



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Erin O'Sullivan for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on  
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Home Afterwhile, a collection of eight short stories and an essay, explores issues of family and maturation from the landscapes of the Midwest. Generations are connected through a sense of place—from small cornfield towns to Chicago and its suburbs—as well as through what gets retold and what goes unspoken. Characters grapple with loss, guilt, and the struggle to find ‘home.’ Sometimes that means ‘home’ in the literal sense of place. Sometimes it is ‘home’ in the sense of people they feel safe with. Sometimes it is a ‘home’ they’ll never reach—one that existed before external events complicated their lives. Though these characters rarely find clear answers, they do manage tentative steps forward, without forgetting the past they have come from.

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Home Afterwhile

by

Erin O'Sullivan

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APPROVED:

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Erin O'Sullivan, Author

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The Cavalier's Escape:  
An Essay

I've hardly made it out of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport when my father calls to tell me he's found something. He won't tell me what it is, but it's clear from the way he times his pauses that he's excited. He always does that when he's telling a story he's really into—stops in the middle and then stops again a few words later—as if trying to hold on until the weight of each syllable can catch up and sink into the conversation before he begins again. He does this when he's planned conversations out beforehand, rehearsed them in his head, and is trying to play it back to you, to say everything just right. I nod into the phone even though I know he can't see me. I'm distracted, trying to recall the last time my father sounded this excited about anything.

My mother, in the driver's seat, nudges me as she moves the car away from the airport curb and into the late summer's rain, reminding me where I am, what I'm doing.

"We'll be home soon," I say. "I'm looking forward to it." And it's true, I am. I've gained a real appreciation of Illinois, and my family within it, after having moved two thousand miles away to Oregon. Of course, having lost both my grandmothers within that year, losing, in effect, an entire familial generation, may have helped expedite that process.



At home that evening my father, mother, and I gather around the CD player in the kitchen and my father tells me how he found, while cleaning out his mother's house, a reel-to-reel tape sitting in a cardboard Marshal Field's box. The extinct within the extinct. He asks me if I know what a reel-to-reel is. I don't, but it doesn't matter. I know he's already prepared an answer. The details are important and he wants to get them right.

He'd found a guy in Springfield who could transfer the material to CD. When he got it back though, the recording was full of phonograph-era music tracks.

"I was pissed. I thought there'd be something there," he says. He pauses and purses his lips together and I know he isn't done yet. "The reel in the box was from a Sunday in 1959. August 9, 1959." He watches me. "August 9<sup>th</sup> was a Sunday this year too. That's when I got the tape back. We're talking fifty years. To. The. Day."

"Wow," I say, and mean it.

"Then," he says, finger paused over the 'Play' button, "this happened."

For a second, then two—literally, I'm watching the player's timer—there's silence, the loud kind that crinkles with static. Then, a voice, hurried. "Here, honey, wait, turn that off for a minute."

Another female voice, farther away. "No, now."

"I don't know what to sing."

"Well, sing *something*." She's closer now and sounds sing-songy herself.

"Well, what should I sing, though?"

"Aunt Jean," I say just as a commotion of other voices comes to life through the static. Jean was my grandmother's mother's sister; I knew her when I was young, before

my own sister was born. At restaurants, she would order me saucers heaping with whipped cream to go on the side of my hot chocolate.

The other, sing-songy voice belongs to Jean's sister, Helen, who was there that day with her husband, Al. The third sister, my great-grandmother, is Anne. She talks very little, although, on occasion she does join in the singing.

My grandmother's voice, light and easy at twenty-five, is the next thing to come through clearly. She steps up close to the microphone, leaning in to say, "would you please put on record that you're going to buy a fence?"

Jean replies, "We're going to run a shower and we're going to buy a chain o'link fence for the O'Sullivan backyard." She takes care to emphasize each syllable in the 'chain o' link.' "Boy, I have to do it now it's on recording, isn't it?"

"Yes," my grandmother, Maryanne, confirms. The afternoon on tape is taking place at her home, in Rolling Meadows, a northwest suburb of Chicago built just three years earlier and flooded with families like themselves who have men fresh out of army bases after Korea. My father is redoing that home now—painting, ordering carpet, refixing molding—to put the one-story structure with a detached garage on the market for the first time ever. My grandmother continues, "And when will this take place?"

"Well, as soon as possible," Jean says breezily. "We must do it while we can do it outdoors."

My father, at five, is collecting money in a bottle from the adults. He wanders mostly under their radar until he comes too close to the reel-to-reel and his father yells from the far end of the room, where he's watching the Sox play on TV, for him to get his

face out of there. My father is called Butch because his name, Gene, is taken up right now by his father, Gene. They are both Eugene Michael O'Sullivan. My father, until his father dies, will tell people that he is Junior and his father, fittingly, will say he is Senior. This, however, is not true. There have been many, many before. There will be none after. My father did not have sons, only daughters, and I, the first born, am Erin Michelle, which was as close as he could get.

On the CD there is more chatter and, then, finally, they start singing and my father, his voice high and young, blends with Jean's and her sisters' as they sing first "You Are My Sunshine" and then a medley of Polish tunes I've never heard before and can't now differentiate between.

In all of this, I notice, my grandfather's voice is decidedly absent.

Excitement overtakes the group and they pause their singing to play the tape back. When the recording resumes, after only the briefest of blips in the CD track, Jean's voice is loud and commanding and full of practice. "Trample! Trample! Went the roan—"

"Say the name of the poem," my grandmother prompts her.

"The Cavalier's Escape," she says and then, slowly, begins again. It's the word 'escape' that makes the poem stick with me, that makes it seem meaningful. When I look up later I'll see I am wrong—it *is* meaningful, but not so much for its escape as for its Cavalier. The poem was written in the 1800s by Walter Thornbury, an Englishman, and illustrated by Matthew Lawless, an Irishman. It was made in reference to the civil wars—the English ones—and its Cavalier is that both in name and character as he flees the Roundheads who chase him, getting cocky as he "wished them all good day." Yet, no

matter how hard he rides, his captors continually gain ground. He survives, making it, at the last moment, to the inside of a castle wall. But, though he escapes with his life, his freedom is lost. Castle or not, the real life Cavaliers were very much caught and Cromwell's Roundheads had barely taken their first breath of power in England before they turned to trying to destroy Ireland—starting with the siege of Drogheda and culminating never, as new scars continue to show up, even today.

I take this nearly four hundred year old atrocity of Cromwell's, and all that snowballed after, personally. Maybe it's my punishment for being born a girl and, hence, breaking the chain, the tradition of naming. Maybe it's something more. I like to think it had something to do with my grandfather, my father's father, who raised his son to be Irish, which is the way my father then raised me. I like to think that when my great-grandfather was forced out of Ireland, forced into America not under illusions of streets of gold and Manifest Destiny, but out of choosing life over death, that none of us—not my grandfather, not my father, nor me, forgot about that. So that when Eugene Michael O'Sullivan, who was neither the first nor the last, sacrificed his cultural and spiritual life in order to save his physical one, in order to raise a family in a place that might not try to take away their lives, it meant something. Something we wouldn't take for granted.

To do so seems to me a very American sin, one that I know I was party to when I was younger. Back then, I enjoyed being Irish for the green and shamrocked gifts my father gave me each St. Patrick's Day. But I hated it more. I hated it because as a shy, awkward grade schooler—bony in a way that didn't hold the appeal of skinny, with a voice that was lower than many of the still prepubescent boys—and as a lower-middle

class kid in an upper-middle class Catholic school, my only goal was to be as anonymous as possible. I was humiliated by my name, which betrayed me at every call of the classroom roll. The first day of school every year I stared hard into the back of Megan Miller's neck and tried to make myself her. It never worked. When the teachers reached my name they laughed, always, and, most often, asked if I wasn't, by chance, Irish. The more ambitious types broke into an exaggerated chorus of "Danny Boy" and, as my classmates filled the room with laughter, I tried hard to sink low enough in my chair to disappear into the green of the linoleum floor.

I might have gone on thinking like that into adulthood, might have been part of the generation to finally rid itself of the past, except that, when I was twelve, my grandfather passed. I was there the day it happened—in the same house that once resounded with off-pitch Polish singing—and sat next to my grandmother on the floor near the couch as she hugged his body and sobbed in a distinctive chest-heaving kind of way. The fact that he had died, was, to me, less significant than the fact of being there in the house where a death had taken place. He was around for twelve years of my life, but, in reality, he was gone long before that. He didn't tell stories, like my other grandparents did, and whether that was because he didn't remember them or simply didn't have the patience for them as diseases, surgeries, and medications overtook his life, I'm not sure. My dad used to tell people, when they asked how his father was, that the man had been dead a long time. I never understood that answer until I listened to this fifty-year-old tape play on for over an hour's time. As that recorded Sunday afternoon faded into evening, and bourbons were passed and refilled around the dinner table, my grandfather became a

voice on the tape—joking loudly and poking fun at his wife’s Polish relatives. He had a sound. He was funny. And he laughed, a lot.

I have only one memory of seeing him smile. It was a month before he died and he was no more, at that point, than a body confined to a wheelchair. My uncle and cousins were in town and they had brought him a cassette tape of old Irish ballads. We played them through dinner and they sounded, to me, no more distinct from one another than the Polish songs my great-aunts yelled into the reel-to-reel’s microphone. The songs were slow and boring and, in my dislike for them, I disregarded my grandfather’s smile. As soon as the meal was over and the adults were moving dishes to the kitchen my older cousins, Michael and Ryan, switched the tape. I grinned at them as The Offspring’s *Americana* album began to play. I wish I was making up that up.

My uncle turned on us seconds in, as soon as he pieced together what had happened. He came out of the kitchen with footsteps that stomped so hard it made the grandfather clock chime. I’d never seen him angry before.

“The other tape was boring,” Michael said.

“It all sounds the same,” I was quick to add.

My uncle’s face was red. He shook his head, paused to look at us, and when no words came out of his opened mouth he shook his head again. “You don’t understand,” he finally said. “You just don’t understand.”

He was right, I didn’t. I don’t now. But I’m getting closer.

I wonder, though, the same thing about my grandfather as I stand in the kitchen listening to the gentle familial chaos caught on tape. At twenty-five, only a few years

older than I am now, did he understand? His father had dedicated his life to the Cause, serving the Rebel County of his native Cork in the IRA. It was the twenties, Collins had already signed the treaty, and Ireland was now fighting both the British and itself. My great-grandfather was on the side determined to regain the six counties of their country that Britain had stolen, blinded by the gravity of such a sin. He blew up train stations along the supply route in Derry. If there were innocent people caught up in all of that, which surely there were, I like to think he felt bad. I don't know though. I never got to hear him tell the stories for himself. What I do know—pieced together from stories that have trickled down through generations of tangents and asides—is that he fought for people who couldn't fight for themselves—his neighbor who was shot straight through the belly while sitting on her own stone wall, awaiting a ride into town, killing her and the baby she carried on the spot. When the Black and Tans paused their truck to make sure she was, indeed, dead, they took the man who cast the shot and raised his arm high, like a boxer come to victory after rounds in the ring. They drove on, laughing. He fought for school children like himself, beaten by priests for speaking Irish, for using their own language, which the oppressors were trying to stomp out. He fought for those same priests who were forced to make such a choice—to help the British slaughter a language or slaughter a people—as the only way they saw victory possible was in the form of a people educated in the English way, perhaps one day able to beat the Brits at their own game. He fought for other people, others whose stories I never got to learn.

I wonder about those missing links just as I wonder about my own grandfather, born into an Irish home on Chicago's South Side. His father was already buried by the

time that Sunday recording took place—dead from brain injuries sustained in the incessant beatings delivered in Dublin’s Kilmainham Jail, injuries that had lain dormant just long enough for him to meet up with friends of the Cause in Chicago, to marry and start a family there. And I wonder if my grandfather ever thought of any of that on Sundays as mundane as the one caught on tape. If he wondered if he was doing right by blending into America’s 1950s—fencing himself into the newly built suburban sprawl, surrounding himself with those who sang songs of a culture not his, and breathing easy as he watched the White Sox throw strikes and balls, hoping that the mix would tilt enough that, in the end, they’d come out on top.

As that Sunday wears on and the singing turns to conversation over dinner, my grandfather answers the question for me. My grandmother and her mother can be heard talking about beef steak tomatoes, how they got two pounds for forty-nine cents. Helen tries to interrupt, saying that Eagles has two pounds for thirty-five cents. She says it again and again in her sing-songy way, but no one listens. They get animated, instead, over Helen’s decision to tap her cigarette ashes onto her dinner plate.

“Helen, don’t put that on the dishes, we wash them off, we use them again!” my grandmother says, lively and uninhibited.

“Well you can wash the ashes off too.”

“For heaven’s sakes!”

Helen starts again. “So the next day I went to Eagles a couple days later—”

“Eagles?” my grandfather says. “Who’s Eagles?”

Helen ignores him and continues. “So the next day, two for thirty-five and—”



“Two pounds or two pieces?” my grandfather comes at her again.

“Oh!” Helen yells, “For God sake’s this guy’s difficult! What does he want?”

“Here, Helen,” Jean says, “you want to cut him? Here.” Everyone laughs as Jean hands her, most likely, a butter knife.

“Cut what? Him? Oh, no this would be on tape recording and I’d be held responsible.”

My grandfather must be brandishing a butter knife of his own, because Jean laughs louder. “Oh, he’s got that saber now! He looks like Theodore Kocisko with his saber!”

The other women laugh and shout out names of Polish men who have posed, at sometime or another, with a saber. He looks like this, they say, he looks like that. He looks like, he looks like.

“IRA,” my grandfather adds, then laughs in an open roar that sounds deep from beneath even the belly, then falls silent. The women go on listing men, but it’s his voice that stays with me. Sitting in his subdivision, amid the promises of a chain-o’link-fence, he is who he is and he is who his father is and, now held as evidence forever—or at least until the CD scratches—the two share one voice.

The CD stops suddenly and I look up at my father.

“It just goes on like that,” he says. “You can finish it later if you like.”

“Sure,” I say. “Later.”

Kelly & Cawley's

The whole thing was his fault. He'd been the one to bring up the Redmond's farm to his daughter during a phone call. He'd been the one to go on about what a great opportunity those folks were giving the local kids—\$700 in a month? That wasn't too bad. It had seemed safe enough, at the time, to sit on his porch and browse the paper in LaSalle while Beth paced her kitchen and shouted over TV noise in the suburbs.

Two weeks later, his far too-innocent looking granddaughter was standing in his kitchen, duffel bag at her feet, and asking what exactly was involved in picking corn again? He tried to give it to her straight, telling her about the size of the bugs that lived between the stalks, about the long jeans, full-sleeved button-down shirts, and heavy socks she'd have to wear in the midst of the brutal Midwest heat, about starting at 5 AM and not ending until dusk, about cutting her hands on the stalks because they were nowhere near as soft as they looked. It wasn't, he emphasized, too late to turn back now. His wife—enthralled with the idea of their eldest granddaughter living in LaSalle, even if just for a month—hushed him with a quiet, "Ray" and told Alicia not to worry, they'd go for ice cream afterward.

He carried her duffel bag to the back bedroom and put it down on top of the faded comforter. Behind him, he heard her unshoulder her backpack and set it softly on the

floor. Keychains, most covered in neon strands of fuzz, spilled out from every zipper. He raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Just another fourteen-year-old thing, his daughter would have told him. Alicia had opened the blind and was pulling the once-white lace curtains aside.

“Tomato plants look good, Grandpa.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “I picked a bunch today. Reds and a few yellows.”

“Cool,” she said, still gazing at his garden plot outside.

“The mattress here sinks a bit,” he said, giving the duffel bag a downward push, as if to demonstrate, “but it’s still good.”

“Grandpa,” she said, stepping away from the window, “relax, it’ll be fine, I don’t think I’ll mind the work, it’s only a month.”

He looked back at her. She had no idea. An hour in those fields could turn into an eternity.

“Grandpa,” she said again. “Come on. Seven. Hundred. Dollars. Have you ever even seen that much money at once?”

He couldn’t help smiling at that and let out a whistle, long and low. He’d forgotten how money like that could sound.

He hadn’t been much older than Alicia was now when he took his first job at Frank’s Ice Cream Shoppe. It was near First Street, just off the railroad tracks, and if you were to grab high on the lamppost outside, stretch yourself as far toward the street as you could, right up to the point when your elbow gave that near popping tug, you could catch

a glimpse of the newly built train station—wedged in between the downtown shops and the Illinois River—and all the excitement that came with it.

His friends chided him about buckling down at a regular after-school job—most of them had another year or so of paper route work and the like, easy things that left their weekends free. He always dismissed it by telling them that his mother knew Frank because she played rummy with his wife on Tuesdays, which meant Frank would treat him right, let him eat ice cream for free and pretend never to see how much time he spent talking with Josie or how he never charged her full price for a soda. But, while all that was true, in the earliest days he used to tell himself he'd work there for nothing. Well, maybe not *nothing*, but definitely less than the forty-five cents an hour Frank gave him. There was more to it, was all. He loved that the whole L-P High School knew him well enough to stroll into Frank's, books still tucked under their arms, and yell, "hey, *jerk!*" from across the room and he'd grin back, quirk and eyebrow like he knew something they didn't, like the apron and goofy white hat gave him some sort of power, and reply, "what'dya have?" And it was true, he did know more than they did, and he liked that too. He knew who liked extra chocolate syrup and whose tongue swelled up like a hot air balloon if they ate nuts. He knew, from the Meyer sisters who'd just been gossiping in the shop, that it was Jimmy who'd been kissing Sarah in the home ec room. He knew, from the boys over in Utica who'd been passing through and talking about Friday night's game, whose ankle might give if hit too hard or who couldn't catch a lateral to save his hide.

Sometimes Josie got mad at him for working too much at Frank's—particularly on Friday nights. And he couldn't blame her really because sometimes he missed the way things used to be too. He'd look around his geometry class some Friday afternoons, listening to the girls talk about earrings and pumps and mixing and matching clothes to wear on their stroll down Route 6, from the roller rink on Fifth to the park near Bucklin Street, and the guys talk about whose parents would let them take the car that night and who would be riding shotgun with the best chance to whistle and wave at the girls as they passed. Always, these conversations made him think of weekends past, riding shotgun in Jack's dad's cruiser, sitting quiet until they passed Josie and then whistling, real low and melodic. He missed meeting up with Josie at the park, in that accidentally-on-purpose kind of way that was all a part of the game. He missed leaning back against the trees down by the fishing hole, watching her skip rocks out across the water, counting the ripples and wishing on just one before it disappeared.

Despite all this, though, he knew, he just *knew*, that he couldn't sit there at the fishing hole when the train whistles were sounding in the distance, bringing the kind of people to LaSalle he'd only known in movies. He hadn't known, at first, quite what to make of their presence in his small town, but he couldn't help the urge to see this piece of the world that existed beyond LaSalle's cornfields. He had just wanted to touch it, turn it over in his palms, like it was something he could keep if he held tight enough.

[white space]

Nowadays, of course, seven hundred dollars didn't hold any real appeal for him, but he could certainly understand the pull it held for Alicia—pull to a powerful unknown, to the kind of thing that could open up a world to you—good or bad, ready or not.

“Ray!” Jo called from the kitchen amidst the opening and shutting of cabinet doors. “Didn’t you say you got potatoes from the store? I don’t see them.”

“I put them down the basement,” he called back. He turned to Alicia. “I better go get those. There’re towels in the bathroom if you want to wash up afterwhile. I think your grandmother gave you the green.”

Later, after the ten o’clock news had given its final signoff and the ice cream dishes had been dried and put away, Ray made his way to the screened-in front porch. It was an evening ritual—to sit in the loveseat looking out at the neighborhood, police scanner crackling in soft codes on the wicker table next to him.

Alicia emerged from the house, book in hand. Her presence surprised him for a moment, he was so used to having this space to himself after Jo had gone to bed. She moved toward the porch light but saw him watching her and seemed to think better of it. She tossed the paperback next to the scanner and sank into the cushioned chair. “Why do you always like to sit out here in the dark?”

“I think it’s nice—to be able to watch everything, and know no one can look back.”

She looked dubiously at him before turning her gaze to the empty street. “But, people still could, you know. It wouldn’t be as clear or anything, but they could still see you.”

He looked at her, looking at the street, and then let his gaze follow hers, seeking a dog walker or a biker or a late night runner. As if the presence of movement might help prove him right.

Before he could say anything, she started again. “Mom said you used to let her sleep out here at night, like, with her friends and stuff.”

He blinked at her, thinking. That was the thing about pulling at the past—some things were so far gone that when they somehow resurfaced you had to pause a bit to remember if they were actually true. Mundane things or big things—it didn’t matter. Said the right way, anything could have been made up. But then it came to him—truth, this time in the form of laughing girls whispering inaudible things and then laughing again. “Yes,” he said. “She liked doing that.”

“Wasn’t that scary?”

He didn’t know if she meant for her mother or for him.

“Couldn’t anyone have just come in here?”

She was referring, he knew, to the handle on the screen door of the porch. The lock, a metal latch no thicker than a toothpick, was more of a polite nod asking people to return later than a real demand that anyone stay out. This was not the first lock in LaSalle Alicia had looked at curiously and it was not the first time that such comments had made him wonder if he’d done enough, if he’d failed by somehow not thinking things through.

A pickup truck growled past, in need of a muffler and moving far too quickly through lanes with speed limits of twenty-five. As it approached the stop sign just beyond the porch, the truck showed no sign of slowing, and sure enough, about two feet after the sign, the front tires hit the dip in the road's gravel at full force. The back end of the truck went airborne for a moment before landing loudly. Expletives followed shortly, flowing through the open driver's window and into the porch screens. Ray had to smile. Alicia turned to him, as if to say, see?

He laughed. "You can always tell who doesn't belong here." You could tell just by sitting here, watching the corner of Campbell and Maple.

"But that's my point," she said. "What if people who didn't belong here had come in? What if they didn't care about the lock? Did you think of that? Did that scare you?"

He'd tried not to think about strangers too much, not since he started working at Frank's, not since the trains started rolling in, not since the outsiders, the Chicagoans particularly, started dubbing LaSalle "Little Reno."

There was a reason Frank's had been so popular—a reason beyond old-fashioned ice cream and sodas that fizzed just right—and that reason revolved around the trains that came into town every weekend and the townspeople that flocked downtown to see them. People usually took their cars downtown in the morning, found a parking spot with a prime view of the station, and left them there all day, walking back with their families at dusk. The children, already dressed in pajamas, sat on top of the car hoods, braiding hair or chewing penny bubble gum while their parents stood by, watching the sidewalk for



familiar faces. The Warners might see the Thompsons dressed up for the evening and call out respective updates on the battle of tomato plants and rabbits while their boys yelled a collective “hi’ya” from the front bumper. Or the Louwoski girls might wave at Ms. Jacobs, the grammar school librarian, while their parents speculated about the origins of her new string of pearls.

At Frank’s, Ray would be close enough to hear the buzz of the town gathering along First Street. Close enough to hear the first rumblings from off in the distance, to hear the crowd quiet themselves as the rumbling soon became a roar and whistle and the looming black steam engine chugged into view of the town. The children on cars forgot about hair and bubble gum; their parents forgot about greeting neighbors; the couples strolling the storefronts in pressed shirts and sparkling jewelry forgot their elegance. For a moment all was forgotten except for the train and the sight of the blue coated conductor who leaned out of the doorway, bellowing loud and long, over the whoosh of breaks and screeches of track: “Kelly and Cawley’s!”

The children could be heard cheering and Ray imagined them waving at the darkened windows, imagined the adults trying to contain themselves with grins and squeezes of shoulders, small chuckles escaping their lips. They took part in this tradition each Friday night because there was something wonderful—even if fleeting—about making oneself known as a resident of the town that had become, seemingly overnight, “Little Reno,” the twenty-second stop on the train ride down from Chicago.

It was just a cigar store, that’s what they told all the papers. Oh, sure, it had gambling-tax stamps from the feds, nearly three hundred more than Vegas in any given

year. But, still, it was just a store. Just a hole-in-the-wall joint between Benny's Barber Shop and the Grand Hotel. And the people, the strangers, well they could have been coming down from Chicago by the trainload for any old reason. Maybe that's just what people did up in Chicago—take the train as an excuse to display their grey pinstriped suits and fedora hats, the ladies with their long kid gloves and hair done up in a twist.

Of course, the whole town knew the strangers came to "Little Reno" not for LaSalle, not for any of them, but for Kelly and Cawley's and the money to be won. But as long as there was a collective agreement to pretend—to pretend the cigar store was just what it claimed to be—the people, Ray included, saw no reason not to think of themselves and their town as a destination, not to sometimes fancy themselves as grander than the Windy City. It was only logical, after all, since they were in fact the place these people were leaving Chicago to come *to*. So, they told the papers, they told the sheriff, heck, they even told each other that Kelly and Cawley's was just your average, run-of-the-mill cigar shop, nothing special to see there. But those same people never missed being downtown on a Friday.

People, Ray knew, went on pretending, standing strong in their false sense of pride, long after they should have.

"Was I scared of the strangers?" Ray repeated his granddaughter's question. "No. To be honest, I never gave them much thought. There didn't seem to be reason to, I guess."

Even in the dark he could see her arching her eyebrows at him. He knew how strange he must sound to her suburban mindset. And not Ward Cleaver's kind of suburban thinking, but the kind that develops after growing up with pictures of serial killers flashing across the six o'clock news.

She'd tucked her legs up to her chest now, buckled her arms around them, and rested her chin on her knee, eyes watching a stray cat moving along the edge of the streetlight's gleam. She was still listening, though. He knew this. The idea of 'stranger danger' was something she'd grown up on. But when he'd been growing up strangers held an allure, a key to something you didn't have but could, if you imitated them closely enough.

Maybe that's why, during the time of Kelly and Cawley's fame, LaSalle didn't question the strangers that came in. In fact, the town welcomed their notoriety, even added to it. It was no strange sight to see young boys tugging on their father's arms, crying, "Look! Dad! There! Is that one Al Capone?" The fathers always shrugged and laughed—said things like, "maybe," and "sure, why not, it could be." For years after the district's officers shut the store down, and even well into the years that the trains stopped whistling through the station, people told stories about that one great time they spotted Al Capone. It seemed fated that if Chicago gamblers, the high rollers and the big timers, were going to be making their way down, the greatest of them all must be among them. And so people put him in—staged him getting off the train, jostling an overweight woman out of his way, placed him standing in front of the record store window, glancing

over the display just to see what was playing, or leaning against the wall right under the cigar shop's cursive lettering, a smoking cigar in one hand and a pocket watch in the other, possessing it casually, without need. Truth be told, the chances of a real Capone sighting were slim, but lousy odds never stopped people from talking.

Ray, of course, saw the strangers up close, in the later hours. They spilled out of Kelly and Cawley's, money spent, and in their trek down Joliet towards the train station many stopped in at Frank's. No matter how much had been lost, there always seemed to be change left for an ice cream soda. He enjoyed watching the suited men stumble step through the doorway and fish stray pennies and nickels out of their pockets, letting the coins jingle against gold rings as they held the money out. Less often, but not exactly rarely, the winners stopped by as well and left him with a tip bigger than what Frank would pay him in a week.

He enjoyed the irony, really. And he enjoyed making up stories for them, imagining, while he scooped their ice cream, what it was that drove them to this, this business of dressing in flashy suits and shiny jewelry. This business of taking the train down to a town that was mapped only by an alias and concluding the night by sipping ice cream sodas from a fountain counter the way they had when they were still dependent on their parents for spare dimes.

Some, of course, stopped being strangers; they came in often enough. And some made themselves known, burned themselves into his memory. There was the night an overweight fellow came in just after eleven, sweating and pounding his fist on the counter demanding eggs in his soda. He kept pounding and yelling until a skinny man

with a gold chain that hung from the pocket of his suit coat came in and started laughing. “Come on, Larry, you old coot,” he said. “We got eggs waiting for us, baskets of ‘em, back in Chicago.” And it sounded, then, like no word Ray had ever heard before. *She-cAW-go*.

Mr. Gold-Chain ushered Larry out the front door, was halfway out it himself when he looked back, fished around in his pocket, chain swinging side to side with the jostle, like the shaking of a head. Finally the man pulled out a quarter and flipped it to him. “Here ya go, kid, for puttin’ up with the eggs.”

Ray caught it, surprised, and nodded his thanks.

The man turned again, walked a step before looking back, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes beneath the brim of his hat. “What’cha gonna do with it, kid? Spend it on candy?”

Ray thought about Josie. About how taking her to the movies seemed like something he’d normally jump at the chance to do. But something stopped him from saying so. Mr. Gold-Chain’s chain jostled back and forth again and Ray followed it with his eyes. He shrugged. “I think I’ll hang on to it for a bit.”

“Saving up are ya? What’cha gonna do, kid? What’cha trying for?”

He let the quarter roll across the creases of his palm for a moment, let it bump against the flesh of his fingers, the spot where gold rings could one day be. He looked back up, shrugged, and let the quarter fall into his pocket. “Make a million, and quit.”

[white space]

Alicia turned her head, letting her cheek fall to her knee and rest there while she looked at him. “Is it because I’m not from here? Is that why you don’t think I should go pick corn? Because I’d be a stranger to all of them?”

“Oh, no,” he said, pushing a hand through whatever wirey grey hair he had left. “No, of course, not. That’s not it at all. You’re no stranger here, you’re as much a part of this town as anyone.”

She laughed. “As anyone?”

“Well, okay maybe not as much as anyone.” He shifted, bent and unbent stiffening legs, and readjusted his position in the chair. “You don’t have to live here to be from here. That’s what I mean. And then there’s others,” he nodded at the stop sign where the truck had just barreled through, “who will move in, mailing address and all, but never be from here a day in their life.”

“So then why don’t you want me to go pick corn? I mean, it *is* good money right? That’s what you told mom. And she said she used to pick corn on and off during the summers too.”

“That’s right. She did.”

The fields had been different then though. The Redmonds had started with just a small patch north of town—that was all most of the farmers had, really, just patches here and there. Times changed though. People started leaving LaSalle for the thrill of city life and farmers were no exception. Soon the Redmonds and the Wills were all that was left to tend the corn and between them they owned all the farms—north, east, and west of the town. The plot to the south, though, was unowned. Or, rather, it was owned by the state,

which in Ray's opinion came down to about the same thing. Little if anything grew there. Recently, though, the Redmonds had petitioned for more land and gotten it. Now, for the first summer since the trains had stopped rolling through, the south fields were to be picked again. And, thanks to Ray's big mouth, his granddaughter was going to be among those stomping all over that ground.

It wasn't unusual for the gamblers to stumble upon Frank's as a mere consequence to their less than sober state, discover they liked it, and make a point to find their way back again. This was good for Ray. He was good at small talk and sticking a smiling 'yes sir' in all the right places and people learned that, expected it, and tipped him accordingly when they got it.

So it didn't strike Ray as strange to see Mr. Gold-Chain at Frank's again a few weeks after the egg incident. What was surprising was seeing Kitty Jacobs with him. In LaSalle, a town whose papers still ran blurbs on who had relatives visiting from out of town and who was expanding the tomato gardens on the side of their house, gossip was inescapable. When Ray had been in grammar school Ms. Cammington had been the librarian, so he'd never actually even met Kitty Jacobs before. But he knew her. She'd come to them a year ago from Peoria, which, granted, was a far cry from Chicago, but at the same time was just large enough and foreign enough to raise questions. She'd attended Bradley University because her father had been Peoria's mayor or commissioner or something like that and the board couldn't say no. She'd lived at home instead of the dormitory to both keep costs down and because her father didn't trust her to be living on

her own. She was patient, bided her time, got her diploma, and took the first train out. The way people told it, that train stalled in LaSalle and everyone had to get off until the engineer could fix the problem. And, although Kitty Jacobs had been bound for Chicago, she never got back on. The reason for her stay changed with every person who told the story, which didn't bother Ray because the reasoning seemed the least important part. She was here now, wasn't she?

He felt a little bad for her, being the constant target of the town's gossip, but only a little. She had to have known what she was coming into. She had to have taken it into account when she decided to stay. LaSalle was no Peoria and there wasn't a building, cornfield, or person who tried to claim otherwise. Sure, the town talked about each other, but it was just talk. There were girls far worse than Kitty Jacobs who, Ray thought, were much more deserving of having judgment passed, but they'd never get it. You couldn't talk too long or speak too firmly against anyone in LaSalle because everyone had a mother that played cards with other mothers and a father that worked at Westclox with other fathers and a brother that played L-P football with other brothers. You couldn't ever judge anyone without taking a whole family down too. And no one wanted to do that. Kitty Jacobs had to have known that coming here alone, coming to stay without connections, left her wide open for trouble.

Regardless, though, Ray thought she was both pretty and smarter than she usually let on. So he was kind of excited to see her with her gloved hand on Mr. Gold-Chain's suit jacket. It'll be good, he thought, if she gets out of here, if Mr. Gold-Chain takes her back to Chicago and she can work in a library up there. He'd never seen a Chicago



library but assumed they'd be huge—more books than a person could ever read—and fancy—gargoyle head statues and oil paintings of people older than the city itself. No one would question the origins of a new string of pearls then. Heck, no one would even notice.

There were signs—the way Mr. Gold-Chain leaned closer to her in the booth, even as Kitty shifted away; the way she said no, she'd prefer not to have a cigarette right now, but he pushed his lighter closer and closer to her mouth until she had no choice but to lift the thing to her lips and accept; the way he held her jacket for her as they were leaving and said, here, Kitty, here—but Ray didn't see them. Or he did, but he didn't stop to think anything of them. He was too busy thinking about what it would be like for Kitty to get off that train in Chicago, and about how she could walk down Michigan Avenue and do more than window shop, she could go straight in and pick what she wanted and Mr. Gold-Chain would charge it to his account, because wherever they were he'd already have an account open to charge things to. Ray was thinking about how she'd wake up each morning to see the sun rising over the lake, glimmering in a way that light over the murky, carp-infested Illinois River couldn't. He was thinking about how she'd walk down State Street afterwhile and never once look up, have no need to gawk at the skyscrapers like the tourists did because she'd be above even them, in a way. She'd have made it.

Because Kitty Jacobs had no local connections, it took all weekend, and half of the school day on Monday, until someone tried to call her at home. When she didn't answer, the grammar school principal decided to stop by her house on his lunch break.

No one there. The situation escalated, and two days later a volunteer search team was combing the cornfields south of town. The McGraws, who worked the land at that time, were less than appreciative of the group stomping through their corn so close to harvest time, but, after the sheriff had found kid gloves and a single pearl near the woodshed, they knew things would only look worse for them if they didn't allow the townspeople in.

Ray went because Frank did—saying there were more important things happening that day than scooping ice cream and that wasn't something Frank said often. And Ray wasn't the one who found her, but for years his dreams played it out like he had. After Kitty, they found three more that were identifiable. Six more that weren't. All buried underneath the corn.

Kitty was the only one from LaSalle, and even she wasn't really theirs, so talk was hushed quickly. It didn't stop the McGraws from packing up and moving shortly thereafter, though. Talk or not, no one wanted to buy that corn.

Ray had spent a long time trying to forget about those fields, about Kitty, about the strangers that came in on the trains, got into his head, and made him overlook what he should have been seeing. The bodies in the cornfields and the state's crackdown on gambling closed up Kelly and Cawley's a few years down the line. Without a destination, LaSalle stopped being "Little Reno" and the trains stopped coming through. Ray worked at Frank's until he graduated high school and then he left it for the Westclox factory. He married Jo. He never made a million, not even close. And he stayed as far as he could from Chicago. For years, it had all seemed easy and clean enough to compartmentalize

and tuck away. Except now the Redmonds were growing corn on the south farm land and there were again going to be townspeople stomping through that field and, because of a little bit of money, his granddaughter was going to be one of them.

Ray cleared his throat and rose slowly from the love seat, taking a few moments to stand up fully on legs that seemed to have stiffened in the night air. He shuffle-stepped towards his granddaughter, her chair occupying the space just before the door. “Your mother picked corn, that’s true, but it was different then. Different fields.”

Alicia looked up at him. “Do you really not want me to do this?”

The answer was yes but he didn’t say so. He kissed the top of her head and opened the door into the house. “I’m going to bed, don’t forget to lock the door when you come back in. And as for the corn, you do what you want. Try the first day. Give it a go. See how you feel afterwhile. You just be careful, that’s all. Be careful.”

“Oh,” she said, almost laughing, relieved somehow, he thought. “I know that, Grandpa.”

“Okay then,” he said going inside. He didn’t like it, of course, but he was done prescribing destinies. That hadn’t worked out so well. He closed the door behind him and shuffled on slowly, feeling his way through the darkened living room. “Okay then,” he repeated once more, to himself.

### What the Woman Didn't Know

Roberta was fairly sure she was the only one who noticed the woman on the other side of the fence, clad in a sagging white sweater, fingers curled around the black steel chain links, watching them all. Not the only who saw, but the only who noticed. It might have been creepy except Roberta recognized her—not her person, but her look—her look that said she was busy inside herself, forced there by things no one understood. Roberta worried not about the woman, but about that look, worried that it was possible for such a thing to follow her into adulthood.

It was late May, the school year would close soon, and when it reopened for business as usual Roberta's business would be elsewhere—middle school, specifically. And the effortlessness of PE softball might not follow her. There were no subjects to think about—no ecosystems of fish, no fraction driven equations, no geographical structures from Peru. More importantly, though, was the fifty-minute escape from the Macklin sisters, Chrissy Little, Mark Jericho, and the like. From her spot out in right field, which she chose not out of a fear of the game but a need for solace, no pretending was needed, no false understanding of unwritten rules that expected to be followed. There were just three outs to fill.

The woman, Roberta knew, with her brown hair falling in strands from its messy bun and mangling itself across her face, didn't know about the Macklin sisters putting Elmer's across the ends of the her ponytail, to decrease the frizz they said; Chrissy telling Tim that the bone structure that ran through Roberta's face combined with the dragging way she walked made her part man; Mark yelling across the playground, you're a virgin aren't you tell us you're a virgin, and lost in a vacuum of uncertainty she'd shouted no in front of the whole school because it seemed certain that to answer yes would be a trick—she'd gotten detention for throwing the dictionary out the window at the start of the following period. Roberta knew the woman didn't know because of the way she stared, and because of the way her fingers curled tight around the links, as if hanging on, afraid to blow away in hurricane winds even though this was a breeze-less day, but mostly because of the way she stared. She looked at them all, spread across plastic bases in a corner of the football field, but looked at them only long enough to see the forms she knew she was looking through. She was looking inside of them, Roberta thought, or even beyond that, beyond the field, beyond the next tree-lined fence, into the neighboring cemetery, maybe even beyond that. She didn't know because they, as a group, didn't stay in her field of vision long enough for her to care.

In the outfield Roberta felt herself bend at the knees. She put a fist into her palm and tried not to jump, surprising herself by the sound it made. If the woman stopped to see her, she might think Roberta to be an athlete, to be a girl in a field, one of many laughing with friends in matching gym t-shirts. She might be anybody here and now, in

this moment, because the woman didn't know what she already was, what everyone around her had decided she was supposed to be.

## Lessons in Question

### Dance

She shifted her weight in the chair and its wooden legs creaked. Above her a rubber chicken, hanging from the ceiling and caught in the cross breeze of window and fan, swayed back and forth like the pendulum of a clock.

“You’re dancing,” he said, looking at her from across the desk.

She looked at the walls covered in postcards from travels and mementos from students past—photographs, paper coasters from bars, bowling score sheets, hand-drawn comic strips.

“You’re dancing like a damn ballerina.”

She felt her face flush and her jaw set firm. She hated being called a sissy. She turned her attention to the hockey stick hanging above the window and thought she wouldn’t mind hitting him over his shiny, bald head with it. Next to the window was a picture of some rabbis gathered around scrolls, feathered pens in hand. She craned her neck a bit, as if she could see over their shoulders, get a picture of what was really going on.

She’d gotten called into his office because of her poem. It was the first poem she’d written since the first grade, when she used to think that ‘poem’ was a complicated

word involving many more than four of the letters between A and Z. Sometimes she'd had more fun throwing letters into 'poem' than she did with the actual piece. It was never the same after her teacher corrected her spelling, and eventually her interest had tapered off into chalk drawings and soccer games.

She'd known by the silence of the class that her lines about the way bubbles slowly disintegrated into the bath water, leaving the body revealed, hadn't quite been interpreted the way she'd intended. They thought she'd been raped. She'd insisted she hadn't and when he said he wanted to talk to her further she'd feared it was because he didn't believe her. Now, a half hour into their second meeting she had realized she was here because he did believe her. It was the questions that couldn't be answered with 'yes' or 'no' that he liked asking the most.

"You need to know that," he continued, holding her rejected poems in his fist. "You're dancing and you need to know that about yourself. I don't care, quite frankly. We can do this for the next twenty years, but you're playing a game. You're baiting me. You need to know that I know that."

She hadn't meant to bait him. She hadn't really meant to be here in the first place. She'd just wanted an easy A, a class in which to throw some words together about dew drops on grass and the way day faded into night. She hadn't planned on it getting personal.

In their first meeting he had asked her to write, just write, about anything. "You have something to say," he'd said, "and you need to find out what it is." She'd tried. And then she'd written about how she didn't feel that bothered, he only said she was. About



how she really wasn't into these touchy, feely, open-up-your-soul kind of things. She was just trying to be honest. He didn't seem to appreciate it.

Surely it was in retribution that he brought a graduate student to the next class. He glared at her as if to suggest she, in particular, should pay attention as this former druggie with Misfits patches all over his black hoodie read lines about lying on his back, high, watching the ceiling fan spin flaming bags of shit around and around. She'd never actually seen such a thing, of course, and yet somehow she understood exactly what it meant.

The following week she had to again report to his office, had to sit with him and write. Write, and not dance. She had to do this, he said, until she outgrew her dancing shoes, or graduated, whichever came first. She wasn't sure why she kept coming back, except for the fact that she couldn't escape the image of those flaming bags of shit. When the poem had been read in class she'd looked at him and he'd looked at her and she felt like, in that moment, he knew her even more deeply than she knew herself. And that was terrifying.

He wanted 'insignificant details:' doorways, sneakers, ankles. Particularly ankles, and how she'd broken hers during a soccer tryout and no one came to help when she fell. How her father got mad and didn't speak to her for a month. How she didn't blame her team or her coach for not acting sooner because everyone knew she always got up.

He'd written that line across the circumference of a white foam stress ball he'd found on the office floor. She got that "I always get up" thrown at her a lot, for reasons she was never sure of except he probably just liked hitting her in the head.

[white space]

Thumbelina

“Shit, it’s you.”

She replied without bothering to look up from her book. “Shit, it’s you.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

She looked up at him, towering over her, one shoulder leaning into the wall she was sitting against. She capped her highlighter and held up her psychology textbook.

“Studying. I hear they do that here.”

“Why are you on the floor?” He stopped. “No, wait, don’t answer that.”

She rolled her eyes. It probably *was* odd, sitting cross-legged on the wood floor of the English Building, but she’d started finding herself there more and more. She told herself the ambiance was better for creativity, for concentration, than that at her sorority house. The English Building used to be the girl’s dormitory in the early 1900s, when the university was first made co-ed. It still looked the part—red brick with ivy on the sides, white pillars, and randomly placed French doors, just for the sake of having French doors. They said there used to be a swimming pool in the basement, paved over when one of the girls drowned. Of course, then, it was said that she still haunted her old home. Sitting in the old hallways that smelled of mold and watching for just such a ghost had become, for her, the safest place on campus.

“It’s Friday,” he said.

“Yup.”

“You’re not drunk yet.”

She laughed before she could help it and then did her best to look smug. “All things in time.”

“You have plans tonight.”

“Yeah. I’m going to...”

“No. Listen. It wasn’t a question.”

“Excuse me?” She arched her eyebrows.

“Do you know Thumbelina?”

She shook her head but wasn’t really sure if she did or not. He nicknamed everyone in his classes—sometimes it was a pet’s name he thought was funny, sometimes it referenced an aspect of your appearance, sometimes it was just to make fun, the more derogatory the better. “Dickhead” was always reserved for his favorite male but “Sheepfucker” was fair game for either gender—which made it difficult to sort out who was who outside of the classroom.

“He’s not in your class, he’s in one of my other ones. Big guy—tall, fat, the whole deal. Awkward as hell. Can’t speak without stuttering. No idea how to approach social interaction.”

“Frizzy blonde hair? Carries a walking stick?”

“That’s the one. He’s a shithead who’ll never get a date. You’re going out with him tonight.”

She tucked her psych book back into her backpack and rose from the floor.

“You’re cracked,” she said and started for the doorway.

“He’ll pick you up at eight—better be out there waiting or he’ll make an attempt to come in that sorority house.”

“What are you trying to do to me?” She was still walking, now backwards, toward the quad outside.

“Nothing. That’s the point.” She paused and shifted her weight. “Thumbelina needs to take a fucking risk. Any risk. Go to some shithole that plays loud music. The kind of place that when you walk out people will be puking in the gutters. Let him pay. Let him be nervous and awkward and sweat through his shirt because he’s taking a sorority girl out. Let him see what being twenty looks like.”

They stared at each other a moment and then he retreated, headed back into the building’s newer section, towards the stairs that led to his office.

“Ten,” she called out after him. “Only geeks head out before that.”

Crying I

“What’s your deal, Pulaski?” he said, plopping down next to her on the wooden bench facing the campus quad.

She leaned forward, elbows on knees. “Nothing.” And as she snorted the word she pictured an Orca with its dorsal fin hacked off, flailing through the water unable to turn over.

They sat in silence for a time period she forgot to measure, one she realized was passing only when he spoke up to end it. “You can cry, you know, it’s okay to do that.”

She wasn't sure which event he was referring to: the grad school rejection letters followed by no interview-interest from either the FBI training program or Teach for America; the fact that she'd once had a plethora of futures to choose from and now had none; the return of her grandmother's breast cancer; her cheating boyfriend who had knocked up the wanna-be actress in his philosophy class. Or, maybe he wasn't responding to any of those things because she hadn't told anyone about them yet. Maybe it was just the look on her face. "I don't feel like crying," she told him.

"You know, *some*," he said, "might be developing the idea that you're a tad emotionally retarded. Worse than any stereotyped male. Really."

Looking over at him, she wasn't sure just how one might be encouraged to reply. She'd heard enough stories to know that he was always an asshole to prove a point. He'd mocked this guy, Cupcake, for being the class fatso until the guy ended up crying in his office and spilling about his mother's brain cancer, stage four. The only thing Cupcake had to do to pass the class from that point on was to interview his mom—about whatever he wanted—and write it down. He didn't even have to turn it in. She didn't know what his point was with her though—he couldn't give her a job, cure diseases, or make her boyfriend stop thinking with his dick. And if there was something beyond all that, something else he was driving at, she simply couldn't deal with opening any more floodgates, didn't even want to try. She looked away from him and shrugged.

He shook his head. "Okay," he said, adjusting the brim of his baseball cap before standing up. "Okay."

[white space]

Pulse

“You’re always doing that,” she said.

“What?”

“That, right there, that thing with your neck.”

“It’s nothing.”

She might have tried again except he silenced her by sticking his hand out, the way her father used to do across the front seat of the car when he had to stop too fast. There was a rustling in the bushes, maybe fifty yards away.

“Look,” he said, voice low. “There.”

Half a football field away was a deer. A real live Bambi looking deer—the first she’d ever seen that hadn’t been on the other side of a car window or a TV screen.

They’d run into each other on the far south end of campus, where the buildings spread out and the College of Agriculture had its farmland. It was a surprising coincidence—she was hardly ever up and working before noon and he’d always said the morning hours were his time to write. In class they had teased him about retreating to the woods behind his house, sitting with a notepad on a dew covered stump, trying to be all Walden-esque. But that morning she was on assignment for her photography class—wasting film and money trying to find new angles on corn stalks. He was meeting with some professor friends who specialized in that same dull corn. Research for a new collection of poems about Midwestern landscapes, he’d told her. She’d almost laughed, but then realized he was serious.

She didn't talk. She tried to breathe as softly and evenly as she could manage. Then she stepped towards it, slowly, as if the grass blades were what was sacred here. Three steps in and the deer stepped towards her too. She stopped. She stepped again and the deer stepped with her. "Oh," she breathed, frozen and unwilling to press her luck. "She's looking right at me."

Turning, wanting to know if he was seeing this, she caught him with his middle and index fingers pressed to the side of his neck. "There," she said. "Again," louder than she meant and in a voice that sounded oddly like her mother's.

He shook his head. "It's a heart thing, that's all."

She turned back and the deer was gone.

Why

"You need to ask questions," he told her as they walked through the quad towards the white pillared Student Union, five bucks on the line to determine whether or not Crispy M&M's came in blue or purple packaging. "Ask anything. Ask anyone. Ask constantly."

She leaned her head almost to her shoulder, squinting up at his eyes, shaded under the brim of his baseball cap. "Why?"

He smiled. "Exactly."

[white space]

## Question

The light press of the glass cooled her forehead as she watched the crowd of students thin; cornfields and cow pastures overtaking campus dorms and tennis courts.

He spoke first. “You gonna tell me what’s going on?”

An orange leaf brushed against the windshield wipers, hesitated a moment, and then pushed onward, leaving the Mazda undecorated as it continued down Lincoln Avenue in the bright sun of late afternoon.

She shrugged without caring if his eyes moved from the road in time to see the gesture. He was only trying to help, sure, but today she wasn’t in the mood.

“Fine.” He tapped the steering wheel with his thumbs, with the beat of the Stones coming through the stereo. “Parents? They’ve decided they can’t take your shit anymore and they’re selling you to a Cambodian brothel?”

“No.” She didn’t laugh and knew this bothered him.

“Drinking? Just another damn Polak, couldn’t stay off the vodka, huh?”

“No.”

“Boys? You’re pregnant? Out screwing around again and it finally caught up with you?”

She groaned. She hadn’t wanted to talk, only to turn her paper in and apologize for missing class. She knew that in his non-traditional world such a formality would be unnerving, but she went anyway, thinking formality might be just what she needed to get a grip on things. However, shortly after bumping heads with the rubber chicken hanging from the ceiling, she’d had second thoughts. The rabbis in the frame by the window



seemed somehow menacing this time, as if they'd turned their backs to her and shielded the paper with their arms.

He'd handed her a ballpoint from the pocket of his khakis, noting she'd forgotten to write her name across the top of the page, and they'd both watched the uneven formation of letters as her hands shook mildly but noticeably. She wasn't sure who'd been more taken aback by that.

Outside his office, they'd stood in silence at the top of the stairs. He hadn't smiled and she hadn't looked up past the fraying cuffs of his pants. When he told her that he had to go so that he could walk his dog, she said okay and began to move away from him, down the hall. He asked if she had any classes, anywhere to be, and if she didn't maybe she should come with him to get the dog. She said okay not because she wanted to talk to him but because she wanted to talk with the girls from the sorority house even less. Also because she knew without looking that he was staring out the staircase window as he said it. She wasn't sure exactly what he was thinking, doubted it was something as severe as envisioning her jumping through it, but as she'd watched her toes following his heels across the street outside, she couldn't help recall his story about checking himself into the Center, about being graded a D on the self-threat scale of A to F, about being left alone in a room after an orderly had come to take the laces off his sneakers and the belt from the loops of his pants. And she couldn't shake that image of his empty belt loops from her mind.

And now they were in his car, heading South toward a forested cluster of faculty homes, hidden unless you knew to look for them. He braked for a red light, shifted in his

seat, twisted his bulky torso to face her. “Talk.” His eyes were still friendly but his voice grew firm.

She sat in silence until the light turned green and the car surged forward. She leaned over, elbows digging into the flesh above her kneecaps, looking out of the corner of her eye at the untrimmed hairs of his beard. “I just—I mean, I guess I’m wondering—”

“Uh-oh, here it comes,” he said, mocking.

Another breath. “Do you—I mean—As a Jew—”

At that he roared with his head back, eyes forgetting the road. “Oh, shit! As a *Jew*! Listen to this!”

Feeling her face grow warm, she sank backwards into the seat cushion. “Fuck you.” She turned towards the window again.

Still snickering, he made a show of pretending to wipe his eyes. “Oh, no, no, no. This is too good. Go on, please, ask me, as a *Jew*.”

She turned to glare at him, pierced her gaze into the birthmark over his right eye. She felt cornered now, but knew there was no leaving the conversation unfinished. She began again, amidst laughter, this time racing her words in a single exhale. “As someone who’s *Jewish*, you need to tell me what you believe happens when someone dies.”

The corners of his lips didn’t move, but his voice went neutral. “Who?”

“Eli,” she said simply, not caring that he didn’t know who Eli was; that he didn’t know about the man in the stolen U-Haul who ran a red doing 90 in a 35; that he didn’t know about how Eli had called it, picked his fate by yelling shotgun on the way out of the store and how that didn’t matter at all, didn’t make it any easier to drive by the Jewel on

Camelot and see the white Star of David his friends had set up surrounded by balloons and bowling trophies and boxes of Little Debbie's.

"We don't know." He moved the car left, off the main road. He glanced at her sideways. "And that's going to bug the Catholic hell out of you."

She watched the trees go by and didn't tell him that she didn't really know Eli that well. That he was just a name she'd grown up having in the background of her life. The kind of thing that you don't notice till it's missing; till you find yourself furrowing your brow, biting your lip, stopping in the midst of actions, standing still and think, what?

He said something else but she didn't hear it. She didn't want *the* answer, she just wanted *an* answer, an answer that would fit Eli because suddenly everything she used to know didn't.

The only memory she could place Eli in at all had him playing basketball with her best friend's little brother. It had someone asking a question and Eli, palms covering the orange ball, squinting into the sun and his voice saying, yeah. Yeah. Nonchalant and soft under curls of black hair. Yeah.

That was all he was—boy with basketball—and yet his death shook her in a place she'd never felt before. And, for some reason, being in that office, watching her hand shake and seeing the way such movement screwed up her letters, made them almost impossible to read, had made something erupt within her.

Now that they had reached his house, the car sat idling in the drive. The house was a large two-story structure with lots of windows leading into lots of rooms. She stood leaning against the car's passenger door, wind shifting hairs into her eyes, his graying

golden retriever squatting happily over a spot of browned grass on the front lawn. She looked at the windows of the house, trying to see in against the glare, and tried to picture the dog moving from room to room, shedding on couches and beds. She wondered who helped him clean all the dog hair up. That many rooms couldn't belong just to him. But, best she could tell, there didn't seem to be anyone else home, at least not now.

"You need a place," he told her from his spot near the car's hood. "You need a place to put him."

She nodded, watching the dog move slowly across the grass, nose shifting through the dirt.

"There's comfort in the question."

"Hmm?" she said absently, lost in the motion of paws on lawn as the dog moved from the dirt into the open garage.

"It's how I reconcile the whole not-knowing thing—how I would guess Eli might have too. Sometimes it has nothing to do with the answers, sometimes you just need the right questions."

Before she could respond the wind picked up and from a dark corner of the garage the dog howled.

"Willa!" he yelled, turning toward the noise. "Come on, come back out here." He shook his head and shrugged. "The wind scares her."

The dog moved quickly into view and even more quickly to stand at his side. She suddenly appeared calm, though the wind continued to move leaves across the driveway.

“I don’t get it.” She bent down until she was eye level with Willa, ran a hand through her thick fur.

“When she’s outside, wind’s part of her universe. It’s natural. It doesn’t bother her and, maybe, she doesn’t even notice it. When she’s inside and can hear it, see it move things, but can’t feel it, she freaks out.”

From her position squatting next to the dog she looked up at him, grinned in spite of herself. “So, she’s not finding comfort in the question, huh?”

“Right....” he trailed off almost before the word was out, dropped his head back, and groaned towards the sky. “Shit. My dog’s a fucking Catholic.”

And at that she laughed.

Angus

“Oh, gross.” She interrupted his story—this one about standing barefoot in the snow of mountains in Idaho, socks in one hand, bottle of Jack in the other—as she pressed the automatic window button upward in attempt to preserve any untainted air left in the car.

This, of course, inspired him to not only move the window back down again, but to keep it there by hitting the child safety locks.

“Are you crazy? Roll the window up! It’s like raw sewage out there!”

He steered the car around the corner, grinning as the field came into view.

“Ladies, gents—”he looked at her pointedly—“and Polaks, we have cows!”

“Ugh, they’re stupid and they *smell*.”

“*You* smell. It’s only the brown ones with the white blotch on their foreheads that are stupid. You should see them run into a fence head on sometime, it’s a riot! They get all shaken up, turn around, do it again. You’d think they were imported from Poland or something.”

She sank further into the seat. “I’d stick my tongue out at you, but ingesting this stench isn’t worth the satisfaction.”

“See that Angus over there? You must be cousins. A definite family resemblance.”

“Angus?”

“Yeah, the ugly black one, next to the fence.”

She looked at him and then back at the cows. “So Angus is...”

He looked at her quizzically, finishing her statement slowly, “the name of that kind of cow. What? You’ve never heard of Angus?”

“I’ve heard of it. I just thought, well, I thought Angus was like Kleenex—”

“You thought a cow was a Kleenex?”

“No, I thought ‘Angus’ was like ‘Kleenex’ or ‘Band-Aid’ or—well, I mean I thought it was a brand name.”

“What?” His laughter rumbled, unsuppressed, through the small car.

“It’s on TV!” she yelled defensively. “You see it all the time—‘100% Angus beef!’”

His laughter continued. “What, do you live in a box?”

She sank back, defeated. “I think they call it suburbia.”

He thumped the steering wheel as the car left the pasture behind. “Oh man—”

“Well it’s not like I don’t know stuff! We just didn’t have cows!”

He sucked in a few breaths to get himself under control, before turning to her, serious but still grinning, “You got a lot of catching up to do if you ever want to start asking things that are worthwhile.”

“And apparently,” she retorted, her gaze once again out the passenger side window, “it starts with cattle.”

Sunrise

“You’ve never seen the sun rise?” He arched the wirey, grey hairs of his brows up, while the deep browns of his eyes remained on the empty road. She turned her gaze there too, away from him, and watched the white reflectors sparkle in the Mazda’s headlights.

“Well.” She felt defensive all of a sudden, worried about what hole in her character she might have unknowingly revealed. “I mean, I’ve *seen* the sun rise, you know, like I’ve been awake and doing—” She paused for a moment. “Whatever, while it’s getting lighter out.” She sighed and ran her thumb over the edge of the looseleaf she’d jotted the airport’s directions on, daring paper cuts. Normally, he’d told her, it was only graduate students he’d take to the airport, especially so early in the morning, but she’d been in a jam and he’d agreed to help her out. The shadows of cornfields stood stiff in the windless morning outside her window, like soldiers at attention, watching the lone car pass by. She was reminded of her youth now, an obvious thing that was still so easy

to forget, and its weight built around her, as if ready to push her overboard into the sea of corn. “It’s just that,” she started and shrugged, trying to work her way back into the space she had felt so comfortable occupying just moments ago. “I’ve never actually *watched* it, you know.”

He glanced at her briefly, but said nothing more, and she was glad. She envied him and he knew it. Or he knew something like it, she was sure. He had done big things in his life—gotten degrees, traveled the world, met famous people, published books—but that wasn’t exactly what unnerved her.

Before college, she’d lived her entire life inside of the same white bedroom walls at the end of the same beige carpeted hall inside of the same grey split level house on the curve of the same tree lined cul-de-sac. She’d loved that life—still did—but, at times like this she was angered by it, worried it might be keeping her from the invisible checklist of things that made up a life.

“You owe me breakfast for this you know. Normally my cab service doesn’t start before dawn.”

“Hey, hash browns at McDonald’s are ninety-nine cents. Pick an exit and go nuts.”

“You know, you were much nicer when I first met you.”

“You were just as much of an ass.”

He beamed and scrunched his shoulders up tight, until they almost met his earlobes. “Thanks.”



Slowly, over the miles that passed, the sky's shade faded from cool to warm and the world brightened timidly before them. She let out a soft, "huh," as the fiery orange ball pushed further and further past the horizon, because it really was just that—fiery. She blinked against the haze that seemed to cover its circumference, squinting to see if such an effect was legitimate or the insistence of imagination and expectation. "It looks like it does in the movies," she heard herself say.

"Pick your jaw up, Polak. Welcome to the AM," he said, squinting at a road sign.

She continued to watch, enamored with the world outside the car window. However, she also noticed herself biting down inadvertently on the inside of her lip. It was the little things, like this—his having seen so many sunrises that the mere act was unnoticeable, the casual ownership of a well used passport, the barefoot fishing off a pier, the eating Chinese takeout right out of the box—it was these things that made her feel unbearably naïve, as if, throughout her twenty-one years she'd never actually lived at all.

## Scars

They were sitting on a bench facing the quad—the same bench where not so long ago he'd told her it was okay to cry and she'd said no. This time, it was her who'd found him.

After a long silence he pulled on the brim of his baseball cap. "I don't want them to take my scars," he said.

"Yes, you do," she said.

He was having surgery soon, he'd told her, minor surgery—as minor as procedures involving the heart can be—to remove built up scar tissue from the bypass he'd had done years earlier.

Students shuffled past, on their way to and from classes, cell phones out, iPod earbuds in. A squirrel clung to the bottom branch of an oak tree nearby, watching them all, waiting for crumbs. In the tower of the Union the bells started to ring in the new hour.

She kicked at a bottle cap that lay on the ground in front of her. She considering asking about all the people—parents, siblings, children, a wife—who might carry this conversation better. But she didn't. Some questions begged to be unasked. So she said, “It'll be okay.”

## Crying II

The morning after it happened, after she had gotten a call from a friend of a friend who happened to be there at the time, she set her alarm for six. This was his time, his hour. She placed the call and could tell he wasn't sure how to react, wasn't sure what she knew. He tried to rib her about being awake before noon.

“I'm sorry,” she said, in the midst of his harassment.

He fell silent on the other end of the line. “If you're sorry,” he said—and she knew he was measuring his words—“then that means you know something. Do you know something?”

“Yeah,” she said.

He was quiet for a long time before he said, “I actually loved that fucking dog.”

“I know.”

“I put her under a tree in the backyard. I might put a bench or something nearby. I haven’t decided yet—”

“That’s nice.”

“I couldn’t do it till morning. I sat with her body all night. Me and this lifeless thing, waiting for daylight to hit. It wasn’t Willa at all—” his voice trailed off and she choose not to fill the void. She listened closely to the puffs of breath on the other end of the line as they grew shorter and lost their evenness, a light jostling that made her think he was pacing from room to room as they spoke.

Finally his voice came back. “I’m not crying,” he said.

She nodded even though he couldn’t see her. “Okay,” she said.

## Birds

She often thinks of a time, not when she first met him and not now, but somewhere mid-way through, when they had been walking to his car on a day clouded in gray. There had been birds in the sky, small black birds, but not blackbirds, and all of the same kind.

She didn’t notice them, didn’t notice anything, until she reached his car, tugged on the passenger door handle and found it still locked.

Looking up, she saw him staring at the sky above the construction site across the street. A new apartment building was in the works—foundation laid, bulldozer resting in the dirt. The birds flew in a single circle around each other, tight movements over and

over, surrounding a patch of insects, food, tiny enough to be invisible to the humans below unless you knew to look. As they flew they squawked and called, almost obnoxiously so. They were waiting, she would discover, to eat, honing a sense of patience.

She didn't know this then, not yet. She had never seen such a thing before. She was sure of that.

"Pulaski," she heard him call without turning, "c'mere and learn something."

She released the door handle and, at his urging, stepped forward.

## The Waterfall Game

The last time I saw Nick was an accident. I'd been nominated by a few of my professors to attend a woman's leadership conference and, even though the trip would only take me as far as Wisconsin, I figured, why not? My mother had come to get me after it was over and she suggested we treat ourselves on the way back to Illinois, that we spend a few hours in the flashing lights and ringing bells of a casino or two. The idea made me laugh because such spontaneity was completely out of character for her and, she thought, for me too, and all of that seemed reason enough to say yes.

We played slots until we each lost all the cash we had on hand. Our 'few hours' had lasted a mere forty minutes, but she was still laughing as she left to bring the car around and I ventured to find a bathroom. I turned a corner and was almost knocked over by a wall of green sweater. "I'm sorry," the sweater said as I stumbled. I looked up. "Oh," it said.

"Oh," I repeated. Its owner stood more than a foot past my head, pale enough to be translucent, with eyes that seemed to sink further the harder you looked. "Nick," I said.

"Hi," he said and pushed his arm up against the wall in an attempt to quiet the shaking of his hands. His eyes kept moving, jackrabbits that'd been spooked.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Who are you here with? What are you doing?” I might have kept asking questions but he started to move away.

“I have to go,” he said, turning. Then he looked back. “I hear you’re in college.”

I nodded dumbly.

“Just,” he said, turning from me again. “Don’t have too much fun.”

When I joined my mother in the car and told her what had happened she just shook her head. “It must be hard,” she said, moving the car out of the parking lot, “living with that much guilt. I can’t imagine. Can you?”

I didn’t reply because I didn’t want her to know that I could. I didn’t want her to start speculating how much of all this might have been my fault.

We were bored, which is how most things worth finishing start, at least in my experience. My cousins were over, our moms were talking in the kitchen, and, as usual, I was following Nick and his little sister Allison up and down the stairs. They were fascinated, again and still, with houses having two floors. But then Nick slipped near the stairs as we were walking from bedroom to bedroom and once he had righted himself, we laughed at the panic that had gripped his face. “What if you fell!” Allison said in a way that was not very question-like at all. And he looked at us and said, “what if I did?” with a voice full of challenge. We had no answer because he was big and we were small and such questions only ever went one way.

His face grew stiff and I didn’t feel like laughing anymore. “Stay here.” He pointed to our sneakers, to the spot where they dug into the worn carpet at the top of the

stairs, and the two of us sat down cross-legged, following orders. He wiped his palms over the front of his White Sox t-shirt, the black already fading to gray from cheap detergent and constant wear. He turned his back to us and stared down the stairs, reminding me for some reason of a conductor, of Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia*, of a man with a baton who could move things any which way the music in his mind led. “This,” he said, and I looked at the brown of the stairway carpet as if I’d never seen it before, “this has to be big. Something very big.” It sounded strange, but he was twelve and I figured he was just onto something I couldn’t see.

Allison looked up. “Like an elephant?” She was six and could still get away with that.

“No,” he said without turning back to look. “It has to be a *thing*. A thing to fall down.”

I remembered a man, a bearded skinny guy I’d seen on TV. He’d talked about seeing Canada out of a barrel and my dad had called him a redneck screw-ball. “Like Niagara?” I said. “Those guys that go over the edge?”

Nick turned, his LA Gear sneakers lighting up in the heels with each of his movements. “No barrel.” He pointed at me and I thought about how my mom would tell him to wash the dirt out from under his nails before he could go any further. “A waterfall. Now that’s an idea.”

“Niagara Falls?” I said.

“No,” he said, lowering himself to his knees. “That’s been done. I don’t know the name of any others. Do you?”

Allison and I shook our heads. We were children from land-locked Illinois towns. We'd never even seen the Lake, let alone a waterfall. Swimming pools were the biggest body of water we had and even those were straight and flat.

"Then fine," he said. "We'll just say 'waterfall.' The Waterfall Game. That'll do." He stretched himself slowly down the length of the stairs, moving his feet to the middle of the staircase, his palms squishing the rug down at the top where we sat. "I'm going to fall," he said.

"Fall?" Allison moved so she was on her hands and knees, their faces almost touching.

"I'm falling down the waterfall and you"—he turned from her to look at me—"you have to save me."

"Me?" I said, also moving onto all fours. "Why?"

"Yeah," Allison pouted, sitting back on her heels. "Why her?"

"That's how we're playing." He shrugged. "Besides, this whole thing was your idea."

That wasn't true. It had been his idea; I'd just made a simple comment along the way. But it no longer mattered what had actually happened and even at seven I knew that. As soon as his words were spoken they created a reality more real than the truth.

Nick let himself start to slide. I leapt forward, stretching my torso as far over the top stair as I dared and swung my hand down to try to grasp onto his. I missed. He slid further away, and the bottom of his t-shirt caught on the edge of a stair. The pale of his stomach pressed into stair after stair, an indent creasing the flesh just above the



bellybutton, the skin reddening as it scraped against the harsh hairs of carpet, while his body picked up speed on the fall.

“Save him!” Allison yelled at me.

I didn’t answer. I didn’t want to take the time. I stretched, knowing that if I got to him I’d probably fall too. I felt the pads of my fingertips brush his. “Grab on!” I shouted at him.

In that instant, I swear I saw him smile. Then he shook his head, brown bowl cut flopping over his ears. Next to me Allison screamed as we watched him fall away from us until the black rubber soles of his sneakers hit the bottom. He flopped onto his back and lay there, covering my mother’s mock oriental rug, his hands outstretched, his knees bent.

“Nick? Nick, are you okay?” Allison asked.

I remained still, stupidly, my hand outstretched to nothing.

“Nope,” his voice came from the bottom of the staircase, as he stared not at us but up at the ceiling, “I’m gone.”

Allison looked at me. “I bet I could have saved him,” she said before standing and making her way down the stairs, stepping over her brother at the bottom.

I don’t remember the first time I met Nick. I guess that’s assumed with family members, like they’ve existed since always. Family, it seems, makes you something more than just people, or maybe less. I often wondered if Nick remembered meeting me. He was my mother’s cousin’s boy—the eldest and only male—and while I’m sure there’s a

term for that, I don't know it. My family was never much for technicalities. In or out, as my father used to say, make up your mind.

More complicated is the fact that I never actually liked Nick. I didn't like that he took all the good colors when we made chalk drawings in the summer, leaving me with white and yellow, and convincing me that I could draw a picture that wouldn't fade. I didn't like that he always stole Park Place when we played Monopoly and insisted he hadn't. I didn't like that he read *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* out loud when I went over to his house to play and when I would remind him that my mom said those were devil things he'd pretend not to hear me and read louder. Then, by eleven, he was the kind of kid who was really into stamp collecting. So much so that for his birthday that year his mom and mine spent seven hours one afternoon baking, shaping, and food coloring a test cake and then a real cake to look like something from 1932 that they kept describing as mint. My father also partook, spending forty-five minutes after church talking to a man who looked old enough and Italian enough to have been the real, live Geppetto. He said if my father was interested in stamps he could get him the congregation price.

I tried to get into it too then, just to see how little scraps of paper could make you so important, and so my dad showed me how to hold envelopes over boiling water so the steam could lift the stamp off the page, edge by edge. But there were no more cakes made and my father didn't conspire with any old Italians on my behalf, and eventually I lost interest. My mother said Nick had more patience than I did and maybe it would be a hobby I'd grow into. I told her if I was going to grow into waiting for glue to melt I'd be

happy to stay short. Nick, however, did grow. Not just into patience and stamp collecting, but, by age sixteen, into a size fifteen shoe. And, for the next few years, he even kept going from there. At 6'8" or 6'9", wherever it was he ended up when the trouble started, he'd grown into someone that was like no one my family had ever known. But, then, maybe that was the point.

We should have bonded more, I'm sure. We were cousins, after all. But even when we were in the same room, Nick always seemed far away. He stayed with me just once when he was fourteen and I was nine. The two of us spent most of the awful night having variations of the same failed conversation. He sat in the Lazy Boy and stared blankly at the TV while I stood around awkwardly, searching the walls for inspiration.

Afterwards, I told my mom that trying to talk to Nick was like trying to unhook snow pants with mittens on when you were near bursting with pee. She stared at me strangely, and never invited him to come stay again. I'm sure this had a ripple effect of sorts, but at the time I was too pleased with myself to care. Now it's too late to tell because in our family the past, as my mother says, stays just where it belongs. And that's that.

There were only a few times, besides those when we were young enough to play the waterfall game, that Nick and I actually had a multi-syllabic exchange. In one, I was over at his house—moving carefully through the hallways because whenever I moved too fast or stepped too heavily their grandfather clock chimed out of sync and the whole house shook. "We have a stronger foundation, that's all," my mother would explain. I

was passing by the laundry room, in which there was no crucifix, when Nick's mother called me over. I stayed on the carpeted side of the doorway while I waited for her to tell me what she wanted. I didn't want to think of the room's bare blue walls as a big deal, but I did. My mother always insisted it couldn't be a true Christian household unless there was a cross in every room, so that anyone who came through could tell—just by looking at the walls—that you had not been lost. Nick's mother handed me a stack of t-shirts. "Can you put these in Nick's room for me? Do you mind?" I accepted the stack, still warm from the dryer, but must have seemed uneasy because she said, "oh it's fine, just knock, he'll let you in."

I did knock but tried to do so softly, so that he wouldn't hear and I could I leave the stack next to the door and go back to flipping through magazines with Allison. However, the door must not have been all the way shut, because as soon as I made contact, it swung open.

I took a step in before thinking. I told myself I'd just put the shirts on the end on the bed and leave. Except there was something wrong with the bed. The red spread that covered the twin mattress hung down to the floor and its surface was covered in small, narrow, lumps, as if it were shielding a whole farm of worms beneath its skin. I reached out to touch one; it didn't move, it didn't squish. I set the laundry on the floor and sank to my knees. Finding the end of the spread I held it tight in both hands and slowly peeled it up, trying to disturb whatever was there as little as possible. I had almost unveiled it when I heard the door slam behind me.

I jumped and the cover flew back as a result. The bed sheet slowly shifted and first one, then two, then five cigarettes fell to the floor by my sneakers. I looked at Nick, whose hand was still on the doorknob, and back down at the floor by my feet. Something in my gut felt tight. My mother, scrubbing the kitchen floor in our home three towns over, without a doubt knew this moment was happening. I was sure of it. I was also sure that, somehow, in her mind, this would all become my fault.

“They’re not worms,” I heard myself say and immediately bit down on my bottom lip. I may not have liked Nick, but he was fifteen and in high school, and I wanted him to at least know that, at ten, I wasn’t a baby like he said his sister was. I didn’t care, really, if he liked me either, but I did want him to understand that I’d made it to double digits and that meant something.

“No,” he said, walking into the room. “They’re not.” He stood in front of me. “What are you doing in here?”

I nodded at the pile of shirts on the floor. “Your mom said to put these in here.”

He bent down and picked the cigarettes up from my feet. He stared at them a moment, thinking. Then he put one in the soft fleshy space between each of his fingers and held his fist out to me. With the white sticks shooting out of his hand like that he reminded me of a creature from the X-Men, one that wasn’t from around here at all. “Want one?” he said.

I felt myself jerk up and back and bit the inside of my cheek again. “No,” I said before I could think of a better answer, not quite a yes, of course, but something along the lines of a maybe with a reason. Something to help me gain a little ground. But all I could

think of was my mother and how if one of those very non-worm things even touched me they'd leave a mark that she'd be able to see.

"No," he repeated. "Of course not."

I knew what I was supposed to do next. He knew it too. I think he was waiting for it actually, after he moved his fist back to his side and stood still, inches from me, our toes nearly touching. I sometimes wonder what might have happened if I had acted then. If I had fulfilled my role. If I had gone to get his mother.

But I said, "So where'd you get them, anyway?"

He seemed to breathe out with a rush. He smoothed the blanket back over his bed and moved towards his desk, tucking the five that had fallen loose into a drawer.

"School."

I don't know why that made me feel like something had been answered, like the impact had been deflated, but it did. High school, I knew, was not going well for Nick. People were mean to him, my mother had told me, because he was so tall. They pointed and laughed and asked him dumb questions like, "how's the weather in that hemisphere?" Sometimes they knocked bottom row lockers into his shins.

He pulled something off his desk. "You like Metallica?" he asked, holding up a CD. I nodded. I'd heard them a few times. My mother saw them once, on MTV, and banned their over-pierced, tattooed selves from entering my periphery. "Satanic," she'd said, and added them to the growing list of things that she felt belonged in that category. Angry music and rock bands that swore too much were at the top of her list these days, but things like Tai Kwon Do, unicorns, and even a few cartoons had also made the list as

I'd been growing up. "Once you invite the devil in," she'd say, "it's not so easy to get him out."

"You can have this," Nick said, holding the CD out to me. It was white, with the band's name written in black marker. "I burned it awhile ago," he said, "and then I thought I lost it so I bought the real thing."

"Really?" I said. "You're giving this to me?" Nick had never given me anything. He hadn't even bothered to sign his name to the generic birthday and Christmas cards his mom sent me.

"Sure," he said, grinning. "What are cousins for?"

I reached for it. Then I pulled back.

"What?" he asked.

"I can't," I said. "My mom—" I bit my lip again. I hated having to let him know that my mother was still the reason I couldn't do certain things. But I hadn't thought of another excuse fast enough and there was no way I could risk bringing hard evidence into the house.

"Okay," he said. Then he turned back to his desk. "Here." He pulled a black Sharpie from the drawer. I moved to stand next to him as he bent over the disk. He scratched out 'Metallica' and, smiling, wrote 'Backstreet Boys' instead. He handed it back to me. "If she finds it, she'll never know."

I wanted to tell him he wasn't fooling anybody. My mother, after all, was strict and maybe crazy, but not dumb. I should have told him a lot of things that day. But I wanted the CD and, more to the point, I wanted to take it from him. So I did. And then he

put a hand on my back and moved me toward the door. I might've liked to have stayed but there was something hypnotizing about Nick's fingers curling around my shoulder blade. He barely had to touch me in order to push me where he wanted and that connection moved me all the way back to the door. He let go slowly, one finger and then another, and then, without a word, turned back towards his desk. I suppose I could have crossed through the doorway again, found reason to stay, but I worried what would happen if I pushed my luck.

When my mom came to pick me up I stuck the CD under my shirt and when I got home I went to my room, shut the door, and stuck it between the mattress and box spring. I thought of it periodically, took it out sometimes when my father was at work and my mother was at the store, and ran my finger over the Sharpie's marks. Now and then my nails would hit the miniscule grooves in the plastic just so and it would make a high sound that I considered almost as good as a musical note. I'd stretch the sounds out by slowly tracing the upstroke of the letters and then letting my finger fall quickly on the down stroke. I never dared to play it.

My mother always said that God doesn't give us anything we can't handle and that point seemed to be proven as Nick became an upperclassman. He was recruited for the volleyball and basketball teams, because no coach believed that a kid that tall couldn't be made into an athlete. He got a job in retail as well, although neither the work or the sports lasted more than a year. He could draw though, and sometimes I wished I could have done that. There was one picture in particular that always struck me as great.



It was framed above the couch in his family's living room—a train winding over tracks, through a mountain covered in snow, the green of pine poking through drifts as the engine moved into the left corner of the page and away from us. I mean, not just A-in-art class-great, but could-make-some-cash-great. His mother saw me staring at it once—“isn't it impressive? People tell me all the time it looks like something I bought in an art store.” I tried not to look at her. “It's nice,” I said and left the room as quickly as I could, the grandfather clock banging after me, and tried not consider how Nick could have probably hung up a picture of crayoned stick figures and people would have reacted much the same. Regardless, this picture wasn't of stick figures and it wasn't in crayon and it was good and I was, unfortunately, jealous.

What I couldn't turn my back on was his newspaper column. He had a dry wit that wasn't necessarily better or snappier than other writers, but he was the only one who didn't care about the repercussions of what he put down in type. He'd do anything for a punch line, going so far as to make things up if he had to. His junior year he hacked into the school's computer system and reset the wallpaper of every teacher's computer screen to show up as his school picture. He got a lot of weird looks and headshakes when he walked the halls, but it was notoriety, no matter the form, and he loved it. His mother and my mother seemed happy he was talking to people in the hallway and getting the occasional phone call at home, but they were clearly surprised by the sudden shedding of his recluse shell. Every kid has an ugly duckling stage, they said, and Nick must have done away with the last fragments of his. But I wasn't surprised. And Allison wasn't. If we'd told them about the waterfall game, they might have known what we did.

Then, one semester he went for bigger, in the process doing away with better, by running a column mocking the show choir's sexuality, raising questions of the vice principal's fidelity, and somehow throwing the school's Muslim and Hispanic populations into the mix in a conversation about head-covered lawn mower riding. Their house was egged, his mother received a death threat made out of letters cut from magazines, and his sister's bike tires were slashed while she was in class at the middle school. He was suspended, of course, and had to write an apology column, which was predictably well-written and shockingly—or not so shockingly—completely unapologetic. Forget high school: everyone in his town now knew exactly who Nick was. And I was envious of the way he could manipulate words into power. Envious of the way he could make people give him exactly what he wanted. Envious that this was his life while my teacher had just called my mother and told her she thought I might be more comfortable moving down a level in language arts. The slower pace would suit me, the teacher had said. I was a reject and Nick, I knew, would be famous. He was too good not to be, and though I never spoke with Nick about a single column he wrote, I got a copy of every one from my mother and kept them in a shoebox under my bed, looking at them at night by flashlight, trying to break the code in his words.

The closest I'd ever come to confronting my mother's opinions about Nick happened right before he left for college and he totaled his parents' minivan. Or, rather, the minivan was totaled while he was driving it. That's the way he told it to his mother who told it to my mother who recounted it to me. *He* didn't do anything wrong, of course. A group of Mexicans, he told his mother, riding down 53, hit him head-on. They barely

spoke English, he said, and the only thing he could make out was that they didn't have any insurance to show. Bad karma, bad luck, it was just one of those things, and his parents had to pay for the whole mess while the immigrant bandits, as Nick termed them, disappeared into the night.

If the story didn't actually have consequences, if Nick's parents didn't have to forego their anniversary trip to pay for the van repair, I might have laughed at it all. A week went by and I waited, silently, for someone to object. Another week went by as I waited for a report to be submitted to the insurance, for the company to then call back with questions of inconsistencies. But nothing happened. Finally, I couldn't take it. Something had to give. While folding laundry, I asked my mother if she'd believe me if I told such a story.

"Probably," she said. "It depends."

That there was a hint of doubt in whether or not she'd believe the tale was insulting, no matter how you looked at it. "Depends on what?" I asked.

She shrugged, picking up a stack of clean t-shirts and leaving to carry them upstairs. "The devil's in the details, you know."

I knew.

I'd always known more of the details than any of them but kept silent so Nick could become the first person I ever knew to go to college. He majored in journalism and I knew it would make him famous someday. His parents set him up in one of DePaul's nicest dorms and Allison and I visited him the first month he was there, taking the

Amtrak up to the city and following our map over and across the gridded streets. When we found his dorm he met us outside and took us for lunch. I knew I was staring up at him in awe and I resented myself for it but, running after him as he moved across intersections without hesitating, without looking both ways, I couldn't help it. I wanted to get close enough to know what that felt like—knowing, just knowing that, for him, the traffic would stop. And it always did.

He took us to Potbelly's, a place I'd never been, and ordered for us. It may have been a chain restaurant, but the fact that it was in the city made it seem like it was the only sandwich place in the world. And the people who came in to eat here seemed like the only people who mattered. And if this was all that existed, it seemed okay to nod at whatever Nick said.

"See that dude there?" He pointed to a group of suit-jacketed blonde goatees and I nodded even though I had no idea which one he was singling out. "I saw him on the El the other day. Couldn't figure out his stop. Kept checking that Blackberry—stupid thing doesn't do you much good if you don't even know what you're searching for." I wasn't following but I kept nodding.

Nick flicked the pickles off of his sandwich and let them pile up in a heap on top of the waxy paper over his tray. I tried to will him to look at me looking at them. He chewed absently, a piece of sprout hanging off his lower lip.

"He stayed on too long." He swallowed and took a drink of soda and then kept it there, straw stuck in his mouth as he talked. "He was on the red line—did I say that?" He didn't wait for me to respond. "Stayed on past the point where everyone like him had

gotten off, you know what I mean?” Nick raised an eyebrow and I looked away, bit into my sandwich and chewed slowly, watching the pickles still sitting untouched on his tray. I didn’t know what he meant. But I did know that if Nick knew this about the goatee man then he must have stayed on “too long” too. Nick was trying to talk over my head, so pleased with how city-suave he sounded that he was becoming completely lax in what details he let slip. He was waving red flags right in front of my face and it would have been so easy to figure out what he was up to, to bring him back from whatever mess he was sliding into. It was my responsibility.

I looked up at him and heard myself ask, “Can I have your pickles?”

Shortly thereafter, he called home to say he’d been robbed, knocked down on the El on his way to Chinatown, the only place in the city that sold the kind of medicine balls he liked. He needed cash, new credit cards, and a new cell phone. It was almost funny—picturing his towering frame sprawled across the aisle of an El car, his size 15 shoes sticking up halfway to the ceiling, in my mind. Then, the next year, after he’d moved out of the dorms and into an apartment complex off campus, taking our old living room couch with him because my mom thought it would be nice if it stayed in the family, he was robbed again. The TV, VCR, stereo, even his watch was fine, but cash, credit, and cell needed another round of replacements. The city, he told his parents, was everything they’d ever warned him about and he was going to start taking his mother’s advice, carry his money folded up in his gym shoes, unlace every time he wanted a cup of coffee. Poor

Nick, his mother would tell mine, he tries so hard, he's having such bad luck. It takes a certain kind of person to make it in that city, but darn it, she felt like Nick could be it.

It was around that time that I tried to take up stamp collecting again. I wanted to see if my mother had been right—if I'd grown into patience, into being like Nick. I did well for awhile, steaming the stamps off of every piece of mail in the house, and pasting them into a notebook, but I grew bored quickly. No doors opened to me because I started hoarding used stickers. No one thought I should move to the city. No one thought I had what it took. My parents didn't seem to notice this time; they just let the subject fade. Something about it had lost its allure.

When things changed, in an obvious, undeniable way, it seemed to happen suddenly and without warning. Even though that wasn't true.

Nick had become a 'bad boy,' my mother told me one day, as if she was talking about a five year old who'd stolen a cookie before dinner. But then, I suppose, how is a mother supposed to sound when she's speaking of grand theft auto, robbery, heroin, and assault, among the nameable charges? My mother first broke the news to me as we crossed paths in the narrow upstairs hallway of our house, not able to wait until we both reached a common destination, not able to find a way to approach the topic subtly, calmly, or some such adverb that avoids the calamity of what our discussion contained. We were within reach of the spot where, years ago, Nick had first fallen in the waterfall game. She was crying, but it didn't take much to make her chin bunch up beneath her quivering bottom lip and so I figured any number of things could have been coming. It

was the way she stood that unnerved me more—she kept her feet planted in the middle of the hallway’s carpet, arms hanging at her sides. If she’d leaned on either wall or pushed her arms into some stance—crossed or pocketed—she would have been readable, familiar.

I stood facing her—waiting for it—whatever *it* was, my back to the pale wallpaper, faded vertical designs that made a zipping sound when you ran your nails across them, endlessly entertaining for a child. I kept my eyes above her left shoulder watching my own childhood face—a bronze schoolhouse hanging on the wall with wallet size school pictures ascending through the years of my youth. At fifteen, I had just two more high school pictures to collect. One photo in particular stood out—on picture day in the first grade I was sick, home from school for weeks. The picture package prepaid, my mother loaded me into the minivan and drove me anyway. I was miserable and the photographer gave up trying to get me to smile. Now, forever, I am framed pneumonia-faced with straight lined, tight lips. When I was climbing back into the van afterwards, jerking hard on the sliding door’s handle, something made me laugh and my mother was furious, wanting to know why I couldn’t have just done that in there. Why I’d insisted on throwing \$34.95 down the drain. It was one of the worst sins of my youth.

“Nick,” she said now. “Your cousin. He’s done terrible things. Terrible.” Her hands flopped into the air before splatting back at her sides. They did this a few times. Over and over, as if they were trying to fly away but couldn’t figure out where to go.

“What’s terrible?”

“He’s in jail.” She looked at me directly for the first time and started crying harder then, her face reddening. “And not just jail—Cook County Jail!”

“Seriously?” I moved forward a bit, lifting my weight from the wall. I couldn’t help being a little excited, just briefly. Nick was the first person I’d known to go to jail. I had a cousin in jail and not everyone could say that. For the briefest of moments I couldn’t believe my luck. But the sensation was fleeting. “Wait, for what?”

“Do you know what kind of *people* are in Cook County Jail?” She didn’t wait for an answer; she moved from the hallway, wiping under her eyes with both hands, and walked into her bedroom, seating herself on the blue pleated bedspread.

“What’d he do?” I asked.

She looked at me. “Everything.”

I know she kept talking, but I don’t remember what actually clicked the pilot light on my sense of alarm. Maybe it was no particular thing, but a gradation over time. Maybe it wasn’t any of the actual crimes he’d committed, but some of the results—his parent’s house being broken into as former ‘friends’ searched for drug money or his expulsion after only two years at DePaul University. But then, in that moment, standing in my mother’s bedroom while she cried, I thought suddenly of Potbelly’s sandwiches, of the toasted bread with the melted cheese and the abundance of pickles that could no longer just be food. And, before anything else, I was mad at Nick on behalf of my favorite turkey sandwich—light mayo, hold the mustard—because I knew at the word “heroin” it would never be allowed to taste the same again.

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Nick served only a year or so of his sentence. He ‘found religion’ or something of that nature, which helped in his parole hearing. I thought that was a strange thing for a guy to suddenly find when he’d spent his childhood surrounded by it. “Whatever helps him,” my mother said.

Whatever it was he actually found seemed to get lost pretty quick. After a month or two of living at home he wasn’t allowed back, under threat of police involvement. Their house kept getting broken into, not exactly robbed, but things like mattresses slashed and dresser drawers thrown askew. The connection was made early but denied until it became undeniable. Nick wasn’t clean at all and owed many things to many people, who were coming to take it back.

“They finally abandoned him?” I asked my mother, watching her skin potatoes in the kitchen. She was setting up to mash pounds upon pounds of them for my senior banquet.

“*He* abandoned *them*,” she said. “But just until he gets cleaned up,” she added. He was family.

We don’t know where Nick went during that time, but he reappeared periodically, my mother telling me weekly stories of which relative had seen him last, and where he’d show up outside bedroom windows, or by their cars in the parking lots of their work, occasionally even knocking on their front doors.

“He’s looking for money,” my mother told me. “We can’t give him any. His mother insists. He needs to break this habit.” She stopped slicing for a moment but didn’t look up.

“You think he’ll come here?” I asked.

She shook her head and started moving the potatoes around the cutting board again. “He knows your father too well for that. The police would be here in an instant.”

I nodded. Nick wasn’t really my dad’s family after all. It was just a because of marriage kind of thing. “But,” I said, “still—”

“If he does?”

“Yeah.”

She didn’t look at me. “Call the police. That’s what you’re supposed to do.”

I tried to catch her eye, the only way I felt I could understand her words, but she dried her hands on her apron and left the room.

Depending on the day, the moment, the hour, I could come up with a different answer, derived from a different set of reasoning, as to whether or not I could actually call the police on my cousin. None of it ever seemed like the right answer, it was always just *an* answer, something to tell yourself so you’re not just sitting in silence wondering what—like pulling petals, he loves me, he loves me not. Sometimes I thought about it lying in bed at night, watching the headlights of passing cars play shadow tricks on the wall. Sometimes I thought about it while warming up for basketball practice, sinking 50 block shots in a row before moving on to free throws. Sometimes I thought about it while mixing mushrooms into pasta sauce for dinner, splattering red bits along the stove, somehow never able to get them all wiped away before my mother found the evidence of my haphazardness. Always, though, I thought about it while sitting in the social studies

resource room of my high school during fourth period study hall—that large basketball court sized space where all the teachers’ desks sat and from which the triangle shaped classrooms sprang off. Sitting at one of those long brown tables, plastic painted to look like wood, I’d wait in that pencil-tapping distracted way that was quickly becoming habit, stare at empty blue lines on white paper that seemed to almost fade before me as the hands crawled around the face of the wall clock.

Over time, other things pushed themselves to the forefront of my thinking, but that’s not to say it went away. It never went away. It mystified my college roommate when, during a trip to the mall, I was pushed out of the way by a grey-hooded sweatshirt-wearing teenager as he yanked a Coach purse off the rack and made a break for the door, and consequently couldn’t eat for a week. She’d look at me with eyes that said, so he stole a purse, who the hell cares, and I’d have to agree—I didn’t care about the purse. Chill out, she told me more than once, it wasn’t like it was your job to stop him. I nodded, of course, but I still couldn’t eat.

Back in high school, in the resource room, I’d be conscious not to look over my shoulder, even though deep down I knew that, of all places, he wouldn’t show up there. And I had no idea if I wanted him to or not. If he came and I didn’t call the cops, I’d be complicit in whatever crime he committed next. But then, maybe that would be a good thing. Maybe it would be a relief for my mother to look at me and say something like—“confession is the road to forgiveness” or “it’s always an option to repent, to save one’s soul.” Maybe if he showed up we could finally get out in the open what a failure I’d been

in stopping his fall. Sitting at that table, all sense of thrill gone, all I could do was stare forward and see him anyway, even though he never came.

## Octaves

My grandmother is still except for her fingertips, which trace the patterns of oak on her kitchen table. She told me once that this was success, when your fingers took on a life all their own, thought for themselves, moved beyond you.

Across the room, a man's face is being ripped in half. And then in half again, the other way. And then those halves in half and then halves again. There are no screams, just pieces of Kodak paper falling silently onto my grandmother's yellowed linoleum tile.

My father is doing the ripping. He's angry about a man named Patrick and, though the man's my uncle, I never knew him long enough to really call him that. He left this house just over two decades ago, almost to the day. He was twenty, just a few years older than I am now. My father won't say why he left, why he never called, or why, it appears, he's never coming back. I used to like to guess—the way you sometimes guess cloud shapes as they stretch across the sky while you're stuck in traffic—I don't any more. There doesn't seem to be much point—knowing won't bring him back, and even if it did I'm not sure we'd know what to do with him anyway. What I do know is that my father hates him because he once loved him and though I know he'll never explain this to me, my grandmother says I'll understand some day.

Outside the house it's noisy—air traffic into and out of O'Hare, which is only ten miles away and, across the street, a fallen tree is being put through the mulcher.

Inside the kitchen, I watch my grandmother's hands and try to keep quiet. A splinter started this all—a little piece of wood I would have happily let be, waiting for new layers of skin to grow over and obscure it. But my father doesn't like things that don't belong and, when he decides something needs to be gone, it's out, never to return. He says it's healthier this way. I'm not sure what my grandmother might have said, if my father wasn't here to speak first. My father was looking for a needle when he found the picture of Patrick stashed away in my grandmother's stationary drawer. So this whole thing is really my fault—or at least it's bound to be retold that way.

Outside the grinding of the tree branches against the blades grows louder and I watch my grandmother's hands. The pads of her fingers fall in pattern against the wood, splaying out before coming back together. The greatest piano scales have you reach all the way out, she once told me, before allowing any finger to work its way back. I didn't understand this because, unlike my grandmother, I never took to the piano. One of her many disappointments in me. There's a yellowed picture of her in the hall—a girl of six with tiny, nail-bitten hands successfully matching pearls to pastels in her mother's vanity mirror—and in it lies everything I was supposed to be. Instead, though, I spent my childhood ripping holes in my jeans and digging up the mud in her backyard in ever-driven search for worms, a backwards baseball cap flopping over my ears all the while. She loves me, no doubt—after spending her life surrounded by brothers and sons and

grandsons she boldly deemed me her favorite from the moment of my birth. It's just not a role I've been very good at filling.

"Why is this here? This should be gone!" My father is calling to my grandmother. "I thought I got rid of this all! This should have been gone a long time ago!"

A lot should have happened a long time ago, I think. My opinion of the whole thing—not that it matters for much—is that someone should have gone looking for Patrick. Someone should have found a way to get him back where he belonged. It terrified me, as a child, that a person could just up and disappear like that, as if they'd never been born. It terrifies me now that I might unwittingly make such a mistake, that I could be the next Patrick.

Since my father denies his very existence, I used to pester my mother for answers as to who Patrick was and where he went. She knows little herself, so it was a dead-end venture. She'd heard murmurings early on about his running off with a pregnant girlfriend or a religious cult, but of course there's no evidence. I've never asked my grandmother. He was the son, she'd once said, who, as a child, promised never to leave her. Bringing that up to her just seemed like crossing a line.

The grinding outside grows as the trunk of the tree begins succumbing to the mulcher. It's getting harder to hear my father, who's shouting now. In a few steps, he's across the kitchen, through the hall, and out the front door, screen slamming behind him. He continues to shout, making his way towards the men with the mulcher, but over the noise I can't hear what he's saying. Inside, I look at my grandmother and she looks back at me. We listen to my father and we watch each other and her fingers push themselves

across the table. She'd wanted piano lessons so badly as a child, she often tells me, that even though the family was barely making rent her daddy took on extra hours at the World's Fair's dinosaur exhibit so she could meet with a real teacher the first Tuesday of every month. They didn't even have a piano. She practiced her scales on sheets of paper.

My father comes back into the kitchen and the noise stops. I don't know if he's won the argument or if they've just finished the tree. From the way he's breathing sharp and deep I feel it could have gone either way. He turns to my grandmother, starts again, "What were you thinking?"

The phone rings. And rings again.

No one moves.

And the phone rings.

My father stares at my grandmother. My grandmother stares at her hands. I stare at both of them.

The answering machine picks up and my little sister's voice comes on. "Hello? Guys? Grandma? I'm done with dance class. Dad? Dad, you said you were stopping at Grandma's and then you'd pick me up. Hello? Well, what am I supposed to do if you're not here? Fine. I guess I'll just wait. I'm calling back if you don't come soon."

There is a click and the machine is off, a blinking red light now calling attention to itself.

My father sucks in a breath and bites his lip. Then, after a pause, he says, "We should go." He starts back towards the front door.



My grandmother nods, puts her fingers across the table one final time and rises to her feet, moving into the hallway to collect her sweater.

“Let’s go,” my father says, over his shoulder, and he must mean me because I’m all that is left. I hear him leave the house and open the door to his car.

My grandmother is still in the hallway, looking back at me with that expression of resigned patience I imagine she practiced a thousand times, standing in the hallway of her childhood apartment, watching her reflection move across the hall window’s glass. Each night, after the dinner dishes were dried, she stood before the window, spreading her piano keys along the edge—three sheets of paper, Scotch taped together, with careful pencil lines marking off fifty-two rectangles, mixed among thirty-six colored ones. The reflection was never quite clear, but it worked well enough and she learned how to give her fingers a life of their own by watching them dance along the reflection of the sill, tapping in beat with the music she quieted to hear.

I nod at her and she turns to follow my father outside. A second car door opens and shuts and the engine turns.

I pick the pieces of Patrick up off the floor and return them to the drawer—they are hers after all—and I follow after my family.

### Chain-o-Link

There was a hole in his life. It wasn't that noticeable, of course, but it was becoming problematic nonetheless.

"What do you think we should do about this?" Jonathan O'Toole asked his wife, Mary, one Sunday afternoon.

"Nothing," she said, pulling cotton t-shirts out of a wicker basket and pinning them up on the line.

"Nothing?" he repeated, leaning against the green panel siding of their house. Green was her favorite color. And, though he'd gone along with it, the idea was still odd to him, even four years after they'd settled in. His father, he knew, would have laughed at him—at the idea of a green house.

"What would we do?" Her fingers worked their toddler's jeans onto the line, the legs dancing through the air as the breeze picked up. She didn't turn to look at him. "It'll get fixed."

He said no more. He didn't want to seem unsure. He watched her finish the laundry and tuck the empty basket under her arm. Pushing himself away from the house, he walked a few steps forward into the yard, up to where the grass blades disappeared and the dirt parted. Although his back was to her, he knew his wife had paused to watch

him, holding the screen door open, standing there halfway in and half way out. He toed the hole, a little wider than a softball, with his loafer.

“Stop that,” Mary called from behind him. “If you ruin it, it won’t be a fence hole any more—the workers will never be able to fit the post in right.”

“If it won’t be a fence hole then what would it be?”

“Just—just a hole! And then we’ll have to start this whole process again. Do you want that?”

He moved his foot back onto solid ground. He didn’t want that at all. It had been nearly two weeks since the hole was dug and they’d yet to hear a peep back from the company—owned by a friend of his uncle-in-law—long overdue to finish the job.

The screen door banged shut behind Mary as she returned to the house and left him alone in the yard. He paced a few feet further away from the siding and looked up and down the street. It was filled with evenly spaced houses like his—exactly like his—except for the colors of the sidings.

The Jencho boys were out with their football again, chasing each other across yards that weren’t theirs and cutting running patterns up and down the blacktopped street. He personally found the boys and their excessive energy amusing. He wouldn’t mind his own son growing into a little of that. Mary, on the other hand, had said more than once that if Mikey ever acted like such a hoodlum she’d ground him for life. Her lilacs weren’t doing well this year and Jonathan knew she blamed the boys. They’d only been caught once in her flowerbeds, and once chasing a football under the clothesline, some button down shirts getting caught up in the tackle. Harmless, he thought. But, for Mary, any time

something seemed mildly out of place—the garden hose wound too loosely or the mailbox left ajar—she had an urge to march down the block and give those boys a talking to. She never did, of course. It was usually just Jonathan who got an earful.

It was his wife who'd started the idea of a chain-o-link fence. He'd been home watching the Sox game with Mikey and she'd been down at the end of the street, watching the final episode of *Dragnet* with, it seemed like, every other wife on the block. She came home and told him she wanted a fence. Everyone was going to be getting one, in fact, and she wanted them to be first.

“We can't afford it,” he'd said.

“My Aunt Jean still owes us a wedding gift. She's been asking what we need. I bet if we tell her we want money for a fence she'd do it!”

Jonathan hadn't really wanted a fence but couldn't think of a single good reason to tell her no. Not to mention, he could see where this was going. He could see her imagining every other house on the block with a nice guarded yard and theirs wide open, beckoning anyone to tramp through. So he'd shrugged and she'd taken it as yes, making plans to call her aunt first thing in the morning.

“Not a picket fence,” he'd told her, later that night, in bed. “I draw the line at picket.”

“Of course not!” she'd said. “Pickets are for two-story Victorians, not us.”

“What are we?”

She'd looked around the room, as if she hadn't spent every night falling asleep in it for the past four years. "This thing? Little three bedroom one-story."

This was true, it was a little three bedroom one-story, but somehow her laying out the facts like that had stung him a bit.

"A chain-o-link," she'd said. "That's what I was discussing with the girls tonight. It seems fitting, right?"

He'd said nothing. Ever since they moved here after James, their son who, at twenty-seven hours old, lived just long enough to be mourned, Jonathan really wasn't sure what was fitting anymore.

But now, though they'd had the first hole dug, the O'Tooles would not be the first with a chain-o-link fence. That was the danger of working with family, Jonathan had found out. They could just up and leave without even a warning. And now what could he do but sit with his hole, bare to the whole neighborhood, and wait to see what would come next. Wait to see if things would ever turn out like they were supposed to. The Duffys and the Millers and the Schmidts had already completed their structures, forcing the Jencho boys into pitching laterals and saving their Hail Marys for church. Jonathan heard the hinges of an opening door and looked up, first right towards his own doorway, and, upon seeing it still, left over towards the neighbors'.

"Howdy," Bob Murvich said, placing the trash bag he was holding on the grass next to his own beige siding. Beige, Jonathan noted, was a much more reasonable color for a house.

They each walked forward a few paces until they met at the edges of their respective, though yet unmarked, properties.

“Hey there,” Jonathan replied. He tried to keep the smirk out of his voice. Bob had developed, just within the last year or so, a tendency to use ‘howdy’ as an all-purpose greeting. It seemed starkly inappropriate for a Chicago suburb—exactly the reason Jonathan kept quiet about it. He himself had grown up on Chicago’s South Side, only knowing grass that clung to houses in patches. Houses so close together that, when he was a kid, it had been his goal to one day skip from rooftop to rooftop, all the way around the block and even further if he chose. Here, houses seemed to be almost swallowed in the vastness of yards—front and back. That’s why, he liked to think, the fences had started going up. A subtle way to show all that grass just who was boss.

“See you still got that hole,” Bob said, nodding towards the dirt.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jonathan said. He knew Bob had gotten guys to come and dig for a fence next week. He also knew that Bob’s fence would get done before his own.

“It was a tester drill,” Jonathan said, hunching his shoulders as he stuffed his hands in his pants’ pockets. “I told ‘em to take their time coming back to finish it off.” He tried to sound confident. Bob looked at him, his head tilting a bit to one side.

Jonathan had taken a marketing class in the two semesters he’d spent in college before joining the army and one of the few things he’d remembered from that time was concept of a red herring. “When you’re in a bind,” his professor used to say, “distract them. Throw them off. A quick one, two, then pow, sucker punch!” So, Jonathan sat down in the grass, dress pants and all, like it was the most normal thing for a twenty-six

year old working man, husband, father, suburban home owner to do. Bob looked down at him for a moment and then took the bait and shrugged, joining his neighbor on the grass. The topic of fences and holes seemed to be sufficiently closed.

Bob fished a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. Jonathan did the same, inhaling once and then letting the thing rest lazily between his fingers, which were resting lazily on his right knee, bent up almost to his chest. That's what he felt he should look like, to any passer-by—lazy. Unworried. As if he was right where he wanted to be. As if he had it all. It was a suburban phenomenon, as was he, according to his mailing address for the past four years.

“You look tense,” Bob said, leaning back, palms flattening the grass behind him. “Get into it with Mary again?”

“No, no. Nothing of the sort.” Jonathan raised the cigarette back to this mouth, watching Bob out of the corners of his eyes. “I'm quite calm. Relaxed even.”

But he couldn't relax—not now with a hole in his yard and not later when it got filled by a fence. Not with fences going up all over the block. It wasn't fair—three stupid words that Jonathan wanted to scream aloud each morning as he fetched the paper from the porch and stared out at the chains that were linking themselves up and down the street. And it wasn't just about him—it wasn't fair to the Jencho boys. They were just boys. They should be able to play—every down should be first and ten, the whole field wide open ahead. They were just boys—they hadn't done anything wrong—hadn't even really had the chance yet. But suddenly here were the fences and they were killing the

boys' game; it would be gone before they even knew what was taken from them. But Jonathan would.

“You sure nothing's wrong?” Bob asked.

Jonathan shook his head.

Although the two men had been friends ever since they moved in to what were barely more than wooden frames on dirt lots—on the same day, just four hours apart—Jonathan couldn't help feeling cautious of the way he presented himself around Bob. He'd learned quickly that Bob had served in Korea. Jonathon had spent the same amount of time in the Army as Bob, but for reasons of chance, had never been deployed further than Missouri.

Bob's nephew had told him early on, drunk on highballs at the house-warming party, that as his neighbor and, thereby, friend, Jonathan needed to encourage Bob's happy-go-lucky attitude. He needed to protect Bob's idiosyncrasies. The family had just pieced him back together, “a real humpty dumpty, you know,” and that's part of why they'd moved him to suburbs. Thought the consistency would be good for him. It was tragic, after all, what happened to Bob in Korea. Jonathan had to ask five times what the dickens had happened and was ready to give when on the fifth try the nephew cracked.

“Uncle Bobby slept in a tree—a tree!—while the Koreans were just down the hill. He spent most of his time trying to remember to hold his breath because he was just that *close*.” It took two holiday parties and a birthday gathering before Jonathan got the story straight. And never a word from Bob himself. It seemed, though, that he'd been separated



from his troop while moving from one city to the next. He thought they'd come back for him when he heard voices—until he realized that those voices weren't American at all. So he dove into the hollow of an old tree and stayed for three days, until he heard words like "White Sox" and "grand slam" again. He'd passed the time by counting—the ants that moved across his boot, the number of times the wind moved the leaves of his tree, the number of times he could tap the knuckles on his right hand before they went numb.

This discovery had unnerved Jonathan. Not just because of the details—the tree and the foreign voices merely yards away and the endless counting until numbness overtook—but because he should have had such an experience himself. He'd served in the same army, joined up while there was a war on. He'd done what he was supposed to. And yet, nothing. No word, no orders, no danger, no glory. He broke three fingers over the course of the entire war, and only because a secretary in the general's office dropped a typewriter on his hand. A damn typewriter.

Jonathan had to be careful at these parties. If Bob's war stories were talked about the questions were bound to circle back—you must have served in Korea too right? Where were you stationed? What kind of action did you get your hands on? What was the craziest thing you'd seen? He couldn't tell them, of course, that a new recruit, late for line ups and terrified of what was to come next, turning to sprint down the barrack hall and out the door but instead slamming himself face first into the cinderblock wall, was the craziest thing he'd seen in the Army.

These days he'd gotten good at deflecting. That whole red herring thing. But, in the times before that, he'd felt the need to tell something, anything that was close to the

truth. So he'd told his father's truths, because he figured they must be, by nature, his in part. When pressed for war stories, Jonathan would tell about hiding out along roadsides with an utter commitment to silence, to the upper hand gained in surprise, that even a movement as subtle as scratching an itch was out of the question. No, you held still, you waited, you stayed committed to the cause. Eventually, the itch would heal itself. And when his audience's eyes widened Jonathan would say he did it for a woman whose name he didn't know, a woman who was shot straight through the belly while sitting on her own property, awaiting a ride into town. A tank of enemy soldiers had rolled through and stopped their journey for the sole purpose of killing her and the baby she carried on the spot. They'd stopped their truck to make sure she was, indeed, dead, then took the man who cast the shot and raised his arm high, like a boxer come to victory after rounds in the ring. They drove on, laughing. Jonathan just didn't say that these things had taken place in Ireland, not Korea, and that the man who felt so moved by the death of a woman he didn't know, moved to risk his life lying belly to dirt in the roadsides along the bogs, was his father and not actually him.

People at the parties always stepped back when he told these stories, as if he'd grown in importance and now took up more space. The first two times Jonathan listened to his father's stories come out as his own he felt on edge, avoided eye contact with his audience and sought out escape routes instead. By the third go round though he realized he would not be caught and then realized he didn't feel at all guilty for telling them. The stories were true—that they weren't true for *him* seemed tangential. He told himself that

given the opportunity he could do the same. He could be everything his father had exemplified.

Bob's prodding at him, his question about Mary, still lingered in the air. Jonathan knew this because Bob's bottom lip jutted out a bit, the way it always did when he tried to think before responding. He didn't do it often, making its rare appearance an easy quirk to spot.

"Yeah? Things are just fine on the home front?" Bob said.

"Yeah."

"So, going bowling tonight's not a problem then?"

Jonathan hesitated. The idea of joining Bob and his bowling buddies was beginning to feel abstract. The same way the concept of war in some place named Korea had begun to seem from Jonathan's desk in Missouri. "Well—"

"Well what? You bought that ball I told you about didn't you?"

"Sure."

"You're all set then. Unless you're not. Unless your problem's bigger than the ball."

He should be all set. There was no reason he couldn't go after all. Mary did things. *Dragnet* viewing parties, *The Ed Sullivan* show sometimes, bridge games on Wednesdays, and Sunday brunch the first week of each month. He *could* go bowling. But he kept thinking back to earlier—to clothespins and the way she pinched the jeans onto the line, to the way she seemed to be holding everything just in place while he felt like

absolutely nothing was as it should be. He kept thinking about the way she wouldn't look at him when she said 'what would we do?' as if she thought what he feared—one wrong move from him might push all of her holding apart.

The screen door opened and then shut. Mikey came walking out, toy fire truck in hand. "Go by Daddy," Mary told the boy, herself barely visible behind the screen of the door in the afternoon sun. "Watch him, Jonathan!" She paused. "Hi, Bob."

Bob gave a nod. "Howdy, Mary."

Mikey crossed the lawn, forgetting the truck as he began pulling up grass blades, one by one, and dropping them into the hole, watching until he couldn't see them any more.

"Whatcha doin' Mikey?"

Mikey looked up at Bob. "The fence will go in the hole," he said. "Then there won't be a hole."

"Sure, sure," Bob said leaning back even further, resting his elbows on the lawn, lounging comfortably, face to the sun. "That's the way it works alright."

They sat for awhile, still except for Mikey who seemed content to pick the grass bald. Then Bob, bored, stood and stomped his cigarette out. "You'll let me know about bowling then?" he said, looking down at Jonathan once again.

"Sure."

"I'm going with or without you, you know."

Jonathan shook his head and bit down on the inside of his cheek to keep from smirking too wide. "I know, Bob." He paused while his neighbor walked away and then turned to his son on the ground beside him. "Well, it's you and me, kiddo."

"And the fence!" Mikey yelled, dropping one blade of grass, then two. His voice always came out in a yell lately, as if it would make up for his small size. Mikey laughed, struck, somehow, by the words. "Fence! Fence! Fence!"

"Shhh," Jonathan tried to hush him. "You don't want a fence."

"Fence!"

"No, no. You want to be able to run around, go wherever you want."

"Fence!"

"No, come on now. Let's think of something you'd really want. What would you like?"

Mikey dropped a grass blade into the hole and looked up at Jonathan with a baby teeth filled grin that seemed to cover his face. "Fence! Fence! Fence! Fence!"

The chanting was harmless, child's play, literally. Jonathan knew this, and was surprised to find his breathing had grown shallow. He was angry at Mikey, somehow, getting angrier every time the four year old laughed the word.

He stood up quickly, not even brushing the loose grass clippings off his pants and strode across the yard. He walked behind the garage and breathed deep, pacing the small shaded area. So what if Mikey was saying 'fence' like a broken record? Mikey repeated everything. He thought he was funny. He was four. He had no idea. And, even if he did, Jonathan tried to reason with himself, what of it? Everyone was getting a fence. Soon

people wouldn't be able to remember living without fences—like running water and washer/dryers. It was just a part of this house, a part of the suburb, what did it matter if his son really did truly want a fence?

He hadn't been gone behind the garage long, but it was just long enough for Mary to come outside and find Mikey sitting alone, pouring more grass blades into the hole, convinced in his four year old way that he could fill it.

Jonathan watched her as she glanced around the yard shaking her head. On their first date he had tried to impress her by leap frogging over a parking meter. He cleared it but fumbled his landing and, when he looked up at her from his spot on the pavement, he found her shaking her head, curls bouncing over her shoulders as if laughing in bemusement. Now she still shook her head at him, but her hair no longer bounced and there was nothing bemusing about her glance. He watched as she gave up quickly and bent to pull Mikey up by the arm in one quick, sharp motion. The boy hung limply in her grasp for a second. Maybe it was the shock of so quickly losing the ground beneath his feet—he let out a small cry. She hushed him and he quieted and the two of them moved to the inside of the screen door, grass blades still clasped in Mikey's fist.

Needless to say, Mary still wasn't talking to Jonathan, nor was he going bowling. Needless to say, Mikey had forgotten all about the fence and was once again absorbed in racing his fire truck across the living room rug. To Jonathan, none of it felt fair.

That night, while Mary put Mikey to bed, the Jencho boys came tearing across the front lawn, shouting, tackling, and running, refusing to stay still. Mary came out of their

son's room and stood at the front window, watching, muttering 'hoodlums' under her breath before retreating to finish the dinner dishes. Jonathan watched the boys until Mary went to bed that evening, early, as she'd done more nights than not since they moved into the house.

He waited until he thought she was asleep and went outside, shutting the screen door softly behind him. The Jencho boys were gone now too, probably also asleep. In fact, Jonathan looked around and felt like the only person left alive on the block. There was no one else in sight and, had he not known they were tucked away behind closed blinds, had he been a stranger to this neighborhood, he could have believed it vacant. Except he wasn't a stranger. He was as much a part of this as any of them.

And so Jonathan made his way across the lawn, placing his toes, once again, right over the edge of the hole. He tried to imagine himself a Jencho boy, running across yards, chasing a spiral. And then he stepped, ever so slowly, into the hole. It was only big enough, at first, to fit the toe of his loafer, but he was patient. He worked his foot back and forth, back and forth, and the hole, grudgingly, began to open up, to do as he directed it to. How long he stood out there, caking his loafer in dry dusty dirt, he couldn't tell. But by the time he was done, the hole was gaping and wide. He wiped off his shoe with a rag from the garage and, in the moonlight, admired his work. There would be a fence, he knew this. Just not yet.

## Home

In Vegas, it was the smell of coffee that usually woke him, even before it was actually brewed. His morning coffee had been the one steady thing in a life otherwise without routine. Now, back in LaSalle, he awoke to stillness, sometimes before dawn, most times hours after. The coffee was the same, but the air was different.

There was a moment this morning, and each morning, when a sense of timelessness filled Fred. There was that slivered space when he first realized he was waking to a new day, and, in that space, he believed it could be any day, any place within his life that he wished. Of course, it wasn't; it was the next day, following with unbreakable momentum that which had come before. The morning sky, filtered through dusty blinds, worked its way into the room that held a twin bed without space for much else, sheets higher in years than in thread count, and two old sweatshirts stuffed into a pillowcase. A single picture lay flat across the dresser: friends from the Flamingo, gathered in their casino jackets. Martha was on his right—the woman who'd coached him into never picking up a stray chip from the floor. He was to call out to its owner, but never to make a move for it, even when it felt rude to stand there, unbending, with the object lying by his toes. And he knew about chips. Knew about wanting just one more, thinking this one, this time, would be able to set it all right. Martha had tried hard to keep



him out of trouble. There was also Sam, in the picture on his left, and Fred's own fingers, hanging long and straight around Sam's shoulder, a few bent casually at the joints, like spider legs, obscuring the embroidered stitches that formed Sam's last name. Without that labeling there was little to distinguish Sam from the rest, which meant that in a few years he would most likely be just another face Fred could not name. They were all posing and he wished they weren't. His life in Vegas was gone—the plush leather sofas and winding white staircase, the coffee table adorned with glass bowls meant to hold nothing at all. He hadn't stuck around that last morning to watch the movers. He hadn't even asked what would happen to it all, how this business of an internet auction worked. He'd lost it. That was all he needed to know. And, now, old bones may have stiffened him, but his surroundings made him want to move, to push the covers away, pad barefoot over the stained carpeting, and move into the kitchen to start the coffee pot up.

He called it Cabrini-Green—the nine floor high rise he now made his coffee in. It was his mother's old building, damn near the same apartment; the same place she'd kept magnetic bingo chips on a TV tray under the window, the same place she'd decorated herself in 'penny pearls' to play gin with her white haired friends on folding chairs in the lobby. Or at least that's what he'd been told by his sister.

It was fitting—if it was true—that the high rise, when his mother lived there, seemed more Gold Coast than Projects. Perceptions notwithstanding, he was willing to venture the building actually hadn't changed all that much, but his mother had always seen LaSalle as grand, even as it was going down the crapper. She died, he was sure, believing she could still tell people she lived in 'Little Reno' and it would mean

something. His mother had been born into the town's cornfield borders at the turn of the century, had grown up in its heyday and, though the trains had long since stopped coming through, though the downtown buildings on First were now vacant and boarded, though the gravel streets had become patchy at best, and though the residents, once separated by membership at Resurrection, St. Patrick's, St. Hyacinth's, or St. Joe's, were now divided into groups of Social Security and Section 8, she died still seeing only leftover glitz and glamour. He had sent her pictures from Vegas once. She called it a knock-off and told him one day he'd realize what a real city was and come back home. Now, six years after her death, he was back. But he wouldn't have called LaSalle a city, and he certainly wasn't going to think of it as home.

Fred sifted through the small cabinet of mismatched dishware for a clean coffee mug. It was a simple act made difficult in the past year by his misshapen ring finger. The finger seemed to have a magnetic attraction to all things glass and ceramic, anything that gave off the perception of sturdy only to become fragile upon contact. He knew there was a fair chance he was exaggerating the effects of having an appendage sewn back on. The right tilt it now took, the thing that made it refuse to align calmly with the rest of his hand was only slight and nowhere near the perpendicular angle he imagined himself to be now cursed with. He knew, however, that there was some obvious scarring, even though that the doctor had reassured him it would fade with time. He doubted it.

Finally, he located a blue mug that boasted the word 'Tacoma'—a place he'd never been, but apparently someone from the 5<sup>th</sup> Street Salvation Army had. He poured his coffee and reminded himself he was supposed to be in a good mood. Beth, his niece,

was visiting her parents on the other side of town and bringing her two daughters with her—Alicia and Maggie. His sister, Jo, would be calling soon to remind him of this. Come over afterwhile Fred, she'd say, even though he'd already agreed to do just that. And he'd roll his eyes because everything in LaSalle seemed to happen afterwhile. He'd be sure to keep his voice kind though. He wanted the day to go well. He hadn't spent much time around the children, but the two of them had accepted him so immediately that there were moments when he felt this is what his life might have been had he never left LaSalle. He stirred the spoon through his coffee, watching the white of the cream and the crystals of sugar fade.

When he arrived at his sister's home on the corner of Campbell and Maple, Alicia and Maggie were both running barefoot across the lawn, racing each other to a tired looking tennis ball that had just been bounced against the side of the garage. They looked his way as he killed the engine and stepped out of the car.

"Hi, Uncle Fred!" they cried, one after the other, as they jogged towards him, tennis ball forgotten.

"It's hi-ya," Maggie corrected as she fell behind Alicia's long strides. "That's the way you say it here."

Alicia rolled her eyes, but smiled as she came to a halt in front him. "She thinks she knows stuff," she said.

He smiled and cupped both his hands around her face and kissed her cheek. "And here's my other Precious." His grin widened as he repeated the gesture with the younger

girl. He couldn't help feeling that the tenderness of his greeting, both in word and in action, never failed to momentarily surprise all three, even though he repeated it each time.

"Uncle Fred!" Maggie yelled up at him as if he was some sort of giant, with ears miles away rather than a foot and a half above her head.

"Yes, ma'am?"

She looked back toward the house and lowered her voice, stepping forward so her bare toenails, covered in chipped neon pink, were pushed right up against his polished brown loafers. "We have a hiding place."

He glanced towards the house himself, searching for the shadows of figures lingering in the kitchen windows. It was something he had taken to doing since his return two months ago, since, really, the night he'd walked naively down a dark Vegas alley with hardly a glance into the shadows. The cliché of it all killed him—a man who knew what he did should have had more sense. For a moment, now, he thought he saw Beth's bushy-haired outline, but when he looked again the pane seemed vacant. He turned back to Maggie and tried to aim his voice towards wondrous. "You do?"

She nodded, her eyes widening. Brown curls whipped across her face as she turned toward her sister. "We can tell him, right?"

"Yeah, he's okay."

Maggie looked relieved as she turned back to him, squinting a bit into the sun.

"You wanna see?"

The thought of being able to hide anywhere in LaSalle struck him as ridiculous. Even during his elementary school years it still devoted a page of the daily paper to who had relatives visiting that week, who was taking the train up to Chicago, and even if any houses were having new furniture delivered. He reminded himself, though, that these girls didn't know this place as he did. It was the difference between visiting Amish country on a field trip and having to live your life without zippers. "Sure," he said.

Maggie turned and started moving across the lawn—something between a run and a dance—while Alicia fell into step beside him. They followed Maggie towards the towering pine in the far corner of the yard. Fred enjoyed Alicia quite a bit; she'd become one of the few pleasures of coming home. True, her mother had been born and raised in LaSalle, but Alicia's father was a suburbanite who refused to live more than a Metra line away from the city proper. Because of that, Alicia knew this place only through her mother's memories and occasional downstate visits to see her grandparents. In this sense, she was an outsider too.

"I like your shirt, Uncle Fred," Alicia said, without looking at it, or him. She was too busy trying to time her footsteps with his. Little did she know it was her pace he was trying to follow.

He made a show of straightening the sleeves of the gray IZOD half-zip, and she tilted her head up at him. "Yes, some lovely young ladies gave this to me."

She bit her lip in an attempt to play along, but the laughter pushed itself through her nostrils in a sharp puff of air. "Yeah?"

He was glad she was pleased. He'd been careful when selecting his wardrobe this morning—the only time he'd bothered being careful in recent memory. And yet, it was actually a blow to the gut—wearing a sweatshirt with a word that barely qualified as a logo in any respectable circle. It had taken everything he had not to grimace when Beth and the girls had presented him with it—their 'welcome back to the Illinois winters' gift. Beth, he knew, was patting herself on the back for this one, undoubtedly proud to have found a "brand name" shirt for him at one of her clearance-rack sales. She remembered that about him, she'd said—that he liked fine things. However, her transition item—here, Uncle Fred, wear this and it'll be like your life hasn't fallen apart—was nothing more than the black and white prison stripes LaSalle had forced upon him his entire childhood. Welcome back.

"Oh, yes," he affirmed, "yes, indeed." He forced a smile, as he knew Alicia was still watching the expression on his face, but he couldn't meet her gaze. Sure, she asked too many questions for his liking and enjoyed her grandfather's embellished stories of the past a bit too much. But even though he worried about that wide-eyed quality of hers, she at least seemed to grasp that LaSalle was fading fast, and that the fate of this town, and the people in it, was nothing to aspire to. He doubted idols of the supposed glory days—names like Kelly and Cawley's or Hegeler Carus Mansion—had ever even entered her vocabulary.

"So," he said, "this is a special tree, huh?"

Her head jerked up in excitement at mention of the hiding place, ponytail bouncing back and forth across her shoulders. She opened her mouth to reply but, for a

moment, froze in hesitation. He could see her trying to weigh her enchantment against her desire to appear respectable to him, grown-up even.

“I mean,” his voice hurried before he was even sure why, “it reminds me of when I drove through Lake Tahoe and these evergreen trees were towering over both sides of the road, following each other up and down the mountain sides. It was breathtaking, and I mean that, it really stopped me breathing for a moment. Majestic, I think was the word that first came to mind.”

“Yeah?” Her grin widened, though he saw her trying to rein it in by keeping her lips pressed together tight.

“Sure,” he said. It occurred to him, with such force he almost stutter-stepped, that he was encouraging all this. He hadn’t meant to. He just didn’t want her to feel bad, to be the reason she felt the need to stop smiling like that. But a hiding place in a tree? A hiding place in LaSalle? It was madness, all of it, and now he was a part of it.

This time, though, when she smiled, he saw bands of green and blue braces shining across her teeth. “That’s really cool, Uncle Fred,” she said.

His shoes were being coated with clips of fresh cut grass, but he fought the urge to wipe them clean. There was something about the girls—the way their hair somehow seemed constantly windblown or the way their faces seemed filled to the brim by big blue eyes and wide sloppy grins—that made him feel as if he existed in a vacuum of sorts, as if his past contained nothing but memories like this one—green grass and sunshine and giggling girls.

By the time they caught up to Maggie she was already proudly pulling back the tree's lowest branches. "You have to crouch down," she instructed him. "It's like a cave."

So he bent in a way that would make his back spasm tomorrow and, once inside, crouched down with them on the needled floor in a way that would make his knees scream later that night. Maggie moved the branches back into place. The air was cooler there, in the shade, and the scuffle of squirrels chasing each other through the upper branches played like a soundtrack on repeat.

"Do you know what kind of tree this is?" Fred asked, trying to get comfortable without looking too uncomfortable in the process.

"Blue spruce!" both girls chimed at once, which caused them to again break into laughter.

"Grandpa told us," Alicia clarified.

"Grandpa tells us every time we play here," Maggie said.

Fred sighed. "I'll bet he does." There were only so many things to tell in LaSalle and so the same stories and same facts and same myths seemed to play over and over among those who stayed and their grandfather, his brother-in-law, Fred knew, was a lifer. Newness, unpredictability, never knowing—those were all things Fred had gone to Vegas seeking. Not knowing how close you were to the edge of a cliff made it real easy to fall, but in his younger days Fred had thrived on walking such a life and death line. There were no cliffs in the cornfields of the Midwest though and, as a man well into his sixties, Fred had to wonder if that wasn't for the best.



The girls had fallen silent. “It’s actually kind of crazy that this tree is here,” he said.

“Grandpa says it’s been here a long time,” Maggie said.

“Oh, I’m sure it has,” he replied. “But it just wasn’t supposed to be.”

The girls looked at each other, eyebrows arched.

“I mean,” he went on, realizing that he’d made it sound as if someone had done something wrong. “It’s just not natural for it to be here. The blue spruce is native to Colorado and it belongs there. Someone had to bring it. It’s a transplant, really.”

“A trans-*plant*,” Alicia laughed.

“Isn’t it *awesome*!” Maggie said, in a way that gave her words no inflection of question at all. She stood on tiptoe, stretching her arms above her head, pushing the pads of her fingertips upwards. She moved with ease around the trunk’s base. “It’s like a castle tower! Or a teepee! Or a mountain! Or—” she looked at her sister. “I’m out of triangle things.”

Alicia glanced at him before leaning back and gazing up at branches above her. “It *is* pretty cool, right?”

He tried not to look too long at the eye-level branches, where the needles were more splayed, illusions betrayed by the cars moving up and down Campbell, the grey stone of his sister’s house, the wire mesh around the tomato plants in the garden. Instead he followed the girls’ gaze upwards, the tree’s tip escaping him in the mess of pine and sap-coated branches. “Absolutely,” he said, but in his mind he could see the tip of the tree start to waver; he could see the branches squeezing themselves inward, against the trunk,

sucking up the narrow hollow the three were squatting in. He saw the pine needles plummeting downward, stacking themselves against him, and burying him whole.

After leaving the tree, he sought safety in the house and found the grown-ups on the screened in back porch—Jo, absorbed in a crossword, except for a brief glance up to smile gingerly at him; her husband, Ray, lounging in the wicker love-seat listening to the police scanner as if it were the weather; and Beth cross-legged on the floor, the local paper spread across her lap. She looked her age—no illusions there—but every once in awhile he still found it hard to grasp that his niece was nearing fifty. A part of him still saw her as a pig-tailed seven-year-old sitting in the dim-lit kitchen, furiously coloring curley tails and snouty faces, wispy grass, and a fence done in blue because the brown crayon was missing. Her first grade construct of the three little pigs was the image she'd chosen to adorn his birthday card that year. When she presented him with it, his last interaction with her for decades to come, he'd smiled and tried not to take it personally. He'd kept it in a desk drawer and glanced at it from time to time while in Vegas, usually when money was low and he was taking to screening his phone calls again. He'd look at those three little pigs and think that in an instant—if he so chose—that's what his life could be. And, in the heat of things, images of LaSalle's predictability and the safety net implicit in that crayon world was almost desirable. But, ultimately, he knew he'd long passed such simplicity. It wasn't safe for him, or anyone else, inside crayoned fences and knowing that made him stay in Vegas, even when he had to change his phone number, even when he had to switch out the plates on his car, even when he had to sell plasma.

When it finally did come time to move back, after that final blow in the alley, Fred tried to pick up the picture and the yellowed paper fell apart in his hands. He left it behind, the pieces closed up in the drawer.

Shortly after the appropriate round of hugs and ‘hi-yas,’ Beth whisked him and the girls away for lunch. He tried to protest her spending money on him, saying there was no need for a restaurant, but she was adamant. “Shh,” she hushed him as they buckled into her Toyota and for a moment he felt almost like a third child in tow. Beth began moving them towards Peru, where the street signs changed from green to red and less familiar restaurants could be found. She fiddled with the radio before confiding, “really, I do want to treat you, but also, you’re my excuse. If I let Mom serve those girls another sprout sandwich lunch, I think they’ll skin me in my sleep!”

“You’re supposed to call it ‘supper’ here, Mom,” Maggie chimed from the back while Alicia returned to her eye-rolling.

The restaurant they choose was a knock-off fifties diner adjacent to the Peru Mall. It had been his suggestion, actually; he’d heard an ad on the radio that morning for banana milkshakes and wouldn’t the girls like that? Though they nodded eagerly, he was the only one who ended up ordering one. Yet there was something greater than the milkshake that drew him to the plastic red wrap-around booth in the corner, tucked under black and white stills of *Rebel Without a Cause* and Elvis, mid-pelvic thrust, during a “Jailhouse Rock” encore; it moved him to nod at a picture across the room, a picture of Elizabeth Taylor. “I used to know that lady,” he said. “We used to go around. There were days—”

Never having heard of Elizabeth Taylor didn't stop Alicia's jaw from dropping open a bit. "Really?" she asked from her spot next to him in the booth.

Fred looked down at her. The place, the photos, had taken him elsewhere and, in going there, he'd almost forgotten what that elsewhere had done to him. He'd almost forgotten what it had been like to have the remnants of a puddle slosh over and into his ear. He'd almost forgotten how warm his own blood felt as it ran over his chin. He'd almost forgotten how strange the wrinkles in his own finger—the ones that ran from nail to joint with traces of darkened hairs—had looked to him when he could study them up close, on the ground beside his face, while the hand they came from was nowhere near.

"No," Fred said. He moved his gaze away from Alicia and picked up a menu. "Not exactly. Though I did see her once in a lobby." From across the table Beth was frowning and he tried to recall exactly what he'd said before Alicia had brought him back. He cleared his throat and looked briefly at Beth before darting his eyes down to the placemat in front of him. "That was a long time ago though," he said.

He didn't tell her that when he looked at the picture, Elizabeth Taylor was actually the furthest thing from his mind. And because he couldn't tell her about the stuff that made him leave, he couldn't tell the stuff that had hooked him, that had kept him there all those years. He couldn't tell her how, decades ago, he'd had a full head of thick black hair and no trouble keeping women. In a picture he still had at the bottom of his suitcase, Gwyneth, deep green eyes now lost in the pixels of black and white, was forever seated next to him, head on his suit-jacketed shoulder, neck lined with diamonds. He'd lived through his 20s, 30s, and even the early days of his 40s in that black and white

naiveté, and he'd done so with Gwyneth who'd been more than willing to come along for the ride. They'd lived the way you were supposed to when you were that unaware—a life of postponed consequence. And now most of him hated that picture, with the kind of hate that starts out as something else entirely. Long ago, in his idiocy, he had trimmed that 8 x 10 into the shape of a heart. All of him hated that.

“Stop. Making. A Scene.” Beth's voice was low and even and Fred wondered how much he'd missed.

“I'm. Not. Making. A Scene.” Alicia matched her mother tone for tone. “Besides,” she continued, “if you'd just let me order what I want we wouldn't even have to be talking right now.”

“You're not getting that. Pick something else.”

“Why not? I have to eat it.”

“Well I have to pay for it and I'm not paying money for grilled cheese. You can make that at home any time you want.”

“But that's what I want to eat!”

“No.”

“You know,” Fred started, trying to keep his focus on the menu, to present a casual air, but all the while aware that as soon as he spoke their heads had jerked in his direction, moved like they'd forgotten he was there. He adjusted his grip on the laminated sheet. “Sometimes there's nothing better on a summer's day than a grilled cheese with a nice fresh slice of tomato in there. Mmm. I think I'll have just that.” He closed the menu

and returned it to the spot on the table in front of him. He hoped he had done so with confidence, the way stage directions might indicate. As if confidence could even be applied to such a thing.

There was a pause in which mother and daughter looked at each other and then back at him. As he placed and replaced his loafers over the stickiness of tiles coated in ketchup spills and French fry crumbs, it occurred to Fred that if they wanted to they could boo him off the stage. And, if they did, what recourse did he have?

Alicia moved first—her head swiveling back and forth between him and her mother. “Really?” she asked.

He wasn’t sure whom she was addressing, so he stayed quiet. Sitting there blankly seemed wrong, so he told himself to smile.

Beth tapped her index finger against the table and shrugged. “Fine. If that’s what you want...” She trailed off and he could see pursing her lips, keeping herself from saying anything further. Alicia grinned.

“What about me, Mom?” Maggie fidgeted, tugging on Beth’s shirtsleeve.

“You get your chicken fingers. You already decided on those.”

Fred kept smiling but stopped listening. He tried to piece the scene back together in his mind, to watch how it had constructed itself, to see what it was that had led him to pick a side. Truth was he liked tomatoes fine but hated grilled cheese. Or at least he thought he still did. He hadn’t even seen such a concoction since he was about eight. Grilled cheese—even the name sounded like it was trying to be something it was not.

Maggie pointed to a poster above his head. "I know that show," she told him proudly. "I watch it with my dad. He says he watched it when he was my age."

Twisting in the booth, Fred saw it was a picture of the Beav and his dad walking down a tree-lined street, each with a baseball glove in hand.

"Did you watch it then too?" she asked.

Fred looked at her, blinked, but made no response. He was still recovering from the grilled cheese debacle and was trying to figure out how to work damage control with Beth. Surely, helping undermine her authority wasn't winning him any brownie points.

"You know," Maggie carried on, "in the sixties."

"Fifties," Alicia retorted. "Dork."

"Hey," Beth cut in sharply, "No name calling." She turned to Maggie, "You're thinking of *Andy Griffith*, that's the other one you watch with Daddy, it aired in the sixties." She turned back to Alicia. "It's easy to get confused with all that black and white."

Fred looked uneasily around the room, taking in its various representations of how one should have experienced the fifties. Pictures of families gathering around TV sets to watch shows of other families that looked just like them walk through fictional picket fenced towns and play football and bake cookies and have pot roast for dinner. Black and white was one thing, but in this diner's memory there was not even a shadow to be had. No, this wasn't *his* fifties.

Flashing a placating smile, Fred excused himself to the bathroom. As he left, he heard Beth whisper sharply to the girls, “what did we talk about, huh? No questions about the past.”

“But *why*?” Maggie, he thought.

“Because I said so.” She sighed. “Let’s just keep everybody happy, okay?”

“But, Mom, it’s LaSalle. All there is, is past.” Alicia, he was sure.

When Fred returned, the food had made its way to the table and the girls seemed ready to embrace him with topics anew. “So, Uncle Fred,” Alicia said before he’d even settled into the booth, “remember your dream book?”

“Well sure.” He picked up a French fry teetering on the edge of his plate. He looked at her and smiled as she also picked at her fries. “That’s not something I’d forget.”

Fred, for all of his prejudices against LaSalle’s overtelling of meaningless, and often fabricated events, would have to admit that every once in awhile he too could forget himself and fall into the trap. In LaSalle there wasn’t much new to do or tell—at his sister’s place they went so far as to plan out the day they would fold the tablecloths and mark it on the calendar—so sometimes if you wanted to talk you had little option but to recall and retell. The place was time’s version of a desert and the retelling was the creation of a mirage, grand enough to help you get through the day-to-day. It was in one of these slips, while he’d sat with Alicia on folding chairs in the backyard, that he’d told her about the dream book. He could usually fill any pause in conversation with trivia about the types of birds in the trees or the kinds of leaves that fell to the grass, but on this



particular day, only weeks after his return to LaSalle, she'd started asking pointed questions. So he'd given her something small to hold her, a safe detail.

She'd said, "What do you miss most, Uncle Fred, about Vegas?"

There was nothing he could tell her that she was old enough to hear. So he said, "This book I used to have. About dreams. You look up the things you dream and it tells you what they mean. Have you ever had something like that?"

She shook her head.

"I'd seen one once, when I was oh, around your age, maybe, on a back shelf of a store downtown. That's when there actually were stores downtown, see." He was dreaming, at that point in his boyhood, almost nightly about the trains and, more importantly, about where they went when they left the LaSalle station. He was dreaming about the men he saw in the cigar shop and the women he was sure they were sleeping with. He had never in his life had such image-filled sleeps and so when he stumbled on a book that promised to tell him what all of it meant, he felt like he had been chosen. As if he'd been right about himself all along and was destined to find the path out of this town. He'd slipped it up under his shirt, and in that instant chose his fate, set the precedent for many events to come, in a way that dreams had nothing to do with. He didn't tell her that part.

"I kept that book my whole life. I don't know if there's anything else I can say that about." He paused to think but came up empty. "I used to get up every morning, sit with a cup of coffee at the kitchen table and think back on my dreams. Then I'd flip

through the pages.” He’d done that up until the day he left Vegas. He was dreaming hardly at all then and didn’t believe in the theory anymore, but had kept looking anyway.

“Don’t you still have it?” she asked.

He smiled at her as she looked up at him, her eyes wide and earnest. Of course she’d ask such a thing. “No,” he said. “No I don’t. I left it behind.”

“Why?”

Why. What age was it that people stopped asking why? And, even after they stopped asking, what age was it that they stopped wondering? When had such a question started escaping him? “You’ve seen my car,” he told her. “That tiny little clown mobile. There wasn’t much that would fit. A lot got left behind.”

“But wasn’t it small? The book?”

He looked out past her, past the tomato plants in the yard, and out into the street where cars went too fast and no one stopped for pedestrians anymore. “It was small,” he said. “But sometimes even the smallest things are too big.”

“Oh,” she said, letting him close the conversation. And he was grateful for that.

She’d surprised him, a few weeks after their porch conversation, with a birthday present. It was wrapped in green, which he was proud to remember was her favorite color. He expected a useless knick-knack of sorts, but when he removed the paper he found a book about dreams and what they mean. He knew immediately that he’d never even open it, but the shock of it overwhelmed him. He’d forgotten what it felt like to fulfill that expression—lump in your throat—and before he could swallow right again it actually scared him for a moment. He recovered himself within a beat or two, but it was

too late. She rushed nervous words, “Because you said...you remember? You remember when we were outside Grandma and Grandpa’s and you were talking about what you left behind? About when you had your coffee...”

“Yes, yes. Of course,” he said quickly. “I remember. I can’t believe you did.”

At that she laughed, the skin under her eyes crinkling. He’d forgotten how that happens when people actually mean what they claim to feel. “Why wouldn’t I?”

It was such an honest question he couldn’t answer it.

“Well,” Alicia said, picking at her fries. “I started doing like you did.”

“Oh?”

“I mean I don’t have coffee or anything because Mom says I can’t yet and it smells bad, but I’m trying hard to remember my dreams, you know, and then every morning I hurry to go look them up.”

“Yeah?” He felt strangely nervous, and so he hurried to fill the air with more words. “Did you get yourself a dream book too?”

“No, no,” Alicia laughed. “But I don’t need a book, I can find all that on the internet.”

“Ah,” said Fred. The internet. Something he stayed far away from. Martha had at least gotten through to him in that respect. The ease of the internet, she knew, would have gotten him in far too deep.

“The other night I had a dream about giraffes.”

“Giraffes?”

“Yeah!” She bit into her grilled cheese and continued with her mouth full. “Have you ever had that one? Do you know what it means?”

“No,” he moved his straw through his milkshake absently, “I can’t say I do.”

“Giraffes!” Maggie laughed. “Maybe it means you’re going to wake up one day like eight feet tall! Then none of your clothes will fit and you won’t be able to take a shower!”

“Ew!” Alicia cried and both girls laughed.

“So what did the old internet have to say about dream giraffes?” Fred asked.

“Apparently,” Alicia sat up straighter and tried to keep her laughter in check, “I need to take a broader view of life, look at the overall picture.”

There was a brief moment of silence. Maggie broke first, dissolving into laughter. “That’s a dumb meaning for a giraffe.”

Alicia laughed too.

“What do you think, Uncle Fred?” Beth asked across her salad plate. “Should she look for the overall picture?” The question was pointed and Fred knew this. He wasn’t sure he was quick enough on his feet to spot all the possible pitfalls of responding with a simple ‘yes.’

He cleared his throat and watched Beth’s fork snap a piece of broccoli into two. “I think,” he said, trying to measure his words carefully, “that she should do what she wants.” He put his sandwich down and smeared the grease remnants across his paper napkin. He thought briefly about stopping there but couldn’t help himself. “But I hope she’d get to just enjoy the giraffe for a little while first.”

There was barely a dip of silence before Maggie began her sleeve tugging again.

“Mom, I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, go on then.”

Maggie shook her head.

Beth put her fork down. “Maggie. You’re a big girl.”

“I don’t know where it *is* here.”

Beth removed her napkin from her lap and placed it, wadded, next to her iced tea.

“Alright,” she said, “let’s go.” The two slid from the booth. “Alicia?”

Soda straw between her lips, Alicia moved her eyes up to meet her mother’s.

“Come on. You too.”

Alicia swallowed and sat back. “I don’t have to go.” Her eyebrows furrowed a bit and she looked at Fred, as if he might have explanation.

“We’re all going so just come along anyway.”

She looked from Fred to Beth and Fred to Beth again. “But I don’t have to. Mom, you haven’t taken me to the bathroom since I was, like, five.”

“I’m not *taking* you, we’re just all going.”

Fred opened his mouth in Alicia’s direction. He might have even gotten as far as

“Why don’t you just...” but he couldn’t say for sure.

“Mom. I don’t. Have to. Pee.”

There was a stare-down that packed a greater punch than the grilled cheese debacle. But Maggie tugged at Beth’s hand and started to bounce from one flip-flopped

foot to another and Beth tucked hairs that were not out of place behind her ear with her free hand. “Fine.”

When they were gone Alicia turned to Fred. “That was weird.”

He chewed his sandwich. “Sometimes family makes us that way.” He watched her focus intensely on her plate, painting little swirls with the ketchup that clung to her remaining fries. The way her brow wrinkled with focus and wisps of brown hair framed her face, she was a near mirror image of the crayon-wielding Beth he remembered from so long ago—minus the pigtails.

“It’s okay though,” he said. “I’ve seen a lot weirder.” He took a quick glance around the restaurant, half expecting to see Beth peering around a corner, monitoring his every move.

He turned back to Alicia as she propped an elbow up on his shoulder, leaning on him gently and sticking a fry in her mouth with her free hand. When she looked up at him her eyes seemed bigger than he’d remembered from this afternoon. And then she smiled. “I don’t know, Uncle Fred, there’s not much that’s weirder than people.”

“Oh, I bet there is,” He thought. “A giraffe’s black tongue? That’s pretty weird.”

“Black tongue!” She jumped back, nearly shrieking, and the sudden burst of noise startled him. He looked around to see if people were staring. “That’s not true!”

“It is,” he said.

“Black tongue,” she repeated. “And...and a purple spot!”

“Sure, right under the belly.”

She roared at that and Fred had to sit back. A purple spot under the belly? Was he really the one who had said that? If there was a tape he would have had to rewind it. And ‘belly’? Had he ever found an appropriate use for such a word? But she was laughing hard, clutching her stomach, and he opened his mouth to tell her to take a deep breath, but found the words couldn’t come out. Sure enough, he realized, he was laughing too. He was laughing and people in the surrounding booths were casting not-so-subtle glances their way, but, damn it, he couldn’t stop laughing.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Beth coming up the aisle and briefly thought that this should deter him, that he should calm down. But he couldn’t help it, he couldn’t gather himself no matter how hard he tried.

He didn’t see Maggie until she bounded up into the booth next to them. She looked wildly at them both before throwing a skinny arm around his neck and laughing too. He wanted to stop her, to tell her that he didn’t even know what was so funny and he’d been there the whole time, so what on earth could she be laughing at? But maybe, he thought, it didn’t matter. Maybe it didn’t matter at all.

Later, as the sun was setting, Fred sat on the back porch, peeling stalks from the corn so Jo could boil them for dinner. Alicia emerged from the house and sat down next to him, which both surprised him and didn’t. Beth had told the girls on the way home from the restaurant that they should play outside or down the basement, leave the adults be—dinner would be ready afterwhile and they should let Uncle Fred rest up until then. He saw her watching them in the rearview mirror as she said this—Maggie nodding back

and Alicia staring out the window as they crossed back into LaSalle and the street signs went from red to green.

Fred asked Alicia if she wanted to learn to shuck corn and she nodded. There wasn't much to teach about pulling away the layers and, though each of them knew it, they both drew it out and Fred knew that this would be one of the things she'd remember him by. For the rest of her life, when she'd describe to total strangers this man that was her great-uncle she'd say, "and then there was that time he taught me to peel corn" and it would never sound as strange to her as it did to everyone else. He was being remembered by corn—one of the very things he'd spent most of his life running from.

"Uncle Fred?" she said, now tugging at a layer of stalk that seemed to be stuck over the kernels.

"Hmm?"

"Why'd you come back home?"

He knew she'd ask, but had no ready answer.

"Well, I didn't really have much of a choice anymore," he said.

"How come?"

How come. How was the question. How do you explain to a child about waking up in an ambulance, your finger on ice in a bucket next to you, and your last memory being that something happened in an alley, something about money that you didn't have then and don't have now, but you can't exactly remember what. The best you can do is conjure up a picture of a black boot, planted firmly in the puddle next to your head, with



laces that you'll never forget—the right loop longer than the left, and the ends starting to fray.

“I had an accident,” he said.

“Yeah, Mom said you were in the hospital. For a long time.”

“Yes.”

“So you came home so you wouldn't slip again?”

He paused for a moment before nodding. Yes, that was exactly it.

“I'm glad you're back, Uncle Fred.”

He smiled at her and reached over to help her tug away that left over, stubborn piece of stalk.

## The Story of World

I named him World. He was mine.

He came to me on a Tuesday, I remember that much. Unless, of course, it was daylight savings time, then it might have been a Wednesday. July, at any rate. Unless, of course, it was June. No matter—it meant less than leaves turning and falling, but more than buds and emptied cocoons. No one understood World, but he meant just the right amount to me.

It was night and the Frontier Days Summer Carnival was ushering stragglers past the orange plastic netting of its fences—markers that would be gone tomorrow like they had never been here at all. And I was cleaning, sweeping the grounds, smoothing the transition from the fest of today to tomorrow's open field. I do this every year. Except for next year. I won't do it then because they've asked me not to. Don't ask me who they are. They never told me their names. They were just men, two men in white polo shirts ironed at the shoulder with edges stretched into belt buckled pants, straining against hairy belly flesh.

They told me, those men did, that I could still work the fields, at least for now. The games will begin again soon and there are posts to maneuver from the wooden barn of a shed to the centers of these fields. There is grass to be cut and lines to be painted so

that children can come and run, and while they run and chase, parents will come and sit in folded chairs that snap back into place when the final whistle blows. That herd will move on then and the next will take their place and the cycle will run like that from eight to three until the next Saturday when the nomads return with their soccer balls to begin again. But in between, in their absence, I will mow. I will remove the tainted tips of grass blades I once streaked white. I will return the grass to green, the field to the form of emptiness no one knows but me. Then I will roll out the tin box on wheels and push it along, dripping paint into the dirt so that cleated shoes know where to run and canvassed chairs know where to snap. Herbie, I call the machine because Hermes was taken and I couldn't find wings made for wheels. But that's beside the point. There're more important things to tell, like when it happened.

I was standing near the fish-bowl booth, taking in what was left of the limelight. The Ferris Wheel was on its last run for the evening and oh, those lights were glorious to see. I would be sad tomorrow, after they took it down, breaking its long arms one by one and loading them up onto the bed of the green-gray truck to drive something like two hundred seventy-seven miles south to the next neighboring town—give or take a few. But, that was tomorrow and right now was not then, that was coming later. So for now I could just stand still, leaning my right side's weight on the brown handled broomstick and my left side's weight on the chipped gray handled stick of the Pushy Dustpan. I call it that because it has a proper name, one that they write on the box in big red letters and that's the name you say when you call the company to order more, but I forgot it

sometime a while ago so I named it the Pushy Dustpan cause that's what it does and because I think it's sad when things don't have a name. All things.

The Ferris Wheel was always last to close. I hope they always keep it that way. There's something about the silence when things stop: the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Go-Go Dragon Kiddie Coaster. Not that I didn't like those things, I did, a lot. But they had to stop for there to be something about the way the air smelled as the soggy cotton candy sticks and churro wrappers swirled my feet, kind enough to gather themselves so I could instead rest and breathe, gazing at the Wheel as it spun, watching the gentle curves of my own Aphrodite.

When it happened, I wasn't doing anything wrong. I was standing just like that, just like I said. I didn't go to him either—World came to me. He must have been left behind in the goldfish giveaway chaos that had ensued after the Squirt N Shoot booth closed but before they turned off the lights in the Maze of Mirrors. The Maze of Mirrors always closes just before the Ferris Wheel and I take comfort in that. That's my second favorite thing, see. It's cause I know where to look, and that's all you have to do to get out okay, just know where to look. And that's how I saw World that Tuesday—unless it was Wednesday—cause I knew where to look, and no one else does really. And just like I knew how to look, World knew how to fly cause he jumped right out of that should-have-been empty fish tank my broom handled hand was waiting by. Now, I know lots of things can jump, but World—well, he really *flew*. There he was in the air, right in front of the Ferris Wheel's gold and red twinkle lights for a good twelve and a half maybe point forty-six minutes at least, flapping his wings disguised as fins and panting through his

gills. He did that, flapping and panting, till he got right up to me and then...he just stopped. Stopped and kur-plunked right into my shirt pocket. I was wearing the nice one, the blue one with the collar—well, they're all blue ones with collars—but this one didn't even have a coffee stain. He landed right on in there under my name. Well, it used to be my name, but the red threads started coming undone last November and well, I pulled at it, I'm not proud of it, but I did, and so even though it used to say my name now it just says "St," but its okay, it's nicer this way. I worry sometimes though, that what if the "St" comes undone because then I won't have a name on my shirt at all and I should have a name, I really should, so then I'd have to get a new name and I just don't know who I'd be. But this isn't about me, it's about World, and no one's taking his name.

I don't know for certain what his name was before he came to me, but I think it may have been World, I really do, because after he kur-plunked I pinched the edge of that blue shirt pocket with my thumb and forefinger, holding it out just a bit, and tucked my chin into what I call my "jolly rolls" that laugh off from my neck, and gazed right down my nose. "Hello, World," I said, just as easy as that, and he looked back up at me and I knew I had gotten it right.

I walked home that way, keeping my chin tucked and my pocket pinched, holding his gaze the whole time. I didn't see the harm in leaving the fairgrounds early—the Cherry Pepsi coated plastic straws seemed to have the sweeping under control anyway. I trusted them, trusted them in a certain way, because there are many ways. This was like the way we trusted Johnson after Lincoln, that Southerner that the Northerners found unique, who could have been great except he'd been a tailor first and it ruined him—on

his knees all day, head to waist, mending seams. He couldn't help it. But I think that, maybe, if his parents had named their tailor son Taylor then, maybe, the whole thing would have been a better fit.

World, though, held a different kind of trust. I could tell without even having to know. For once, as I walked home, I didn't need to watch empty sidewalk lines. I didn't need to check that I was following the straight path. I didn't need to do any of that, meaning I could afford to watch the newest addition to the lint farm in my pocket. "Hello, World," I would say, just every now and then, just to make sure he knew I was still there.

When I reached the shiny 302 that hung on my apartment door I made sure I removed my shoes before pushing it open. I didn't want World to think I was decrepit or dilapidated and I told him so. "World," I said, "it's important to remove one's shoes before entering a home so you don't look decrepit or dilapidated." I was proud after I said this—those had been my words for the day. Rick, the man who used to live in the apartment here with me, who used to sleep in the living room on a deflated air mattress, he never appreciated my words for the day and was always trickling coffee grounds over my flashcards and list sheets. He never removed his shoes either. It was something in his name, I think, that made him this way. It echoed too hard and sharp at the end—that "ck" can't be good for anyone. I do not miss him. Except on Tuesdays, between eight and four, when the navy wool knit sweaters and silver ice cream scoopers are sold on the Home Shopping Network. Things were sometimes easier then—we would laugh for hours as I did crosswords and Rick tried to guess the 'call-now' prices before they flashed across the screen.

But, unlike Rick, World was impressed as I carried him over the threshold. I could tell. I pointed out my section of shelved fiction and my overflowing stacks of biographies framing the eastern window. I store those two next to each other because I'm not really sure there's much of a difference anyway. "It's all what you choose to name your characters, World," I said, "that's all that changes. At least sometimes anyway." I was about to point out my astronomy section when Edith Hamilton jumped up from her spot next to the potted plant, which I water daily even though the only thing in need of water is the medium grade vermiculite soil that the waxed leaves sprout from, and she bit me. Her big silver hardcover *Mythology* letters launched themselves from their prime spotlighted area on the green shag carpet and straight onto my big toe.

Now normally I would not have taken kindly to this. It hurt—and unnecessarily so. After all, I had never wronged Edith—I read her chapters front to back, even the ones on the Lesser gods and Muses, keeping them crisp and never dog-eared. "Edith, oh Edith," I cried, "how could you?" And I waited for the wailing to start. This time didn't go like normal, though, and it was all because of World. See, as soon as I opened my mouth, he laughed. Not that I heard it, of course—that would be strange. Now, if I had a dog, which I don't but if I did I'd name him Buckweaver, *he* would have heard World's laughter because everyone knows fish laugh all high-pitched like that. And so I watched him, laughing up at me from the bottom of my shirt pocket, and I pictured all the howling that would be going on if Buckweaver were here to hear it and I knew, I just knew that World was laughing to stop me from crying. That's how I knew he was meant to be mine, my World.

Our life went on like that, day in, day out. I transferred him from my blue collared shirt pocket to a two liter Mountain Dew bottle wrapped tight in a Milky Way wrapper for home décor that sat under the slightly paled yellow-green wallpaper on top of my mahogany dresser. Next to the bottle I placed my glimmering trophy that I shined with a gold-toed sock each night before bed. It was the only award I'd ever received. A marker of a perfect 300 score from the Rantoul County bowling league. It was waiting here in the apartment for me when I first moved in. World liked it a lot.

I let him live in my room. I've never let anyone live in my room. I let him know things. He knew that I put on my left slipper before my right, that I had koala bears on my pillowcases. "I know it's silly, World," I'd say, every night right before I'd curl up against the koalas and turn out the lights. "But it's just the way it's always been. All my life, I've had koalas." And World would peek over the edge of that Milky Way wrapper and I swear I could see him smile. He also knew that every time I thought about the scene from that TV show—the one with the mom and the baby that live in New York—when the mom is in a play and the director asks her, "You threw the shoe out the window and it hit a car?" and she says yes cause she doesn't know what else to say, when really the baby had hit the car crash button on the sound board, it would make me laugh and laugh and laugh until I peed in my pants, but just a little. It's not funny. Not really. I laugh though, every time, and World is the only one who ever knew.

World lived forever and ever, see. Until one day—I think it was around September 31<sup>st</sup>—he didn't. He was mine, World was. He was mine. I'm not going to go



into how it happened. I don't want to. It was 1848 all over again—Taylor beating Cass with no political experience and never having voted. Funny things like that happen a lot.

The worst part, afterward, was learning to be alone again. I don't just mean living by myself. I've done that over and over, but I mean alone without my World. Things that used to matter now didn't because they couldn't. I'd see a naked Snickers or Kit Kat wrapper in the street and think how great of an addition it would be to World's bottle, only to remember that there was still a bottle but no World to live within it. The biographies could fall out of order, one book slipping over another as the stacks toppled over, the astronomy section could lie askew, and it could all just sit like that because now that World was gone there was no one here to know.

I'm not sure how long that terrible period went on, that period of not knowing how to talk just to myself like I now had to do. Maybe it was awhile and maybe it would have kept going except one day, nineteen days ago, I changed. I bought new pillowcases without knowing why and put them on instead of the koala bears. My pillows sat there, now blue but still puffy, and I waited, expecting them to move, expecting something to change. But the bears' cases, held together with the same kind of red threads that made up the name tag on the shirt I used to wear, didn't seem to mind being removed. There was no sense of vengeance, no clawing, or growling of whys.

It was not unlike the carnival—the not going back, I mean. It was not unlike being made to stay away just because I knew it better than anyone else did. Carnival work, it was explained to me by the men that day, is a tricky kind of work and, really, some decorum of detachment is needed. The spectacle needs to be able to come and go so that

when only the field remains the people involved, the people like who I used to be, will leave without any sense of the need to look back. And for all I could do, I never could quite do that.

I told this story, the story of World, all of it in all its glory, to a group of children playing after school at the soccer fields one day. I expected a sea of ‘wows’ and not much more, but one girl asked me what I called it all. “All what?” I said. “All of it all,” she said. “All of the finding and the walking and the book biting and the laughing and the bottle decorating and the dying and pillowcase changing. What do you call it all?” And at that we all sat quietly for a long time, folding loose grass blades into necklace chains until finally I said, “I don’t know.” And we continued to sit just like that until she had to go.