giant deer.

Reiko folded her napkin across her lap, refusing to look at him "I was going to ask you to meet Anna but tonight may be a bad time."

Reiko's dating history was sparse and often secret. What started as hiding partners from her conservative parents had aged into a quiet need for privacy. Teddy often heard about girlfriends only after they had left or been left, when Reiko texted him to come to her place with boxes and he helped excavate them from her life. A sweatshirt here, a book there. He learned what kind of person she connected with by the discarded entrails of where their lives had overlapped. He didn't know a firm number of past partners, but knew she had spent the last five Christmases, as usual, with him and his parents upstate. At the start, he had learned to crochet

and crafted her a custom stocking for the mantle. It was the first time he'd seen her cry in a decade, pulling wrapped knickknacks and mini toiletries from the tangled mess of yarn. She did not talk to or about her parents. When she first mentioned Anna to him the week before he knew the weight of her name on Reiko's tongue was special, significant.

"Why do you say that?" Teddy gulped at his water, panting heavily. He choked on an ice cube with a malformed squeak before hocking it back into the glass.

Reiko pretended not to notice, examining at the menu. "You're unwell."

"I've never felt better!" He patted at his forehead with a much-abused napkin. The genuine glee of his height-enhanced existence shone through his smile. "I'd love to meet her."

A waiter came to take their order but tripped over the shellacked wooden lengths of his legs.

"Excuse me," Teddy contorted his knees into an even more impossible position. The waiter, straightened and stepped delicately over the stilts as he pulled out a notepad. For a moment Teddy felt a rush, as if the man were about to artfully sketch his portrait in charcoal, today, the most wonderful day of his life. What luck! The man pulled out a normal ballpoint pen. What misery!

"Anything to drink?"

"I'll have two gin and tonics and he'll have nothing." Reiko finally put down the menu and acknowledged his existence, if in the third person.

"Right away." The man lunged over the stilts again, head straight forward as if hurdling over columnar false legs were part of his daily duties. Perhaps it was.

"I'd like a glass of orange juice."

“I’d like an explanation.” Reiko leaned forward, tenting her fingers. She had swiped a lone streak of lavender eyeshadow over each of her eyes. A kind of signature, minimal sloppiness made avant garde by her high cheekbones and slender jaw.

“My height supplements finally kicked in.”

She lifted the side of her lip in distrust. “The ones you bought from the fake Saudi prince who was using the crowdfunding to support his return to the throne?”

“Yes, those precisely.”

“Uh-huh. And you’re going to be like this for?” She drawled on the last word, waiting.

“For-ever!” Teddy hadn’t thought of his plan beyond this lunch but as his lips formed the word in a series of partings and meetings it felt true. Although he felt the pressure of the leather straps cutting into his insoles and a sharpness in his knees and hips from the weight it felt right – the closest to right he’d felt in a good long while. The rightness of it floated around his body before clinging to his skin like a butterfly on the flesh of a flower. “It’s permanent.”

“I see.”

The waiter returned with Reiko’s drinks. She finished both before Teddy was done ordering.

As they exited the restaurant, Teddy saw a tall man, a very tall man, a man still somehow taller than him, draped in a trench coat that could have easily been used for curtains. “Why, my good sir!”

“Yes?” the man turned, slow in his enormity. “Ah! A comrade in height!”

Teddy walked towards the man, hoping distance had warped his perspective. No, as he got close enough to peer at the edges of the man's frameless glasses it became clear the tall man was a good three heads taller. Teddy could see the underside of the man's hair lifting in a coif above his forehead and felt, for the first time in hours, small.

"Are you also wearing," Teddy glanced around, lowering his voice, "stilts?"

"Never heard of them."

Teddy lifted one foot to kick at the man's shin, listening for the dull echo of wood.

The tall man crossed his arms, annoyed. "Fine, yes, I'm wearing stilts. No need to be rude."

"Where did you procure yours extra-long?"

The man looked down at Teddy, grinning. "Why, the back, of course. Only a fool would settle for the small fries in the window."

"The back," Teddy wondered. He had been so focused on his goal he had never even examined the rest of the shop.

"Teddy, please don't kick strangers." Reiko called, exasperated. "Can we go?"

"Why yes, dearheart!"

"I'm going to custom order an extra-tall coffin and kill you."

"You'll have to catch me first!" Teddy nodded his thanks at the man before bounding past Reiko, rubber feet making a loud *thwop* on the inside of his shoes with each wide step. He called to her retreating silhouette over his shoulder, "I'll meet you at the bar later, I have an errand to run!"

“Boy!” Teddy yelled over the jangling of the entrance bell. He managed to drum up some volume despite being out of breath from the walk. “You didn’t tell me there were larger stilts in the back.”

The gangly teen, somehow more knobble-kneed than before, smirked. “You didn’t ask.”

“Well, I’m asking now.”

“How much money do you have?”

Teddy used his house key to slice open the seam of his wallet. After his tire blew out on the highway a few months back he had added an additional pocket for emergency funds. He had requested Reiko help him sew it closed to ward off temptation, but now ripped at her neat stitches.

“I have another fifty dollars.”

“Trade in the ones you have, and I can grab you Model Three.”

Teddy felt his mouth fill with saliva, “Model Three?”

“They go up to Ten.”

“To Ten!”

The boy looked him from crown to foot again. He smirked in that slanting, demoralizing way only teen boys can muster, “Dude, you couldn’t handle Model Ten.”

“How much are they?”

“Two grand.”

Teddy wanted to retort but his wallet was now well and truly empty. “Bring me the Three, please.”

He was twenty minutes early to meet Reiko and Anna. The taller model had wider feet at the base he had spent the last hour getting used to, walking in wide, wonky circles at the park like a concussed stork. Although there was a stumbling awkwardness to his gait, it felt like the only way he had always been meant to move. He wondered if this is how Reiko had felt, suspended in the air to block a spike from passing the net, poised in arabesque as the trill of the piano kept her in place. There was a part of him, a deep, inner part, that longed to defy nature in vertical suspension, that bubbled over with delight as he ducked under tree branches.

“Can you do any tricks?” A high-pitched voice called out.

“Hm?” Teddy pivoted on one trembling foot to find a young girl, hair braided tight around the crown of her head like a bird’s nest.

“Tricks! Tall people tricks.”

He thought for a moment, shifting his weight from side to side. “Like this?” He grasped the branch of a nearby maple and shook it once softly, then again with more force. Oblong seeds twisted on the breeze like helicopter blades. The girl giggled as she spun in tight circles, arms raised to grasp at the falling leaves. Ted laughed as they cascaded with a sound like beads inside a maraca. He shook even more forcefully until the wall of debris grew so thick he couldn’t see the little girl, his torso rising above the fluttering new freefall of treetops.

“Ow!” she cried out from below.

“Oh, sorry!” Teddy ceased his shaking and waited for the girl to appear from the maelstrom. Her bird’s nest was littered with sticks and leaves and she was rubbing her eyes with small fists. “Let’s clean this up together.” He lowered his arm like he had countless times to retrieve toys, eraser bits, crayon wrappers, bouncy balls, but he towered over the girl’s head. He steadied himself on the tree as he tried to bend his knees, wobbling and shaking more whip-

winged helicopter seeds. The girl began to cry outright, the sound softened by its new distance from his ears.

“Ted, what are you doing?” He heard Reiko before he saw her. The girl ran past her towards her mother across the park.

“Hello,” Teddy called, jostling the tree again as he raised his arm to wave. Reiko had changed into a black velour dress that brushed her ankles. Her arms were crossed. To her side was a petite woman with crimped blonde hair like undercooked pie crust.

“Is this your friend?”

Reiko cradled her head in her hands. “No, I’ve never met this man in my life.”

Ted watched the mother take the girl’s hand and leave, furrowing her brow over her shoulder. He felt a strange tightness in his chest. He took a deep breath and let the wind hit his face, slightly warmer than the breeze at the ground.

“Do you mind if we talk out here? I don’t know if I can get inside the bar.” It had taken him several minutes to figure out how to exit the shop and his spine still ached from attempting to limbo beneath the doorframe. He had lost a single button from the chest of his shirt. At the center of the park was a large but simple fountain, poorly detailed fish spurting up water in staccato bursts. The women shuffled awkwardly before perching at the fountain’s edge.

“So how did you two meet?” Anna asked.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” Teddy walked in slow circles to keep his balance and felt suddenly like a child performing a snow-day skit for his parents. He couldn’t remember the last time Reiko had dated someone seriously enough to introduce. He fingered the hole where his button should fit, tried to cover it as if pledging allegiance to the conversation.

Anna laughed a surprisingly deep, throaty laugh considering how small she was. “Fair! I do SFX makeup for movies and ran into this one on set.” She elbowed Reiko who leaned away but smiled. “Your turn.”

“I got a point on her in middle school volleyball try-outs!” Teddy stilled himself to place his fists on his hips, puffing out his chest. “You’re looking at one of the only people on the planet who has landed a spike on Reiko ‘The Wall’ Yamaguchi.”

“It was a lucky shot and I hadn’t hit my growth spurt,” Reiko huffed.

“I could do it again!”

“They wouldn’t let your clumsy ass within 10 feet of the court.” As she said that, with her typical clairvoyance, he felt his right foot slide out from beneath his weight. He caught himself on the rugged trunk of the maple but felt his legs buckle and lose traction, pulling him down to collide with the cobblestone of the plaza. His head rang with a disjointed bell choir of pain.

“Are you okay?” Reiko was above him, her angular face distorted with worry. The light of her joking was extinguished. The seriousness in her voice was foreign and intimidating.

“Yes, yes.”

She didn’t seem convinced.

Was he okay? He lay there for a few breaths, arms splayed but legs too heavy to lift. Deep in his core he ached not from the fall but from how large the world seemed laying here, looking up. Trees became towers, lamppost the sun, helicopter seeds falling on his face like rain – origin distant, desirable, undeserving. He had seen the top of the maple and the crest where the fountain water hit air too high to cut through. It rose over and over in a futile rhythm, pushing up

but never able to best gravity beyond its means. Rising, sputtering, the fall. This time he looked up into Anna's nostrils.

"Bend your knees first, then brace and we'll pull you up by the arms." She leaned forward and he felt her voice soft in his ear, "My brother wears the Model Five." She winked as she and Reiko hoisted him back up to standing.

"Can I do some part-time work on your sets?"

"What?" Reiko was frowning, displeased for some reason.

"I need two thousand dollars."

Three months later, Teddy shivered as the wind whipped at his suit jacket. He pushed his trembling fingers to secure it closed. He lifted one foot, heavy, heavy, kicked forward with the full force of his quadriceps, and stepped. He heard a mild exclamation as a woman, barely made out through the fog of clouds, pulled her son away from the shifting mass of wood. As he began to lift his other foot he heard curses from a young girl, hair bleached a stripy black, shaking a fist full of knife. He lifted the leg curiously, calves shaking with the effort, to see she had made it only half-way through carving a jagged heart into the grain with unfinished initials.

"Quite sorry about that!" Teddy shouted, wind snatching at each word.

He watched her arms writhe but heard nothing. He was now so tall, so enormously, ferociously tall, that even sound could not travel from the earth to his ears, pinkened and chapped by the thinning air.

Teddy heard the echoes of squawking, resisted the urge to turn his torso and look behind him lest he be thrown off-balance. Over time it became louder and louder until a syncopated

chorus of deep-throated screeching hit him over the ear. To his left, a flock of geese, flying in a primally precise arrowhead. The leader seemed to look at him, eyes glassy, before squawking at its mates to move past. The last bird on the end brushed the edge of him with her feathers, shouting her distaste at having been shifted an inch out of line. Teddy floundered for a moment, threw up his arms for balance. The wind cut at the flailing worsted wool of his jacket, lifting from his spine like wings.

Teddy imagined, then, a flock of men taller than houses, towers, clouds, each with his wings outstretched and tie flapping in the breeze like a magnificent tail. Some trailed in front of him, some behind, and far to the left his partner in symmetry, an older man with a silk-feathered cap who would laugh, wave, nod. They would walk, legs straining but triumphant, calling to each other with affirmations of success, squawking. A half-diamond of stilt men, happy men, tall men. But not yet, not today. Today he was alone. Towering, ginormous, alone. He could feel the thin air of the troposphere brush against his smile. It wicked sweat as fast as his brow could produce it, sent it plummeting down to Earth.

Boeing 787

Rahul Balakrishnan didn't begin to feel sick until four hours and 39 minutes after take-off. He was the kind of flier who kept his screen tuned to the map – watched the plane icon crawl its way across the continent like a caterpillar with poor survival instincts up the side of a car tire. That made it easy for him to track the exact moment his chest tightened and jaw locked, sweat like condensation on glass beading at his lower back. He thought at first it was something he ate. For fifty-three years he had eaten his wife's terrible cooking. Laid out for him in the mornings, packed neatly into a tower of metal cylinders for lunch, waiting on the table when he returned home for dinner. Eggs like rubber, *parotta* like doorstoppers, curry like the muddied water you strain from canned beans. He didn't have the valor or appropriate gentleness to say something when they were first married, and he certainly didn't now. He loved her fiercely, thought perhaps it wasn't the food itself but the growing miles between them that had struck so forcefully at his heart. With each mile travelled the thread between them pulled taut, then, sharply, began to pull back. He sunk in his chair; breath heavy. She had laughed at his apartment when she first came to this country. The kind of woman who wasn't afraid to laugh with her mouth wide open, whose humor came with only observation and no malice. He had made a meager attempt at decorating – a single framed print from the local museum hung only slightly crooked, a thin blanket he had been gifted free with purchase of two pairs of slippers thrown over the couch. He had hidden all his plastic utensils and bowls, some still stained with the last good meal he would eat in his home. That's what he heard, now, as his back slid over the woven plastic cushion of seat 39C. His wife laughing, throaty and warm, at the mess of a life they would build together.

Darius Clarke got claustrophobic in small spaces. Where else could you be claustrophobic, really? So he had the traditional type. Straight up claustrophobia. The kind that made his knees shake as he shoved them into the space between his seat and the one in front of him, that sent his hands reaching for the paper bag in the seat pocket to contain his exasperated exhalations. He felt a wash of guilt-ridden relief as the man next to him slumped in his seat, slowly, then oozed to the ground. More space to breathe, but a new problem. Darius in his general panic had not been capable of speech for some time but reached his cursedly long limbs to the ceiling (God, how he detested the closeness of the ceiling) to summon a flight attendant. He took a deep, stuttering breath as the space above the armrests lightened and the one at his feet became heavier like water sinking below oil.

“Is there a doctor on board?” The flight attendant glanced at Darius as she asked.

The bag covering his face rapidly crumpled and expanded with panic. She dismissed him as a candidate. An older woman across the aisle, red hair gray at the root, blinked her eyes open, took out her earphones, and dropped to the man’s side.

Darius could have cried with relief. He wasn’t a doctor – far from it, his degree in hotel hospitality wasn’t going to save a life today – but being in any position of responsibility now was a terror. He tried not to whimper as the aisle filled with a second attendant and the space around him constricted even more violently on his throat.

“Hi, sir.” The woman to his left put an arm on his shoulder. “I hope it’s okay I’m touching you. It’s going to be okay.”

The woman was around his daughter's age – couldn't be much past thirty. He tried to straighten his spine and look less pathetic.

“Try to take a deeper breath in if you can.” She caught his gaze and held it. Her face was concentrated with freckles like cinnamon over foam. “With me, now. She took a deep breath in, stomach straining against her seat belt, and held it for a moment before an equally slow release. He mimicked her, his bag mutating with stale air. “Good. Let's do another.” He squared his shoulders towards her, his back to the aisle. They did four more. She smiled as he dropped the bag to his lap.

“I'm sorry. Thank you.”

“It's no trouble. I do it all the time.”

“Should we,” Darius shuddered at the thought, “help?”

She flicked her gaze over his shoulder and returned to meet his. “I think it would be best if we stayed out of their way.”

He nodded, reluctant to turn around himself. “What do you do?”

“I'm a special ed teacher. I'm starting a new job in elementary next week.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“In Newark?”

“No, I'm catching a train to the city. My wife and I are moving there for her school.”

“NYU?”

“Columbia.”

“That's fantastic.”

“You know,” for the first time, her eyes unfocused. “I don't think I've ever said that.”

“Columbia?”

She fidgeted with the ends of a long, neat braid. “Wife. I have a wife.”

“Congratulations to you both.”

“It was a secret thing, nobody knows. It’s weird to think of someone as your wife if nobody knows.”

“Well, I know.”

She smiled again. “Would you like to see the ring?”

Winnie Wong lifted her hand to show the man her white-gold band nestled beneath a modest sapphire. She had put on both for the first time at the courthouse – she and Viv had exchanged engagement rings weeks before, but they waited in boxes, never worn. Viv was probably in the apartment now; decorating with a fervor Winnie had never been able to fathom or match. The most outstanding aspect of her design ethos was her patience – her inability to settle. She awoke each morning and crosschecked marketplace websites and local estate sale listings to find the exact things she wanted in the exact stain, shape, and texture. The vision she had for a room in her head was as crisp as it was unyielding. She breathed it into reality without hesitation or doubt. She was a comfortable kind of person to love, to be loved by. Winnie knew she was exactly the kind of person she wanted.

“What’s taking you to Newark?”

“My daughter’s baby is due in the morning. She was induced early, this was a bit of a last minute thing.” Darius tried not to let his voice waver, counted the freckles on Winnie’s upper cheek to relax.

“Congratulations to you as well! First grandchild?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m flying in to stay with her and help out where I can.”

“That’s sweet.”

Darius’ wife passed when his girl was only two. He quit his job and lived off of savings, sweet cream, soft-boiled eggs, and Lexapro for 18 months. She was a good girl, always had been, but enterprising. Clever. Too smart to be fooled by his rambling excuses for the absence of her mother, too discerning to buy into his pretending at doing half as good a job. The first time he cried in front of her wasn’t when he heard the news, or at the funeral, but five weeks later, when he had scrapped together just enough of a routine to feel the ground beneath his feet. Breakfast, playtime, counting, sing-along, lunch, park, nap, bed, pluck at the hairs graying between his eyebrows, bend over to stretch out the vertebrae of his lower back, stare blankly at photo albums and try not to think about all of this being easier, faster, less. Try not to look forward to school so much. Try not to pray his daughter’s childhood away.

He was washing a dish when she got behind the dryer. There shouldn’t have been so big a gap there, but it rocked itself out of place when he overfilled it. He overfilled it almost every time. She didn’t respond to her name at first. She wasn’t where he’d left her in the dining room, or where she usually hid behind the sofa. Eventually it was her giggling that gave her away, that grew even louder as her father appeared in the door to the laundry room with wild eyes and sweat streaming down his neck. She refused to come out. She laughed as he slammed the power and the dryer stopped shaking, rumbling heat and mass only inches from her small feet. She laughed even harder at his desperation, at his coos and panicked whispers, at how silly he looked on his hands and knees begging her to shimmy back to the safety of open tile. He had to crawl in to get her. It took over half an hour. He stopped breathing for longer than he should have been able, soaked his sweat-slick palms in tears as he finally gasped dust and lint. In the end she worked her way towards him, more concerned than entertained by this display of new, unfamiliar

emotion. He couldn't bear to touch her for long, just put her on the couch while he heaved, arms and legs spread, on the living room carpet. He remembered the feeling of a small hand on his cheek, two rough pats. She lay down next to him, limbs wide, for the rest of the afternoon.

“I was supposed to drive. I don't do, uh,” Darius shifted his legs uncomfortably, “confined spaces.”

Winnie pulled her body away from him, closer to the window.

He thanked her. “Ran out of time, that's all.”

As she shifted Winnie could make out the dense, methodic thump of the doctor's hands on Rahul's chest.

Hank Cole learned CPR in high school. The certification was built into 11th grade health class, but he'd missed the day of the formal examination and never gotten the card for his wallet. No one could know he knew the steps, and he had no way to prove it. He'd heard about people being sued for doing CPR wrong – for breaking the ribs, for not. Good Samaritan laws had loopholes and clauses. God knows he couldn't afford a lawsuit. He'd heard on NPR last week about flight, fight, or fawn – the third kind of person who froze in the face of danger, the kind of person imbued with fragileness destined to avoidable death by motorist. He wasn't like that, though. He wouldn't freeze watching the man in directly in front of him slump against his armrest, stiff-limbed but loose at the joints like an artist's figure. He wouldn't shift his foot away as the man slid to the floor, drowsy-eyed and mewling too softly for anyone else to hear above the dim roar of the engine. He wouldn't pretend to be deeply engrossed in the menu screen of his personal television for the two minutes before a flight attendant rushed down the aisle, sensibly

square heels thudding against the carpet, and knelt at the man's side, pressing said heels into his ankle. He wasn't the kind of person to admit these things, even as they happened. He was, though, the kind who wouldn't complain.

He shifted his feet further as the woman checked the man's throat and pressed her ear to his mouth to listen for the exhales of a body alive, soul-filled, inhabited by the weariness and responsibility of being tethered to the world. Was he man with kids, grandkids, a spoiled calico waiting impatiently at home? Or was he already a corpse – an object without the cosmic stuffing to support such obligations?

“Is there a doctor on board?” The flight attendant called. A passenger diagonal from him stood and spoke softly as the attendant began the compressions. Hank winced at the first crack of the rib.

“Could I get past you to use the restroom?” The woman seated to his left was awake, just pulling off her headphones and sleep mask.

“Ah,” Hank broke his imaginary reverie. He looked to his right as if the scene may have disappeared in the moments between blinks. “You probably don't want to do that.”

“What's going on?”

He leaned back so she could look for herself.

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

“Is he alright?”

Hank turned his head again as if the diagnoses would be set up neatly on a sign, printed in Helvetica for their convenience.

“Doesn't look like it.”

“Oh.” The woman scrambled for the bag in front of her. “I’m going to be sick.”

“Please don’t,” Hank whispered, more to himself than anything, but it was too late. The woman was retching into the branded blue bag, her curly hair bouncing with each jarring tug of her head. He caught the eye of the elderly man at their window above her head, pursed his lips like *get a load of this*. The man did not reciprocate.

“I would offer to get you a water or something but the flight attendants are... occupied.”

“Don’t say that.” The woman huffed, the stench of her bile escaping the sides of her mouth. “Dios mío.”

Alejandra Muñoz hadn’t flown in over 15 years. It was one of the first things she thought when she exited the hospital doors with her first baby swaddled in her carrier, ready for her trip home. Nobody would want her on a plane for years. She had an infant now, a precious lump of excess flesh, who was calm then but would be screaming within the hour to make sure the world knew she was alive. *I can’t come see you*, she practiced gesturing down sheepishly, *the baby and all*. The crying in the background of the phone calls really sold it. That protection lasted her at least 5 years. She had two more daughters. Family and friends, without question, had made flight arrangements to come to her. For a decade and a half she folded empanadas and coats and calendars and spare pillowcases and sheets with her feet safely, gratefully on the ground.

Hank crossed his shaking arms and leaned back as if settling in for a game of baseball on TV, uneager to pretend to know the rules. “They’re professionals. Statistically, he has a higher survival rate here than on, say, the subway.”

Alejandra heaved. “What is wrong with you?”

Depends on who you ask. The former Mrs. Cole? He was a coward. He lacked conviction. He didn’t stand up for the things he cared about, no matter how much he waxed

poetic on how deeply he cared about them. He didn't follow through on plans. He let their house and their lawn and their garden and their relationship spoil and rot if she didn't remind him and outline their upkeep. She was a practical woman. Quiet. She hoisted the emotional labor of their marriage without much pomp or petition for longer than many could bear. It took her longer than it should have to realize how little he added to her life. He had the maturity and self-awareness to know when she left that it was for the best. He was proud of that, of how much he cared for her from afar, swaddled his own loneliness in certainty – without self-deprecation or exaggeration – that she was better off. He knew the more mature instinct would be a motivation to “step up” and metamorphosize into the kind of man she deserved – bring home flowers in his one nice suit and roll up his shirtsleeves to heal years of modest incompetence – but that possibility felt foggy, unfocused and poorly framed. The thought of it made his limbs heavy.

“Can I?” Alejandra trailed the end of her sentence, nodding her chin at his barf bag.

He nodded. She had just enough time to fold the first over with neat edges before vomiting in the second.

Ayako Tanaka stared down at the pearlsh crescent in her palm that had once been the bottom of her left front tooth. She had gone hunting for fossils, once, with her father by the river. They had packed sieves and shovels and Ziploc bags for their discoveries, left the house before sunrise as if there were crowds of people eager to press their knees into mud who might get to the dried husks of long-dead invertebrates before them. As if their corpses had not littered the silt for millenia, with all of human evolution to be lost, trampled, scavenged, before they arrived at 4:30AM. She had done her work dutifully, as she did everything dutifully then. The time before

her father's passing was one of diligent participation in his hobbies, measured in success on scales only he could discern. She scooped mud into the plastic-rimmed sieve, shook generously in running water until the dirt washed away to reveal mounds of shifting pebbles and sticks. They rubbed against each other with a slight clacking, and she imagined them smoothing against each other infinitesimally, that if she were to squat here, sifting, for months or years they would tumble down to their most precious, uniform selves and her father would live forever. Looking over her shoulder, his own sieve in hand, immortal as the sun rose and set, sweat forever beading and cooling on his brow.

They had found over a dozen fossils that day. Mostly worthless ammonites or formless indentations. But at the top of the pile, glistening and poised, two shark's teeth. She remembered pressing the rosiness of her finger pads to the point, imagining the squelch and rip of flesh. Her father had displayed them proudly in a shadowbox over the receiver for the landline, dusted and Windexed long after it was disconnected. They hovered on a bed of velvet, curved to viciously blunt points like upside-down waves. Her tooth looked nothing like that. An omnivore's tooth, squared and only slightly serrated. It wasn't even a full tooth – just the bottom left quadrant shattered and sad-looking. A piece of bone that had never been alone in its life, even in the time when it floated around her infant skull, waiting to settle behind her pinkish child gums. Her agent was going to kill her. If she even had an agent for more than a few minutes after delivering the news.

“Excuse me, are you a model?”

She turned to the woman in the seat next to her, neck pillow obscuring the soft fold of her chin. Ayako nodded, not wanting to expose the jagged skyline of her mouth.

“I thought I recognized you. My daughter follows you online. Flying in for fashion week?”

She nodded again.

“I was a background extra in *Hairspray*. The first one. The production team came around school asking if any of us wanted to be in the movie. I think they paid me all of 10 cents.” The woman laughed, her hands coming up to cover her smile like a tin of Ladyfingers laid out on the counter, ready for trifle. “Beauty doesn’t pay, huh?”

Ayako smiled with her lips pressed together. She tried not to think about the almonds and egg whites rattling in her stomach like a down-beat maraca. Here she was, in Coach, her knees almost touching a stranger’s, flying across the country for shows that might not pay back the cost of the ticket. Her father had not believed in good investments; in “exposure” or “opportunity” or the other buzzwords trilled between the expensively lacquered lips of her agent. What you had you could hold in your hands, deposit in your bank account. He kept all of his most prized possessions in plain sight. The walls of his house had been covered, floor to ceiling, in floating shelves and picture frames, glass boxes and tapestries. He kept her mother’s wedding kimono in a case above the TV, impractically large, the arms raised to form a “t” like a crucifix.

“No, seems not.”

A flight attendant rushed past them, her hips moving at sharp angles like an Olympic speed walker.

“What’s all the commotion?” The woman asked.

Ayako craned her neck. “There’s a man on the ground three rows up.” She closed her fist around the shard of her tooth.

“Oh, dear.” The woman’s smile dropped, the outer edges of her cheeks drooping in dismay.

Marian O’Toole knew too much about people on the ground. Patients were safest in their beds. There were bed sores or hair mats or the occasional catheter mishap, but those unwellnesses were expected, routine. There was a certain level of peace, as much as a hospital can claw through a miasma of illness for peace, to a sick person safely horizontal. A position of rest, of access, of everything visible at once. She hated waking patients for medicine or injections, but when their eyes crumbled open there was a moment, just a moment, of looseness. A stretching of the body elongated and suspended. The aches would drop and settle like tetrominoes but for a moment of time the body was relieved to be at rest somewhere designed for such indulgences. The real danger was the floor. A collapse at moments of greatest vulnerability – shuffling to the bathroom, moving between exam rooms, standing to greet a parent who has folded their spine over a chair like a coat, contorted all night for that hug. A patient who stands enough to fall has a hard-won, fragile confidence. They are sea-drowned between harbors. They don’t always stand up.

“The flight attendant is bent with her ear to his mouth.”

Ayako thought of her father, of the way he’d pant in the doorway of her room, already breathless before she even awoke to go fishing, fossil hunting, leaf peeping, meteor chasing.

“Is there a doctor on board?” The woman kneeling called.

Marian closed her eyes, “Did anyone stand?”

“The woman in the seat across is up and seems to be directing things.”

“Lucky. Unless she asks for help with the compressions there’s nothing we can do.”

Ayako opened her fist to a small pool of blood following the lines of her hand like a river delta. The jagged inner edge of her tooth dug under the first few layers of her palm. She saw Marian watch with no horror, just interest and the calmness of someone who moves often with purpose.

“What do you have there?”

Ayako lifted her top lip with her knuckle. Marian nodded.

“What are the chances it goes back where it came from by tomorrow morning?”

“None.”

She was out of a job, then. Several jobs. Her father had always clucked his tongue at the idea of a profession based solely on looks. *You won't be beautiful forever.* She hadn't expected to be marred by the universe so soon, hated to think of his words as prophecy. She would be late on rent again. He wasn't around to gloat. When Marian pulled a sheet of antiseptic wipes from her purse, Ayako offered her hand. She was used to being poked and prodded, cinched and sewn.

“How did this happen?”

“I fell off my bike.” She was trained to be graceful, willowy, flexible. The hazards of a normal reality felt extra embarrassing.

“You're a beautiful girl and it'll be an easy fix. Probably just a crown.”

Ayako slipped the shard into her pocket. She imagined nestling it in her jewelry tray at home, how it would shine slightly yellow in the reflection of pearls. A minor dental procedure seemed insignificant in the wake of the muted tragedy just out of view. She remembered the call from her father's physician, a family friend who gave her Legos each year for her birthdays between 3 and 12. She remembered her spot by the window in front of the mirror in her old apartment, her inability to decide between two satin slips. She was holding both hangers and

balancing her phone on her shoulder when she finally picked up, caught it on the last ring. What if this man had a daughter, a girl who was stuck between dresses right now, deciding what to wear to a casting, trying to shed the guilt of her career path like torn stockings, unaware of the call she'd get once the plane landed?

“Hey,” Marian crumpled the plastic wings from the bandage. “Don’t think about it, if you can. It won’t help anyone.”

She rubbed the ribbed surface of the Band-Aid and felt the squelch of Neosporin underneath.

“Could we get a picture, for my daughter? She’d be thrilled.”

“Sure.” Ayako brushed back her hair and tilted her chin. She emptied her mind and pursed her face with the ease of practice. Marian held up her phone and took the shot, careful to tilt the frame away from the aisle.

Jackie Wilson cleaned graves because it was cheaper than yoga. Yes, there were the initial equipment costs – the portable power washer, the detergent, the thick, unpliant bristle brush like the one her mother used to smooth her hair before gymnastics competitions – but no monthly fee. No expensive four-way stretch leggings and bra sets, no camel toe, no loitering behind strollers (half babies, half dogs) waiting in line for faux-health chia seed sludge that ran \$12 before tip and tax. She got a better arm workout scraping flowering layers of spores from slate slabs than in her disfigured, pound-destined downward dog with nowhere to look but her own unvarnished toes.

In fact, Jackie liked cleaning the tombstones. Not because it was charitable or honored the memory of the deceased, though she would scratch at those buzzwords on second dates for the thrill of her captive audience's initial confusion and revulsion, but because it was something to do. An activity that no one offered to tag along to or spectate, that even her own mother politely diverted conversation from on the phone. The excuse to use an industrial level of water pressure away from her HOA's watchful eye was a welcome bonus. When she arrived at the cemetery, a stone was dirty. When she left, it was clean. No one alive had reason to know or care. It was the perfect hobby.

That's what she was thinking about now – graves. The bodies churning and wheezing into soil beneath them; the appropriate ratio of detergent to water to use on marble, the scratching sound of bristles against stone, the huff of chemicals working at dirt that had settled before their invention. She felt it in her nostrils now: sharp, soapy, and rounded off into sweetness at the tail.

It was just minutes ago the attendant had rushed past her; the sound of her breathing sucked up into the vacuum of stale air. She couldn't hear much but made out a wrinkled suit-clad figure on the ground many rows up, limbs sprawled on the dusty carpet. A man on the plane could be dying. This part wasn't really her specialty.

“Is the cart lady going to come around again?”

“Hm?” Jackie turned from the muted commotion in the aisle to the small blonde girl seated in the middle of her row. She glanced up at the older woman by the window, tongue protruding slightly in unconscious comfort, head lolling against the plastic, that she had assumed was the child's mother. “Are you flying alone?”

“I’m an unaccompanied minor.” The girl rushed through the syllables with the ease of practice and lack of understanding. “I would like another orange juice.”

Jackie ducked her head out slightly – there were at least two flight attendants, the stripes of their uniforms shifting like zebra stripes, moving rapidly several rows up.

“No, I don’t think she’ll be by for a while more.”

Lottie Campbell, 7 years and three quarters years old, sighed with the early acceptance of someone used to disappointment. Her father was a good-for-nothing-rat-bastard-shit-stubbed clown man. Her mother’s therapist had once applauded her creativity in fabricating new, increasingly complex epithets for his reference in their family group sessions. He often sighed the same kind of sigh. She had four more hours before she had to hug him again, taste the sappy tar of cigarette smoke on the upper palette of her mouth. He was supposed to have quit, but *que será, será*. She had hoped to flush the area with another box of orange juice.

“Is there a doctor on board?” An attendant called. Jackie saw a woman in a brown cardigan stand to join them in the aisle. The girl hadn’t heard.

“You know, I used to do that.” Jackie pointed at some cartoon gymnastics on Lottie’s screen, eager to distract her.

“Flips and stuff?”

“Yup.”

“Cool. Have you ever fallen?”

“Of course.”

“Bad?”

“Twice. The first time I hit my head real hard. I couldn’t see clearly and I had a hard time reading for a few weeks. The second, I heard a pop,” she pushed her left shoulder forward for

effect, “when my arm bone came out. It was like one of those wrapped up Tootsie Roll toys you get on your plate at Christmas time. All the air pushed out of one spot, an opening where it can’t take the stress.”

Lottie closed her lips and pulled her finger against the inside of her cheek, *pop*.

“You get it, just like that. It terrified me unconscious. I passed right out. When I woke up, Clarence Knick was standing over me, all tall and greasy. He was apparently a volunteer EMT, but nobody talked to him or knew much about him beyond that he worked part-time with his dad at the morgue. I thought I was dead.”

Jackie chuckled but Lottie only nodded seriously, like a simian researcher observing her subject. She remembered why the situation had reminded her of that day and grimaced at her own poor taste. Her last boyfriend had dumped her for being *freakishly unmaternal* towards his daughter. You can’t win ‘em all.

“Last week I jumped off the side of the slide because I got tired of waiting.” Lottie raised her right knee like an offering, bumps and crisscrossing scabs shifting under the dim light. “I got all this business.”

“Gnarly.”

“Thanks.” Lottie turned back to her show.

Jackie tried not to shift too noticeably as she checked the aisle again. She had to strain her neck to see one flight attendant on her knees, now. The other was speaking to someone still in their seat. She smelled it again, just a sense-memory, chemically soaped water pooling into mud, cut with tangy green florets of mold like lime wedges on the rim of a glass. Flowers rotting. Pine on the air. She pulled her seat up to block the girl’s view.

The plane went quiet as the intercom buzzed with static. “Hello, everyone. This is the captain speaking. We’re having a medical emergency on our flight this evening, and the seatbelt sign is on. Please stay in your seats, clear the aisles, and wait for further updates from staff.” A moment of nothing but the engines whirring, then noise from every seat.

“Are they going to land the plane?”

“We’re almost to Newark.”

“What’s the emergency?”

“I’ve got a connection.”

“You think anyone here gives a rat’s ass about your connection?”

“Excuse me?”

“Where are you going?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“No, really. Please tell me where you’re going that’s more important than this man dying.”

“Please don’t say that, I can’t knock on wood.”

“No wood on planes.”

“Does anybody have anything wood?”

“I’ve got an umbrella handle.”

“Thank you.”

“My dad is waiting for me.”

“What about those of us with connections?”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I need to catch my connection to London.”

“It can wait.”

“It can’t!” Brigitte Le yelled louder than she had intended. She softened. “I hope he’s okay, I really do. But I need to get to London, my sister is sick. We’re not sure if she’ll make it through the night.” She caught the eye of a flight attendant tasked with settling everyone in their seats. “I can’t miss my connection, please.”

The weight of this, an additional death, hung in the recycled air. Death was something that existed outside of this aerodynamic vacuum, that could demand urgency outside of their circumstance.

“Newark is the closest airport. We’ll be doing an emergency landing, but at the intended destination. You will all be able to exit after the paramedics come for him.”

“Thank you.”

The news travelled in mumbles and whispers from the bathrooms up to first class. By the time the captain made a similar announcement all 248 passengers were quiet.

While they were in the air Rahul was both dead and not dead. They were on a plane in a state of emergency, they were on a plane with a corpse. After landing, a team of medics with a narrow stretcher carried him out to the terminal. Only 52 of the passengers watched as they went by, took in the sight of the man with his arms crossed like a pharaoh. No one would receive an update from the airline, the hospital. The door opening depressurized the cabin, let out the air they had collectively in and exhaled, broke the seal on the biome in which the paths of their lives had ephemerally intertwined.