AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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The Fifth Floor and Other Stories is a short-story collection about missed connection and exposure—about lonely men in specific places.

APPROVED:

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Jacob Ian Mercer, Author
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The Fifth Floor and Other Stories
As much as he complained about his evening shift at the Asteroid Hotel and Casino, Colin had to admit he liked getting home late, after his parents had gone to bed. He liked the darkness and silence of the place when he slipped in, how it seemed to come alive with his presence and need him, like a turbine needs water, to move about—to microwave dinner, lift weights, play *Battlefield France: Blitzkrieg!* online until dawn. In two months, he’d be back to the old routine. And already, it exhausted him: up by seven, eight hours at Palo Verde High, then after school with art club and field hockey and, at his mother’s insistence this year, Seniors Reading to Seniors—“to beef up your college apps,” she’d said.

“No one beefs up their college apps,” he’d replied. “No one I know.” None of his field-hockey teammates. They lit bonfires in the desert, drank malt liquor, and didn’t invite him. Not his best friend—his only friend—Jeff, whose parents would pay Jeff’s way through University of Nevada, Reno, who was gone all summer, visiting his dad in North Carolina.

“You’ll thank me in the future,” Colin’s mom had said.

He doubted it. For now, all he could do was savor being free.

When he awoke in the afternoon, his parents were usually at work. And when he left for work, they weren’t home yet. They crossed paths every once in a while, on days off or when someone was running late, and when they did, it was awkward for Colin—increasingly so as the summer wore on—like seeing an old friend he’d promised to call
but never did. Or seeing the maid he left messes for. For long stretches, the only way he
knew his parents were still around was that the house stayed clean. His sheets would get
miraculously washed every week, and every dish he left in the sink would be ready to use
the next day. In late July, he found his dad had been sleeping in the garage—in the
Subaru—and he’d gone weeks, easily, without knowing. He could have gone a couple
weeks more if only, one night, he hadn’t wandered into the garage in search of an
exercise ball. He turned on the lights and saw him: bolting upright in the reclined
passenger seat, under a blanket.

“It’s been good for my back,” his dad told him the next morning. A Thursday
morning, early, before his dad went to work.

“You don’t have to explain it to me,” Colin said. He was in bed, squinting at his
dad, who stood motionless in the middle of the room. Hands in his pockets. Tall and
potbellied and slouching, dressed in his card-dealer uniform: black slacks, vest, and tie,
white dress shirt. The shirt was discolored slightly, wrinkled, as if he’d slept in it (which
he hadn’t, Colin knew for certain). A moment earlier, he’d rapped on Colin’s door and
woken him up.

“It’s just that your mom has been having these hot flashes,” his dad said. “She
cranks up the air conditioning and has the fan pointed at the bed. And still—still she says
I emit too much body heat.” He laughed sharply. “So it’s best for us both that I sleep in
the car.”

Colin didn’t say anything.
His dad crossed his arms in front of his chest. Cleared his throat. “I’ve been thinking of moving in with Nana for a while. She hasn’t been doing well lately.” He paused. On the street outside, a motorcycle flew past.

Colin closed his eyes. This was the third time in two years his dad had threatened to move in with Nana—first the previous summer, when Colin’s mom had called him a “big blinkered mule” in front of their friends; and again in March, when Nana left the tub running and flooded half of her trailer. Part of him wished his dad would just leave. Get it over with. The rest was simply exhausted—he’d gotten only two hours of sleep and needed more. Much more. “That sounds fine,” he said, rolling away, onto his side.

“This is serious,” his dad said. “Don’t be rude.”

Colin didn’t move.

The floor creaked as his dad strode to the bed. He cleared his throat again and stood over him, nostrils whistling with each exhalation.

Colin held his breath.

A moment of stillness, and his dad grabbed him by the shoulder with both hands and wrenched him onto his back—pinned him down. Colin’s eyes went wide (this man rarely even hugged him) and his dad glowered into them, his own eyes widening, grey-green and—surprisingly to Colin—full of life, like oysters squirming in their shells.

“Talk to me,” his dad said.

“About what?”

“Anything. Tell me about work.”
At the Asteroid, Colin was in charge of the goldfish. Four hundred of them. A hundred in each glass aquarium built into a wall of what was once a storage room for banqueting supplies, two floors underground and directly below the lobby. It was a small room, about the size of his parents’ kitchen—and it looked like their kitchen, too, with white walls and fluorescent lighting and a scuffed tile floor. Below the aquariums were plastic cabinets crammed with nets and pH test strips and jars of fish flakes, which, no matter how often he mopped, got everywhere and crunched underfoot like breakfast cereal.

The Asteroid staff called this room “the fish house.” Colin thought “the water closet” would be better, that or “the ocean floor,” since working down there, surrounded by hundreds of gallons of water, by the fish, the drone of mechanical filtering systems and the smell of ammonia and brine saturating the air, gave him the sensation of walking on the bottom of the sea. He thought “the tank” would work, too, since some nights, as he wiped down the glass or sprinkled krill pellets in the water, he felt as though the fish were watching him—as though, for a few hours a day, he were on display, entertainment for eight hundred little eyes.

“These goldfish know me,” he once told Bernie, the head night porter, as Bernie delivered him the next day’s order. Bernie usually delivered it, unless he wasn’t working. If he wasn’t too busy, he’d usually stick around to talk, too. His shift started at ten—six hours after Colin’s—and when Colin went home at midnight, Bernie had only receptionists for company. Tugging at his big black mustache, he’d kill time bitching
about the guests, about the years he’d put in at the Asteroid (“I’ve seen three owners
come and go. Three!”)—and Colin was happy to bitch with him.

“Goldfish can’t know you,” Bernie said. “They don’t have memories.”

“Says who?”

“Scientists.”

“Well, these do. Whenever I walk into the room, they’re swimming normally at
first. But soon as they see me, they start darting around like crazy, around the tanks and
up to the surface, opening their mouths for food. They don’t do it for anyone else.”

“Let me see.” Bernie opened the door to the fish house and walked in alone and
closed it behind him. After a moment, he stuck his head out and said, “Alright, now
you.”

Colin circled the room slowly, and at each tank he passed, the fish picked up their
speed, swimming madly like angry swarms of bees.

Bernie laughed and slapped him on the back. “These things like you,” he said.

“They scare me,” Colin said. “But at least they’re behind glass.”

And at least, he thought, it was only a summer job—and so far, the best he’d ever
had. His first had been at a roller rink called Skate of the Union, where he’d worked the
rental booth. His second had been the previous summer, at the Circle K five blocks from
home. The graveyard shift, with all those late-night drunks and addicts.
And at least working at the Asteroid was easy. By four, the maids had finished cleaning the last of the rooms and stacked the goldfish bowls on tiered, metal carts, which they left outside the fish house for him—two carts with water and fish in the bowls and two with clean, empty bowls for tomorrow’s order. He wheeled them inside, scooped up the goldfish with a little green net, and put them back in the aquariums. He fed them. He pH-tested their water. After Bernie stopped by, he put fish in clean bowls with clean water and pushed them back in the hall, where they were picked up in the morning and delivered to guests. That was it. Scoop, feed, test, and return—five nights a week from four PM to midnight.

Some nights, though, dragged on forever. He glanced at the clock every five minutes. Depending on the manager on duty, he sneaked upstairs to the kitchen for coffee and a cold roll. He played games with the fish. They stared at him, and he stared back to see if they’d blink. He knew they wouldn’t, but he wanted them to. He wanted to leave. He wanted to dump glass-cleaner in the tanks and watch what happened.

On nights like these, Colin got home later than usual. He’d clock out and elbow his way through masses of guests in the lobby and the casino, into an elevator to the parking garage. He had an old, tan Chrysler Le Baron—Nana’s, technically, but she couldn’t drive it—and on these nights, he’d cruise the Strip with his windows down, taking in the exhaust and clamor and pulsing neon, watching the tourists as they did the same. Light from the massive billboards and marquees reflected in their faces. It lit up Las Vegas Boulevard like daylight—fuzzy, plastic daylight—that stopped at the tops of the hotels as though the sky stopped there.
At the end of the boulevard, he merged onto I-15 South. He sped toward California, past the golden stream of headlights surging from Los Angeles on the northbound lane, deep into the desert until every trace of Vegas disappeared and there were endless stars and he felt too small to be watched—too small to matter to anyone or anything. And he liked that.

The kind of people who own goldfish, Colin had always thought, are the kind of people who own wind chimes and grandfather clocks—people who insulate their homes with smooth, steady movement and softness, like bubble wrap around crystal bowls. His parents were like this. They hadn’t owned a goldfish in a long time, but they did have wind chimes—three sets of them on the back patio—and a grandfather clock with a long, golden pendulum swinging endlessly in a living-room corner. They needed an oscillating fan to fall asleep. They needed talk radio played low in the background to ease into their mornings.

Most Las Vegans he knew were like this, too—talk-radio listeners, goldfish owners. The older ones were, at least, people like his parents and their friends who worked in or around the Strip. His dad was a blackjack dealer at the Thunderbird Hotel and Casino, his mom the table games supervisor at the Holy Roman. When they came home from work, fatigued and reeking of cigarette smoke, they pulled the blinds, turned up the air conditioner, and drank beers in silence from frosted mugs, recovering from the day. Sometimes their friends came over and drank beers with them. They sat around the
living room and listened to cool jazz and complained about gamblers who either couldn’t hold their liquor or lose gracefully.

“I had to call security again yesterday,” his mom would say, rubbing the back of her neck. “A man punched a Heineken bottle into a poker table. He shook his glassy hand at one of my employees—poor woman—crying and shouting something about mortgage payments.” Their friends would shake their heads and sip beer. In the background, Miles Davis would let loose a long, high C.

“They should assign us firearms,” his dad would say. “Like airline pilots.”

For the past couple of years, since he’d turned fifteen, Colin had skipped these get-togethers and hidden in his bedroom upstairs, reading Frank Herbert novels and playing computer games. He couldn’t stand Miles Davis. He preferred wailing guitars and double foot pedals—heavy metal, thrash metal and punk. Movies with fistfights and plastic explosives. Air shows and war games. Most days, he’d hide in his room even if there weren’t guests. He’d come out only for food or for the bathroom or to get to his car. His parents didn’t care anymore. Long days at work and fights with one another had finally overwhelmed them. If his grades were good, which they were—straight A’s aside from a B+ in AP Calculus—they didn’t nag him much. They’d say things like, “Fine! Eat toaster strudel for dinner if you want, but we’re not buying that crap for you anymore.”

When they hired him at the Asteroid, they’d told Colin he wouldn’t have to deal with guests. “In fact, you’ll rarely even see the guests,” the housekeeping manager, Dale,
a thin, chalky man who smelled of cigarettes and hand lotion, had told him during the interview. “You’ll spend most of your time on basement level two, between our laundry room and the custodial storage closets.”

“Basements are fine,” he’d said.

“And you work alone.”

“That’s fine, too.” It was perfect, actually. Exactly what he’d been looking for: a job where he could earn his money quietly and by himself. Somewhere like a factory or a warehouse, where he wouldn’t have to work behind a counter and grin and please people all day.

“How much experience have you had with goldfish?” Dale asked

“Not much,” he said. “I had one once, when I was in third, fourth grade.” It had died within a day. His parents had bought it for him one Saturday morning, the whole setup—the bowl, the krill pellets, the gravel, An Essential Guide to Keeping Goldfish, and a green, terra cotta Eifel Tower for it to hide in—and by the evening, it was floating belly-up on the surface. He blamed the manual. It told him a goldfish’s color varied with its exposure to light (the more light, the more golden it would be), and he wanted his to be intensely gold. He put the fishbowl in his driveway, where it cooked in the Nevada heat until the sun went down. “Do I need experience?”

“No—not really.” Dale smiled and leaned back in his chair. “Taking care of goldfish is pretty straightforward, but it’s nothing we train you for. Not yet. This is a very, very new addition to the resort.” He told Colin how a growing number of Las
Vegas hotels were offering goldfish to their guests, as optional amenities like mini-bar snacks or ashtrays. “Now our receptionists not only ask, ‘Smoking or non-smoking?’” he said, “but ‘Would you like a fish in your suite?’ as well.” They’d gotten the idea from upscale European hotels, which had been providing goldfish for some time. Guests had requested them. American guests were requesting them now. And the whole phenomenon had started with scientific studies in Austria proving people sleep better with goldfish in their rooms—longer and more peaceful sleep—that even a few minutes with a fish relaxes muscles and lowers heart rates.

Colin was skeptical about the whole concept. “I’m surrounded by hundreds of these things eight hours a day, and it doesn’t relax me one bit,” he told Bernie a couple weeks into the job. “By all accounts, I should pass out the moment I walk into the room. I should be so calm I’m dead.”

Bernie had become Colin’s contact with the rest of the hotel, with the front desk and room-service department and the guests. It was easy to forget the rest of the place existed, all that marble and neon aboveground. On the basement levels, it was all tile floors and overhead lighting. Wholesale crates of cleaning solvents and floor wax. Battalions of custodians and housekeepers who scoured the suites and disappeared down service elevators like ants into the earth. Colin assumed the people who ordered goldfish would be like his parents: distempered, dull. But whenever he asked Bernie, “Where are the fish going tomorrow?” he was always surprised.

“Some loner weirdo who won’t come to the door,” Bernie might say. “Just leaves the door ajar with the tip taped to it, leaves the lights off, and hides in a dark corner.”
He’d pull up a stool and roll his sleeves, exposing his tattooed forearms. On each arm was a name in black, Old English lettering: Arlo on the right, Nadia on the left. His kids. He’d withdraw a flask of Jäger from his vest, take a pull, and sometimes hand it to Colin, who tried his hardest not to wince as he sipped it.

He never knew whether to trust Bernie’s reports. Each night, the profiles changed dramatically. “A Slovakian couple on their honeymoon,” Bernie said once. “The room reeks of sex.” Or “A family with a little girl. They wanted a jar of fish flakes, too. And a tub of vanilla ice cream.”

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A week after he discovered his dad in the garage, Colin got home around 12:30 and found all the lights on in the house, his parents’ voices, loud and severe, resonating from the kitchen. “You act like you’re such a goddamn expert!” he heard his dad say. Dishes and silverware clattered. Colin closed the front door silently behind him. “An associate’s degree—that’s not an education. It’s job training. Like truck-driving school.”

“And I make double your paycheck because of it,” his mom said.

Until now, Colin had never known his parents could function past midnight. Even on those New Year’s Eves when they’d stayed up to celebrate as a family, his mom and dad always passed out in their recliners by 11. At midnight, Colin would stand alone in the backyard, watching fireworks blast from the Strip, like casino marquees smashed to pieces and hurled at the sky.

“I’m trying to be a good father.”

“You’re trying to be your father—and you know you weren’t raised right.”
“That’s some nerve, telling me how I was raised!”

Colin crept toward the kitchen. He’d never seen his parents fight. Sometimes he heard muffled shouts through their bedroom door, but he’d only ever witnessed the aftermath—the long silences between them, his mom’s occasional absence at dinner (leftovers or toaster strudel on those nights), his dad sleeping in the Subaru. His parents seemed to plan it that way: scheduling their arguments around him, for when he was gone or out of earshot—as if he’d never notice the broken coffee mugs in the garbage. The plaster those mugs chipped off the walls. “That means they give a shit about you,” Jeff told him once. “I wish my parents had fought that way.”

“I wish mine would get a divorce,” he’d said.

He crept closer. Shadows played across the linoleum through the kitchen doorway.

“I was trusted to make my own decisions,” his dad said.

“You were ignored.”

They had to know he was home. They had to have seen his headlights as he pulled into the driveway, heard his car door slam—and yet they kept fighting. Strangely, this excited Colin. His parents were arguing not only about him, it seemed, but for him. A performance. On his schedule. As though they wanted him, finally, to see them in action.

In the kitchen, they both stood with their backs to him, his dad in the center of the room, next to the breakfast table, his mom at the counter, shoveling something from a
casserole dish onto a plate. Each wore a bathrobe—his dad’s green, his mom’s blue.

“My parents didn’t have time for coddling—you know this,” his dad said. “They each worked two jobs to support us.”

His mom threw a spatula into the sink. “We don’t. We have no excuse.” She turned around. She looked bad. Tired. More wrinkled than usual, as though she’d been sleeping on her face. Her hair, dyed blond, was matted to her scalp. Her eyes met Colin’s. His muscles tensed. For a moment, he feared she’d attack him, too, drag him into the argument—ask about his upbringing. She gave a tight-lipped smile. “Have you eaten?” she asked, as though he’d been standing there all along.

His dad turned.

Colin shook his head.

She grabbed the plate from the counter behind her. “Then I have dinner for you,” she said and shuffled to him, in a pair of fluffy white slippers. “Baked it tonight. It’s still hot.” She shoved the plate in his hands. Manicotti. His favorite. The edges looked burnt. Usually, his mom made manicotti only for his birthday. “Have a seat,” she said.

He pulled out a chair at the breakfast table, where a place setting waited. He grabbed the fork and looked up, from his mom to his dad. They stood staring at his plate, their faces hanging blankly, like wet towels. He took a bite. They still stared.

His mom cleared her throat. “Let’s all have a seat,” she said, and she pulled out a chair across from him. Cupped her hands together. “Dear?” she said to his dad.

His dad didn’t move. He stood with his arms crossed, scowling at the pasta—just as he’d scowled at Colin a week earlier as he’d pinned him down in bed. Colin—
desperate to get him out of the room—had thrown goldfish facts at him, things he’d learned from Bernie: “They can see infra-red light,” he’d said. Or “A school of goldfish isn’t called a school. It’s called a troubling.” At this, his dad had laughed and loosened his grip.

Slowly, his dad shook his head. “Goddamn it, Maggie.” He looked up at Colin. “Do you even want manicotti for dinner?”

“Don’t,” his mom said, under her breath.

“Sure,” Colin said.

“Why don’t we all just sit down?” she repeated.

He shook his head again. “How about going to college out of state? Do you want that?”

His mom spun in her chair. “This isn’t the way to handle it,” she said. “We’re supposed to have a discussion.”

“I hope you’re not applying to Nevada schools.”

She jumped up. “You agreed to a discussion.” She thrust her neck forward, the tendons tight and quivering like bungee cords, and clenched her fists. Colin had never seen his mom like this: an inch away from punching someone in the throat—from hurling coffee mugs or having a stroke. He looked away. “You promised not to act like an ass.”

His dad took a couple steps back. He grinned like an eight-year-old with a slingshot. “Where do you want to go to school most, son?”
He knew he should stay quiet—anwering would only make things worse—but he was enticed by the tension in the room. “UNR,” he said. He’d assumed he’d share a dorm room with Jeff. Hang out with other Palo Verde grads. Spend spring break on Lake Tahoe. That his parents were fighting over college, so soon—and when he’d only vaguely thought about it himself—stunned him.

“That’s too bad. Your mom wants you far away from us, in a different state.”

“Don’t lie to him,” his mom said, her face flushing red.

“Arizona…Colorado…”

“You know it’s not like that.”

“New York…”

“You promised we could talk about this!” She pushed his dad in the chest with both hands, and he staggered back, bumping into the counter.

He laughed. “Rhode Island…Connecticut…”

She looked at Colin. Her eyes were wet and red as her face. “I just want you away from the casino business, honey. It’s a horrible environment.”

“Next step, your mom’s choosing a girlfriend for you. Some cold, resentful bitch who kicks you out of bed every night.”

She turned and pushed his dad again, harder this time—and he staggered back, flapping his arms like an ostrich. He hit the drain rack and sent pots and pans crashing to the floor.

“Idiot!” his mom yelled.
Colin dropped his fork and leaped to his feet. This was too much. He ran out of the kitchen—out the front door as his dad laughed and called after him, “I’d run, too, if I were you!” He jumped in his Le Baron and sped out of the cul-de-sac, hands clutching the steering wheel hard. He glanced at the clock. He wanted to call Jeff, wanted to tell him—to tell someone—that his parents had gone completely insane, but it was 1:50. Almost 4 on the East Coast. He merged onto the freeway. Punched the accelerator. What they’d said about college hadn’t fazed him—he still had time to figure things out. It was their faces: his dad’s stupid grin, his mom’s furious neck muscles. Was this how Jeff’s parents had fought? Screaming and shoving each other, using their son’s presence as a weapon?

This time, maybe he’d drive all the way to L.A., hit the Pacific by sunrise. He knew a kid who’d stolen his mom’s debit card and car after a big argument, taken off for Pasadena. Rented a condo. Lived off of baby back ribs and sirloin steak for two weeks—one week for his mom to call the cops, another for them to catch him. He imagined doing this—sucking his parents’ bank account dry, in luxury. Maybe he’d check into the YMCA and get a job at a different hotel. Maybe not.

He took the Las Vegas Boulevard exit and drove to the Asteroid.

Bernie put an arm around Colin’s shoulder, squeezed it, and led him to an elevator—not the rickety service elevator, but a real one, golden and full of mirrors—which they rode up to the sixth floor. He led him down the hall and around a couple of corners until they arrived at room 615. “No offense,” Bernie said, “but if my wife and I ever turn out
like your folks, I hope the kids run away. Find better parents.” He laughed. He fished in
his pocket and pulled out a housekeeping key.

“Whose room is this?” Colin asked.

“Don’t worry. I guarantee you no one is here.”

The place was huge, a penthouse suite—“the best in the building,” Bernie told
him. It looked nearly as big as Colin’s house, but nicer, with a staircase to a second floor,
terracotta tiles, and a massive chandelier of blown glass, glimmering like the fragment of
some exploded star. Bernie told him that, over the past few days, he’d hit it off with the
old man who’d occupied the suite. Sheets and pillows lay crumpled around the king-size
bed. Dirty room-service dishes, littered with half-eaten salads and cuts of beef, towered
in the corners. Atop the television, an ashtray overflowed with cigarette butts. There
were half a dozen goldfish bowls, too, arranged randomly about the place—two on the
coffee table, one on the staircase, one on the floor (pushed halfway behind the divan), and
two on the bedside table, next to the telephone. The goldfish in the bowl on the floor was
dead, floating on its back beside a soggy, half-smoked Pall Mall.

“This guy was a true gentleman,” Bernie said. An excellent tipper. A retired
corporate executive from Indianapolis. “He told me yesterday he’d be leaving a day
early and that, seeing as how he’d already paid for the room, it’d be a shame if it went to
waste.” He grinned. “You can stay here tonight. There’s a lot of leftover liquor.”

Bernie fixed them each a drink—a Maker’s Mark on the rocks—and they went
out onto the balcony, where there were two more goldfish bowls, perched on patio
furniture. They drank. They reclined on deck chairs. They gazed down into the
courtyard, at the swaying palms and the guests diving in the pool under the lights, and they drank some more. “You know—when I was your age, I was into goldfish, too,” Bernie said after his second glass, grinning. “I was a student at Texas Tech. We had some wild parties back then, and sometimes people would dare me to swallow goldfish. I swallowed ten in a row one night—ten! They wiggled down my throat like raw oysters.” He laughed. “Do your friends ever do that—at parties? Swallow goldfish?”

Colin felt warm, a little dizzy. He’d never had bourbon before. “None of my friends drink,” he said.

“Next year, then—you’ll see what I’m talking about next year. You’ll love college. Wherever you wind up going.”

Colin grabbed the bottle and refilled his glass. “I don’t know,” he said and took a drink. He gazed at the palms again, smiling as his vision blurred, blending them fuzzily into the lights, into the splashing and laughter below. He felt acutely—and for the first time—the city’s warm, tender embrace, like that of an old friend who’d suddenly become a lover. “We’ll see what happens,” he heard himself say. “What if I stayed on at the Asteroid full-time, after graduation?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

He imagined telling this to his parents, the looks on their faces—on his mom’s face. He smiled. “But I might.”
From the room came the sound of the front door opening, slamming shut. “Room service!” someone called. Some shuffling and heavy thuds. There was a voice—two voices, a man’s and a woman’s—muttering softly and laughing.

Bernie set down his glass. He looked at Colin and thrust out his lower lip. “I invited some guests,” he said.

“How’d they get in?”

“I made keycards.”

They went inside. Crouching on the floor next to the bed were, in fact, a man and a woman—both, from what Colin could tell, almost thirty. Well-dressed. The woman was slender and petite and wore a vintage floral-print dress, white with yellow flowers. A bracelet of earthy stones. She wore her blond hair up, and several locks fell in front of her face as she laughed and scrambled for something on the floor. The man had his back to the door. He was thin and blonde, too—the pair could have easily been siblings—and balding; he wore a pair of khaki slacks and a blue blazer. “Shit, it’s slippery!” he squealed.

“Catch it!” said the woman.

Colin crept over a few steps—the second time he’d crept into a room this night—and saw they were scrambling for a goldfish. It was flopping on the floor in a puddle of water, next to an overturned fishbowl. They must have knocked it off the bedside table. The woman saw him first. She jerked her head toward him—then at Bernie—and smiled. “We had a little accident,” she said.

Bernie laughed. “Colin’s on it—are n’t you? He’s wildlife control.”
Mechanically, he moved to the bed. The man and woman stepped back, and everyone watched him. He knelt down near the puddle and swiped at the fish clumsily until he cupped it in both hands. In the man’s black shoes, he saw the chandelier’s reflection, which blurred apart in his vision, then reformed. The fish was more sticky than slippery, drying out in the hot air. Its overturned bowl was almost empty, so he dropped it in one of the occupied bowls on the bedside table. The two fish circled each other, like sniffing dogs.

“This is Peter and Agatha Feldge,” Bernie said. “Room 226. We met a couple nights ago, when I brought them a bottle of Merlot and two ham sandwiches.”

“And a box of Raisinettes,” Peter said. He was lightly bearded, Colin saw now, and wore a shiny yellow tie, which was partially unknotted and hanging loosely from his neck. He shook Colin’s hand. “We’re in the Whitworths’ wedding.”

“The Whitworths?” he said.

Agatha shook it too. Her hand was warm and soft—tiny and muscular, like the rest of her. She could have been a gymnast. Colin’s hand was cold, and, he knew, fishy, and he shoved it quickly in his pocket. “Nice room,” she said.

“On loan from a true gentleman!” said Bernie, and he turned and walked to the balcony. “Colin, is your glass out here?” he called. “Do you want it?”

“It’s on the railing,” Colin said. On the bedside table next to him, all three goldfish swam in wild circles. He moved away, took a seat on the divan.
“Who else wants whiskey?” Bernie called.

“Do you have any gin?” Agatha asked.

Peter pulled his cell from his pocket. “Do you mind if we invite some friends?”

From where Colin sat, he could smell dead fish and cigarette behind him. Like sour smoked salmon.

Over the next half hour, more guests arrived—three middle-aged women in party dresses, a Slovakian couple—all with keycards. Bernie propped the door open with the empty fishbowl, scrawled Welcome Friends on a sheet of hotel stationary, and stuck it to the door with a piece of chewing gum. More arrived. Peter called friends and relatives from the wedding party, and soon the room was full. The drinks flowed. Cigarette smoke filled the air. Colin finished his bourbon, and Agatha mixed him a gin and tonic.

“Colin!” Bernie called, wobbling on his feet. “This is what I’m talking about! In college, this is what you’ll do!”

“You’re not in college?” Agatha asked. “How old are you?”

“Almost eighteen,” he said.

Colin smoked a cigarette. He moved about the place in a daze, gazing into the goldfish bowls, watching them dip and whirl and blend with the party. Bernie was right, he thought. These were goldfish people, too—gamblers, revelers, cocaine snorters. He drank Canadian Club from the bottle. Talked to a grey-bearded Alaskan man, who
worked at a missile range, test-launching rockets for the government. “They explode in
the tundra, miles away from anyone,” he said. His voice boomed like a sports
announcer’s. He grabbed the bottle from Colin and took a pull. “Sometimes we needed
to take samples, so we’d drive out to where the missiles landed. That was a sight. They
blasted through inches of permafrost and exposed the wet, black earth below—earth that
hadn’t seen the sun since god-knows-when.” Colin imagined the explosions, sweated and
trembled excitedly. The energy in the room—the heat, the cigarette smoke—thrilled him.
He drank more. Lost track of time completely.

At some point, Bernie grabbed him and they descended, with some of the
wedding party, to the casino, where the staff recognized him and let him in. At the dollar
slots, he won forty bucks, ten bucks, lost twenty and won forty more. He staggered to the
marble bathroom and vomited in the sink. He staggered back out and ordered another
beer. Blurred lights, ringing bells—this was his parents’ Las Vegas. And what’s so wrong
with it? he thought. There was comfort in this ostentation and chaos—in how, at any time
on any day, the resort was filled with people, all wound up with the thrill of a big win or
the frustration of a loss, all eating and drinking and smoking and laughing and
swaggering through the front door with happy, mischievous looks in their eyes. These
people liked him. Unlike those field-hockey assholes, they’d drink with him, too. He
absentmindedly scanned the blackjack tables for his dad. If his dad were here, he’d leap
on him and pin him down, tell him he belonged in the garage. If Colin were back home,
he’d throw his mom’s casserole dish of manicotti to the floor, with the pots and pans.
Another few games at the slots. He was up fifty dollars. Agatha came behind him, placed her hands on his shoulders—he’d almost forgotten about Agatha, and she looked like a gymnast more than ever now, all thrumming with life, ready to sprint at a pummel horse, to fly through the air—and she asked him to show her the fish house.

In the golden elevator, she pressed him against a mirrored wall and kissed him soft on the lips. Her hair smelled like talcum powder. He smelled like beer, fish, and vomit, he knew, but he didn’t care—didn’t even hold his breath as he kissed her back. Who was this woman? Wasn’t she married? Would Jeff believe him when he bragged about this? At the fish house door, he struggled with his keys—completely missed the knob twice—but she steadied his hand with hers, still warm and soft and strong, and they opened it together.

Inside, it was dark. The only light emanated from the tanks, which were lit from above by long, blue strips of fluorescent bulbs. The water glowed neon, bright as washer fluid. Colin squinted, and the fish appeared as black silhouettes against the blue, swarming together, like storm clouds, as he entered. He reached for the light switch, but Agatha grabbed his hand and said, “Don’t. It’s better this way.” She moved closer to an aquarium. “What are they doing?”

“They know me,” he said. “They like me.” He wrapped his arm around her waist, kissed her. She tasted like beer, too. She yanked at his uniform shirt, untucking it, slipped her arms under it, and pulled it over his head. Pulled him to the ground, onto his back on the cold linoleum. Fish flakes stuck to his bare skin. She climbed on top of him,
and he struggled with her bra clasps, tugging and tugging, and gazed up at the tanks. The fish were watching him, swimming faster.

If goldfish had memories, he thought, they’d remember this night. Likely they remembered every night in this hotel, every hotel room they’d been brought to—the countless guests they’d seen drunk and high and violent, making love, fighting, and reuniting. They recorded the history of this place. A history he was part of. Naked and exposed. And that was okay. At this moment, for the first times in years, Kyle felt fine with being watched, at peace with it—acknowledged, included, an appendage of some warm, pulsing organism. He unclasped Agatha’s bra. She laughed and flung it across the room. He tried lifting his hands again, but he couldn’t. They slid down her sides and onto the floor, heavy as stones. He stared at blue glow.

“Hey,” she said.

Next chance he got, he’d ask Dale about upcoming shifts on weekdays, after school. If he tried, in a year, he might work his way up to bellhop. Then to housekeeping manager. He yawned, big and wide. He’d have to tell his mom he dropped art club and field hockey and Seniors Reading to Seniors—and she’d have to deal with it. The goldfish swarmed and pulsed in the neon blue, and his eyes ached. If she didn’t like it, he’d move out. To Nana’s.

“Hey kid!”

Colin closed his eyes. He felt light and warm, buoyant as a chunk of driftwood—lighter as Agatha slid off him. He yawned again. At the break of dawn—if it wasn’t dawn already—he’d race the rising sun back home. Desert air roaring through the
windows, the Le Baron shuddering. Creosote and sagebrush, strip malls and convenience stores. When he opened the front door, they’d be waiting for him, sitting on the living-room couch—and he’d hold out in front of him a gift: a goldfish in a shiny glass bowl.

Colin drifted off to sleep—into the deepest, most peaceful sleep he’d ever slept. He heard the fish-house door click shut, then not a sound but his breathing. The drone of the filtering system. Lapping water.
Todd was hooked on Leslie McGarrigle because she smelled like a can of tennis balls freshly opened. Sharp. Chemical. And stunningly, thrillingly new—not pristine necessarily (not Leslie) but novel, new in the sense that this scent hadn’t existed long: a matter of decades, he calculated, with the dawn of factories and felt and rubber-compounds.

For the longest time, she hadn’t smelled like much of anything, not from what Todd could recall. She’d smelled like any other young woman he knew—skin lotion, laundry detergent, botanicals from the shampoo her stylist sold her—and when she walked past at Bank of the West, he’d swivel his chair at the drive-thru window and watch her, as he did every other young woman he worked with. He noted her resemblance, from behind, at least, to the woman he’d dated in college: the long, rigid bones and black hair and razor-straight posture. But from the front, she looked different. Benign. Her eyes were green, soft and self-conscious and, when she glanced at him, lingered only long enough to tell him she was interested. He’d smile. Then he’d turn and launch another canister of cash through the vacuum pipe.

She asked him out for drinks one day after work. They went to a bar called The Javelina—a dim, woody place with dartboards, peanut shells on the floor—and drank happy-hour beers until they sat on the same bench in their booth, their legs touching.

“You look like a Judas Priest man,” she’d said. “Do you have a quarter for the jukebox?”
At that time, he smelled nothing but her shampoo: French lavender and mango. And peanuts.

The tennis balls didn’t come until later.

It was early on a dry, windy Saturday morning, unseasonably cold for late September—and her apartment was cold, too, dark and cavern-like with the blinds pulled over open widows. Todd woke up shivering. His arm was around Leslie, cupping her body in his, and she was shivering, too. The comforter had been kicked to the floor. He wondered vaguely where his socks were—and it hit him. He opened his eyes and the smell hit him, as though an aluminum seal had cracked open in front of his face, filling his nostrils instantly. The scent was hers, he had no doubt. An acrid chartreuse-ness. He shoved his nose in her neck and breathed deep. “Are you using new soap?” he whispered.

“Hnn,” she sighed. She was half-awake. In the windows, the blinds swung forward in the wind, then back with a plastic *thwap*.

“You smell like a gym.” He took another breath. “A clean one, with waxed floors.”

Leslie smelled like gasoline. *But only faintly,* Todd thought as they drove to Idaho to meet her parents. *Like when you pump gas and get a little on your hands, and it sticks with you for the rest of the ride.* Like when the gas fumes mingle with the new-car smell and the air freshener hanging from your mirror, the sun beating through the windshield. It tasted sweet. It made him light-headed, headachy sometimes, so he took
acetaminophen. An hour without her sent his muscles spasming, his lungs laboring for air—so he’d told her he loved her. Moved in with her, never truly telling her why. She didn’t notice the smell and, if he brought it up, grew quiet. No one else noticed, either. When he’d said to his coworkers at the bank, “Okay, here she comes—now take a whiff and tell me what you think,” they’d wrinkled their brows at him. Which was fine. The scent was his to enjoy.

Halfway to Idaho. A semi truck thundered past, hauling an enormous steel tank of milk. “This is the first time I’ve taken a man home to meet my family,” she said.

He wondered how her parents smelled.

“Are you nervous?”

He wondered if their home smelled, too, if walking through it would be like walking through a nail salon. An oil spill. A pile of permanent markers set on fire in a sealed room. He’d never dated a woman whose parents hadn’t liked him instantly. In fact, he still got birthday cards from his college girlfriend’s mom. Was he nervous? No. “A little,” he said and breathed deep, smiling at the road.

Leslie McGarrigle smelled like a roof of freshly rolled shingles. And he’d never smell anything else—not if he could help it. In his pants pocket, a silver-plated ring pressed into his leg. Set with a green stone, perfectly round.
I am no farmer. An old Pakistani man named Mazari, not me, owns the fields surrounding my property—the onions edging it and the alfalfa across the drainage ditch—and, they say, he owns about a dozen more between here and the state line. A corporate farmer. A good man, I feel, and I have no cause to feel otherwise. I see him about three times a year. He spots me in my garden and pulls up to my gate in his white Tacoma, gets out, and extends a hand over the fence. “It’s that time of year, Mr. Bustos,” he says. His hands are large, but his handshakes are always soft, like warm dough. His eyes are always big and wet. “I’ll have a man in the field two mornings from now with a tractor full of zinc. He’ll be spraying for an hour and a half—two hours, tops. Five to seven. As always, I’d recommend you stay indoors that morning.”

“I’ll eat a long breakfast,” I say.

“There you go.”

He looks more like a baker than a farmer, all large and spongy, and I imagine him baking onions into bread, alfalfa into cakes for the dairy cows up the road, in Mesquite. My late wife, Beth, said he reminded her of an uncle she’d lost when she was young—drowned after driving his RV into the Rio Grande. Whenever Mazari stopped by in his pickup, she’d listen to us talk from the front porch, sweeping or feeding the dogs even if they weren’t hungry, and she’d tell me afterward, “I swear to God, Les, that farmer looks just like him.”
“This man is Pakistani, not Mexican,” I’d remind her.

“How do you know?”

“Everyone knows,” I’d say. “Besides, he has an accent.”

Years ago, when the border was more open, wet runners—Beth called them *mogados*—stopped by our house frequently, asking if these fields were mine. Like Mazari, they lingered by the gate. Beth spoke to them, and I’d hover beside her while she translated. “He’s looking for work,” she’d usually say. “Says the field is weedy and he’ll hoe it for cheap.” And she’d explain the situation to the man (sometimes a pair of them, sometimes a man, his wife, and their wide-eyed children) and apologize. We’d send him off with a jug of water. Maybe an apple or two.

Sometimes people got lost on our road and stopped to ask directions, usually to the racetracks. Once, after I helped him, a man asked me, “This your farm?”

“It’s an onion field,” I said, “not a farm,” and he climbed into his convertible with a huff.

But that was years ago, and for some time, no one but Mazari stopped by. After Beth died, her family stopped visiting—and our friends, it turned out, were her friends mostly, and soon they stopped calling. I’d gone weeks without a visitor—and I’d learned to enjoy it—until one morning, the first week of August, the jogger approached me.

I was working in my garden, as I do every morning. I’d seen him before. He’d jogged past my place for the first time one week earlier, and he’d done the same every morning since. Always around six. Always in a pair of little gold shorts and white sneakers. This morning, the soil was wet with yesterday’s rain, and my watermelons...
were fat as potbellied pigs. I was pulling mustard weeds and hadn’t seen him approach.

“Is this your farm?” he asked.

I yanked a big, heavy weed from the ground. My throat felt loose and warm, like I’d swallowed hot soup—and I laughed. Somehow, I’d forgotten people asked me this question. “Nope,” I said and stood up, brushing dirt from my jeans. I met him at the fence. I had a good look at him: broad-shouldered and muscular. Crew cut and a thin, brown beard. He had his arms crossed on my fence, leaning on it, breathing heavily, and his skin was slick with sweat. We shook hands. “Lester Bustos,” I said.

“Brian Chapman.” A strong handshake. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Bustos.” Polite. Good looking, even though he was grinning. He reminded me of myself thirty-five years younger, all beefed-up from basic training, ready to be shipped to Saigon. I’d grinned like that. Stupidly. Lucky I was trained as a metal worker, not an infantryman. “My family and I just moved in up the road,” he said. “Montes Road. Next to the old grain silo.”

“Oh yes? Good,” I said. Montes Road was two miles away. Not a bad jog. “It seems they just put up the for-sale sign.”

“It’s a nice house.” He stood back, hands on his hips, and gazed across the onion field. “Shame this isn’t your farm. I wanted to ask you for an onion.”

“Oh yes?”

“I’ve never had one fresh from the ground.”

“You should.”

“I’m sure.”
“Take one, I mean. The farmer has plenty. He won’t mind if you take a couple.” I paused. “Take something from my garden, too,” I said, pointing behind me, holding back a laugh. “Everything’s grown like crazy in this rain. There’s too much for just me to eat.” This was true. I didn’t know what I’d do with all that produce—the summer squash, watermelons, greens and carrots. They covered a whole corner of my front yard.

He leaned over the fence to get a look.

“Here,” I said, walking to my garden. I wrapped my arms around the biggest watermelon I had and yanked it from the vine, staggering back a couple steps. It must have weighed fifty pounds. “Take this. Best in Doña Ana county, I guarantee you.”

His eyes were huge. His hands were up as though I were holding him at gunpoint.

“Please. I can’t eat all of these.” I grunted, trying to lift it over the fence. “One or two will do me for the whole summer.”

He took it and stood staring at it dumbly for a moment. “Gosh. Thank you, Mr. Bustos.”

“You’re welcome. How big is your family?”

“It’s me, my wife, and my little girl.”

“Great,” I turned from the fence. “You’ll have some leftovers tomorrow, too.”

He jogged off, the gigantic watermelon in his arms. Two miles, and he had to lug it the whole way. I watched him, laughing at how ridiculous he looked, until he disappeared down the road.
If Beth were still alive, she would have said the rain brought the jogger. Or that he brought the rain—that the two were, in some way, connected. She would have shuffled out to our dirt road and poked at his footprints in the rain-water mud with a stick and said, “Maybe this is what the wait was for. *Something* must have held the rain back for so long.”

And I would have said, “Global warming.”

And she would have wrinkled her eyes at me—eyes that, the instant she turned fifty, became the most wrinkled eyes on earth, like tortoise skin—and said, “Maybe.” But she wouldn’t have meant it.

This summer, the monsoon rains came late, and until then the farmers were anxious. The whole Borderland was. The heat was brutal, over one hundred every day, and afternoons, I could smell the whole field of onions cooking. I crossed the bridge to and from town and saw the Rio Grande shrink from farmers draining it for their fields. Hay at the dairies caught fire. Migrant workers died from heatstroke. Drug cartels in Juarez murdered people like crazy, as if the heat had driven them to violence, and they wrapped the bodies tightly in blankets and flung them, from moving vehicles, into the desert. Newspapers called these bodies *encobijados*. There were pictures. They looked like mummies, all wrapped up. Or like sacrifices to God, for rain. If anything had brought the monsoon, I thought, it was the *encobijados*—and they certainly hadn’t brought the jogger. He’s a nice man with a nice family. Polite, with his “Gosh, thank you, Mr. Bustos,” and all.
The morning I met him, after he’d run off with my melon, is when I remembered that the first rain came the first day he jogged by my home. Thunderheads, fat with Gulf water, had rolled over the West Mesa that afternoon, and it had poured for hours. It rained every day after that, for two weeks. But again, I didn’t think he brought it. The monsoon comes in early July, it’s true—and it has for most of the twenty years I’ve lived here, in this trailer—but some years it just comes later. And some years, it even rains too much, and the fields flood. People’s homes flood, too. Once, it rained so much that Beth invited her two sisters over—“It has to be three women,” she’d said—and as the clouds gathered thick over the Mesa, they sharpened long knives and cut crosses in the air in the direction of the clouds. And it didn’t rain again until the next July.

The morning after the melon, the jogger returned. Six a.m. I was watching for him this time. I was in my garden, and again the soil was damp from yesterday’s rain. He jogged up, sweaty and breathing heavy in his little gold shorts, and he waved. “Good morning, Mr. Bustos!” he said.

“Good morning, Brian.” I set down my trowel and met him at the fence.

“I just wanted to thank you for the watermelon.” He had little headphones in his ears this morning. A little music device strapped to one arm. He took the headphones out, and they dangled from his sweaty neck. “It was delicious. Perfectly ripe.”

“Would you like another?”

“Oh—no.” His eyes got wide. “But thank you. I was wondering, actually, if I could return the favor sometime.” He paused, wiping his brow, still breathing hard. “Whenever you’re free for dinner, we’d love to have you.”
I stared at him. When was the last time I’d been invited to dinner? Months ago.

“We’d like to get to know our new neighbors, and we thought—well—that you’d be a good place to start!”

My throat felt warm and loose again. I saw that his shoes were caked in mud, and I thought it must be hard to jog like that. All that heavy mud weighing you down.

“When?” I asked.

“Whenever you’re not busy.”

I moved from his shoes to his eyes. Beautiful eyes. “I’m never busy. Not anymore.” Deep blue, rimmed with green. Wet and eager like mine were thirty-five years ago, when from a helicopter, I saw the Indian Ocean for the first time. Like when, at a flea market in Albuquerque, I met Beth. It was my eyes, she always told me, that she’d fallen in love with first. “I always have an open schedule,” I said, smiling. “A luxury of being retired.”

“How about tomorrow, then?”

“What time?”

“Seven. After I get off work.” He paused, grinned. “Some of us don’t have your luxury, yet, Mr. Bustos.” And he jogged off.

I went back to my garden, but a second later, I heard his voice again. “I almost forgot,” the voice said. He was at the fence.

“I was wondering—my wife wanted me to ask you—” he was jogging in place now, “do you get ants in your garden?”

“Not really.”
“Or anywhere else? In your house? I’m talking ants,” and he stuck out a thumb and forefinger like a claw, the fingers three inches apart. “Big suckers. Like they could carry your dog away.”

I had no idea.

“Well,” he said, “we’re from Ohio originally. Maybe everything here just seems bigger.” And he jogged off again.

As I prepared for my dinner with the jogger and his family—The Joggers, I called them in my mind—I thought of their ant problem. Usually, since Mazari sprays pesticides three times a year, the only bugs I see are dead, but we did have ants one summer. Swarms of little black ones. They carried Mazari’s dead bugs—how they weren’t poisoned, themselves, I don’t know—down into the big hill they’d built on the inside of our fence. Beth had said, “They’re not in the garden yet, but they will be.” And so she decided to get rid of them.

“How?” I asked.

“Humiliation,” she said, and she waited until the ants were asleep. The night of a full moon. She’d found a stone, about the size of a football, and took it to the ant hill in her nightdress, barefoot. I watched her from the front porch. It was warm out, sticky, and bullfrogs croaked in the wet fields. She got on her knees in the dirt. With the stone, she pounded on the hill’s entrance three times, and said to the ants, “Pay your rent! Pay your rent! Your rent!” Three nights in a row, but I stopped watching after the first.
“They’re moving away,” she told me the third night. “They have no money, so they’re ashamed.”

If Beth were alive, she would have come to dinner and told the Joggers this story—recommend they try it with their ants. She would have baked a cobbler for the dinner (peach, because it was summer) and worn a summer dress—maybe her light yellow one with little blue flowers, which she wore even when she was old. Even when she was sick.

When the jogger left, the morning he invited me to his home, I drove to town and bought a peach cobbler. Donut holes were on sale, too, so I bought those—but just for me. I took the cobbler home, unwrapped it, and set it on the stove so it looked freshly baked. I went to my bedroom closet and looked for my bolo tie. Beth’s summer dresses are in there. So is her nightgown, next to my old army uniform. When she was sick, she wore the nightgown all the time because, all the time, she was in bed.

The last two weeks she was alive, she wouldn’t let me in bed without permission. “There’s already a man in here with me,” she’d say. An old man with a long, white beard—a ghost, she told me. That’s why I couldn’t see him. “And if you want in, you have to ask him.”

“But it’s my bed, not his,” I said.

“Don’t be rude.” She narrowed her eyes. “Ask him. Say con su permiso.”
And so I did—my face burned red, and I asked him—but he wouldn’t get out. He just scooted over. So those last two weeks, I slept on the couch. I stopped going into the bedroom.

“Don’t be jealous—we’re not sleeping together!” she’d call from bed. “He’s just a friend. He used to live here. Like me, he got sick from the pesticides.”

I swore. I broke my favorite mug, the one that looks like a hot-air balloon and says *Balloon Fiesta*. “For the last time, you’re not sick from goddamn pesticides,” I said—yelled. “That’s not what the doctors say.”

“I’m thirsty,” she said.

But I didn’t bring her water. I know I should have, but I didn’t. When she stopped asking for anything—grew completely quiet—I grew more frightened than angry. I stopped entering the bedroom altogether.

My bolo tie wasn’t in the closet. I found it hanging from the coat rack by the door. I found a couple of dress shirts I used to wear, but when I tried them on, I noticed grease stains on them. That wouldn’t do. I wanted to look my best for the Joggers. I was flattered that I’d been invited to their home—that they wanted to know me better—and I wanted to know them, too, become their good friend and tour guide to the Mesilla Valley. I’d housesit for them when they were away. Drive their daughter to school. Start a new life with new friends, now that Beth was gone.

I drove back to town, to a men’s clothing store—a new store I hadn’t been to before. Nice staff. They told me what shirts were on sale, and I bought two, one red and
one blue. And a pair of nice socks. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d bought a pair of nice socks.

The next morning, I woke up and put on my blue shirt, my socks, and my bolo tie, then went outside to my garden. For an hour, I pulled weeds and watched for the jogger. He came by around six-thirty. I rose to meet him, but he didn’t stop—just kept jogging with his headphones in and called, “See you at seven, Mr. Bustos!” I went back inside and looked at myself in the mirror. The shirt was still crisp and clean, fresh from the package. It smelled like the package. I changed into my red shirt. And later, that afternoon, I changed back into blue. I heated up the cobbler and watched the rain.

I met the jogger’s family. Like him, they’re polite and good-looking. His wife, Candice, looks like Beth did when she was young—trim (like she jogs, too) and petite with short, black hair and a pointed nose—and she cooks a mean pot roast. His daughter, Briana, looks like her father and scampers around the yard, red-haired and full of energy, like a fox.

By the time I arrived, the rain had stopped. They’d pushed two picnic tables together in the backyard. I helped drape them with a white tablecloth. I asked if I could help set the table, and the wife said, “No thank you, Mr. Bustos. Would you like something to drink? Snapple?”

I walked around the yard—almost half an acre, edged with elms and mulberry trees, a stone statue of St. Francis Assisi in an empty flowerbed—and watched the daughter drop a fork in the grass twice, wipe it off, and stick it next to a plate. She set the
table for six. I wanted to ask why, but I kept quiet and just watched. She made me wish I
had a daughter of my own, and I hadn’t wished that for a while. Long ago, the doctors
said Beth and I would never have kids, since my sperm moves in zigzags like jumpy
hummingbirds.

I heard tires on gravel. I peered around the corner and saw a white Tacoma pull
into the driveway. Mazari and a big, blond-haired woman got out, and the Joggers went
out to meet them.

“What a lovely place!” the blond woman said, following the jogger and his wife
into the backyard. “I’ve driven by so many times, but I’ve never seen it up close.” She
wore a flowery tank top and shorts and flip-flops that snapped on her heels. She shoved a
big Tupperware bowl into the wife’s hands. “I made carrot salad.”

“Mr. Bustos! A pleasure to see you!” Mazari called. I went to them and shook
hands. “This is my wife, Janette,” he said. “Janette, Mr. Bustos lives next to one of my
fields, a couple miles from here.” Her hand was soft like his, like a little sponge. She
was his age, with poofy hair and bulldog jowls beneath her chin. I’d heard of Mazari’s
wife—she was a town council member, came from Houston—but somehow I was
surprised to see her. In my mind, Mazari never had a family, a home—he patrolled his
fields endlessly, the Tacoma a white ghost haunting his crops.

“The corn field?” she asked. “Can you believe how short the corn is this year—
this drought?” The jogger stopped next to us with a plate of devilled eggs.

“The onion field,” I said. I wanted to leave. Not because I disliked Mazari, but
because suddenly, with his presence, there was no point in being there. My invitation
was no longer special. With him, I was just a tenant, an old man in a field that wasn’t mine—not a houseguest or a future friend.

“So this is the farmer you told me about?” the jogger asked.

“That’s right,” I said.

“You’ve been talking about me, Bustos?” Mazari slapped me on the back.

“How do you know each other?” I asked.

“I stopped by the other day and welcomed them to the neighborhood,” Mazari said.

“He brought a delicious bunt cake,” the jogger said, and his wife said dinner was ready.

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I made sure not to sit at the table setting with the fork the daughter had dropped. So did the daughter. She sat next to me. When her mother sat in that spot, took the fork, and speared salad with it, I turned to the daughter and winked, and she giggled.

As we ate, we discussed the differences between Ohio and New Mexico—or the others did. I had no right to speak. I was an outsider, the only wifeless man at the table. I arranged vegetables on my plate to make faces, for the daughter to see.

“It took a plumber three days to come to our house after calling him,” the jogger’s wife said. “Can you believe that?” She lit a citronella candle to keep mosquitoes away, and I realized I hadn’t seen mosquitoes in a long time.
“Of course,” said Mazari’s wife. She smacked wetly on pot roast. “A few summers back, one of our barns caught fire—the one in La Union—and it took half an hour for the volunteer fire department to show.”

“And even then, it was just a couple of men in an old pickup,” Mazari said. “No engine. They said the man with the engine was looking for his keys, and when he finally arrived, it was too late. They all just stood in the road smoking cigarettes, watching it burn.” He snatched a deviled egg. “That’s the attitude around here—lazy. No one wants to work.”

“What’d you lose?” the jogger asked.

“Seven tons of corn,” Mazari said. “It smelled like an Orville Redenbacher factory in flames.”

For dessert, we had my cobbler and what was left of the watermelon. The melon was crisp and sweet. We spat seeds on the wet lawn. The daughter and I had a spitting contest, and I taught her to arc the seeds in the air for distance. I was about to excuse myself and go home—the others were still talking without me—when the daughter took me by the hand and said, “Come see the ant.” The sun was setting on the West Mesa.

“Oh, yes!” the jogger said. “Tell us what you think of the ant—if you’ve seen anything like it before.”

“Disgusting,” his wife said, chewing.

“What do you mean, the ant?” Mazari asked.
The daughter led me to the front steps of their house. A big glass jar was there, on the second step, and it was full of clear liquid, with an insect in it. I got close, squinted. “Daddy found it. In the bathtub,” the daughter said. In the fading sunlight, her hair was even redder. Behind me, I heard people rising from the table.

It wasn’t an ant. But I’d seen it before. Same body segments of an ant, proportioned the same, with the same pinchers and legs—but it was three inches long. Slick and skin-colored. A fat abdomen striped with black. Its face was pressed against the glass, and the face looked like a baby’s skull. “What do you think?” said the jogger’s voice from behind me. He, his wife, and the Mazaris stood with us, now. “Preserved it in vodka.”

“Is that real?” said Mazari’s wife.

I didn’t take my eyes off the face. It looked like the faces of encobijados I’d seen in pictures, the blanket peeled back and the skin still clinging tight. Black eyes. “My wife called these niño de la tierra,” I said, “child of the earth. It’s not an ant. Not poisonous. They come with the rain in the summer, at night.” Sometimes Beth found them dead in Mazari’s fields, brought them back and showed them to me. “When they’re alive, if you pinch them, they cry like babies,” she’d tell me.

“It’s a potato bug,” Mazari said.

If Beth had been alive for the dinner, she would have left hours earlier—the moment Mazari arrived. When he’d drive up to our home, she’d grow quiet and disappear inside, stomp around and slam cabinets. “That farmer and his goddamn spraying,” she’d say.
“At least he gives us a warning,” I’d tell her.

“I don’t trust him. Even if he does look like my uncle. Same bones. Same fat face.”

She’d spend the evening sealing our windows with masking tape and stuffing rags under our doors. The tractor would start before sunrise, and we’d stay in bed late, until they killed the engine. And we’d stay inside at least an hour after that. At least when we were retired, we did. When we were both young and working and had to get to our cars, we couldn’t avoid the spraying, so Beth would hand me a bandana, saying, “Cover your mouth. You don’t want to breathe this in.” And we’d sprint out the door, through thick, misty air that burned our eyes.

To Mazari, it was business, I know that. But I should have done something. I should have told him to stop.

I turned to face them—to say what, I don’t know—and locked eyes with the jogger. Like mine, his eyes looked wet, and in the fading light, I imagined he was crying for Beth. Like we shared the same eyes, so he was crying, though he didn’t know why—asking for an answer. “She died last summer,” I said. “From a tumor.” There was movement on the lawn. Rustling grass.

“I’m so sorry,” he said—they both did, he and his wife.

I wanted to crawl into their arms. To live in their home and tell them everything—how the paramedics told me, after I finally called them, Beth was two-days dead. How cold and dry her eyes had been when they took her away. How cold, like ice, the
mattress had been, too—and how it wouldn’t warm up, so I drove it to the desert to burn it, but it wouldn’t burn. How I still slept on the couch. The daughter disappeared, and the Mazaris turned away. “There was an old man,” I said, “in my bed—”

“Do you see this?” Mazari said. Rustling grass. Small shadows.

“An old man—”

“Oh my god,” said Mazari’s wife, and the rustling grew louder.

The jogger and his wife turned, too.

I opened my mouth to speak again, but closed it and fixed my eyes on the lawn. I leaned forward and squinted in the dusk light—and I saw them: black-striped and scurrying through the yard, emerging from the wet soil. A whole swarm of them. The daughter had a stick, and she danced around them in the grass, swatting them and squealing happily.

“I called the exterminator three days ago,” the jogger’s wife said, “and you can see how much good that did.” She laughed. They all did. The daughter’s stick made contact with one of the insects with a thwick sound, and it launched into the air.

“You’ll be waiting at least over the weekend,” said Mazari’s wife. “They never come on the weekend.”

“Do it yourself,” Mazari said. “Get some heptachlor, a half-gallon, and spray it around. These things would be gone like that,” he said, snapping his fingers.

My throat grew loose and warm. I clutched it. I laughed—at nothing at first, because the laughter came like a reflex, and then at this man: at how absurd he was, with this stupid suggestion. His flab and his bunt cake. I imagined him handing a bunt cake to
the jogger in his big baker’s hands. I laughed because, right then, I knew he was as
eridiculous as the rest of us. A sick heat poured from me, and I breathed it back in and it
grew. “Like that!” I said mockingly, and the words filled the night air. “It’ll kill you—
like it killed my wife.”

The daughter whacked bugs and danced. Everyone else stopped and stared.

“Now wait a minute,” Mazari said.

The words felt electric in my mouth. Urgent. Like premonition. They sparked
with every curse Beth had ever hurled at Mazari, every cabinet door she’d slammed,
every moment she’d spent bedridden—like she’d spoken them, not me, standing next to
me in a summer dress. It’ll kill you. That’s why the jogger was here, I knew then: not so
he could be my friend—I don’t deserve friends, given what I’ve done—but so I could tell
him this. “Listen!” I said.

I walked into yard, to the daughter, who blinked at me like a startled lamb.
Insects swarmed over my feet. I grabbed the stick from her and threw it across the lawn.
“Listen,” I said. In the waxing starlight, everyone listened. An insect ran up my trousers
and tickled my skin. I jiggled my leg. I swayed as the ground moved beneath me. “To
get rid of these, all you need is a stone. And the full moon.”
When Sandra left to visit her sister in Tucson for a week—“To see my new niece,” she’d said, “and to get out of this stupid, endless rain”—Carlo decided, come what may, to rearrange the living-room furniture.

It wouldn’t be easy, he knew. The room was like a sliding-block puzzle. Although he had 200 square feet to work with, the space was long and narrow. And its layout—the positions of the doorways and windows, the fireplace and embedded cabinets—limited his options severely. For instance, because it was the room’s focal point, everything had to face the fireplace. And because of the cabinets, the sofa couldn’t fit against the south wall. He measured it the morning Sandra left, smoking a cigarillo in his bathrobe. Eighty inches long. The tape measure rattled like a snake. Ninety inches of wall space between the cabinets and end table, and the cabinet doors were a foot wide, which meant they wouldn’t open with the sofa there. He paced his empty house. *Unless I move the end table*, he thought. He smoked and scribbled notes on a legal pad. *What are the consequences—the pros and cons—of moving that end table?*

Normally, he ignored these things. He let Sandra worry about interior decoration, her color schemes and motifs (reds and browns and barnyard animals in the kitchen, blues and waterfowl in the bathroom), her wind chimes and pottery on the front porch, her tablecloths that shifted with the Oregon seasons, but now, he felt, a change was overdue. In the three years they’d lived together, they’d moved the furniture only once. And even then, it was to replace the old, tweed sofa with a longer, wider, white-leather
monstrosity Sandra sent back to La-Z-Boy an hour after delivery. “This is disgusting,”
she’d told him.

“It’s what we ordered,” he’d said. “Hardwood frame, top-grain leather.”

“I feel like I’m sitting on a cow—an entire cow, all hollowed out and filled with
polystyrene foam.” So they returned it. They hauled the old one back in. They pushed it
back to the old spot, facing the fireplace, beside the end table with a stack of cork
coasters and antique copper lamp—and there it stayed. That was two years ago, just after
they’d moved into the little house on Fifteenth and Taft, a cozy residential corner between
the university and downtown. The location was fine—very quiet, lots of towering firs—
and the house was ideal for the price, with hardwood floors and ample closet space and
big, beautiful windows filling the place with light. “With positive energy,” Sandra
sometimes said. “They keep the chi in constant motion.”

The morning she left, Carlo stopped his pacing and squatted, gargoyle-like, in the
doorway from the foyer. He balanced the legal pad on his knees and sketched furiously
—boxes and thick, dark lines. Rain pummeled the house. When Sandra first saw the
furniture, he knew, she’d be standing exactly where he was now. In a pair of new
earrings, maybe, Navajo silver. Skin bronzed from the desert sun. He’d make sure she
entered the house first, and he’d hang back and watch her, remove his shoes slowly or
pretend to struggle with her luggage. He imagined her gasping, dropping something—
maybe he’d get her a welcome-home gift so she could drop it, a bouquet of white roses or
a mug—and she’d lean against the doorframe for support. Then she’d enter the room,
slowly, behold a space completely reinvigorated, like a beaten-out old rug. Like an emptied lint filter. Chi flowing as it never had before.

He sketched a large box at the top of the page. This was the living room. He sketched seven smaller boxes inside it: the couch, the loveseat, the two recliners and end tables, the coffee table—all in their current positions. Thin rectangles along the big box’s edge were the cabinets and fireplace. Thick, dark lines were windows and doorways. He drew an X in the doorway from the foyer, an arrow pointing to it, wrote “You are here.” He pulled another cigarillo from his bathrobe pocket, fingers shaking. He felt unusual this morning—unfocused. Detached, like his muscles had peeled from his bones. It’s furniture, he thought, striking a match on the floor. No one’s ever gasped or swooned over furniture. She’d probably tell him she liked the new arrangement, leave it for a while, then complain. Like she’d done with the flannel sheets he’d bought last winter—with the leather couch. Like always. Snubbing his every contribution to their home.

He rubbed his scalp. The thought faded, like most of his thoughts had this morning—and he saw her again, wide-eyed and smiling as she surveyed the new furniture arrangement. Trailed her delicate fingers along the recliner cushions. A fire blazed in the hearth behind her—the kind they’d built two years ago when the fireplace was still new: a mound of birch and pine needles. A single match thrown in and—whoof—instant flames. Flat, dingy beetles fled the fire once, like a retreating army, and Sandra leapt to her feet and said, “Help me catch these!”

“How?” he asked. “Shit! They fly!”

“I don’t know—be gentle. Don’t kill them!”
His hand moved mechanically across the legal pad. It drew a second large box beneath the first and went limp. Left it empty. Sweat dripped down his sides, and above him, smoke collected on the ceiling like cobwebs. Of all the possible configurations of all the furniture he owned, there was one—at least one, he knew, some golden wonder of aesthetics—that would reinstate this lost harmony, the thrumming joy and adventure of sharing this home. He’d find it. He listened to the rain. He stared into the box’s blankness: the room of the future. Pure potential.

***

Sandra’s flight had left at 5:55. She’d shaken Carlo awake at 3:30, and they’d driven in the dark and the rain up I-5, sipping coffee from a steel thermos and blasting Alice in Chains with the bass cranked to keep from nodding off, to get her to Portland an hour before boarding. The interstate was strangely empty, even for this early on a Sunday—just a couple of tractor trailers here and there and an orange microbus bleeding smoke on the shoulder in Salem. Wet and dark and empty, like a fish’s throat, he’d thought. One of those long fishes, like a pike or a marlin.

When they got to Portland, it was even wetter, rain so heavy he could barely see through the windshield. He gripped the wheel and squinted at the road. He glanced quickly at Sandra. She looked half-asleep. Her head was tilted back, and she gazed straight ahead, her jaw slightly slack. They hadn’t spoken since they’d left Corvallis—not since he’d backed halfway out the driveway and she’d said, “Stop the car! I forgot my lip balm”; then a mile down the road, when she’d waved the CD at him, asked “This
okay?” and shoved it in the stereo without waiting for an answer. He’d grunted in response.

Six months ago, this silence—an hour of it—would have meant they were fighting. But now, he didn’t know what to think. Sandra, who’d been typically so frank, so confrontational (“For once, honey, refill the fucking ice-cube trays!”), had since the summer grown alarmingly agreeable—docile, even, as though you could push her in any direction, like a floating helium balloon. The night before, when he’d snapped at her for keeping the thermostat at 78, she hadn’t snapped back; she’d just smiled at him, said “You can turn it down if you’d like,” and kept packing. As though, suddenly, her mood wasn’t worth spoiling for anything. Especially not for him.

A soggy, black bag of garbage lay split open on the road, and he swerved to miss it. He cleared his throat. “What’s the forecast for Tucson?” he asked, turning down the music.

She yawned, stretching like a cat. Her black bangs slid across her nose, still limp and tangled from bed. “Hot and sunny,” she said. “Today, I’m doing nothing but reading by the pool.”

“How hot?” he asked.

“Seventy.” She batted the hair from her face. “As cold as December should get.” She looked at him and grinned, her big, white teeth flashing under the passing streetlamps. “I’ll work on my tan for you. Wouldn’t you like that, if I came back nice and tan?”
He nodded. For a moment, he imagined she wasn’t coming back at all. That she’d been agreeable lately because she knew she’d be leaving, returning to the desert forever. He wouldn’t blame her if she did. “You know what I’m doing all day?” he asked.

“Missing me.”


“It’d better be.”

Through the downpour, he scanned the road signs for an airplane icon. “You know, maybe I should go with you after all,” he said—as if she’d invited him in the first place. He glanced at her face to gauge her reaction. “I could use hot and sunny for a few days.”

She laughed—a genuine, deep-bellied laugh. “You’d dry up,” she said. “There’s not enough gloom for you.”

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All the way home, it kept raining. Still no one on the road. Nothing on the radio, either, but evangelists and Dick Clark playing those same, old, Everly Brothers songs Carlo couldn’t stand (*Not enough gloom*, he thought). The sun had risen sluggishly at his left, behind a thin film of clouds, exposing expanses of evergreens and tree farms, barren grass fields and vineyards in blue-grey light. He’d crawl back into bed and sleep all day once he got home. Now that Sandra was gone, he could do that. He could sleep as long
as he wanted, cook what he wanted, drink and smoke and see friends when he wanted—anything. He’d grill a steak for dinner. Bloody. Or barhop with Ben, check out the new cantina in Southtown—Rita Fajita’s, “Home of the World-Famous Half-gallon Glass,” the banner out front read. He’d be down for that. Ben had suggested smoking together. He’d be down for that, too.

Two weeks earlier, he’d planned on spending this time with Meredith. He’d still been sleeping with her then—not too often, maybe once a week—and he’d imagined taking her to his place when Sandra was gone. He’d envisioned building a fire. Making spiced wine. Sitting on the sofa, where she’d laugh as he joked about their coworkers, as he always did—Janet and her floral-print muumuu, snaggletooth Randal, who almost ate his own face as he talked. Meredith made an excellent audience. And she had the body of a Russian ballerina. She had a boyfriend, too, who’d finally proposed to her two weeks before Sandra left. Then she quit her job. Left without a word. Left a hollow spot in Carlo’s weekly schedule—in his gut, like an abandoned ant hive.

When he got home, he didn’t go back to bed. On his way to the bedroom, he paused, gazed out the living-room window into the side yard. Rain hammered the glass and the sweetgum by the fence, dribbled from its spiky sea-urchin fruit. The furnace kicked on with a snarl. The wall clock ticked, and he turned to it—a round, wooden wall clock hanging above the living-room mantel, above a row of pictures of Carlo and Sandra at the coast, a glass bowl of matchbooks, a couple of fat, white candles that smelled of coniferous trees. He stared at that clock for a moment. He glanced at his watch and then back. 7:03.
Other than the furnace and the rain-patter, the only sound in the house was the clock’s ticking. The ticking was too loud, he decided. And the clock was too—something else—too wooden, maybe. Too round. The glass bowl on the mantel was round, too, as were the candles and a couple of the picture frames. Too much roundness in one place—that was the problem. He took the clock down. After a couple of tries, he found a better place for it, on the opposite wall, above a wooden bookcase filled with books he and Sandra hadn’t touched since college. Then he went searching for his bathrobe and measuring tape.

According to his calculations, Carlo spent more time in the living room than anywhere else in the house, reading or entertaining guests or snuggling—she called it snuggling, not him; he called it falling asleep to the radio—with Sandra. In fact, when he thought of his house, he usually thought of this room first, of a stranger’s first impression of the place. And for the most part, he thought it was a good impression. Cozy. The ceiling was low. The fireplace was brick, and the big, beautiful windows faced south and east, with views of the front porch and side yard. On the walls were framed photos and paintings, most of the desert, where Sandra had grown up, all yellow and brown and boxy. Carlo had taken the photos. When they’d visited Sandra’s family two summers earlier—her sister in Tucson, her mom and dad in Phoenix—she’d asked him to bring his camera equipment and photograph deserty things: mountain ranges and black-eyed Susans, saguaros, goldfinches perched on cacti, tumbleweeds rolling across empty highways. “So I can look at them when we’re home and feel warm,” she’d said.
This was the first time he’d met her family. He’d been surprised at how similar they all looked, even her mom and dad. All were light and small-boned—or hollow-boned, like birds—with tan skin and thin, dark hair. Desert people. Maybe more like geckos than birds. They moved quickly, from one spot of shade to the other. When they went thrift-shopping in downtown Tucson where Sandra’s sister lived, they practically sprinted from store to store, and Carlo had to work to keep up.

Now, in his living room, Carlo felt the history in each piece of furniture. The old tweed sofa he’d inherited from a college roommate after graduation. He’d had good times on that couch. On warm, sunny days, they’d dragged it outside, onto the front lawn. He’d passed out on it piss-drunk. He’d gotten laid on it—twice—though he never told Sandra. That was before he’d known her. Now, they used it mainly for naps and enjoying fires in the winter. For snuggling.

They had a beige fabric loveseat, too, to the right of the couch, against the window and facing the two recliners at the couch’s left. One recliner matched the loveseat (a set from the Portland IKEA), and the other was brown leather, a gift from Sandra’s parents. Both were separated by a wooden end table, which matched the table by the couch and the coffee table in the middle of the room—a set they’d bought from his coworker Mack, who’d sold his things and moved with his wife and kids to New Zealand, whose office Meredith moved into.

The morning Sandra left—after he moved the wall clock, after he measured and sketched every piece of furniture—Carlo switched around the recliners. That was it.
Nothing complicated. He thought the brown leather would look better next to the tweed couch. And the beige chair, in its place, would complement the dark brick of the fireplace. It took him maybe five minutes, shoving them out and away and into their new spots. He backed up to the window and sat on the loveseat to get a better look. Still, it didn’t feel right. The leather chair was too close to the couch—how did he lose two inches?—and if he moved the couch out, he’d disrupt the walking space between it and the west wall. He was exhausted from having woken up so early, but he felt fidgety, too, a kind of tension in the blood—a sensation he imagined toads experienced before hibernating or elephant seals felt before gathering on wet, rocky inlets to breed.

He switched the loveseat and recliners. He stood in the hallway to survey the arrangement. Now the living room looked awkward, like it was trying too hard. He moved the couch a foot to the left. Pushed the bookcase into the hallway. Put an end table on each side of the loveseat. Returned the clock to its original place on the mantel, then took it down again, took out the batteries, and shoved it in a drawer in the kitchen.

Eventually, he gave up on planning. He sensed cohesion by smell, by dust and Old English. By sound: the scrape of table legs on hardwood. His skin grew responsive, raw and red, and every texture chafed: the furniture leather, polyester and tweed, his cotton polo. He couldn’t stop thinking of Sandra, of her reaction to each new configuration.

Around one in the afternoon, his cell rang, and he wrenched it from his pocket. He expected Sandra—but it was Ben. He ignored it. When did she land? Shouldn’t she contact him, tell him she was alright? If the loveseat wasn’t flush against the southeast
corner, would she mind? By 2:00, the living room looked like it belonged to someone else. Everything was in a different place—though, Carlo knew, not in the right place—and he fell asleep on the couch, which was shoved at an angle against the windows where the loveseat had been, and slept until the next morning, when he got up for work.

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For the past couple of years, Carlo had been working for the Oregon State agronomy department. It wasn’t the most exciting job, but it was the steadiest he’d had. For eight hours a day, he sat and stared through a microscope at soil samples and seeds and mulch and took photos, with a digital camera attachment, for the scientists to analyze. In college, he’d studied to be a photographer—a journalistic photographer, he’d hoped—but quickly found after graduation that Northwest magazines and newspapers weren’t hiring. Not people like him, inexperienced with few connections. But still, he took photos when he could. In the walk-in closet at home were stacks of milk crates crammed with pictures and packets of negatives.

When he and Sandra had first started seeing each other, she’d been his favorite subject. He must have used two dozen rolls of film just on her—Sandra collecting pine cones in the woods; Sandra eating a plum, folding a towel, cooking oatmeal in Carlo’s green flannel shirt; Sandra naked in bed. Especially Sandra naked in bed. Her hips and her thighs inspired him relentlessly, as did her nipples—“like little dried apricots,” he’d told her once, and she laughed and told him not to say that again. If she’d pose for him, he’d snap pictures until he was too aroused to snap pictures and they’d make love until she wanted to pose again. All afternoon. Often. “What are you doing with these
“photos?” she sometimes asked as they lay together on the mattress, the sheets and pillows flung to the floor.

“I’m making a calendar,” he said once, “a different nipple for every month.” And another time, “I’m publishing a coffee-table book.”

“A pop-up book?” she asked.

“We’ll keep one for this year’s Christmas card,” he said.

The photo sessions became less frequent until they’d stopped altogether. He and Sandra hadn’t spent an afternoon making love in almost a year.

Some days, on his lunch break, he’d walk upstairs to see if Sandra was around, though she usually wasn’t. She worked two floors up in the same building, with the ornithologists. Most days, she was hiking in the field with scientists, where she tagged birds and set up webcams above nests to monitor hatchlings—a job infinitely more interesting than his, though she complained about it constantly. She’d come home from work caked in dirt and sweat and, yanking off her hiking boots, announce, “I’m so overqualified for this crap.” With a master’s in biology, she wanted to work in the field, not as an assistant but as a researcher. She’d applied to other universities, to the BLM of Idaho, Wyoming and Maryland—and he’d said he would follow wherever she went, though in truth, he was happy she hadn’t found another job. He liked the Northwest fine. He’d always lived here. It was his natural habitat.

The day after Sandra left, work dragged on forever. Having slept so long the previous day, he felt rested, yet the edginess was still there. He looked up from his
microscope and at the clock constantly. He took his breaks early. He went to the
bathroom even when he didn’t have to go, and by the end of the day he’d meticulously
organized his desk, setting his microscope and data sheets—though he hadn’t used them
once—at right angles, his samples in neat little rows. By 4:59, he was out the door. For
the rest of the evening, he rearranged the furniture, retrying all the combinations from the
previous night.

Around 9:30, his cell rang. Ben again. He ignored it. Around 10, he went to
Target and bought a new coffee table to see if it added anything, but it didn’t—so he
taped the receipt to it and set it on the front porch.

He had a couple glasses of wine. He sat on the couch (now in the middle of the
room, where the coffee table once was) and imagined a webcam hidden in the sweetgum
tree outside, filming through the window. What would Sandra think if she saw him
moving the furniture like this, watching poolside on her laptop? What would the
ornithologists think? *Observe how the male nests while his mate is away,* they’d
probably say and scribble down notes. Did the males usually nest? From what he
remembered Sandra saying, male birds did at least half the work.

A while ago—maybe the December before—she’d told him about a pair of bald
eagles her supervisors were studying with a webcam. There were hatchlings in the nest,
and the father eagle was a first-time father. The mother was more experienced, and she
knew to curl her talons when she entered the nest so as not to injure the brood. The father
didn’t. “Over the course of a week,” Sandra told him, “he accidentally killed every
hatchling in the nest. This doesn’t usually happen with eagles, but this bird was a slow
learner.” Her eyes watered. “He killed the last of his babies today. I saw it—we all did, everyone huddled around the computer. The room fell dead silent and I cried and cried.”

A brood. He and Sandra had talked—what seemed like years ago—about getting married and having children. But now, he hadn’t the slightest clue what she wanted.

“Let’s wait another two or three years and see how we feel,” she’d said the last time he brought it up.

“I promise I’ll curl my talons,” he’d said.

She’d looked away.

He wanted to blame her for driving him to Meredith. “An act of sexual frustration,” he wanted to call it—a reaction to her indifference. But in truth, he’d cheated on her even when their relationship had been strong. Not for any one reason he knew of. The first time, last September, because he and Meredith had been drunk and it made him feel good to be wanted, to be attractive to someone new. And when Sandra got aggressive—and then passive—soon enough he needed this other woman. He did push-ups for her. Bought her bracelets. And did Sandra know? Impossible. If she’d confronted him for half-empty ice-cube trays, she never would have let this slide.

He imagined a webcam in the sweetgum again. What would Sandra do if she saw him with Meredith in their living room, humping on the couch in front of a roaring fire? If Meredith hadn’t gotten engaged? He went to the kitchen and poured another glass of wine. Lit up a cigarillo. She wouldn’t stay in Arizona. She’d come home and kill him.
The next day after work, Ben showed up at his door. Carlo had wanted nothing more than to move furniture, but he couldn’t tell Ben to leave, so they drank whiskey sours in the living room. Carlo sat in the leather recliner. Ben sprawled on the loveseat, his long, lanky limbs extended in every direction. Carlo had moved the furniture back to its original configuration—everything but the fabric recliner, which he’d moved to the front porch that morning, next to the new coffee table he planned on returning.

They talked at length, mostly about Ben’s two favorite subjects: *M*A*S*H* and his lovely young fiancée, Chloe, whom he likened to a Top Gun-era Nicole Kidman, “but with brown hair—better hair” whenever he had the chance. He and Chloe had been engaged for years, as long as Carlo had known him, the wedding date always sliding further into the future. “How’s Sandra?” Ben finally asked. “How’s Tucson treating her?”

Carlo crunched his ice. “I don’t know. I haven’t talked to her since she left.”

Ben jerked himself upright on the loveseat, moving it forward an inch, which made the hair on Carlo’s back prickle. “You haven’t called? Do you know if she’s alive—that she hasn’t been hit by a train or something?”

He laughed into his glass. “It’s a battle of wills. A game.”

“Is she leaving you?”

“No.”

Ben paused. “If I was her, I’d leave you.” He looked sternly into Carlo’s eyes. Before, he’d been sympathetic about Meredith. Promised he wouldn’t tell anyone—not even Chloe.
Carlo sat up in his seat. He looked sternly back at him. Imagined head-butting him, baring his teeth like an aggressive baboon.

“I’m just fucking with you,” Ben said.

They smoked—not weed, as Carlo had expected, but salvia. Ben loaded the pipe.

“How this stuff is great,” he said. Carlo leaned forward. It looked like mulch he photographed at work, like a scoop of forest floor. “It makes you feel like you’re a page in a book.”

“A book,” Carlo said. “Is it open or closed?”

Ben paused, examining the pipe. “It depends on how much you smoke,” he said and fished in his pockets for a lighter.

Carlo smoked a good amount. He sat on the sofa. Ben sat cross-legged on the floor with his back against the loveseat, swaying back and forth and staring at the reflection of light in the hardwood, like some kind of waterfowl—like a great blue heron, Carlo finally decided, scanning a pond for fish. Carlo couldn’t speak. He couldn’t move, either, and felt as though the air had grown heavy as lead and was pressing him into the couch, fusing him with it until its tweed upholstery and his skin became one. Carlo the sofa-man. Sofa the man-couch. He could feel the texture of the air, too, as it pressed him down, and it felt rough and uneven. That’s what’s wrong with the air: It’s uneven. He thought of chi. He needed to make it—the air, the chi, the positive energy—smooth and soft.
Ben hummed as he swayed, and Carlo felt himself swaying, too. *If Sandra were a page in a book, which page would she be—and in what book?* Probably a page in some novel he’d read in college, one that seems simple at first with its spare descriptions of drinking and game-hunting and beautiful women but, upon closer inspection, holds a depth of complexity below its surface. One Carlo once thought he understood but in reality didn’t. Not because he couldn’t—it was never because you couldn’t, he realized with the sense of hot oxygen filling his ears, his sinus cavity, *but because I won’t.*

*Because it’s too much effort.*

The fourth day, he stayed home from work. He got up early with a hangover and called in sick and pushed furniture around his living room all day. He threw his legal pad in the garbage. When the positive energy flowed, he’d know. He’d feel it: a metaphysical, ancient-Chinese wind tunnel exploding over the area rug or down the hall in a massive surge of light. Around noon, he polished off the whiskey he and Ben had been drinking. He fell asleep an hour later and woke up around dinnertime and moved furniture until midnight. With a throbbing headache, he called Sandra, but she didn’t answer—*what time is it in Arizona?*—so he went to bed.

The next day, Carlo stacked the pieces of furniture on top of each other—couch, love seat, and coffee table in one stack; recliner, recliner, and end table in another. *Like totem poles,* he thought, and he took pictures of them.

On Friday, he pushed all the furniture—threw all the pictures and books and everything in his living room—outside onto the front lawn. From the porch, he watched
the rain soak it through. He watched the neighbors drive by slowly in their minivans and gawk, returning home from work or the store. A couple of college guys in gym shorts and cotton hoodies (why they never wore raincoats, he didn’t know) walked by, stopped, and asked, “You giving this stuff away?”

“Sure,” he said, and they grabbed the antique copper lamp.

After a while, Carlo went inside. In his empty living room, he sat in the middle of the hardwood floor. He closed his eyes and lay back slowly, spreading his arms and legs wide, touching nothing. The furnace clicked on. He’d considered emptying the walk-in closet next. All those crates of photos. He thought of Sandra.

Two summers ago, she’d first become shy of the camera. He’d be lucky to snap a picture of her at the coast or in the woods—and only then when she was in a particularly good mood. “Don’t hide your face,” he’d say, “and smile. You have the most photogenic smile on the planet. You could be in dental-floss ads.”

She’d thrust her head forward and look him in the eyes until he put the camera down. This was, since they’d been together, the first dramatic change in her—from playful to stern. And then, later, from stern to indifferent. Like water turning to ice, and then ice to steam.

“Just look natural, then,” he’d say, still trying. “Pretend you don’t know what a camera is—like one of your spotted owls or ospreys.”

Now, rain pummeled the house, and he listened to it. He felt kneaded, swept-over like a rock at the bottom of a rushing creek. Even if she’d never pose for him again,
Carlo would change. Whatever she wanted, he’d be it. Wherever she wanted to move, he’d go—to Maryland, to the desert. They’d start fresh.

When Sandra came home—and she would come home—before he’d let her say a word, he’d lead her here, to this spot, and have her lie down like this and feel it. The positive energy. It was finally flowing.
Routine Maintenance

Kyle didn’t know who to blame for the scalding water in the baptismal font, his dad or himself, though he was sure his dad blamed him. The moment Pastor Ted dipped a toe in the steaming pool and leapt back, crying “Aye caramba!” into his microphone headset, Kyle heard a low moan, like a buffalo’s, rumble from his dad’s throat. Without turning, he could feel the look of shock and condemnation, too—a look his dad had been practicing lately, a grimace and a knotted forehead, like a reaction to an offensive joke—that seemed to accuse him of planning this all along. As though he’d not only boiled the pastor alive, but had thrown in potatoes and diced onions, as well.

It was true: the morning before, he’d cranked the church’s water heater from *Warm* to *Hot*—but he hadn’t expected this. The act had been impulsive, even childish, and if he’d expected anything, it was church members burning their hands at the sink. A petty kind of retribution. As he sat in the front pew, like anyone else, Kyle gawked in disbelief at the spectacle.

It had started during the sermon. Heat and humidity had seeped from the stage, which Kyle had never felt before. And the sermon had been about Jesus’ baptism, the pastor commenting on how cool and relieving the Jordan must have been in the Near East, which was fitting. After that, everything happened quickly. Pastor Ted and the Harvest band shoved the trap kit and amps and microphones to the back of the stage. Congregants in swimsuits lined up along the side wall. Pastor Ted, clad in trunks, a YMCA tee hugging his paunch, tugged open the trapdoor and staggered back as steam
poured out like theatrical smoke at a rock concert. “This happens sometimes,” he said.
“We keep the hatch closed for the service and steam builds up.” And he stepped in.

Kyle’s dad grabbed him tightly by the arm and dragged him from the pew, past the laughing congregation, past Pastor Ted hooting and flapping his arms like a startled duck onstage, and through the door into the kitchen. He didn’t say a word. He flung open the pantry and grabbed a pair of orange five-gallon buckets and tossed one to Kyle, then charged out the back exit, into the foot of December snow.

For a moment, Kyle stood motionless in the kitchen, the bucket dangling from his fingers. His dad’s glare, his silence, made Kyle wish he’d done worse. Something dramatic enough to make his dad actually scold him, so he could talk back and tell him it was his fault, too. That he’d driven him to it. The whole church had. He shivered. Outside the open door, snow fell lightly, as it had for nearly two weeks. He could hear Pastor Ted through the wall. “Forget baptism by water,” the pastor said, “This is baptism by fire!” And the congregation laughed.

The morning before, over pancakes, his dad had said, “Everyone should know how to flush a water heater. It’s routine maintenance. Like checking the oil in your car.” He dipped his knife into the tub of butter. “This’ll be good practice.” He’d said the same thing in November about cleaning rain gutters, in August about lubricating firearms. In August, he’d driven Kyle, despite his protests, thirty miles east of Colorado Springs, into the grasslands to shoot targets. “Survival skills,” he’d called it.
Lately, he’d been dragging Kyle to church to do odd jobs, on weekdays and Saturdays. Like many of the church members, his dad volunteered around Harvest—pulling weeds, waxing the floor, polishing candle holders, anything—but since he’d been elected church elder a few months earlier, he’d taken to these chores with a keener sense of duty. Over the summer, he’d repainted the church bathroom, though no one had asked him to. In early autumn, he’d hired a retrofitting crew to re-insulate the building, which he’d paid for himself. Now Harvest held heat like a thermos.

Kyle broke his egg yolk and watched it bleed into his pancakes. “This isn’t how I wanted to spend my Saturday,” he said. Most Sundays, he went to church, and every Tuesday night, he went to youth group—which was fine. But two days a week at Harvest was enough. He had other things to do. He’d told Miranda he’d meet her at noon today, to go ice skating.

“It’ll take an hour, maybe two,” his dad said.

“I have plans with the guys,” Kyle lied.

His dad straightened his back. “Tell them you’re busy,” he said and took his plate to the kitchen.

Harvest Evangelical’s electric water heater was forty-four years old and still functioning. “Something plumbers say is impossible,” Kyle’s dad told him proudly as they navigated icy streets to the church, the pickup fishtailing twice on Cheyenne Avenue. “Most heaters last ten years, fifteen tops. They collect pounds of sediment and corrode until the water looks like iced tea or the bottom drops out and the building floods.”
Plastic tubes crack and leak, he told him. Bacteria builds up and makes the water smell like rotten eggs. This wasn’t a high-quality heater, either—a generic model someone had bought on sale from Sears during the Johnson administration, five-feet tall and egg-white, stuck in the far right corner of the church basement.

Like the rest of the building, the basement had been retrofitted, but it was freezing when Kyle and his dad descended the steps, so they kept their parkas on. Kyle carried a garden hose, his dad a tool kit, and they flipped on the light and found the machine behind a wall of crates and boxes of cleaning materials. It was stained and caked in grime, wrapped in pink, fluffy insulation. It towered like a colossal, prize-winning gourd, copper pipes snaking to the walls like tendrils.

“This thing hasn’t been serviced in years,” Kyle’s dad said as he swiped dust from the tank with a finger. He set his toolbox down. “First, we need to kill the circuit breaker. We don’t want to electrocute ourselves.”

Kyle nodded. They’d be in the basement longer than two hours, he knew. Two and a half, maybe—three. His dad would find another chore for them, if flushing the heater went quickly.

His dad pulled a flashlight from his parka, turned it on, and handed it to Kyle. He crossed the room to the fuse box by the stairs. “Alright,” he said, and the room went dark.

Kyle shined the flashlight from one end of the basement to the other. He’d never set foot in here before. Crates and boxes were stacked everywhere, holding hymnals, musty board games, croquet and badminton equipment for picnics, holiday decorations.
He spotted the supplies for Harvest’s annual Interactive Nativity: a makeshift wooden manger cradling black garbage bags full of robes and false beards. Soon, he knew, Pastor Ted would drag the manger up the basement steps and dust it off. He’d give his speech on the four C’s: “Cooking, casting, costumes, and critters.” He’d say, “There’s going to be live animals, and we need some people to take care of them. We need a Mary, a Joseph, three Wise Men, and some shepherds.”

“You see that spigot sticking out?” Kyle’s dad said. “Screw the hose on there. We’ll run it outside through the window.”

Kyle knelt down and screwed the hose to the drain valve at the bottom of the tank. Black grime stuck to his hands.

His dad took the flashlight. “Now we close the shut-off valve to the cold inlet.”

Soon, his dad would sign the two of them up to play shepherds, just as he’d done last year—just as his mom had done the four years before that, before she’d moved to Kansas City. The first year Kyle had been a shepherd was the first year of the Interactive Nativity. He’d been eleven then. He dreaded it now, but then he’d been thrilled by the whole ordeal, standing ankle-deep in the snow of downtown Colorado Springs, waving a crook and kneeling to the Red Cross practice dummy they’d used as baby Jesus. That year, they’d thrown things together at the last minute. Kyle wore cotton balls glued to his face for a beard and a blue bathrobe with his down jacket zipped over it. They’d borrowed a couple of white, fluffy goats that looked vaguely like sheep and a palomino horse named Horatio, who went berserk when they tied him to a stop sign.
That year, Kyle’s mom had played Mary. She’d looked just like the Virgin’s image he’d seen in Sunday-school coloring books—stoic and slender, a long face with delicate features framed by a white, cotton shawl hanging to her waist. His mom wore a long, periwinkle dress, too, and leggings, snow boots, a parka, woolen mittens. When people walked past, she’d press her mittened hands together as if in prayer, or she’d lean over the manger and caress baby Jesus’ rubber cheeks. “My favorite part of this nativity,” she said to Kyle, “is when the children visit.”

It was his favorite part, too. Adults usually hurried past, but little kids stared at Jesus and the animals with eyes wide and shiny like linoleum tiles.

She said, “It seems like they’re thinking, This is it. This is the way it was when Jesus was born.”

Four years later, his parents separated. His mom left the state and joined a Christian jazz quartet, played the clarinet. She moved in with a trumpeter named Paul. Whenever she called, she said she was doing well. “I know you’re confused,” she told Kyle during their first phone conversation. “But understand that here, making music with this man, I’ve come closer to God. That can happen when you meet someone. Unexpectedly.”

After the call, his dad had come up behind him, put his hand on Kyle’s shoulder. “We have to be careful because the devil knows our weaknesses,” he said. “Your mother’s is bebop.”

When Kyle’s mom left, his dad kept himself as occupied as possible. He took on extra shifts at the fire department, applied for the position of church elder, fired guns in
the prairie weekend afternoons, returning with paper targets blown to shreds. He did odd jobs.

As they squatted in the church basement, Kyle’s dad shoved the hose in Kyle’s hands. “I need you to run this through the window,” he said. “Then go outside and throw it in a snow bank or something, somewhere away from the building.”

By now, Kyle had resigned to follow orders—quickly, to move things along. He cracked the window and slid the hose through then tramped up the steps, down the hallway and past the chapel office, outside into the falling snow. He grabbed the hose and stretched it as far as he could and tossed it in a depression in the ground. “Okay,” he said through the window, and his dad cranked open the drain valve. The hose expanded, sputtered, and choked. Kyle bent over the end of it and watched as thick, black sediment hissed steamily out like waste from a large intestine, boiling hot, melting the snow down to the dead grass below. It came in grainy chunks sometimes. After a while, hot water emptied from the tank completely and cold water took its place.

“Come on back,” Kyle’s dad called. “I have more to show you.”

On the way, he passed the chapel office. He heard Pastor Ted through the door, rolling around in his desk chair and humming to himself. “Good Vibrations,” it sounded like. Kyle hurried by. Quietly. If the pastor heard him, Kyle knew, his morning would be shot—even more so than it was now. The office door would fly open in an instant, and he’d be trapped, interrogated, most likely, as he’d been the Sunday before. The sounds stopped abruptly, and he bolted down the basement steps.
The previous Sunday, Pastor Ted had ripped six inches of packing tape from a roll and slapped it lengthwise onto Kyle’s forearm, grinning. “You remember the three levels of temptation?” he asked.

Kyle stared down at his lap where his arm lay. He rotated his wrist. The tape tugged at his skin, as if his skin had shrunk in the heat of the chapel office. The re-insulation had worked wonders. It felt eighty degrees in there, and the air was damp from the snow melting off boots and dripping from the parkas hung from hooks on the back wall. The air smelled of algae and feet.

“Think of Jesus in the desert,” the pastor said.

Kyle thought of the Everglades. The tape and the moisture on his skin made him feel like a swamp creature. Something with scales or an exoskeleton. “Is this from last Sunday’s sermon?”

“Yes.”

“I wasn’t here last Sunday.”

“I know.” Pastor Ted put both hands on the desk behind him and leaned back, thrusting out his paunch. It was a late-thirties paunch, a new development from the past year, and it seemed to Kyle that the pastor was still learning how to carry it. Like he’d learned to wear his late-thirties hairline. “You were sleeping in.”

“I was at a friend’s house. We were working on a diorama for class.”
“What class?”

“English.”

“A diorama of what?”

“King Lear, Act IV. The scene where Gloucester’s eyes get gouged out.”

Pastor Ted grinned a big, wet grin. “Carnal temptation, visual temptation, and prideful temptation,” he said and cleared his throat. “When Jesus turned thirty, the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil.”

The packing tape reflected the orange oval of a desk lamp and the square of the office window, blue-grey light filtering through the snowfall outside. Kyle glanced out the window. It had been snowing for three days. Eleven inches.

“Prideful temptation was when the devil dared Jesus to prove he was the son of God by commanding the angels. Visual temptation was when he showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offered them in exchange for submission. Carnal temptation, though,” Pastor Ted said, “is what I mainly want to talk to you about.” He leaned forward and grabbed a corner of the tape and jerked hard, ripping it off.

Kyle recoiled and clutched his arm. It burned, damp with sweat.

The pastor grinned. The tape dangled from his fingers, covered in black hairs. “Carnal temptation was when Jesus was famished and the devil said to him, ‘If you are the son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’”

He squinted at the tape. Was there skin on it, too?
“And Jesus replied, ‘One does not live on bread alone.’” Pastor Ted paused.

“You know all about carnal temptation, don’t you, Kyle?”

“I don’t know.”

“That hurt, right?”

“I think I’m bleeding a little.”

“Do you know why I called you to my office?”

“Because I missed church last Sunday.”

Pastor Ted straightened up and sucked in his paunch. “Because we’re worried about you. I want you to answer me truthfully: are you in a sexual relationship?”

“We?”

“Your father asked me to talk to you. Who’s this Melinda girl you’ve been seeing?”

Kyle paused. “Miranda.” He’d been seeing her for only a couple of weeks. A few dates. He thought only his friends and the youth pastor knew they were together.

“Let me show you something.” The pastor grabbed Kyle’s arm and slapped the tape on the same spot and ripped it off.

Kyle winced.

“Did that hurt as much as the first time?”

“No.”
Pastor Ted slapped on the tape and ripped it off again. “How about this time?”

“Stop it.”

“Not that bad, right?”

Kyle was silent.

“You’re too young to be having sex, Kyle. You’re going to have sex with this girl for a while, until you break up. And when you break up, it’s going to hurt. A lot. Like the first time I pulled off the tape. Then you’ll move on to another girl and have sex with her until you break up—only this time, it won’t hurt as bad because it won’t mean as much. And then you’ll move on. Eventually you’ll be desensitized. The more sexual relationships you have, the less those relationships will mean.”

“Why do you think I’m having sex?” He hadn’t been—not yet.

“Well, we know you weren’t making a diorama with a friend last Sunday.”

In the church basement, Kyle tugged the garden hose back through the window. He considered his meeting with the pastor. It hadn’t made sense—how could his dad have told Ted about Miranda? He knew next to nothing about Kyle’s personal life.

His dad pulled a withered, metal rod from the water heater. “See this?” he asked. He shined the flashlight on it. It was bent and shriveled like a dried-out celery stalk.

“This is the sacrificial anode. It’s made of zinc, which rusts quickly so the tank doesn’t
have to.” He grinned. “We could call it the Jesus rod. We sacrifice it so the heater can be saved.”

“Dad,” Kyle said. He squatted next to him.

“Yes?”

He couldn’t recall the last time he’d confronted his dad about anything. Not since he was fifteen, maybe, when he’d accused him of driving his mom away. His dad hadn’t spoken—just swiped the fruit basket off the dining-room table and left the house, didn’t come back until the next morning. Now, though, Kyle felt entitled to a discussion. To answers. His life was the issue, after all. “Last Sunday, I met with Pastor Ted,” he said.

“That’s right.” His dad’s face was expressionless. Saggy around the eyes.

“How did he know about Miranda?”

“I told him.”

“How did you know?”

His dad set down the rod. “I was driving past the Tastee-Freez one day. I saw you two walk out, holding hands. So I asked Ted to do some research.”

“But I’ve only told a few of my friends.”

“A few of your friends go to Harvest,” he said. “You told the youth pastor, too, right?”

Kyle gripped his thighs. In youth group, the teens always talked about relationships, asked questions and voiced concerns—promised confidentiality among
members. He felt his hands sweat through his jeans. Kyle wouldn’t have told them anything if he’d known they’d talk. “You didn’t have to send me to the pastor,” he said quietly, trying to keep his voice steady. “You can trust me. I won’t do anything stupid.”

“Of course you will.” His dad stood up. “You don’t know enough not to.”

Kyle stood up, too, stumbled over the hose, and locked eyes with his dad. “You want to meet her?” he asked, harshly, as if it were a threat. “She’s a nice girl.”

His dad picked up his toolbox. “We’re done. Help me take our things back to the truck.” And he walked up the stairs.

Kyle listened to his dad’s footsteps pound down the hall, the chapel door open and close. As hard as he could, he kicked a box labeled *Harvest Home Videos: 1987-91*, releasing a cloud of dust into the air. He kicked the hose—and when he bent down to pick it up, paused suddenly, listened again: from above came a faint rumbling sound, like a bowling ball rolling down a lane. Pastor Ted’s desk chair.

Kyle imagined shoving the chair, with Ted in it, down the basement steps. He imagined bursting into youth group on Tuesday and hurling the Scripture Sculptures they’d been painting against the wall. He felt no desire to go ice skating now. His head ached. His mouth was dry and tasted faintly of maple syrup. *The taste of betrayal*, he decided. On his way out, in thoughtless fury, he cranked up the water heater.

The day of the baptism, Kyle followed his dad out the back exit. He’d left his parka, hat, and gloves inside, and the cold bit at his skin. His dad trotted up to a snow bank, bent his knees, and, with a smooth, sweeping arc to the ground, filled his bucket
with snow. Kyle followed suit. They ran back into the chapel and up onstage, where they dumped the snow into the steaming pool. “That’ll work,” said Pastor Ted, and they ran out to get more. Other congregants got up to help. Some grabbed orange buckets from the pantry; some found mop pails and saucepans and large Tupperware containers—and they all ran back and forth, scooping snow and unloading it into the font.

Pastor Ted killed time onstage. “This is why some churches do sprinklings,” he said into his headset, shaking his head in mock solemnity. The church members in the pews laughed. Along the side wall, people still stood in their swimsuits. They hugged themselves and rubbed their arms as cold air poured in from the back.

As Kyle dumped snow in the pool, he saw his friend from youth group, Lenny, standing in the baptism line. Lenny’s arms were crossed and goose-bumpy, his nipples poking out, knifelike, from his white undershirt. In the pews, his parents and grandparents, dressed up for the occasion, weren’t laughing; his mom bent down, shoving her camera back into her knapsack. Most of these people, Kyle thought—not just Lenny and his family, but everyone in line—must be bitter that their ceremony had become a spectacle. That their baptism would feel like a hot bath. When they drained the font, a ring of dirt might even be left along the waterline. Like a ring of washed-away sins. Kyle tried pretending they deserved it—for betraying his trust, for banishing him to Pastor Ted’s office—but he couldn’t.

He jogged back outside. He couldn’t blame any of these people for the scalding water—not Pastor Ted, not his dad. It was his fault alone. He’d lost composure and turned the heater’s dial. He’d skipped church two Sundays earlier to be with Miranda.
Her parents had been gone for the day, and she and Kyle had spent all morning on her bed—making out, slipping their hands up each others’ shirts. That morning, Miranda opened her blouse, exposing her breasts to him. They were warm and round—softer than he’d imagined.

Since his mom left, Kyle had had wanted to find someone like she had—someone who could bring him closer to God. He’d never felt closer to Him than when he’d been with his mom, dressed as a shepherd, watching children peek into Jesus’ manger. But with Miranda, he could almost recapture that feeling, in a different, more furious way—like warming his hands by fire, instead of a furnace.

Maybe if he explained that to his dad, he’d want to meet her. Or maybe not.

Maybe his dad was right, and he really was a disappointing son.

He thought back to the August afternoon his dad had taken him shooting. The day had been hot and clear. Indian grass stretched in all directions, and prairie dogs crisscrossed the dirt road, dodging the tires as the Tacoma barreled into the grasslands. They parked the truck and sat on the tailgate. His dad took apart the shotgun, scrubbed the pieces with a toothbrush, and reassembled it. He planted a steel-framed bracket in the ground and stuck a paper target on it, and they stood fifty yards away. “Watch me,” his dad said. “Hold the gun with one hand behind the forearm and one hand on the grip behind the trigger.”
Kyle stared into the distance, at the perfect horizon line. He imagined God drawing it along the edge of a giant book. Behind him were the Rockies and the faraway city glinting in the sun.

“Now move the butt to your shoulder, and make sure it touches your cheek the right way. Like this.”

He wondered if he could see into Kansas from where he stood—if in Kansas, his mom could see a horizon as flat as this. Probably. If a buffalo didn’t get in the way.

“Are you listening?” his dad asked.

Kyle shrugged.

“This is important.” His dad shoved the shotgun into his hands. “Let’s see if you’ve learned anything,” he said.

Kyle grasped the gun with one hand. It was heavy and warm from the sun, and it reeked of oil and grease. A breeze blew through his hair. He stood up straight, stuck it against his right shoulder, and aimed it lazily at the target. Still holding it with one hand, he pulled the trigger. The recoil knocked him back like a boot-kick to the chest, twisting him around, and he fell and dropped the gun onto the rocky soil. The paper target was spotless, swaying in the breeze on its frame. Not like he’d expected to hit it.

Looking up at his dad, sitting in the dirt next to the smoking shotgun, he saw that look of shock and condemnation for the first time. He wanted to crawl away, into a hole with the prairie dogs. His dad grabbed the gun and left him on the ground. He turned to the target at an angle and aimed at it, planting his feet firmly beneath him, pressing the butt snugly against his shoulder, and staring down the barrel. He blasted a chunk from
the target’s center. He pumped the gun and shot it again. And again. Over and over, stepping a little closer each time. As the paper filled with big, ragged holes, Kansas showed through more and more. It looked as though Kyle’s dad were shooting at the horizon line—that and the blue sky that swallowed it. He gritted his teeth, and sweat coursed down his cheeks. He reloaded the gun and blasted the target until nothing but thin shreds of paper hung from the steel, blowing in the breeze like cobwebs. He lowered the gun and stared into the distance through the empty frame. “You see?” he said. “That’s how it’s done.”
The woodpile was four cords of alligator juniper, piñon, and pockets of oak and aspen, split and stacked six feet high along two adjacent walls of the Sandovals’ adobe tool shed. It totaled about seven trees in all—five more than the Sandoval property sustained, five fewer than the Montes Road properties grew combined, except for Servino’s acre at the dead end, its cherry orchard edging the blistered malpais. Elias Sandoval had cut the wood himself. He’d split the wood himself with the old splitting maul his father once used. He’d separated the split pieces from the smaller, round pieces and stacked them all carefully, tossing scraps in a white, plastic bucket with the word KINDLING written on it, underlined twice, in magic marker.

“You don’t have to work this hard,” Elias’s wife, Cynthia, told him. “Betty Alvarez’s husband buys his firewood in Alamogordo, from a lumberyard. It’s all pecan, too. All hardwood. The lumberyard delivers it to you in a big dump truck.”

“Sounds expensive,” Elias said.

“It is. But Betty’s husband says it’s worth it.”

“He probably can’t operate a chainsaw.”

This was the second woodpile Elias had assembled himself. He’d assembled his first the summer before—the first summer he and Cynthia were married, their first in the little white house on Montes Road. That year, he’d cut four cords as well, but he’d done so sloppily, with too many logs of equal size and too many gaps between them in the pile,
so the pile slanted and sunk like an abandoned wasp nest. But the second pile was perfect. By the end of that summer, all 1200 pounds of timber were stacked tightly together against the tool shed. No gaps. No slant. Split pieces flanked the round ones to keep them from rolling off, and wood was grouped together by tree type. Standing on his lawn, arms crossed, broad shoulders thrown back, Elias gazed upon the woodpile and smiled and felt like a master blockmason, a carpenter, a Mesolithic hunter-gatherer on the open savannah. That he owned the most magnificent woodpile in all of Carrizozo, New Mexico was no marvel, not to Elias. This was the product of hours of grit and sweat under the high-desert sun.

That year, the season’s first chill came the first Friday of November. The year before, it had come around the same time, on the second Monday, and Elias had marked that date by writing “First frost and fire of season” in red pen on the kitchen calendar. He was prepared for it now. All of the Tularosa Basin was prepared, too, as it always was in late autumn—still and silent as if listening for a pistol shot signaling “go.” Leaves were poised to drop off branches, and bear grass was ready to brown. Nut farmers, with rusty tractors parked around their fields, were ready for the husks hanging from their trees to split open and expose their crop.

The farmers fingered coral rosaries as they waited. Many had asked Father Talamantes to bless their orchards early that summer, to make the sign of the cross over their well pumps and fence posts. According to some, Rudy Salopek tried blessing his own orchard once, and his trees grew little white flowers instead of pecans. He blessed
his cattle, too, and one cow gave birth to a calf-shaped hunk of gold, which people from all corners of Lincoln County came to see until they found it was actually made of pyrite.

The Friday of the chill, it was dark by the time Elias got home from the BLM office, and as he stepped out of his red Silverado onto the gravel driveway, the breeze blew and his skin tightened. He shivered and looked up at the sky. Thin clouds floated in front of the stars and the rising crescent moon. Inside, Cynthia was drawn up on the couch in front of the TV, wrapped in the green comforter from their bed. Only her head stuck out from the mass of fabric. Around her pale face, her long, black hair was in staticy disarray. “Happy Friday,” she said and grinned wide as Elias plopped down next to her. “It’s cold.”

He kissed her. Wheel of Fortune was on with the sound muted. “The weatherman said it would be.”

“He didn’t say it’d be this cold. When I got home, I had to rescue all my tomato plants. I dragged their pots inside before they froze to death.”

Elias laughed. “You brought the plants inside?”

“In the kitchen.” Cynthia scooted closer to him. “By the back door.”

“You know tomatoes won’t grow in November.”

“These will. We’ll keep them by the stove so they stay warm.”

“Really?”

“Why not?”

He bent down and untied his shoes, kicked one of them off.
“And you can’t say no. You’re not allergic to tomato plants. They’re my replacement cats.” She was silent for a moment, looked down at Elias’s feet. “Don’t take your shoes off yet. You need to build a fire—for me and the plants.”

“Right now?”

“If we can’t have a furnace, you need to build fires. Whenever it’s cold.” She grabbed the remote and turned the TV’s sound back on.

About fifty feet of lawn and fifty feet of dirt separated the back porch from the adobe tool shed. A little orange porch light illuminated only half that distance, leaving the woodpile in darkness, so Elias grabbed a Maglite from a kitchen drawer before he went outside. He pulled on a sweater, walked out, and found the wheelbarrow by the cactus bed around the side of the house, then wheeled it to the pile. The weatherman had said it would be forty degrees that night, and it felt like it. The breeze still blew. The sky was still blanketed by clouds. It was too cold for crickets, so the only sounds he heard were his feet on the grass, the wheel squeaking in its pivot; in the distance, a lone coyote yammering madly to itself.

There used to be more coyotes, it seemed to Elias. Packs of them. During the first couple months on Montes Road, he and Cynthia had stood outside on nights like this, arms around each others’ waists, listening to the howls pierce the night in gospel call-and-response. “Coyotes are some of the most adaptable creatures,” Cynthia had said. “Like cockroaches. They can live anywhere. If you cut one’s head off, it can live for days.” Elias wondered where the coyotes had gone. Maybe they hadn’t gone anywhere,
and he and Cynthia simply didn’t listen for them anymore. Why not? He glanced back at the house and thought maybe he should go get Cynthia and bring her outside to listen. As he thought this, Elias rammed his wheelbarrow into a tree.

He grunted and fell forward onto the wheelbarrow but caught himself before he toppled over with it. His flashlight clattered to the ground. He staggered, grabbed for the flashlight a couple times, and finally seized it and spun around, pointing it at the tree, his hand shaking. Behind him, the blue-green glow of the television flickered from the window. The coyote still yammered. He breathed heavily.

Nothing had grown in this spot before. The tree hadn’t been in the yard when he left for work that morning, he knew that. If it had, he couldn’t have missed it—it looked over three stories tall, maybe twenty-five feet in diameter. Bigger than most he’d seen anywhere, even the Sacramentos.

“Cynthia!” he called and waited, keeping his eyes on the tree. There was no answer. Only the coyote. The glow from the window. He took a couple steps back and picked up a rock, flung it at the tree, and missed. He threw another rock, and it glanced off the trunk, clattering into the darkness. The beam of Elias’s Maglite quivered. Slowly, he approached the tree. He extended his hand and grazed his fingertips along the bark, drew his hand back quickly as if the bark burned, then extended it again. This was like nothing he’d ever seen. The trunk looked like a patchwork quilt, sections of varying sizes, textures, and colors with shallow, seam-like grooves between them. Some sections were black with checkered scales; others were smooth and light and taut; still others were
grayish and coarse. After a moment, Elias froze. He turned and shone his light on the woodpile, only a few feet away. Almost half of it was gone.

He sprinted across the yard, up the back steps, and into the kitchen. “Cynthia!” He fell, tripping over a potted tomato plant, spilling black soil onto the linoleum, and scrambled to his feet.

“What is it?” Cynthia ran to the kitchen and gasped. “My tomatoes!” She bent down on the floor. “At least pick this back up!”

“No don’t,” Elias panted. “Later.” He grabbed her arm, and she pulled away. “Listen!” He grabbed her arm again, harder this time, and shook it. “My woodpile—it’s a tree!”

She parted her lips but didn’t speak.

“My woodpile changed itself back into a tree.”

***

For the couple of years he’d cut and collected wood, Elias had done so conventionally. His chainsaw was nothing special—a STIHL with a sixteen-inch guide bar, a standard, mid-range model his great uncle had given him with three quarts of chain oil as a wedding present. At an estate sale he’d bought a little two-wheel trailer, which he hitched to the back of his truck so he could haul a full cord. Before he felled trees, he acquired the right permits. He cut in the right patches of forest. He stuck to the one-cord limit his permit allowed, even left logs behind when he felt he’d cut too much. The year the tree appeared, he did nothing he hadn’t done the year before.
Four times that summer, he’d climbed into his Silverado at 5 AM while Cynthia slept and took the 57 from Carrizozo across the desert, past the black and mangled lava field of the malpais, Valley of Fires, and into the towering Sacramento Mountains. Yuccas and endless bear grass flew by. Nighthawks circled above. In the early light, Valley of Fires looked like a sea of charcoal bricks starting to smolder, and when Elias squinted into that sea, he could see the shapes of nocturnal creatures disappearing into their dens—the coyotes and foxes, the nighthawks and chupacabras. Some said that Eddie Saenz’s grandpa walked the malpais at night, that forty years earlier he’d grown tired of living and wandered into the Valley to die but never did. Elias always looked for him.

The highway twisted uphill around Nogal, and an hour later Elias reached the Lincoln National Forest, 6000 feet high. He stopped by the Ranger Station outside Fort Selden and paid five dollars for a woodcutting permit and drove into the forest and felled trees, cutting them into logs all day in the hot, piney air. He paused only to drink from his water jug and to eat the sandwich he’d made the night before. When he’d cut a cord’s worth, he pitched the logs into the truck bed and the trailer then headed down the mountain.

Four cords, Elias calculated, were enough to keep him and Cynthia warm for the winter—from the first chill of early November to the tail end of March, when the winds stopped ripping through the grasses and cacti of the Tularosa Basin. Their first winter, four had been enough. Elias had fed the wood into a black, iron bullfrog of a Franklin stove that squatted against a living-room wall. Its chimney pipe was burnished and
perfectly perpendicular to the floor, straight and strong as if it propped up the ceiling. He
and Cynthia spent long evenings together on a rug by that stove. Elias opened the stove’s
little metal doors wide and put a screen in place so they could watch the logs burn. He
laid his head in Cynthia’s cross-legged lap. She ran her fingers through his hair, and they
talked until the heat dried the saliva from their mouths. That winter, they made love in
front of the stove frequently. When their mouths became too dry to kiss, they ducked
their heads and breathed heavy into each others’ necks and shoulder blades. They swirled
the fire with a metal rod and blew it bigger with bellows. They watched the juniper pop
and sizzle until their eyes watered.

One night, they fell asleep naked on the rug, and Elias woke up drenched in
sweat. He rolled onto his back and looked up and saw the chimney pipe was hissing and
glowing orange in the middle, like the cherry end of a cigar. Heat surged from it. He
shook Cynthia awake and they both leapt up and staggered back, staring.

“Holy shit!” Elias said.

“What is this?” asked Cynthia, her voice faltering. “What’s it doing?”

“I don’t know!”

“You don’t know?”

“No.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“You’re going to burn the house down!” She snatched her clothes up off the floor
and hugged them against herself. “I thought you knew what you were doing!”

“I’m new at this.”

“You told me you grew up with one of these things.”
“I did. I watched my dad use it.”

“You watched?”

“Calm down.”

“I thought you knew what you were doing!”

“Not when the pipe is bright fucking orange, I don’t!” Elias spun around in a nervous circle, surveying the room around him, looked up at the pipe then ran to the kitchen. He ran back with a plastic mixing bowl full of water and ripped the screen off the stove and threw the water onto the flaming logs, which hissed and spat smoke into the room. Coughing, they watched the chimney sizzle for a moment. “Give it a little while,” Elias coughed. “I bet it’ll die down.”

And it did. The next day, Elias grabbed his Maglite and stuck his head into the stove and shined the light up the pipe. It was clogged with ash tar. He climbed on the roof and plunged it clean with a long-handled brush, and did so twice a month to keep the smoke and heat flowing smoothly out.

The morning after the tree appeared, Elias and Cynthia stood in their backyard with the police sheriff, staring up at the tree. In the sunlight, the tree looked even taller, wider; its patchwork of wood more prominent. It was gnarled and twisted like an ancient iguana, and its branches were leafless. For a long time, the sheriff was silent. His hands were thrust in his pockets; his shaved, sweaty head tilted upward, mouth gaping open like a trout’s. At last, he spoke: “What kind of tree is it?”
“It’s hard to say,” Elias said. “There’s mostly juniper and piñon in it. Some aspen and oak.”

“A piñuniper!” The sheriff laughed and shook his head, eyes still on the tree. He cleared his throat and looked at Elias, then at Cynthia. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

The couple glanced at each other. Cynthia shrugged.

“Find whoever did this, I guess,” said Elias.

The sheriff stared at him. “Whoever did this.”

“Yes.”

“Like a witch?”

Elias was silent.

The sheriff rubbed the back of his neck and gazed at the tree. Its branches swayed lazily in the breeze. “This, my friends,” he said slowly, distractedly, his eyes fixed on the branches, “is the real deal. I’m not making any arrests. Only God could have done this.”

“You think so?” asked Cynthia

“Sure. Or the devil. But this doesn’t look like an evil tree.”

“A miracle,” Cynthia said. Elias expected her to laugh, to smirk or narrow her eyes—but she didn’t. Like the sheriff, she gazed at the leafless branches.
“It’s rare, but this sort of thing happens. Remember how in Las Cruces last year an image of Christ appeared on a corn tortilla?”

They shook their heads.

“It was all over the news for about a week. A couple days after it appeared, it bled red chile sauce.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Elias said.

“This is ridiculous,” said the sheriff, gesturing towards the tree. “But it’s okay. Be happy. Enjoy it.” He put his hat on. “Hang a tire swing on it or something.”

The Sandoval’s home was the only home in Carrizozo heated with firewood alone. Plenty of homes had fireplaces, but they were used mostly for ambience, during family gatherings and holiday events. Some fireplaces ran on gas and held fake logs on immaculate iron grates. Others burned manufactured logs made from sawdust and vegetable wax. Most homes had gas furnaces. Some had electric ones. Some had space heaters and closets of thick sweaters and ovens turned on with no food inside.

Betty Alvarez’s husband kept a cord of pecan behind his house, but he built a fire only once a week and heated his home with a gas furnace the rest of the time. Eddie Saenz heated his with wood when he could, but usually tried candles and stolen UV lamps. One night, he made a glorious fire when his meth lab exploded in his bomb shelter and the shelter went up in raging flames. The fire was colossal, beautiful in the cool evening. People could see it shimmer from miles around. Elias and Cynthia
watched it from their backyard with their arms around each others’ waists. “What is it?” asked Cynthia.

“I don’t know,” said Elias. “Looks like someone opened the devil’s backdoor.”

After the incident with the pipe, Cynthia wanted a gas furnace installed. She had a cousin in Albuquerque who worked in heating and cooling, and he told her he’d install one for cheap. “It’d be easier on you,” she told Elias. “All we’d have to do is turn a dial, and the house would be warm.”

“I don’t mind the work,” he said. “So why worry? You don’t have to do it.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“It’s not *dangerous.*”

“You’re going to burn us alive while we sleep.” She called him stubborn and narrow-minded, said he was afraid of change—but Elias stayed firm. He’d master fire-building, he was convinced, as his father had. He’d make his fires last longer and burn more efficiently—use less piñon so the smoke stayed clean and keep the stove’s iron doors closed to avoid wasting heat.

After the pipe, he and Cynthia watched the fire less frequently. They rarely gazed at it or made love in its light. But Elias built one every evening when he came home from work and kept it burning most of the night. Though he knew Cynthia could build one without him, he felt it was his responsibility. It flickered in his mind every weekday on the way home from work, like a pilot light.
After the tree appeared, fire-building became a chore. When Elias hauled wood from the pile into the house, he did so quickly, with his eyes on the ground and away from the tree, and he carried in more wood than usual to make his trips outside less frequent. The patchwork trunk made him think of dead body parts stitched together to make a monster. Its shadow, he was convinced, fell almost always on his woodpile, and this shadow was almost always eerily cold. He hated the pilgrims, too. They swarmed around him and got in the way and watched him as he worked.

The first people who came to see the tree were the Sandovals’ neighbors on Montes Road. They showed up shortly after the sheriff left, slamming on the brakes of their rickety minivans and station wagons as they drove past, climbing out and wandering onto the lawn, wide-eyed. “What is this?” one asked Elias. “Did you build it? Is it art?”

On Sunday morning, Cynthia and Elias awoke to the sound of voices outside. Elias groaned and staggered out of bed to the window, where he squinted out through the slats of the blinds. Some of the neighbors were back, along with a dozen other people. The visitors gawked at the tree and crossed themselves and whispered to one another.

Elias threw on his robe and a pair of slippers.

“Where are you going?” Cynthia asked.

“I’m going to tell them to get off our property. They’re trespassing. And it’s early.”

“Don’t,” said Cynthia. “They should see our tree if they want. It’s special.”

“It’s creepy as hell.”
“It’s miraculous!”

He stepped back, startled. Normally, Cynthia was so practical—about everything, the locals’ superstitions, home heating systems.

She climbed out of bed. “I’m going to make them a pot of coffee.”

Around noon, there was a knock on the Sandovals’ door. Elias opened it to find Father Talamantes standing on the steps with a group of maybe forty Carrizozoans lingering behind him in the driveway. “Good day, Elias,” said Father Talamantes, extending his hand. “I hope you don’t mind us stopping by unannounced.” The priest was a short man—short and stocky with dark, leathery skin and a sparrow-hawk nose and a bald head, tufts of grey hair peeking out from behind each ear. He wore all black with a white clerical collar. The people behind him wore their Sunday best. Elias wore a pair of faded blue jeans and a green flannel shirt, and he knew these people had driven to his home straight from church.

Elias shook the priest’s hand. “No. Of course not.”

“I thought you’d be happy to know your name came up several times in church this morning.”

“Oh?”

“And before church. And after. A few congregants asked that we pray for you and Cynthia, that—how did they put it?—that the miracle growing in your backyard endure and watch over your home.”
Elias looked out at the gathering on his driveway. Half the people had already drifted around the house, to the back. Others were on their cell phones. Two, three more cars pulled up with whistling brakes.

“Do you have a miracle growing in your backyard, Elias?”

“I’m not sure.” A Suburban pulled up. Its doors flew open and children poured out, scrambling over each other like mice. “How can you tell?”

The priest smiled. “Did a gigantic tree, in fact, suddenly spring up out of the blue?”

“Yes. It used to be my woodpile.”

“And this doesn’t seem miraculous to you?”

Elias looked at Father Talamantes then down at the ground. “It seems inconvenient.”

The two were silent for a moment.

“I haven’t seen you or Cynthia at church for quite some time.”

Elias kept his eyes on the ground.

“In fact, I don’t believe you’ve set foot in San Albino since I married you two. Was that three years ago?”

“Two years.”

“Two years ago. I’d very much like to see you Sundays. It might do you some good. It might help you get a handle on this—this new development in your life.”

“It might.”
“Ours is a nurturing community, Elias. You’re not the only one. This sort of thing happens.”

Elias glanced outside again. The remainder of the driveway gathering had disappeared around the house.

“More often than you might think. Do you remember what happened to Rhonda Perkins? She’s a church member.”

Elias shook his head.

“It was last April. For three consecutive days, the peace lily in her kitchen levitated two feet above the countertop. On the third day, she took a rolling pin to it, like a baseball bat. We’ve discussed the miracle with her frequently since then, and she’s improving. Do you remember the stigmata of her brother-in-law, Tony?”

“No.”

“Servino Ybarra?”

Elias cleared his throat. “The tree is in back, around the left side of the house,” he said, looking into the priest’s little green eyes. They widened, surprised at his rudeness, but Elias didn’t care. He wanted his backyard free again, his life back to normal. “You’ll know it when you see it.”

“Thank you,” the priest said quietly. He turned. “We won’t be here long.”

But the congregation didn’t leave. As the afternoon progressed, more and more cars rolled in and lined Montes Road all the way down to the dead end—rickety minivans and station wagons, SUVs and three-quarter-ton pickups, rusty compact cars with the bumpers bungeed on and license plates displayed in back windows. By dinner, the
Sandovals’ backyard was overflowing with people, singing and weeping and kneeling in the sun-baked dirt. They caressed the tree and stuck hand-fashioned crosses of twigs and popsicle sticks to its patchwork trunk with chewing gum. They pried off pieces of bark to put in their pockets. They yammered madly to themselves. When the sun went down, they passed around candles, which drifted about the lawn like a swarm of fireflies.

All the while, Cynthia was outside in the gathering. Elias watched her from the kitchen window as she filled plastic water jugs with the garden hose and passed them around. Like the others, she knelt and she sang. Women and men embraced her, kissed her forehead, wept into her sweater. Her hair was pulled back tight into a ponytail. Elias could see her expression clearly: somber and confident, her brown eyes wide and lustrous as if a boiler had clicked on somewhere deep and rendered her down. Everything excessive evaporated.

Elias paced around the house, waiting for her to come in for dinner. She never did. He squinted out the window and thought he could make out her silhouette by the tool shed, holding a candle. Voices all around her sang *Come thou the soul’s delightful guest / the pilgrim’s sweet relief.* He microwaved a burrito for himself. He considered taking one out to Cynthia, but the thought of wading through a singing, kneeling mob made him shudder. After midnight, he went to bed alone.

Hours later, Elias awoke as Cynthia slipped under the covers. She shifted and turned on her side, facing away from him. After a moment Elias asked, “Are they gone?”

Cynthia didn’t answer. She lay perfectly still.

“Are they gone?” Elias repeated.
“The people from Carrizozo went home,” she said finally. “The others are in their cars or their tents.”

“Their tents?”

“I’m tired. I have to go to work in the morning.”

They lay in silence.

Cynthia’s breathing grew steady, and Elias thought she’d fallen asleep until she spoke again. “You’ll have to deal with it,” she said quietly. “I know you don’t like the tree, but you’ll have to deal with it. You have to go back out eventually.”

Elias said nothing.

“You didn’t build a fire tonight.”

He realized he hadn’t. He’d forgotten completely. The house was freezing, and he hadn’t noticed. “I’m sorry.”

“Good night.”

Elias didn’t fall asleep for some time. His head ached. He pictured a circle of tents on the lawn outside and people roasting hotdogs and heating pots of coffee over little campfires. He thought of Cynthia’s expression earlier that day. He’d seen this expression on her face only twice before. The first was when his father had fallen ill and Elias and Cynthia had driven through the night to Phoenix to see him before he passed away. The second was when Betty Alvarez’s burro had complications giving birth, its contractions keeping up for an hour after it pushed out the filly. Betty had called Cynthia, and Cynthia had hurried over and washed her arm and plunged it repeatedly into the jenny, fishing for the afterbirth. It was massive when she pulled it out, like a deflated
volleyball. She brought it home in a trash bag. “It’ll be great for fertilizing the
flowerbeds and tomatoes,” she’d said and mashed it into pulp with a stone.

Elias liked it when she wore this expression. It made her more beautiful.

Over the following week, people from all corners of Lincoln County came to see
the Sandoval’s tree. Families from Corona and Ruidoso pitched tents on the lawn and
parked RVs along the road. On one RV’s rear window, someone had written: “O Blessed
Piñuniper!” in green, erasable marker. Across the road from the RV, a taco wagon set up
business and the pilgrims formed long lines to buy tacos and gorditas and the “Piñuniper
Burrito,” as advertised on a cardboard sign taped next to the cashier’s window. In town,
the motels filled up quickly. Traffic filtered through Carrizozo towards Montes Road.
Some pilgrims traveled to the tree on foot, many over long distances. “I met a man today
who walked here all the way from Roswell,” Cynthia told Elias on Wednesday. “As he
walked, he whipped his back with a leather belt.”

When he left for work and when he returned, Elias walked fast between his home
and his Silverado. He avoided the pilgrims’ stares. Many learned to leave him alone.
Each evening, he lingered at the BLM office later than the evening before. He knew
Cynthia wouldn’t be waiting for him when he got home; she’d be busy in the backyard.
After his coworkers had left, he sat at his desk and flipped through fishing magazines.
He shuffled a deck of cards absently. Driving home, he cruised slower than usual and
took long, meandering back roads. On Thursday evening, he drove out to Valley of Fires
State Park and pitched rocks into the malpais for half an hour. On Friday evening, as he
passed the Carrizozo Feed Store & Bar, he pulled into the parking lot on impulse and went inside for the first time.

It was stiflingly hot as Elias entered. The heat enfolded him, thick and damp, not from any furnace or stove, but from the people packed in tight, drinking and laughing and gesturing wildly, sitting on stools encircling wooden tables and a long counter. The building was long with a low ceiling and wooden floor. On his left were shelves of grain pellets and chicken feed, roped off this time of day from the revelry to his right. Lamps with heavy shades and dim bulbs hung from the ceiling like stalactites. Beer advertisements plastered the walls, displaying scantily clad women clutching bottles beaded with condensation.

At the sight of Elias, the patrons burst into wide grins and cheers and whistles. The patrons were mostly men, most of whom Elias recognized. He had expected to. Most other husbands, he knew, went to the Feed Store & Bar at least a couple times a week after work. Betty Alvarez’s husband was there, sitting at a table with a pair of men in dirty overalls. Rhonda Perkins’s brother-in-law, Tony, fished through a bowl of peanuts. Rudy Salopek sat at the bar, hunched over a mug of beer almost empty. Elias squeezed his way to the bar, and the men slapped his back and called to him from all around:

“What kind of fertilizer you been using, Elias?”

“Mr. Sandoval! Mr. Piñuniper!”

“Autograph my coaster!”
“What’d you do with my wife, man? She went to your place yesterday, and I haven’t seen her since!”

“Let me buy you a beer!”

“Let me!”

“What’re you doing here? Is it because Lou’s wife is at your place?”

People crowded around him and pushed him to the counter. They slid him a tall mug of beer, which he finished quickly, and they slid him another. The beer was cold. Elias sweated from the heat, and he could smell the sweat on the men around him. He could smell the soil from the fields they’d sweated in that day, motor oil and aftershave, grain pellets and chicken feed. He drifted through the mass, from table to table, shaking hands with the people he knew. People he didn’t see anymore, not since he’d been married. They bought him beers. “Salud!” they said. “To my woodpile!” Elias said. He played cards with volunteer firefighters and knocked over bowls of peanuts with his elbows. He laughed hard at bad jokes. In time, he found himself leaning on the bar next to Rudy Salopek, who hadn’t moved since Elias’s arrival, still hunched over a mug of beer.

“Rudy,” said Elias and clapped his hand on the man’s shoulder, “how’s the cattle business, my friend?”

Rudy grunted and took a long pull from his mug, and beer dribbled into his graying black beard. He wore a red baseball cap and a denim jacket, which clung tight
around his belly. He rolled his eyes up at Elias—eyes glistening like a mounted deer’s—and stared at him in silence for a moment. “I sold them. Sold the pasture. They’re turning it into a trailer park now.”

“No kidding.” Elias sipped his beer. The room blurred in his peripheral vision, and sweat ran down his cheeks. “Are you retired, then?”

“I’ve still got my trees.” Rudy kept staring.

Elias stared back.

“I know why you’re here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me buy you a drink.”

“I have a drink”

“You have a beer. Let me buy you a drink.” He tilted his head back. “Whiskies!” he cried, and spit flew from his lips. “Two whiskies!” Around them, bottles clinked and laughter resounded in the thick air. Rudy’s eyes rolled back to Elias. “It’s that tree, isn’t it?”

Elias didn’t respond.

“It’s fucking up your life.”

“I’m trying to adapt.”
Rudy laughed. His laughter blended with the noise and thickness in the air around them. “By getting drunk? You plan on doing this every night?”

Elias sipped his beer. “Maybe.”

“Listen to me. You have to grow some *cojones*. You listening?”

“Yes.”

“You have to do something about it.”

“My wife loves the tree.”

“Your wife? Are you listening to me? I said *cojones*.”

“She thinks it’s a miracle.” He wiped sweat from his head.

“I thought I’d been given a miracle once—that calf. You remember that calf?”

Elias nodded. His head felt heavy.

“That calf made my life a living hell. All those fuckers swarming my fields. The shame when they rejected it, when they realized what the miracle really was. I got rid of that thing. I—where are those goddamn whiskies? You see them?”

Elias tilted his head back. It lolled momentarily to one shoulder. “Whiskies! Two whiskies!” he cried.
“My cousin owns a foundry down in Las Cruces. I would’ve sold the calf if it’d been worth anything. I checked. It wasn’t. I took it to my cousin, and one night we threw it in the furnace.”

Elias found two shot glasses of whiskey on the counter in front of him and picked one up and swallowed the liquor down.

“I watched it as it melted and burned. It burned my eyes.”

The whiskey made him feel hot and sick.

“It was beautiful. Like staring into the sun.”

Around midnight, Elias pulled into his gravel driveway. He parked his Silverado at an angle, between a minivan and an old Cadillac with Texas plates, and as he staggered from his truck, the night air was cool. He stood motionless for a moment and looked up at a sky free of clouds, with unlimited stars and a moon waxing full. He shivered.

Singing voices drifted from around the house, and as Elias’s eyes followed the sound, he saw an orange glow flickering from the backyard, playing off the line of cars parked along Montes Road.

He followed the voices and the glow. He rounded the corner of the house and beheld a sprawling array of tents and a bonfire out by the tool shed, where the lawn turned to dirt. A ring of people encircled the fire. They held hands and sang, rosary beads dangling from their fingers. *Come Holy Ghost Creator blest, they sang, And in our hearts take up thy rest / Come with thy grace and heavenly aid / To fill the hearts which*
through what made. They sang slow and measured. To fill the hearts which thou hast made.

The woodpile was illuminated in the firelight, behind the circle. It was dismantled. The logs were scattered in front of the shed, mixed with sleeping bags and soiled napkins, water bottles, burrito wrappers. Elias watched as a small man with a ponytail gathered an armful of logs and brought them to the fire. The circle opened for him like a living thing—like a sea creature’s mouth, hungry, instinctive—and he dumped the logs in and the blaze leapt high.

He wanted to cry out, to rush to his woodpile and protect it—to fling logs at the pilgrims until they ran from his property and left him and Cynthia alone. But there was little left to save. He stood slack-jawed for a moment, blinking at the fire.

And sweet anointing from above.

He turned to the house. Cynthia stood by the back door—how long she’d been standing there, he didn’t know—holding a sack of paper cups and a jug of water. She watched him. She hung her arms at her sides and straightened, standing taller than he’d ever seen her—calmer, more self-possessed. “They destroyed it!” he yelled, flailing his arms at the scattered wood. He tried to move to her, through the mass, but he couldn’t—the crowd was too dense. They sang. A hook-nosed woman elbowed past and glanced at him, pulling a little boy quickly along.

She nodded. The firelight reflected back even brighter from her pale face, it seemed—amplified by a new warm glow within her. A new Cynthia, enkindled by the miracle tree. “Come inside,” she said.

“You let them do it!”
“You’re drunk.”

His fingers dug into his palms. “How could you?” All those mornings he’d risen at dawn and driven into the mountains; all those hours he’d strained and sweated, cutting timber, splitting logs and stacking them, feeding them to the stove—that maddening, painstaking search for the hot, slow-smoldering blaze that would keep them warm through the night—none of it had been for these people. Not for a miraculous tree or the touch of God. He’d done it for her. To provide basic comfort, with his hands—so she would need him. “I want them gone—now!” And he needed her to need him. What else would keep them together?

He pushed against the current of people, digging his shoes into the lawn. Pilgrims eyed him nervously, shuffled away—and others took their place. Some stepped on his feet and knocked him with their shoulders. The singing grew louder.

*Thy light to every sense impart.*

Cynthia stood still, her face expressionless. “You have to deal with it,” she called over the voices. “Adjust! The tree—it’s a gift.”

He pushed. The tree had taken his home, his wife—how was this a gift? In time, it would take him, too, leave him dead-eyed and bent like Rudy Salopek, beer dribbling from his lips. Broken. Bitter. A mislaid elbow cracked into his jaw, and he staggered back—holding his face—and turned to the tree.

In the firelight, its patchwork trunk glowed orange. From the ground up to a height only the longest arms could reach, flowers and beads, photos and homemade crosses stuck to its bark, like barnacles on a monstrous whale. This tree wasn’t a gift. It
was a curse. Whether Cynthia could hear him, he didn’t know—but he yelled it: “A curse!”

Without looking back, with slow, deliberate steps, he made his way to the tool shed. He used his shoulders, dipping them for leverage, parting the crowd. In the back of the shed, leaning against a wall, was his father’s old splitting maul. He could almost feel it in his hands: its bluntness and reliable weight. Before it happened, he saw the scene unfold: he’d hold the maul high at angle above his shoulder, like a baseball bat. The pilgrims would flee, crossing themselves, and he’d run at the tree. He’d run, and he’d swing the maul back, then forward as hard as he could, twisting his body, absorbing the impact as he buried the blade deep into the patchwork trunk—over and over, until it fell.

Afterward, Cynthia would rush to him. They’d warm themselves on its burning remains.
The Coronado

I lied when I told Lynn I never remember my dreams.

It was our first morning together at the Coronado, Lynn straddling my lap, the late-morning sunlight illuminating every detail of her body—her mole constellations, her brown hair, her appendectomy scar replicating the curves of her hipbone and stomach. Dust, floating from the stacks of cardboard boxes duct-taped and labeled Bedroom, hung in the light around her. “In my dream, I had a little white terrier,” she said, drumming her fingers on my chest, “and one day, I left the window open in the apartment and it jumped out, falling five stories to the ground.”

I considered leaving the curtains and blinds packed. If I left them in the box, I thought, the sunlight could do this every morning. It fit all her features together. Scar included. The scar gave her character, like a veteran swordfighter. “Was it this apartment?” I asked.

“Uh huh.”

“This window?”

“No, the one in the living room.” She drummed her fingers on my chest.

I drummed mine on her thighs. I considered leaving the bed frame where it was, too, in my old roommate’s garage on the other side of El Paso. Lying here like this felt right. Just a mattress on a wood floor. No frame. Nice and simple.
“Then I went out and bought a bigger dog,” she said. “I thought a bigger one would be better. It was white, too. I brought it back to the apartment and made sure the window was closed, but when I left the room and came back, I found the window open. It had jumped out.” Lynn shifted. The mattress squeaked, and her breasts joggled like Christmas pudding. She said that, in her dream, she bought another white dog. And another. Each one was bigger than the last, and each one jumped. The last one was huge, a mastiff. It jumped, too, and after it did she leaned out the window and looked down at the street below. “There they were,” she said, “all my dogs lying in a row from smallest to largest, splattered on the sidewalk.” She stopped drumming. “That’s it.”

“Jesus,” I said.

She rolled off my lap and onto her back next to me and stared at the ceiling.

I stared, too, watching the dust float in the light. “Was I in the apartment?”

“No.”

I turned on my side to face her, propped up on an elbow. “Where was I?”

“You weren’t in the dream.”

“That’s too bad.” I traced the scar on her belly with my thumb. It was exactly between her navel and left hip. An equator and two poles. “I would’ve installed a smaller window for you.”

She smiled.

“Am I ever in your dreams?”
“Of course.” She was silent for a moment. “I dreamt of you a few days ago, I think. We were gamblers. I was mad because you owed me a thousand dollars and wouldn’t pay.” She grinned. “How about me?”

“What?”

“Do you ever dream of me?”

It’s hard to say exactly why I lied. Before that morning, in the five months we’d been together, I hadn’t actively hidden anything from Lynn. “I don’t know,” I said.

The night before, I’d dreamt we were students at UTEP again. We’d skipped class and gone to San Albino Church and climbed the church’s spiral stone staircase to the roof. Up there, we could see everything—the whole city, Mexico, New Mexico. We had wild sex on that roof, pigeons flying all around us. My dreams of Lynn always ended like that. “I can never remember.”

I was embarrassed, I guess. Just about every night I dreamt about us making love. On church roofs. In tropical rainforests, office buildings and hospitals. In the cockpits of Martin B-26 Marauders, engines flaming through storms of gunfire, plummeting into the Mediterranean. I knew she never dreamed of me in this way. Why didn’t she?

At that time, I considered moving in with Lynn was a mark of maturity, like renting a car or buying good wine—an advanced kind of closeness I’d only watched other couples share. I imagined the boxes of my things and her things adjusting to one another, forming alliances, becoming our things. Our apartment. Our mattress on the floor.
Our living-room window faced south, and from our position five stories above the ground, we could see the over the mile of old warehouses and railroad cars that had once been part of downtown El Paso, over the Rio Grande into Mexico. Juarez, at least the section we could see, was an ocean of crumbling hovels patched together with cardboard and aluminum siding glinting in the sun, stretching back to a range of brown, scruffy mountains. We’d stand together at this window constantly, I imagined, my arms around her waist, and from where we stood, the two cities would blend together—no river in between. We’d split the grocery bill and share the same bar of soap.

That morning—before mornings together grew tedious, before hiding my dreams felt like holding my breath, sinking deeper and deeper underwater—and months before, one snowy afternoon, Lynn stood in the bedroom doorway and said she’d been dreaming of someone else—I believed we’d be like that borderless cityscape. Inseparable. We both did, I think. And maybe that morning, we were. We made love once more, then climbed out of bed and tore open boxes, searching for fresh sets of clothes.