

***Exploring Troubled Romance:
A Collection of Stories***

a thesis by Chris Bradley

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Reaching

Joan Tucker stood beside the granite-topped island of her kitchen and breathed in the thick cinnamon air. After three days of laundry, sweeping, dusting, and watching DVDs, this was the only place Joan could think of to pass the fourth straight day without her daughter Gail.

Her husband Jeff had bought three new sets of cooking utensils when they had moved in last fall, and much of this was strewn about. Applesauce simmered on the stovetop, and pots dirtied by jam filled the sink. In the oven, a broccoli cheese quiche baked on the newly-discovered intensive hot air setting, and Joan did her best to keep an eye on it. She could never tell with quiches. Just as the twenty minutes expired on her applesauce, the oven timer sounded, and then another beep came from the corner—Joan had forgotten about her loaf of rye. It now puffed to fill the glass dome of the bread machine, a two-year-old and previously unused wedding present. Joan placed her wooden spoon on its crock, extinguished the stove's burner, reached back to silence the bread machine, and opened the oven to save the quiche. She had almost grabbed it with her bare hands when she remembered to slip on a mitt. As everything lay steaming on the counter, Joan leaned against the sink and released a whimper. A few seconds passed before she realized it had come from her mouth, and she suddenly and desperately wanted to cry. She resisted only by turning to the wide window above the kitchen sink.

Through the few swirling snowflakes, a quarter-mile below the house, scattered chunks of ice bobbed in Upper Peoria Lake. Often the lake would be frozen in February, but this Illinois winter had become mild. Last night's two-inch snowfall had been the first in weeks, and

every school and road remained open. Joan had felt a nearly physical pain when the morning news revealed no closures. Last year, when she had still been teaching at Peoria Heights High, snow had stranded the Tuckers in the hills a half-dozen times, disrupting Joan's literature class and leaving Gail to sled idly for days. Jeff had somehow managed to time his East Coast sales trips to miss most of these snow-ins. Now, when Joan had counted on these flurries to close St. Thomas Elementary and let her keep Gail home, the kitchen thermometer read a benign noon temperature of thirty-six degrees. Joan ground her teeth.

When it was thirty-six degrees, the school bus climbed their hill with ease, and Joan couldn't stop Gail from climbing aboard. Gail seemed to want to—Joan had made sure to ask her twice every morning if she felt too sick to go, but she had said no each time—as thin and as pale as she was. Jeff and Dr. Benson wanted her to go, too. Ever since Gail had finished her second round of chemotherapy a month before, they had lobbied for Joan to let her daughter return to the fourth grade. As they had put it, her blood counts had bounced back, so she should, too. So, although Joan could still close her thumb and ring finger around Gail's biceps, although Gail still stumbled climbing the stairs, to school she went. Jeff drove and flew around to sell his enterprise servers, and Joan stood amid the remnants of the day's cooking projects, willing the mercury to drop.

At 2:00, the thrush on the kitchen's wall clock sang. Joan's stomach tightened—the bus driver had arrived within five minutes of the hour every day this week. She put away the final cleaned pot and strode to the entryway. She cursed the clouded glass—thousand-dollar panes, and all she could see were fat gray blurs.

Outside, the blue school bus sat at the curb. Children smiled along its length, craning forward or backward. The driver's seat was empty. Joan panicked until he rose at the rear of

the bus, and Gail appeared next to him in her orange winter coat. But her relief turned to dismay as she watched her daughter descend, supported by the driver. Gail seemed barely able to walk. This morning she had been smiling, and had eaten breakfast without throwing up, but now she looked pallid. While Joan had been cooking treats, Gail had been struggling through the jostling halls of St. Thomas and standing at the sidelines through two recesses. The playground aide would have comforted Gail, but not like Joan could have if she had been there, or if Gail had stayed home. Joan blinked away tears. The doctor had promised that Gail was ready.

"Gail!" She ran down the front steps and wrapped her arms around her daughter. "I'm so sorry." She ran a hand through Gail's bristly hair. It was growing back faster, and seemed straighter and a darker brown than it had been before it fell out. Gail's face, too, was undergoing a change. During chemo, it had been puffy from all of the steroids, but now her cheeks had become more slender, and her blue eyes seemed to protrude as the skin around them shrank back. After Gail's face had been plump for so long, Joan feared its new lean look.

"I'm fine, Mom." Gail's voice seemed to come from the end of a slack tin can phone. Yet her face showed resiliency. Her eyes stared into Joan's, and her jaw clenched. Every face inside the bus looked on as she pulled from Joan's embrace.

Joan stood and caught the stare of the bus driver. He was a young man in khakis and an argyle sweater who might have been handsome if he smiled, but whose mouth was drawn down in alignment with his mustache. He spat over his shoulder on the front lawn. Finally he said, "I don't know what you're thinking, ma'am."

"The doctor told us..." But the driver had turned back to his bus. Joan had given ground to her husband and the doctor as she had tried to do right by Gail, and now this man saw her as a bad mother. These men buffeted her, making decisions and casting judgment, and Joan

questioned her strength against them. Worst of all, she had left her mother behind in Seattle when she came to the Midwest with Gail to marry Jeff. She took a deep breath and guided her daughter inside.

Surely it was just a bad day. Dr. Benson, in the supreme calm of his bedside manner, had said that that would happen as Gail's condition improved. But Joan struggled to believe that the cancer had really left. Whatever the blood counts had said, she knew how her daughter acted when healthy. She sledded, or, when the weather cleared, rollerbladed with the neighbors. But now, as had been her routine during the past months, she settled onto the living room couch off the kitchen. She lay on her side with her legs folded back in a vee, and her aluminum throw-up bowl sat close at hand. A ring was bracketed to its side, and whenever it rang, Joan knew to come.

Gail would remain in this spot until dinner, then return briefly afterward before going up to bed. This lethargy had first appeared last August. But Gail had shown no other symptoms, and Joan had ignored it. A week later, Jeff's mother came and took Gail to the doctor while Joan was out of town; the resulting diagnosis shook them all. For her part, Joan had watched this cancer grow in her child, and had done nothing. Now, when her mother's instinct had flared, how could she neglect it? These things could come back—it could have begun three weeks ago after the last blood draw—and if it did, Joan would have allowed its return.

Gail now began to read *Batgirl* as Joan entered the kitchen. She found everything finished and cleaned, and dinner was still four hours away. She returned and sat in the chair along the wall adjacent to Gail's couch. She tapped her fingers atop its cool leather arms.

"How was school?" The hood of Gail's sweatshirt was down, and Joan could just see through her fledgling hair to the scalp.

Gail's eyes remained on the page. "Fine."

Joan was at a loss for what to say next. Maybe she should have begun by mentioning the applesauce she had made earlier, which Gail loved, or the ice floating on the lake. "Did you see Garrett?" she asked after a moment. Garrett Dawson had been Gail's best friend at school the previous year. Joan had come to understand their friendship not by anything concrete—Gail had never flat-out told her about it, and Garrett lived across town and hadn't often come over—but by the points of reference in Gail's stories. At recess, Gail would play kickball "on Garrett's team," or "against Garrett."

"Yeah, during lunch," Gail said, "but he was with Jake and Govy." She looked up and made a face, flaring her nostrils. "He's a punk now."

Joan leaned forward and placed her chin in her palm, then thought that made her look overeager and sat back. "How come?"

"Not him, I guess, but his friends. They rub my head and call me—'Whiskers,' and he doesn't say anything." Her eyes were downcast.

Joan wiped tears from her eyes, relieved she had leaned back out of her daughter's sight. She had promised Jeff that she would be strong and avoid crying in front of Gail, and she hated to break her word—each time, it felt like failing herself, and her daughter, anew. But injustices kept coming, and with each came new pain. Jeff helped, of course, when he was around. He made sure Gail's material needs were fulfilled, and placed all of the phone calls to the insurance companies—Joan had once looked at his cell phone statement, and was astonished to see it stretch for eleven pages. But right at this moment, as she slowed her breathing to compose herself for Gail, he was of little help.

Jeff's mother, who lived in Madison, Wisconsin, was closer than Joan's, but he used her mostly as a threat—he had said he would send for her if Joan "couldn't handle things." The summer before, Vi had come with her giant pink suitcase when Jeff was having back prob-

lems, and she and her cigarettes had taken over the house. She prepared all of Jeff's meals, and even fluffed his pillows on the couch. Joan had been on vacation and could have done these things, but she took no offense; Jeff could be coddled by his mother if he wished. But Vi also took Gail shopping, which had always been Joan's special treat, and then, while Joan was on a day trip to Chicago with a coworker, Vi made the trip with Gail to the doctor's office. Whatever the woman's intentions, because of her Joan had not been present for her daughter's diagnosis. Joan had been unable to hold her daughter's hand during the moment Gail had learned that she had leukemia. Joan could never forgive Vi for that.

Yet, Joan did need some help. She needed an ally. Gail took so much of her physical and mental energy that she felt sapped after several hours with her. She had the pouch at the bottom of her purse. Her mother had given it to her when she had come to visit during the first weeks of Gail's illness, to be used should Joan ever need to "check out for a little while"; but she had never used it, needing all of her faculties to watch over Gail.

The metal loop rang against Gail's bowl, and Joan had risen and returned with a cloth and glass of water by the time the first heaves started. This bout was a quick one. Joan wiped her daughter's mouth with the warm, damp cloth, and Gail didn't fuss. Afterward, Gail lay back in the crevice of the couch and pulled her wool blanket up to her neck. As she pushed the bottom out with her feet, she resembled for a moment a plaid sarcophagus. Then she bent her knees, and the image faded. She picked up her comic book.

"Mom, how fast does hair grow back?" Her voice trembled slightly over the last few words.

Joan managed a small smile. Her hair did seem to be coming on stronger lately. "As quick as lightning, honey. Why?" She peered at Gail's comic book and saw an illustration of an old bald man. "Who's that?"

Gail tilted the comic for Joan to see. "Doctor Death."

Joan shuddered and looked away. The sarcophagus flashed back to her mind, and she felt on the verge of tears: her daughter, spending the afternoon with Doctor Death. Gail usually read *Archie* or *Alf*. Joan snatched the comic away.

Gail's bottom lip quivered. "Mom!" When she sat up, several other comic books slid to the carpet. On the cover of one was a busty, silver-haired woman.

Undoubtedly Jeff had been her source. How had she failed to notice these comics before? She inhaled deeply, and held her breath; if she let it out, she couldn't be responsible for her words. Jeff's role was to work and support the family every way he could, and Joan's was to stay home and care for Gail. Now he undermined her even while he was absent.

In the issue Joan held, Batman and Batgirl wore black batsuits and futuristic gas masks to fend off a swirling green poison. Doctor Death, his head disembodied and looming above, was covered in wrinkles and seemed to have no teeth; his mask resembled a respirator. Gail had already seen a death more real come and go. Perhaps, if it came again, it would help her to envision it as a feeble old man.

But Jeff shouldn't have brought death under this roof, whatever its form, not when Gail still spent her afternoons on the couch, and when Joan was still afraid to leave the house. She had the freedom now, but what if something happened and the school called?

An acrid smell suddenly pressed upon her, and Joan realized that she was still holding the throw-up bowl. She tossed the *Batgirl* comic on the couch beside Gail, who glared at Joan with the exasperation only a mother could provoke, and took the bowl to the bathroom to clean it for the next time.

Jeff came in the door at seven, just as the hour hand reached the nightingale. The heels

of his dress shoes clumped along the hardwood floor as he walked toward the kitchen. Joan was at the island slicing vegetables for a salad, and Gail had gone to her room an hour before to rest. Joan turned to kiss him hello and asked about his day.

Jeff sighed and stretched his arms up and out. "I sold the Limeys all they needed, and then some."

Joan laughed. Jeff had called his customers Limeys ever since his sales trip to the UK a year and a half back, and she still found it funny. He hung his overcoat and hat on the tall back of a chair at the table, then methodically emptied each pocket of his slacks and blazer into the wicker basket on the counter. He had just turned forty, two years younger than Joan, but his custom suit and graying hair attested to the hard-won successes he'd already achieved. Joan knew only that his trade had something to do with mainframe computers, but it had struck her as glamorous ever since she had first seen him on a sales call at her bank in Seattle. He had sat at the manager's desk and given his pitch in a black pinstriped suit and matching fur felt Homburg. Joan hadn't thought any businessmen still wore hats. As he left, he had approached her in line, doffed his hat, and asked for her number. He was the most debonair man she had ever seen, and she wrote it out and dropped it in his hat. He was only in town for three days before returning to Illinois, but they met for dinner twice. They only saw each other at wide intervals during the months to come, but Jeff called from every city he went to, and finally Joan decided she and her daughter ought to move to Peoria. Gail had lacked a father figure since her dad—never Joan's husband—had skipped out on them when Gail was born.

Joan pulled a tuna casserole from the oven. Her quiche from earlier had come out soggy, and Gail had requested tuna when Joan had taken her up to her room. Every night this week Gail had gone upstairs before Jeff came home, even though Joan encouraged her to wait for

him. Jeff was only home for two weeks before his next trip East to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston. Probably Gail just needed the rest, but Joan wished she would stay. Jeff hardly saw her, and Joan felt more comfortable with her at the dinner table. One on one, Joan had little to say to Jeff. Nothing of note happened when she was home all day, especially with Gail gone. But she couldn't very well drag Gail down just for the sake of conversation. Instead, Joan would bring her a plate of food when she and Jeff sat down to eat, and in this way, the family would eat together.

Jeff came up behind Joan and slipped a cold hand under her sweater to massage her back. Joan shivered. "Smells good," he said.

He was lying. When she had taken Jeff to Pike Place Market on their first date, he had admitted that he disliked the smell of fish. "There's nothing like that in the Midwest," he had said. "I was twenty-eight when I first saw the ocean, and my first thought was I'd stepped into one grand portable toilet."

But Jeff knew tuna fish was Gail's favorite meal.

"How is she?" he asked.

Joan turned. His light blue eyes glinted under the island's light, and he looked hale. Of course, he traveled to other cities with winter sunshine while Joan and Gail remained in Peoria. "Fine, upstairs sleeping." Joan didn't feel like talking about how sickly Gail had looked, or about the inappropriate comics. Not while he was smiling, and she felt so comfortable in his arms. She lifted her chin to kiss him. His face was still smooth from his morning shave.

They sat at the table and quietly scooped casserole onto their plates. Joan watched in wonder as Jeff loaded his. He did try to make things work; he hadn't complained about much of anything since Gail's illness.

"I don't know if Gail should be back in school yet," she said.

Jeff stabbed at a hunk of tuna, then looked out the window. The glow from the kitchen showed no snow falling, and the thawing lake had disappeared in the darkness. Jeff bit into the tuna, chewed it slowly. "I thought we'd finished that discussion. The doc said she was ready. Besides, she's made it through her first few days okay."

"Yes, but this afternoon Gail couldn't even make it off the bus. The driver had to help her. I felt like a horrible mother having sent her to school like that." Joan flushed as she remembered the driver spitting on their lawn.

"She's bound to have her good days and bad days. As long as her blood counts are good, her doctor said it's important that we let her work through—"

"Have you felt her body recently? There's nothing there." The fork in her hand trembled against her plate.

"That's why Dr. Benson thinks—"

"Fuck Dr. Benson! What do *you* think?" She edged to the front of her chair.

Jeff rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, then looked back at Joan. His eyes had reddened. "I think Gail's going to be okay. But we'll go see Dr. Benson on Monday. Can this wait till Monday?"

Part of Joan wanted to take Gail for a blood test right now. But she needed to believe him, and to trust that the concern on Jeff's face matched her own. Joan sat back in her chair and nodded. It was Thursday. Gail could get through one more day of school. Jeff's hand reached across the table, and Joan clasped it for a moment. Then she stood, went to the stove, and fixed a plate to take to Gail.

The next morning, thirty-four degrees and sunny, Joan stood at the counter reading *The Peoria Journal Star* and sipping the last of her fiber cereal. Before Jeff had left for work, he'd

made her promise Gail would go to school, unless she threw up. "She *wants* to go," he had said. "You'll see."

When she saw Gail out of the corner of her eye, Joan called to her. Gail froze on the cusp of the entryway, her face obscured by the hood of her puffy coat. "I was thinking I'd just drive you to school today."

Gail was silent for several seconds before she finally said, "How come?" She turned to face Joan, and her hood cast shadow upon her thin cheeks. "I like riding the bus with everyone else."

"Because I have an appointment in the area." She didn't, but if Gail had to leave the house, Joan would come along. And suddenly, the prospect of a sunny morning drive cheered her.

"Are you going to pick me up, too?"

"Sure." Joan knelt to snap Gail's coat. Her daughter's face seemed to have more color this morning. "Maybe we can go get ice cream."

Gail's eyes narrowed slightly, as if cautious of a trick. "Isn't it too cold for that?"

"What would you rather have?"

"Hot dogs."

"All right then. We'll have hot dogs." Gail hoisted her backpack higher as she turned away, and Joan noticed the flap hanging open. "Hold on." As she zipped it closed, she saw copies of *Batgirl* and *Alf*. Maybe Gail had told someone at school what she had been reading, and had packed them to show off at recess. Joan said nothing.

During the fifteen-minute drive to St. Thomas Elementary, Joan snuck several glances at her daughter. Gail stared ahead wordlessly. Before chemo, Gail had always loved to hear her own voice. She would sing "25 or 6 to 4" along with Chicago when Joan played their greatest

hits in the car, and just last year, in what she called her "twinkling moment," she had played Constanze Mozart in her class's production of *Of Mice and Mozart*. Now, but for the clanging ring, Gail even threw up quietly.

St. Thomas was a two-story cement building hemmed in by tall rows of poplars. The building had initially been designed as a minimum-security prison, until the city changed course at the last minute. Joan had seen holes in the window sills designed for metal bars when she'd attended a parent-teacher conference.

She kissed her daughter, and barely resisted holding onto Gail's book bag as she clambered out. Joan had promised Jeff one more day. She slumped as she watched Gail disappear into the school. She could hardly distinguish Gail's reedy body beneath her baggy jeans and coat. Joan tried to picture her daughter inside the building, striding through the drab hallway in search of the cell block that held her homeroom class.

Joan turned into the residential neighborhood behind the school, wondering how she would manage to wait for the bird clock at home to announce 2:00. She'd run out of projects. She stopped the car on a deserted street she didn't recognize. It had the same tall poplars, but more tightly packed; their branches rose higher, reaching into the blue sky above. The sidewalks undulated, bent and cracked by the poplars' stretching, thirsty roots.

Joan rolled down the window and felt the nip of the cold air. She turned off her cell phone and reclined her seat, then dug through the bottom of her purse for the nylon pouch her mother had given her. Inside the Navajo-patterned bag was about a quarter-ounce of marijuana. Her mother had a prescription for her arthritis. After Joan rolled a joint, she took a long hit and sank deeper into the leather upholstery, determined not to think about Jeff's objections. She brought the joint to her lips two more times, three, four, until she felt a sudden urge to sleep and flicked it out the window. A few seconds later, she was out.

...

Gail's brown hair is long again—See, honey, quick as lightning!—down beyond her knees now. Tie it up, Gail, don't let it touch the floor—but Gail doesn't listen, smiling and sitting with Garret in a tree house, thirty years old and picnicking with their two redheaded children. The planks of the treehouse extend across the window as Joan watches from below, and all she can see now is Gail's lustrous hair, still growing, pushing through the gaps—she reaches for it as it snakes to the ground, grasps it. Heaping tufts of hair come loose and turn gray and rough. She looks up, finds the window open again, and watches every last strand pull free from Gail's head. A faint green fog issues from the treehouse, Gail's silhouette sinks from sight, and Joan hears a distant metal rattle. She sits on the ground and cries into her daughter's coarse hair.

Joan woke to a horn blaring. She felt wetness on her cheeks and studied her empty arms. The back of her car was sticking several feet into the street.

Joan could barely start the car with her chilled, stiff fingers, but cranked the cold air for a minute anyway to rouse herself and ventilate the interior. She had been asleep for an hour. She pulled the car away, and after two turns found a street she recognized. Maybe she would spend some time in the backyard shed and check on her gardening supplies. She had promised to let Gail help her with the planters when the weather warmed. Gail had requested butternut squash.

As she passed the school she saw a bright figure slip into the bushes to her right. Joan eased the gas. Slowly her mind processed what she had seen, then she slammed on the brakes and got out of the car.

Gail's orange coat blazed amid the patchy brown hedge. "Gail!" she called, her mind

suddenly lucid. The coat remained motionless. "Gail!" Joan's muscles tensed.

She reached in the hedge and grabbed a handful of orange. As she pulled, the nylon slipped through her fingers and Gail tumbled onto the sidewalk. Joan grasped her coat firmly with both hands, her breath heaving. Gail trembled and looked everywhere but at Joan. Her hood was down, and bits of the hedge stuck to her short hair. Joan remembered Gail in the treehouse in her dream, gone bald once more, and hoped only that this hair would have the chance to keep growing.

"What do you think you're doing!" Joan's breath fogged in the crisp air, but she only felt heat within. "Why aren't you in school?"

Gail began to cry in halting sobs. Joan's anger and fear faded. She moved her hands up to Gail's short, coarse hair, then stroked her daughter's face. Her lips close to Gail's ear, she said, "My job is to take care of you, honey. I can't do that if you run away."

"The kids were calling me 'Frail Gail,' " Gail said. "I just want to go home."

"Yes." Joan helped her daughter to her feet. "I'll take you home."

When Jeff came home at seven o'clock, Joan lay on the couch alongside a sleeping Gail, reading through a stack of her daughter's comics. The nightingale's call had just trailed away, and a nearly full moon had risen beyond the living room window. Joan heard the clinking of Jeff's keys as he placed them on the counter, and she imagined his frown as he looked at the empty dinner table.

Joan and Gail had eaten three hours earlier. Joan had wanted to somehow salvage the day, so she had her daughter point to things she wanted, and then cooked every one of them. Gail sat on the kitchen's island, her chin on her palms, and considered the pantry for a minute or two while Joan held the cupboards wide. "Rice-a-Roni," Gail whispered. Joan selected it.

"Macaroni and cheese," a bit louder. Joan pulled it down. "Brownies." Gail's eyes widened as Joan grabbed the box without hesitation.

"How's Gail?" Jeff asked, and Joan turned.

Jeff stood against the island. He wore his Homburg tipped down over his forehead, and his arms were crossed. His shoulders seemed more slumped than usual. Joan decided not to tell him about Gail running away from school. He must have had a trying day at work, and some burdens she needed to bear alone. She had come to see this morning as a private moment of understanding between mother and daughter. Joan arched her eyebrows and affected a smile. "She made it through the week. She's been out off and on for a few hours."

"Listen—" Jeff leaned forward to remove his suit coat.

Joan tensed. He never followed that word with anything good.

"I got a call from Gail's teacher earlier."

Joan shifted her daughter off her chest, and Gail looked up with half-open eyes. Joan sat up to face her husband. "Yeah, Gail had some trouble this morning."

"'Trouble'?" He folded his coat in half and laid it on the kitchen table. "Her teacher said she was missing, so I tried to call you, but your phone was off. I had left the office and was about to call the police when the principal called and said you had found her."

Gail sat up now, too. She stretched her arms and looked from Jeff to Joan.

"Yes," Joan said. She lifted Gail onto her lap. "I called the school to let them know she was safe."

"I suppose it would have been too much to ask for you to call me, too?" Jeff swept his arms wide, palms upturned, but kept his voice level.

"I had Gail to deal with!" She hugged her daughter to her chest and thought of Jeff filling spreadsheets while she pulled Gail from the hedge, and as she later ministered to her at

home. Gail reached for her hand, and they interlocked their fingers.

"Your hands are full. I get that." Jeff emptied his pockets in the wicker basket. "That's why Mom's flying in from Madison on Sunday night. I thought you might—that is, with Gail still sick, I thought you could use the help."

Immediately Joan smelled cigarette smoke hanging over the room. "What's she going to do? She's in worse shape than Gail—" Jeff slowly shook his head, and she felt Gail's eyes on her. Gail squeezed her hand tight.

"I'm going to be okay now, right Mom?" Her eyes were dry, but wide and bright as the moon behind her. Its white light shone on Gail's back.

"Of course you are." She stroked Gail's hair. It was slightly longer and softer than she remembered.

Gail leaned into Joan's chest, and Joan dropped her hand to her daughter's back. "I don't mind Grandma coming," Gail said. "We had fun when she was here before, when Dad was hurt."

"Joan?" Jeff said from the island. He removed his hat and cradled the crown in his hand. "What do you think?"

Vi would arrive Sunday night toting her pink suitcase and handbag full of Virginia Slims, grinning and showing off her yellowed teeth. She would sit next to Gail in the backseat of the car on the way back from the airport, and they would share stories and make plans for the coming week, or weeks. Vi would take Gail shopping again, and maybe drive her into Chicago. They would stop first at North Clark Street for the caramel corn at "Nuts on Clark"—where Joan had twice taken Gail since moving here—and then maybe go ice skating, if Gail felt up to it. Vi would watch from outside the rink, leaning on the railing and eating caramel corn, cheering on Gail every time she skated by. Gail would smile widely, and the

hair on her head would be just an eighth-inch longer than it was now. Joan would be at home for all of this. She would dust a few things after Jeff left for work, maybe cook something, and then stand over the sink and watch the shifting waters of Upper Peoria Lake. The ice would just about be melted by then. Before too long, it would be warm enough to water ski, and also to plant gardens. Joan would then remember that she needed to go to the store to get the seeds for Gail's butternut squash. Hours later, Gail and Vi would return to find her there by the sink, and her daughter would still have the same wide smile.

Gail wrapped her arms tighter around Joan's middle, and breathed in deeply. When the exhale came, Joan felt its strength and warmth against her chest.

"Yes," she said. "We'll need to ready the guest room, then."

Shelter

Jacob watched as the baby's curled figure filled the monitor. Her puffy little body squirmed, and his own stomach tossed and turned: in six months, Lily would be born, and he would watch her squirm on the embroidered pink sheets Lena had already folded neatly into her crib. Lily, the darling little namesake of Lena's grandmother. Jacob was excited to finally, at thirty-three, have pictures of his own to pass around the office—but he didn't yet know what lay beneath this anticipation. He figured he would find out when he first felt Lily breathing in his arms. She would cry and smile, and he would know.

"It's certainly a girl," the doctor said, directing his laser pen toward the ultrasound image. "At this point, you can tell more from what's not there than what is."

Dr. Frank glanced at Jacob, and Jacob offered a small laugh. He was simply glad to have a doctor who expressed human emotion. Jacob and Lena had been to another gynecologist a few weeks prior, but the experience had exasperated both of them. Jacob hadn't liked the way Dr. Jenson had looked at his girlfriend. Dr. Jenson had the taut, thin build of a distance runner, and wore thick glasses that magnified his dark brown eyes. They had been too focused, his face too intent, as he examined Lena's stomach. Then the crotch of Dr. Jenson's pants moved as he leaned over Lena. Jacob almost demanded they leave right then, but bit his lip. This had been Lena's first big decision of a—not unwanted, but sudden pregnancy, and Jacob had promised to let her have final say during the process. He was relieved when Lena suggested afterward that they try someone else. "I noticed he didn't smile once," she had said. They decided to pretend the appointment didn't happen and try again with someone new.

Dr. Frank now looked at Lena's stomach kindly, almost reverently. His eyes softened as

he examined her, and he asked before he touched.

Still, Lena looked uncomfortable as the doctor placed his hands on her. She hadn't yet become accustomed to this new part of her—something to be probed and examined. She had been so skinny; now, she fretted about bulging so quickly. Her favorite checkered t-shirt lay torn at the base of their dresser after it had shown her belly when she pulled it on that morning. But Jacob thought Lena looked even more striking than before. Tiny tingles ran up his spine when he watched her in the armchair in the corner of his apartment where they lived, wearing her reading glasses and sweats, a novel propped on her stomach. He stared, too, in bed when she wore baggy night shirts that suggested only an anthill of a bump beneath, until Lena eventually looked down from her book and nudged him with her elbow. "She doesn't like you staring," Lena would say.

Dr. Frank now stood straight, his own belly a slight paunch, and addressed them both. "I can always tell by this point how they'll come out," he said, roaming the ultrasound image with his laser. "And she's going to be a beauty."

Lena looked at Jacob and offered a broad smile. For the past three months that smile had been fleeting; on top of doctor appointments, they needed to move into a house with a room for Lily. Jacob's excitement had faded as Lena raised ever more logistical concerns about preschool boundaries and crib designs. But the glow now on her face, which showed through every freckle under her eyes, sent through him the same trembling energy as when they first met.

Only five months ago, fate had led them both to Schlotzsky's Deli in West Eugene on their lunch breaks. They had sat down at the same table simultaneously. "Is this seat taken?" Jacob said. He was pleased to have thought of anything at all to say to this woman who, even at that first moment, he wanted for his wife. She said no, and their courtship began. Lena's

smile progressed from embarrassed to confident and relaxed, and Jacob ate as slowly as possible. They talked about his job servicing power lines for the local electric co-op, and her job selling items for people at internet auction, and then an upcoming production of *As You Like It* they had both heard about on the radio. He said he had once played Cassio in *Othello*, not sure if that would impress her, and she leaned in and confessed to having played Feste the Clown in *Twelfth Night*. They decided to meet again that weekend for the play. It was not only this shared love for theater, not just Lena's gleaming orange hair and rosy skin, but her conspiratorial leprechaun-green eyes that made Jacob want to sit with her through the rest of their lives.

Jacob felt sure he could nurture and raise Lily with Lena by his side.

Dr. Frank had been wrong.

Months later, Jacob tried in vain to see beauty in Lily after his wife's screaming hours of labor. Lily's color was far too dark, and a glassy red and purple cord twisted around her neck. Then there was the ringing silence. Lena's moans halted, but Lily did not cry, or squirm, or kick. The number of white coats in the room tripled almost immediately, but when the last one stepped away several minutes later, Lily lay still. Dr. Frank shook his head, and Jacob picked Lily up, wishing only that her chest might rise and fall. He could hardly understand why it didn't, and could not pull his eyes from this still form that had come from his wife. When he finally looked up, he saw Lena sprawled motionless across the hospital bed, her exhausted body yielding to the bed's wet sheets. She seemed neither his wife of two months nor the woman he had met at lunch so long ago, simply—flat. Against her forehead and eyes stuck sweat-matted hair; her drawn face had lost its color and contours; and her belly sagged, the peel of a fruit mined for its flesh.

Lena raised dull eyes to the ceiling. They closed slowly, then snapped open again, and

Lena began to wail. Her earlier moans had scared Jacob in their depth and length, but these shrieks were sharper and bore a keener sorrow than any human sound he knew. She leveled her eyes on Jacob. Tears built and dripped slowly; she lacked the energy to sob. Jacob registered the weight of the baby in his arms—he didn't know how heavy she was, and now there was no reason to weigh her—and the truth finally penetrated. Terror poured over him, his arms shook, and the baby's head lolled. He handed the baby to Dr. Frank and hurried from the room. His tennis shoes caught against the floor, and he stumbled into the far wall, catching himself against the warm glass of the window. Sharp August sunlight blinded his eyes. He staggered down the hallway to a restroom a hundred yards away, and threw up almost as soon as he entered the first stall. Not all of it went in the toilet. He watched it come forth, his lunch, then water and bile. He sank to the cool floor, drooped his head, and failed to cry, empty. He fingered his rolling wedding band, thinking of the same ring on Lena's finger, and passed it over the knuckle and back. He leaned forward and spat thick foam into the toilet, flushed, and walked back to his wife.

One month later, Jacob returned from work to find a pet carrier and fifty-pound bag of dog food on his side of the garage. He parked in the driveway and sat with his hands on the wheel and his seatbelt buckled. Lena had never mentioned wanting a dog, and judging by the packing-crate-sized carrier, it was going to be big. Now hardly seemed the time. Lena was going in to work a few hours a week—but neither slept well. They kissed each other good-night, then lay in silence for hours. If Jacob had to get up with the dog, he doubted he'd have the energy to work on power poles all day.

A scratchy bark came as Jacob turned his key in the front door, and a foot-tall yellow lab squirmed out. The dog sniffed his boots briefly before bounding to a patch of grass by the

sidewalk and crouching. Lena appeared and beamed at the lab, which now wriggled on its back right where it had peed.

"So." Jacob raised his eyebrows.

"Saved from the shelter." Lena leaned against the door frame, in baggy gray sweatpants and a sweatshirt. She had worn some combination of sweats for the past month, despite her new morning workout regimen. She wore them even to bed, and Jacob felt sad to look at and touch a body of cotton every night. He struggled to accept and love this new flat, fit Lena when he could still imagine a belly, even a baby, underneath her loose clothes.

"That would explain its lying in its own urine. Does it have a name?"

"Yes, *she* does. Lily."

Jacob's arms suddenly seemed to be supporting a phantom weight, and he leaned back against the rail of their porch. "Lena, I can't call her that."

"But that's actually her name. I found her at the Humane Society. They had a cute cocker spaniel, too, but I thought you would like the lab more." Her head tilted to the side as she watched the dog, and she hunched up slightly against the door frame. She looked like a shy child.

"Fuck its name. I'm not calling it that, and I don't want it in our house."

Lena sank to her knees and snapped her fingers. The dog trotted up, and she collected it in her arms. She kissed its forehead, then extended it to Jacob. But his arms couldn't take any more weight. Jacob felt ill and pushed past her to the stairs inside.

"We needed something, you know." Lena's voice cracked.

Jacob walked past the closed door that hid the crib Lena refused to let him take down. She wanted to preserve Lily's memory, she'd said, but she, too, mostly avoided the room. It had become a stale tomb, as if Lily were buried there. He pushed the image from his mind and

collapsed on their bed's down comforter, crying. He felt with acute pain the void that came with their baby's death, but didn't know how best to fill it, or if he was ready to. He was still feeling out his grief's dimensions. How different it must be from Lena's. Jacob's nausea grew as he cried, and he went to the toilet to throw up. After the last heaves he sat back against the wall. A sharp bark rang out from the kitchen below.

Once Jacob had changed clothes, he closed himself in the upstairs office. He wrote checks for several bills, then stilled. Hunger built in his stomach; such a simple pang to understand and so easy to fix. Eventually, Jacob returned to the bedroom and lay quietly with eye shades on. When Lena came to bed, he heard no dog. Not even Lena could sleep with Lily in the same room.

Three weeks later, snow had already begun to fall in earnest in the Cascades. Jacob marveled at the early-winter flakes piling up. Only his carbon-fiber snowshoes kept him from plunging through the lumpy white powder that stretched in all directions. Eugene had been similarly colorless when he and Micah had left that morning, everything muted beneath the endless gray banks of October rain clouds. Micah, Jacob's coworker, moved briskly ahead, and Jacob tried to quicken his pace in his unwieldy shoes.

Lena would be in the woods by now, too. She had sent Jacob off on his overnighter with a kiss, then waited for Kim from work to come get her and take her to Silver Falls. Today was their personal "Explore Oregon" day, a suggestion from their therapist. Jacob thought it sounded silly, but when he had seen Lena nod, he had, too. This morning, she had looked the best she had in weeks. She seemed dressed up in her boots, nylon pants, and raincoat, and her smile showed that she was was feeling better.

"I definitely saw a prostitute at the mall yesterday," Micah called, a dozen yards up the

hill. "Then on my way home I caught a homeless guy shitting on a rock."

Jacob took a dim view of Micah's crassness, but let this statement go. Jacob had basically invited himself when Micah had mentioned his plans last week in the utility truck; he'd feared he wouldn't be able to find anyone else to explore Oregon with. The last time Jacob had seen a prostitute was six months before for his bachelor party in Las Vegas. Most of his high school friends still lived in Reno. This woman had been leaning against the sphinx of the Luxor, draped in sequined gold. Jacob refocused all his energy on moving his feet, heavier with every step. His quads tightened from the exertion, despite the occasional pole-climbing he had to do at work. He was now a mile and a half from both Micah's Bronco and the snow shelter ahead, though, so he had no choice but to keep moving.

Micah neared the top of the rise, and Jacob tried conversation to make him slow down. "You're always—" Jacob paused to regain his breath—"saying that you saw a prostitute."

"But this time I did!"

"So what?" Jacob asked.

"You just should have seen her, that's all. Spiked heels, fishnets, vinyl shorts that barely kept her legs in. She was just like you would imagine."

But Jacob imagined someone different. She had deep brown skin and was wrapped in gold, poised on two four-inch, Dorothy-red heels—the woman Jacob had solicited as he shuffled away from his friends on the gaming floor at 4 a.m., drunk. She had seemed a mystery of light and dark, her skin absorbing and her dress reflecting the glow of the hotel's floodlights, and he suddenly wanted to take her to his room and clutch her, pull the light out of her. For fifty dollars, she would be his. Jacob reached for his wallet before he realized what he was doing. *He was drunk. It was four a.m. He would soon have a wife.* He hurried to the casino entrance and didn't look back. But it was something else that had brought him to his senses.

With Lily growing steadily inside of Lena, he had already felt married. He considered himself no less of a husband without the baby, but struggled to convince Lena of this reasoning.

Whether or not she acted like his wife seemed to depend on which side of the bed she rose from.

Jacob's breath became ragged as the hill steepened near the top, and he was thankful when Micah stopped to pull out the map, trying to manage its folds with his gloved fingers. Micah looked abominable in his winter get-up. His white winter coat had turned a faint brown from heavy use, and his features were hardly visible between his hood and the untrimmed beard spreading up his face and down his neck. Micah was thick, too, like the old growth around them; he could probably walk across the snow without the help of snowshoes.

"How does it look?" Jacob pushed his merino wool beanie away from his eyebrows.

"Just another half-mile to the overnight shelter. We're making good time, considering."

Micah's words seemed to hold no spite, but Jacob and Micah had only ever gone out for beers together. He doubted Micah could help him come to any new place of peace. Besides, Jacob was nearing the point of being able to pull through on his own. Lena was the one who remained astray. He'd insisted on counseling for her benefit, with the outside hope the therapist would suggest removing the dog. She hadn't.

Jacob's phone beeped inside his jacket pocket, and a few robins in the trees, perched on branches like statues, took off in quick, swerving flight. The hill had apparently brought him into service range. Micah shot him a dour look, then folded up the map as Jacob listened to a message from Lena: *Hi, honey, I hope you're having fun with your friend. I'm at home. I called Kim to postpone. I'm sorry—I just needed to stay with Lily today. See you tomorrow when you get back. Love you.*"

"Well?" Micah asked.

"My wife. Problems with the dog." Micah knew about the baby, but Jacob had been too embarrassed to explain Explore Oregon, and didn't feel like talking things over with him.

Micah shrugged. "I'm a cat person myself." He started forward, and Jacob followed.

Jacob knew that Lena had changed back into her sweats and lay in the den with the dog. What right did she have to break her plans and remain home, while he trekked through the mountains on tennis rackets?

Jacob resisted the dog out of loyalty. He was trying to move past Lily, just to feel normal again, but sometimes he felt that as though he was still her father. He had held her in his arms, however briefly, and felt her warmth, before she—what? Had Lily died, or had she never been alive? Was it Lily in Lena's womb when they had read about the big hungry bear and the red ripe strawberry—or just a failed group of cells? Had she felt anything when she heard his voice? There in the delivery room, blue like a large bruise, Jacob couldn't believe that she had ever thought or felt.

She had kicked, though. Lena had lived with these kicks for the better part of the year, and she often placed Jacob's hand on her stomach to feel them—the only time she wasn't self-conscious about her belly. Afterwards, Lena said she felt phantom kicks, especially when she didn't eat—which was often—and her stomach growled. Jacob told her they would go away, but that further saddened her. Recently, he had caught her on her back with the dog on her stomach. When she had seen him, she had returned to making her decoupage boxes. These she intended for the kids at the orphanage—"There's no reason they shouldn't have a bit of color in their day, too," she'd said—but she would never deliver them. She needed something to drag her from the cell of grief she'd made. Why Jacob couldn't be that something, he didn't know.

Finally, with Jacob's legs protesting fiercely, the trees thinned and they stepped into a

clearing. Micah emerged first, then Jacob. Criss-crossed tracks led to a log forest service shelter at the far end. Wisps of smoke were beginning to spiral away from the chimney in the peaked roof. They trudged across the last stretch of snow, and Micah pushed open the door.

Two people were stooped building a fire at the opposite end of the rectangular shelter, bundled in snow clothes. Only when they turned could Jacob distinguish their gender: a woman and a man in their early forties, he with a half-moon scar running down his right cheekbone into the scruff of his beard, she with close-cropped black hair.

"Howdy, strangers!" Micah said.

"Right back at you," the man said, and gave a friendly nod. "I'm Bill Neeson, and this is my wife, Darla." He gestured with a piece of kindling toward her.

Darla waved a mittened hand. She wore khaki boots with elaborate puffs of wool overflowing from their tops, and a matching red jacket and pants. She looked like the robins from earlier.

Micah and Jacob unlatched their snowshoes and crossed the room. Bill offered Jacob a firm shake; a thin, hairless line ran across the back of his hand—another scar. Jacob wondered if there were others, imagining a grid of scars like the tracks outside, and whether they had multiple stories or one. He moved his hand to a scar at his hairline, a stamp-sized right angle from his first week back at work after the stillbirth. He'd become lightheaded as he rode the truck's lift to the top of a pole, and fainted. He awoke on the grass with Micah over him.

"You fellas have impeccable timing," Darla said. "We just arrived fifteen minutes ago."

"We haven't even had time to properly warm each other up yet!" Bill leaned over to kiss his wife. She raised her eyebrows, but didn't shy away. That morning, Jacob had been amazed when Lena had kissed him with Micah watching from the driveway.

"You just watch yourself," Darla said with a grin. "You might end up with another scar."

She pulled an imaginary knife from the waist of her pants and sliced it through the air at Bill.

"Don't worry, guys," Bill said, running his index finger along his scar. "It was just a hunting accident."

They both seemed crazy, but some excitement was a relief. Jacob's life seemed to have been on mute since he and Lena picked out Lily's tiny mahogany violin case as a coffin. The silence and stillness of the mortuary had followed them and taken root in their house.

Three sets of bunk beds lined the wall. Bill and Darla were set up on the bunks in the corner, their bags rolled out on top and bottom. Their sleeping separately surprised Jacob—whatever his and Lena's distance in daylight, they lay touching all through the night as they drifted in and out of sleep. He would have felt strangely alone sleeping apart from Lena while in the same room. Maybe the nightly rituals of marriage changed and loosened after so many years. But Bill was also a few inches over six feet, so maybe it was just a practical matter. Jacob and Micah each took a bunk for himself, then rejoined Bill and Darla around the fire. It was only five-thirty, but Jacob's legs were cramping more frequently. He would have to sleep soon.

Soon the the rich, greasy aroma of baked beans and chili, and the mediterranean spices of a can of stewed tomatoes filled the room. Bill had packed in two bottles of wine from his father's vineyard—Jacob could hardly imagine bearing such superfluous weight for three miles of snowshoeing—and he passed around plastic cups while Micah tended the food and fire. Now that Jacob was sitting, his hunger had grown ravenous, and he became steadily lightheaded as he sipped red wine in the warmth of the wood stove. The room had no windows, and his head nodded, jerked up and refocused, then nodded again. Lena would be eating dinner now, too, or, having finished, be walking down the hallway to the den. He imagined her coming up to the door that only she opened, once every week or two, turning the

handle slowly and entering. Seeking the rear wall in the dark room and standing over the empty crib in the corner. Bending to pick up the blanket folded at the foot, holding it tight.

"Where are y'all coming from?" Darla asked Jacob.

Jacob cleared his throat. "Eugene. A couple of hours south. You?"

"Astoria. Decided it was time to get out of town for a 'lovers' weekend,' you know?"

Darla had a chubby face, though she was not unattractive for it. More like she had yet to shed the last of her baby fat.

"I'm on something of a getaway myself, I suppose," Jacob said.

"So you and Micah...?" Darla nodded at his wedding band.

Jacob let out a peal of laughter, too loud for the small room, and Micah and Bill turned from the stove to look at him. "No, I'm married. To a woman, I mean. Lena's back at home."

"Watching the kids?"

"Something like that," Jacob said.

"We decided it was best not to have kids," Darla said.

Jacob's right quad seized, and he extended the leg to relieve it, holding it aloft. "Why?"

"It—would have taken too much of our time and energy, taken away the closeness Bill and I have."

A few trembling flames were visible through the wood stove's slightly open door.

"Are you okay?" Darla cocked her head.

"I'm just a bit overheated is all. I need a refill." He walked to the table, picked up the wine bottle and looked at it. If he had another cup-full, he wouldn't be able to stem his tears.

"Dinner is served!" Micah called.

When Jacob returned to the fire, he sat opposite Darla. Within ten minutes, the food had vanished, and Bill and Darla brought out a pack of cards. Jacob took part half-heartedly for a

few rounds of gin rummy, then excused himself and went to his bunk.

Even away from the fire, Jacob felt feverish, and his legs were stiffening. He decided to step outside. A turbulent dark had fallen, composed of shifting shadows and rustling trees. Black pine branches hung over the back side of the shelter, as though they were an open hand preparing to lift it from the ground. Across the clearing, a quarter moon illuminated the snow with a soft glow. Jacob headed left into the woods.

Without his snowshoes, he sank two feet with every step. This postholing was even more laborious than snowshoeing, but he had no destination, and contented himself with the crunch of each step. Stars bright and faint spread across the sky, filling and texturing the darkness in a way the ambient light of the city made impossible. Jacob had seen some of these same stars with Lena from their hot tub, but never so clearly and in such depth. A longing arose to stay here—Lena could come, too, and stand with him in the snow. He would kiss her under this blanket of stars without her shying away. They would stock the shelter and never go back.

He moved up a slight ridge. From the top, he made out Orion, the hunter of the night sky. Three dazzling stars made up the constellation's belt, and close by, Sirius, the Dog Star, nipped at its heels. Jacob began to cry. Seeing these stars, that star, millions of miles away—and millions of years in the past—and Lena always just as far, was too much. Even their marriage couldn't bridge such a gap. His mistake had been thinking that it could.

Jacob turned toward a scraping sound and saw a beam of light bobbing up and down along the snow. He was surprised when Darla emerged from the darkness.

"How," she said, breathing in bursts, "did you make it this far without your snowshoes?"

"Thinking about other things, I guess." He looked back at the sky, but now saw only the residual glow of the flashlight.

"You aren't really okay, are you?" she asked.

He thought about lying again, but she deserved the truth after seeking him out. "No, I'm not. Earlier, what I said about my wife—we don't have any kids. A month and a half ago we almost had a daughter, but she died during birth."

"I thought something like that might have happened. You still look like a deer in the headlights." She paused, taking a moment to look at the stars. "Was she planned?"

The question took Jacob aback, but Darla's tone was gentle. "No. Actually, Lena became pregnant a few months after we met."

"Well, given and taken away by fate. Maybe it was for the best."

His impulse was to yell at this stranger. But Darla's frank honesty was refreshing, and no anger built inside. That he didn't have to bear this woman's pity was a relief. "Maybe—" He thought of Lena's shame over her belly, her retreat into herself. "—maybe it was. But what kind of parent can say that and believe it?"

"I lied earlier, too," Darla said. "We tried for years to have a child. Couldn't do it. Never figured out if it was me or Bill, but nothin' doin'. These days, it's true I don't want a child, but there was a time I dearly wanted one. A daughter, a son. Didn't matter."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't you see? Here I am with Bill, our love all the stronger for what we've gone through. That was our test. We passed. And if there's not ever another little Darla in the world, I can live with that." She swept her arms wide, encompassing everything around them, and her flashlight played across the treetops before giving way to the black sky and faraway twinkles of light. "Go ahead and take a minute. But if you need anything out of Micah, you better come back sooner rather than later. He pulled out a quart of whiskey, and he and Bill are not long for this world."

She turned, and her light faded into the pines. He pulled out his wallet and removed a picture. He could only see its outlines, but knew it by heart. He and Lena were in the theater lobby during the intermission of *As You Like It*. She wore a knee-length pale yellow dress, and her head was tilted as Jacob explained some plot point about the previous act. She wasn't yet smiling, but her lips were slightly upturned. He stared at her, imagining. Imagining what their life would have been like if Lily had lived. Years of pictures and trips and landmark birthdays, of fending off boyfriends, of sports teams and parent meetings—of devotion to Lily. And to each other? Maybe he and Lena would have drifted apart anyway, gradually; maybe they would have divorced and left Lily in the lurch between homes.

His eyes had readjusted to the night, and Jacob followed his tracks back by the light of the moon and stars. He had no answer. He knew only that he felt severed. He pulled off his left glove and held his hand up to the sky, watching the starlight glint off his ring. Where before it offered a promise of love and union, it now seemed a sentence to a fractured life. Jacob rolled the ring smoothly over his knuckle and placed it in his pocket, then moved off into the trees, back to the shelter.

Another Time Capsule

Ed sat in his recliner, his torso rocking back and forth, and stared at his favorite photograph. His feet dangled off the end of the footrest, lifeless. Ice clinked a soothing rhythm against the sides of his tumbler as he swirled his glass and, for once, Ed felt no aches.

Like the rest of Ed and Ann's two-story house, the living room was sparsely furnished. A painting by Ann hung on one white wall, a violence of splattered colors framed in black. A cigar store Indian stood in the corner opposite Ed; its original colors had faded to a muted brown. Two photographs in ridged gold plating sat on opposite ends of the mantle. At left, Ed and Ann posed in pastel formalwear at their renewal of vows ten years ago, when they came West from Georgia; looking at it made Ed clammy. He stared at the other.

Reagan was one of the finest dogs to come from Royal Hounds; a greyhound fit to be shown, if Ed believed in such tom-fool nonsense. Reagan had followed the photographer's instructions with less sass than many human subjects might have shown. Now, the dog was gone.

Ed studied the cubes in his Ron Zacapa Centenario rum, a liquor that had come from some exotic place he had once been but could not return to. His stiff joints would no longer bear the beautiful ivory beaches. Thousands of miniscule bubbles dotted the ice cubes, living in forced immobility, until Ed freed them with the heat from his hands. He set the sweating drink on the lamp table, then ran his hand through his gray hair. The dampness from his hand was unsettling, and he quickly brought it back down. A few hairs came with it.

"Are you going to sit there all night looking at that picture? Come on, Ed, come to bed."

Ann stood behind him. Though her voice was dulcet, he cringed. He shifted his weight

to his legs, paused to see if they would hold, and rose with a grunt.

"I'm coming. I just need a moment to gather myself."

"I hate going to bed alone," she said. "I like to feel your warmth." Ann offered her best sulking voice, extending the syllable of every word like an irritable adolescent.

Ed had a hard time believing she was fifty-five and receiving the same senior discount he did at sixty-nine—his age for one more day. It was the same surprise he'd felt three years into their marriage when Ann turned twenty-one and began to buy alcohol.

Ed straightened and turned. His wife's petite body leaned against the kitchen doorframe, her eyes fixed on the floor. She no longer wore nightgowns; now that they had come to the Northwest, she wore the same flannel pajamas from the first leaf fall to the last violet bloom. Ed couldn't picture her naked body, though he imagined one firmer than his own. He'd read recently that Islamic law provided for a husband's sexual satisfaction, and a younger Ed might have demanded the same—had, in fact, on one or two occasions, he remembered with shame. But Ann wasn't quite so young anymore, and Ed didn't harbor the same urges.

"Ed?" She paused. "He's gone, you know." Ann's eyes rose to Reagan's photograph.

She said the words sweetly, bracingly, but Ed did not mistake the presence of something less benign. He scowled and looked at his drink. If she was trying to bait him, she would fail. "I'll see you in bed."

Later, after a climb up the stairs made treacherous by his arthritis, Ed lay beside his sleeping wife. There had been three fingers of rum in his glass when Ann called him to bed, and he needed both hands to climb the stairs, so he'd downed the rest. Now the rum was coming on. The sheets stifled him and he threw them back. He decided on his new Ethiopian blend for his morning coffee, then thought about the boundless hours to follow—every one of which would press upon him without Reagan to take to the park. His career had been an un-

ending stream of seventy-hour workweeks spent walking sweltering city pavement. He had hardly known what to do with himself when they moved to Falso, Washington to relax and ease his arthritis pain.

"Ha, ease my pain..."

Ann groaned beside him, and Ed tensed. Her favorite cousin lived here, Charlene, but Ed only saw her on holidays. Charlene was a mousy little brunette who reminded him of the innumerable squirrels in their neighborhood, a new development pressed up against the woods. Ed would have preferred moving to Santa Fe, or maybe Cody, Wyoming, some place with heat and character, with vestiges of the Old West. Here it just rained all the time, and his joints felt as bad as ever.

And his dog had gone missing, the second to do so. Reagan and his predecessor, Charley, both stayed outside because of Ann's allergies, and Ed had been careful to fence their backyard. Cougars roamed the woods, and people set traps. But with both dogs Ed had woken up to find a hole under the fence. Neither had come back or even been found.

Ann clutched at Ed's broad chest. She had—wore?—long, curling eyelashes, and her soft brown hair nestled in below her neck, relaxed. Her pillow showed a trace of rouge, despite the scrubbing Ann had done before bed. Her smooth cheeks inflated as she breathed through her mouth, sending puffs of hot air onto Ed's arm. He tried to inch away, but her arms held firm, and any resistance sent waves of pain through his body. He settled for bunching up the sheet in front of her mouth.

She had a surprise planned for him tomorrow. He hoped it wouldn't take too long. He hadn't checked with the Humane Society for two days. And Royal Hounds had left a message; there was a new greyhound, Edna, up for adoption. It was much too soon. Ann clutched at him again, and he gave up on returning downstairs.

At nine the next morning, Ann led Ed into the sunlight and toward a square black crate in a rear corner of their backyard. "Happy birthday!" She'd been awake since six and finished off a whole pot of tea.

Ed scowled. The squishing sound of their marshy lawn unnerved him, and Ann had let him finish only one cup of coffee.

Though the soft ground eased the burden on Ed's feet, moving forward felt as though he were walking in sand.

"Well, it sure dwarfs the other one." Ed studied the dewy surface of the massive plastic packing crate, already secured by yards of duct tape.

Ann tugged his hand and pulled him closer. "It's not every day you turn seventy." She stood on her toes and whispered in his ear, "And who knows if you'll make it to eighty!" She giggled, and her broad smile matched the sun poking through the clouds.

"So what's in it?" Ed asked. He shifted his weight between each painful foot.

"I can't tell you, you know that." Ann's smile stretched wider.

Her self-satisfaction irritated Ed. He considered dispensing with the ceremony and leaving Ann to bury the box herself. "It's my present, and you just said I won't make it—"

"*Might* not make it—"

"Fine, might not make it to eighty," Ed said. "And I still don't know what's in the other one you've—"

"*We've*—"

"*We've* buried out here.

She paused took a deep breath, as if recalling the start of a poem she learned in grade school. "We are placing a part of our present souls under the care of the earth, where it must

remain undisturbed—you therefore mustn't know which part."

Ann paused, daring Ed to interject, but he bit his lip and let her continue.

"Later, there may come a time when we find ourselves shiftless and adrift, and at that moment we will look to these capsules for guidance. For renewal—"

Ed tuned out the rest of her spiritual platitudes. It was all a part of some New Age philosophy she had found. He was convinced Ann was making everything up on the spot.

Ed tilted the crate first one way, then the other, divining its contents like a Christmas present. Ann had packed it well; nothing shifted inside. They lowered the box into the hole that Ann had sneaked off to dig the day before. Ed's knees creaked and his legs wobbled as he squatted, but they held.

Ed tried for a moment to clear his mind and simply smell the juniper surrounding him, but he did not feel like he was placing some part of his soul under the lock and key of the earth to be rediscovered—or simply discovered—at a later date. It was simply a chore, a punishment even, though for what he wasn't sure. Ed pictured Cool Hand Luke out in the prisonyard digging, digging, digging. But unlike that rebellious jailbird, Ed hadn't tried to escape. Maybe he ought to—it'd be something exciting for a change.

Why there had to be such a cloud of mystery was beyond Ed. What was the use of a time capsule if he didn't know what was being encapsulated? Ann presented today's burial as a birthday surprise, and he had to accept the gift graciously, but the first time capsule had not coincided with a birthday or anything else. Ann had suddenly felt the need to establish an accord with the earth. It was just like when she started feeding him fish oil for his arthritis. There was simply no telling.

After burying the box under a mound of soil, Ed allowed Ann to lead him by hand as they trudged back to the house. A few drops of rain pattered on their shoulders as they reached

the door.

"Timeliness is next to godliness, as they say," Ann said.

Ed wasn't sure that was exactly what they said, but let it go and stepped into the house. Ann veered toward the kitchen, and he hobbled to his chair. Only a few mud spots marked his khaki pants from the digging. Ed hadn't decided how many fingers of Centenario yet, but thought he had earned quite a few. For now, Ed just sat. Their chore had consumed more of his morning than he had wagered, so he could endure a few hours here until lunch. Then he would see about the Human Society. Maybe Ann would drive him.

Whatever pain he had felt after walking Reagan, these long, linking days of immobility and recline only intensified his suffering when he did try to move. He tried not to, and instead looked at the photograph on the mantle. Ed's right hand slipped down the side of his chair, but his fingers scratched at nothing. Today was the eighth day. Now he just had Ann.

She was gorgeous the day they renewed their vows. Her beauty still shone from the mantle photograph. They had chosen Easter for the ceremony, to symbolize the second life of their marriage out West, and had thought a pastel color scheme would enliven things. Ed found his baby blue suit downtown at a vintage store in thirty minutes. Ann had to drive the hour north to Seattle to find her dress. When she stood next to him in her pale purple gown, her brunette hair tied up into a nest, he felt the same cold feet he had had twenty-eight years before at their wedding.

But his feet were colder the second time around. They'd only been in town a month, and only Charlene attended the ceremony, as a witness. As pretty as Ann was—with hazel eyes that enraptured Ed (and, he was fairly sure, the priest), and skin the purest white, like sun-bleached sand—even so she no longer roused his desires.

And so it was now. Her brand of beauty, naturally stunning and made-up to be perfect,

was meant for a libertine. Those days were behind Ed. As his body failed him, physical intimacy was as much of a chore as digging a hole. He regretted that Ann still found joy in the digging and he could do nothing for her.

She was silent now in the kitchen, probably busy preparing his lunch. Ever since Ed's health had forced him to retire, she had taken it upon herself to fix his every meal. He hadn't eaten the same thing twice in months. It was the least she could do, she said. But Ed wished she would do less. It had been too long since he had cranked a can opener and tasted greasy chili that had those little oily bubbles on top that you could never quite mix in. Ann was working her way through culinary Europe, with the occasional jump to the Pacific Rim; North American fare wasn't even a blip on the radar screen. What was that she had served with last night's dinner? *Onigiri*? That wouldn't do for an old man.

Ed reached for a glass that wasn't yet there. He'd have to wait till after his *vichyssoise*. Ann's latest. She had seen Alfred serve it in a Batman movie, she had said, and if it was good enough for Bruce Wayne, it was good enough for Ed. But after Ann had explained—and spelled—the French dish, Ed could only think, *cold soup*?

Ed reclined further. *Superb Crosswords* lay beside him, and it was open to the puzzle, "Something Bothering You?" Ed tried to recline more, but the chair was already as flat as it would go. His hand again reached down to stroke the soft head of his absent dog.

"Ed!" Ann's voice trilled from the kitchen. "I'm going for potatoes. Do you need anything?"

He resisted asking for his rum, and said no. A few seconds later the door slammed.

Soon Ed's lower back tingled from its sloped position, and his arms chafed on the mealy upholstery. He rose and stumped around the house.

Several more of Ann's paintings lined the downstairs hallway, variously splatter and

landscapes, and small bookshelves filled intermittent niches. Shelves in the guest room and office supported more books, statuettes, empty bottles of Ed's imported rum. He felt surprise at each full shelf.

With the first capsule, too, Ed hadn't discovered anything to be gone. He had asked Ann for days about the box's contents, but she never budged, not even when he hid her makeup and jewelry. Ed had considered unearthing the box himself, just to see, but it hadn't seemed worth the effort, or the argument that would follow. It would have been better for one of his dogs to dig it up. Now the task fell to him. He thought he understood the fulfillment Ann received from her New Age spirituality, but could she expect him to hold the same appreciation? He appreciated frankness too much to hide behind philosophy. His pique grew as he failed to think of one secret he held from Ann, and rebellion surged inside of him. He would look in the time capsule.

Rain drove down, but Ed decided to brave the deluge. He collected his boots and umbrella and walked outside. Ed glanced at Reagan on the way for confidence, and he imagined that the dog urged him on with a wink.

Ed strode toward the lawn's back corner, ready to discover whatever LPs and Louis L'Amour books warranted such extensive secrecy. The rain pounded his umbrella for a few moments, then suddenly halted when he reached the burial spot. The two shovels still rested against the fence, and Ed took one; pain surged through his hands when he pushed the shovel tip into the soil. It was still soft, though heavy with water. The wet ground made a sucking noise as he lifted the top level of soil.

"Sounds something like Ann."

Half of an earthworm lay at the bottom of the divot he had just made. Ed remembered reading that they could grow back body parts, so he lifted it up with his shovel and set it

aside. He glanced toward the house occasionally, but kept working until he heard the shovel crack against hard plastic.

Ed knelt and brushed the remaining soil from the top to reveal the near cheval-de-frise of duct tape that Ann had wrapped around the box. He felt along the lumpy strips with their ridges and bubbles, then along the smooth edges of the plastic. It was cool and moist from the earth, and he let his hand linger, enjoying the wetness. But his legs were beginning to complain, so he dug into his pocket for his folding knife. He carved open the capsule with the care he had once used for whittling.

Finally the last strip snapped, and the box popped open. Pain shot through his left leg, and he shifted his weight to his right, but he did not rise. He kept his eyes on the dark interior of the box.

He planted his free hand to ease the pressure on his legs, and it sank into the mud. His fingers closed around something slimy. Half of a worm. He flicked it away then plunged his other hand into the box. Ed shut his eyes tight as his fingers pushed aside crinkled paper and packing peanuts, then touched something soft, dry, and rigid. Shock swept through his body, and it seemed to lock. There he stayed, on his knees, as moisture seeped through his jeans and up and down his legs. In the distance, a door opened, shut, but he remained rooted. One hand drove deeper in the mud as the other clenched fur.

Footsteps approached, but he didn't turn.

"Ed—" Ann breathed the word.

He felt his mouth open and close, like the feeder fish he used to see at the mall. He swallowed. "What about the other box?"

Ann didn't respond.

"It wasn't the cougars, was it?"

"Of course it was," she mumbled. "You don't think—"

He raised a mud-caked hand from the ground to silence her.

"You mustn't believe that I—" She stopped as Ed turned to look at her.

Tears ran from each eye. He felt as if his face were cracking.

"This is Reagan."

Ann tried a placating smile, but it faltered. "Yes, but—"

"This is Reagan!"

"There were cougars, you wouldn't have wanted to see it! You already feel so much pain—"

Ed shook his head; his whole body trembled. "Jesus, Ann," he said, finally pulling his arm out of the box. "Greyhounds never have been known for their digging."

Finding his footing on the muddy ground, he managed to right himself without Ann's assistance and made for the house. She called to him, but he didn't stop. Rain tapped on his shoulders, increasing with each splashing footfall. He stepped inside and locked the door. A half-full glass of Centenario waited for him by his chair, but he ignored it. He selected the key for the coupe from the basket on the kitchen counter and stepped out the front door into the rain.

A Christmas Toy

Snow weighed down the trees' boughs, covered every street sign, and veiled the sky. The road ahead remained stubbornly gray. Mark's fiancée, Camille, had said that her parents' vacation home in Sunriver was an ideal place to celebrate Christmas; but five minutes past the wooden welcome sign, Mark already harbored doubts. He could manage the snow, but every few hundred yards he came upon another roundabout, and Camille had misordered the sequence in her directions. After two wrong turns and a near foray onto a bike path, Camille would owe him for this. A massage, with oils. Maybe that would rekindle things.

Mark was thirty-five and the new day manager of Giampietro's, a three-story Victorian house remodeled into an Italian restaurant. He ran up and down its spiral staircases less now that he didn't serve, but the back of his stiff white collar was still yellowed by the end of each shift. Mark thought he fit the part of manager well: tall, but not intimidating, a thin build, and calming green eyes. Features that helped make things right with customers when something went wrong. And something did, every day. His manager's utility belt, which he wore at all times, held a sleeve of gift cards, a roll of small bills for change, and a detergent pen.

The week after Mark's promotion, they had gone home-shopping, and found the perfect beach house in Yachats. There, he and Camille—the four-star-restaurant manager and the crafter of toys—would settle and marry and make love and not leave until the ocean rose and carried them away.

But he first had to navigate the pretzel of slushy roads that led to the Rousseaus' house. Ahead, a blue figure emerged from the whiteout. Mark stopped alongside.

"Excuse me! Do you know how I can find Mountain View Lane?"

The walker turned, and through the falling flakes he saw a middle-aged woman whose face bulged from the fur lining of her hood. The fat in her cheeks surely warmed her as much as the fur. A delicate pair of eyeglass frames rested on her short, curving nose, and they fogged in the moist air. Her eyes were vague and milky behind the lenses.

"Sure! Those are my stomping grounds!" She smiled; she wore braces on her bottom row of teeth. "I'm Yvonne Blakely." She extended her hand, and Mark, after a second, took it with both of his. He gave her his managerial smile.

"Pleasure. I'm Mark Whinsome. So how about those directions? I'm not quite so bundled." He had put on black slacks that morning to meet the senior manager, and he may as well have been naked against the frigid gusts that penetrated the car.

She jutted out her chin, then carefully listed the roundabouts and right-turns that would lead to Mountain View. Mark stared at the bridge of her nose as she spoke, as he used to do while taking people's orders.

"I think I can manage that. Thanks."

"See you around!" Yvonne withdrew and crunched away through the snow.

The Blakely house would be a picture of Christmas extravagance, Mark was sure, if the exclamation points in Yvonne's voice were any indication. Long strands of white icicle lights would trail from every rail and all of the eaves, a wreath would hang on the front door—maybe, too, on the grill of her car—and mounds of gift boxes would hide the tree. Perhaps Mountain View was long, and they wouldn't see each other around. His eyes already hurt from the glow of the lights. Mark had been relieved to hear that Camille's family celebrated a simple, noncommercial Christmas. He'd had no idea what to get Camille, or what she deserved, given her recent distance.

The mechanism inside the door resisted as Mark rolled up the window, and the glass

stopped two inches from the top. The Volvo was Camille's car, a decade old, and something nonessential broke every few months. He drove it now because Camille and her parents were coming north from her toymaker convention a few hours away, and he wanted them to have the Suburban in case they found trouble on the roads. She'd asked Mark to go with them—she was presenting her company's new toy, after months of secrecy—but he'd had to stay for one last shift.

Three roundabouts later Mark came upon Mountain View Lane, and he popped his gloved hands together after making the final, correct turn. He felt no less satisfaction than the previous summer when he and Camille had visited her cousins in Paris. Mark had fought off swarms of compact cars and Camille's erroneous passenger-seat driving to successfully navigate the Arc de Triomphe.

The Rousseaus' vacation home was a light brown two-story structure. It had a wrap-around porch, and two wooden rocking chairs by the front door, chained together so they would remain safe during the months Camille's parents were gone. It was an unnecessary security measure; the chairs had weathered to a deep, fungal green.

Two doors down, an SUV sat in front of a khaki, one-story ranch house, a series of footprints connecting them. The truck had a wreath on the front, and Mark knew it belonged to Yvonne. But the house had no Christmas lights, nor did any of the cul-de-sac's other half-dozen houses. These appeared empty. Perhaps the lack of decoration had to do with what Camille had said about Sunriver's strict building code, which seemed to forbid any paint color that didn't naturally occur in the earth's soil. Dim, deserted, and snowed under, Mountain View Lane resembled a Northwestern ghost town.

Inside the Rousseaus', Mark felt the stagnant air from last Christmas, infused with the scent of stale candles. He would have to wait for the others in this chilly potpourri of caramel

apple and cinnamon. It would be several hours. Mark took two deep breaths, as he did when exasperated by a customer, and cheered himself by thinking back on Camille's final act of persuasion, the one that brought him here to the snow: her warm, whispering appeal an inch from his ear. *You will be fine*, she had said. *I'll make sure of it*. Whatever her meaning, he, long-starved, had heard sex; if she gave truth to this, he would have his happy Christmas.

Mark was on his third hour reading *The Hobbit* by the fire when he heard Camille, Philippe, and Caroline arrive. The book had been his personal Christmas tradition since middle school, when he first followed Bilbo Baggins to the Lonely Mountain. Now he was sorry to leave the hobbit behind in Mirkwood. Mark finished the paragraph he was on before rising to greet everyone in the entryway down the hall.

Camille entered tightly wrapped in her favorite charcoal peacoat. A burgundy scarf wound about her neck. The cold had flushed her cheeks, concealing her usual orange freckles. Camille had done up her long amber-streaked brown hair, apparently for the convention. Her shoulders seemed bare without her curls, which now coiled upon the peak of her head like a thin desert snake. Mark's blood coursed through him with greater vigor, and close by his heart came a twinge. Perhaps tonight Camille would keep his heart and blood pumping. She was always gorgeous—every night he filled his eyes with Camille in the last seconds before sleep, so that he might have beautiful dreams—but their last passionate lovemaking had been the night they had found their beach house.

Camille slipped her feet from her boots and gave Mark a wet, chilling hug. Her peacoat soaked through his sweater, but her jasmine smell kept him from pulling away.

"Well, honey, looks like you made it okay." Mark kissed her and removed her coat. He looked for a coat rack but found none, and instead draped it over his forearm.

"Yes, nothing to report. Odd, we're nearly alone this year. The Blakelys are the only other ones who have come for the holidays. Mom and Dad went over to say hi." Camille gestured toward the Yvonne's house and wreathed SUV, where the woman surely distributed large slices of walnut fruitcake to Philippe and Caroline. "By the way, how did my Volvo hold up?" Camille's lips parted just enough to reveal a thin strip of white teeth.

Mark knew she wanted to hear how the Volvo had bested him. She was proud of its faults, and of her singular ability to manage them. But he wouldn't give her the satisfaction, and he realized that the passenger seat was still collecting snow from the open window. "It held up wonderfully. But you owe me a massage. Your directions were awful." He stretched the last syllable and ended it softly as he thought about Camille's warm hands tracing and kneading the muscles of his shoulders, back, and thighs.

The door swung open and sent a cold gust across Mark's face. Philippe and Caroline entered with their duffle bags.

"Mark!" Philippe said. A wide smile covered his portly face. "So good of you to come!"

"Yes," said Caroline. "This might just become your new holiday tradition!"

"Grand," Mark said. "Just grand." His voice came out as hollow as he suddenly felt. Even in their cheer—or maybe because of it, thick and dripping, like Yvonne Blakely's—they sapped his romantic energies from the moment before.

This was only the third time Mark had seen Camille's parents. They traveled continuously in retirement. Each of their families had emigrated from France after World War II, and they were normal Americans with respect to manners, names, and, in Philippe's case, obesity. But something was off. At least Camille seemed normal, and had remained thin into her thirties like her mother. Mark didn't think he had to fear waking up one morning to an overweight wife, who had no place in his beach house vision. How could such a wife inspire beautiful

dreams?

Mark hugged Caroline and kissed her on both cheeks. She was a few inches shorter than Camille, closer to five feet. Like her daughter, she wore a peacoat, the same deep black as her hair, and draped her body with all kinds of jewelry. An especially fine diamond-studded cross hung around her neck. From what he'd seen, Mark didn't think the couple was actually religious—Camille surely wasn't—but they pretended with great energy. The first time Mark had encountered them, when they came for a weekend over the summer to meet him and see his and Camille's apartment, Philippe had insisted on taking everyone to church. He had stopped at the first one they came to, which happened to be Episcopal, and he kept his eyes shut tight throughout the sermon. Mark had nearly been convinced, until he caught Philippe peeking every few minutes. Maybe he was trying to show off the piety of the French, or maybe he thought that's what American families were supposed to do together, but he looked as relieved as Mark was when they left.

Mark hesitated as he leaned toward Philippe, but the squat man looked expectant, so Mark gave him two kisses alongside his cheeks.

A few hours later, Mark leaned against the hard plastic wall of the Sunriver mall's outdoor skating rink. Blue sky poked at the horizon, but scattered flakes still fell, some fluttering toward Mark under the covering. Camille had decided on a whim they should go ice skating, just as Mark had settled in to read a few more pages before dinner. It was so *pretty* outside, she had said as she tugged on his sleeve—why couldn't they leave the house? This when four inches of snow had accumulated on the window's ledge. He had ignored her until she lay down beside him on the bed and slowly, gently traced her fingers up and down his thigh. That was better—they could bond just as well lying in bed. He set his book down, expecting his

massage, and closed his eyes. A moment longer her hands roamed across his chest, then her weight rose from the bed, and nothing. "Come on," she'd said as he opened his eyes, and with a sidelong glance at his book, a pitched tent on the bedside table, he went.

The floppy canvas uppers and chipped blades of Mark's skates inspired in him little confidence, so he watched Camille. She wound through the sparse crowd of other couples with easy, nimble turns. A couple in their early twenties skated by Mark to the exit.

"Good ice out there!" the man said.

"Don't listen to him," the woman said softly, leaning toward Mark. "It's too chunky."

"I'll await the Zamboni, then."

She raised an eyebrow, then laughed, and continued to laugh as she and the man clomped away.

Camille came near every so often, but Mark could only wave and shout a few words before she was once more out of range. He soon became bored and ordered a beer at the concession stand.

"Good ice out there?" asked the boy behind the counter, a blond kid of about eighteen. A patchy beard grew along his jawline.

"Yeah," Mark said. He sipped his hefeweizen. "A bit chunky, though."

"You here for the holidays?"

"Isn't everyone?"

Camille called from the rink, and Mark carried his beer over.

"Mark! You barely came onto the ice!" She leaned her elbows against the railing and perched her head on her fists.

"I stood there and watched you for at least ten minutes. You were the epitome of grace."

Camille smiled, and in that moment the diverse colors of her face shone. Her orange

freckles were in full bloom on her cheeks, the cold had given her lips a hint of purple, and her tawny eyes glinted even under the stark glow of the fluorescent light above. Mark decided he could take at least one lap around the ice with her before they left.

Later, after dinner, Mark changed into his bathrobe and a thinning pair of felt slippers he found in his closet, then joined the others around the fire. Camille lay on the couch and Philippe and Caroline sat in armchairs opposite. A series of tall, narrow windows made up the wall behind them, and each seemed alight as it reflected the burning wood in the hearth. Mark was pleased to see everyone else finally reading, but just as he moved Camille's legs to sit down, Philippe spoke.

"Mark, come on." He rose from his chair. "Let's get some more wood."

The pile of wood by the hearth still measured at least two feet high. "Right now?"

"You used too much this afternoon, and we might need more for the morning. It's better to go now."

Camille kept her nose in her book and offered no support, so Mark reluctantly followed Philippe from the room. Philippe led him through the hall and down a narrow set of stairs to the basement.

It was a square room as large as the ground level, and a workshop covered the middle of the concrete floor. Along the walls were wooden partitions that divided each side into a series of alcoves. Some of these niches contained obscure tools that Mark didn't recognize, and one held tremendous stacks of firewood, enough to keep the house crackling for years. Philippe had surely been joking about Mark burning too much wood.

"Load me up." Philippe held out his forearms for Mark to fill. They were short, but strong and wide. After piling on the sixth piece, Mark suggested he could get the rest, but

Philippe only glared at him. "I said load me up."

Mark added every piece he could, trying to cover Philippe's face, ruddy and probing. After the tenth, Philippe finally left the alcove. Mark managed to fill his own arms with eight pieces, and returned to the stairs hoping to find Philippe halfway up, collapsed under his load. Mark would shake his head at the pudgy man—he told him so—then offer him a hand. But Philippe called to Mark from the corner.

Phillipe loaded his wood into a lift that seemed to rise to the hearth, much like the old dumbwaiter they still used at Giampietro's.

"Did you make this?" Mark asked.

"Yes, when I built the house. It's my favorite feature."

For a moment Mark looked in wonder at this man whose collared denim shirt seemed a tent dress. Then he smiled as he realized Philippe was joking again. "You built this house? I thought you were an insurance salesman."

"I was. But I could also build a house. All I needed were the tools you see around you. Would you know what to do with those tools?" Philippe placed Mark's firewood into the lift piece by piece, undoubtedly counting them.

Mark took a deep breath and imagined how Philippe would look crammed into the lift, spilling out its edges. "No, I can't say I would."

Philippe finished loading and looked at Mark with squinting brown eyes. "You want to marry my daughter? You learn to use tools, and then we can talk like men."

Philippe pressed a button to send the lift to the hearth and went upstairs, flipping off the light as he left. The man had a duty to his daughter, but Mark hoped Philippe's show wouldn't last long. He wasn't sure how hard he was willing to fight for Camille's hand. He had met her when he served her and a girlfriend one night at Giampietro's, and he could always meet an-

other to share his beach house with.

Mark fumbled for the lift's down button and returned upstairs.

The Rousseaus had gone to sleep early, after Philippe delegated Mark to tend the fire. He sat on the couch, eyes closed, as Camille lay across his lap.

"Hey." Camille looked up from her magazine. "Do you want to see my toy?"

Mark's eyelids were heavy, he was warm inside his plush robe, and he wanted only to sit. "Right now? It's late, and it's already been such a long day."

"Come on." Camille poked him in the side, and Mark flinched, but didn't move. "I've been working on it for months. And you didn't come to the convention."

"I couldn't have." But Mark had been curious these many months. "Where is it?"

"In the car."

"No way."

"I'm getting the keys. I'll go without you." She rose, and a few seconds later Mark heard the front door open. Soon a draft brushed against Mark's bare calves, and it lingered after Camille returned inside and shut the door.

"Okay," Camille called from the kitchen. "It's in here."

Mark heaved himself to his feet and went to the kitchen. Camille stepped aside to reveal the toy on the table.

It was Heidi, a blonde, white-skinned doll in a sparkly pink box. It wore a red skirt and white apron and blouse, and came packaged with an assortment of cooking implements and utensils. The toy didn't surprise him, given the company's history with Barbie. But it was disappointing. Camille's development process had spanned six months and included focus groups, yet the toy looked like any other piece of painted plastic on store shelves.

"So." Camille leaned against the kitchen doorframe, her eyebrows raised. "Now you've seen Heidi. Do you like her?"

Camille had put much into this toy; Mark had seen, and barely resisted exploring, the thick files in her home office. He, too, had sacrificed for Heidi; he had often fallen asleep alone while Camille retooled and refined her designs. But when he noticed the tiny wooden spoon that Heidi grasped in her little fingers, he began to laugh.

Camille crossed her arms, and Mark lost them in the folds of her navy bathrobe. "Huh. Just a silly waste of my time, then, is she?"

"Camille, I didn't say that." He had stopped laughing, but tried in vain to remove his smile. Heidi was very silly. But wasn't she supposed to be? He sat at the table. "Okay, let's be serious, then. What's the angle?"

Camille held her head aslant. "There have been some successful cooking video games to come along recently, and we wanted to tap that into market. You should appreciate the concept. You work at a restaurant."

"I manage a restaurant, yes." Mark felt that he had somehow been lured into a trap; but he wasn't yet sure what kind, or how he might escape it.

Camille threw her head back. Her hair, now loose, splayed against the doorframe and seemed to hang for a moment before settling on her shoulders. "Is there a difference?"

"Of course there is! And how can you attack me, when you make playthings?" He leaned his head back into the web of his clasped hands. "Why are we even talking about this?"

Camille stared at her fingernails. She picked at the corner of one. She looked up at him with eyes suddenly fighting tears. "You don't appreciate what I do."

If she had cried, Mark would have risen to hold her; deprived of this imperative, he merely sat, confused. "Camille, I'm sure kids will love Heidi—"

"I'm not just talking about Heidi." Her tears streamed. "I mean me. You never come to me, take me up, make love to me, never want to do things with me. And when I come to you, you lie silently, waiting for it to be over. Then I make Heidi. Something beautiful you will like. And you laugh."

"Camille." She spoke nonsense now—he had only found her toy funny, and now she spoke this nonsense—and he struggled to wade through her words. So—so! she had been ready and willing, only waiting. Waiting for him to open his eyes and return her caresses, so she might give herself up to him.

Mark now rose to hold her tight, to offer his warmth and absorb her shivering fears. Their every layer of clothing was a hindrance as he tried to feel each point of contact with her up and down his body. Her head rested against his shoulder, nudging into his neck, and Mark held tighter still. Her toes pressed the ends of his slippers, her knees knocked against his shins, her waist fused with his own as she nestled deeper into him still. Flakes golden in the kitchen light swirled round and built on the window sill beside them. Six inches now, or seven, and if it snowed through the night—if only they could make it through—they might awake to walls of white around the house. Then, if they could make it through, they would remain in bed, impervious to all, and feel each other, and make love. They would celebrate Christmas in bed, and Boxing Day, then return to the salty winds of the coast, claim their beach house, and make love and raise their children to be good in love, too.

Camille raised her eyes to meet his, and he thought, he hoped he saw snow building in them.

Progression

A damp wind blew across the veranda, and Toru pulled his thin arms tight around his chest. The ragged end of his last cigarette drooped from his mouth, its glow dull against the final reds and yellows on the Oregon ash trees lining the street two floors below. He kicked the butts scattered at his feet, puffed at his Marlboro one more time, then flicked it over the railing. The grass was so wet he could have sent over a burning torch without risking anything more than a smolder.

Toru opened the sliding glass door and sat on the kitchen floor. He did have a chair and a mattress in his one-bedroom campus apartment, but both still smelled like Momoko. Her lilac scent—it did seem to be hers; Toru had never seen her using perfume—clung to everything. Just under a week ago, he had taken both pairs of jeans, his t-shirts, and all three sweat-shirts to be laundered. Her scent disappeared, but now his clothes didn't seem to belong. Last night he had slept on the carpet among empty bottles of Corona, but he woke from a dream at sunrise and remembered the night they'd had sex on the floor. That left the cold, flaking tile of the kitchen.

Toru's empty stomach turned over, and he rubbed together his right index and middle fingers. He could buy a pack of cigarettes tomorrow if his father's wire came through. It might, or, if his father had sought a prostitute that night, it might not. Two months into Toru's second year at Oregon State, he had learned to expect little. He, his brother—now starting college in California—and the prostitutes competed for the same funds. So, too, did his mother, whenever her lawyers re-crunched the numbers and found that she really hadn't received her fair share during the divorce.

Or maybe Toru would go grocery shopping when the money arrived. He could roam Safeway's aisles instead of the Circle K's. But his rumbling stomach demanded food now. On the counter, old noodles wound crusted about the bottoms of three neon bowls, and a half-roll of sushi lay on a plate alongside. In the cupboards, he had rice. Lots of rice, in the one box that never emptied.

But Toru stayed on the floor flicking his bony fingers together, listening to the sound of the friction.

On Wednesday, a week and a day before, three raps from Toru's owl knocker had announced Momoko's arrival. He finished brushing his teeth, then smoothed his t-shirt and went to the door. She knocked once more just before he opened it.

Momoko wore a knee-length black dress and a white cardigan with large wooden buttons. Her black hair was tucked back behind her ears and fell to her shoulders. She smiled without showing her teeth.

"Hey. Come in." Toru swung his left arm wide. She stepped in and hugged him, and he sniffed her neck. But he had just applied cologne and couldn't pick out her scent before she pulled away.

Momoko sat in the faded green armchair in the front room's corner and was silent for a moment. Her eyes scanned the shelves that lined two walls. Their contents had changed little since her visit two days before: several empty cigarette cartons, staggered stacks of CD and DVD cases, most containing pirated discs, and an eight-track player that Toru had never used. He had one tape, Jethro Tull's *Aqualung*, which had come with it at the secondhand store.

"Where are we eating tonight?" Momoko spoke with only a slight accent. This was her first term here, but she had studied in Australia for a year during high school.

Toru leaned against the wall. "The Szechuan House. John recommended it." Toru and John had worked as co-group leaders during international student orientation. He had met Momoko at the same time. She had stood out in her black patent leather boots, midnight blue jeans, and the white sweater she wore now, but she had been the quiet girl in their group. Toru had assumed she spoke little English. Then, after the two-day program, she had thanked him and offered to "shout him a pot." Toru accepted without question, and he was relieved when she then asked which bar was his favorite.

"Haven't we been there already?" Momoko curled a lock of hair around her index and middle fingers, then released it.

"It just opened. Downtown somewhere." Toru went into the kitchen adjacent and opened the refrigerator. "Do you want a beer first?"

From the other room, the armchair's springs groaned as Momoko reclined. "It's only six o'clock. You shouldn't have one either. We're about to eat."

Toru returned with a Corona and popped its top on his belt buckle, as he had so often seen his father do with Sapporo bottles. Toru had learned the trick recently as he played Led Zeppelin on his acoustic and drank through a six-pack. "It's dark outside," he said. "That's enough for me."

"Drink it fast, then. I want to go." Her fingers returned to her hair, twirling and letting go. Her bangs had come loose from behind her ear and now slanted across the left side of her face. From three or four meters, Toru could not distinguish the color of her hair from her darkly brown eyes. She scratched her slim nose with a cream-colored nail.

Toru raised his bottle, but found it empty. "Okay. We can go."

The Szechuan House was a ten-minute walk from Toru's apartment. He and Momoko walked arm-in-arm, and he stayed close to feel her body's warmth. He hadn't brought a sweat-

shirt with him. The restaurant would be the twentieth they had tried during their nine weeks together. Momoko had said she didn't mind eating at his or her apartment, but he preferred to treat her, and he couldn't host her at his place. He had no table.

A tiny bell chimed as they entered. Garlic, peppers, and roasting poultry greeted them at the door. The restaurant shared the bottom floor of a downtown office building, but set itself apart with its decor: thick red curtains hung across the wide front windows, and low lamplight illuminated the tables. Toru especially liked the multicolored, gold-threaded tapestries hanging along each wall. One showed a red dragon snaking unceasingly in the shape of infinity. The hostess led them to a table in the darkest corner and left two menus on the table. Toru pulled out Momoko's chair, then sat across from her. Her pale skin had darkened in the dim light, and the edges of her profile were shadowy. Her long, thin neck remained prominent, framed by her falling hair. Momoko was the prettiest girl he had seen in the United States—though she was from a neighboring borough in Tokyo back home—and he was grateful he had met her during her first week here. She smiled; probably she had been curt with him earlier because she was hungry.

"Pick anything you want," Toru said. "I just received a wire from my dad."

"Toru, I can pay—"

He silenced her with a stern look.

Toru always left enough to take her out; he would always have enough for her. That much his dad had taught him. Momoko arched her eyebrows, a familiar look, but one that now held some other meaning, too. Something like resignation. She picked up her menu.

Their waitress came with water glasses and asked for drink orders. She had blonde hair cut in a bob around her slender face. Her pale blue eyes shone even in the low light. Momoko shook her head, and Toru told the waitress—Kylie, her name tag said, with a heart over the

"i"—that they were fine.

Toru noted the tea-smoked duck on the menu, and he imagined for a moment its fennel and peppercorns on his tongue. But it cost fifteen dollars, and his money had to last through the week. He settled on the cucumber salad.

Across the room, Kylie emerged from the kitchen with a steaming tray. She strode toward the corner and stopped at the table before theirs. Two middle-aged men in suits watched as she offloaded their plates of tea-smoked duck. Toru smelled the fennel and reconsidered. He could buy Winston cigarettes instead of Marlboros, or Pabst instead of Corona. One of the men sliced into his whole bird, took a bite, and smiled his approval to Kylie. She then turned to Toru and Momoko's table. As she pulled out her notepad, he decided on the duck.

"Have y'all decided?"

Momoko's menu lay folded in front of her, and her eyes were sweeping the wall's tapestries.

"Yes, I think so," Toru said. "Momoko?"

She opened her menu and scanned the entree list with her index finger. "The tea-smoked duck, please."

Kylie finished writing, then looked at him.

"Just—the cucumber salad," he said.

She thanked them and went away.

Momoko's eyes had returned to the walls, and her fingers were back in her hair. Toru wondered if she had noticed the duck on the table beside them; she had probably chosen it at random. But she would enjoy it, and might offer him some.

"How are your classes going?" Toru asked.

Momoko met his eyes. "Most are going well. My economics professor is a bludger,

though."

Toru raised his eyebrows.

"He's lazy. We have been discussing social welfare programs, and he said that he spent most of last year on unemployment."

Toru sat straighter in his chair. "My father has been on unemployment."

"Toru, don't be offended. This man—" She scratched at a small, circular stain on the white tablecloth. "He lost his job at some other school, then sat at home collecting government money. He did nothing until Oregon State gave him a position."

"You don't know. Maybe he was looking for jobs."

Momoko leaned across the table on her elbows. "No—he admitted this. He's a bludger."

"My father—" Toru's hands encircled his water glass. The tablecloth was wet from the its condensation, and he realized that he was sweating, too. He had left home three weeks before school started. His father had been working then as an office clerk—for men like those at the next table, who wore suits and ate nothing but whole roast duck—but he had lost such a job before. He could be on unemployment now.

Kylie appeared from the kitchen, and neither of them said anything further. Steam appeared to issue from every plate except Toru's. Maybe his father had someone like Kylie at home. She would have the bob—black, not blonde—and the same slender face. She would arrive with a similar button-up white blouse, and his father would see that it came off quickly. Kylie unloaded a few plates before coming to their table. Toru watched Momoko eat her duck without touching his own food, as hungry as he was, and she didn't offer him any. When she finished, they rose and left. Toru left his cucumber salad on the table.

At eight o'clock they reached Toru's apartment. He held a carton of cigarettes under one arm as he led Momoko to his green recliner. He set the carton alongside the chair, then struck

a match and lit several tall candles along the shelves. He went to the kitchen to douse it and throw it away. Several bowls sat on the counter, empty, and Toru wished he had his salad. Inside the refrigerator he found only condiments.

"Toru," Momoko called with a whimper. "We just got back from dinner."

He took one last look and left the kitchen. Momoko lay back in the chair, her hair arrayed against the upholstery like rays of black sunlight. Her eyes glimmered vaguely in the candlelight, and they seemed vacant, as if she watched him from far away. Toru bent to kiss her, feeling with his hands for the buttons of her white blouse. Her hand pushed against his, and he squeezed it lightly, then removed her shirt. He lowered himself and rotated her on top. His fingers itched to hold a cigarette, and moved hungrily along Momoko's chest, back, and neck, into her hair. For minutes they remained there, kissing, her head in his hands, until she pulled away, stood, and slipped off her pants. Toru's fingers reached for the cigarette carton beside the chair and fiddled with the packaging as Momoko lay atop him again. She undid his belt while he worked at the plastic wrapping, and mounted him. Flickering candle flames reflected in her eyes, which glistened and seemed about to drip; he let the carton fall. The touch of her hands fulfilled a deeper urge.

Afterward, Momoko nestled herself beside him, and soon she was asleep. Toru would not be able to sleep for hours, but he lay quiet and content as every part of Momoko's body radiated warmth. They could remain together until eleven in the morning, when he would wake and find her looking at him as he now looked at her. He would kiss the tip of her nose, then lead her to the shower. After, in the gray November light filtering into Toru's room, they would turn away from each other to dress—Momoko would select fresh clothes from her stack in the closet—and walk to campus.

Toru's tongue felt thick and dry, and he shifted Momoko off him and retrieved a beer.

He set its cap against the counter's edge and struck it with the base of his palm, and the bottle popped open. Another trick he had learned from his father.

Toru shivered. He was waiting for the temperature to drop to the thirties before turning on the heat. He finished his beer and started another. Momoko still slept in the chair, and she looked too peaceful to move, so he went to his room and wrapped himself in his blankets. Moonlight entered through the bedroom's single oblong window, but the moon was already too high to see. Soon it would crest the horizon in Tokyo. Maybe his father would see it, if he weren't too occupied. Would he then think of where it had come from? How his sons were finding their way, across the Pacific?

Toru heard the chair squeak as it returned upright, then the soft *foomp* of the footrest clicking into place. It was one a.m. He must have dozed off. He tracked Momoko's silhouette as she entered and lay beside him. Her eyes struggled to stay open. She reached for his hand.

"I'm cold. Why did you leave me?"

He interlocked his fingers with hers, long, smooth, and cool. "I didn't want to wake you." He lifted his beer from the nightstand and sipped it.

Momoko sat up. "Toru."

Her expression was hidden in the dark. He tried to lay her back down.

She pulled away. "How many have you had?"

He replaced the beer on the nightstand. "Only one."

"That is the first?"

"This is the second."

"I'm going to be sorry"—she turned to the wall and lay down—"to have to leave."

Toru propped himself on his elbow. "What are you talking about?"

But Momoko's breathing slowed, and soon she was asleep again. Toru stroked her

cheek, and it came back wet. Had she been crying? He would ask in the morning.

Toru next awoke mid-morning, close to falling off the bed. He reached behind, but felt only a warm depression where Momoko had been. He picked up his half-full beer from the night before, but didn't drink it. He called her name, and she emerged from the bathroom, buttoning her pale yellow blouse. Her face was dimpled, although she wasn't smiling.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To the library. To study." She brushed her bangs from her eyes. "You could come with me."

He shielded his tired eyes from the morning light. "Come back to bed."

"Toru—all you do is lie in bed." Her hand reached halfway to her hair, then dropped. "You drink and smoke darts—"

"What?"

"Cigarettes! You smoke cigarettes and drink and—" She leaned against the doorframe, took a deep breath, then righted herself. "It's nine o'clock now. I'm going to Cornerstone for breakfast. I will wait there an hour, and if you don't come, I will go to the library." She closed her eyes for five seconds, then reopened them, dry. "And we—this—will be over."

Amid the gray of the morning, the darks of her hair and eyes, and the lights of her skin and clothes were striking. Had she cause to smile, her white teeth, too, would have shined. She surely deserved a good man, one who would take care of her; had not Toru been that man? "I love you," he said.

"Then meet me at the cafe." She disappeared from the doorway, and a few seconds later the owl knocker clacked as she left.

Toru threw his pillow into the hall and leaned against the headboard. The last time he had cried was two years ago when his parents separated. They had argued for years, and his

father had already begun seeing prostitutes; but when his mother finally packed up and left, both father and son cried. Now Toru cried again.

After a time, he calmed enough to notice a bird singing outside his window. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes and an issue of *Rolling Stone* and went outside. Dark gray clouds blew across the sky, but none brought rain. Toru emptied the cigarettes along the chipped white railing and smoked each in succession. He did love her. If she wanted, he wouldn't smoke and drink so much. But it was pointless now. His father had given up his vices for months after his mother left, and she hadn't come back. Toru finished his last cigarette and went inside. It was 10:15.

Toru's cell phone vibrated against his thigh. He pulled it from his tight pocket: *John K Calling*. John had texted him twice earlier in the day—*Wats up? hit me back* and *U busy? lets hang*. Toru let the call ring through to voicemail.

He rose and paced. He kicked into a tighter pile the empty beer cases in the corner of the entryway, then went to his bedroom. His phone beeped, but Toru sat on his bed and began to strum his acoustic guitar. He repeated the opening chord progression to "Stairway to Heaven" six times, then switched to "Kashmir."

The knocker pounded against the front door, ending his acoustic session. Toru considered sitting in quiet until John left, but he wanted to talk to somebody. He'd skipped school the last three days, after attending his first Monday class.

He opened the front door, shook hands with John, and led him inside. He gestured to the recliner.

John sat and crossed his legs at the knee. His argyle socks became visible under his khakis. He had short, straight blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a jutting chin. He appeared to

be a natural fraternity man, but had never joined one.

"Have you tried that eight-track yet?" John smiled and tousled his hair. It fell back to the same place. When John had first seen the stereo, he had offered to buy it on behalf of his grandfather.

Toru searched in vain for something to perch on, then sat cross-legged on the carpet. He tried not to think about what part it was, and what he and Momoko had done there. "I doubt that it works." The machine was now covered in dust and a few spiderwebs.

John whistled, and Toru saw a pack of cigarettes flying his way. He caught the Marlboros and smiled. "Thanks."

John swept an upturned hand toward Toru. "You're welcome." He recrossed his legs the opposite way, then clasped his hands in his lap. "So what are you doing now?"

"What do I do?" He struck the Marlboros against his palm. "Play guitar, read, study." Every day that week, he had gone to the library at noon to do his reading. He had to be ready for next week's finals. If he failed anything, the money would stop for good. But he struggled to read at the library. Many Japanese girls studied there. They would mouth lines of Japanese pop songs, and Toru would imagine Momoko singing. Not at the library, but in downtown Tokyo—she and her girlfriends disembarking shortcase at Shibuya station to rent a karaoke room at Big Echo.

"That's good." John raised a fist to support his chin. "I was worried since you hadn't returned my texts or calls. I had thought about writing a letter." He again switched his legs, then replaced his chin on his hand. "By the way, I went for bubble tea yesterday with my friend Hank—have you been to the place? I took you there once, I think, last month—and I saw Momoko." His voice rose at the end, as if in question.

Toru flicked his fingers together as his hand dangled over his knee. She couldn't have

been wearing her white cardigan; she had left it behind. Toru had torn off its wooden buttons a few nights ago when he was drunk. Maybe her raspberry windbreaker. "How is she?"

"Well, I think. She was by herself. We talked about International Week next term." John raised an index finger. "I've been meaning to ask—you're going to help with Japan Night, yes?"

"Sure."

"I knew you would. Anyway, Momoko looked good. And—" John leaned forward. "She asked about you."

Toru's feet prickled as they neared numbness, but he ignored them. "What does that mean? What did she say?"

"She said, 'How is Toru?' "

"And what did you say?"

John smiled. "What should I have said?"

Toru extended his legs, and his feet throbbed as blood rushed back. "I don't know. That I am doing well."

"And so I did. You ought to go see her. She misses you."

"Did she say that?"

"No, but—"

"She left me." Toru punched the carpet. "She knows where I am."

John sat back, his smile gone. "You know—Hank's throwing a party tomorrow night. If you're done studying, you could come."

Toru began to say no, but closed his mouth before it slipped out. There would be drinks, and he would at least know John. And maybe—maybe he could invite Momoko. She had wanted to know how he was.

He rose. "I think I would like that," he said. "Going to your friend's party."

"Great!" John clapped his hands. "Great." He was still for a moment, then glanced at his wristwatch. "I'll keep you posted."

Toru escorted John to the door. A chilling gust blew in as he opened it, but he stayed to watch John drive down Southwest E. He felt alert in the cold, more than he had in the past week. The refrigerator hummed, cooling a shortcase of Pabst, and Toru stepped inside. But he stopped at the edge of the carpet. Although he had pushed most of his junk into the corner, paper scraps, pop tops, and bits of what could have been food cluttered the floor. He decided to vacuum.

He didn't own one, but he knew a woman on the ground floor named Flora. They crossed paths at noon as Toru went to class and she came home on her lunch break from the bank. She was about thirty. Once, she had left cream of chicken in her slow cooker before going to work, and she invited Toru in to share. Her apartment was smaller than Toru's, and smelled only of the chicken. He left an hour later with a bulging stomach and no desire to go to school.

Toru knocked on her maroon door. No lights were on. He waited a minute, then returned upstairs. He could pick up some of what littered the floor. Just before his landing, he slipped on a patch of moss. His feet shot backward, and his right shoulder struck the cement. Toru cursed and picked himself up slowly. His shoulder throbbed, but didn't feel broken. He fumbled for his keys and retreated inside.

The front room was inky, darker than it had been a few minutes before. Beyond the veranda, the late afternoon sun had dwindled to a deep evening grape. Toru sat in the armchair, hoping now for Momoko's smell; but he detected instead John's lightly bitter cologne. He had found the chair on the sidewalk the same afternoon he met Momoko. Its upholstery had been

worn, but not stained, and John had helped him carry it upstairs. The discovery had meant that Toru could invite Momoko over; she would have a place to sit. And there she had sat every time she came over. There—here—was the first and last place they had had sex.

Before he could rethink what he was doing, Toru pulled out his cell phone and dialed Momoko. Cocco's "Sweet Berry Kiss" played as it rang. Maybe she wouldn't answer his call; he should have blocked his number, or at least thought of something to say on her answering machine—

"Hello?"

He breathed in sharply.

"Toru?" Then, under her breath, "I knew I should have let—"

Toru stood. "Hi, I'm here. I—how are you?"

"I'm okay." For three seconds there was silence. "Have you been drinking?"

"I just wanted to talk, no!" He paced, kicking the floor's clutter toward the walls.

"Well, what did you want to talk about?"

Toru stopped in front of the veranda. The sky's purple had deepened so that he could imagine it was the dark brown of Momoko's eyes. "I'd like to see you."

"You didn't come to the cafe." There was a slight whimper.

"I was confused then. I'm still confused. But I want to see you." He sat in the chair and reclined. He detected a trace of lilac. "Would you like to go to a party tomorrow night? It's at John's friend's house."

Again there was silence. Momoko would probably want to wear her cardigan. Toru could ask Flora to sew the wooden buttons back on; he would tell her the truth, that he had pulled them off. She would understand.

"Toru, I don't think so."

"What? But—John said you asked how I was."

"Is that why you called? I'm happy that you're doing well. But I am now, too. I'm not ready to do this again."

"You don't want to go?"

"I—no, I don't want to go."

Toru hung up. He almost threw his phone, but sat up and slipped it in his pocket. His breath came in heaves for a minute, and he waited to cry, but didn't. John would be sorry to hear that he had misread Momoko. Toru went to the kitchen and grabbed a Pabst.

Outside, it was black. He could barely distinguish the ash trees that stood beyond the streetlights' reach. A red dot shined from the corner of the room—the stereo's standby light. How many years ago had people owned these machines? Toru pressed play and wound the tape forward to "Aqualung," then sat in the chair. *Sitting on a park bench / Eyeing little girls with bad intent*. He retrieved his guitar to play along, but stopped when the pain in his shoulder flared. Maybe he had broken something. He grabbed another beer from the refrigerator. *Feeling like a dead duck / Spitting out pieces of his broken luck. / Sun streaking cold / An old man wandering lonely*. Toru, listening to the lyrics for the first time, sympathized with the lonely old man.

He let the tape finish and listened to its whistling idle. No other sounds penetrated his walls. His neighbors were probably eating dinner in contented silence, and maybe reading over class notes. John was surely doing the same. Toru's brother was in Humboldt, smoking pot with friends. They met in someone's basement, he knew, chipped in, and took rips from the bong until everything was gone. His dad was at the office doing clerical work—if he still had his job—or maybe at home with a woman.

Toru slammed his fist on his knee, then cursed as his shoulder blazed with pain. Even

his old father had someone. So what if he paid for her? He had simply learned how things worked. She smiled, and touched, and made love, and she remained as long as there was money. Momoko was worse. Toru had taken care of her, and paid for everything; when she left, he sought her back. And yet she stayed away. He rose from the chair, flung open the sliding glass door, and spat to the grass his broken luck.

The Perfect Housewife

Luke pressed the buzzer for Ellen's fourth-floor apartment, then stepped back into a slice of afternoon sun that lingered in the narrow cobblestone street. He had been warming himself on a bench in the piazza, and was sorry to have to come inside with an hour of daylight remaining. When a low grumble around the corner announced the approach of a Fiat 500, Luke retreated to the building's shady stoop to allow its passing. The car zipped by and disappeared around the next bend, and the entryway finally clicked open.

Luke was relieved to find the lobby bare when he entered. A few days ago, Luke had had to tip-toe through at least two dozen flower baskets that covered the floor; several of the Mediterranean blooms were similar to those at his uncle's flower shop back home in Vermont. Apparently, a long-standing tenant and revered professor of Dante had died the day before. Ellen had been watching a dubbed Stallone movie, and just as a thunderous explosion collapsed the Holland Tunnel, an elderly man knocked at her door. Giuseppe Torrellini had just gone away, the man said—Ellen was specific about this; undoubtedly she liked how he'd used the Italian phrase "gone away" instead of "died"—and would she please keep the noise down? Ellen finished the movie on mute.

The building's owners, a family of noble ancestry, had some years ago retrofitted it with an elevator. It barely accommodated Luke, though he was only 5'8", and it groaned with each trip, so he climbed the stairs. Each stair was solid marble, white speckled with black, with smooth dips in the middle where two hundred years of feet had worn them away. Still, this building was not nearly the oldest in Macerata. The city dated to 1320, a span difficult to fathom even for Luke, who could trace his roots to New Amsterdam. Such history had com-

pelled Luke apply for this graduate architecture program. He admired the immortality of Italy, the permanence of place that would allow him and Ellen to bring their children to the same sites in twenty years. Surely by then he would have settled down into the role of husband and father.

Luke passed a few small, bent Italian women going about their daily shopping. They invariably lifted their heads from drab overcoats to study him, and he quickened his pace. He wanted to be able to chat with these world-wise women, to be a part of their community, but every broken syllable he uttered worked against him. Instead, he marveled at these coats he had seen everyone over fifty wearing since his arrival a month ago on Labor Day. The broad array of colors the younger generations wore, even the men, seemed no less peculiar. But Luke received curious looks, too, when he strode through town in cargo shorts and a t-shirt. These glances held no animosity—far from it—but clearly, few Americans found their way to this little town.

On an ordinary day, the younger women wore strange and alluring combinations of purples and yellows the likes of which Luke had only seen on theater majors in the U.S. Linen and silk replaced the usual American cottons and plaid wool. Ellen had embraced this fashion sea change wholeheartedly. Every Wednesday before class, she searched for deals along the winding streets of downtown, and she rarely touched her American wardrobe. Luke considered this overhaul a plus.

Luke thought himself lucky to have come overseas with an evolving Italian fashionista, because, in a way, he felt he had been tricked. Other students, family friends, guide books—each had said that all the women in Italy were surpassingly beautiful. Such uniform beauty, though tantalizing, hadn't seemed possible, but he had heard it so many times that he began to believe it. But he had seen only normal people thus far—some pretty, some ugly, but most in-

between. This should not have surprised him, but he felt compelled to turn to the consistent beauty of art and architecture. Although Ellen never wanted to come on his extended walking tours, he sometimes insisted; he wanted them to experience this beauty together.

On the fourth floor, Luke approached the sturdy oak doors to his left, paused a moment to catch his breath, and pressed the button under "ROSSETTI." A tinny buzzing came through the tall, narrow double doors and filled the landing. It was a much more irritating and impatient sound than American doorbells.

Two other apartments completed this floor, each with high sets of doors as imperious as Ellen's. Luke had never seen anyone come in or out. He tried in vain to read the brass nameplates from where he stood. The outer wall's one thick pane of crown glass cast a perpetual dusk upon the landing. He tapped his foot on the ground and combed down his curly hair with his fingers.

"*Chi è?*" Ellen said from the other side.

"It's me," Luke said. "You just buzzed me up."

She often used Italian with him, thinking he needed the practice. And he did, but felt baffled enough dealing with old ladies and market vendors without having to decipher his girlfriend, too.

Bolts slid up from the floor and down from the ceiling, and the door on the right swung partially open. Ellen had already disappeared somewhere, leaving Luke to the burgundy entryway. The landlord was a man of thirty or so, but perhaps his mother had died here and left him the apartment. If so, he had not disturbed her old upholstery and carpets, out of respect or indifference. The apartment's best feature was at the end of the long central hallway: a series of hexagonal windows in Ellen's bedroom, overlooking Piazza della Libertà and the rolling hills of the countryside a mile away.

"Luke, come into the kitchen! Dinner's almost ready."

Luke lingered for a moment, wishing he could watch the approaching sunset. The sun was not yet visible, but Ellen's white dresser and bedspread glowed orange under its light. A painting of a knight mounted on his steed hung above the headboard, framed in matte-black. His visor was lifted, but no face showed behind; it seemed to be Italo Calvino's *Nonexistent Knight*. A pastel damsel on the wall opposite outstretched a white-gloved hand in greeting, but her attentions were not reciprocated. Luke feared she would soon turn her gaze on him and looked away.

If he had brought the ring with him, he might have chosen to propose here. The sea lay in the opposite direction, but beneath this bank of windows spread seemingly the whole of the Marche wine country. It promised an infinity equal to that of the diamond he had chosen for Ellen back home.

He had picked the ring out at the mall before they left, assisted by a twenty-something woman in a violet pantsuit. She had graduated from a fashion design and merchandising school in San Francisco, and although she was slightly overweight, she had still made herself attractive, so he trusted her advice on a ring. Luke had also asked Ellen's father for her hand, something that embarrassed him. But it had seemed something that Ellen would want to know he'd done. Her dad had listened politely but judiciously in his armchair as Luke explained how much he loved Ellen, and how he would always provide for her. After ten minutes, they shook on it, both of their hands slightly sweaty. In the end, though, Luke had left the ring in its display under the care of the woman in the pantsuit. He hadn't wanted to worry about it while traveling, or to have the pressure of having to evaluate the romantic potential of every place they went.

He returned to the kitchen and leaned against the doorframe. The TV was on now, blar-

ing Italian music videos. Ellen stood by the stove at the near end of the room, a long, narrow rectangle with a table hidden in a niche at the far end.

The room smelled heavily of onions and garlic, two of his favorite foods. Sometimes it was hard not to take Ellen for granted. He should have gone with her last night to the wine tasting in Montepulciano, rather than stay at home to do his homework; he should have spent last night with her. She had joined another couple from their architecture program, pretending to be interested in the countryside as Harlan sat across the bus aisle with Angela, his hand on her knee, and in the subtle differences of each red as Harlan and Angela shared a glass.

Ellen wore one of her market outfits tonight: her favorite pants—a tight pair of royal blue jeans she boasted felt like linen—and a thirty-euro royal blue "Italia" sweatshirt that Luke had seen elsewhere selling for five.

"Maddy's joining us for dinner, if that's all right." Ellen nodded her head toward the opposite corner of the room. "Her plans with Justine fell through."

A jolt moved through Luke, a series of chilling tingles that ran to the ends of his limbs. "What?"

A silky voice came from the far end of the kitchen. "Is that okay?"

Luke entered the kitchen proper and peered into the alcove: there sat Maddy, whom he had hoped he might avoid for two more months until they all returned to the U.S., where she would be three time zones away in Gig Harbor, Washington. But here she was, doe-eyed, her Italian textbook open before her.

His stomach tightened as Maddy—six feet, tall even in her chair—watched him with dun eyes. Those same eyes had penetrated his apartment's peephole the previous night, slightly glazed but wide open.

"Yeah," Luke said. "Sure."

...

"Where's Josh," Maddy had stated in slurred, quiet words on the other side of the peephole. Her wavy auburn hair lay about her shoulders.

Josh, Luke's roommate, was gone, but Luke opened the door. Maddy walked calmly toward him, murmured, "Josh," and lowered her head to kiss him. He held still a moment, then lifted his chin to meet her mouth, and Maddy's tongue left a trail of saliva across his upper lip. It tasted of Fernet-Branca. Luke knew the responsible thing to do: put her to bed in Josh's room. But Maddy was so drunk that she might vomit, maybe even suffocate in it. Her eyelids were drooping now, her narrow nose flaring slightly as she breathed, her weight collapsing onto him. He put his arm through Maddy's and led her down the hall to his bed, laying her on top of his covers. She reached toward him, clutching at the air with her fingers, then let her arms drop. Her eyes fluttered open and closed. He settled into his chair across from her with a glass of red wine and a chapter on Ghiberti's bronze doors. He had finished two pages when Maddy's bra landed on his laptop keyboard. For a moment he stared at its cups, as deep as his wine glass and darker than its contents, then he swiveled around. Maddy was sprawled naked on his turquoise comforter.

The only woman Luke had ever seen naked before was Ellen, and she would only undress with the lights off, leaving Luke to see her with his hands. Then she would come alive, call his name, and hold him tight.

Maddy said nothing now, but fixed her eyes upon him. His hands craved to explore this great beauty, manifested from *The Birth of Venus* and lying as if Botticelli had arranged her. Atop her long, slender neck, her head cocked ten degrees, and thick locks of her auburn hair outspread on his pillow as if blown. Her expression was serene—steady brown eyes, lips lightly met—a conscious calm that promised all of her body, in time. Her hands, meanwhile,

apologized ambivalently, her right placed ineffectually across her breasts, her left fanning over her groin. Between them, the dips and curves of her stomach rippled with every short, shallow breath. Luke throbbed. No woman so beautiful would come to him like this again. He ached to make love to her, to touch her, to shape her on his bed as Botticelli did on canvas. This was the beauty he had come to Italy for. This moment. He stripped to his Jockey shorts and lay beside her, wanting and not wanting to move her hands. Wanting her to remain Venus. He moved the hand from her breast, but left the other. They kissed, slowly and deeply, quietly, until Maddy raised her head to Luke's ear. "Luke."

The throbbing stopped, and Luke saw anew the drunk girl beneath him. Had she moaned, or called him Josh, he could have gone on, sculpting her until she, and he, had crumbled. But now he thought of Ellen whispering his name; he smelled and tasted once more the alcohol on Maddy, and rose to put on his pants.

Maddy sat at Ellen's kitchen table, her gaze returned to the Italian textbook spread before her. She had passed out soon after she spoke his name. By the time Josh returned from the disco near sunrise, Luke had moved her to his bed—where she had thrown up, not on Josh's comforter, but into a pair of tennis shoes on the floor alongside. Luke shuddered. The smell of vomit in the small room had been acrid. He went to Ellen and placed his hand on the small of her back as she stirred a pot of tomato sauce. Her chest fit snugly into his side.

"Smells good," he said.

"*Bene*. It needs to be good if I'm going to be making it for you for the rest of our lives."

When she turned to Luke and winked, it felt like a slap. But she often spoke of their future like that.

"Just another minute," she said.

But even with Ellen's gaze on her saucepan, and Maddy's on her textbook, Luke knew he had the better part of each girl's attention. The narrow kitchen felt claustrophobic. He could nearly touch both walls simultaneously, and the stovetop's rising steam turned opaque the thin windows looking onto the alley below. Only a dozen strides away he could be in Ellen's room, and track the arc of the falling sun across the clear bedroom windows. The final minutes of daylight on the piazza below were always beautiful; the sun's rays painted the pavement scarlet. Someone surely admired the scene now from the bench where Luke had been not half an hour ago.

The legs of Maddy's chair scraped across the floor. She approached Ellen at the stove, her slight hips swaying beneath her pastel skirt, and held out her book.

"Not now, Maddy," Ellen said. "I'm just about to take the sauce off."

"Just a quick question." She extended her arm farther. "How do you conjugate—"

"Maddy, just wait till after dinner." Ellen's voice deepened slightly.

Briefly, Luke hoped that Ellen might turn on Maddy, push her away; Ellen had always been stronger than Luke. But she only waved Maddy away with her stirring hand. A few spots of sauce spattered Maddy's lined pages.

Maddy turned to Luke with raised eyebrows, then winked and returned to her chair. Perhaps she didn't remember much. Or anything at all. He felt a strum of excitement in his hands as he thought of keeping the memory for himself. Despite his weakness and shame, for the rest of his life he would be able to recall Maddy's finely crafted body and his passion for it. As she returned to her book and her face relaxed, Luke once more saw the striking lines and silent beauty of Venus, and he wanted to lay her out upon the white linoleum.

Ellen's hand rested on his biceps. "Honey, would you grab the plates from the cupboard?"

"Of course, honey."

Ellen smiled. She loved pet names, although they felt empty to Luke; they were what TV actors said when they pretended to love each other. He used one now only to distance himself from Maddy. Maybe when he and Ellen married, he would devise his own pet name for her, something simple but unique, something he could believe in. *Linen*, maybe, like her pants. He watched as she stirred her sauce. *Ladle*. Yes, she would be his ladle, scooping him up.

He should have brought the ring. Its three-quarter carat, princess-cut diamond gleamed right now from the center of its dark purple cushion, an ocean away. He could almost feel the ring box against his thigh. Were it there, he would lead Ellen away from the stove and Maddy and the old ladies and out to the piazza, where, just as the sun sunk behind the clock tower, he would sit Ellen on the bench, kneel, and pledge himself to her.

Luke carried the plates to the table and set them out, placing one across Maddy's notebook. She smiled; she seemed to think he was being playful.

"What was it happened to your dinner plans?" Luke asked.

"Justine cancelled." Maddy thumped her pencil's pink eraser top on the tablecloth.

"Just like that, huh?"

Maddy shrugged her shoulders, smiling still. Luke noted for the first time a chip on one of her front teeth. "Just like that," she said.

Luke wondered how long ago Justine had cancelled—if the girls had ever had such plans—and how much time Maddy had spent alone with Ellen before he arrived. How far beyond pleasantries their conversation had gone. Some day, at least, perhaps when he had the ring, Ellen would have to know.

"Good thing Ellen always makes a lot."

"Yes, good thing," Ellen said, walking up with the pasta and sauce. "The perfect housewife."

A few weeks ago they had been studying pictures of the abbey in Tolentino, and she had stopped him midway through his explanation of its rose window. "You know I'm only studying this stuff because of you, right?" she'd asked.

The question took him aback, and she continued before he could think of what to say.

"Don't get me wrong," she said, placing a hand on his forearm, "it's interesting—but I'll be just as happy to stay at home while you go off to be the professor."

Luke's mother had stayed home until he was out of middle school, but he had been surprised to hear Ellen share this preference, especially given her excitement to be in Italy. A tidy house and a hot dinner every night would be lovely. But her world would be so small; he would live and grow, and she would languish. What would they talk about?

Now Ellen served each of them with her wooden spoon—not really a ladle, Luke realized—then set the dishes in the sink to soak.

The square table barely fit inside its niche; one of its sides was flush against the wall. Maddy and Ellen sat opposite each other, Luke in-between. A bare bulb layered with dust extended from the wall above. Luke let the girls take the first bites. Ellen had embellished her sauce with zucchini and eggplant, a recipe similar to something they had ordered at a restaurant the week before. He ate and sipped red wine for several minutes without looking up, half-listening as the girls discussed bits of Italian grammar.

"The pasta is wonderful," he said. "Don't you think so, Maddy?" But then he noticed that her plate was still nearly full.

"I don't like eggplant," she said. "It's too spongy."

"So eat around it."

"Ellen chopped it too small."

Luke leaned back in his chair and laughed. He had been foolish last night. Now, in the washed-out light of the alcove, she lacked glamour: her hair lay lifeless, and her face appeared slightly yellow.

Ellen raised her eyebrows. "If she doesn't like it, she doesn't have to eat it," she said.

"Good," Maddy said. "I won't."

They both turned to Luke.

"Maddy." He leaned forward. "Ellen probably spent four hours cooking this sauce."

"Two hours," Ellen said.

"Two hours!" Luke said. "And you're not going to eat it."

"It's not a big deal," Ellen said in the even tone she used when explaining a grammatical rule. "She just doesn't like eggplant."

"Well, I love it," he said. "Here." He pulled Maddy's plate over and cocooned his fork in spaghetti.

"What are you doing." Ellen's voice did not rise into a question.

"Not letting your pasta go to waste."

"Maddy was eating from that plate. That's gross."

"Why is that gross?" Maddy asked. "Do I have cooties?" Her smile seemed painted on—not the subtle, entrancing smile of Botticelli's Venus, but a grotesque rictus from a Goya canvas. Luke wished the ages to whisk by and wash away her crimson lips.

"Luke."

He looked at Ellen. "What?"

"Stop."

"Stop what?"

Ellen's cheeks were sucked in slightly. "Stop staring at her."

His eye had lingered too long. But he deserved her reproach, desired it even, and he did not protest. He twirled more pasta around his fork.

"Luke, stop." Ellen pushed her chair back a foot, preparing to rise—

"One more bite."

Ellen leaned forward and placed her hand on his wrist; her fingertips settled lightly on the back of his hand, with her knuckles arched. She pressed her lips together and squared her chin, and a slight horizontal line ran across her forehead. Her eyes were wide palettes of green. Just a gentle admonition.

Luke's hand lay tense under her touch. He wanted Ellen to press her flesh to his, to raise her voice. He wanted her to be angry. *I spent last night with Maddy*, he wanted to say.

But Ellen lifted her hand from his and began to eat in silence. Luke felt another pair of eyes, but he ignored them. He pushed away the plate of spaghetti and sat back cold, sad, and limp.